

Terry W. York
Dayspring Baptist Church
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Psalm 23

The Table of Vulnerability

The 23rd Psalm is a great literary passage. It is also a universally accepted source of great comfort. But, for all its comfort, the 23rd psalm also contains a challenge. The table the Lord has prepared for us is not in the green pastures part...this is no picnic. The table the Lord has prepared for us is a *Lenten* lunch. Its prepared for *us*, but the table is set in the valley of the shadow of death, in the presence of our enemies.

Perhaps we should pray.

God, there are things in our hearts and on our minds this morning that are uncomfortable at best, some of them are frightening. The scary things of our world seem to multiply and comforting things seem become fewer. We stand between the two, stretched and torn.

Shepherd our thoughts this morning. Our minds have a tendency to wander off in all directions. Bring our hearts and minds, our fears and hopes, our prayers into focus this morning, into the sharp, clear focus of your love for us, your mercy, your presence.

This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

The Lenten season is a time of being invited to join a journey. But in the interest of fair warning we should know that if we sign up for this journey, we will need to undergo a bit of orientation and preparation. The journey will take a lot out of us, so we need to be in shape. An important part of this conditioning is a meal. You know how it works; athletes have special training tables, even exclusive dining halls. You can well imagine, then, that the meals served there are carefully and purposefully planned and prepared. Few are qualified and authorized to even be in the area, let alone sit and eat at the tables. I'm a professor at Baylor. In fact, I serve on two separate faculties at Baylor, but the coaches and trainers are not impressed. I have never been invited to wander into the athletes dining facility at Baylor for lunch. I'm not on their journey.

In our psalm for this morning there is a training table. Its for those who *have* been invited to join a journey. That's us; each of us present this morning. Indeed, the season of Lent is an invitation to each of us to join a journey. The introductory, conditioning meal is not only *included* in the invitation, it's mandatory.

The accepted understanding of this table prepared *in the presence of my enemies* is that it is something of a "my god is better than your god," in your face, sort of statement. We enjoy a meal of the Lord's preparing while the Lord protects us in the presence of our enemies. Go ahead, shoot your arrows at me, I'll use them for toothpicks. That spear there, throw it at me, it would make a good spit. I have no problem with that interpretation. In fact, I find great comfort in it. I'm certainly not suggesting that that is an incorrect reading. *I do want to say though, that if taunting is the only thing this meal*

*was about, it seems it would be a table prepared before **them**, before my **enemies**; to make a point with **them**.* But the table is prepared before **me**. I must consider the possibility that the table was prepared to teach **me** a lesson, to prepare **me** for a demanding journey.

I *have* to look back on this psalm through the lens of Jesus. The psalmist didn't have to, but I do. I am in Christ and he is in me, and the Lord who is my shepherd loves my enemies. The Lord who is *my* shepherd stuck **his neck out** for my enemies. I don't think he wants *me sticking my tongue out* at them. I can't imagine the Lord helping me say "nanny, nanny, boo-boo" through fried chicken and potato salad to a starving enemy. My sisters and brothers, what must the journey be, if this is the training table?

In 1719, the great British hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674-1748) published his book, *The Psalms of David **Imitated** in the Language of the New Testament*. With this hymnal he set out to Christianize the psalms. Watts had not only grown weary of poor singing, he had also grown weary of singing what he considered to be pre-Christian texts. I'm no Isaac Watts, and I'm not trying to wade in and help Watts baptize David, but I *am* reading the psalm as a Christ-follower, how can I not? And the Lord, who is *my* shepherd, loves the enemy, in fact he loved them all the way to the cross and even on the cross and even in our day, and this Lenten season reminds me that this is the journey to which our Lord invites us; has invited me. The journey is tough and risky, it will take conditioning.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. When I was in the Marine Corps that passage was often quoted with a somewhat amended and rather vulgar tag line... "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil because I'm the meanest *bleep* in the valley." I may be too polite to *say* it exactly like that, but I'm not too humble to *live* like that. The Lord, who is my shepherd, has prepared a table for me. I am to sit down at the table of his provision, his protection in the presence of my enemies. Are those enemies simply observers or are they guests invited by the Lord? I don't have to recite a list of current enemies, not during war, not during an election year, not given the situation where you work, not given the state of the economy, not given our world. You know the guest list as well as I and the Holy Spirit is whispering it in our hearts and ears right now. [silence]

Yet, we have more formidable enemies than other humans. The apostle Paul writes about spiritual foes. I'm not even referring to those. I'm thinking about other deep, fierce enemies, the enemies that might well have followed you into this room this morning: fear...fatigue... pain...temptation... betrayal...death itself. My sisters and brothers, these were Jesus' enemies before they were ours. Remember, Judas had *his* feet under the table at the Last Supper. Don't forget that Jesus prayed "if there is any other way, let this cup pass from me." Jesus was fully human and those are the words of a frightened man. You will recall that Jesus had to get away for awhile after serving an impromptu meal to 5000 people...he was tired. Talk about the stress of making due with what you have, he fed all those people out of a kid's lunch box. You want to talk about your fears, your fatigue, your pain?... Well, guess what? We should, with God and with those who are Christ in our midst, because Jesus sat at that table long before we did, we can talk to him.

Oh that we could ask him, "How did you handle it Jesus?" His answers would begin with what we read in the Bible... Well, I prayed the truth in the garden. I was really

hoping there might be a way other than the cross. And then there was the time back then when I tried to gently tell all the disciples around the table at the Last Supper that in one way or another they'd probably all betray me. And I hope you can also see that the main way I handled all this was by maintaining my faith in the Father, even though it stretched pretty thin at one point. You remember the 22 Psalm...starts out "My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?" Well, I blurted that out at the deepest moment of fear and pain. I hung on to the *words* of my faith and the real faith came quickly behind them. I had to believe that the Father was there, even though the enemy seemed to be winning. That's how I did it, at least that's part of it. Would you like to do lunch? I've prepared a table. Sounds like you're hungry...*something's* gnawing at you.

On this Lenten Sunday, we acknowledge out loud in front of God and evryone that the journey can get dark. The psalmist knew that, but somehow his darkest images and his brightest images often seemed at home in the same psalm. That's certainly true of the 23rd. Seems like that's how it is with Jesus. Cheers and jeers, Lent and Resurrection, it's all in the experience of the same savior. It's all in the same journey of following that savior.

Life is much the same way. Brightness and darkness seem to be a set. Having our heads anointed with oil doesn't always feel like a blessing. Sometimes it feels like an ordination. Sometimes it feels like a burial ritual, and our cup can overflow in any one of those situations. Life can swamp us. Our cup does overflow with blessing and we thank God for that. But we also have to admit that sometimes our cup, like our "plate" is full to overflowing with the demands of life. Sometimes our cup overflows because tears of frustration and fear fall into the same cup with the oil of blessing, and they don't seem to mix.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. We can depend on our shepherd's love. But we also know there are days, and all this grey draped around us is a reminder...there are days when we feel like the goodness and mercy are following us at a pretty far distance back there behind us somewhere. We're ready for goodness and mercy to catch up with us. We believe in goodness and mercy with all our heart, but there are days that, like Jesus, its about all we can do to hang on to the words. And the words of faith too often clash with crucifying words like cancer and surgery and deployment and re-structuring and, well you know the list, and you know the grey and sooty parchment upon which the list is written. Sometimes it seems like the only goodness and mercy in our life is the goodness and mercy that we dispense, and often, we're just too tired. You know the feeling. Jesus certainly does.

Jesus...from restoring the ear of a soldier who came to arrest him, to praying for forgiveness for those who were in the process of crucifying him, to crying out memorized words into the darkness, though fear of death and pain (both physical and emotional), through faith and doubt, the Master has shown us how to relate to our enemies.

I have permission from my father to tell you this story he told me many years ago. Its from his experiences as a young Marine fighting in the South Pacific during WWII. [Mr. O.C. Bridges, I acknowledge your presence, sir, as I relate this story.] My father's unit was assigned, along with many others, to take the island of Peleliu. The Marines were advancing so fast through the Pacific Islands, supplies could not keep up with them. As they were preparing to go ashore, my father and the other Marines were issued what few boxes of rations still existed. They were told that there was nothing else to eat. They

were told that if they took any prisoners, the Marines would have to share their rations with those prisoners. No orders there, the Marines were left to draw their own conclusions. Sure enough, in the course of this terrible battle, the rare occurrence did happen. A Japanese soldier came out of a cave and surrendered to the small group of Marines of which my father coincidentally happened to be the ranking member. The enemy soldier was brought to my dad and the ration instructions were rehearsed. If you take any prisoners you must feed them from your own rations. The difficult decision was my father's to make. My father's response was, "Don't execute him, he can have part of mine."

Did you hear the echo?...*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.* I must tell you this as well, humbly taking the edge off of the poignant moment, my Dad also said, "There was a good chance we were all going to starve or be killed anyway." The "good guys" and the "bad guys" were in the same boat, or perhaps better said this morning...they were at the same table.

I think we've discovered something we can give up for Lent: we can give up power, replacing it with vulnerability. We are called to give up whatever would keep us from sitting down to eat with our enemies, whomever or whatever they may be. We are called to be vulnerable in the presence of our enemies, for they **and we** are always in the presence of the Lord, our Shepherd.

The Lord, our Shepherd has called us to a table where we will sit with our enemies, the ones that have faces and the ones that don't; our foes and our fears. Our Shepherd has called us to a training table prepared for us today and all our days, a table where we are to sit with our enemies, eyeball to eyeball *across* the table and knee to knee *under* the table, eating from the only provisions we have, each of us taking bread from the same loaf and dipping it into the same cup. Some around the table will be remembering, some will be learning, all will be hoping.

Amen