

Psalm 23:5

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[0 : 00] Today is our fifth Sunday looking at the 23rd Psalm, often called the Shepherd's Psalm.

Christians love Scripture in general, but they particularly love this Psalm. They always have. The idea that Jesus would be our good shepherd was so compelling to the early church that it was one of their favorite images.

You might remember two weeks ago, I showed an image from the Roman catacombs of the good shepherd with the shepherd's staff in one hand and the sheep around his shoulders the other. Now today, if you're joining us for the first time or if you've been gone much of the summer and are just now returning, I'll summarize some of the themes from the psalm for you.

One theme is God's presence. Verse 2 says that the shepherd makes us lie down in green pastures. The sheep have a lot of needs and they only lie down when those needs are met.

[1 : 09] And the way a shepherd meets most of those needs is simply being present. And when we're in the valley of the shadow of death, it's the presence of God that becomes very precious to us.

Another theme is God's protection and provision for us. I shall not be in want. He leads me beside still waters. And the third theme we looked at is repentance.

When we read he restores my soul, we are to understand that he brings us from following the wrong path and sets us onto the right path.

David hits all these themes by focusing on the imagery of a sheep and his shepherd. This verse is different.

He departs from this imagery. And I'll explain what this verse means in a second. But I thought that at the very beginning of this time together, I should bring to your attention several people in our congregation who are in desperate need of knowing and experiencing the Lord as their good shepherd.

[2 : 12] On Friday, Vance Barnwell passed away. He was the father of our dear friends Matt Barnwell and Travis Barnwell and the father-in-law to Tiara. Also, as of 5 p.m. today, just 20 minutes ago, Winston Morrison is on a flight back to Ghana to attend the funeral for his father.

So before we get into this, let's pray for them. Okay. Even now, father, as the flight makes its way towards Ghana, and Winston is leaving this continent, going to the new continent, where the reality of all this is going to hit him more deeply and more profoundly.

We ask that on this flight, and when he gets there, you would comfort him, that he would more richly know and experience your presence, that you're comforting care as his good shepherd.

For the Barnwells also, we pray the same thing. Comfort them in the loss of their father. And would you, father, very father-like, tend and care for them, comfort them.

Thank you that both of those men are knowing you profoundly now in your presence.

[3 : 38] Would we, in these moments together also, more deeply know your presence and your power to comfort and love us. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Okay. Let's look at verse 5. David writes, You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil.

My cup overflows. It's not immediately clear how this fits into the sheep-shepherd imagery, right? But some writers and commentaries try and make it work.

They'll point out how in various parts of the world, like in North America, in the Southwest, or in Kenya, or in Switzerland, that there's table land.

And that shepherds will go and prepare this table land for their sheep. They'll go ahead of them by pulling out all of the toxic weeds that might poison the sheep or scaring away all the nasty animals, like predators and snakes and such.

[4 : 46] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. That sounds great, but there's no table land in the holy land. So David probably didn't have that in mind.

What we find David doing is actually switching from describing God as a shepherd to describing him as a host. The Lord is my host.

Yesterday at our men's breakfast, we asked Winston, who I just referred to earlier, what do Americans not know about being Christians because of our Americanness? Or what can we learn from the Ghanaian Christian perspective?

One thing, and he didn't use these words precisely, that we don't know much about hospitality. This would contrast us against not just Ghana, but against much of the world and for much of human history.

Take the wealthy, for instance. In America, in general, if you want to display your wealth, you often acquire a big house and you set it apart with nice green land around it.

[6 : 01] Sometimes you gate it up. Wealth tends to separate us from our neighbors. In David's day, and in much of the ancient Near East, if you want to show off your wealth, the way to do it is through hospitality.

In the East, a man's fame is spread by means of his table and lavish hospitality rather than by his possessions. He hosts meals with three times as much food as his guests can eat.

Strangers and neighbors alike discuss tables where they have been guests. These stories spread from one town to another and from generation to generation.

And there's all kinds of gossip as to how guests and strangers are entertained. One observer writes, The modern Western way of showing off possessions assumes isolation and distance from the community.

It is enough that you drive by. Note my palatial house and see my expensive car parked beside it. But David's imagery has to do with community life that is strengthened and solidified by shared meals.

[7 : 11] You spread a table before me. You also anoint my head with oil. Now when I think of anointing, I think of kings and queens that are anointed with oil to be consecrated and set apart for these special roles.

What I didn't realize is that anointing with oil is also a practice of hospitality in the ancient world. And it's found all over the ancient world. Egypt, Rome, Greece, Persia.

Expensive, perfumed oil used to anoint guests. There's paintings in Egyptian tombs of women with what are called unguent cones on their head.

Unguent is the same word as unction. But these cones are made of wax. It's perfumed. And over time, the heat from the head melts the wax.

And it's perfumed and it just starts to drip down onto the person. And so we also see the practice of anointing as an octave hospitality in Jesus' day.

[8 : 19] In Luke chapter 7, Jesus is at the house of a man named Simon. Simon is a Pharisee. And into this gathering comes a woman from the town.

And the woman anoints Jesus' feet with her tears and with perfume. And Simon and the Pharisees are offended.

Like, Jesus, do you know who this woman is? And he rebukes Simon for several things. But one thing that I really hadn't caught before is that he rebukes their hospitality.

He says to Simon, I entered your house. You gave me no water for my feet. But she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss. But from the time I came in, she has not ceased to kiss my feet.

You did not anoint my head with oil. But she has anointed my feet with ointment. Okay, so we have a table. We have anointing.

[9 : 22] And we also have an overflowing cup. Now, with hospitality in mind, it's not hard to imagine what this is. We're at a party. And the host keeps your cup full of wine.

All right. So, verse 5. We have a host. And we have a pretty magnificent party. But in the middle of this description of hospitality comes a curious statement.

In the presence of my enemies. And what could that mean? Is David, like, gloating? Is God showing some kind of strange favoritism for David and being mean to other people?

Well, I think it would be helpful to look at the Gospels again to see what this might mean. In Luke chapter 15, Jesus tells a parable about a good shepherd who retrieves a lost sheep.

And in keeping with Psalm 23, he shifts from talking about sheep to talking about a party. It's the story of the prodigal son. Many of you know this story, perhaps.

[10:28] But this story depicts a father, a very wealthy, respected father, with two children. Two grown sons, the younger of which decides that he wants his inheritance now.

So he asks his father for his share of the inheritance. The father gives it. And the younger son goes away and spends it all on a wild time. And then becomes destitute with nothing.

He ends up having to share food with pigs, living in a pigsty. And while he's in the mud and muck, he realizes, Man, my dad's servants have it much better than I do.

So why don't I just go back to him and ask if I can be one of his servants? And so he comes home. And the father, we learn, is waiting for him, looking out for him.

And when he sees his youngest son, he runs out and greets him and hugs him, takes his robe, puts it on him, takes off his ring, puts it on his son's finger, and commands that a party shall be had to celebrate the return and reconciliation of his youngest son.

[11:35] And the older brother is incensed. The older brother said, You know, I've been serving you all these years, and you never threw me a party. Well, the older brother is probably not alone in his feelings.

The party guests are also probably feeling much the same way. They're probably disgusted at this smelly, shaven-head young man in rags who has just squandered the wealth of this wealthy, respectable man and has brought shame to his house.

They attend the party, but they're not at the party to welcome him back. They are there to celebrate the costly efforts of the father to reconcile the son back to himself.

You hear that? They are not there to honor the son. They're there to honor the father. We can trace similar themes in the account of Jesus and Zacchaeus, which we read earlier.

You might remember that Jesus came into town, and Zacchaeus was a tax collector, so he would have been very much hated by the town because Zacchaeus and tax collectors are known for being corrupt, fraudulent.

[12:57] So Jesus says, Come down from there. I want to enter your house and be a guest there. We can assume that they had a meal together, and this causes the religious elite to grumble.

They said, He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. Again and again, Jesus engenders hostility because of the people with whom he chooses to eat his meals.

Again and again, Jesus engenders hostility because of the people with whom he chooses to eat his meals. But Jesus said about Zacchaeus, Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is the son of Abraham.

For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost. And so looking back on this episode in his life, Zacchaeus can say, Jesus sought me and saved me. He shared a meal with me.

In doing so, the anger of my enemies, he took on himself. The hostility, which I deserved, he took on himself as well. The prodigal son can look back at the moment in his life and say, My village despised me.

[14:13] My brother hated me. But in full view of all of them, my dad ran out and greeted me and ordered a banquet in the presence of my enemies. David looks back on his life and writes a song.

I was a dumb sheep. And he restored my soul, the Lord, my shepherd. He brought me back and he spread a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

So what about ourselves? We can tend to think that we're pretty special, that God's pretty lucky to have us on his team.

But this psalm, in harmony with what Jesus taught, and in harmony with what Paul taught in his first letter to the Corinthians, tells us that God chose the weak in the presence of the strong.

He chose the foolish, that's you and me, in the presence of the wise. He chose the lowly and despised, that's you and me, and in what looks like foolishness and madness to the world, he brought us into his household, he adopts us, and throws us a party, and he dances over us, all at a great price to himself.

[15:33] The cost was the death of his own dear son. Jesus, the only one in this universe who has ever had any rightful claims of supremacy, the only one who could claim any special status because of his bloodline, shed his own blood that we, the lowliest, could belong to a family.

The first implication of three that we'll look at is that if we don't deserve the hospitality that God has shown us, if, because of his mercy and grace, God has taken the initiative to redeem us and to

reconcile us to himself and to each other, apart from any merit of our own, then our identity must be based on grace.

Which means, Christians can have no claims of superiority over anyone at all.

To be both Christian and racist is a contradiction. And if joining God's family means bearing his name, then we hate what he hates, and we denounce racism and bigotry at every turn.

A second implication is this. When God spreads a table for us and makes us part of his family, then we join the family business.

[17 : 15] God's design for humanity is to destroy racial division and hostility and from many peoples to create one new humanity. Therefore, his mission becomes our mission.

So how is the church of the Advent doing when it comes to this mission? Frankly, as Tommy pointed out, we confess every week that we have left a lot of things undone.

Tommy sent a letter to us on Monday. If you haven't received it, contact the office. We can send it to you. But there's much we have left undone. Words left unspoken.

Relationships left uninitiated. Empathy left unextended. Burdens left unshared. Pain left unconsolated. And yes, racism in the church left unaddressed.

perhaps Psalm 23 verse 5 gives us a place to start when it comes to joining God's mission in demolishing racial division.

[18 : 32] It starts with a table. A table. If you were to tell a story about a man and woman becoming intimate, it would start with flirtation, which would lead to dating and courtship.

Maybe. That's how it used to be in my day. Anyways. Which would lead to engagement, which would lead to marriage, which would lead to a bedroom.

Okay? In Psalm 23, David does a similar thing. He takes us further and further into intimacy with God. We start in the third person, the Lord is my shepherd.

Then he switches to the first person, you are with me. And then he takes us to a table. Not a surprise, right?

Some of you grew up in close-knit families where dinner together was a special time. The table can be a place of intimacy and love and safety.

[19 : 38] The time together at the table, perhaps it's a weekly time. For us, it's Friday, six o'clock, pizza and a movie. But you don't miss that time. It's a special time.

So intimacy and love and safety. But unfortunately, as Austin Channing Brown points out, the table can then become a place of separation and isolation.

and we can use the table to reinforce the things we already believe. Our church is a long way to go to experience the kind of diversity that Jesus has envisioned for his church.

Perhaps that begins at our tables. If we as a church want to join Christ's mission of breaking down racial hostility, perhaps it means we start by inviting people very different from us into our homes, to our tables, sharing a meal, extending generous, overflowing hospitality.

One last implication is this. Jesus doesn't feed us figuratively. He feeds us literally. God has always fed his people.

[21 : 06] It's been several thousand years. Well, I don't know how much time. But we tend to forget how radical Genesis 2 may have appeared to the ancient world.

The reason is because religions say something very different about the purpose of humanity and feeding and food. For instance, in the Babylonian religion, you had a great war of the gods, Marduk and his crew proved to be victorious, so set the other gods to work tending the fields, keeping the canals going, growing the food, while these gods started to grumble.

So Marduk took the most rebellious of the gods, slayed them, and took his blood to create humanity and as humans that he created to feed the gods.

Right? But God creates humans and he feeds them. This is, it's not until recently that I realized this, but this is a theme from beginning to end of scripture.

God feeds his people. And into eternity future we find God feeding his people at the great wedding feast of the Lamb.

[22 : 22] Right? And he feeds us today, not figuratively, but literally. He feeds us every week here at this table. He nourishes us with himself.

He says in the Gospel of John, whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true blood, excuse me, my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. In this meal, God nourishes us and extends to us friendship and intimacy. In this meal, he joins us together with brothers and sisters and with them we experience intimacy and reconciliation. creation. Here is where God's story of the universe is retold and remembered and reconstituted week after week.

[23 : 35] The story of God creating a good world which fell into sin and rebellion and brokenness, redeemed by the body of Christ, broken but risen again.

Therefore, the implication is this, make this meal a priority. Do your best not to miss this meal. This is where you are fed.

This is where you are connected to one another. This is where you are connected to the hope that one day we will share together as a ransomed people of God from every tribe and language and people and nation, a great wedding feast together, a feast that will last into eternity, in a place where conflicts and war and hostility and death is seized, a place where death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Let's pray. Let's pray.