

In the Valley: The Host with the Most

Main Idea: In Jesus we are hosted by God.

Purpose: To encourage people that God loves and cares for them in Christ.

Passage: Psalm 23:5-6

Message:

Maybe you've had an experience where someone has taken excellent care of you. They provided all the right touches; they've made sure you have everything you need and even a lot of the things you want. There's nothing like it when you experience it. It relaxes you. It makes you feel settled, like you know you're in good hands; all you need to do is enjoy the company you're with.

Whatever experience you may have had, **it doesn't compare to the Host with the Most.** It doesn't compare to God laying the spread, providing all the good things, and caring for your every need.

We're looking at the last two verses of Psalm 23 today as we conclude our series *In the Valley*. John has gone through the first four verses of the psalm where the psalmist is looking to YHWH as his shepherd—the one who makes him lie down in green pastures, and leads him beside quiet waters, refreshes his soul, and guides him along paths of righteousness. YHWH's rod and staff comfort the psalmist even when going through the valley of the shadow of death. We saw that **we lack nothing when Jesus is our Shepherd** and that **it is only Jesus that gives us rest in our restless souls.**

Now, in the final two verses, the psalm makes a pretty big shift from all of the sheep and shepherd imagery. You've probably already realized this if you've taken John up on his challenge to memorize the psalm.

The Host

Let's take a look at the last two verses of the psalm:

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

(Psalm 23:5-6)

Notice the change in who is being addressed. In the first four verses of the psalm, David is describing the Lord—everything is in the third person. But in v. 5, things become more personal. David is now addressing the Lord directly: "You prepare a table..."

But the big shift that happens is that the imagery of the psalm has completely changed! It was all about sheep and shepherds; now there's a meal, and there's oil, and there's wine, and there's a host; and this is the Host with the Most—you can't top Him—He will out-host anybody. **It's YHWH; it's YHWH setting the table.**

Psalm 23 isn't the only place in scripture with this concept of God setting the table for His people. In fact, it's not even the only place in the Psalms.

Psalm 78 recounts the big blocks of Israel's history, like how they were brought out of Egypt by God, and it says that the Israelites questioned whether God would take care of them. In v. 19 it says, "*They spoke against God; they said, 'Can God really spread a table in the wilderness?'*"

Oh, yeah, God can spread a table alright. He provided food for them for 40 years in the wilderness—water, quail, and manna—they lacked nothing. In Psalm 23, David is expressing a time of walking through the darkest valley. It sounds like a wilderness place; it sounds like what the Israelites had to walk through as God rescued them from Egypt.

Can God set a table in the wilderness? Yeah, He's done it before, and He's doing it in Psalm 23 in an extravagant way. **David isn't just surviving the darkest valley—he's being brought out of it into a place of feasting and celebration.**

The host anoints his guest with oil. Picture a dry, dusty place that produces dry, dusty skin; and that skin being rubbed with oil; its dryness being quenched; the guest given a luxury for their comfort. Maybe this makes you think of Jesus as He was dining at the house of a Pharisee, and what is described as a "sinful woman" came in, wet Jesus' feet with her tears, kissed them, dried them with her hair, and then poured expensive perfume on them. Jesus said to the Pharisee, "*You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet,*" (Luke 7:46).

In Psalm 23, the guest is cared for with oil upon his head. And his cup overflows. Now, I'm going to offend some of your sensibilities, but the Hebrew word for overflows is the idea of drinking to the point of intoxication; and the Greek translation even more so. I'm not condoning it—I'm just telling you what the Bible says.

In all seriousness, I'm NOT condoning heavy drinking, and I know some of you shouldn't drink at all, so this is not an encouragement to do so. But the picture here is of the host filling that wine glass up every time it gets low. There's no holding back; he's not going to run out of wine.

Put that all together—there's prepared table, the anointing with oil, the overflowing cup of wine—and it's an image, of not just a nice meal at the hands of a good host, but it's a victory feast; it's coming through the valley of shadow-death where there is evil and overcoming the enemy.

The enemy is no longer in pursuit; instead, it is goodness and love—*tov* and *hesed*, two Hebrew terms that you've heard us talk about before—that are following David. There's a little wordplay here, because that word for "follow" is used numerous times in the Psalms, but it's usually translated "pursue" or "persecute", and almost always used in a negative way for what the enemies do to the psalmist—they pursue him in violence. **In Psalm 23, YHWH is aggressively pursuing David with *tov* and *hesed*, goodness and love.**

Tov is the word used from the first chapter of the Bible where God created everything good. **It comes right from His character, His being.**

Hesed you've probably heard before as well; it's that word for God's faithful, covenant love. It is a specifically committed love. David had many enemies pursue him, but more importantly, he had God's goodness and committed love pursuing him.

The final line of the psalm returns to a theme that we've seen throughout the psalm—being in the presence of God. It says, *"and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* Now, if you remember from last week, John pointed out that in v. 3 where the NIV says, *'he refreshes my soul,* a better translation might be, *'he brings me back to life.* The word "refreshes" is actually the word for *return* (*shuv*). Well, it's the same word here for "dwell": an alternate translation would be *"and I will return to the house of the Lord forever,"* or *all the days of my life.*

He has wandered through the valley, and YHWH has been with him the whole time, but now that he has victory over his enemies, **he will return to the house of the Lord. He will take his rightful place.**

The Messiah

All that sounds great to me; at least, for David. **There's something going on here though, where we kind of need to back out and take a look at the bigger picture, not just of Psalm 23, but all the Psalms, and the whole story of the Bible.** So, let's do a little theology here. Theology's good for us—it helps us understand who God is and how He relates to us.

Have you ever asked yourself, **"How are the Psalms the word of God?"** I mean, these are the prayers of David and others, right? How does a person's prayer become the word of God? Last week, John mentioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer asked this question many years ago. **His answer was that the psalms are the prayers of Jesus.** He said, *"If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible and especially the Psalms ...we must not ask first what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ."*

Maybe there's more to the Psalms than just a collection of individual prayers and poems. There's a clue to this in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, it talks about the start of the church, beginning with the Apostles, after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. At the beginning of the story, a group of Jesus' followers are hiding out in a room in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit comes upon them and gives them power to speak in other languages so that they could tell other people about Jesus.

Peter is telling a crowd of people about Jesus, and as part of his speech, he quotes from Psalm 16. He says that David says regarding Jesus in Psalm 16 that, *"you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay,"* (Acts 2:27). That's Peter quoting Psalm 16.

Then Peter goes on with his speech:

"Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the

resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay,” (Acts 2:29-31).

Did you catch what’s happening here? **David was more than just a shepherd; he was more than a king; he was a prophet. And what he wrote in the Psalms he wrote about the Messiah—about Jesus.** Now, somehow it related to his own life as well, but the intended subject was the Messiah who was going to come from his line.

It wasn’t just Peter; many writers of the New Testament definitely viewed the Psalms this way. The Psalms are quoted in the New Testament more than any other book of the Old Testament. The Psalms are quoted or clearly alluded to at least 90 times by my count, but some scholars have found closer to 300 allusions to the Psalms. **A vast majority of the quotes and allusions are being used to show that Jesus is the Messiah, or to teach us something about Jesus.**

We don’t have time today to try to see how all the Psalms are connected, and how the book itself forms a whole, but these aren’t just loosely connected prayers and poems. They are intentionally placed in order to communicate a message.

And the message of the Psalms is that God is going to send a King to reign over all the earth. But first, that King’s going to suffer. That King is going to go through the valley of the shadow of death. But He will emerge from that victorious. **He will be brought back to life, and He will return to the house of the Lord.**

I remember when I was first learning this perspective on the Psalms when I was in college. The Psalms had never really connected with me before. This was just my own experience, but I couldn’t understand their significance. They felt very repetitive and full of symbolism, and way too personal. Other than a couple favorites that I had, I was just kind of lost when I read them. But when I began to see how they formed something bigger, and when I began to see Jesus in the Psalms, it was like they came alive to me and Psalms quickly became my favorite book to study. If I ever go on for a PhD, I’m writing my dissertation on the Psalms!

In Christ

Let’s come back to Psalm 23. With that information, how does Psalm 23 relate to us? If Psalm 23 is about Jesus, who’s hosting *me*?? Where’s *my* lamb kabab??

I think the primary answer to this lies in a concept that appears hundreds of times in the New Testament. Here’s an example from 2 Corinthians: *“Therefore, if anyone is **in Christ**, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”* (2 Corinthians 5:17)

To be *in Christ* means that we’ve identified ourselves with Jesus. We’ve turned away from the old way of humanity, the way of Adam, that consistently turns away from God. Instead, we’re taking on the life of the new humanity of Jesus. “The new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!”

This idea of being *in Christ* means that we actually share in who Christ is. As God the Father views Jesus, so He views us *in Christ*. **What is true of Him becomes true of us. The blessings and the benefits that are poured out on Jesus are poured out on us *in Christ*.**

So, in Psalm 23, Jesus the Messiah is hosted by God and given a lavish victory banquet. But it's also a promise to *us*. **In Jesus, we are hosted by God.** The victory that Jesus had is shared with us and the banquet is shared with us as well. Jesus said, "*Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God,*" (Luke 14:15) **You may not have felt like you've been hosted by God, but you will. In Jesus, we will all be hosted by God at His table.**

One of the best passages for seeing this is Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In the first chapter of this letter alone, the phrase "in Christ", "in Him", or the equivalent appears 13 times. The letter begins:

*"Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens **in Christ**. For he chose us **in him**, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. He predestined us to be adopted as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us **in the Beloved One**,"* (Eph. 1:3-6, CSB)

When I was a relatively new Christian, this passage became really meaningful to me. I was growing in my knowledge of and relationship with God, but I questioned His love for me. I know God loves people, but maybe not me. Why would He love me? It was as I was reading this passage in Ephesians that something clicked in my head and in my heart. **God has demonstrated how great His love is by sending Jesus, and regardless of how loveable or not I feel, when I identify myself with Jesus, all the love and goodness the Father has for Jesus, He has for me as well.** As Jesus said as he prayed to the Father, "...*you have loved them just as you have loved me,*" (John 17:23).

Confidence

One of the things that I hope we can all really come away with in reading Psalm 23 is when we see ourselves in Christ, receiving what Christ receives from the Father, **we can have confidence in God's goodness and love.** John mentioned a couple of weeks ago that Psalm 23 is a psalm of confidence—it's expressing trust in Who God is and that He'll care for us. **Just as God's goodness and love pursue David and pursue the Messiah, so also, they pursue us.** Seeing Jesus in this Psalm demonstrates that to us, because He walked through the valley of shadow-death so that we could have life in Him. That is God's goodness and love pursuing us!

Remember, a big theme in the psalm is that **God is with us**—He's with us in green pastures; He's with us in the darkest valley; He's with us as He hosts us lavishly. Dallas Willard said, in regard to Psalm 23, "*Our challenge is to stay with him in the increasing belief that God truly desires to be with us.*" Do you believe that? Do you have confidence in that? That God wants to be with you. He's pursuing you with His goodness and love.

Many of us might need a reminder of that. As the pandemic continues—we just passed the eight-month mark and restrictions are getting tight again—studies are showing that there is an increase in anxiety and depression, loneliness and isolation, relational tension within households, and an increase in addiction. **Now, just as much as ever, we need to remember that God is pursuing us with His goodness and His faithful, committed love.**

Who around you needs to know that as well? **Who needs to know that Jesus has gone before them in their struggle and wants to be with them in the midst of it?**

Bonhoeffer wrote,

“It is the incarnate Son of God, who has borne every human weakness in his own flesh, who here pours out the heart of all humanity before God and who stands in our place and prays for us. He has known torment and pain, guilt and death more deeply than we. Therefore, it is the prayer of the human nature assumed by him which comes here before God. It is really our prayer, but since he knows us better than we know ourselves and since he himself was true man for our sakes, it is also really his prayer, and it can become our prayer only because it was his prayer.”

This brings us to the final thing for us to see today. When we see Jesus in the Psalms; when we understand that God wants to host us in Christ, and that Christ has gone before us in the victory, **we see something bigger than ourselves.** We’re a part of something bigger, something more important. I’m not saying you’re not important—you are; that’s why Jesus died for you—but **there’s something happening that’s bigger than us.**

That helps us to understand the enemies mentioned in v. 5. Remember, the table is prepared in the presence of the enemies. Well, if I think the Psalm is primarily about me, I may be tempted to envision God preparing a table in the presence of my unkind neighbor who thinks differently than I do about the world. I don’t think God intends to validate our choice of enemies. We have too many enemies in our society right now. **When we’re part of a bigger story, though, we see that enemy as one that only Jesus can defeat; and one that He already has defeated.**

When we put our attention on Jesus; when we think more about who He is and what He’s inviting us into, we become a part of the story of God reconciling the world to himself in Christ. We become heirs in the kingdom of God where we will feast with Jesus at God’s table. **We have security in knowing that we will be with God forever—because He wants to be with us. Our lives become a part of His life; and all of His life becomes ours.**

Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians,

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory,” (Colossians 3:1-4).

Our Shepherd will see it done. He will bring us to the place where the table is set, the oil is ready, the wine is poured. And the company that we get to enjoy, and praise, is the almighty God, full of goodness and love.