

## MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“A SUMMER PSALM: THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD”

### 4. Overflowing Cup (Psalm 23:5)

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This morning we continue our look at the best-known psalm, Psalm 23:

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he restores my soul.  
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I  
will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

We all have our favorite parts of Psalm 23.

- For some of us, it's the very first verse: “The Lord is my shepherd”. Some of you might even have a little plaque with these words hanging on a wall in your home.
- For some of us, our favorite part is verses 2-3: “He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.” Maybe some of you have a pillow embroidered with this promise on your living room sofa.
- For lots of us, verse 4 is our favorite part of Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me”. I've seen lots of homes with this verse counted cross-stitched and framed.

But here's the deal: *No one* ever says that verse five is their favorite part of Psalm 23. Because, it wouldn't be taken well if you gave your mother-in-law a ceramic serving platter with these words inscribed on it: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my *enemies*”. And I've never seen a decorative pillow embroidered with the words, “You pour oil on my head.”

Verse five of Psalm 23 is like a thorn sticking out of a rose; like a great rock & roll song with a lousy bridge; like a classic novel with a distracting subplot; like a contending baseball team with no middle relief. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of

my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” What is going on in verse five?

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The problem is that it seems as if the whole metaphor has changed. In the first four verses of Psalm 23, the image is clear: God is our shepherd, leading us to refreshment and sustenance, guiding our lives, walking alongside us in times of fear. But now, in verse five, it's talking about a banquet, and there's no shepherd in sight.

But what's happening in verse five is that the psalmist is actually extending the shepherd metaphor. Except that while in verses 1-4 the shepherd is out in the field, in verse five the shepherd has set up camp.

Here's the background we need to understand verse five. Imagine you're taking a long-distance trip through Israel in the year 1,000 B.C. First of all, you don't have a car, and there's no public transportation. You're probably not exceptionally rich, so you don't have a horse. You might have a donkey, but most likely you're going to have to walk. So as you're planning your trip, you're planning it, not in 500-mile intervals, but in 12-mile intervals.

And once you've covered the daily 12 miles, in 1,000 B.C. you're not going to find a Holiday Inn Express. Maybe there'll be a village where someone will put you up for the night. But, especially if the trip takes you through unpopulated territory, there's only one place you'll be able to bed down – in a shepherd's encampment.

You see, verse five requires us to adjust our image of the shepherd a bit. He's no longer a solitary shepherd out for the day with his 100 sheep. Now he's a shepherd who's the head of his tribe, who's traveling with his kinsmen and their 800 sheep, moving slowly along their semi-nomadic route. And when night comes, they throw down their blankets, set up their tents, and make camp.

Now, according to the code of hospitality in the Ancient Near East, if you're a traveler and reach a shepherd's encampment at night, he's obligated to take you in. And the shepherd won't just take you in – he'll treat you as an honored guest. The shepherd will offer you protection from wild animals in the wilderness and from anyone else – even if the reason you're traveling is to escape from people who are trying to track you down.

*This* is the angle on the shepherd image that the psalmist takes in verse five. The “leading beside still water”, the “guiding in paths of righteousness”, the “accompanying through the valley of shadows” is done for the day. It's nighttime, the shepherd and his tribe have set up camp, and the shepherd now becomes the welcoming host.

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And this is what the shepherd-host does:

***“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”*** The shepherd, as host, feeds you out of his kindness and generosity, wanting neither to shame himself nor to dishonor you. And we’re talking a feast here, a banquet, a party. And it’s a banquet you don’t have to eat looking over your shoulder in case there’s someone after you, because the shepherd-host has welcomed you into his tent, which means you’re safe for the night. To be embraced by the shepherd-host means provision and protection.

***“You anoint my head with oil.”*** I’ve always found this to be a challenging verse for youth group kids. Why in the world would somebody want a can of 5W-30 poured on his head? But this isn’t motor oil. We’re in the desert. Water is scarce. The ground is dusty. After a long, hot day of walking, it’s a privilege to get clean. And the shepherd-host gives you what you need – scented oil, poured on your head, rubbed through your hair and on your face and hands, pulling away the dirt and grime, replacing the sweat with perfume. To be embraced by the shepherd-host means refreshment.

***“My cup overflows.”*** And the party goes on. It’s not just a banquet, it’s a banquet with free re-fills. There’s no designated driver here, there’s no two-drink limit, there’s no end to the shepherd-host’s generosity – he keeps pouring and pouring and pouring in the joy of celebration. To be embraced by the shepherd-host means abundant blessing.

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

Of these three images of God as the shepherd-host in verse five, I want to take a deeper look at the last one – “my cup overflows.”

It’s actually somewhat surprising that this image speaks to us. Because we can’t think of any real-life situation where we enjoy an overflowing cup:

- Your teenager sits down in the living room, starts to pour a can of Coca-Cola into a glass, and he pours too fast and the carbonation starts to fizz and it spills over the top of the glass all over the sofa.
- Your four-year-old wants to be helpful, and she lugs the milk carton over from the refrigerator, climbs up in her chair, and starts to pour milk on her Fruit Loops until there’s a milk waterfall streaming off the edge of the kitchen table.
- You’re running late for your meeting. You swing into the Starbucks drive-through, order your double hi-test, and as you take off, the top isn’t on securely, and scalding hot coffee overflows onto your lap.

How can this image of an overflowing cup speak to us when our first reaction is always, “No! Quick – go get some towels to clean it up!!”

But I think there's a very real level at which we connect with this image of an overflowing cup, and the reason is this – we live in a world where so many things constantly become empty. Time and again we need to fill the car up with another tank of gas. Time and again we need to replace the old batteries with new ones. Even our bodies need to be constantly re-filled, every day – three meals, 7 hours of sleep.

And this is true on a deeper level. There are times when our relationships become empty, when we're just going through the motions. There are seasons in our lives when we are tired, depressed, burned-out. Sometimes we wonder whether we're living our lives or just passing time. It doesn't seem right to spend so much of our lives re-filling and re-stocking and replenishing and renewing, that we live in a world that is constantly running down, running out, running on empty.

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And that's why verse five of Psalm 23 is such a great promise: "My cup overflows." It's a picture of life that never runs down, never runs out, never becomes empty. A life that is filled from within, brimming up, spilling out over the edges.

It's the same image Jesus puts before the Samaritan woman at the well in *The Gospel of John*. Jesus tells the woman:

*"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. ... Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:10-14)*

"A spring welling up to eternal life." "My cup overflows." You see, these aren't poetic words designed to lift our spirits. They are descriptive words, explanatory words, words that point us to what it means, what it looks like, what it feels like to be connected to God in faith.

What would it be like if there really is a God? And what would it be like if this God isn't a distant "First Mover" but a present reality, a powerfully present reality, a God who comes to us and surrounds us and upholds us and fills us from the inside out with His very own life?

What would it be like? It would be like a spring, bubbling up, from within, filling us with life and love and forgiveness and joy. It would be like a cup where the question isn't whether it's half-empty or half-full, because it's constantly overflowing, running over.

\* \* \*

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

Friends, believe the promise of the most-awkward verse in the most-beautiful psalm: to know God, to be in a living relationship with the living God, to know that God is above you and beneath you and beside you and within you, is to experience an entirely new kind of life – a life where we experience God’s blessings as blessings that fill us to overflowing. And that’s good news. AMEN

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