

seeing GOD

MEET *G*OD IN THE UNEXPECTED

DAVID ROPER



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PART 1

Calling on the Lord





We Share God's Glory

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image."

—Genesis 1:26

I must confess that I'm a humanist—like David, whose poem raises the best question of all: "What is man?" (Psalm 8:4).

What is man? Biologically he's a mammalian vertebrate; order: primate; genus: homo; species: sapiens. His body is made up of organs, tissues, cells, and protoplasm. Chemically he's composed mostly of water, a large quantity of carbon, and various amounts of iron, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, sulfur, lime, nitrogen, and some mineral salts. Psychologically he has intellectual, emotional, and volitional powers and various instincts. He has on occasion dashed off a 4.2-second forty and leaped into the air a little over 7.5 feet.

But man has to be something more. We long for other, more complete explanations. Something in man refuses to be cribbed and confined and reaches out beyond mere scientific description. Eternity is in our hearts. We too ask, "What is man? What am I?"

Down inside us is a mystery from which comes our pursuit of excellence; our love of athletics, art, and music; our yearning to know and to be known; our deep discontent at our inability to live up to our own ideals. This is part of the "something more" that makes us truly human. That's why we want to know what it means to be a man.

We ask, as Saul Bellow did, "Is there nothing else between birth and death but what I can get out of this perversity—only a favorable balance of disorderly emotions? No freedom? Only impulses? And what about all the good I

have in my heart—doesn't it mean anything? Is it simply a joke? A false hope that makes a man feel the illusion of worth?" Is this all there is?

And what about our instincts? We know that men were meant to be courageous, selfless, loyal. Manhood is deeply rooted and is a memory written in our hearts. We know the rules. We just can't comply. And in the end we get tired of trying to be a man. As G. K. Chesterton said, "Pessimism comes not when we get weary of doing evil but when we get weary of doing good." No, there must be something more.

What are we? The psalmist fills in the picture. God made man the summit of creation, the highest order of created beings, the most godlike creature in heaven and earth, only slightly less than God Himself. Man is the only creature who shares God's glory and honor. We have great dignity and worth. For all our foibles and flaws, we have vast potential for good in science and technology, in arts and letters. We have tremendous capacity to give and love, to know and to be known. No man has ever plumbed his own depths. We're wonderful because God made us so.

The poet's conclusion, therefore, is noteworthy:

O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is *your name* in all the earth! (Psalm 8:9).

His contemplation of man's greatness leads the poet to worship not man but the God who made man, who "crowned him with glory and honor" and "put everything under his feet" (Psalm 8:5–6).

And so we, along with the psalmist, give thanks to the One who made man—who formed the creative genius of Michelangelo, the music genius of Amadeus Mozart, the hand-eye coordination of Joe Montana. Contrary to our common belief, there are no self-made men. "It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves" (Psalm 100:3 KJV). We know that it takes God to make men great, and we give thanks to Him for making us what we are. We must give credit where credit is due.

—*The Strength of a Man*



He Knew He Was Homesick

“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.

—Luke 15:24

A certain young man had a father who gave him a warm and safe home, food to eat, and most of all his love and loyalty. The young man could have lived happily ever after, but he didn’t like the house rules. He wanted to be on his own.

The father thought otherwise; he knew a young man needed limits and respect for boundaries. His son would only be at odds with himself, utterly unhappy with a freedom that knew no fear, limits, or respect for others.

But the boy wanted to leap the fences. Life’s mysteries beckoned; his pulse raced; he feared he might miss out on life. He must find himself; as we say, he had to have space.

His friends agreed. “It’s good,” they said, “for a man to assert himself. You have to risk the boy to find the man. There comes a time to be recognized, to get yourself free.”

The boy demanded his inheritance. “After all, he argued, it’s mine; I have it coming to me.” So the father gave him his legacy. Now he could do as he pleased, never stopping to think that all he possessed came from his father. He wasn’t thankful for his father’s love.

He couldn’t stay in his hometown—too many reminders of his father’s presence—so, like Kipling, he looked for a place “where there ain’t no Ten Commandments.” He hied himself to San Francisco where a man can quickly find and lose himself. He bought a condo by the bay, a new wardrobe, an SUV. He was an instant sensation, one of the beautiful people.

He spent lavishly and threw himself into the company of trendy friends, but something was amiss. A persistent melancholy hounded him, a dreary sameness, a monotony that he could not shake. The unhappier he became, the more he diverted himself by celebrating. And then he realized his diversions controlled him. He could no longer be alone or free.

Most of his friends shared the same fate. They had that hollow look in their eyes; their faces told their story.

He went from bad to worse—a downturn that drove him to the sinks of skid row. He ran out of money and friends. Left with nothing but unsatisfied longing, he turned to drugs to ease the pain. He had neither morality nor modesty.

Then one day he awoke to remember his father's house and its joy. He remembered the good things: the love, the warmth, the knowledge that he belonged. He knew then he was homesick; he had to go home.

But not as a son. He had forfeited his right to be called his father's son. He would go and ask for a mere servant's role—anything to get back home. And so he packed a bag and caught a bus for home. On the way he rehearsed his lines: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (Luke 15:18–19).

When he was only a speck in the distance, his father saw him. He ran as fast as his faltering old legs could carry him, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. He brought him to the house and gave him new clothes and shoes. Then he threw a barbecue for all the neighbors, and he told every guest, "This son of mine was dead, but now he's alive again."

Jesus told this story of the prodigal son more than two thousand years ago, but the picture of the waiting Father has not faded. Our heavenly Father still loves us and waits patiently and longingly for us to come home.

In one way or another, we are all like the wayward son. We have our dark ages. We fool around with sex, drugs, ambition, and a hundred other diversions. He permits us to use our bodies for self-gratification, our energy to pursue selfish ends, and even our minds to devise arguments against Him. And He will let us search restlessly, relentlessly, until we utterly weary ourselves. When we exhaust our options, we turn to Him. Before we can even ask for help, He wraps us in His arms and will not let us go.

—*The Strength of a Man*



God Has a Shepherd's Heart

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
—Psalm 23:1

The problem with most of us is that we have no clear picture of the God we long to worship. Our image of Him is clouded by the memory of cold cathedrals and bitter religions, by pastors or priests who put the fear of God into us, or by all that we suffered as children from fathers who were absent, emotionally detached, brutal, or weak. All of us have inexact notions of God.

Who is He? This is the question to which all others lead—the question that God Himself put into our hearts (and if He put it into our hearts, there must be an answer in His heart waiting to be revealed).

In Psalm 23:1 David gives us a comforting and compelling answer: “*Yahweh* is my shepherd.” David used the name that God gave Himself. An older generation of scholars referred to the name as the “Ineffable Tetragrammaton”—the unutterable four-letter word. The Jews rarely pronounced the letters that make up God’s name (written without vowels as YHWH) for fear of arousing God’s wrath. Instead they substituted some lesser word like *Adonai* (my Lord) or *Elohim* (the generic name for God).

The term *Yahweh* comes from a form of the Hebrew verb “to be” and suggests a self-sufficient God. But that explanation is cold comfort to me. I prefer David’s description: *Yahweh* is my *shepherd*.

Shepherd is a modest metaphor, yet one that is freighted with meaning. Part of the comparison is the portrayal of a shepherd and his sheep; the other is David’s experience and ours. David paints a picture and puts us into it.

This is the genius of Psalm 23: It belongs to us; we can use David's words as our own.

David's opening statement, "The Lord is my shepherd," introduces the controlling image that appears throughout the poem. Each line elaborates the symbol, filling out the picture, showing us how our Shepherd-God leads us to that place where we shall no longer want.

David himself was a shepherd. He spent much of his youth tending his "few sheep in the desert" (1 Samuel 17:28). The desert is one of the best places in the world to learn. There are few distractions, and there is little that can be used. In such a place we're more inclined to think about the meaning of things rather than about what those things provide.

One day as David was watching his sheep, the idea came to him that God was like a shepherd. He thought of the incessant care that sheep require—their helplessness and defenselessness. He recalled their foolish straying from safe paths; their constant need for a guide. He thought of the time and patience it took for them to trust him before they would follow. He remembered the times when he led them through danger and they huddled close at his heels. He pondered the fact that he must think for his sheep, fight for them, guard them, and find their pasture and quiet pools. He remembered their bruises and scratches, which he bound up, and he marveled at how frequently he had to rescue them from harm. Yet not one of his sheep was aware of how well it was watched. Yes, he mused, God is very much like a good shepherd.

Ancient shepherds knew their sheep by name. They were acquainted with all their ways—their peculiarities, their characteristic marks, their tendencies, their idiosyncrasies.

Back then shepherds didn't drive their sheep; they led them. At the shepherd's morning call—a distinctive guttural sound—each flock would rise and follow its master to the feeding grounds. Even if two shepherds called their flocks at the same time and the sheep were intermingled, they never followed the wrong shepherd. All day long the sheep followed their own shepherd as he searched the wilderness looking for grassy meadows and sheltered pools where his flock could feed and drink in peace.

At certain times of the year it became necessary to move the flocks deeper into the wilderness, where predators lurked. But the sheep were always well guarded. Shepherds carried a "rod" (a heavy club) on their belts and a shepherd's staff in their hands. The staff had a crook that was used to extricate the sheep from perilous places or to restrain them from wandering away; the club was a weapon to ward off beasts.

Throughout the day each shepherd stayed close to his sheep, watching them carefully and protecting them from the slightest harm. When one sheep strayed, the shepherd searched for it until it was found. Then he laid it across his shoulders and brought it back home. At the end of the day, each shepherd led his flock to the safety of the fold and slept across the gate to protect his sheep.

A good shepherd *never* left his sheep alone. They would have been lost without him. His presence was their assurance.

Ezekiel announced the birth of the best of all shepherds long before He was born. He said that when He came, He would tend God's flock with tender, loving care.

Another Good Shepherd was on the way, one who would be one with the Father in pastoral compassion: "I will place over them one [unique] shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be a prince among them. I the Lord have spoken" (Ezekiel 34:23–24).

Another Good Shepherd: David's long-awaited Son, our Lord Jesus, that Great Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11).

Some six hundred years later, Jesus stood near the place where David composed his Shepherd Song and said with quiet assurance,

I [myself] am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:11–15).

This is our Lord Jesus, "that great Shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20).

He was one with the Father: He too saw us as "sheep without a shepherd." He "came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). He's the one who left the "ninety-nine on the hills" and went "to look for the one [sheep] that wandered away," forever establishing the value of one person and the Father's desire that not one of them should be lost (Matthew 18:12–14).

He has a shepherd's heart, beating with pure and generous love that counted not His own life-blood too dear a price to pay down as our ransom. He has a shepherd's eye that takes in the whole flock and misses not even the poor sheep wandering away on the mountains cold. He has a shepherd's faithfulness, which will never fail or forsake, leave us comfortless, nor flee when He sees the wolf coming. He has a shepherd's strength, so that He is well able to deliver us from the jaw of the lion or the paw of the bear. He has a shepherd's tenderness; no lamb so tiny that He will not carry it; no saint so weak that He will not gently lead; no soul so faint that He will not give it rest . . . His gentleness makes great (F. B. Meyer).

But there's more: The Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep. The Father issued the decree:

Awake, O sword, against my shepherd,
 against the man who is close to me! . . .
 Strike the shepherd . . . (Zechariah 13:7).

And the Shepherd was slain.

Since the beginning of time, religions have decreed that a lamb should give up its life for the shepherd. The shepherd would bring his lamb to the sanctuary, lean with all his weight on the lamb's head, and confess his sin. The lamb would be slain, and its blood would flow out—a life for a life.

What irony: Now the shepherd gives up His life for His lamb.

He was pierced for *our* transgressions,
 he was crushed for *our* iniquities;
 the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
 and by his wounds we are healed.
 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
 each of us has turned to his own way;
 and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:5–6).

The story is about the death of God. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). He died for *all* sin—the

obvious sins of murder, adultery, and theft as well as for the secret sins of selfishness and pride. He *Himself* bore our sins in His body on the cross. This was sin's final cure.

The normal way of looking at the Cross is to say that man was so bad and God was so mad that someone had to pay. But it was not anger that led Christ to be crucified; it was love. The Crucifixion is the point of the story: God loves us so much that He *Himself* took on our guilt. He internalized *all* our sin and healed it. When it was over He said, "It is finished!" There is nothing left for us to do but to enter into forgiving acceptance—and for those of us who have already entered it, to enter into more of it.

"But," you say, "why would He want me? He knows my sin, my wandering. I'm not good enough. I'm not sorry enough for my sin. I'm unable not to sin."

Our waywardness doesn't have to be explained to God. He's never surprised by anything we do. He sees everything at a single glance—what is, what could have been, what would have been apart from our sinful choices. He sees into the dark corners and crannies of our hearts and knows everything about us there is to know. But what He sees only draws out His love. There is no deeper motivation in God than love. It is His nature to love; He can do no other; "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Do you have some nameless grief? Some vague, sad pain? Some inexplicable ache in your heart? Come to Him who made your heart. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28–30).

To know that God is like this, and to know this God, is rest. There is no more profound lesson than this: He is the one thing that we need.

Shepherd—the word carries with it thoughts of tenderness, security, and provision, yet it means nothing as long as I cannot say, "The Lord is *my* shepherd." What a difference that monosyllable makes—all the difference in the world. It means that I can have all of God's attention all of the time, just as though I'm the only one. I may be part of a flock, but I'm one of a kind.

It's one thing to say, "The Lord is a shepherd"; it's another to say, "The Lord is *my* shepherd." Martin Luther observed that faith is a matter of personal pronouns: *my* Lord and *my* God. This is the faith that saves.

Every morning the Shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:3–4).

This morning as you awakened, His eyes swept over you; He called you by name and said, “Come, follow me.” It’s a once-for-all thing; it’s an everyday thing.

Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care .

—Psalm 95:6–7

—*Psalm 23*