

“The Spy in the Sky”

I enjoy the NASA web site. Who hasn't looked up into a brilliant night sky and been moved? The other night I was in the NASA website, and I connected to the Hubble Space Telescope (the ST, as it's called). The site was idle, but I downloaded the latest images sent back to earth. Amazing pictures!

And I thought of the late Carl Sagan, the astronomer who was a frequent guest on Johnny Carson's "Tonight" show, and who's "Billions and Billions of stars" was a familiar phrase to those who appreciated his work.

And I thought of a Thursday night at Central Oklahoma Christian Camp. I was directing Jr. Hi Church camp. For the closing night's worship, we went out to the dam on the lake and lay in the grass on our backs and looked up into the stars.

One of the counselors was a docent at a Planetarium, and she pointed out some of the constellations in the sky and talked about them: "That's 'Orion'. It was named after Orion, a hunter in Greek mythology. Its brightest stars are Rigel and Betelgeuse.

Rigel is actually three stars that appear to us as one. It is the sixth brightest star in the sky. The nearest of the three stars is 860 light years from earth. That's more than 84 trillion miles.

Betelgeuse is the ninth brightest star in the sky. It is perhaps 30 times larger than our sun, and is approximately 640 light years from earth. That's 62.5 trillion miles!

And on she went, pointing out stars and constellations, talking about distances that are almost incomprehensible! She talked about light years: the distance light travels in a year. And she pointed out Deneb, the most distant star we can see with the unaided human eye. Located in the constellation of Cygnus, the swan, it's located around 1550 light years away from Earth— 151.5 trillion miles.

And she talked about infinity—how you could take the distance to that farthest star—think about it... And double it—and then double that... And you still haven't scratched the surface of infinity.

And, then, about the time we began to smell smoke coming from between their ears, someone read,

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ...³When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? (Ps. 8:1, 3-4 NIV)

...and I thought of the 19th Psalm:

(Ps. 19 NIV) *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ²Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. ... ⁴...*

In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, ⁵which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. ⁶It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

The Hubble Space Telescope is an amazing instrument. One authority is quoted as saying,

"It's not hyperbole to say that ST is as much an improvement over the most powerful existing telescope as Galileo's first spyglass in 1609 was over the human eye. ... From the top of the Empire State Building it could bring into focus a single star on the American Flag on the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor. ST will record images ... via electronic light collectors so sensitive they could detect a penlight on the Moon."

Thanks to the Hubble, a mind-boggling new dimension will open to us: it will take us into the future. Can you imagine? Time travel: a reality! Let me explain.

Think of a bolt of lightning flashing across the sky. Several seconds later we hear the thunderclap. In reality, we are hearing into the past. The sound of the thunder is a direct result of, and happens simultaneously with, the lightning flash. But sound waves travel slower than light waves; therefore, if the lightning flashes a mile away, you will hear the sound some 4.69 seconds later—a sound that was actually made 4.69 seconds in the past.

In those same 4.69 seconds, a beam of light could travel 8.3 million miles—it could circle the earth 350 times! Does that kind of "blow your mind?" Well, listen to this: a "light year" is the distance light travels in one year—5.8 trillion miles. And the Hubble Space Telescope is able to see, today, light that will not reach the naked human eye on earth for another twelve billion years!

Now, I tried to multiply that out, but I couldn't find a calculator that had enough zeros! 5.8 trillion times 12 billion! So, I did it by hand (one weekend), and it comes out 69, followed by 21 zeroes. I think that's 69 sextillion. That's how many miles into space the Hubble telescope can see! Now, is there smoke coming from between your ears?

You want to put God in perspective? Think of those numbers—5.8 trillion miles times 12 billion—and listen to these words from Genesis:

God made two great lights--the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars, ¹⁷and set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, (GENESIS 1:16-17 NIV)

"The heavens declare the glory of God." Gives one a new perspective, makes you want to sing the "Doxology", doesn't it?

But the primary value of the Hubble Space Telescope is in the fact that the

space shuttle has carried it above the distorting effects of the earth's atmosphere. Even on the clearest night the oxygen and other gases in the atmosphere, along with the humidity and dust particles and pollution, tend to bend light waves, much like a flawed pane of glass. And when that bending is multiplied through the powerful lenses of telescopes, the objects appear to shimmer. But in space, above the atmosphere, there's nothing to distort the light.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if somehow our lives could be lifted above the distortions caused by our participation in this world? Wouldn't it be great if we could see things clearly—put all the complex, confusing, overwhelming forces of our culture in perspective—if we could see clearly enough to be able to prioritize the things with which we try to decorate the moments of our lives?

Oprah had Dr. Laura Schlessinger on her show recently. They were talking about family—and about the forces in our culture that tear families apart. They took it all in; but one comment stood out. They talked about how people let work and success come between them and their families—long hours; work brought home... And in the course of the conversation somebody said, "Have you ever heard anybody say on his deathbed, 'I wish I'd spent more time at work, and less time with my family.'"

But, how do you do it amid all the demands of work and recreational activities, kids' sports and piano lessons and dance lessons and karate lessons and church choir and scouts and family reunions and birthday parties and...

And how do you work in time for spiritual growth and development, when most families don't even say grace over meals—they don't even eat at the same time or the same place.

Busy! Busy! Busy! Our vision is distorted because we believe all that activity and stress will lead to success and popularity and fulfillment and happiness. We need a vehicle—a space shuttle—to lift us above the confusion and the distortions, so we can see clearly.

One such vehicle might be found in the words of the Psalmist: "*The heavens declare the glory of God!*" The vehicle is praise.

It's difficult to look into a star-spangled night sky, and, in the face of that awesome infinity come away without a change of perspective. It's difficult to praise God and continue to put your trust and confidence in activities and material possessions and social connections as a means of satisfaction and inner peace.

So how's your track record? How's your family life? Are your days filled with stress? Maybe you need to go outside tonight—or on the next clear night--and look up into the heavens. Get some perspective!

"The heavens declare the glory of God!"