

"4R: PSALM 23 FOR TODAY (#4): DINING WELL"

(Psalm 23:5-6, NRSV)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 9-4-22]

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1. **[11am ONLY]** Read Text: Psalm 23:5-6 (NRSV) and Pray.

2. At one point in our lives or another probably most of us have hosted a party or celebration of some sort with family and/or friends --...

 A--...Maybe it was a birthday party, anniversary, Super Bowl party, or something else.

 B--And when you did, you remember how important it was to have everything "just right" so that your guests would have a great time and feel at home, right?

3. Well, today we wrap up our series on Psalm 23 in which we've been unpacking four spiritual practices (all beginning with the letter "R") to help us discover, claim, and live in the peace that God desires for each of us in our crazy, hectic lives.

A--And as we do that, we find two verses describing God essentially as a great *Host* who's dinner party helps us "dine well," & because we're *satisfied* with the host & the provision they provide, we are renewed for our daily labors (**RENEW** = this week's "R").

[9am ONLY: Let's say the words of Verses 5-6 (NRSV) together... "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*"]

B--Now, you might wonder how being a "dinner host" relates to all the *shepherd* metaphors we find throughout the rest of Psalm 23?

C--Well, if we think about a "host" as being "*one who receives or entertains guests,*" then each phrase of today's two verses of scripture makes this very clear. For example...

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4. Verse 5 begins with three phrases: **"YOU PREPARE A TABLE BEFORE ME IN THE PRESENCE OF MY ENEMIES; YOU ANOINT MY HEAD WITH OIL; MY CUP OVERFLOWS."**

A--Remember that in ancient times, there were few public inns on the roads. So, the custom developed that travelers and their animals would be granted at least three days' worth of food and shelter by the people(s) over who's lands they crossed. ¹

B--And if you *hosted* a traveler in your home, then the ancient hospitality codes *required* that one of your responsibilities as "host" was to help RENEW your guest(s) by providing them with various services.

1--For one, not only did you have to provide lodging for your guests, but also had to literally "*prepare a table*" of food, and offer a "*cup running over / overflowing*" with a beverage as their drink.

2--You were also responsible for providing them with protection from "*enemies*" while they were a guest in your care in your home.

3--And a *great* host would often even offer to "*anoint*"/massage the head of their guest(s) with soothing oils (kind of like offering a guest a hot, relaxing bath today).

4--In effect, ancient hosts were required to provide the equivalent of a hotel room, restaurant, spa, and "safe-house" all wrapped up in one. ²

C--And since the grazing fields of *sheep* were the lands most often crossed by travelers, guess who it was who were called upon *most often* to be hosts to offer this kind of hospitality? *Shepherds!* So, we have (for one) a *literal* meaning to these three phrases.

5. But more than this, ancient shepherds also often used the language of hospitality *figuratively* when referring to their work.

A--For example, ancient pastures were often called "*tables*" -- even today, the Spanish word for "*table*" (*mesa*) is used to refer to grazing ranges for cattle, sheep & livestock

1--So, the phrase "*prepare a table*" was merely a shepherd's way of talking about the preparation of fields and pastureland for grazing by their flocks:...

2--...I.E., They would uproot poisonous weeds & thorns, and clear the area of the sheep's "*enemies*," such as snakes, scorpion's nests, and other wild animals.

B--Another example of this figurative use of hospitality language is what often happened in the evening as sheep were corralled:... ³

1--A good shepherd would separate the injured/sick sheep from the others, and then "*anoint [their] heads with oil*" as a salve to treat their wounds/sickness.

2--And these sick/injured sheep were also often given cups/bowls of various fermented herbs mixed with honey and water in order to speed the healing process -- literally, their "*cups*" were "*running over/overflowing*."

6. So, whether we think of these three phrases in *literal* or *figurative* terms, they're images that the Bible writers felt *certainly* applied to how *God* cares for us.

A--For example, just as a shepherd desires for his sheep to thrive on the high, rich "*tables*" and ranges of good, healthy pastureland, so God (*our* "Good Shepherd") desires for you and I to flourish on the "*tablelands*" of a good, holy, godly life.

B--Through the life and ministry of Jesus, God has worked hard to "*prepare a table*" of grace, blessing, and abundance for those who'll follow Him and listen to His will.

1--And His deep desire for you and me is that we learn to live *above* the mundane, ordinary, "ho-hum" levels of daily life -- ...

2--...that by following him, we'll be able to walk in the rich pastures and "tablelands" of holiness, selflessness, and love.

C--When we do this, it's like we're feasting at a "*table*" of blessing and RENEWAL which God "*prepares*" for us by clearing away "*enemies*" of our lives like fear, doubt, hopelessness, and loneliness, filling and overflowing our "*cups*" with the healing, life-giving water of His presence.

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7. And because God does all these things for us, it's only natural that we can therefore affirm the words of the Psalm writer in Verse 6: "**SURELY GOODNESS AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE...**"

A--Just like *sheepdogs* who follow behind the flock to make sure no sheep wander off or are attacked from the rear, when you and I trust God to be our "Good Shepherd," His "*goodness and mercy*" follow *us* and become *our* constant companions, as well.

B--So this phrase, in fact, is really just an affirmation of trust in the *shepherd* BY the *sheep* -- an acknowledgment that no matter what happens to us, our families, or our jobs, we'll always be under the care and protection of the One who is the source of all "*goodness*" and "*mercy*."

8. What's more is that when we discover how deeply *satisfying* God's companionship can be in life, we can also join the Psalmist when He says, "**AND I SHALL DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD FOREVER (or MY WHOLE LIFE LONG).**" ⁴

A--Here we have sheep so completely satisfied being part of their flock, so fully content with the care they receive, and so much "at home" with their shepherd that they have no desire for anyone or anything else -- they are RENEWED because they are absolutely *content* and *fulfilled* in the metaphorical "house" of their shepherd.

1--You know, if we say that we follow God in our lives today, then we need to allow Him to satisfy us where we can say, "*God, you're all I need. No matter what happens to me, I don't desire or need anything or anyone else but YOU!*"

2-- In one of his books, Christian psychologist and author John Piper wrote that "*God is most glorified in US when we are most satisfied in HIM.*" ⁵

B--This is a lesson it took me a long time to learn: even after I'd been a pastor for over 10 years, there were parts of my life I looked after by myself; problems I tried to fix on my own; issues blocking my full relationship with God that I ignored.

1--I couldn't fully experience "*the house of the Lord*" because I was still too much in control of *some* parts of my life.

2--But when I had friends and family who cared enough to lovingly confront me, I was able to quit trying to fix myself in those areas, and instead learned more and more how simply to be *fully satisfied in God*, and my life has been different ever since.

C--So, how satisfied are you in God? Are you content with the flock He's put you in (your church)? Or are you a restless, consumer-driven sheep, always looking for fulfillment and contentment from (first) one place, then from another?
(there's a lot of people like that in today's world, never full satisfied with the provision & flock God has provided... always looking for perfection somewhere *else*)

D--But, you see, when you & I get to that place in our lives where we're truly satisfied & content with *God* and with His *sheep* (*despite* the flaws of those sheep), then we'll finally have understood what this Psalm is all about, and we'll "dine well" and find RENEWAL for our souls and spirits... ⁶

E--...because RENEWAL, you see, ultimately comes through US being *satisfied* and *content* with GOD'S presence and provision in our lives.

--IV--

9. So my hope is that over these last 4 weeks, we've all come to understand how Psalm 23 is really just a reminder of four spiritual practices that help us experience peace in the midst of our crazy, hectic lives.

A--The entire chapter is a metaphor which teaches us that as we dwell in the great "pastureland" called life, if we'll invite and allow God to be our "Good Shepherd",...

B--...We can: **RECEIVE** God's provision, be **RESTORED** through His guidance, find His comfort and **REST**, and be **RENEWED** as we are satisfied by the bounty and blessing of God's very presence.

10. [PRAY: "O Lord, we confess today that many of us have tried to navigate the 'maze' of the 'pasture' of life on our own, and we've ended up trapped by the 'evils' that lurk about. Others of us have journeyed through life at such a fast pace that we've 'burned out' - forgive our arrogance and selfishness. Thank you for reminding us today not only that you have 'prepared' the way before us so we could avoid the pitfalls of life, but so that we can be RESTORED and RENEWED if we will but take time to slow down and RECEIVE the bounty and hospitality of your presence in our lives. As good sheep, teach us contentment with you -- to REST in you and know that you can satisfy every desire and every need of our lives, and to trust in you to provide these as we look to you alone as our Good Shepherd. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen."]

11. [Suggested closing *contemporary* worship song: *The Goodness of God* (Jenn Johnson)]

ENDNOTES:

¹ In ancient times, this entertainment of a stranger in one's home or dwelling-place was recognized as a sacred duty which must be taken seriously -- it carried with it the weight and effect of unofficial law in nearly every country.

² Some might wonder *why* they should go to all this trouble for a total stranger? After all, they might rob you! However, in that day and time, the hospitality codes were considered so sacred that abuse or breach of it by a traveler would have dire consequences -- even one's literal "enemy" was bound to uphold these hospitality codes. And, of course, every traveler was also protected and ensured of lodging by the fact that most "hosts" were travelers themselves at different times. So, as others had hosted them in their travels, so shepherds turned around and hosted others, as well.

³ Generally, they used the image of a good "host" simply as a way to describe good and attentive care to their own flocks.

⁴ Even though the King James Version translates this final phrase ("*my whole life long*") as "*forever*," the two renderings refer essentially to the same thing: "*as long as I exist, in this life and the next*."

⁵ John Piper, Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist (2003).

⁶ Today's two verses may be paraphrased with words that God calls to each of us...

"Come away and rest a while. Let me shower you with hospitality and grace. Let me prepare a table of spiritual nourishment for you, even though you're face to face with enemies that you call pain, fear, addiction, loneliness, despair. Let me anoint your head with oil, so that I can bring healing and a soothing balm for the hurts and pains of your heart and life. Let me give you a cup overflowing with my salvation, so that you need not be burdened by the guilt of sin, and so that 'goodness' and 'mercy' are the only things that'll ever bother you ever again. Let me prepare a banquet for you in my house, so that the deepest needs and desires of your heart can be satisfied from this day forth and forever, and so that you'll never want for anything or anyone else again."