

The world's winningest athletes seem to have a knack for it. Fighter pilots live and die by it. CIA agents spend years learning it. Your high-school friend, the one everyone labeled as "street smart," had somehow managed to tap into it. Even many mothers — the ones who seem to have developed "eyes in the back of their head" — have mastered it.

The "It," I'm talking about is situational awareness. It's the ability to scan one's surroundings, make a quick judgment about what will likely happen next, and decide what actions might be required of you as a result. Many experts in military, and combat theory, believe this skill of split-second assessment is the fundamental ingredient for human success in sticky situations.

Take, for example, the heroics of Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, who was able to quickly assess his surroundings and beautifully land a commercial airplane in the Hudson River. There's no denying that the ability to know what's going on, so we can figure out what to do, is essential to surviving and thriving in life. No matter if we're looking to dominate in a certain sport, fly a jet, or parent some crazy kids, situational awareness is critical to our success.

Jesus would probably agree. In fact, that's exactly what he's saying to his disciples in Luke 21, our Gospel this morning. At this point in the narrative, Jesus is just days away from dying on the cross and, as a result, his focus has shifted to preparing the disciples for the world they would be living in after he'd risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. Nothing gives you clarity like staring into the barrel of a loaded gun. But Jesus, staring at a gruesome cross, thought not of himself, but of those who'd be taking up their cross after him.

The disciples had taken a moment to marvel at the temple, which Herod was rebuilding. Historians such as Tacitus and Josephus tell us it was indeed impressive, made of massive stones and decorated with gifts from foreign countries, with doors and gates of the finest craftsmanship. But Jesus interrupts the

disciples' observance of the temple's beauty by boldly stating that a time was coming when the temple towering over them would come crashing to the ground. "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

It sounded absurd at the time. Imagine standing in St. Peter's Square in Rome and waving in the direction of the basilica, saying, "The day is coming when not one stone, statue, candle, fresco or altar will remain standing." Undaunted, Jesus continues. "A time of judgment is just around the corner," he says. "It will be a time when the earth itself will begin freaking out with earthquakes and famines. There will be struggles between nations, the fall of great powers and even persecution for those following me. It's coming. And you have to be ready. If you're my disciple, you need to survey the situation. You need to assess what's happening and stay aware."

Now, history and Scripture tell us that Jesus was pointing to and predicting more than one event. In 70 C.E., the very temple he was referring to was, in fact, destroyed. Along with Jerusalem's fall came intense persecution of Christians, exactly as Jesus said. But his words stretched beyond 70 C.E. into a future that lies ahead of us today. Jesus' words of warning pointed also to a time of struggle and judgment to come upon all the earth. It's a time of intense struggle that will serve as the warning sound for the world's waning days and for Jesus' triumphant return. Then he will erase, once and for all, every effect of sin and set up a new, eternal reality for us, his forgiven family. And until it all comes to pass, Jesus' call to readiness, to watchfulness, and to faith-filled situational awareness still stands.

Why? Because in the meantime we, as his followers, have a job to do, and because he tells us things are going to get really bad, before they get really good. Think about it: When situational awareness is high, we can succeed despite

extremely difficult circumstances. When situational awareness is low, we can fail despite extremely simple circumstances.

This begs the question: Just what does it look like to live with the spiritual, situational awareness Jesus encourages? Specifically, knowing that we live in increasingly difficult times, how do we keep our guard up, our eyes open, and do things “right,” such as, say, Captain Sully? Likewise, what’s at stake if we insist on keeping our eyes glued to other things while the road around us becomes more dangerous?

Let’s take a look. First, it’s important for us to confess that many followers of Jesus wrongly live as though they have the option of opting out of his call to readiness in Luke 21. Rather than having any situational awareness, many people have situational *apathy*. They’ve become completely uncaring about the world around them, which Jesus says demands our attention. Perhaps some of us have been lulled into a sense of security by a quiet suburban existence? We enjoy a world where, at the moment, our greatest inconvenience is when the DVR forgets to capture the latest episode of *Grey’s Anatomy*. And even that isn’t a very big deal, because these days we use the internet to stream almost any show to our Big screen televisions or our mobile devices.

We’ve lost sight of the fact that the wars and injustice happening outside our neighborhoods and subdivisions demand as much attention as the soccer practices and play dates within them. We can become as impressed with the substance of our everyday lives as the ancient world was with the Herodian Temple, which gave the sense that it was unshakable and would last forever. Humanity, after all, tends to suffer from delusions of immortality.

Still, others of us have simply been inoculated against such awareness by the gospel itself. Growing up in Sunday school, or having done enough Bible study, we know the good news of how this whole story turns out in the end. We’ve

studied Revelation and read that “we win.” It’s given us a free pass to write off what’s happening in the world as “unimportant” for those of us who already have a ticket to the “after-party.”

The end result of such situational apathy is a missed opportunity. Jesus tells his disciples — and us — that being engaged in the raging world around us will result in an “opportunity to testify.” He tells us that as this broken world increasingly shows itself for what it is, in the form of all kinds of strife, struggle and persecution, those disciples standing in the midst of it will be afforded the chance to share with their friends, their families, and even their enemies just why this world is so broken, we might answer with the word sin and just who has made and will make it all better, Jesus of course!

Today he paints a stark picture of what the road to “the end” looks like, but he wasn’t trying to stir up worry and angst in his people, rather he was trying to do the exact opposite! He told us the truth of what was coming so we could have peace. It’s the kind of peace a child has when his father warns him ahead of time that thunder is coming, or that the road is about to get bumpy. It’s the kind of peace that says to your soul, “Even though you have to endure, you’re going to get through it.” It’s the kind of peace produced by the fact that when trouble *does* arrive, it proves only that Jesus is surprised by nothing and therefore capable of everything.

Jesus’ goal in getting his disciples, in getting us, ready for the end is to produce a peace in us that understands that despite chaos, God’s plan is moving on. Worldwide struggle does not mean the world is outside of his divine control. In fact, Jesus wants us to see such “fearful” events as signs of God’s activity in bringing things to a joyful conclusion. Situational obsession is driven by fear and can lead us to store up canned goods, bottled water, toilet paper, and to invest in gold. Situational awareness, however, is looking around — seeing all that our

Savior said would come to pass — and being motivated by our peace to share the good news that God’s plan is taking place.

Actually, just to make it simple, situational awareness comes down to three actions. First, let’s expand our world by opening up our eyes a little wider. Many of us have a very small, biased understanding of our world. What if we began watching the *BBC World News* rather than simply the local news? What if we signed up to receive updates from Voice of the Martyrs ([www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com)) to stay updated on the persecution and struggles of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world?

Second, when struggles do arise in this life, let’s pray not just for them to end, *but* pray for the grace and strength to endure them well. Let’s have the maturity and awareness to know that many times, but especially in these closing, end times, God will bring himself glory and give others opportunity to draw close to the truth of Christ, not in our avoidance of struggles, but through the witness provided by our endurance of them.

Last, and certainly not least, while we keep our eyes on what’s happening in the world, let our hearts be focused on what God’s Word promises. Specifically, we remember that “not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

Apparently, these days fighter pilots, athletes, mom’s and CIA agents aren’t the only ones who have situational awareness. Hmm. Seems like Jesus was on to something. As the world around us tumbles and toils, crumbles and falls, with the help of our Lord and Savior may we have it, too. Thanks be to God. Amen.