

Thanksgiving: (*Psalm 100:4*)

“I give thanks to you, O God; I give thanks, for your name is near. I recount your wondrous deeds ... I will sing praise to the God of Jacob.” (Psalm 75:1,9)

Dear Father,

How good to spend time with you. Thank you for your support, comfort and guidance, and for your forgiveness, loving kindness and tender mercy.

Hymn: *by Charles Wesley*

1. O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!
2. My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth abroad the honours of thy name.
3. Jesus! the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears, 'tis life, and health, and peace.
4. He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean; his blood availed for me.
5. He speaks, and *listening to his voice*, new life the dead receive;
the mournful, broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe.

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Scripture Reading:

- John 10: 1-6, 25-30 (*maybe read the whole chapter*)

Hymn: *by Horatius Bonar*

1. I heard the voice of Jesus say: “Come unto Me and rest;
lay down, thou weary one, lay down thy head upon My breast!”
I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad;
I found in Him a resting-place, and He has made me glad.
2. I heard the voice of Jesus say: “Behold, I freely give the living water;
thirsty one, stoop down, and drink, and live!”
I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life-giving stream;
my thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in Him.
3. I heard the voice of Jesus say: “I am this dark world’s Light;
look unto Me, thy morn shall rise, and all thy day be bright!”
I looked to Jesus, and I found in Him my Star, my Sun;
and in that Light of life I’ll walk, till all my journey's done.

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Message:

Knowing His Voice

What a wonderful way Jesus had of getting peoples' attention, not just at the time he spoke, but forever afterwards. His stories use vivid imagery that his listeners would have immediately related to and would remember and think about, perhaps not always "getting it" on first hearing but eventually the embedded truth becomes evident.

An example of this is the parable of the shepherd and his flock in John chapter 10. It seems the disciples didn't understand it (verse 6) – the shepherd who calls his sheep and leads them. Jesus had to explain it to them. No one can lead sheep except the shepherd who knows them. And only the sheep who know their shepherd will respond to that particular voice. But the time is coming, and is now (to quote Jesus, John 4:23) when this parable is becoming even more significant today for the one who "trembles at His word" (Isaiah 66:2). Do we understand the applicability and seriousness of what Jesus is saying, or are we like the disciples who hear an interesting story but fail to grasp its immediate application for us today?

Today we are hearing many voices calling to us. Some are obviously ungodly and it takes no great discernment to recognise them as such. You would already be making such judgments on a fairly regular basis, especially with what is presented in the media. Despite their superficial attractiveness, as some offerings appear, a moment's reflection soon makes you see it for what it is – greed, shallowness, self interest and similar. And this is all part of what the Holy Spirit does in the life of the Christian as a result of studying the Scriptures, listening to the exposition of Scripture, and discussing together in the context of Bible studies and fellowship. In this way the plumb line of God's word has its practical and regular application.

But the enemy does not give up. He has a range of methods available to him to oppose the Christian and attack the church which he will and does use, but there is one particular tactic he used at the very beginning and which he has used over and over again ever since. And why would that be? Because it is highly effective. And what is it? It is deception. From the very beginning when Eve declared "the serpent deceived me" (Genesis 3:13), throughout history and right to the very end (Revelation 12:9; 13:14). The enemy even tried it on Jesus (Luke 4:9-11). The warnings are repeated often throughout Scripture: "Do not be deceived" (Deut 11:16; Jeremiah 29:9; 2 Thess 2:3).

It's early days yet, and maybe for many of our older generation it will be less of a problem, but we all need to be aware of it. The introduction of Artificial Intelligence, abbreviated to AI (although livestock farmers may know AI to mean something else) has opened the door to a new level of deception that may be very difficult to identify. It seems that AI will enable those who want to to present well known persons saying things and presenting things that they never said, or would never have said. Feasibly we could soon be seeing realistic videos of Billy Graham and other well known evangelists and Bible scholars presenting views and doctrines that they never held to. We can expect to see images of personages who appear very spiritual, who seem to know the Scriptures well, answering questions in interviews or live online chat situations providing convincing and persuasive answers to deep questions. They will appear authentic. They will be persuasive. They will

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convince many. How can the Christian be protected and remain in the Truth? What will be important is not whether you are listening to AI or not, is it real or simulated, indeed it may be impossible to tell, but the issue will be whether what you are hearing is the truth or not.

In the parable that we are looking at, it is evident that there are many shepherds, but only one true shepherd. To an outsider watching it may be difficult to tell the difference between the shepherds. They look similar, act in similar ways, they all know about sheep, they all say similar things. But the sheep will only respond to one voice.

It is imperative that Christians know their Saviour. The sheep need to know their shepherd and recognise his voice. Our shepherd is gentle and humble (Matt 11:29). His voice is not heard in the streets (Is 42:2). His presence is like a dove. He uses persuasion, not coercion. He woos, not threatens. Yes, he can certainly show his anger and the strength of his arm, but his dealings with his people are as a good father with his child.

In addition to his character, he has given us his word, and woe to those who add to it or take away from it (Rev 22:18). The Christian therefore has an obligation, for their own security and wellbeing, to know what God has said. Bible reading and study is imperative. Scriptures is the plumb line of truth against which all else that is said can be compared.

And the Christian must learn to talk with the Lord. The world mocks the idea of God talking with or to the individual. We hear it often enough: “he thinks God speaks to him directly!” thereby accusing the other of spiritual arrogance or superiority. But it is the privilege of every Christian to draw near to, to cuddle into, their Father, and hear from him. This talking with the Lord is called prayer and needs to be a regular part of everyday life. “What a friend we have in Jesus, what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer”. Everything!

And the Christian has the privilege of fellowship with other believers. Of course, that can present challenges when different personalities don't get on (Proverbs 27:17), but it is essential, in fact mandatory, for several reasons, including the avoidance of deception. Isolation provides an easy target.

In all of these things, the Christian learns to know and recognise the voice of the Good Shepherd. The Christian sees the deception of the pretenders not just because they see the flaws in their arguments or can fault their proposals (these indicators might be hard to detect), but because it's not the voice they recognise. It may look good, it may sound plausible, it seems harmless, the offers are attractive, and many are on board. But it's not my Shepherd speaking. I know his voice, and it's not the one I'm now hearing. I can't put my finger on it, but it's not him. I'm not going there.

You can have confidence that you can recognise the voice of your Saviour, the voice of the Good Shepherd, of Jesus who laid down his life for your safety and security, and yet who lives. Actually, you know that voice already. Listen for it, and when you hear it, and you will and you do already, you will recognise it and know peace, security, comfort and strength.

Amen.

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Prayer for Suffering Christians: (Barnabas Prayer for 2/7/2023)

Lord God and Heavenly Father, we pray for the troubled land of Afghanistan. We know that poverty and hunger have left more than 28 million people needing urgent help. We ask that You provide for the needs of those who have nothing, especially our Christian brothers and sisters who also have to contend with the risk of being killed for their faith. If it is Your will, please keep safe those who seek first Your Kingdom in these lands. Give them grace to endure.

In Jesus' mighty Name. (Matthew 6:33; 24:13)

Hymn: *by Charles A Miles*

1. I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses.

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.*

2. He speaks, and the sound of His voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing;
And the melody that He gave to me within my heart is ringing.

3. I'd stay in the garden with Him tho' the night around me be falling;
But He bids me go; thro' the voice of woe, His voice to me is calling.

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Benediction

Be assured that as you draw near to Jesus, he will draw near to you. You have been given eternal life and you will not perish. You cannot be taken away from his care for your God is greater than all. (James 4:8; John 10:28-29)

The Lord bless you and keep you.

Amen

This service was prepared by Warren Mack for HopeNet SA