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SIMPLE CRICKETS

I cannot stand the smell of fish. However, I love fishing. My love for fishing started in my childhood. My dad took us fishing almost every summer. My, how we loved his tackle box. It was filled with all kinds of cool lures. We were convinced that in order to catch the most fish, we needed the biggest, fanciest lure we could find. In our minds, neon colors, lots of gadgets, maybe some glitter, was sure to bring in an abundant catch. I don't think we ever caught anything with those disco lures. However, my dad, using a simple live cricket would catch enough for all of us. It took us a long time to give up those fancy lures and start using dad's real bait. Once we did, we started catching fish. (You could argue that the real reasons we didn't catch any fish were incessant talking, and casting, but that doesn't go with what I'm trying to do here).

Shortly after accepting God's invitation to relationship with Him, I was excited to find out that fishing was involved.....fishing for men.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Matthew 4:18-22

I'm still trying to figure out this fishing for men thing. I will be the first to admit that fishing for fish is much different than fishing for men - but - there are some aspects that are similar, at least for me. In both settings, my first reaction is to grab the biggest, fanciest lure that I can find. When it comes to fishing for men, that "lure" is usually a building and a cool program - lots of gadgets - maybe some glitter - sure to bring in some un-churched folks. The only problem is that in most cases, this doesn't seem to be working. Sure, some folks *nibble* on the bait, for a while, but very few folks actually *take* the bait. This isn't news to anyone, many churches are having this discussion, but I am amazed at how fast a church

conversation about imitating the ministry of Christ, a ministry that was defined by 'going out,' turns into a conversation about how we can get people into our church buildings.

Simon Peter, James, and John, left everything to follow Christ. They left their nets, family, and careers to fish for men. As they followed their Rabbi, they learned how to seek and find, they learned how to fish. Yet, we have the hardest time leaving our buildings. Have church buildings and programs become the lures that we use to fish for men? Are we so attached to our buildings that it is impossible for us to imitate the ministry of Christ? I'm not saying that all buildings and programs are bad. I know that some churches have had great success with both, but I question whether it was the cool building/program or if maybe it was something deeper.....like relationship. Maybe, relationship, the kind that Jesus demonstrated and described in His command to Love God and Neighbor, is the 'simple cricket' that so many of our churches are missing?

Great things have happened within the walls of church buildings. Gathering together with other members of the Body of Christ to worship and fellowship is essential. I am grateful for the church buildings that I have grown up in, I have learned a lot about Christ within those walls. But, I also learned that fishing for men involves *staying put* and *tossing out new lures*. I am not advocating selling all of our church buildings off - what I am asking - is if our attachment and dependence on them is hindering the Commission to spread the Gospel?

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NUMBER TWENTY-THREE

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he
 leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of
 righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow
 of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with
 me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of
 mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil;
 my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the
 days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of
 the LORD for ever. (Psalm 23)

Those have to be among the most read, most famous, and most comforting words in the Bible. They can be found on bookmarkers, plaques, and jewelry. They have been the inspiration for paintings, both mediocre and great. Much has been said and written about the twenty-third Psalm. Therefore it should be daunting to try to come

He is the good shepherd.
There is no doubt about
that. Are you his sheep?

up with something original. What makes it more daunting is that I was raised in southern New Mexico. That is cattle country, not sheep country. There is a big difference between herding steers and herding sheep, and I know little about either. But here goes, anyway.

My Shepherd

David was familiar with herding sheep; he was a shepherd. He knew the ins and outs of handling this particular animal. He knew what it was to be a shepherd. Apparently so did a descendant of his. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd." (Jn 10:11) He discoursed at length about shepherding and sheep. How, then, did Jesus look on being a shepherd.

When he said he was the good shepherd, he followed it with an explanation: the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. David knew what it was to be a good shepherd and risk his life.

And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear,

and took a lamb out of the flock: And I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear. (1 Sam 17:34-36)

David risked his life for his sheep, but never had to actually die for them. Jesus, on the other hand, had that as his purpose from birth. He gave his life for us, his sheep. "I lay down my life, that I might take it again." (Jn 10:17) If laying down a life is the definition of a good shepherd, Jesus was as good a shepherd as there ever was.

Jesus gave a second definition of a good shepherd. "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine." (Jn 10:14) In a sense, the writer of Hebrews says that he is a better shepherd because he knows his sheep. He became one of them, that he might know them better. "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." (Heb 4:15-16) He is the good shepherd. There is no doubt about that. The real question is whether you know him; whether you are one of his sheep.

I Shall Not Be in Want

The next lines of the Psalm begin with "I shall not want." Some translations put it, "I shall not be in want." Does this mean that God will give us everything we want, no matter how bad it may be for us? Perhaps. Sometimes I think that God answers even our bad prayers, just to show us how bad our thinking is. But for the most part, this may be more a question of need. It is more accurately translated "I shall lack nothing." Interestingly, the word used for "want" is the same word used in Genesis 8 to describe the waters abating or decreasing. The psalmist is saying my needs are decreasing. Someone once defined a need as the difference between what is and what should be. So David is saying that God supplies what should be more and more.

The psalmist then describes some of those things that a sheep would need: green pastures and still waters. But then he makes it more personal: restoration of soul and paths of righteousness.

What is restoration of the soul? "Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones." (Pr 16:24) Are you in need of encouragement? Read God's word. Are you in pain? Let God's Spirit into your life. "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will

send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me.” (Jn 15:26) What more pleasant words could there be for the soul than the good news of salvation? Sin no longer has rule in the lives of God’s people. Forgiveness of sin is available. Forgiveness can be assured. That is the ultimate restoration of the soul.

What does man need? What is the ultimate of what should be? It is righteousness. It is restoration into a state where one can walk with God. If what should be minus what is equals need, then righteousness is the need. Man once walked with God. Sin separated him from God. Righteousness makes up the difference. But, “there is none righteous, no, not one.” (Rom 3:10) So how can he lead me in the paths of righteousness?

For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. (Rom 4:3-5)

He leads in the paths of righteousness because without the Christ there is no righteousness. The faith of, and on, Jesus is our righteousness. He leads us in the paths of righteousness because he is actually carrying us in that path.

There is something else we need that he promises as well. Comfort. We all like to be comfortable. When we are not comfortable, that makes us uncomfortable. Makes sense, sort of. When we walk through deep shadows, we need to feel that we are not alone. When life seems to be at its lowest ebb, God is there to let us know that it will get better.

It seems that Jesus was frequently telling his disciples, “Fear not.” Maybe that was because fear was a significant force in their lives. The church in Thessalonica apparently had worry issues. Somebody had told them that Jesus was coming back very soon, and they just were not ready for it. (Or some were too ready, giving up their jobs to wait for him on the mountain tops.) Paul has to repeat a command to “comfort yourselves.” He reminds them of the comfort of God’s grace. Whatever we face here on earth, it is temporary. It is only a stubbed toe. It hurts when it happens, but the pain is soon gone. Even death is but a temporary stop on the way to eternal life. “Comfort yourselves with these words.”

I am honored

The final several lines of this short psalm address the ways in which God honors his people. When we want to honor a person, how do we do it? There is the gold watch or other fancy gift. But the best way to honor a person usually involves food. We have birthday parties with cake and ice cream. Along with the gold watch or

some other gift, the retirement party may be a dinner, or at least a lunch. God’s way of honoring us is not much different.

Not only does God prepare us a table, he invites our enemies to sit there. It’s a pretty big honor to have a party in your honor if all the guests are your friends. But when your enemies are invited, and have to come, it is possibly the highest form of revenge. Jesus knew that it felt good to be honored above others, some of whom may not have appreciated you.

When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at

A need is the difference
between what is and
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meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (Luke 14:8-11)

On top of that, the host publicly declares you are special. Anointing was the equivalent to the proverbial key to the executive washroom. Everybody got their feet washed; not everybody got anointed with oil. And then to have unlimited refills without having to get up. In the presence of our enemies, God promises to wait on us hand and foot.

The retirement banquet has to end. The birthday party guests go home. The day of honor is over and you go back to being an ordinary guy. That is how it is in life. But in real life, that is God’s life, the party never ends. I had a friend who always wanted to find two girls named Goodness and Mercy because then he would never have to worry about being alone; they would follow him forever. God has provided these two servants to be with us all of our lives. Goodness and Mercy. In a world that seems to know neither, God honors us forever with both. Because these two are servants in God’s house. The parties may end in this life, but because of God’s son and his choice to live and die as one of us, the party in God’s house goes on and on. Because of God’s goodness and mercy we can dwell in his house forever.

HIGHS AND LOWS

I am body surfing in Hawaii. I swim out a few hundred yards from shore, no mean feat for me. I wait for the right moment. I am in a trough between breakers. I start swimming for shore with all I have left. The next thing I know I am atop a wave speeding shoreward. Looking down I see the beach about twelve feet below me and realize that if I don't put my feet down and start running at just the right moment I am about to be slammed into the packed sand of Sunset Beach. After a morning of that, I need a chiropractor to fix the neck I nearly broke a couple of times because I didn't get my feet down.

Life moves in such cycles: the valley, the peak, and repeat. We rely on that cycle when it comes to radio signals or light. Our bodies even need the cycle of dark and light; ask anybody who has been on a transoceanic flight. Efficiency experts talk of matching our circadian rhythms to our work schedules. Every diabetic knows the cycle of low and high glucose counts. It seems that God also understands that for every low we need a corresponding high. He built it into the calendar of festivals for the Jewish people.

Ten days into a month you hear a trumpet sound. The songs in synagogue are mournful. The emphasis of the day is on sin. It is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Today God makes his decisions about what will come to you in the next year. You have spent ten days thinking about your sins in the previous year, and spent those days going to those you have wronged to ask for their forgiveness. On top of all that, you are not allowed to eat. The pleasures of life are denied to you for twenty-five hours. This is your annual trip into the valley. The command for the day even sounds low. "It shall be an holy convocation unto

you; and ye shall afflict your souls." (Lev 23:27) Affliction, sin, atonement; how low can it get?

The day after, you begin a climb. You start upward by beginning to build an imperfect building. Five days after Yom Kippur the command is to feast for seven days. It's time to party! And such a party. The Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles) is sometimes merely called "The Feast," it is such a party. Sins have been forgiven. A new year has begun. The command to abstain from food has been rescinded and replaced by a command to feast. Not just eat; feast! And to do so for seven days. If you are like me, it doesn't take a command to get food into your belly. How much higher can you get than to be told you have to eat?

Yes, God understand his creation. He knows that when we are at our low point we need a following high. Maybe not always such extremes as these two holidays, but we need the contrast. Without the following high point, our lows become depression. The peaks, however, cannot last. Perhaps that is why *Succos* is a seven day feast. Not only does God know we need to recover from a low point, but he puts a limit on the high. The command to feast is constrained to a seven-day period. Feast now, because the rest of the year is coming at you quickly. Just like that twelve-foot wave slams into the beach, the peaks God gives us are followed by lower points. Our bodies are made for cycles. On this earth there is no perpetual low, or perpetual high. And maybe that is another lesson of the fall festivals. Although the feast is followed by the mundane, God promises us that even that will not last. There will be another peak to climb. It's just on the other side of this valley.

(Yom Kippur is October 9 and Succos begins October 14, 2008.)

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