

Next Sunday will be the first Sunday in Lent. On Wednesday 1st March and every Wednesday until Holy Week, we shall meet here for 15-20 minutes, to reflect on God's purpose for the cross on which His Son surrendered His life. Lent is to Easter, what Advent is to Christmas, both are a time to review our understanding of the most important question of all time, why God considered it necessary to become one of us.

Last Sunday we examined a familiar parable. I hope you agree, that Luke 15 is mistakenly titled, "The Prodigal Son"; it should be titled "The Parable of our Loving and Gracious God". Jesus' purpose in telling it was to reveal the character of God<sup>1</sup>. He was not narrating a story about two wayward sons; one like the lost lamb, gets lost in the big bad world and wants to return home to work as a slave for his father, and the other, like the one lost coin, is lost in his own father's house, unaware of his valued status as a family member, considers himself instead, no more than a "slave" working for his father.

It is interesting to note, both sons imagined their father to be a stern taskmaster without mercy, and we can easily fall into the same trap of interpreting God to be the same. When we place ourselves as the principal characters in God's story, we view the world from our point of view and God is a secondary character who can be blamed for not being who we think He should be. When, however, we read this parable with the Father as the principal character, who goes out of His way shedding all dignity, to reconcile both sons to Himself and into the family, we realise how badly we have mistaken God's character. How we relate to God is based on our understanding of who **we** think He is, and when **WE** realise we have got it wrong, we have ourselves to blame, because we put ourselves as principal characters in God's story, and blame Him for everything that does not go according to our plans.

Today, lets turn to the Old Testament (or the Testament Before Christ). If I were to ask, which Psalm best reveals God's character, you would be right to point me to Psalm 23. It is magnificent song of worship, composed by David as he transitioned from boyhood to manhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11:27; John 5:30, 36; John 5:19-20; John 14:6

Looking back on his boyhood life as shepherd, caring, providing and protecting the family's flock, David discovers the Perfect Shepherd.

A quick review of David's background might help us better appreciate this Psalm. He was the youngest of eight brothers; the first three served in Saul's army<sup>2</sup>, the next four probably worked on the farm, and David the youngest, was relegated (not different to football teams being *relegated*, sent to the bottom of the heap!) to looking after the sheep.

The nation of Israel was at war with its neighbours, when David presented himself to Saul, the first king of Israel. The rank and file of Saul's army were trembling in their boots, intimidated by the taunting of the Philistine army and their mascot, the abnormally large, steroid-fed giant called Goliath. On hearing news of God's army being taunted, David is incensed that, "this uncircumcised Philistine is defying the armies of the living God", and he should not be allowed to get away with that.

The first thing we notice about young David, is that he **knows** the "Living God", God whom he has known personally. He says to Saul, "I have attacked and rescued lambs from the mouth of lions and bears, and when they turned on me, I killed them (*literally*: ripped open their jaws!)" and concludes, "The Living God, who delivered me from the lion and the bear **WILL deliver me from the hand of this uncircumcised Philistine who dares to defy the armies of the Living God!**"<sup>3</sup>

This young man who has this incredible, unshakeable confidence in the "Living God", is the one who composes this great song of worship.

He starts with a triumphant declaration, "The Lord is my shepherd!" You can place the emphasis on any single word, and the declaration of triumph is just as powerful! *When the Lord God is my Shepherd* David continues, *I will never lack anything, nor want anything*. Spoken straight out of David's experience of life, each of us can make the same declaration, because we are here today

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 17:13-14

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 17:37

enjoying God's care, protection and provision. He is the Perfect Shepherd and we can declare with David's confidence, He is **MY** Shepherd!

David then points out the difference between the Perfect Shepherd, and himself, the ordinary shepherd.

- David may have led his sheep into green pastures, but the Perfect Shepherd **makes** him to lie down, **makes** him rest, relax and enjoy the green pastures. The green pastures are not only good to feed on, but resting on the green pasture is soul-cleansing therapy. God knows the stresses and strains of life which drain us of energy and joy, and He wants to restore joy in us. He leads us into green pastures and there **makes** us rest. We lie down comfortably on our backs on lush green grass (dry grass is prickly and uncomfortable!) and look up towards the heavens. The world around us disappears and we can focus our minds and our thoughts on God the Perfect Shepherd, but we must first acknowledge Him, *The Lord **IS** my shepherd.*
- David may lead sheep to the stream, but the Perfect Shepherd leads him beside **still** waters, where he can be nourished without fear of an undercurrent sweeping him away.
- Now, David is ready to tell us what the Perfect Shepherd does, which the ordinary shepherd **cannot do**.
  - He **restores my soul**; The Perfect Shepherd takes my exhausted body, tired mind and weary spirit consumed with worries and anxieties, and restores its vigour and fills it with new joy. I can rejoice in my soul, delighting in God who loves me and cares for me!
  - He **leads me in paths of righteousness**, for His Name sake. The path of righteous living leads me into the presence of our Righteous God, the Perfect Shepherd, but I cannot be righteous on my own unless the Perfect Shepherd **leads** me in paths of righteousness.
  - The dark valley may frighten me of impending death, but it is only a shadow of death! **I will not fear** anything the evil one tries against me; he uses death to frighten me, but I know death is only a shadow.

- I am **comforted by the knowledge** that the Perfect Shepherd is equipped to protect me. We live in times when *seeing is believing*, but David says, the knowledge, the awareness that the Perfect Shepherd has at His disposal, a rod to beat wild animals away, and a staff to pull me back from the cliff's edge, this knowledge is my comfort and relieves me of all worry and anxiety.

The Perfect Shepherd not only affirms me in private, but He goes much further, and affirms me in public! And how!

- The Perfect Shepherd, honours **ME** as His guest. He prepares a sumptuous banquet for me because this Perfect Shepherd does not do "ordinary" and "simple". Jesus taught us to pray "Give us this day our daily bread", teaching us to depend on "Our Father" who provides for us each day, but the Perfect Shepherd does not do "daily bread"; He does not place a slice of bread on our plate as our daily portion. He does only banquets!
- AND the Perfect Shepherd **prepares and serves** the banquet; he wears the chef's hat and apron, gets all sweaty and messy preparing a banquet for me, and He serves me! Our God will not hold back when blessing us.
- We all have enemies. Not all *enemies* want to kill us. Anyone who would discredit me before my Shepherd, who thinks I am good for nothing, who thinks I am misguided in placing my faith in the Perfect Shepherd and tries to persuade me to think and act otherwise, who thinks **MY Shepherd** does not really care and is only concerned with enriching Himself as many other shepherds do, they are all my enemies. They stand on the sidelines and watch the Lord My Shepherd prepare a banquet and delight in serving me, and watch me enjoy His banquet.
- The Lord, My Shepherd, is so pleased I have accepted His leadership as my Shepherd, and accepted His invitation to His banquet, He anoints my head with oil. He sets me apart as someone special, making me Holy, as He is Holy.

**This is the purpose of God, that we are hallmarked with God's Holiness.**

We may not think we deserve to be Holy as God is Holy, we may not even

believe we can be Holy as God is Holy, but God anoints us with oil. He consecrates us and **HE MAKES** us Holy, that we may be identified and known as His children, because we carry the hallmark of His Holiness.

David ends this Psalm of worship with two final declarations.

- every day of my life on earth. I am protected by God's goodness and God's mercy. God cares for me, not because I love Him, but because **HE** first loved me. He forgives all my mistakes and errors of judgment, accepts me as His own, and draws me into His Kingdom on earth where I am protected and cared for.
- and finally, I have God's Word, and I take His Word as my assurance, that when this life is over, I will live with Him, in His house, in eternity, for eternity.

As we prepare to enter into the season of Lent, let's remember this:

If in your actions, thoughts and words, you have made **every effort** (that's all it takes - *every effort*) to try and live up to God's Holiness, then rejoice and be happy, for you **ARE** a valuable member of God's family. Enjoy His graciousness and His lavishness in His home where you belong.

If in your actions, thoughts and words, you have strayed from God's Holiness, a simple act of repentance brings **God** running back to greet you. In Luke 15, the word **Forgiveness** is not mentioned. It is not a word on God's lips! The simple act of welcome with open arms, is forgiveness itself.

God our Loving Father, is also God our Perfect Shepherd. He knows our every need and our every fear; He journeys with us every day, to care, protect and provide for us, and He affirms our faith in Him when the world around us rejects Him and us.

Significantly, He anoints us and makes us Holy as He is Holy, that we may be known as His children here and now, and are ready to spend eternity with Him.

Will you allow this our God, to be your loving Father your Perfect Shepherd?

**AMEN.**