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**Sunday 30 April 2023 to Sunday 7 May 2023**

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Sunday 30 April 2023

**Hearing and trusting God’s voice**

by Charles Bertelsmeier

***… they follow him because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don’t know his voice (John 10:4b,5).***

Read [John 10:1–10](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+10%3A1%E2%80%9310&version=NRSVUE)

This verse is from a half chapter in the Gospel of John in which Jesus talks about himself as the Good Shepherd looking after his sheep. The only responses required of the sheep are to recognise Jesus’ voice and follow where he leads them. He promises a rich and fulfilling life. If we try to translate this to our own context in our lives, it raises the question of how we identify the voice of our Lord Jesus and recognise it in the midst of other competing voices.

This brought to mind an experience I had when I was in my late 30s. It was a period of my life when I had few commitments and some spare time, and I was open to experience other expressions of Christianity. This led me into some of the 'fringes' of Christianity (you may refer to them as sects). The contact point for one of these groups was a colleague from work, and he proposed some one-on-one Bible studies during our lunch break. He started by quoting many Bible verses and proposing interpretations that I was uncomfortable with. An amazing thing happened; the Holy Spirit put other verses of the Bible into my mind that clearly countered his interpretation. Together, we searched for these verses in the Bible, and this led to some interesting discussions. Unfortunately, we only managed one study; the opportunity for more didn’t eventuate. On reflection, I see that I was hearing and recognising the voice of the Good Shepherd to me (the Bible verses I was recalling) at the same time this other 'shepherd' was trying to lead me down a different path.

This experience also brought home to me the necessity of continuing to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd through systematically reading the Bible. The Holy Spirit could only bring to mind verses I had already read, and these only then had authority to speak to the situation when we actually found them in the Bible. Otherwise, I would effectively have been only offering an opinion.

Are you finding time to regularly and systematically read through the Bible (possibly using different translations each time through), so that you come to readily recognise the voice of the Good Shepherd as he leads you?

***Thank you, Heavenly Father, for revealing yourself to us through the Word, your Son. Thank you for the word written down so that we can read it and grow in knowing you. Thank you for your Spirit who keeps speaking your word into the situations we face in our lives. Amen.***

*Charles is a retired engineer who has worked on communications projects for the Air Force, Army and Navy. He lives in a retirement village in the outer north-western suburbs of Sydney with his wife, Diane. Together they have four children and eight grandchildren whom they love spending time with. He keeps himself busy with their pot plants, community vegetable garden, researching his family history and volunteering at LifeWay Lutheran Church.*

Monday 1 May 2023

**Holy transformations**

by Charles Bertelsmeier

***For God’s will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:10).***

Read [Hebrews 10:1–10](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+10%3A1%E2%80%9310&version=NRSVUE)

Sacrifices of burnt offerings to God are recorded early in the Bible as having been performed by Noah, Abraham and Jacob – long before God commanded the Israelites under Moses. Among other things, killing and burning an animal as a sacrifice to God was an act of submission to God as well as making payment for their sin and receiving his forgiveness and favour.

Through Moses, God instituted a system of daily animal sacrifices to pay for the sins of the people of Israel and this went on for centuries. However, right from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was identified as the Lamb of God, the ultimate sacrifice for the sins, not just of the Israelites, but for the sins of all humanity. And, having made us holy by Jesus’ perfect life, his death and his resurrection, God adopts us into the heavenly family as his children. And he now wants to teach us how to live as his children.

We regularly face situations in which we are overwhelmed and discouraged. The challenge for us is to see past the immediate threats to our peace and security and recall the love that Jesus had for each one of us as he hung on the cross. God is in complete control. His Spirit is right beside us, and he wants to teach us how to relax into his love and respond in ways that honour him. Instead of losing control and potentially exacerbating the situation, a response wrapped in Jesus’ love may help defuse the situation. And it may also help someone to want to investigate further what (or who) it was that enabled us to respond in such a positive way.

Christians over the ages have learned how important it is to regularly (daily) spend time with God so that this transforming work of the Spirit can take place. Otherwise, it is so easy to get caught up in the advice and pressures of our world to concentrate our thoughts on what seems good and fun for us but never really satisfies us.

How important to you is your relationship with God? Are you committed to spending time in the school of the Holy Spirit so that your relationship with your Heavenly Father grows stronger?

***Heavenly Father, I know that Jesus lived the perfect life for me that I cannot live. I also know that Jesus died on the cross to free me from all the debts I owe for not living that perfect life. Thank you also for your Spirit living in me to change me to become more and more like Jesus in my attitudes, personality and priorities. Amen.***

Tuesday 2 May 2023

**Getting cleaned up**

by Charles Bertelsmeier

***For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ’s blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:22b).***

Read [Hebrews 10:11–25](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+10%3A11%E2%80%9325&version=NRSVUE)

Those of us who have grown up in the church may be so used to biblical and theological terms and jargon that we may not realise that those new to Christianity may struggle to understand statements such as the above verse, or even may be offended by them.

If we got blood splattered on us, I’m sure that most of us would rush to get it washed off. So why would we want to let ourselves be sprinkled with Jesus’ blood?  Anyway, Jesus is no longer physically here on earth, so how do we get sprinkled with his blood? What does this really mean?

To understand, we really need to go back to the Old Testament. After Moses led the Israelite slaves out of Egypt and got them settled down at the foot of Mount Sinai, God gave the Israelites instructions on how they were to worship him (as well as instructions on how they should live and interact with each other). Worship was organised around a temple (initially made out of a tent or tabernacle) and was led by priests who had special priestly garments to wear. Connected with the tabernacle were furniture and utensils used in the worship rituals. All of these were dedicated for holy use, and part of the dedication ceremony involved the sprinkling of the blood of a sacrificed animal. (Details are given in the Old Testament in Exodus chapters 25 to 31 and 35 to 40 and in Leviticus chapter 8.)

God wanted it to be clear to his people that not living to God’s standards was serious business and that, according to God’s standards, any failure deserved death. Because God was looking forward to Jesus being our substitute and dying in our place, he instituted the sacrifice of animals as the substitute in the meantime. The blood of the sacrificed animal was sprinkled on people to cleanse them of their guilt before God.

Once Jesus died on the cross as the substitute for us, the animal sacrifices were no longer needed since Jesus’ substitutionary death is effective from the beginning of time to the end of time. Whereas the Israelites were reminded daily of God’s grace and mercy through the regular animal sacrifices, we are reminded in the regular meal of holy communion of God’s grace and mercy through Jesus’ sacrifice. And in our baptism, we are washed clean with pure water.

If you haven’t already done so, or haven’t done so for some time, why not commit to reading through the first five books of the Old Testament, prayerfully asking God to open your heart and mind to understand how he organised the Old Testament religious practices to point forward to the saving work of his Son, Jesus?

***Heavenly Father, thank you for making me clean and holy as your child through the sacrifice that Jesus made because of his love for me. I now surrender my life to you to live as your child. Amen.***

Wednesday 3 May 2023

**Is impatience getting you down?**

by Charles Bertelsmeier

***Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God’s will (Hebrews 10:36a).***

Read [Hebrews 10:26–39](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+10%3A26%E2%80%9339&version=NRSVUE)

Most of us have had experiences when time goes really slowly, for example, when we are doing something we don’t enjoy, and there is something else we would rather be doing but can’t get to it until the current activity is completed. We probably also have had experiences when time seems to go very fast as when we are completely absorbed in some activity we really enjoy.

When the writer to the Hebrews calls for patient endurance, it may sound as though he is calling us to a life and activities during which, from past experience, we expect time will seem to drag on.

Reading the whole recommended section of the text, we get the impression that the recipients of the letter began their Christian faith with much excitement and commitment. It was all something new, and really amazing things were happening (miracles, the dead restored to life, etc). They were so caught up in what was happening, that even the persecution from outside the church didn’t faze them. They were having a really awesome time. And there was even the expectation that Jesus would return soon and take them to be with him forever.

But then, over time, things settled down to a more normal rhythm. Jesus hadn’t returned. The excitement of living as God’s children started to fade and even turn into a bit of a drudge. They were even tempted to go looking elsewhere for fun and excitement.

The problem was that their expectation of what God should be doing and when he should be doing it was out of line with God’s own plan. They were becoming impatient with God. Instead of surrendering themselves to God’s plans and purposes for their lives, they were seeking to live their lives on their own terms.

The writer calls their attention to what lives were like under God when they first became Christians. God hadn’t changed. He still wanted to involve them in the work of his kingdom. They need to learn patience for things to happen when and how God knew best.

Have you felt frustrated with what your church community has been doing? Do you feel frustrated with your own life? Is it empty and unfulfilling? Are you frustrated enough to hand it all over to God and let him lead you in new directions, trusting in his timing?

***Heavenly Father, we do so enjoy the times when we get to experience you doing amazing things. Yet there is still joy and peace working with you when things just keep going at a more steady pace. Please help us to faithfully follow your leading as we wait patiently for you to achieve your outcomes. Amen.***

Thursday 4 May 2023

**Growing in trust**

by Charles Bertelsmeier

***Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him (Hebrews 11:6b).***

Read [Hebrews 11:1–12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+11%3A1%E2%80%9312&version=NRSVUE)

Chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews provides a list of heroes of faith in the Old Testament. All these people received promises and/or directions from God and responded in a way that showed that they trusted that God would hold to his side of the bargain. However, this trust or faith in God was something that grew over time. Abraham tried to hurry God along by fathering an heir with his wife’s maid; it took Moses some time to accept his role as leader of the Israelites; Gideon asked God twice to perform miracles with a sheep’s fleece. But as they experienced God’s faithfulness, their faith in him grew and God gave them more and more responsibilities.

Our own growth in faith will be unique to us, but it begins with a seed of faith. For some, the seed will be the gift of growing up in a loving, caring family that teaches the children about God and demonstrates their trust in God by the way they live. For others, it will be someone sharing with them their own experience of God working in their life and providing an invitation to check God out for themselves. Again, for others, the seed of faith will be something they read in a book, see on social media or experience on an audiovisual screen. Sometimes it might take a crisis in our lives to get us to grab that seed of faith and call out to God for help.

God assures us that his love is for everyone and his Holy Spirit is at work in all of these situations to nurture the seed of faith so that it germinates and grows. However, God doesn’t force his intentions on us. For us to grow, we need to follow the examples of these heroes of faith and take that step forward, to follow where God is calling us to go. As we see God at work in our lives and the lives of others, our trust in God’s promises and directions will grow stronger.

Sometimes, to go forward, we need to leave things behind. Some people will find it just too hard to let go, and their growth in their relationship with their Heavenly Father will be stifled. If we have grown sufficiently in our trust in God’s love for us and are open and honest with him, we can take these struggles to him for his help, and he has promised to work with us to free us from all that distracts from our growth as his child.

Can you be open and honest with God about the things you find hard to let go of? Do you trust God’s love for you to the extent that you can tell God honestly about your struggles and ask his help? Are you sincerely seeking to know God and his plan for your life?

***Heavenly Father, thank you for loving me so much that you will never let go of me. Thank you for your patience with me as I struggle to be what I think you want me to be. Please help me to let go and snuggle into your loving embrace. Amen.***

Friday 5 May 2023

**Homeward bound**

by Charles Bertelsmeier

***But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:16).***

Read [Hebrews 11:13–22](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+11%3A13%E2%80%9322&version=NRSVUE)

I find it interesting the way we set goals in our lives. Our focus can be very immediate – such as dealing with this moment’s panic situation or the task at hand. Or it may just be getting through the day or making it to the weekend when we can relax.

When we are young, our longer-term focus may be on getting an education, getting a secure, well-paid and satisfying job, finding a life partner and owning a home. As we get older, our focus may expand to planning for our retirement and becoming financially secure.

Then life throws challenges at us: health issues, relationship breakdowns and financial setbacks. Our focus then changes to dealing with these challenges and hopefully getting back on track with our previous plans.

In our busyness with our plans, God also has plans for us. He wants us to grow in our relationship with him, understanding how precious we are to him. He wants us to learn how to live as his beloved children. He wants to teach us how to think of others and learn how to be true friends to them. He wants to teach us how to care for the wonderful creation he has given us. Oh, and don’t forget, he is planning an awesome new universe for us to live in following our departure from this life.

The verse above is from chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews which provides a list of heroes of faith in the Old Testament. Although they are remembered for the things they did while living on this earth, the author of this letter reminds us of the dual focus they had. While busy with carrying out what God was calling them to do, living on this planet was not all there was to life, but that there was a lot more to come.

As I write this, a close friend of mine who has leukemia has been told by his doctor that they have tried all possible treatments and none have worked. He is being kept alive by regular blood transfusions but has zero immunity and, therefore, is susceptible to any infection. He knows that it may not be long before he goes home to meet Jesus, who will be waiting there with open arms of welcome.

Although you are busy living life here on planet Earth, do you ever get to reflect on the open, waiting arms of Jesus as he welcomes you to the new home that he has prepared for you?

***Heavenly Father, thank you for the assurance that you have prepared a new home for us with you forever. But thank you, too, that you are with us in our everyday lives here on earth, helping us to grow as your children as we wait for you to call us home. Amen.***

Saturday 6 May 2023

**Help!**

by Charles Bertelsmeier

***Let your favour shine on your servant. In your unfailing love, rescue me (Psalm 31:16).***

Read [Psalm 31:1–5,15,16](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+31%3A1%E2%80%935%2C15%2C16&version=NRSVUE)

This psalm was written by David. David faced a number of episodes in his life when others were blatantly out to kill him. Some of these were King Saul, who was jealous of David early in David’s life; the Philistines who were mortal enemies of the Israelites; and then, later in his life, his son Absalom, who ultimately wanted David’s throne for himself. In all of these threats to David’s life, God rescued him and he ultimately died peacefully in old age.

Just thinking about one of these, Absalom’s war against David, it’s interesting that this attack by Absalom is partly a consequence of David’s most grievous sin, his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Bathsheba’s husband. The prophet Nathan told David that God had forgiven him, but that he would have to live with the consequences of what he had done: his family would now live by the sword. Subsequently, members of this family were involved in deception, rape, murder and treason.

Due to David’s many successes and God’s rich blessings, it would have been easy for David to develop a bit of pride and a sense of entitlement. When that happens to us, God in his love for us may need to teach us again about humility and our need for complete reliance on him.

We could be forgiven for believing that David should not expect any favours from God in this particular case. He blatantly disobeyed God’s rules and then committed murder to try to cover up what he had done. But David knew God very well and understood that although he deserved nothing from God, God was all about restoring relationships, especially our relationship with him. When we come to God for help, it has nothing to do with what we may have or not have done – it is all about God’s love and mercy.

In this verse, David is looking to see the smile of love on God’s face, the smile of acceptance and welcome into his embrace of safety and security.

How open are you to being completely honest with God about all those secret things in your life and entrusting them to God to deal with?

***Heavenly Father, we know we deserve nothing from you. We also know how much we have hurt others with our selfishness and thoughtlessness. And, Father, sometimes we are so loaded down by our guilt and sense of failure, we don’t feel worthy to come to you for forgiveness and restoration. Thank you for continuing to remind us of your love and desire to draw us back into your love and embrace. Amen.***

Sunday 7 May 2023

**This is the way**

by Libby Krahling

***Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me (John 14:1).***

Read [John 14:1–14](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+14%3A1%E2%80%9314&version=NRSVUE)

It's the Last Supper. Jesus has just made it clear that he will be put to death very soon, and the disciples won’t see him for a while. One of them will betray Jesus, and one will deny he even knows him. It’s a lot to take in.

Now Jesus tells them, ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me’ (verse 1). He reassures them that while he will die, he is going before them to heaven to prepare a place for them. They might not understand what he is saying now (and they clearly don’t), but what they need to remember is that anyone who knows Jesus knows God. God will welcome them into his kingdom because they know Jesus.

The disciples struggle to understand everything Jesus is telling them. Thomas wants to know how to get to this big palace in the sky. Jesus explains that he, Jesus, is the way, the truth and the life and that anyone who wants to get to the Father needs to go through him. They still don’t get it. Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father. Again, Jesus explains that he is God, and he has been with them the whole time. If they know Jesus, they already know the Father.

I imagine the disciples’ heads are about to explode at this point. In verse 11, Jesus says, ‘Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe because of the works themselves.’ In other words, if this is too much for you to comprehend right now, look at what I’ve done – all the miracles, the healings, the fulfilment of prophecies.

As people living on this side of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we might be tempted to scoff at the disciples’ lack of comprehension. We know that Jesus died as the perfect sacrifice for our sins so that the Father no longer counts our failings against us. Through faith in Christ, we have eternal life and can know God as our loving Father.

How often, though, do we live even more cluelessly than those disciples? They at least asked Jesus to explain and sought to understand his words. They may not have understood the big picture, but they did trust Jesus, even in the midst of their confusion. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death or feel lost in the desert, may we remember that we know Jesus, too. Even if we don’t understand what’s happening in our lives or our world right now, we know the most important thing – Christ Jesus and him crucified. If you are overwhelmed and struggling with doubt, fix your eyes on what Jesus has already shown you. One step after the next, keep walking the path. Through it all, Jesus will show you the way.

***Lord Jesus, forgive us when we forget who you are and trust in our own strength and reason. Help us to walk in your way, knowing your truth and bathed in your light. Amen.***

*Libby Krahling and her husband Phil are members of St Petri Lutheran Church, Nuriootpa, in South Australia. They have two adult sons. Libby runs the Worship Planning Page, organises the Daily Devotions, and this year is currently working on the Worship and Devotional Life in Lutheran Schools and Early Childhood Services project for Lutheran Education Australia. In her spare time, Libby loves to cook, read and paint.*