

A Prepared Table

Psalm 23

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Dear congregation, our text this evening comes in the words of verse 5 of Psalm 23, a Psalm we have been considering over recent weeks. Psalm 23:5,

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

So we've said from the beginning that this Psalm is a confession of faith. It's David's confession. It's the believer's confession of faith. And so we ask this evening, is it your own? And you notice that in our preaching, we ask that kind of question often, is this yours? Can you say this? And the reason we ask these kinds of question is because the scripture asks these kinds of question. Remember what Jesus says to the blind man in John 9, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" Remember what Jesus says to the Pharisees, "What think ye of Christ?" What he says to his disciples, "Who do men say that I am? But who do you say that I am? Will you also go away?"

And you might begin to think why keep asking? Why ask people who have followed so faithfully this whole time? Can't we simply assume that if we're here tonight, that we do believe in the Son of God? Can't we assume that if we're in the church, if we're in the covenant community, if we've been baptized, if we're making confession of faith, if we've made confession of faith, if we attend the Lord's Supper, can't we simply assume that we do believe? Well, the fact of the matter is, the Bible calls on all to ask these kinds of questions to those who profess and those who don't. It calls us to make sure, to give diligence to make our calling and our election sure, certain. It calls us to examine ourselves, as Paul tells the Corinthians, "Examine yourself whether you are in the faith. Prove your own selves. Know your own selves whether Christ be in you or not." Every time the Lord's Supper happens, there is this call not from the preacher but from the word of God to examine yourself. Examine yourself. "Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of that bread."

Now the intention of these questions is not to make people overly and morbidly introspective. It's not to turn people in on themselves. It's not have people always wondering and never coming to assurance, and always looking inside themselves, and always questioning. That's not the intention of these kinds of question. The intention of

these questions is to make sure that the thing we confess is on good ground. It's to make sure that we're standing on the right foundation, that we're building on the rock so that you would know that. That's because that ultimately is where assurance comes from when you see the foundation that you're standing on. It's not in how spectacular the house is, it's not how grand, it's not how wonderful the windows and the doors on the house, that's not what counts. What counts is the foundation and that's what these questions are driving you to, is the foundation good? Is the foundation good?

When you see the foundation you are standing on, when you look away from yourselves to Christ alone, when you come to say, "All my hope is in him," that's where assurance comes from. When you're able to say after this kind of examination whether for the first time or again, "It's not my works. It's not my effort. It's not my reformations of life. It's not my church attendance. It's not my profession of faith. It's not my experience of this or of that, but it's my shepherd. It's my shepherd." That's what this Psalmist is saying, "The LORD is my shepherd," and when you can say that in truth, then all is well. And this is the place the sheep come to again and rest again. This is the place and this is the place these questions want to bring you. Can you say in truth, "The LORD is my shepherd"? And so that's why we keep asking questions. Can you say this? Is this your profession too?

Children, I was reading about a young boy somewhere in the north of England some time ago, and he was out looking after his father's sheep, and this Christian man came to him and spoke to him and started talking to him about the good shepherd of John 10, the good shepherd that gave his life for the sheep. And the little boy wanted to know more about this good shepherd that gave his life for the sheep, and so he began to speak to him about it and he said to him, the Christian man, "Do you know Psalm 23?" And he said, "No." And so he said, "Well, try to learn the first line. The LORD is my shepherd." And he pointed to his fingers and said, "You can point to your fingers for each one of these words. "The LORD is my shepherd." And the man said to him, "Now when you get to that fourth finger, you hold it very tightly with your other hand. "The LORD is my shepherd." And he said, "Because it's so important to realize it's not just that this Jesus is a good shepherd who gives his life for sheep, but by faith when you come to him and you trust in him, he is my shepherd." And that is the all-important thing.

And so this man gave him a Bible when he asked to know more about the shepherd. He gave him a Bible and he said, "You need to read this Bible and pray to the Lord and ask the Lord to show you the shepherd from this book." And so the boy, he went home and he showed his parents this book that he had, this Bible, how he was going to read about this good shepherd who gave his life for the sheep, "So that he would be my shepherd too."

Well, after some time, this Christian man, he was in this area again and so he wanted to go and see this boy again. So he goes and he finds the mother of the boy and the mother told him that the son had died. And he spoke of how sorry he was. He was wanting to see him again. But the mother said, "Are you the man who spoke to my boy and taught him about something to do with his fingers and you gave him this book?" And he said, "Yes,

that was me." And she said, "Well, my boy just before he died, he told me that if you ever saw this man, tell him, tell him that I died holding the fourth finger of my hand. The LORD is my shepherd."

Dear children, you can have this shepherd too. You don't need to wait until you're old. You don't need to wait for any thing or any age before you can hold, as it were, that fourth finger and say, "The LORD is my shepherd." Yes, the Lord must give this, he must give this grace, but the good shepherd is one who takes children into his arms and says, "Let them come to me. Suffer little children to come unto me and don't forbid them for of such is the kingdom of God."

Well, here in verse 5, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." Now remember that everything that follows, that comes in this Psalm follows this initial confession, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." And really the rest of the Psalm is an explanation of what the person who has Christ as the shepherd has, and this not lacking or this not wanting anything and certainly at times that is severely tested. Dear confessing members, this confession will be severely tested. The valley of the shadow of death will test this confession when everything appears to be slipping out of our grasp, when we appear to be losing everything, as we saw this morning. But here again in verse 5, you have the presence of enemies, and you may ask, "Well, these enemies seem so strong and I'm so weak." And you maybe ask as you look out on this journey that's before you, this path that is before you, "Will I make it? Will I be able to persevere to the end? Will I get what I need?" David says in this verse, "The Lord will abundantly and cordially provide everything I need in this dangerous journey. The Lord will abundantly and cordially," that's a word that speaks of the kindness and the warmth of what he gives, "He will abundantly and cordially provide everything I need in this dangerous journey."

Now firstly here, we want to see the presence of the enemies; secondly, the preparing of the table; and thirdly, the pleasure in Christ's welcome. The presence of the enemies, the preparing of the table, and the pleasure in Christ's welcome.

Firstly, the presence of the enemies. Sheep have many enemies, not least, of course, is themselves. They can be, as we would say, their own worst enemy with their foolishness but they have many enemies outside of themselves. There are dangerous animals: the lion, the wolf, the bear. Douglas Macmillan, remember the shepherd who became a preacher, he in his shepherd days he spoke of hooded crows that would pluck out the sheep's eye. So birds are dangerous enemies that would leave the sheep, he says, blind and he spoke of the black beaked seagulls that would go straight for their ribs or for the liver of the sheep. So the birds or the oriental birds in the east, the vultures, or the buzzards, especially when the sheep is on its back and it's a cast sheep on its back, it's very vulnerable, it's very exposed to the birds. There's also poisonous plants. There are parasites and fleas and that kind of thing that are great enemies to the sheep and David understood this. He understood how exposed sheep were, how many enemies they had.

Remember when he speaks to Saul before fighting Goliath, he says of himself, "Your servant kept his father's sheep and there came a lion and a bear and took a lamb out of the flock and I went after him and smote him and delivered him out of his mouth." Jesus clearly knew this. In John 10, he speaks of the wolf that comes to destroy, to kill, to steal, to scatter the sheep. Paul knew this. Remember when he speaks to the Ephesians towards the end of the book of Acts 20, he's warning them about false teachers, people who will teach you false doctrine, people who will come in subtly with different ideas or different emphases, a different gospel ultimately, and he says these are – listen to what he says – he says, "Take heed therefore to yourselves unto all the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers to feed the church of God which he has purchased with his own blood, for I know this, that after my departing, grievous wolves will enter in among you not sparing the flock." False teachers, a different gospel, a different emphasis, a little addition here, a little subtraction there, he says they are grievous wolves who won't spare the flock. And he says, "Also of your own selves, from your own midst, from your own congregations, from your own denominations, men will rise speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them. Be careful," he says.

And so it's important, confessing members, it's important to realize you cannot speak about belonging to Christ as the good shepherd without recognizing the reality of the enemies around you. The moment you profess the name of Christ publicly, you're marked. Your adversary, the devil, goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. The devil is an enemy. The world is an enemy, its fashion, its godlessness, its thinking, its entertainment, its music, its dress. James says, "Don't you know that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God." He's drawing the lines and he's saying there's not this middle ground, this kind of neutral territory, this blurring of the lines. No, if you're a friend of the world, you're an enemy of God.

John says the same thing, "The world," he says, "doesn't know you." Well, of course, he's not speaking of simply knowing your name or knowing who you are at work. No, he's saying the world doesn't understand you. The world doesn't get who you are because you're from a different world, as it were. The world does not know us because it didn't know him.

But then there's not only the devil and the world, there's yourselves, your own flesh. How often Paul and the apostles speak this way and they speak about it as a warfare, the remains of sin. Unbelief. Hardness of heart. My own wandering. Paul as a mature Christian says, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man but I see another law in my members warring, fighting, against the law of my mind." Peter says in 1 Peter 2:11, "I beseech you, dearly beloved, as strangers and pilgrims in this world, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul." If there's no fight with sin, then there's no life in the soul.

So the world, the flesh, the devil, sometimes the fight, as it were, sadly, can even be from good people, from God's own people. You notice in this Psalm how the Psalmist moves from a difficult place in verse 4 to difficult people in verse 5. Verse 4 is the valley of the

shadow of death, verse 5 is the presence of mine enemies. I was listening to Eric Alexander on this Psalm, this is back in the mid '90s and he says there how appalling it is how people can be the instrument of causing such distress to other people. He says he was asked to be a peacemaker in the churches there in Glasgow in the '90s, places where there had been strife and division, and he says, "You know, one of the saddest things I discovered in 1994 is how unbelievably cruel professing Christians can be to each other." And I think he says throughout the whole of the church of God, one of the things we greatly need to plead for is this, "Lord, set a watch over my lips and mellow my spirit."

But the Lord says here or the Psalmist says, "You prepare a table for me in the presence of mine enemies." A Christian has enemies. A Christian doesn't realize how many enemies there are. He knows many of them, we're not ignorant of Satan's devices, but the key thing is that the shepherd knows them all. The shepherd knows them all. The shepherd deals with them all. The shepherd deals with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The shepherd, remember, is also very similar to, if not even identical to, the king. And this we believe in a special way speaks to Christ as the king. Now what does Christ do as a king? The Shorter Catechism tells us that Christ executes the office of a king in subduing us to himself. There's his first work: subduing us, subduing the wickedness of my own heart, the enmity of my own heart. He subdues it to himself. He then rules and defends us, and he restrains and conquers all his and our enemies.

So it can a fear, especially as you begin on this Christian profession, you look at this long journey ahead, you see so many enemies and it can be a fear, "Will I survive? Will I persevere? Will I bring a stain on the profession of Christ? Will I fall one day at the hand of Saul," David asks. Douglas Macmillan again said that after he was converted, I think he had lived a very wild life before, he says after his conversion his old drinking friends in the pub were saying he would not be able to keep it up, and then they began taking bets, they made bets as to how long he would last. Initially they said he won't last a month. He was converted in June and they said by the end of July, there's this Highland Games, and one of them said, "He'll make it up to the dance but he won't make it past that. That's the point he'll come back." And after that, they had more bets and this time it was a little longer and they said, "Well, he'll make it to the end of the year." You see, the enemy is seeking to trip him up but the point is God saves, God keeps, God preserves his people. He prepares a table in the presence of all who would pull us down and separate us from the shepherd heart and the shepherd love.

So the presence of enemies but, secondly, the preparing of the table. "Thou preparest a table before me." Now some say, at least with the shepherd/sheep idea that the table was on the top of the mountain. It was like a plateau where there would be lush grass to feed on and this was like the table that was set up, and that could certainly be. Macmillan suggests that one of the old practices in the east was to raise up the table above the ground, I think like we would call it a trough, to raise it up off the ground because on the ground it was infested with parasites and with fleas that could get into the skin and even ultimately kill the sheep. And so you raise up the table and you put the food on it and so the sheep feed in the presence of these enemies, but the point at least is this: they are

eating in the presence of the enemies without being distracted by them, or at least this, the enemies can't stop the sheep from feeding. The enemies cannot stop the sheep from feeding. That's a lesson for today. It's a lesson for the governments in some countries today that want to stop the preaching of the gospel. You won't stop the sheep from feeding. The shepherd will get the food to the sheep one way or the other.

That's the idea here, "Thou preparest a table in the presence of mine enemies." The good shepherd is raising up a table in the gospel for sinners in the midst of the enemies that are out there and in here. He's raising up a table and this gospel is a table. It has food on it. It has the milk of the word. It has Christ, the bread of life, broken before you. It has Christ, the water of life, set before you. It has Christ saying, "Eat, friends. Drink. Drink abundantly. O beloved, if any man thirst, let him come to me and drink. If any man hunger, let him come to me and eat."

This gospel is a table set up in the presence of a world that is at enmity with God but the point, the key point is this: the Lord is able to bring the supplies his people need wherever they are. What a comfort. The Lord is able to bring the supplies his people need wherever they are. Nothing can come between them and what they need. Yes, they can be surrounded by enemies, enemies that seek to cut off the supply line, enemies that seek to kill and to destroy, but with the good shepherd the supply will always get through. "My God shall supply all your need according to his riches and glory by Christ Jesus." Nothing can cut them off from God, this is said. Those who have the good shepherd, nothing can ultimately come between them and the grace of God that is in Jesus Christ. You might feel cut off, you might feel surrounded by enmity and enemies, you might find an enmity within, you might say like the woman, "Truth, Lord, I'm not worthy but the dogs eat from the crumbs that fall from the master's table." And this Psalm is saying and David is telling us, he's telling the people of God, "You are not cut off. The grace you need will get through." Oh, what a glorious thing to be a Christian then. What a glorious thing to have this line, as it were, from Christ who is the vine and his people the branches in him truly, to always have the grace that is needed for the day.

Remember David again in 2 Samuel 17. Was he not cut off? He was hounded, he was chased, they were plotting for his life, they were hunting him down, they had sophisticated and clever men giving advice. There's Ahithophel and Hushai. His enemies were everywhere. People had to hide underground in the wells to hide from the enemies, and you would ask, "Well, how could David possibly feast with this kind of situation, with these kinds of enemies pursuing hot after him? How could there be a table there?" And yet aren't these words at the end of that chapter so marvelously beautiful and glorious, "when David was come to Mahanaim, that Shobi the son of Nahash of Rabbah of the children of Ammon, and Machir the son of Ammiel of Lodebar, and Barzillai the Gileadite of Rogelim, Brought beds, and basons, and earthen vessels, and wheat, and barley, and flour, and parched corn, and beans, and lentiles, and parched pulse, And honey, and butter, and sheep, and cheese of kine, for David, and for the people that were with him, to eat: for they said, The people is hungry, and weary, and thirsty, in the wilderness." You see, for the people of God, the provision gets through. The Lord uses

means and the Lord will find the way to bring what is needed to his people. How well do you think, children, David enjoyed this meal? One of the best meals he ever had.

Isn't it such a wonderful thing when the Lord does this? Do you know this? Do you understand this? Do you understand that in the presence of enemies, when times are difficult, when it's so unexpected that the Lord comes in his word and it's as though the supply comes to you and the word is opened and there you went to it cold, you went to it without any expectation and suddenly there it was, there was the thing you needed, there was the answer, there was the food, there was the manna. You come to the house of God and you come weary and heavy with all the care and the burden and with, yes, your own sense of sin and wandering and unworthiness, and there it was, there it was in the sermon or the singing, there was bread for you. Unexpected but there it was. The Lord was preparing a table in the presence of your enemies.

The Communion Table is a table lifted up in the wilderness. In the presence of enemies, there's bread and wine and Christ says in the midst of this world that is so difficult, this world that is so antagonistic, this world that is so weary for the people of God at times, and there is the table raised up and Christ coming as the good shepherd and saying, "Eat, friends, and drink abundantly. This is my body broken for you." And as one man said, "Sometimes you come to the table but other times the table comes to you." And Christ, you find him coming and raising up this table for you, "My blood shed for you, drink it."

But I want to notice here, thirdly, the pleasure in Christ's welcome, and we have that in these words, "thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." There's the anointing of the head. Now the shepherds would say that they use oil, some kind of oil and spice to put and massage onto the head of the sheep to keep it from the fleas that would otherwise get in there, or the flies that usually swarm around the face of the sheep and irritate the sheep. And so you anoint my head with oil and the flies go and you can eat, as it were, in peace.

Now that may well be there, that may well be in this picture. No doubt too, though, David is thinking of his own anointing, his anointing as king. Remember, Samuel came to Jesse and found David and the youngest son of Jesse, and the Lord said, "Take, fill your horn with oil and go to Jess for I have provided me a king. So you anoint the king," and then verse 13, Samuel takes the horn of oil and he anoints David in the midst of his brethren, and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward. And so Psalm 89 speaking of David says, "I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him, With whom my hand shall be established: mine arm also shall strengthen him."

So this anointing oil really speaking of the work of the Spirit of God, tells us about our need for the Holy Spirit. Do we not sing, "With thy anointing I am blessed"? And when through Christ we have this anointing, it means that God is present. By his Spirit he's present, he's helping, he's protecting. That's why the counsel of Ahithophel failed. That's why the counsel of Hushai failed. That's why they couldn't find David. That's why there was food for David even in chapter 17 of 2 Samuel, the last verses of 2 Samuel. That's

why every tongue that will rise in judgment against the people of God will be condemned.

Now, of course, that speaks to us and points us back to Christ who is the anointed one. That's what Christ means, the anointed. And he, of course, is the anointed one. He is the one who has defeated all the enemies of his people. He is the one who was anointed with the Spirit without measure. And it's with his anointing that comes down from the head to the people that the people of God are blessed. Remember what John writes in his epistle, 1 John 2:26, he says, "The anointing which you have received of him," or from him, "abides in you." It's coming through Christ, the head, and the anointing that he has. The oil that comes upon the head of Aaron flows down through Christ to the skirts of the garment to all the people of God and it has strength and it has power. Not their own but his and that's why the people of God persevere, that's why they can keep on keeping on.

And then he says not only "you anoint my head with oil," but "my cup runs over." A beautiful expression speaking about the abundance, speaking about the warmth even of the grace of God. The grace of God is not a cold thing, dear congregation, the grace of God is warm, the grace of God is loving, the grace of God is abundant. He provides a table and he welcomes people there, and what you have in Christ is an abundance, not just a full cup but an overflowing cup. There's always an overflowing with Christ and, of course, you may not feel that and most of the time God's people don't feel that. They might feel more like Naomi, "Don't call me pleasant, call me bitter. Don't call me Naomi, call me Marah. I went out full but now I am empty." But you know the thing about the grace of God, he fills the cup again. He pours into the cup again. There's this constant pouring in, this constant restoring, this constant giving and giving and giving of the grace that is in Christ so that his people remain dependent, so that his people keep coming, his people keep asking, his people keep knocking and asking and seeking and receiving. Grace upon grace.

There's an abundance in the gospel. It's not the bare necessity you receive. No, it's grace upon grace. He will abundantly pardon. He will multiply pardons literally, Isaiah 55. He is able to do exceeding abundantly above what we can ask or think. Out of his fullness have all we received. And when you take from his fullness, his fullness doesn't lessen. It is always fullness and there's always an abundance. And it's so often in the trials and in the middle of enemies and difficulties, in the valley, that you experience something of the grace and mercy and power and goodness and abundance of the Lord that you never knew before. You see it in other Christians, perhaps, and it's a blessed thing if you know it yourself, if you can say like Paul does, "The grace of God was exceeding abundant towards me."

But I want to leave you with this. If you have tasted that the Lord is gracious, if you have drunk from this cup, if you know this anointing at all, this strengthening through Christ by his Spirit, if you know anything of these things, if you know what it is to feed, if you know what it is to be revived by the word of God, then you must remember and we all must remember, we must never forget what it cost the good shepherd to give this. Never forget Psalm 22 before Psalm 23. Think of how he was in the midst of enemies, the way

he describes them. "They pierce my hands and my feet. They're like bulls. They're like strong bulls of Bashan. There's the roaring lion who is speaking and shouting at me, a lion hungry for its prey. They laugh at me. They mock me." Oh the enmity that Christ faced and for the oil of gladness to be put upon the head of any one of us, there had to be a crown of thorns upon his head. For the overflowing cup to be in our hands, for the cup of blessing which is here in the gospel this evening, the good shepherd had to take the cup of wrath and he had to drink it to its bitterest dregs until there was not a drop left. And then from his own blood, he fills it with a cup of blessing and of salvation that overflows in the gospel and that overflows to sinners so that there will be an abundance of pardon and mercy for sinners like you and me.

Never forget what Christ had to do as the anointed one to give an anointing to any one of us. So the question this evening is not so much, indeed it's not at all what do you think of your own anointing, but what do you think about his? It's not what do you think about yourself, it's what do you think about Christ? Do you say, "I'll take the wilderness. I'll take the cross. I'll take the shame. I'll take the enmity. I'll take the difficulties of the way. I'll take the suffering. If only I can drink from his cup. If only I can taste the blessing of salvation." Do you know what it is to feast in Christ? Do you know what it is to be satisfied with him? Can you cling to that fourth finger and say, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want"?

I want to conclude here with words from Charles Spurgeon. "Unconverted hearer, I know you are not happy. You say, 'I wish my cup would run over.' What are you doing with it? 'Well, I'm trying to empty it of my old sins.' That will not make it run over. 'I have been washing it with my tears.' That will not make it run over. Do you know the only way of having joy and peace in your heart? What would you do with an empty cup if you were thirsty? Would you not hold it under a fountain until it was full? This is what you must do with your poor, dry, empty soul. Come and receive from Christ grace for grace, 'For as many as received him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God, even to as many as believe on his name.' Hold your empty cup under the stream of divine fullness which flows to the guilty through Jesus Christ, and you also shall joyfully say, 'My cup runneth over.'" Amen.

Let us pray.