Psalm 23:5 *Walking With the Shepherd: You Prepare a Table Before Me*

***Martin and Gracia Burnham***On May 27, 2001 Martin and Gracia Burnham were celebrating their 18th wedding anniversary at the Dos Palmas Resort in Palawan, Philippines.

Martin was a missionary pilot with New Tribes Mission. He had just spent two weeks stateside with the mission leadership team and upon arriving back in the Philippines was going to spend another week apart from his family flying relief for another pilot on Palawan. Because it was their anniversary, Gracia decided to surprise him by arranging for another missionary couple to watch their three children—ages 13 through 10—so she could spend the week with him in Palawan. They kicked the week off with the stay at the exotic beach resort, complete with one of those cabins built on stilts out over the water. It was a bit of an extravagance for a missionary couple on a tight budget, but their missionary friends convinced her they would benefit from the R & R.

That same night, a group of Muslim young men who called themselves the *Abu Sayyaf* (“Father of the Swordsman”) drove a speedboat 300 miles across the Sulu Sea to the Dos Palmos resort. The Abu Sayyaf was a group that supposedly wanted independence for their part of the Philippines and loosely identified itself with Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. They targeted the resort because they believed those who were staying there would be wealthy and would pay a heavy ransom. Essentially, it was terrorism for profit by way of kidnapping.

The Burnhams were roused from their cabin in the early morning and hustled onto the boat with 18 others. They had with them only the shorts they were wearing, Gracia’s t-shirt, and two pairs of flimsy flip-flops. They spent the next three days crossing the Sulu Sea, first in the speed boat, then in a slightly larger, but much slower, fishing vessel. Then they were taken into the jungle, where they were hidden from the rest of the world while their captors used a satellite phone to make ransom demands and give semi-coherent political speeches.

When the Abu Sayyaf discovered the Burnhams were Americans, they were at first excited. They figured that Americans on holiday in the Philippines meant deep pockets. But when they discovered they were missionaries they were greatly disappointed. Missionary agencies are notoriously short on funds and have a long-standing policy of not paying ransoms. That meant that if the Burnhams were going to be of any value to them, they would have to pressure the American government.

The problem was, this was May of 2001—three months before 9/11. At this point very few Americans were familiar with the names Al Qaeda or Osama Bin Laden or Abu Sayyaf. This was true within the government as well as in the general public. The Burnhams’ capture made little impact in the U.S.

In the early weeks of their captivity, several of their fellow captives were ransomed and released. There was also one running gun battle with Philippine military which resulted in several hostages being left behind and then killed. Over time, new hostages were taken and released. Through it all, the Burnhams remained. They were malnourished, constantly sick, forced to sleep on the jungle floor with their hands bound to trees, and forced to move at a moment’s notice.

After 9/11, the U.S. became much more attuned to terror activities and the Burnhams’ plight. As the War on Terror ramped up many saw the Abu Sayyaf as a vulnerable branch of Al Qaeda. It was important, however, that the U.S. not overstep Philippine sovereignty. All efforts to help the Burnhams would still need to be run through Philippine military.

In many ways, the rescue efforts were a comedy of errors. A childhood friend of the Abu Sayyaf was recruited to make contact, and many supplies were funneled through him to the group. This meant the group had some better food, medical supplies, and even an improved satellite phone. The terrorists thought they were being clever, never realizing these things were coming from the CIA. The satellite phone even had GPS, which meant that whenever it was used, the CIA could trace its exact location. However, for fear of exposing their techniques, the CIA could only give approximate coordinates to the Philippine military. It was never enough to pin the group down.

On another occasion, a backpack containing tracking technology was delivered to the group. The leader of the Abu Sayyaf wore it proudly. But the drones required to read the tracking device were unavailable. They were all being used in Afghanistan.

Finally, on June 7, 2002—slightly more than a year after being captured—the Philippine military pinned the group down and attacked. The raid was botched, however, and Martin Burnham was shot and killed. Gracia was also shot and wounded in a leg. She lay next to her husband and pretended to be dead until all the gunfire came to an end. Many of the terrorists managed to escape, but their boat was tracked and they were captured or killed shortly thereafter.

In the days following her rescue, Gracia became a minor celebrity. News organizations vied for interviews. She gave a brief, prepared statement that included this paragraph:

A very bad thing happened to Martin and me when we were taken hostage. But we want everyone to know that God was good to us every single day of our captivity. Martin was also a strength to all the hostages. He was a good man, and he died well.

At Martin’s funeral in Wichita, KS, the pastor said: “Gracia was rescued from the jungle by a helicopter; Martin was rescued from the jungle on angels’ wings.”

Today, Gracia continues to travel and share her story, and her testimony in Jesus Christ. While she remains steadfast in her insistence that the members of Abu Sayyaf are criminals and need to be punished; she has also maintained correspondence with some of them who are in prison and is even pleased to report that some of them have committed their lives to Jesus. A few years after her rescue she released a book. She entitled it: *In the Presence of My Enemies.*

That line, of course, comes from Psalm 23. Specifically, it is **Psalm 23:5**, and the full quote is:

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

It’s an interesting line, given even more depth when applied to the Burnhams’ story. It is a testimony of God’s faithfulness even in the midst of terrible circumstances. Even as she was being held hostage by her enemies—even as she was being starved—Gracia could still speak of God’s provision for her. Still, she felt God’s care. Still, she knew, she had a seat at His table.

***The Gracious Host***We are continuing our series on Psalm 23. For the past month or so, we have been making our way through this Psalm which is one of the best-known passages in the Bible. Every week, I’ve been asking you to recite it with me. So let’s put it up on the screen now, **and we’ll read it together:**

**1**The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
**2**    He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
**3**    he refreshes my soul.  
He guides me along the right paths  
    for his name’s sake.  
**4**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.

**5**You prepare a table before me  
    in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil;  
    my cup overflows.  
**6**Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
    all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
    forever.

As I indicated earlier, we have come now to the fifth verse.“You prepare a table before me.” It is at this point that most scholars agree the metaphor has changed.

Many suggest that you can think of this Psalm as having two stanzas. In the first stanza, the dominant metaphor is “The LORD is my shepherd.” The first four verses all draw on the imagery of shepherds and sheep.

In the second stanza, then, starting in verse 5, the metaphor is “The LORD is my host.” The picture is of a lavish banquet, where the Psalmist is now invited as an honored guest. In this stanza, we no longer picture ourselves as sheep, but as men and women who have been given a seat at the table of the king.

At any rate, whether you picture Him as a generous shepherd or as a royal benefactor, the picture in verse 5 is of God providing for those who belong to Him. And not just a little. Rather, the picture that verse 5 paints is of lavish, abundant blessings from God. A feasting table. Rich oil. Overflowing cups. I’ll put it like this:

**God is our gracious host who promises not only to provide for us, but to provide for us in extravagant ways.**

God provides for us. But not just a little. God is not stingy. He gives us more and more.

**Psalm 23:5** is all about God’s lavish blessing. God’s extravagance is pictured in three ways.

***At the King’s Table***First, God’s lavish blessing is evidenced by the feast he prepares in the **face of our enemies.** It’s not just that God feeds us, but He does so in defiance of those who would do us harm.

We need to think about how seriously ancient middle eastern culture took the notion of hospitality and guests. In that culture, to be invited to a seat at someone’s table was to be taken under that person’s protection. For as long as you were a guest in someone’s home—or, in that culture, someone’s tent—then that person took responsibility for you. Your host would meet all your needs, provide you with all your food, and—more importantly—guarantee your protection from all your enemies.

A table that had been prepared was a public announcement that no one was to molest THIS guest. And the greater the influence/prestige/power of the host the greater the security.

Think about what a dramatic statement it can be to simply eat a meal. When you are at war, one of the last things you can do is sit down and eat a leisurely supper. When you are a soldier, you eat when the opportunity presents, and most often you do so hurriedly. Even today, our modern combat soldiers go into battle with MREs—Meals Ready to Eat. Essentially meals that have been freeze dried, vacuum sealed, and dehydrated to be eaten as quickly as possible with virtually no preparation needed. Food squeezed out of a tube, or powders mixed with water, don’t exactly speak of lavish extravagance. It is eating as necessity, not eating for pleasure.

But if you are at war, and you take the time to sit down at a table and to enjoy a multi-course meal over the course of several hours, then that is a statement. You are saying that you are confident. You are not worried about your enemy’s attack. You are not worried about anything they can do to you. Nothing snubs an enemy and says “We are untouchable!” quite like sitting down to dinner in the middle of a war.

And that is precisely what David is describing here. It’s as though during one of the many periods of exile in David’s life—fleeing from crazy king Saul, from angry Philistines, or even from his own son Absalom—a wealthy sheik takes him into his tent. And this sheik is so powerful and well-connected that all his enemies can do is stand outside the tent and watch as David eats and takes his comfort.

That’s the kind of extravagant provision God provides. I read an article this week entitled “Hospitality is War.” It tracked the many different times God is pictured as hosting a feast or inviting people to dine in scripture, and it showed how in each case it is a declaration against His enemies. The invitation to the King’s table is a statement to all who would wish to harm us that this guest is under the protection of the king, that we have been claimed as His own. The article says:

It has been Christ’s plan since the beginning of the church to advance his kingdom through dinner tables… God has made forks and spoons, pans, pots, and plates weapons of war against the darkness. (Chad Ashby, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/hospitality-is-war>)

And so it was that Gracia Burnham could maintain her faith even in the midst of grave trial. It’s how she and Martin could continue to sing hymns and befuddle their captors with kindness. They knew that no matter what happened—even if these enemies took their lives—they could not be robbed of their seat at the King’s table.

***Honored Guests***The second evidence of God’s lavish blessing is the **oil he anoints us with.** It’s not just that God invites us in, but He honors us as well.

In that culture, oil was a versatile, multi-use product. In a climate where dry skin was a problem—especially for travelers—anointing with oil was a refreshment. Oil could be used as a cosmetic, a deodorant, a shampoo, or even a medicine.

We also know oil would be used in the commissioning of kings and priests and prophets. In the story of Samuel choosing David out of all his brothers to be the next king, the Lord’s choice of David was signified by a ceremony of anointing. In other words, oil was poured over his head. In that case, however, the word for anointing is very specialized. It’s different than the word used in Psalm 23. The word used here has less to do with being set apart for special service and more to do with lavish blessing and honor. One commentator suggests the meaning of “to make luxuriant.” (Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 79)

The idea, then, is that once a host invites a guest into his home, one of the ways to honor that guest is by providing plenty of oil with which to clean up and refresh.

Think of the story told about Jesus in Luke 7. Jesus is having dinner at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. And while He is at the table, a woman enters the house. This woman has a reputation around town, and it is not a good one. She comes in carrying an alabaster jar of perfume—this would have been olive oil mixed with fragrant spices like myrrh and frankincense—and it would have been expensive. She comes to Jesus’ feet and begins to wash them. The Bible says she wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. And then she anoints Him with the oil and perfume.

It is an act of devotion—dramatic, extravagant and scandalous. The Pharisees take offense and conclude that if Jesus were any kind of prophet, He’d know what kind of woman this was. But Jesus takes a different perspective. It’s precisely because He knows what kind of woman she is that He knows what a deep act of devotion this represents.

His reply to Simon is that, even though Simon was his host, Simon had not honored him in any way. No water had been provided for Jesus’ feet, no oil for refreshing His head. Simon had failed to honor His guest. This woman, on the other hand, had honored Jesus a great deal.

That’s what oil represents. It is honor bestowed by the host onto the guest. And in Psalm 23:5, it is the Lord who is pictured pouring out the oil. It is we, who have been invited to the table, who are receiving the honor.

***Life to the Full***And then, the third evidence of God’s lavish blessing is that **our cup overflows.** It’s not just that God fills our cup, He fills it to overflowing.

The idea is simple enough: God is not stingy. He is not holding back. No matter how much we receive from God, we cannot empty God’s reserve.

Each week we have been in Psalm 23 I have also taken us to John 10. John 10 is where Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd. It is sort of the New Testament parallel to Psalm 23. And today is no exception. Today, the verse is **John 10:10**, Jesus says:

**10**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

We have enemies in this world. A thief. One who wants to steal, kill and destroy.

But Jesus is the Shepherd who protects us. He came not to steal, kill and destroy; but to give life. And not just any life, but life to the full.

I like the way the King James Version phrases this verse. Jesus says: “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

More abundantly. Abundant life. Jesus does not only promise to provide for us, but he promises to provide for us in extravagant ways. He doesn’t just fill our cup, He fills it to overflowing.

This verse, John 10:10, is one of the major Bible texts behind our mission statement as a church. Here at Hope Church we use the slogan: Bring Joy, Experience Joy. That’s a shortening of the statement that “we are here to bring joy to Jesus, and to experience joy in Him.”

Our first, and highest calling is to do what glorifies Jesus. To serve and worship and honor Him. As I like to say: we are here to put a smile on Jesus’ face.

But the second part of that statement is so important. We don’t serve Jesus simply because it’s the right thing to do and He deserves it. Those things are true. But we also serve Jesus because we believe that when we do, we will experience joy. That serving Jesus is what we were created for, and when we are in right relationship with Him we are in the best place possible. In other words: we have life, and we have it to the full.

And so our church exists as testament to the idea Jesus provides us with abundant life. We are guests at His table, He anoints our heads with oil, He fills our cup to overflowing. Our battle cry as a church is that joy--real joy, extravagant joy—is found in Jesus.

***At the Table***When we planned out the series for Psalm 23 we didn’t arrange it so that **this verse would** fall on communion Sunday, it just sort of happened that way. But as it turns out, it couldn’t have been more appropriate.

As I was working on this sermon, I had a picture in my mind of the communion table at the church I grew up in: First Reformed Church in Hospers, IA. It’s one of those things that I saw so often that I stopped noticing it after a while; and once I thought of it I wasn’t sure if I remembered it correctly, so I had to ask my Mom, and just to make sure she went to the church and checked. But on the communion table that sits at the front of the sanctuary in Hospers, something that I saw just about every week for the first 18 years of my life, it says: “Thou preparest a table before me.”

Now, obviously, when David wrote this line, he didn’t know anything about communion. I’m not saying that it is a prophetic prediction of the last supper Jesus celebrated with the disciples or anything like that.

But there isn’t much doubt that when Jesus told His disciples to remember Him by repeating the Lord’s Supper, this line was part of what that supper is meant to symbolize. And Christians throughout the centuries have seen the connection as well.

I mentioned an article earlier called “Hospitality is War.” It includes this paragraph:

It’s no accident that we accept the hospitality of our Savior every time we approach the Communion Table. Jesus has invited us to share in his eternal victory through his death and resurrection at a table. It signals to the powers of darkness that our victory is certain; their defeat is imminent. (Chad Ashby, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/hospitality-is-war>)

Communion is one of the ways that we wage war against our enemies—the thieves that would steal, kill and destroy us. Communion is one of the ways that we snub our enemy, by sitting down at a table in the midst of battle.

Our king is a generous host. Our king is a lavish benefactor. When we are under His banner, nothing can touch us.

In communion, we are invited again to His table.