

4

SHEPHERDS AND THIEVES

JOHN 10:1-21

We had you look at this passage in the past year in other devotional resources. Right in the middle of the passage is a core verse for Living Word.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

- John 10:10

And in The Message translation: *A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.*

That is how Jesus describes life. It is hard. There are thieves everyone. Real thieves and metaphorical thieves. Cancer is a thief. Abuse is a thief. The abuser is a thief. A thief is anything and anyone who takes away what you need to flourish. You have experienced many such thieves in your life, and each one has hurt you.

Reflect: What are some of the thieves that have hurt you the most? Are there any right-now thieves that are hurting you?

Jesus says he is the good shepherd who is here to protect, take care of, and nurture the flock. He is not a hired hand who doesn't care about the flock. He is a shepherd whose life is devoted to the flock. To you. And it is his mission to rescue you from the thieves that are everywhere.

The last part of your reading for today tells you just how far Jesus the good shepherd will go to protect you and take care of you.

There are still thieves. There is still evil. There is still suffering. But there is a Great Shepherd who will risk everything so you may have real and eternal, more and better life than you ever dreamed of.

Worship: Take some time to reflect, consider, draw near, and love this Great Shepherd. Trust him. Rest in him. What do you experience as you do this?

5

ARGUE WITH GOD, BUT CAREFULLY

GENESIS 32:22-32

Do you know the very name Israel means “strives with God” or “wrestles with God”? Before his name was changed to Israel, he was known as Jacob. Jacob did a lot of foolish things. Dumb things. Wrong things. He hurt others. He brought pain into others' lives. And he was about to face the consequences of all the wrongdoing, slamming him like a freight train (or a herd of camels, to be culturally appropriate). You can read the back story in Genesis 27:1–32:21. It is quite a story.

So, now Jacob is in a real mess and facing death. He is desperate, so he does what many of us do in such times. He turns to God. And he has a powerful encounter. He wrestles with God. And in that encounter, he is changed. So is his name.

We must do the same. We must wrestle with God, strive with God, struggle with God. We can even argue with God. We can protest evil and suffering (even when it is our own evil), but we must do so very carefully.

We bring our confusion, our dismay, our grief, our hurt, our fear, our doubt, our frustration, and in the right amount and in the right way, our anger to God.

Wrestling is not fun. It is not easy. And God will prevail. If you hang in there, you will eventually get the answer, the wisdom, the grace, the faith, the hope you need. And you will be marked (changed) by the wrestling.

We'll help you wrestle with God about evil, pain, and suffering, but in a way that will be redemptive and help you draw close to God and not turn away from him.

Reflect: Are you ready to wrestle with God honestly, humbly, vigorously, instead of dismissing, ignoring, or rejecting him? If you have been doing these devotionals, you are warming up for what lies ahead.

Living
in tough
times

THE QUESTION THAT DOES NOT GO AWAY

MARCH 3 · DEVOTIONAL PREPARED BY
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1

I BELIEVE, BUT I NEED HELP

MARK 9:14-29

I have always been moved by the story of the distraught father whose little boy was plagued by demonic powers. The disciples had been unable to do anything to help the boy. Now, Jesus is on the scene and engages the father. The father asks for help. “Jesus if you can do something, please do it.” *“If you can?”* Jesus replies, *“Everything is possible for one who believes.”* Now comes one of my favorite verses in the Bible:

“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.”

I think that is where most of us are much of the time when life is hard. We believe, but we know we need more. Our belief is not strong enough. Our faith is shaky. Our hope is fragile. Our trust is wavering. That is what suffering does to us. There are few things more effective in hurting our faith than times of suffering.

Evil means bad things happen in the world. All sorts of bad things happen for a wide variety of reasons.

Pain is what we experience when bad things happen to us. It may be physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, or some combination of those things.

Suffering is what we go through when pain enters our life. It is the process of living with the pain of bad things happening to us.

Reflect: For your very first reflection of this series, do a little remembering of the hardest things you have gone through. What bad things have happened to you? What current suffering are you experiencing? How is life hard? And generally, how are you doing right now? How is your faith? How is your connection with Jesus?

Pray: A very good prayer to pray today and all days is, “Lord, I believe, help me overcome my weakness, my doubts, my confusion, and those places where belief is weak.”

2

WHERE ELSE WILL WE GO?

JOHN 6:60-71

Everyone has to come up with an answer to the problem of pain, suffering, and evil. And it’s a BIG problem without any easy answers. Well-meaning people try to give us simple answers to our pain and suffering. Sometimes we are the well-meaning people giving answers to others who hurt!

Suffering is a problem, but it is a “wicked” problem (no pun intended). It is actually a type of problem that has no apparent solution. It is so complicated and seems to change so quickly that just as you think you are finding an answer, the problem has changed. Evil and suffering are indeed wicked problems.

And I like to use the word *mystery*. For even when we begin to find clues and partial answers, and even as we begin to put the pieces together and see some perspective emerging, we will never have all the answers we want. Not even close. Not on earth. **So we press on, with our “faith seeking to understand.”** That is how one of the ancient theologians described the Christian life. I like that. I hope you like it also. We have faith, let’s use that to keep searching. We have pain, let’s allow it to search for help and hope.

That is what we see with the disciples and Jesus. The answers Jesus has been giving about life have been hard, and not what some followers were expecting, so they left. That creates the very poignant scene of Jesus asking his twelve closest followers what they are going to do.

Reflect: As you consider what Peter said on behalf of the twelve, think about where else you would go for help if you don’t think Jesus can provide what you need. Where else will you turn? Who else will you listen to? Why is it worth your while (in fact, your very life) to keep close to Jesus when life is hard?

Pray: Use the words of Peter to shape your own prayer about your own tough times.

3

THERE IS EVIL, BUT OUR GOD IS POWERFUL

DANIEL 3

You may be familiar with the story of the golden idol, the blazing furnace, the proud king, and the courageous three young Jews. Even if you are, be sure to read all of Daniel 3. After you have read the chapter, read and highlight verses 16–18 in your Bible. I believe this is one of the finest and most spiritual confessions of faith you will find in the Bible. It captures the core of the problem of evil.

There is evil. Right now it is a crazy king, a hot furnace, and being burned alive. God is powerful. He is able to rescue us from this evil. God is good. He will deliver us from this evil.

How can God be all powerful and fully good, and then allow evil? That is the dilemma. It is more than a problem, it is a conundrum, a puzzle, a paradox, a mystery. Any two of the three parts make sense, but not all three.

God can be good but not powerful enough to deliver us from evil. Or God can be powerful but not good enough to prevent evil. Or God can be fully good and all powerful and there will be no evil to go through. Any two make sense, but not all three.

However, the three young men cut through the paradox with an incredible statement. There is evil. Our God is powerful. Our God is good. He will deliver us. But even if God does not put an end to our suffering, God alone is our God and we will not stop worshipping or trusting him.

Here is my proposal. This is faith. Real faith. True faith. Deep faith. Saving faith. Transforming faith. I know most of us do not live at that place, but that is where we are meant to live.

Reflect: That is where we want to take you on this 4-week journey. What do you think will work against you getting there? What do you think will help you grow into that kind of faith? here? What do you think will help you grow into that kind of faith?

“Lord, to whom shall we go? you have the words of eternal life...” -PETER IN JOHN 6:68