

July 26/27, 2025

You Prepare a Table
Everything We Need Series
Psalm 23:5
Pastor Ryan Harmon

Well, this summer, as we have been walking through the 23rd Psalm together, I have found that each week, with each phrase, my heart has been overwhelmed with gratitude, with thankfulness. It's as if with each phrase there's been this deep sigh of relief that says, "I am so thankful that's true." That's been true every single week, until this week. Now, don't get me wrong. It's not that what we are going to reflect upon this morning isn't comforting. In fact, for me, it's just the opposite. It is so astounding that I find myself struggling to believe it could actually be true. As believers, we talk often about the fact that God loves us, and while we might struggle to believe that sometimes, we know that's true because God is love. He sent His Son into the world because He loved the world. But do you know it's also true that not only does God love you, He really enjoys you. He really likes you. In fact He celebrates you. Could that possibly be true? That's what we're going to look at this morning. Open your Bibles with me to Psalm 23.

We're going to be very zealous this morning, and we are going to cover an entire verse. Not just a phrase, but all of verse 5. As we begin, let me recite the first four verses for you. You can follow along in your head. We've been saying it all summer,

**The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.**

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. (*NASB, Psalm 23:1-4)**

Every one of those phrases speaks of the comfort of the leading of the shepherd. That leads us to this morning's phrase, this morning's verse, Verse 5:

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You have anointed my head with oil;
My cup overflows.**

Now immediately when we come to verse 5, we are faced with a choice. We have to make an interpretive decision. The question is whether or not David is continuing with the metaphor—the

imagery of the shepherd and the sheep—or whether he’s changed the metaphor, and he’s speaking about something different here in verse 5. There are a few commentators that believe what this is, is a continuation of that shepherding metaphor. A number of people have reached out to me over the course of this series and have asked whether I’m familiar with the book by Philip Keller that’s titled *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. It is a wonderful little book, a great devotional study of this very psalm. I’d highly recommend it. Keller takes that approach. He believes this is a continuation of the shepherding imagery. And so what that means is that when David says, **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies**, that is describing the way a shepherd would find a high table, or a plateau area within the wilderness. He would lead the sheep up there, and there’d still be predators around—enemies—but they’d be safe. And to prepare that table, to prepare that plateau, the shepherd would go and would remove any plants that might be poisonous or dangerous for the sheep. When David says, **You anoint my head with oil**, that’s a reference, in Keller’s view, to the fact that often shepherds would treat wounds on the sheep’s head especially, but all over the sheep’s body really, with oil for medicinal purposes. It would be comforting. **My cup overflows** is a reference to the fact that the shepherd provides water in abundance. And sometimes, if the sheep were sick or were hurt or were injured, the shepherd might also add a little bit of his wine into that mix in order to dull some of the pain that a sheep might feel. There’s no question that is an absolutely comforting picture.

There are a number of commentators that believe, however, that it is better to understand the language of verse 5 as a shift in a metaphor. The shift is this. **The LORD is our Shepherd**. That remains true absolutely, and that’s been the focus of the first four verses. But here in verse 5, what we have is the introduction of a new imagery, a new metaphor. And it’s this: the LORD is an extravagant and generous host. He hosts a meal. He prepares a meal. Now, at the end of the day, I don’t know that it matters all that much whether this all is taking place up on a tableland, on a plateau, or whether it’s taking place physically in a banqueting hall or at a table. The point isn’t so much where this is happening, as it is who is preparing things and what that signifies for those receiving that preparation. The point isn’t where it takes place; it’s who and what this says about what God is like. But for our purposes, I’m going to continue with the understanding that David here has shifted the metaphor, and this is describing the LORD as a generous host. So David says, **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies**. To prepare a table is essentially to prepare a meal; it’s to prepare a feast.

Now in the Middle East, even to this day, certainly back in David’s day and in the first century when Jesus and the disciples were in their ministry, hospitality was a very important thing. It was important for a host to be a generous and hospitable host. And not only would who the host invites say something about the people that the host is inviting over, but also how extravagant the meal was would say something about how generous, how good, how amazing and reputable the host was. So hospitality was important. It was a way to gain prominence. It was a way to gain favor. If you were very important in the world, if you were very important in your town, then you were the kind of person that hosted the absolute best meals. Now we need to admit every time we read the Bible, there are times where it becomes very clear that we culturally are a long way away from the world of the first century, or even all the way back in David’s day.

And that’s certainly true when it comes to this topic of hospitality. Hospitality isn’t nearly as important to us as it was certainly to David and in Jesus’ day. When we think about hospitality, it

kind of is a segment of the economy. You know, it's hotels and restaurants. That's the hospitality industry. But it wasn't that way in David's world. For them, hospitality was a way of life. It was a way to bless. We live in a world where if you have people over to your house, the chances are no one in your neighborhood, unless you have very nosy neighbors, will know. No one will know who you have over. No one will know what you served. It's all going to be done in private.

But in David's world, it was all very, very public. That's because the houses they lived in were very public. In fact, that's one of the reasons Jesus constantly got in trouble. Everyone could see who He was eating with, and they kept determining He's eating with the wrong people. And the reason that is, is because these houses were not enclosed. They often had open doors, and you could look from the street right into the table, and you knew exactly what was going on in there. So that helps us understand why it's possible that David, here in the first part of the phrase of verse 5, says, **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies**. The fact is that the whole town knows when a meal is being prepared. The whole town knows when a feast is about to occur, and knows exactly who's been invited. And if the whole town knows, and the town includes your enemies, then your enemies know as well. So that's the scene. The Lord is a host, preparing the food, preparing the table for an evening full of a generous feast.

David continues. He says, **You've anointed my head with oil**. Now what we know about these feasts is, if it was an extravagant feast, then a good host would start the evening with an anointing with oil. Now again, this is a long way away from our world. If any of you came over to our house and I gave you some olive oil, you'd be confused. "Is he expecting me to cook?" That'd be what we'd wonder. In that day, however, oil and anointing conveyed a number of different things. First and foremost it conveyed blessing and honor. We see that throughout the Old Testament, when kings were anointed. This is a way of affirming someone, of invoking your pleasure upon them. That's exactly what anointing conveyed when you arrived at someone's house. It also had a purpose though, that was a little more luxurious. In this dry and weary world of the Middle East, your skin gets hot and dry and cracked and sunburned because you are out in the scorching heat and wind all the time, so the giving of olive oil before a feast, was a way to introduce some comfort, soothing for your skin. And finally, often we know that these hosts would infuse this oil with pleasing scents and aromas. And so these people would put this oil over their head, and suddenly the entire room would be filled with a beautiful scent, ultimately creating an environment that says this is going to be a good and luxurious evening. That's what's being described when David says, **You've anointed my head with oil**. Essentially, it's telling us the Lord pulled out all the stops. He thought of everything. This isn't just a meal. This is a feast. It is going to be good, and it's going to be enjoyable...and He's thought of everything.

Now imagine you were invited over to some friend's house. You show up, and as you drive in the driveway, you can smell the food that's been cooking, and it just smells amazing...savory. It's just wonderful. And then you walk in and your friends just greet you generously; they just are so pleased to see you. They pour out just praise upon you, "So thankful you're here, so thankful you're my friend." And then they say, "Hey, before we eat, I had a special treat that I prepared." Now, as I offer this up, I'm going to speak in generalities for a moment, okay? If this doesn't work for you, it's okay.

But ladies, imagine you show up at the house, and all your friends have gathered to celebrate you. And then, before the meal is served, one of them says, “Hey, we’ve hired the best pedicurist in the city. We’re having pedicures. It’s going to be amazing, because I want this evening to be unforgettable.” It’s incredible! It’s a blessing, with great extravagance. Fellas, if that sounds really enticing to you, run with it, okay? (*laughter*) It sounds like a nightmare to me. So instead, for me, it reminds me of a time that I went with my father to a hunting and fishing and golfing lodge up in South Dakota. We pulled up, and you could tell that the meal is going to be amazing, that first meal of the evening. But before we eat the meal, they took us into a side room, and there was a football game on, and there was a fire that was roaring, and there were these big bowls of Hot Tamales and M&M’s, and then this massive vat of buffalo jerky. And they said, “Eat to your heart’s content.” And I remember thinking, “I could stay here forever.” (*laughter*) This is incredible. The host has thought of everything: luxury, generosity, and extravagance being poured out. **You have anointed my head with oil.**

And lastly, **my cup overflows**. Here’s what that means. Once the meal begins, the host has thought of everything. The meal is amazing. Everything is filled with luxury and extravagance, and the host has servers waiting in the wings. So as you are eating, as you are drinking, the second your cup starts to be slightly empty, the servers come and top it off. But they don’t just fill it to the top. They fill it to overflowing. It’s a symbol of generosity, of abundance...overflowing abundance. That’s what the Lord has prepared. That’s what that table signifies.

Now let me ask you a question. If somehow you could step into that very scene and the Lord Himself has prepared this extravagant evening for you, could you receive it...could you receive it? Now I ask that because I think as Nebraskans and as Midwesterners, I think we struggle when people make a fuss. The Lord is making a very big fuss in this scene. He’s thought of everything. It’s going to bless, and it’s going to be an over-the-top blessing! He’s going to provide, and it’s going to be over-the-top provision! It’s going to be a celebration, and it’s going to be an extravagant celebration! And I think, as people, we struggle sometimes to receive that, and we certainly struggle to think that we belong there. In fact, we struggle sometimes even to receive a compliment. You know what that’s like? Someone compliments you and you defer, you deflect, “Oh, it’s nothing.” The Lord has prepared a table. He’s thought of everything...pouring out blessing and honor and goodness and extravagance because He loves you. He’s not only our leader, the One who rescues us, the One who provides for us, He also is our friend and our host, who desires to enjoy an evening with us, celebrating our friendship, celebrating who we are. That’s the scene.

But I did gloss over one important part of the phrase, **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies**. So what is that all about? Who are our enemies? (Now just think this. Don’t whisper it to your friend. But do you have enemies? Does a person come to mind?) Now I’m afraid that often, when we read about enemies in the Bible, I’m afraid that too often our mind goes way over there somewhere...to a world far away from us, to enemies that we do not know and we will never meet. Say you hear about a terrorist organization, or you hear about a nation that opposes our nation, and when we read about enemies in the Bible, we start to think about those people and those groups that are so far removed from us we will never have any tangible contact with them. Because of that, I think some of the impact of Jesus’ words and even this phrase loses some of its impact when we think about people way out there. So I find it helpful when I read

about enemies in the Bible, to think about my very life and simply to think about people who don't like me. It's people who don't care for me. I think we all have people like that, people who just think you're the worst. They don't want to interact with you at the office; they avoid you. Or maybe it's a neighbor that kind of looks disapprovingly upon you. Your yard isn't nice enough...something like that. Or maybe it's someone who doesn't think you're really worthy of their time or their energy or their attention. When we're called to love our enemies, we're called to love those people. Now certainly we're called to love our enemies in other countries as well. That's certainly true. But this call to love our enemies is that there are people in our world that just think we aren't that great. We're called to love them. And here in this scene, this meal is all taking place in the presence of people just like that, people in the town that aren't too fond of them. I'm quite confident that everyone in the room has someone like that in your workplace, in your neighborhood, possibly even in your family...and that's hard. It doesn't feel good.

When I was thinking about this, it took me back to when I first started on staff. It's all the way back in 2007 and I was meeting with different people. I was the Young Adult Pastor at the time, and there was one person that I met with, who had some disagreements with some of the way that I wanted to move forward. Eventually we met again. And as we met, I was like, "How are you doing?" And he's like, "Well, I left the church." "Oh?" I said, "Why?" He said, "Because of you." And I said, "How's your burrito?" (*laughter*) I was curious and so I explored more. I said, "Can you help me understand?" He said, "I can't go to a church that would hire someone like you." That didn't feel good; he didn't care for me too much.

Now Jesus says *to love our enemies and bless those who curse us*. We are called to love that person who doesn't care for me. Now, with that kind of imagery in mind, when we think about enemies, thinking about people that are close to home, let's consider this phrase, **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies**. To our enemies, what are we? I'd say we're people that aren't deserving of a whole lot. We're people that should be avoided. We're people not worthy of celebration, not worthy of respect, not worthy of honor, certainly not worthy of the abundant blessing that's been described in this scene. In fact to our enemies, they might look down on a host that would invite people like you and me over for a meal. That's exactly what happened to Jesus all the time. "How dare you eat with them?" Our enemies look upon the host and they lose some confidence that the host even knows what they're doing. Maybe they don't have any discernment, because what kind of hosts would invite someone like you and someone like me over to dinner? And the answer is the Lord; that's who. The Lord knows the derision, knows the way our enemies think about us, knows what they think of Him because of the way He blesses us. And He does not care; He loves us. He says, "I'm having them over because they belong to Me, and it doesn't matter that the world looks down on us. It doesn't matter that the enemies say we don't deserve to be there." The Lord who loves us and leads us, He says we belong, and He invites us to the table with Him so that we might celebrate with Him and enjoy the fellowship and abundance and blessing and provision because He loves us. And not only does He love us, He really likes us; He enjoys us.

Have you ever been really celebrated? I've said already that's an uncomfortable thing for me. Growing up, even when I was a kid, I didn't want to have birthday parties. I don't know why. My kids don't get it; they don't understand it. If you're a counselor in the room, you could have a heyday with that one, trying to figure that out. But I've never made a big deal about my birthdays.

A few years ago, however, it was my birthday, and my cousin called me up and said, “Hey, why don’t we go out for your birthday? Why don’t you and Janee drive up to Omaha and go out with me and my wife? There’s a new steakhouse real close to where we live. We’d love to go try it out.” Now, I love my cousin, love spending time with him, and so I was excited to go do that. So we drove up and went out to dinner with him. And as we sat down, my cousin looked at me and said, “Hey, this is on me tonight.” And I remember just being overwhelmed with how generous that was. Now, because I don’t really want to be a bother, and I don’t want anyone to make a fuss over me, here’s what I did. Maybe it’s what you would do too. I took the menu and turned to where the hamburgers were, (*laughter*) thinking, “What’s the cheapest thing I can get?” Now I think my cousin knew I was going to do that, so here’s what he did. He took away the menu, and he started to order. “We’re going to get this steak for the table. We’re going to get these appetizers. We’re going to get all of these sides. Let’s get all the desserts that we want.” And he ordered for the table, and we had an evening that was unlike any I remember. By the time the meal was done, I remember thinking to myself, “Other than my parents, I don’t know that I’ve ever been this extravagantly celebrated in my entire life!” I told him that. I said, “Thank you.” What else can you say but thank you?

The Lord loves us. He leads us. He is our Shepherd. He promises to be with us in the middle of dark valleys, and He generously celebrates us and invites us to the table with Him. The question I’m asking is, “Can you receive that from Him?” See, I think we struggle to receive it, and I think one of the reasons we struggle to receive it is because we hear the chatter of our enemies, and we agree a little bit. We hear the lies of *the* enemy, and we start to hear that voice more than we see the blessing and provision of the Lord. We start to think, “Maybe I’ve sinned too much. Maybe my sins are too bad. Maybe I’ve sinned too recently. Maybe God is just getting tired of the fact that I keep stumbling. I just keep struggling to follow Him, and even though I know He loves me, I don’t think He would enjoy me all that much.” If any of that sounds familiar, those are lies. That is the voice of the enemy. It’s the voice that’s infused and inspired by the enemy and sometimes put in the mouth of our enemies. And the Lord looks at us and says, “None of that is true. Here is what is true.” The Lord longs to invite you and me into table fellowship with Him. And He has spent time cooking up the feast, and He did that so He could enjoy it with you. That’s who He is. **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.** Could God? Would God bless us like that?

I don’t struggle to believe that He celebrates when someone who is lost is found. A few weeks ago, when we were talking about ***He restores my soul***...He brings me back...He rescues me, we talked about Luke 15, and how when one lost sheep is found, it is party time. And I understand how, when the lost are found, that is a point of major celebration. I understand that. But I will tell you what I struggle with as someone who has been walking with God a very long time. I struggle to believe that as I continue to struggle often with the same things, as I continue to go to Him with the same requests, I struggle to believe that He could possibly continue to celebrate me. I start to feel like maybe He just tolerates me. Maybe He’s getting a little tired of the fact that I just seem a little stuck. But Psalm 23 tells us, **He prepares a table** and invites me/us into fellowship with Him. He prepares the meal.

Have you ever thought about how many meals there are in the Bible? It’s fascinating, actually, the number of meals that take place in the Bible, starting all the way back in Genesis. Then there’s

that amazing meal that Abraham has with the three strangers that we think are somehow manifestations of God Himself. It's just amazing! You could do a very fascinating study on your own of all the different meals that take place in the Bible. Jesus loved meals. He loved to do ministry over meals...table fellowship. Of all the meals in the Bible, though, I do have a favorite. My favorite comes at the end of the Gospel of John, John Chapter 21. You can turn there if you want. I'm also going to just tell you the story. John 21 occurs after the crucifixion, after the resurrection, after Jesus appeared to Mary first and then to the others, but before He's ascended into heaven. Now in John 21 the disciples are still in this waiting moment...waiting and wondering about what's next. And so as they wait, they eventually make their way from Jerusalem—where all of that took place—and they make their way back up north into Galilee, the place that they were raised, the place they lived, the place where they had all of these profound memories of ministry with Jesus. And there they sat, waiting and wondering, wondering what's next. John tells us there were seven of them there, but there's one disciple who comes into focus, who really is the focal point of John chapter 21, and that's Peter. And Peter is the first one who speaks in John chapter 21 as they waited, as they wondered, and Peter says this in Verse 3:

I'm going fishing.

Now, I don't know that I'm absolutely right about this, but every time I hear Peter say, **"I am going fishing,"** I hear it as coming from a dejected man, a man that is struggling, a man that's turning back to what he knew, but doesn't know what to do as he waits, so he's turning back to fishing. Now I think the reason I can have some confidence in that assessment, is the last time in the Gospel of John that we have heard from Peter is back all the way in the courtyard on the night that Jesus was betrayed. The last words we heard from Peter were a response when the little girl said to him, "Aren't you with Him?" Peter said, "I don't know Him; I'm not with Him." He disassociated himself from his friend and his teacher, and the One who rose from the dead. He denied Him three times. I think if there was a list of people who regretted an evening and wished they had a do-over, Peter would be near the top of the list. I can't imagine how many times over the course of those days, he thought to himself, "How could I have done that? Not just once, but I did it three times, and I was warned. Jesus told me I was going to do it, and I still did it. In Jesus' darkest hour, I denied any affiliation with Him!" So when I hear Peter say, **"I'm going fishing,"** I hear someone filled with shame, someone who's struggling—a discouraged man—and so he goes fishing, and then the other six join him. They're out all night. John tells us they fish all night and **they caught nothing.** I'm not a fisherman, but I don't think that helped the mood very much. That's a long night when you come back empty handed. But then something changes. Verse 4:

But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. So Jesus said to them, "Children, you don't have any fish, do you?" (John 21:4-5)

The One that Peter denied stood there on the beach. He called out to the disciples and asked if they had caught anything. And then He tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, which I'm sure to a bunch of professional fishermen, sounded like an absolutely ridiculous request. Hey, maybe the fish were just hanging out on the other side. Maybe that's what was happening. But they obey. They throw their nets in, and they catch a haul of fish that is so big they can't possibly pull it in. And in that moment they knew. We're told that **the disciple that Jesus loved,** (That's

the way John refers to himself.) turned to Peter, and he said, **“It is the Lord.”** And Peter is so overwhelmed—Peter does a very Peter thing—and he just jumps out of the boat and starts swimming to shore. He has to get there as quick as he can. The disciples in the boat start to row back to shore. And when they all reach the shore, here is what they find. Verse 9:

So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire *already* laid and fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have now caught.” Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come *and* have breakfast.” (John 21:9-12)

They arrive at the shore, and what did they find? A charcoal fire prepared...a meal cooking, prepared. **You have prepared a table before me...**fellowship, celebration, generosity. We’re not told about *a cup that’s overflowing*. We do have a net that was overflowing—153 fish—which apparently was such a big catch that they decided they better note how many fish exactly it was. Jesus, on the beach, waiting to enjoy table fellowship with His friends. And right there, in the midst of those friends, stands Peter. Peter, the denier. Peter the one probably wrestling with shame. Peter the one that maybe believes the Lord will forgive him, but maybe he’s been disqualified from continued ministry. After all, he is the only one that denied Jesus, and to that one, Jesus says, “Let’s eat. I prepared a table. Let’s enjoy the meal.” That’s what God is like. **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You have anointed my head with oil. My cup overflows.** The Lord is our Shepherd, and He is also our generous host...abundantly supplying...preparing a meal...preparing a blessing...preparing an evening of honoring and celebration...disregarding the voices of the enemy, because He loves us. Not only does He love us, He really likes us, and He wants to enjoy fellowship with us. The question is, “Will we be people that will receive it? Will we tune out the voices of the enemies that say we could never sit at that table, and will we listen to the One who invites us to come and to eat with Him?” Let’s pray together.

Our Father, we do turn to You, acknowledging You are our Shepherd and You are also Lord. You are also the one that prepares the feast. And we’re overwhelmed that You would do that, Lord, because so often we, in our minds, start to think that we are unworthy and we diminish the power and the goodness of Your grace that makes fallen, sinful, frail people, like us, able to be called children of God, invited into the very table of the King, to enjoy fellowship now and forever. So, Lord, help us believe that it might change the way we think about ourselves, and also might change the way we live that others might know that is who You are, and that there is room at the table for more. Father, we pray these things in the name of Your Son, Jesus, Amen.

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