

The Mercy Mountains

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April 26, 2020

Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. 1 Peter 4:19

It just so happens that I've been boning up on angels lately. Studying from Martyn Lloyd-Jones' God the Father, God the Son from his "Great Doctrines of the Bible" series which ran on Friday night meetings from 1952-1957 when he began his famous studies on Romans. The series was completed just prior to my wife's birth! Chapter 10, "Good Angels," Dr. Lloyd-Jones ended his discourse on angels with this:

"I think you will agree with me that we neglect the biblical teaching about the angels to our own loss." [I am afraid that we could admit the same about many biblical doctrines, not just angels!] "Had you realized that all this was true? True for you and true for me!" [Well, no I hadn't realized how much sound doctrine there is about "good angels," the ones in heaven who exist to serve God and us unceasingly.] "Do not attempt to seek into something that is a mystery, but believe the biblical teaching. That is God's Word, and that is what it teaches about the angels, and about their relationship to us. *They are ministering spirits of God, appointed and sent to minister to us, the heirs of heaven. Whether you or I realize it or not, the angels are doing this for us*. It may be that we shall go through this life without seeing an angel in any form, but whether we see them or not, we can be absolutely certain **that this is the work they are doing for us**. They are caring for us, they are watching over us, they are protecting us, and sheltering us. They often deliver us, and they are used by God to help us in this way." (p.114)

I do not often use extensive quotes like this one, but I include it because 1. I found it convicting, 2. urgent and 3. challenging. First, I found it convicting. The "neglect of biblical teaching" on angels—and on a wide variety of other very important doctrines!—is something that I, to my regret, must own. Sermonizing is no excuse for doctrinal neglect, or for failing to refresh my knowledge of biblical theology. I do do some, I do not do enough. Second, urgent. There is so much that we can learn and master on any biblical doctrine—asserting effort to be comprehensive, thorough and careful in our examination of the Word (to see, **if indeed, it be so**—the Bereans' strength and praise). Otherwise we are ignorant of the various things we ought to be conversant in. Neglect and sloth will do this to a mind! If you do not think vigorously, you will never develop mental vigor. Slipping into cliché and mindless citations of vagrant verses—yes, I did say, vagrant because they seem to wander homeless through our minds without a foundation or purpose. We quote scripture and have no self—studied understanding of what they meant originally, or actually do mean now. Reviewing our proverbial usage is akin to fact-checking. Expressing God's word to one another warrants more care, more respect. Thirdly, this remonstrance from the good Doctor challenges us to not neglect our study of doctrine—get a sound, informed and scripturally supported understanding of what has been revealed to us for us to know. Want to know about angels? Read the Word—take notes if it helps, discuss it with your friends. Develop your grasp of truth.

So Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (1 Peter 4:19) We are suffering. We are not suffering because of anything we have done, necessarily, on an individual, or moral basis to bring down God's wrath. It is possible that coronavirus is a visitation of God due to a general departure from Him and His ways—it is good to be thoughtfully repentant over sin, or over any dishonoring of God we may discover in ourselves, our choices. There may be certain things needing adjustment. However, it is not right for us to assume that this affliction is outside the will of God due to our ignorance of specific transgressions. And it is always proper to plead for mercy for all the afflicted, ourselves included.

Peter is saying, among other things, that we who are afflicted in such a way as we are, we should **entrust our souls to our Creator**. I think this means we are to dwell upon the attributes of God as the proper means for building up, and strengthening our faith *that we might bear up in trying times*. So, this means pondering God's power, omnipotence, omnipresence, his holiness, all sufficiency, truth and faithfulness. It means adoring him for these attributes. Frankly, this is my default position. I run to assurances that God is God, that he is *in control* and that he has *a plan*. . . things work out the the best because God is good. However, there is a whole other raft of divine attributes that are also worthy of reflection: God's mercy, love and wisdom . . . plus, his manifest desire to bless us, keep promises to us, provide for us, protect us and meet our needs. This second horn, so to speak, on the mercy seat, is what establishes God as our God. That is what we need to know when we are suffering: that we are known and not forgotten, we are not forsaken or abandoned—that we are his sheep and he knows us by name and that he leads, guides, feeds and protects us. It is great that God is big and strong . . . that he is able to shepherd us, but it is his willingness to do so that secures us. Is God willing to lead us to his mercy mountains . . . *will he come to meet us* on our way there? Will he send his angels to accompany us?

It is in this latter matter that I frame Jacob's meeting of the Lord's two camps (the word is plural) at **Mahanaim**. Jacob has survived one terror and he is on the brink of a second: his brother Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men—another armed force. Jacob is in the foothills of mercy mountains **when the angels of God met him**. . . yes, **Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him**.

Let's note this first. **Jacob went on his way**. This means that he, as a loving shepherd, was leading his flock westward towards the Promised Land. He was a shepherd, he thought like one. He strategized as a shepherd does when leading out his sheep to **green pastures** and **still waters**. But, lest this elude our attention, Jacob is being shepherded as he shepherds. The 23rd Psalm praises the Lord as our Shepherd, **The Lord is my shepherd** is, first and foremost about what God does, about what God is doing even as I speak—his angels still attending us! See the "shepherd" attributes of God in this picture: **God's mercy, love and wisdom . . . plus, his manifest desire to bless us, keep promises to us, provide for us, protect us and meet our needs**. The two camps may be pictured as God's vanguard, and God's rear guard—this is accurate, not just pictorial. It is more than an image, something to be pictured. Jacob is reassured that as he moves forward—his shepherd God will go before and, as is the case with exceptionally large flocks, a rear guard of other shepherds will follow so that none the stragglers, or wanderers get lost—or slain.

Be in thoughts of God as Creator and as Shepherd frequently, delightfully, consistently for this is the portal through which divine influence enters the believer's soul, filling it with heat and light, love and life, truth and justice. And these reflection leave deep impressions of God upon the heart, grooves in the mind. In this case, knowing much about God leads to believing much of God. This is to our comfort—and not just to our edification. *Strength in contemplation leads to strength in faith!* Seriously, attending on God leads to his attending to you. Do not the sheep come when he calls them by name? Do they not bleat in recognition? Do they not present themselves to him for tending and for care? Yes, because they trust him whose voice they know.

14. **I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.**

O God, my Creator!

Wonderful are your works;

My soul knows it very well.

15. **My frame was not hidden from you
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.**

You made me, O God!

16. **Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.**

When you carried me as a lamb,
and began to shepherd me lifelong
speaking tenderly, calling me by name.

17. **How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!**

Recorded and revealed for me in your Word.

18. **If I would count them, they are more than the sands,
I awake and I am with you still.** Psalm 139:14-18

Assure your interest in his attributes—the whole range of them, the entire inventory of His being! Abraham was convinced that God was **able to perform what he had promised**. God is still able, believe it. Then you will see him as **your God—move God out of the theoretical realm into the realm of practical experience!** We are to dwell upon the attributes of God as the proper means for building up, and strengthening our faith that we might bear up in trying times. Seize both horns of the mercy seat: both his power and his mercy. Sweet and strong assurances will result.

I am not sure why I tend to doubt God's willingness to shepherd us—perhaps you are like me in that. His mercy, goodness, bounty, grace, love and loving kindness, his compassion (yes, even to his bowels of compassion!), his patience, long-suffering, forgiveness, understanding, pity and advocacy are no less evident, no less prominent in scripture. I do not doubt his power, omniscience, omnipresence, holiness, justice and truth—the more abstract and less personal attributes of God. His guidance is as plain and evident as **green pastures** and **still waters**— as rescue and deliverance. The basic ingredients of my walk are too eclipsed by his perfections, perhaps. Maybe I am too wise in my own conceits, trust too much in my own experiences, or are too taken with my own convictions (especially those which are half-known and uncertain!). These are very

common ways of going astray. The right way is good, and it is full of life as I advance from the mercy mountains to the hills of glory—where every ascent is marked with fire, horses and chariots and angelic hosts, all encircling the throne of my King.

Oh, if only I could master **entrusting my soul to my Creator God. . . and my Shepherd.** If I could learn to think more upon him and leave the other thinking up to him—learn to focus on being lead-able, and teachable.

Listen, despair lies along any road that does not lead us home to Jesus` . . . to his sheepfold, his kingdom, his house. Lord, lead us past the Castle of Despair, past the discouragements, the dangers and deep ditches on either side . . . away from dark dungeons which come from following self-love to self-destruction. Keep me from the impatience and petulance which comes from demanding that everything goes my way. What do I know? You know where **green pastures lie** and **still waters**, too. By your grace lead me, Lord, to better follow you and to trust you as my friend.

Amen