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“What’s In A Relationship ... With God?”

In his book *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey tells the stories of people who had come to Christianity expecting really wonderful things from their relationship with God, but had ended up being disappointed. Some of those had left the faith altogether; others had stayed, but really were just going through the motions.

One of the problems that Yancey mentioned was the language we use. For example, it’s been popular for a long time for people to talk about having a “personal relationship with God.” I mean, it sounds good, but the problem is that, what many may experience in their day-to-day relationship with God, can feel very different from the other personal relationships they enjoy. And it’s partly because we can’t see God. It can be very hard to hear God. And our prayers are often more monologue than dialogue. And even though we may *believe* that God has actually acted in our lives, those actions can sometimes be hard to pin down. And even though *we* might interpret certain things as acts of God’s, *other people* might interpret those same things differently.

So, that raises the question: What can we *realistically* expect from a relationship with God? I think the answer to that question can be found in the psalm we just recited, Psalm 23.

But it's important to keep in mind that the Bible tends to talk about what we might expect from a relationship with God in the *images* it uses to describe God. And it uses images, because the human language simply cannot do God justice. And so, we read in scripture that *God is like a strong rock*, a solid place upon which we can stand. That *God is like a castle*, a place where we can find refuge. That *God is like a mother hen* gathering her chicks under her wings, a place where we can find protection. And that *God is like the best of fathers*, providing for his children, teaching them, disciplining them, but in a just and loving way.

Now, it might surprise you to hear that our psalm uses two images for God, because most of us have grown up thinking of this psalm as describing God as the quintessential shepherd, and only that. But a closer reading will reveal something more.

In the first four verses, God is presented as the shepherd *par excellence* who: provides for his sheep; who leads them in right directions; and who never abandons them. But in the last two

verses, the imagery changes; and there God is presented as a gracious and hospitable host, who: welcomes us to a sumptuous meal in his house; and who then invites us to stay with him for the rest of our lives. So then, what do these two images of God — that of the good shepherd, and that of the gracious host — tell us about what we can expect from a relationship with God?

First, we can expect God to provide for our needs. (Not necessarily with our “wants,” mind you, but certainly with our needs.) And the lovely imagery of verses 2 and 3 talks about how the shepherd provides for the ordinary daily needs of the flock, where we read:

²He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. ³He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake.

In short (and, perhaps, obviously) “green pastures” are places where there’s plenty of good grass for the sheep to eat. “Still waters” are places where it’s safe and accessible for the sheep to drink. And the “right paths” are those that lead us from danger into safety, and towards more good pasture. And it’s through these

measures that the shepherd “revives my soul” — that is, that’s how the shepherd keeps us alive.

And so, in these verses, the psalmist is inviting us to think about the daily necessities of life: food to eat, clothes to wear, water to drink, a safe and warm place to live. And so on. And all of these, the psalmist asserts, are provided us by God our shepherd.

In fact, we take it on faith that God has created the earth in such a way, that there are adequate resources for *everyone* to live a simple and basic life; that is, if we will use those resources wisely, and share them justly. And because there *are* people in the world who don’t yet enjoy those necessities of life, God therefore calls us, as his people, to live simply and give generously, so that everyone has enough, and no one has too much.

So, and according to Psalm 23:2-3, what we can expect from a relationship with God, is that God will provide for our needs, and that God will lead us towards the right paths.

But there’s more.

The next thing the psalmist tells us, to expect from our relationship with God our shepherd, is a bit tougher to figure out. Let's hear, again, the fourth verse:

⁴Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Now, many preachers will claim that here is the promise of protection from danger. But I don't think that's right, because if it was, I think we'd all have to agree that, in this — in protecting his people from danger — God our shepherd has been an abject failure! And that's why I think something else is being talked about.

When our daughter Emily was still quite young — 8 or 10 years old — she needed to undergo some corrective surgery. It was going to be a painful procedure, and she was quite nervous about it all. But what gave her the courage to go through it, was the knowledge that Peggy and I would be with her when they put her to sleep, and that we would be there when she awoke afterwards. And so, Emily took comfort knowing that *she'd never be alone*.

Something similar, I think, is being expressed in our gospel reading, when Jesus says

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand ” (John 10:27-28).

This is *not* the promise of protection from danger, but rather the promise that God *is always with us*; the promise that we are never alone. And with that knowledge and assurance, we *can* face daunting and challenging situations because we know that we are always in God’s hands; that we live in the shadow of God’s wings; and that nothing (as St. Paul elsewhere wrote) that nothing can separate us from God’s love. Nothing.

And that takes us to the fourth and final thing that we can expect from a relationship with God, and that is: there will always be a welcome for us in God’s presence.

And so, let’s look again at verses 5 and 6:

⁵You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.

⁶Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

When these verses are heard in the context of a funeral, as they often are, we will usually interpret them to mean that there will be a place for us in heaven. But that's probably not what the *psalmist* was thinking about, because in those days the Jews didn't have a fully formed theology of the afterlife. But in those days, the phrase "the house of the Lord," referenced the Temple in Jerusalem.

And so, what the psalmist had in mind, as the final thing that we can expect from our relationship with God, is the promise that there will *always* be a place for us at the table of God, with food on our plates, and drink in our cups, and plenty of anointing oil to cleanse and refresh us. And there, we can be in the presence of God, and experience his love and goodness *forever*. And that's what God is like. We're no longer merely *guests* at his table; we're members of his *family*; always welcomed in his presence.

And so, to wrap us: What can we expect from a relationship with God? Well, this Psalm tells us, four things: that God will provide for our needs; that God guide us towards the right paths; that God will always be with us; and that God will always welcome us, no matter who we are, and no matter what.

And the main thing that we have to do to realize these promises, is simply to trust; to trust that what our psalmist experienced in his or her life, will become a reality in our lives as well. Trust, and believe. For believing, as it turns out, is seeing.

Amen.