

## TO THIS DAY

In the monthly services at Sky View called Scripture and Prayer with Verna and Friends, we were talking about imagery in the Bible, especially as it relates to God and people. I think the best known image in this respect is that of God as a shepherd and we who believe as the sheep of his pasture. Besides Psalm 23, written by young David when he was tending his father's sheep, the Bible is full of passages that use the same theme. I wondered how it would be to write a piece that combined these beautiful Scriptures into a meaningful whole, so I asked a friend, with the help of a concordance, to assist me in gathering the references. The result was a piece I call "The Shepherd Trio," because I wrote it for three readers. It is part of the essay called "Teamwork (A Tribute to the Gaithers)."

This project yielded a wonderful bonus for me. Although I had read the story many times, I had no recollection that another shepherd had called the Lord his shepherd. That man is Jacob, and his story is told in Genesis. When he was an old man, he moved with his family to Egypt, where he was reunited with his long-lost son, Joseph. By then Joseph was married and had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, whom Jacob wanted to bless. According to Genesis 48:15,16, he began his blessing like this: *May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, THE GOD WHO HAS BEEN MY SHEPHERD ALL MY LIFE TO THIS DAY, the Angel who delivered me from harm – may he bless these boys.*

What a good time I have had meditating on this passage! It contains two great privileges of old age:

- First, the chance to look back over your life and give God glory, and
- Second, the chance to bless the younger generations, whether they are your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, or the younger people with whom you have contact, related or not.

When Jacob looked back, I'm sure he remembered the failures in his life; but more than that, he saw the faithfulness of God to him all his life. He also realized the impact that his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham had on him as he watched them walk with God. Maybe that's why he was so eager to bless his children and grandchildren. Jesus blessed the children. Let's do the same!

A wonderful picture of Jacob is emerging as I think about him afresh, and it is full of instruction for us. I like to look at the Old and New Testaments together when studying a person or topic, believing, as I do, in these couplets: The New is in the Old contained; the Old is by the New explained. Or: The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed. In the case of Jacob, great commentary is found in the book of Hebrews, written perhaps 1,800 years after Jacob's death. In chapter 11 people of faith are named along with the deeds that their faith impelled them to do. Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham are mentioned, and then comes this interesting sentence, on which I will comment shortly: *All these people were still living by faith when they died.*

And then, after telling of a dramatic incident involving Abraham and his son Isaac, the writer goes on to say: *By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.* From this, we could certainly say that Isaac and Jacob were also still living by faith when they died. And that verse clarifies for me something I have been pondering for a long time. I see now that there are two kinds of faith, just as there are two kinds of grace.

The first kind of each is the type that produces our salvation, as stated in Ephesians 2:8,9: *For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.* Then after we have been saved, we are meant to embark on a lifestyle characterized by the kind of grace and faith that lets us live a dynamic Christian life, one that is also full of good deeds. Jesus said we are to go into all the world and make disciples, and he would be with us to the end. What a description of living by faith: A life full of purpose (to bring people everywhere closer to

God by our teaching and example) and a constant awareness that the Lord is with us! Not all of God's children take up the challenge, though. Some never really get started, and some start well and then drop out. They do not lose their salvation, but they lose the opportunity to be a blessing to others and to glorify God.

Thank God, there have always been those who endure to the end, thus serving as role models for us. That's the significance of the statement that *all these people were still living by faith when they died*. Paul, the apostle, thought of his life as a race, and wanted so much to finish the race well. According to the Scriptures, eventually Paul knew that he had accomplished his goal, much to his delight. I certainly share his desire; I want to bring blessing to others and glory to God in my old age and still be living by faith when I die. What are your plans for this portion of your life?

My definition of grace is undeserved, unearned favor coming from God. This favor is so abundantly available that each of us should be able to say that God's grace has been sufficient to get us through the difficult circumstances that came our way. My definition of faith is simple: it is believing God – enough to act. This is far different from believing that there is a God; demons believe that much and they tremble! No, believing God, as I see it, means responding to him, first for salvation and then for a lifetime of connection with and obedience to God.

This brings me back to the story of Jacob. Last night I scanned his story as told in Genesis, much to my profit. Noticing afresh that God knew Jacob and Esau, his twin, when they were still in their mother's womb, my mind went to Psalm 139, where David said that God saw him and knew him before he was born. I was thrilled to think that there was another connection between Jacob and David besides the fact that both were shepherds who considered the Lord to be their shepherd! I have just reread Psalm 139 and the thrill exploded! Why, that Psalm could have been written by Jacob, so well does it fit his life! To me, the importance of linking the two men is that we know the relationship between God and David was so special; only now do I see that Jacob had that same deep, loving relationship with God, as did other people of faith. Could it be that even I am loved with that same quality of love? What about you? (What has happened as I type this is that for me the love of God just got deeper and higher and wider and longer, and I find that overwhelming.)

A full development of this subject would be great for a discipleship retreat. For this essay I will mention a few similarities and then let you develop this comparison, if you wish.

- Both men spent a lot of time running and hiding from someone who wanted them dead. No matter where they went, God was there to meet them.

- Both had many children from multiple wives. Both were caused grief by some of their children.

- Both wrestled with God: Jacob literally and David with words. Both were tenacious. Jacob wouldn't let go until God blessed him, a sign of submission according to Hebrews 7:7, which says the lesser is blessed by the greater. A number of David's Psalms start out sounding as if he and God were opponents. After pouring out all his complaints, David always ended up praising the Lord, the clear winner. (See Psalm 13, for example.)

- Both used many names when referring to God, indicating to me that they had deep personal relationships with the Lord, which included many encounters worth pondering and remembering with names as well as memorials. I knew that about David, of course, but this insight into Jacob's heart and mind seems wonderfully fresh to me.

I will list again the three names for God that Jacob used when blessing his grandsons and then add other names that he used when he blessed his son Joseph (Genesis 49:24,25):

1. The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked.
2. The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day.
3. The Angel who has delivered me from all harm.
4. The Mighty One of Jacob.

5. The Shepherd.
6. The Rock of Israel.
7. Your father's God, who helps you.
8. The Almighty, who blesses you.

I have a feeling this is only the start of Jacob's list of names for God. Now I want to comment on name #2, especially on the phrases "all my life" and "to this day." "All my life" means to me that Jacob saw God's involvement in his life back to his birth, possibly even to his conception. Think what that means: acceptance of your genetic characteristics and your parents; a sense that God was directing you even before you knew him personally; a sense of being called according to the purpose of God in such a way that even your sins and follies somehow work out for good. How blessed are those who are at peace with their past, who can confidently say, "The Lord has been my shepherd all my life!"

"To this day," on the other hand, refers to the present and, by implication, the future. No matter what the day, tomorrow is in the future; when it comes, however, it is today, the present. Sound familiar? This is the principle behind living one day at a time. The Psalmist said daily, *"This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it."* A lifestyle of praise and thanksgiving is developed in those who adopt this practice. Think how our confidence in God would grow if we were to say daily (second line mine):

The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day  
Will surely be there to guide me all the rest of the way.

I think the expression "to this day" includes an acceptance, not only of what we have experienced in life, but of the way things are in our old age. Jacob has much to teach us about ageing and dying.

– He accepted infirmities as he aged. Jacob walked with a limp for many years. And then, according to Genesis 48:10, he was afflicted the same way his father Isaac had been: with failing eyesight, which progressed until he could hardly see.

– He submitted to the advice of his children. I'm thinking of the time he allowed Benjamin to go to Egypt with his brothers. It was not easy for Jacob to relinquish control, but he did it! So can we.

– He relocated. He moved with his children and grandchildren to Egypt from Canaan, a really big change. Many of us would do well to give up our resistance to change.

– He prepared for death by talking about it, distributing his assets – including blessings, and giving instructions concerning his burial. Thank you, Jacob, for the fine example you have set for us!

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Afterword: Though I have never been a literal shepherd, I certainly have been aware of myself as one of God's sheep. I am glad to have reached the age where I can look back and sincerely say with Jacob, THE LORD HAS BEEN MY SHEPHERD ALL MY LIFE TO THIS DAY. I am crippled, too, and my physical powers are diminishing, yet I have no quarrel with God. My wonderful shepherd will lead me all the way Home and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!