

Grapes or Giants?

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- [0 : 00] So what I wanted to do just for a few moments this morning is think loosely in general terms about the story that we read in Numbers and also the story we read in Acts.
- Two different times in history, two different times with regard to the revelation of God and Scripture, but all with a theme, a thread running through it.
- And we can look back at some of the earlier passages in Scripture before Jesus, kind of with the light of Jesus and with the knowledge of Jesus and realize the purposes and plans that He was working out even in these times.
- Our focus as Christians is very often, I think, maybe particularly in our culture, in our context. Maybe it's just the weather.
- We often focus on negative things about the Christian life, the battle that the Christian life is. And that's absolutely fine because it is a battle and it's described as a battle.
- [1 : 07] And the Christian life is often in reality for us, a struggle in a battle and we wouldn't want to minimize that thought or that reality for us. But it's not just a battle for us because we are also guaranteed the victory.
- The victory has already been won. That's why we focus so much on the cross of Jesus Christ, the death of Jesus, His resurrection on the first day of the week and His ascension.
- And that is transformative, and it ought to be at least transformative for all of us. It's not just a kind of theological sort of nicety that we consider now and again.
- It is the life-changing reality for all of us that Jesus defeated the power of death and sin, and as we trust in Him, we can know that victory in our own lives.
- And it's important, I think, for us going into a new year to remember that, to remember who we are and who we serve as believers and to constantly remind ourselves of the promises and the plan of God that goes beyond 2023 and goes even beyond our own lives and has a great future.
- [2 : 26] And we're called to focus on the promises. We'll do a lot of that with the children and the verses that we'll read over, the 52 verses we'll try to memorize over the years. A good thing to do.
- The promises are good. They're good to be, to fuse our minds with these promises, to think about them and to remember that they're not just glib, they're not just theoretical, but they're there for a reason, not only as promises, but as plan.
- His purpose is in plan. We see it from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation that there is one clear thread that runs through Scripture, and it all revolves around the rescue purposes and plans and love of God and Jesus Christ for us.
- Now, we accept, and I accept that there are huge challenges and huge battles that we face, and we oughtn't to be blind to that, and we're not naive and we're not foolish and stupid when we think about the victory that is ours.
- But I do want to make two points today, because we remember that the challenges and the battles we face were no greater, very different, but no greater than the ones Caleb faced as one of the spies who saw the promised land along with the other spies.

- [3 : 48] He saw things differently from the other ones. We'll talk about that for a moment. And no different for the apostles in the New Testament. They also had many challenges and oppositions and difficulties.
- I don't suppose many of us will be jailed or crucified upside down for our faith in Jesus. It's unlikely.
- But that was the kind of battles and struggles that these old and New Testament believers faced. But I just want to ask two questions on this New Year's morning.
- The first is, what do we see in our Christian journey, in our Christian lives? And it's the title of the sermon. Do we see grapes or do we see giants?
- Because in this story in the Old Testament, the spies were sent out to spy out the land and they were to bring back some of the produce of the land, because God had promised them this land and He promised them it was a land flowing with milk and honey.
- [4 : 54] It was a beautiful place. It was the promised land that they were to have. And they were to bring back some of the produce as a... Literally as a taster of what lay ahead for them.
- And they brought this...we read it in that verse that they brought a cluster of grapes on a pole that they hung it on and they brought it back as a beautiful fruit of the land.
- And that was what God had promised. But the 12 spies that went out, Caleb was the only one who could see by faith and understand that they could take this land and it could become theirs.
- Because the other 11 could only see the giants, the Nephilim, the big people. And as they said at the end of that chapter, we seem to ourselves like grasshoppers.
- So you could re-title it. Could it be grapes or grasshoppers or grapes or giants? The G's all work either way. But the principle there, and I'm not going to go into this story really, and I'm not going to focus on the giants today and the oppositions and the difficulties and the impossibilities because they're all there in our lives.
- [6 : 12] But just very simply, the question is in our lives, do we see the promises of God as believers? Do we think they apply to us?
- Are we like Caleb who says in verse 30, he climbed the people before Moses and said, let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.
- Well able to overcome it. And the NIV says, we can certainly do it. So he saw with the eye of faith, we can take this land because it's promised to us by God and it's got all the promises that He made for us.
- And is that how we live our Christian lives? Do we focus on the promises that God has made for us to be in His company, to overcome, to have the victory, to know a future with Him, and to look at the end of the story as well for us?
- Do we recognize the milk and honey that is promised to us in this life and in the life to come? The blessings, the strength, the presence of the Spirit, the forgiveness, the hope, the beatific vision, seeing Jesus and being in relationship with Him.
- [7 : 26] Do we feed on these promises? And do we recognize that all that we do in His name has weight, has significance?
- Even the cup of cold water that we will give to somebody is noted and is remembered and is significant to the living God.
- Do we trust Him that as Christians we can live in 2023 and say, yes, certainly we can do it. We can overcome.
- We can live the way He wants us to live in obedience to Him. Whatever giants, whatever opposition we face, whether that be circumstantial or whether it be personal in our own lives.

Do we remember that with the living God, camels can go through the eye of needles? We are able to overcome what we face in this life.

[8 : 26] We recognize and we see that God raises the dead, the greatest impossibility of all God has already done. And so we can live this year focusing on grapes rather than giants.

It's very difficult for us to do unless we focus and channel our lives around the promises and the hope and the character of God. We can evangelize and share our faith with courage, recognizing that God will sustain us and will enable us to see people respond to gospel truth because of what Jesus has done.

We all, we're not really focusing on a moralistic teaching or a do-it-yourself, hey, just keep on going and think of promises.

We recognize that our power source is the living God in Christ and that we are to be relying on Him because of what He did on the cross because of the defeat of death and sin and His resurrection and His grace to us, that He has gifted us salvation and He has gifted us a home and He's gifted us a future.

And we recognize that He has defeated all of these realities in our lives. It's so easy to go into this year, I presume, for us all to just see giants, to see opposition, to see things that can't be overcome.

[10 : 07] And yet we recognize that death and sin and hell have been defeated, that Christ is victorious. And we are encouraged and challenged to look with the eye of faith at everything we face, at all our circumstances, at all our personal situations we find ourselves in, to look and to focus on the Word of God and the promises of God.

Now you may be sitting here this morning saying, easy for you to say, minister, you're not on the front line, you just slip back into your study with an open Bible and a worn-out knees from praying, wish that were the case.

And it's true, I do have a great privilege. I recognize that, I've got a great privilege of not being on the front line at one level.

And I hope that humbly I always recognize that. But we all have different giants that we face. We're all ultimately tempted by the same unbelieving heart and we're all opposed by the same enemy.

These tactics are different for you as they may be for me, but nonetheless they're there. But we all have the same call.

[11 : 36] We all have the same call in 1 Timothy 4, 7, which is that we're to train ourselves to be godly and to look with the eyes of faith.

Don't depend on just your quick fix on a Sunday morning and the preaching of the Word, significant and important though that is, remember that we have this responsibility to be our trained ourselves, looking to God, focusing on God, being self-controlled, praying and seeking godliness and living with the eye of faith ourselves, pleading His promises and taking up discipleship.

Our ongoing challenge of discipleship from the picture of Jeremiah 17, the tree, the great tree that speaks of the Christian walk and says that tree will always bear fruit, even in a drought, even in a desert place, because its roots go down and along to the living water, to the stream always.

And it said that tree doesn't need to be afraid of the heat because its strength and its nourishment and its energy come from the living water under the ground.

And what is unseen is so important in your Christian life, what nobody else sees, where your roots are, where you find your energy and strength and courage from, it is not visible.

[13 : 09] The fruit is, the fruit is that when you're faced with impossibilities and you're faced with giants, you don't feel like a grasshopper, but you can say, yes, we can do this.

We can certainly do it. We can overcome because of God's promises, because of the risen Savior and because of the hope and the commitment He has to us that He will never leave us nor forsake us.

So we can... the challenge for us in terms of grapes or giants is that we ourselves can be the fruit. We ourselves can reflect the reality of Christ in our lives.

And we pray, I hope we can pray, as I certainly seek to pray, that my eyes might be opened in the same way that Elisha's servant's eyes were opened in the story that we did with the kids, which is kind of similar in one way to the story we did.

We're looking at what is unseen is always greater than what is seen. And however bleak and difficult the challenges and opposition is, in Christ we can know victory and we can know that He who is with us is greater than He who is against us.

[14 : 30] So that is an encouragement. And it's great to do and great to recognize that Christ invites us to Himself and He says, you know, my yoke is easy and my burden is like.

Come to me, says in Matthew 11. It's easy at that level because of whom we trust and whom we serve. Thirty-five years ago I was in the free church book room, as it used to be called, it's now a book shop, used to be a book room.

And I was a raw, thirty-five years, a raw 24-year-old starting my first year of training to become a minister.

And I was probably buying one of the books that I had to get for learning Hebrew or Greek or something like that. And an old professor came in, he was retired by this time called Professor Macintosh, he was a lovely old man.

And he knew my father and he knew family and things like that. And he hadn't met me since I'd kind of been a child. And he was asking what I was doing, I was saying I was going in for the ministry.

[15 : 40] And he just said to me, an old man, he just said, you'll never serve a better master. And it's very simple, I kind of throw away comment in many ways, but I've never forgotten that because he's right.

Just now in thirty-five years, he's absolutely right that there is no greater Lord and master to serve than the Lord Jesus Christ. And we should never forget that at the start of a year.

We have a Savior with a triune commitment, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose currency is forgiveness and shared strength. He doesn't keep things to himself, he shares us with himself.

We have not just a Savior, we have His Word, Scripture, which is our great hope. And you can go to someone today and ask them what they're going to do with a dead man who claimed to be God who walked out of the grave on the third day.

You've got that? You've got that truth that we can challenge people with from Scripture? And we've got a gospel society, like-minded believers, a church family that we can embrace and know.

[16 : 53] Not many people have that, that triumphant of amazing realities of Savior, Scripture and society. So in 2023, what is it we see?

What is it you see by faith? To use a non-biblical illustration, we should be glass half full people, not by a humbug glass half empty people, because of who we serve and because of what He's done for us.

So very briefly, what do we see? Do we see grapes or giants? And that's a challenge that only you can answer and only I can answer for myself. Very often it's giants, isn't it?

Very briefly, the second question is, what do we do? Do we praise or do we protest? And that just takes us to the New Testament story of Paul and Silas who were in prison.

See, it wasn't easy for them. It might be easy for some other Christians in life, but it wasn't easy for Paul and Silas. They were imprisoned for sharing their faith.

[18 : 00] It was midnight, it was probably blooming cold, and they had been flogged. And they might have well have been there saying, well, why on earth am I here in prison?

Why are we in prison? We're doing a lot of such amazing work. The other apostles seemed to have it easy, really sore in pain and cold and in chains, and they were praising.

They were praising at that moment. Why were they praising at that moment? Because they could see grapes. They could see the promises.

They were entrusting themselves to the living God. They didn't feel like grasshoppers there. They didn't feel like the opposition was so gigantic, and it was the Roman Empire after all.

But they had the spirit of Caleb. We can certainly do this. God is with us. We're doing His will. And very shortly, it became evident why God had them imprisoned, because He had a prison officer that He wanted them to share faith with, and He and all His households became Christians, and who knows the power and significance of that in their lives?

[19 : 18] The temptation for us always, isn't it, is to protest rather than praise. It's so hard. This is so difficult, Lord. Let's just, we just want to hunker down until judgment day in a kind of survival mode.

Just go underground until it's all ended. Within a spiritual drought, helpless, hopeless conditions for blessing, I'm such a rubbish Christian compared to others and what I see around me.

There's just giants all over the place in my life. Where are you, God? I feel like I'm in prison. I feel I'm in a hopeless situation spiritually.

Look how easy other Christians have it. Envious, jealous, mistrusting of them. So we protest, we stamp our feet at God.

We're Protestants after all. Maybe that's why we protest so much. But praise is impossible, but that's what makes praise so significant.

[20 : 26] It's kind of easy to praise when everything is going smoothly. Well, it's just run of the mill, isn't it? But when we can praise God in the darkness, in what seems like a prison cell, that's what makes it so radically life-transforming.

When we know that He takes even the hardest circumstances in our lives and will turn them on their head for our good, nothing and nobody else can do that.

And even when the circumstances keep hitting us, keep batting us, He can take us through them. He can enable us to not just survive, but to praise Him.

Nothing and nobody can enable you to do that. I empower you to do that unless it's the living God who has shown you His victory and has shown you His love and has shown you His purposes and plan for your future, which is the promised land.

So in a world of impossibilities, and I kind of slow to use the word resolutions because I know they generally don't go much past the end of January, but are we going to see grapes or giants, and in whom are we going to trust as we go into this beautiful new year that He is ordained for us?

[21 : 58] I mean, let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray for Your grace, for Your help, for faith to see. We know we can't do these things on our own.

We know You've already gifted us freely salvation and forgiveness and hope and a future. These are Your gifts, and will You not then withhold from us every single thing we need to enable us to continue and to grow and to develop as Christians?

Whatever our circumstances, whatever we face, Lord God, we pray and ask that we would have the spirit of Caleb, we can certainly do it. Not in some kind of just motivational talk, motivational chat, but with the eye of faith, recognizing Your purposes and plans, and Your promises never to leave us nor forsake us, and to transform us and to take us home, and to give us an inheritance that is eternal, that death will be defeated, and that the future is unbelievably great.

Reminders of these things, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.