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AS THE DEER

Why can a female red deer never be first in line? Because she will always “be hind.” Why is a hind without a stag always a loser? Because to be a winner “You’ve Got to Have Hart.” (I apologize to my international readers for a joke that won’t translate well; I won’t apologize to my English speaking readers, because I never apologize for a pun, no matter how bad it is.) I needed a way, though, to introduce the animals called the hind and the hart. A hind is a female red deer, while a hart is the male of the breed. Both are mentioned several times in the Bible, and often in a way that we can learn lessons from them.

The red deer is especially noted for its pleasant and impressive appearance. Because of this, the Song of Songs refers to the boyfriend as a hart upon the mountains. “Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices.” (SOS 8:14) (See also SOS 2:9,17.) In that same book the girlfriend admonishes her handmaidens not to disturb her sleeping boyfriend. In doing so, she emphasizes her admonition “by the hinds of the field.” Apparently they were so prized by the maidens of that time that people swore by the deer as they might swear by any valued object.

In showing God’s power, on psalmist notes that it is God who makes the hind to calve. (Ps 29:9) When God presented a series of questions to Job, to show how far above Job’s thoughts were his own, he asked, “Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth? Canst thou mark when the hinds do calve?” (Job 39:1) The hind is under God’s power, and his watchfulness. If God so cares for the deer of the field, how much more will he care for you!

One of the noted characteristics of the hind (but not the hart) is its family loyalty. Mother red deer and their children form a family group that lasts until the children mate for themselves. Even then, young males often have territories that overlap those of their mothers. Biblical writers also noted this loyalty. “Rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love.” (Prov 5:18-19) Jeremiah considered this loyalty so amazing that a

violation of it would be as remarkable as God’s destruction of Jerusalem. “Yea, the hind also calved in the field, and forsook it, because there was no grass.” (Jer 14:5) He goes on to talk about the sins of Jerusalem that would bring this marvel about.

Red deer are also noted for finding whatever they need for sustenance. Harts have come down from the hills to eat from farm crops when food was scarce. This persistence in finding what they need was noted by a psalmist. “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so my soul panteth after thee, O God.” (Ps 42:1)

The one characteristic of the red deer most noted by biblical writers, however, is their agility. “Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.” (Isa 35:6) Beyond noticing their mere leaping, many writers make reference specifically to the unerring hinds’ feet. (Yes, that would include their hind feet.) In 2 Samuel 22, David makes a psalm upon his deliverance from his enemies. This is also Psalm 18. In verse 34 (verse 33 in the Psalm) David says, “He maketh my feet like hinds’ feet: and setteth me upon my high places.” He praises God for keeping him from falling. After Habakkuk had a vision of God in all his glory, he concludes by asserting God’s faithful support. “The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds’ feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places.” (Hab 3:19)

The hart and the hind don’t worry about food, or falling. As we go through our days, we should be like they. Let us pant for God, who will plant our feet on the heights. Then we will be as pleasant in aspect as the hart or the hind.

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THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

Hanukkah, which begins on December 7th this year, has been called the Festival of Lights. The common story, first recorded about two hundred years after the event it celebrates, says that when the Jewish forces under the Maccabees restored the Temple after it had been profaned by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, they could only find one day's worth of oil certified pure for the Temple menorah. It would take seven days to produce more oil. It is said that the one-day supply of oil lasted for eight days, and this miracle is celebrated as Hanukkah.

There is little indication that this version was known in the early part of the First Century AD. In John 10:22, the holiday is called the "Feast of Dedication," which fits more closely with the account in 2 Maccabees. Josephus says, "And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival." (Antiquities of the Jews, XII, VII, 7) Josephus, though, in spite of being a well-educated Pharisee, was writing to a

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Roman audience and may have played down the miraculous aspect of the story. Clearly the holiday was called the festival of Lights as early as 60 AD. Whether or not the story of the oil is true, and it may well be, the idea of a festival of light has some validity. Even the Feast of Booths ended with just such a festival. There is even reason for Christians to celebrate light.

God is Light

A festival of light is especially appropriate because God is the giver of all light. His first recorded words in Genesis 1 were "Let there be light." John tells us, (John 1:5), "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

Light is necessary for all life as we know it. One of the popular experiments in high school biology has been to try to grow plants in total darkness. Plants and animals do not grow well in the absence of light. We will die without God.

While that is true in the physical world, it is also true in the spiritual realm. God is the giver of physical light, but also of his Word, the spiritual light. The comparison between righteousness/sin and light/darkness is an ancient one. We tend to think of light as good and darkness as bad. Thus we picture God's communication to us as light. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." (Ps 119:105) "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear." (Ps 27:1) "Who is among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God." (Isa 50:10)

Even salvation in Jesus is equated with living in God's light. "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." (1 Jn 1:7) Fellowship with other people can be valuable and enjoyable, but John here talks about an even greater fellowship. Walking in the light of God is to have fellowship with God. We can be friends with the creator of the universe! That is to know spiritual light.

Prophetic literature in the Bible talks about God giving this spiritual light to all who will follow him. This was to include more than just the Jewish nation. "And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising." (Isa 60:3) One time the Jews of Pisidian Antioch (now part of Turkey) rejected Paul's teaching. As a result, he quoted Isaiah 49:6.

But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, *saying*, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth. (Acts 13:45-47)

Isaiah further prefigured God lighting his church, both Jews and Gentiles.

Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise. The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the LORD shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down;

neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended. (Isa 60:18-20)

There are many who believe that the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 and 22 is the church on earth, and not a picture of heaven. The passage just quoted from Isaiah bears some support for this idea, when compared to the language of those chapters in the Revelation.

And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Rev 21:23-27)

“And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.” (Rev 22:5) Since the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven and is spoken of in the same terms as Isaiah's picture of the Gentiles joining in God's salvation, it is not unreasonable to see this as a picture of Christ's church on earth.

Jesus is Light

When John the Baptizer was born, his father Zacharias prophesied about his son and the one who would follow him. In that prophecy, he quoted Isaiah 9:2. “To give light to them that sit in darkness and *in* the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:79) Matthew begins his account of the ministry of Jesus with the same quotation (Matt 4:16)

Perhaps the most famous commentary on the words of Jesus by one of the gospel writers begins “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) Three verses later John adds: “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” This refers back to his description of Jesus in the first chapter. “In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.” (Jn 1:4-5)

Jesus even described himself as light. The day after the Feast of Booths was characterized by the lighting of an enormous menorah, which was said to give light to the whole of Jerusalem. On the day after this, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” (Jn 8:12)

It was through the Son that God fully revealed himself to the world. Through Jesus God was revealing his own light to man.

We are light

From early time God has wanted his people to show his light to a lost world. Abraham spread the gospel of the one God. The nation of Israel was set aside under Moses to show the world that God still cared for his people. Isaiah described how that nation could outshine the noonday sun. “And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday.” (Isa 58:10) Paul said it a little differently, without using the example of light. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” (Eph 2:10)

Jesus said it a different way; one which is more appropriate to Hanukkah. “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a

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candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (Matt 5:14-16; also Lk 8:16; 11:33) One of the requirements of the holiday of Hanukkah is the lighting of the menorah, to commemorate the lighting of the Temple lamp when it was rededicated after exactly three years of defilement. Part of the requirement for the menorah is that it be placed where it can be seen from the street. A menorah that is lit and then hidden in the interior of the house is worse than worthless; it is an affront to God. It is saying, “I believe in you, but I am ashamed to let anyone else know that.” If we have the word of God and refuse to show it to men, we are saying the same thing. We are refusing to give people the opportunity to glorify God.

“For ye were formerly darkness, but now are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.” (Eph 5:8)

TIRED AND TRUE

“And Jacob boiled pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was tired.” (Gen 25:29)

Esau was tired. He is the first person in the Bible to be so described. Why was he tired? While he was no doubt tired physically, might there be a spiritual lesson here? Perhaps we can learn something from Esau’s exhaustion.

The history of the two brothers shows two clear attitudes. Jacob followed the God of his father and grandfather. Everything in his life shows that his primary interest was in learning about God. The scripture says that Esau came from the field. That field may symbolize the world, with its pleasures. He had been out seeking food for the belly, instead of food for the soul. Jacob, who had perhaps been studying God’s word, had settled for a quick bowl of soup, but Esau had spent effort seeking (and not finding) pleasure for his belly.

When we spend all our time in the world, seeking the things of the world, we will likewise come from the field tired. That is because the world may feed the body, but it has nothing to nourish our souls. When we spend time in the word our souls are refreshed. We can live on less of the world, because that nourishment (though necessary) is incidental to feeding the soul.

There is a story, told in 1 Samuel 14, that King Saul had sworn that anyone in his army that ate during a specific battle would be executed. Saul’s son, Jonathan, had not heard that oath, and so when he was tired and came upon some honey he ate and was refreshed. Perhaps it was of this incident that David thought when he wrote, “How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”

(Ps 119:103) Just as honey replenishes the body, God’s word replenishes the soul.

Even God needed rest and replenishment. “It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.” (Ex 31:17) God realized that men would have to spend a lot of time involved in making their own livelihood. Therefore, he provided for the children of Israel a time to recharge themselves. God doesn’t want us tired, and especially not tired from earthly things. Although the sabbath was specifically for the Jews, and is not required for non-Jewish Christians, the principle of the sabbath is still valid. In America today we have gotten so busy that our supposed days off are sometimes more hectic than our work days. Whether fifteen minutes a day, or a day a week, we need to leave Esau’s fields and enter Jacob’s study hall. If God needed refreshing, how can we do without it?

Our time in God’s word, however, must be productive. If our minds are still in the field it will do us no good. God said as much to Isaiah. “To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.” (Isa 28:12-13) If the Bible is no more than “line upon line” to us, we are no better off than if we were hunting with Esau. Instead we should spend more time in the word and less time in the world.

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