

## **“Our Shepherd’s Provision”**

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*Seventh in a series on Psalm 23*

Psalm 23

June 21, 2020

Please read Psalm 23. If you’re reading this online, you can see this Scripture selection [by clicking here](#).

This week we leave the shepherd behind. Not the Lord our Shepherd. Wherever we go, God is with us. Picturing God as our Shepherd has done its job, telling us vitally important things about God. Now we’re moving to a new picture. God is giving you a feast.

This is generous hospitality. It is God’s open-hearted generosity to you.

Through the Bible, hospitality is huge.<sup>1</sup> Think about this. In our culture, how do we show off wealth? Slick cars with tinted windows. Mansions behind gates and walls. Travelling in luxury to exotic places. Walking red carpets behind ropes. In our culture, too often wealth isolates.

In biblical cultures, when you were wealthy you threw a feast. Invited a crowd. Gave them food and wine until they were stuffed and silly, and kept it coming. Instead of putting your name high on a building, you guaranteed your reputation by welcoming guests.

It wasn’t just the wealthy. Even the poorest would welcome you, pull out all the stops for you, share whatever they had with you, and bring honour to you.

Here is a classic.<sup>2</sup> Abraham is snoozing in front of his tent. Three strangers appear. He shakes himself awake, implores them to stay, then rushes off to get the meal going.

But Abraham doesn’t get things ready. He gets Sarah his wife and his servant busy preparing things for the table. In that culture, Abraham is the patriarch, the head of the household. He is the host. He entertains the guests. Preparing the meal is the job of women, servants, slaves. The men feast together, the rest stay behind the scenes.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A thousand-year journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 54f.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 18.

In Abraham's story, everything goes according to that script. Except, it turns out the guests are in fact angels, even the LORD in disguise. So things do get strange. But that's that story. Let's come back to our Psalm.

II

*"You host me at a table,"* it says. Except that's not what it says. *"You prepare a table before me. . . ."* That's about getting the meal ready.<sup>3</sup>

It's one thing to say God is like a patriarch, magnanimously hosting us at God's wealthy table. I think that's part of the picture here. But the Psalm subverts what we'd expect. God is also like the traditional housewife, or servant, or slave, doing the work behind the scenes, preparing the feast for you.

For you.

Often, we focus on what we need to do for God. Absolutely! We are right to see our whole lives as offerings to God. Acting with love for God with everything you have, and everything you are. Acting with love for others, who are God's children too. That's what living a God-honouring life is for you.

But everything about your God-honouring life starts, continues, and finishes with the "much more" God is doing for you.

God hosts you, and God gets everything ready for you. Anointing you with oil . . . that's to make you smell better. God makes you fit for the banquet. Filling your cup to the top, then again, and again. For you, God spares nothing.

This is God, whom Jesus shows us. Jesus is our shepherd, looking for the missing sheep. He is also the housewife, looking for you, her lost coin.<sup>4</sup> Jesus is the Saviour, kneeling as a servant to wash smelly feet, making you fit for the banquet.<sup>5</sup> Jesus put aside all his divine power and privilege, to suffer a slave's death a cross for you.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *"This phrase cannot mean 'set the table,' because in traditional Middle Eastern society people eat without using individual plates or eating utensils. Eating is carried out by tearing off a small piece of flat bread and using it to lift food from the common dish to the mouth. Each bite starts with a fresh piece of bread. There is nothing to do to 'set the table' except perhaps 'spread the rugs.'" Bailey, 55.*

<sup>4</sup> Luke 15.1-7. In the story that follows, of the prodigal father and his two wayward sons, we see a traditional patriarch who acts like a mother was expected to. All of these images, Jesus says, tell us about him.

<sup>5</sup> John 13.1-17.

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2.5-11.

For you. And for your enemies.

### III

I chose Leonard Bernstein's setting of Psalm 23 for us to listen to a few minutes ago.<sup>7</sup> I like its beauty. I like hearing it sung in Hebrew. I also like how Bernstein breaks into Psalm 23 with verses from Psalm 2. He interrupts the comforting Shepherd Psalm with clashing words and sounds about nations raging against God and God's chosen king, God's messiah. They make themselves God's enemies.

Psalm 23 is honest about the valleys of shadowy darkness and death we go through. It is also honest about enemies.

God feasts you in clear view of those who despise you, and are out to defeat you, maybe even destroy you.

The Bible imagines that when God's Kingdom comes, it will be a feast. Jesus described those who would be there. Everyone gets invited. But who is drawn to Jesus? People whom our sinful world shuts out, Jesus welcomes in.<sup>8</sup> Who is Jesus going to fete at his feast? Migrant workers. Undocumented border-crossers. Casualties of lynchings, slave-ships, and residential schools. Want to be there too? Jesus invites you.

The trans woman who's been forced out of their church, is going to be sitting at the big table. Jesus wants to be their waiter.

### IV

I need more help from Jesus, though, about this enemy-thing. What does he do with enemies?

He's walking through Jericho. Above the crowd, up a tree he sees Zacchaeus. A scoundrel. A thief. He corrupts his official power to exploit people, especially the poor whom God particularly loves. God-fearing people hate Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus hates them. Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "Come down! We're going to your house for supper." No, Jesus does not prepare the feast. Still, in the view of all Zacchaeus righteous enemies, Jesus turns him into a friend.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Chichester Psalms, Movement II. Performed by the choir of Wells Cathedral, Somerset, England (2001). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7ADzn9ZPLQ>

<sup>8</sup> Luke 14.15-23.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 19.1-10.

A father is insulted by his son, who wishes his dad dead. It's a scandal. The son takes off with dad's money. The neighbours say, "Good riddance." Son lives an ungodly life, a shameful life. He blows it. Because he's got no where else to go, he crawls back to Dad. Everyone comes out to see the show, as that ingrate, that screw-up, gets what's coming to him. Dad runs out and grabs his son, and holds him, and kisses him, and brings him home. Dad throws a party, and invites everyone so they can see him honour his dishonourable son.<sup>10</sup> Jesus says, "I'm like that!"

Jesus died to save people from the sin and evil that has hold of them. Hold of us. I was ungodly. Jesus died for me. You were a sinner. Jesus died for you. We were God's enemies. Jesus died for us, to make us friends.

## V

I was in the Black Lives Matter march yesterday in Fergus. It was great. It had tough moments, like this. A guy was stopped by a traffic controller. He was yelling unkind, hateful things at us. People were yelling back at him. I figured, being a middle-aged little guy, I'd go stand between him and the line marching by. Better me than someone else.

He starts yelling at me. I'm holding up my sign, "Love Your Neighbour MEANS Black Lives Matter." He can't see I'm smiling, because of my mask. All I'm saying is, "I'm listening to you" and trying to keep things from getting worse. Eventually he was able to go, and drove off.

He was my enemy. He is caught in that hateful sin of racism. It's twisting him against God, who loves him. As hateful sin twists me and you against God.

Jesus came to make us, his enemies, into his friends.

So now I'm thinking . . . when Jesus feasts me in the presence of my enemies . . . maybe me and that guy, and me and those against whom I've acted hatefully, we'll be enjoying the banquet together: healed, freed, forgiven, friends.

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 15.11-32.