

Psalm 23 — A PSALM OF DAVID. (Part II)

Introduction

Last week we saw that what we have in Psalm 23 is a prayer (or a song) that really does capture the essence of that relationship that exists between the covenant God and His covenant child. We remember that in the Hebrew, the very first word of this chapter is a name; it's God's covenant name "Yahweh" – "Yahweh is my shepherd." And then it's only at the end of this chapter, at the end of verse six, that we hear this name again at the conclusion of the psalm: "I will dwell in the house of Yahweh forever." It's this *name*, then, that really does set the whole context for our reading of the rest of the chapter – of everything in the middle. In verse 3 the psalmist says, "He leads me in the right paths *for His name's sake*." In other words, He leads me in the right paths for the sake of being proven faithful to the covenant that He has made. Think about it like this: Because of the covenant, God's own honor and glory (and that's saying more than we can ever know)—His own honor and glory is now bound up together with His commitment to me as His covenant child. This is what God has been pleased to do! In verse 4 the psalmist says, "I will fear no evil, *for you are with me*." "Yahweh" means "I was"/"I am"/"I will be", and God revealed this name to His people against the backdrop of his promise to Moses: "*I will be— with you*." Psalm 23 (like all the psalms) lives and breathes in this world of the covenant – of God's oath-bound, blood-sealed promise and commitment to those whom He has called and chosen by His grace.

God initiates the covenant, but of course it's still a covenant *relationship* that's "mutual" and "reciprocal." And so we, too are called to covenant faithfulness. *We* are called to *trust* our covenant God implicitly – to live our lives each day in wholehearted submission and obedience to Him by faith. It's in this light that we see that Psalm 23 isn't only a psalm of comfort. It's also a psalm that challenges us to be able to pray these words at all times and in all circumstances by faith:

- Psalm 23:1–4 — The LORD is my shepherd; *I shall not want*. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. *He leads me in the right paths* for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, *I will fear no evil*, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

And now the psalmist continues in verse five:

I. Psalm 23:5a (cf. Prov. 9:1-2) — You prepare a table before me...

There are some who think that the imagery here is still that of the shepherd and his sheep and that this "table" is actually a rich *tableland* full of grass. But it's not unnatural for the psalmist to change images, and I think the reason he does so here is because the shepherd/sheep imagery cannot express *fully* all that's experienced by those who are in covenant with God. In addition to the imagery of the shepherd and his sheep we also *need* the imagery of the gracious host and His honored guest – "You prepare a table before me." And why do we need this imagery? What does this "table" tell us about the nature of covenant relationship with God? Well, we know that the

shepherd doesn't eat at the same table with his sheep; the shepherd doesn't sit down to the same meal with his sheep. And yet this is what our covenant God does – with *us*. What can it mean when God sets His own table with a meal, and then invites me to sit down to that meal and eat even in His own house?

In Old Testament times, the *making* of a covenant and *entering into* a covenant relationship was often marked or signified by the sharing of a meal together. So when Jacob and his father-in-law Laban made a covenant with one another, we read that Jacob “called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread [shared a meal] and spent the night in the hill country” (Gen. 31:51-54). When Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro was welcomed into Israel as a worshiper of the only true God, we read that “Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread [share a meal] with Moses’ father-in-law before God” (Exod. 18:12). When God came down on Mount Sinai and made the covenant with Israel, we read:

□ Exodus 24:9–11 — Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

We know that when Jesus first introduced the New Covenant, He did so within the context of a meal shared with His disciples in the upper room (Lk. 22:14-20), and He also made a meal—namely, the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 11:20-26)—to be the sign and the seal of that covenant forever after.

Are you seeing the beautiful picture here? Why should the making of a covenant relationship be marked by the eating of a covenant meal? Why should the maintenance and the continuation of a covenant relationship also be marked by the continual eating of covenant meals? Even today we understand that sharing a meal is a picture of sharing fellowship together – of people taking time especially after the busyness and responsibilities of the day to enjoy one another’s company and to connect and converse together. That’s what all shared meals should be. So I think of the words of Jesus in Revelation chapter three:

□ Revelation 3:20 — “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, *I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.*”

When the psalmist says to Yahweh, his covenant God, “You prepare a table before me,” we have to be thinking first of all of this meal as a “covenant meal.” It’s a meal that pictures for us the fellowship and the communion that the covenant God desires to share with His covenant child. I think of something else that Jesus said in the Gospel of John:

□ John 14:23 — “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

Do I understand that God wants to share this intimacy of relationship and this sweetness of fellowship with *me*? Christianity is truly not just about confessing a set of propositions, but about

enjoying and delighting in communion with God. No, I'm not talking about mysticism here, but I am talking about genuinely loving a personal being—THE personal being whose name is Yahweh—and being loved by Him, about genuinely praising and worshiping and crying out “Abba, Father” and being received and accepted by God in His beloved Son.

Yahweh's table is a symbol of intimate fellowship and communion. It's also a mark of the very highest honor and favor.

II. Psalm 23:5a (take two) — You prepare a table before me...

We remember from last week that the image of the shepherd is actually a royal and kingly image. All the faithful in Israel knew Yahweh as their King – the one who sat enthroned above the cherubim – and it was this King who was their shepherd. So, now, when the psalmist says, “*You* [Yahweh] prepare a table before me,” what kind of table is this that he's thinking of? It's the King's table. And who is it that's preparing the table? Who is it that's the host at this meal? It's none other than the King – the King of kings and the Lord of lords! In ancient times, it was a mark of the very highest honor and favor to be invited by the King to sit and to eat at his table. So, for example, we read in Jeremiah chapter 52:

- Jeremiah 52:31–33 — In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah... Evil-merodach king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed Jehoiachin king of Judah and brought him out of prison. And he spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put off his prison garments. And every day of his life he dined regularly at the king's table.

And then listen to this wonderful passage from 2 Samuel chapter 9:

- 2 Samuel 9:7–13 — David said to [Mephibosheth], “Do not fear, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul your father, **and you shall eat at my table always.**” And he paid homage and said, “What is your servant, that you should show regard for a dead dog such as I?” Then the king called Ziba, Saul's servant, and said to him, “All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson. And you and your sons and your servants shall till the land for him and shall bring in the produce, that your master's grandson may have bread to eat. **But Mephibosheth your master's grandson shall always eat at my table.**” ... Then Ziba said to the king, “According to all that my lord the king commands his servant, so will your servant do.” **So Mephibosheth ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons...** And all who lived in Ziba's house became Mephibosheth's servants. So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, **for he ate always at the king's table.**

It's against this backdrop that we can better understand the gratitude and the wonder of the psalmist when he says to His covenant Lord and King, “You prepare a table before me.” What an amazing thing that *our* Lord and King would invite us to sit at His own table as His honored guests – and in the end not just as guests, but even as members of His own household!

In the extended household of the king, there were *many* who would eat at the king's table. Nehemiah was just the governor of a small community of Jewish exiles now returned to their land, but he could still say that there were 150 men at his table besides those who came from the surrounding nations and that what was prepared at his expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance (Neh. 5:17-18). Compare this with King Solomon! There were so many honored guests at Solomon's table that his "provision for one day was one hundred eighty bushels of fine flour, three hundred sixty bushels of meal, ten fat oxen, twenty pasture-fed cattle, [and] a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl" (1 Kings 4:22-23). There are many honored guests in the King's household who are invited to eat at the King's table just like there are many sheep in the shepherd's flock, but the psalmist still sees his place at this table as a place that's been prepared especially and personally for him and the fellowship that he enjoys with his covenant King as a fellowship no less intimate and no less sweet than if this were a table set *only* for him – "You prepare a table before *me*." Who wouldn't want to sit at the *King's* table? Who wouldn't be overwhelmed to be so highly honored and favored as to be invited to sit at the King's own table? And who wouldn't delight to sit down with the King at His table and enjoy that intimate table fellowship with Him? Brothers and sisters, these are all the things that we have been invited to do as those who are in covenant with God.

Yahweh's table is a symbol of intimate fellowship and communion, it's a mark of the highest honor and favor, and it's also a place of perfect safety and protection.

III. Psalm 23:5b — You prepare a table before me **in the presence of my enemies...**

In the Old Testament, "hospitality" meant a lot more and was a way bigger deal than it is in our western culture today. In the Old Testament, the host voluntarily took upon himself full responsibility for the welfare and for the safekeeping of his guests. So we think of Lot, who invited two visiting strangers (who were actually angels) to spend the night in his home. When they entered his house "he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate" (Gen. 19:3). Later that night, when the men of the city surrounded the house and demanded that Lot hand his guests over to them, Lot went out to them and entreated them:

□ Genesis 19:8 — "Do nothing to these men, *for they have come under the shelter of my roof*."

In the end, Lot wasn't able to keep his guests safe (and they didn't need him to), but this is still a perfect example of the reality that we see in Psalm 23. As those who've been invited to the King's table, we've also, as it were, come under the shelter of His roof. As our host at the table, He has voluntarily taken on Himself the full responsibility for our safekeeping. And so to sit at His table is to experience the most perfect and wonderful feeling of true peace and security. It's to know that in the end, all the enemy can do is look on helplessly from the outside and know that I'm forever beyond his reach. I am safe. I am secure. There is nothing and no one that can touch me. To return to the imagery of the sheep, I think of Jesus' words in John chapter ten:

□ John 10:27-29 — My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and *no one will snatch them out of my hand*. My

Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and *no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*

The king's table is a symbol of intimate fellowship and communion, it's a mark of the highest honor and favor, it's a place of perfect safety and protection, and so—not surprisingly—it's also the place of deepest satisfaction, and happiness, and joy.

IV. Psalm 23:5c — You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; **you anoint my head with oil; my cup is filled to overflowing.**

We usually associate “anointing with oil” with the ceremonial anointing of a king, or a prophet, or a priest. But this “anointing with oil” is different. In the Old Testament, people would anoint *themselves* with scented oil as something that was refreshing and rejuvenating (Deut. 28:40; Mic. 6:15; Ps. 92:10). Maybe we could think of today's lotions or perfumes, though I think that analogy still falls short. Scented oil was really an “extra,” so unless you were rich you certainly wouldn't be anointing yourself every day of the week (cf. Amos 6:4-6). When Ruth was going to meet Boaz at the threshing floor at night, Naomi said to her:

□ Ruth 3:3 — Wash therefore and anoint yourself...

That was a special time and a special occasion, and so we can see how “anointing with oil” would come to be associated not just with refreshment but also with special times of festivity and celebration and joy.

- Ecclesiastes 9:7-8 (cf. Ps. 104:14-15) — Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart... Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.
- Proverbs 27:9 — Oil and perfume [scented oil] make the heart glad...
- Psalm 45:7 (cf. 92:10) — You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

Are you beginning to see the picture? To anoint oneself with oil was not only refreshing and rejuvenating, but also a sign of gladness and joy. We could even say that it was an encouragement to *be* glad and joyful. When you anointed yourself with oil, it helped to put you in the right frame of mind for festivity and celebration and rejoicing.

With this background in mind, we come back now to Psalm 23 and what do we see? We see not the guest anointing himself, but the host providing the oil and anointing his honored guest. Apparently, that's what any gracious and hospitable host would do for his guest (cf. Lk. 7:44-46) as a way of refreshing the body and gladdening the heart – preparing him for all the festivities to come. And so we see how the psalmist is picturing himself as the honored guest at Yahweh's table and confessing that his place at this table is one of the utmost joy and gladness. It's *God*, as his gracious host, who anoints his head with that refreshing, rejuvenating oil of gladness – *and who also* fills his cup to overflowing. Oil and wine, in the Bible, go together because both are symbols of joy. The psalmist writes in another place:

- Psalm 104:14–15 (Deut. 28:39-40; Mic. 6:15; Amos 6:6) — You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man’s heart.

Here in Psalm 23 he says: “You anoint my head with oil; my cup is filled to overflowing.” The point isn’t that his cup is actually “overflowing” or “running over.” That’s not what we’re meant to imagine. The Hebrew word here isn’t a verb, but a noun, and it means to be filled up completely, to be full to the brim; it means to be *full to the point* of overflowing. That’s the kind of joy that God gives to those who are in covenant with Him. This is the joy that is the lot of all those who sit as honored guests at His table – who have experienced his salvation.

- Psalm 116:12–14 — What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.
- Psalm 16:5 — The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

Brothers and sisters, do we know the joy of being those who have been invited to sit at God’s table and share in covenant fellowship with Him? Do we know the joy of those who have experienced God’s salvation and who can therefore say with the psalmist, “You anoint my head with oil; my cup is filled to overflowing”? I think of Jesus who turned the water into the best wine (Jn. 2:9-10), and who came eating and drinking (cf. Mat. 11:19) as a sign of the joy and gladness that He brought. And I think of the passage in Isaiah that Jesus Himself quoted as being fulfilled in His own ministry (cf. Lk. 4:16-21):

- Isaiah 61:1–3 (cf. 2 Sam. 14:2; Dan. 10:2-3; Mat. 6:17-18) — The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion— to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, **the oil of gladness instead of mourning**, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.

The king’s table is a symbol of intimate fellowship and communion, it’s a mark of the highest honor and favor, it’s a place of perfect safety and protection, and so it’s also the place of the deepest joy and gladness. Given all of these things, what an awesome privilege it is to be in covenant relationship with God; to be able to say with the psalmist: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup is filled to overflowing.” David continues in verse six:

V. Psalm 23:6a — Surely goodness and steadfast love will follow after me all the days of my life...

After all that we’ve reflected on in the previous five verses, this is the conclusion. And if you really think about it, how could we come to any other conclusion? If the Lord is *my* shepherd

(with all that this means) and if the Lord is *my* gracious host (with all that this means), “*surely*,” then, “goodness and steadfast love will follow after me *all* the days of my life.”

The Hebrew word for “steadfast love,” here, is “*hesed*.” This is that special, covenant love that God pours out on the one to whom He has revealed Himself personally as Yahweh – or, in my case and in yours, on the one to whom He has revealed Himself personally as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I don’t think “goodness,” here, is meant to be read as something parallel to “steadfast love.” Instead, I believe that “goodness” is a word that’s used to emphasize all of the beauty and all the sweetness and all the perfections of God’s steadfast love. In other words, when we read “goodness and steadfast love,” I think what we’re meant to understand is something like this: “Surely all the goodness of [God’s] steadfast love will follow after me all the days of my life.” I say “follow after” instead of just “follow” to emphasize the sense of following closely – of following persistently and even relentlessly. The point of this word is that no matter where I go, I’ll never be out of the reach of all the goodness of God’s steadfast love. No matter where I go and no matter what my circumstances may ever be, I’ll never be able to escape the persistent, relentless pursuit of the goodness of God’s steadfast love. Which is to say that as one with whom God has entered into covenant, *God Himself* will never, ever stop pursuing me with His love.

These are encouraging and comforting words, but do you feel that we’re also being *challenged* to be able to pray these words *by faith*? After speaking in the second person *to* the Lord in the last two verses (“You... your... you... you...”), the psalmist returns to the third person in verse six so that now it’s as though he’s exhorting himself and preaching to himself. Sometimes I may feel like God is absent and far off – as the psalmist himself often did. Sometimes I may feel that there is no protection against the enemy who prowls around seeking someone to devour. Sometimes I may struggle to feel the privilege and the honor and the joy and the gladness of sitting at God’s own table. And yet by faith I can still say: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” By faith I can still say at all times and in all circumstances: “*Surely* the goodness of His steadfast love will follow after me all the days of my life.”

VI. Psalm 23:6b — Surely the goodness of his steadfast love will follow after me all the days of my life, **and I will return [to dwell] in the house of the LORD for as long as I live [lit. “for length of days”].**

How does this psalm of comfort and trust end? It ends with the psalmist’s own personal statement of covenant commitment – which also happens to be the expression of his own deepest longing and desire: “...and I will return [to dwell] in the house of the LORD for as long as I live.” I wonder if this is something that’s often missed in our meditations on Psalm 23. This Psalm isn’t just about what my covenant Lord does for me; it’s about my own commitment to seek always after my covenant Lord and be satisfied always in His presence – more than in any other place.

The Hebrew is awkward because it says, literally, “And I will return in the house of the Lord.” That’s why our English Bibles translate simply, “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord.” But it’s better if we translate more fully and more accurately: “I will return [to dwell] in the house of the LORD for as long as I live” (cf. ESV footnote). What the psalmist is thinking of, here, are

those regular, repeated visits to the temple (in David's case, the tabernacle). For those who lived further away, these would be regular, repeated pilgrimages or journeys to the temple (cf. Ps. 84). For as long as the psalmist lives and for as long as he is able, He will never, ever stop returning to "dwell" in Yahweh's house (Ps. 27:4; 26:8; 42:1-2; 63:1-3; 65:4). And why is this? Because it's in the temple, it's in the place of God's "*special*" presence, that I perceive the most clearly that He is *present with me always*. It's in the temple, in that place of God's "special" presence, that I perceive the most clearly that the Lord is my shepherd always, and that He has invited me to sit always with Him at His table. It's when I'm worshiping in God's temple (in this household of God) that I see and perceive the most clearly that the goodness of His steadfast love will surely follow after me all the days of my life (cf. Ps. 73:16-17). Therefore, it's in the temple, it's in *this* place of God's "special" presence, that I am especially strengthened and encouraged to pray these words by faith – in all circumstances and at all times:

- Psalm 23:1–6 (cf. Rev. 3:11-13; 7:13-17) — The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup is filled to overflowing. Surely the goodness of his steadfast love will follow after me all the days of my life, and I will return to dwell in the house of the LORD for as long as I live.