



Sermon

The Lord our Righteousness

Genesis 15:1-6; Jeremiah 23:1-6; Romans 4:1-5, 22-25

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Through lockdown I have been exploring Psalm 23 with you to strengthen and encourage us in these trying times. Through this short Psalm we can be more sure of our Lord's wonderful nature and of his care and provision for us.

The Psalm is ascribed to David who was himself a shepherd as a boy and youth. We have seen how the Psalm draws deeply on a knowledge of sheep and shepherding. This is a rich metaphor for the relationship of God with his people. You may remember that I said this metaphor is not confined to this psalm - it was routinely used to describe the relationship of kings to the people. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel use it prophetically to contrast the selfish leadership of bad kings with the generous caring shepherding that God would provide for his people.

We have discovered together a title of God in this Psalm: *Jehovah-Raah* – the Lord is my shepherd. Following on from that, we explored the idea that the Psalm in describing God's character provides illustrations of some of the formal titles of God given elsewhere in scripture.

We looked first at *Jehovah-Jireh* (Provider) and *Jehovah-Shalom* (Peace) and then last time at four more titles: *Jehovah-Rapha* (our Healer), *Jehovah-Shammah* (who is present), *Jehovah-Ezer* (our help) and *Jehovah-Nissi* (our Banner). *That is seven so far.*

In gold mining, the precious metal is often found in a layer in the rock, called a lode. A belt of very rich gold-bearing quartz is called a mother lode. This theme of the names of God has been something of a mother lode of riches and it is not exhausted yet! Today I want to introduce another to you: *Jehovah-Tsidkeneau* (our Righteousness).

Verse 3 says, "He leads me in paths of righteousness." To lead someone in a righteous way, one must be righteous. And of course, God is the origin, the definition and the standard of all righteousness. There is a title of God, *Yaweh Tsidkeneau*, the Lord our righteousness. It is this title which is illustrated by "he leads me in paths of righteousness."

The word righteousness in Hebrew is *tzedeq*. It is not so much about being 'good' as being 'in right relationship with God and with other people.' We see that developed in Luke 10, when Jesus was asked by an expert in the Law, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus bounced the question back to him and he answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

This is what it is to be righteous to inherit eternal life: love God with all your being and love your neighbour as yourself. You see the two dimensions there – right relationship with God and right relationship with other people.

The title, the Lord our Righteousness, comes from the Jeremiah passage we heard, Jeremiah 23:6. He was delivering a prophecy against the leaders of Israel who were misruling the nation. Again using the metaphor of shepherds, he said they were destroying and scattering the flock. God warned them that he would punish them for the wrong they have done and promised that he would restore the flock and give them good shepherds who would care for them. And then he promised:

Jeremiah 23:5-6 "The days are coming, when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.

There it is *Yahweh Tsidkenu* - the Lord our Righteousness. It is a name to be given to the Messiah. But this is a divine name a Yahweh name. Remember that "Yahweh" is the name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. The name is regarded as being so holy by the Jews, that they won't even say it, lest they blaspheme. This is the holy God himself – our righteousness.

That expression, "our righteousness" is picked up by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:30 when he wrote, "... Christ Jesus ... has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." Christ has become for us our righteousness. Could that be a part of the background to Jesus' thinking when he said he is the Way? Our Saviour leads us in ways of righteousness.

Our righteousness is the major theme of the Epistle to the Romans, where Paul explained first that it is not possible to be righteous before God by our own efforts. We have all failed. "There is no one righteous, no not one," he wrote quoting from Psalm 14. Then he shows the only way to be righteous is by faith. He used the example of Abraham being reckoned righteous by God because of this faith. We heard that account in the reading from Genesis 15 and Paul's reasoning from Romans 4.

When we put our faith in Jesus as our saviour, when we believe he died for our sins, then the wrongdoing on our spiritual account is transferred to him and he has paid it. And in that great exchange of the cross, his righteousness is reckoned positively for us on our spiritual account. We are taken into Christ, so our sins are covered by his sacrifice and his right relationship with God becomes ours!

This is very wonderful ... it is ... salvation. Paul expresses it another way in 2nd Corinthians 5:21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

These are high-flying words – what can he mean? Jesus was sinless and he died an innocent man. Yet, he was carrying the sins of the world and died to pay the just penalty for that sin. This was prophesied by the famous prophecy of Isaiah 53. Let me abridge that passage to highlight the point:

The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ... for the transgression of my people he was stricken. ...the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. ... he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many...

It is the principle of the sacrificial system, the innocent died in place of the guilty. Finally, in Christ, those sacrifices found their meaning and fulfilment when he willingly bore our sins and died in our place.

But then the counterpart of that is his righteousness is reckoned to us. Do you notice that Paul writes "that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In him: it is as we are in Christ that we become the righteousness of Christ.

It means that God can see us as righteous, that we have relationship with God free of the barrier of sin. And because we are given the indwelling Holy Spirit, we start to be empowered to live empowered and equipped by God. We start to show the family likeness. We are declared righteous and we are being made righteous – conformed to the image of Christ.

There is a lovely verse in Psalm 119:32: “I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.”

When we are forgiven and set free, then we can obey wholeheartedly. We can run in the path of his commands. The Hebrew word speaks of a trodden path and indeed, you can only run on an formed path, otherwise you will be likely to fall or twist your ankle. There is a freedom, an expansiveness when we are forgiven and we know the joy of our salvation. Then we can run in God’s paths for us – the paths of righteousness.

Psalm 23:3 again: “you lead me in paths of righteousness.” The Passion Translation has an interesting marginal note to this verse, “Or ‘circular paths of righteousness.’”



I wondered where that had come from. Checking the Lexicon I discovered the word translated paths has a definition of a beaten track, a path, an entrenchment, a circumvallation. Now a circumvallation is a surrounding defensive wall. Think of the defensive terraces we see on Auckland’s Pa sites. On each terrace, there would have been a wooden palisade – these were circumvallations.

It is a common for sheep on hillsides to form beaten paths – miniature terraces – and to circle their way up higher. They eventually form a path that keeps leading them higher. This is what the psalm is referring to here. Each step we take following our Shepherd will lead

us higher, even though it may seem we are going in circles.

Has life seemed like that for you? “Lord, I been here before!” Yes and you will come here again, but maybe you hadn’t noticed you are higher than you were the last time you were on this side of the mountain. We face challenges, we surmount them, we face them again to practise our new trust, skills and knowledge. We go around again to learn more deeply, to be stretched a bit more, to become used and practised at our new level of faith.

Christ is our righteousness. It has been stated by God. It brings us freedom and joy. As we follow him and allow him to be our righteous, then we can run in that freedom.

Some questions for you to think about:

- Was it helpful to understand righteousness as a right relationship with God and other people?
- Did this teaching confirm or deepen your understanding of the righteousness we have in Christ rather than earning it by good works?
- How are you allowing God to lead you on the “paths of righteousness?”
- Maybe you find yourself off the path in some way? If so, how are you allowing God (and perhaps someone close to you) to help bring you back?