

Rev Tim Perkins
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“Jesus asked the boy’s father, ‘How long has he been like this?’ ‘From childhood, ‘he answered. ‘It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.’ ‘If you can’? said Jesus. ‘Everything is possible for the one who believes.’ Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’”(Mark 9: 21 - 24)

Dear Friends,

I am grateful to Rev’s Lesley and Shannon and to Deacon Liz for writing the Circuit Pastoral Letter over the last three weeks. You are stuck with me again this week! And then in the coming fortnight Rev’s Roger and Roberta will be at the helm.

Despite the quotation above, I want to return to the words of Psalm 23 that I reflected on in my last letter to you. You may recall that I had begun to explore whether it really is possible to live a life without lack or want, as the Psalmist puts it. Can we journey through life with a sense of peace and contentment and without any sense of fear? Is that really possible?

I believe it is even though I do not always live in that reality! I have been spending some time reading Dallas Willard’s book, ‘Life without lack,’ over recent weeks. I have been struck by these words: *“There are three things that must be working within us before we can truly experience the sufficiency of God: faith, death to self, and agape love. These three combine to create a triangle of sufficiency in our lives. When faith, death to self, and love are alive in you, you will find that hope and joy pervade your entire life as a natural result. Each one is a gift from God, and our privilege and calling is to become the kind of people who can receive these gifts and work with God to develop them as we learn to live a life without lack.”*

I want to reflect briefly just on the first of these three this week, faith. Trust is another equally good word for it. To have faith in God is simply to trust God, to rely upon him in the face of all your fears. And to reflect on this key aspect of Christian living I want to dwell on the passage quoted above from Mark’s Gospel. You may recall that the account comes immediately after Peter, James and John’s experience of the Transfiguration of Jesus and the appearance with Jesus of Moses and Elijah. It is almost as if Mark is contrasting the disciples’ inability to grasp just who Jesus is in the face of the blindingly obvious evidence, with the desperate cry of the man whose son was ill. This man had little evidence to go on but what he had heard whispered in the streets of this man Jesus. *‘If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us,’* he cries out. In his desperation he seems to have just the tiniest grain of faith or hope that what he has heard of Jesus might just be true.

Then comes the part where most of us want to crawl under a rock and hide. Jesus said to the man, *‘If you can? Everything is possible for the one who believes.’* Everything? Really? Does this mean that all things are possible to us too? Yes, it does, if God is our Shepherd and we should feel free to speak right back to Jesus the words of the desperately hopeful father, *‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.’*

Dallas Willard goes on to say: *“The nature of faith involves love and the desire for good. When the father begged Jesus to heal his son, that was faith – love and desire – in action. When with tears he cried out, ‘Lord, I believe,’ he did believe. He had just enough faith to make a fool of himself (dying to self) by coming there in the first place. You know what they were all saying*

back home 'Yeah, yeah. Old Josh. He took his kid up to see this wild preacher...' Yes, he did just that. With a great deal of desperation and tears he cried out, 'I believe. Help my unbelief.' And Jesus did help, by healing the boy. The cup of the man's faith only had a few drops in it, but you can be sure he left with a whole lot more. Everything is possible for the one who believes.'

Does that describe my faith, or yours? Do we really believe that everything is possible to God? Jesus repeats the same thing in the following chapter when he is talking about the camel and the eye of a needle: *'Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.'* All things! Faith or trust that God is our Shepherd and that his plans for us are good.

But it is hard to believe that when we see so much pain and evil in the world or in our own lives that often has such devastating effect. We are trying to live in faith, in the kingdom of a loving God, but the ways of this world are constantly shaping our minds and thoughts, and our thoughts affect our beliefs and our actions follow on from there. Many of us live with a foot in both kingdoms. What we see and experience of life in this world often causes us to doubt the goodness and power of our Shepherd, and we somehow fall in to the trap of thinking that we can do a better job ourselves, we can sort our own problems, and we begin to seek to live in our own kingdom and not in God's. We become like the sheep that wandered off and got lost. And yet God will give everything for that one sheep. God will give everything for you. The only constraint to living in the kingdom of God is trusting that the King knows best and that the King is sovereign and throwing yourself wholeheartedly into his arms of love and mercy.

That thought leads us onto the second aspect of Willard's triangle of sufficiency – death to self. But I will consider that more next time. For now, I want to encourage you to reflect upon your experiences of the goodness of God. Find some time, no matter how difficult or dark life may seem to be for you at the moment, to sit down and physically write a list of the things you have to be thankful for, the times when you have known God's goodness, the places where you see his love at work in your life and in this world. 'Count your blessings, name them one by one' as the old song goes.

And spend some time each day this week meditating on these words from the first half of Ps. 23. Allow them to sit in your mind in such a way that they counter the thoughts of doubt or distrust that often reside there. Even memorise them if you can so that you can call them to mind whenever you need to:

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me." (Psalm 23: 1 – 4)

With Every Blessing

Rev Tim Perkins