

This morning we will finish our short series of sermons on Psalm 23. We will consider verses 5-6. There is lots to think about in this Psalm and a time like the time we are living through is a good time to think about the various pictures and ideas that this Psalm brings before us. In verses 1-4 the dominant image has been that of the Lord as our Shepherd and we, his people, as the sheep. In the last two verses, the imagery of the shepherd and his sheep is left behind.

The picture in verse 5 is of David sitting at a table in the presence of his enemies. God has prepared this table for him and is treating him as an honored guest while his enemies look on. The theme of God taking care of his people in the midst of trouble is continued. But we have a new set of images to explore. This is how God, in the Bible, through his Spirit, makes the truth of his care for us real and powerful in our experience. The Bible is meant to be thought about and dwelled upon. In particular the Psalms are poetry and poetry is intended to impact our emotions as well as our minds by means of imagery and beautiful or striking expressions. May God enable us to feel the impact of what he is saying to us in these verses.

Now maybe at first glance, verse 5 may not seem to be too relevant for us because it speaks about enemies and we may not be aware of having any enemies. The Psalms have a lot to say about enemies, but I think for many of us, those passages do not seem to relate much to our lives because we are blessed to live in a culture where we are quite safe from enemies. We have good law and order. Our lives are relatively peaceful. We probably are not too stressed about being harmed by other people.

Certainly, the situation in which the OT saints lived was different from ours. That is not to say that our world today is so peaceful – clearly many people in the world are suffering because of enemies. It seems like the experience of the people of God in ancient Israel was closer to that of people in the poorer, less orderly, parts of the world today where regular people are more at the mercy of thieves or tribal hatreds or corrupt officials or persecution. Even though there is lots wrong with our system, most of us, I think, are not too bothered by enemies.

But we can and must think of enemies in a broader way. Most often the enemies that the Bible speaks about are related to the fundamental biblical divide between those who are for God and those who are against him. The biblical background for enemies begins in Genesis 3 with the fall. Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned there was a war with God on the one side and Satan and Adam and Eve on the other side. God in his grace intervened to bring Adam and Eve back to his side and so the ensuing struggle that would define human history would be between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. That is described in that key text in Genesis 3 that sets up the struggle between God and his people and Satan and his followers that is the meaning of human history. God says to the serpent “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

The whole biblical story is the story of a struggle between God and Satan and the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. It is about God’s plan to overcome Satan and the destruction that his rebellion unleashed

on the world. It culminates in Jesus' victory over sin, death, and Satan on the cross and through the resurrection.

And that means that you have enemies. In many cases still today, and indeed more than ever, the people of God have human enemies who hate them and want to destroy them. We have them too, but so far they are more restrained in our part of the world. But there are spiritual enemies even if there are no obvious physical ones. There is spiritual warfare going on which means that there are evil spiritual beings who are dedicated to our hurt and destruction. Behind all of them is Satan. Ephesians 6:12 says "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Satan and his forces use everything within their power to harm us. What they are after is to get us to turn away from God – to get us to join them in their rebellion against God. And they will use many different means to try to do that. They use temptation to make sin look attractive. They use persecution to try to get people to turn away from the Lord. They use suffering to make people think that God has abandoned them or to tempt them to be bitter against God.

It is important to see that hardships and suffering are used by Satan to get us to turn away from the Lord while at the same time they are used by God to test and strengthen us. We see this basic idea expressed in that wonderful text at the end of Joseph's life that shows how the same event can mean one thing for an enemy and another thing for God. Remember what Joseph said to his brothers at the end of his life? They had sold him into slavery out of hatred. At the end of the story Joseph was able to say to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...." The same event can be meant for evil by Satan and by people while God can be using it for good.

We see this same thing in the story of Job. Satan had a hand in Job's suffering. Satan was trying to get Job to curse God. God allowed Satan to try. Satan had one purpose in Job's suffering, God had another. This same point is made in the account of Paul's thorn in the flesh. Paul relates this in 2 Corinthians 12. Whatever his thorn in the flesh was it was something difficult for Paul to bear. He refers to it as "a messenger of Satan to harass" him. But at the same time it is clear from the passage that God was using the same affliction to demonstrate his power in Paul's weakness.

My point is that anything that tempts us to sin is an enemy, but God is using it as a test to strengthen us. That applies to anything hard in our lives. Anything that is hard is a temptation to sin. It is a temptation to be bitter against God. It is a temptation to question God's love and care. It is a temptation to be discouraged or anxious or to complain. These are all enemies. Satan is seeking to destroy us through them. There is a sense in which every form of suffering is an enemy because it tempts us to turn away from God. But the same time, God is allowing it or sending it as a means of testing or discipline to strengthen us.

There is another enemy that the Bible speaks of. We have an enemy within. Our sinful nature. In 1 Peter 2:11 Peter refers to “the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.” The passions of the flesh are part of us – they are our sinful nature. Because our sinful nature is not completely eradicated when we receive the Holy Spirit, we have an enemy living inside of us which we are called to put to death. This is behind the famous saying of John Owen, “be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

The passions of the flesh war against our souls. They are within us, but they are a deadly enemy of our souls. And we are called to fight against them. This is a life and death struggle. Paul in Romans 8:13 says “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” This is a serious matter. It is a life and death matter. We have an enemy within us, our sinful nature that wars against our souls and we are called to put that enemy to death by the power of the Spirit.

The Bible also speaks of death as an enemy. 1 Corinthians 15:25, says, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Death is the result of sin and sin came into the world through the temptation of Satan. Death, sin and Satan are all interconnected. They are our enemies. They threaten us with separation from God which is the ultimate disaster. The issues of life are momentous. The issue of life is heaven and hell. Any anything that tempts us away from God is a deadly enemy.

So we are surrounded by enemies. Everything that we are called to fight is an enemy. Spiritual warfare a common way of describing the Christian life. That which we fight against are our enemies. These range from Satan himself, to temptations, to our own sinful nature. Hardships and difficulties can be enemies in that they tempt us to things like discouragement and despair and hopelessness and fear. So David’s mention of enemies is very relevant to us as we consider his statement that God prepares a table before him in the presence of his enemies.

The table is a symbol for fellowship and provision and security. The background for the symbol is the meaning of hospitality in the world of ancient Israel. We have seen that it was a dangerous place. There was some measure of law and order, but there was more disorder than what we are used to and so vulnerability to human enemies of various kinds was a reality. In that context hospitality included protection. The host was obligated to protect his guests from enemies. And that is a key part of the picture that David is painting for us in verse 5, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” The enemies are present, but they are on the outside looking in. The enemies are nearby but David is safe because he is sitting at the Lord’s table – the table that God had prepared for him.

But a key aspect of hospitality was also fellowship. Eating together points to fellowship and fellowship with God is always in view when eating or feasting is mentioned in the Bible in connection with God. It’s a big theme in the Bible. Some of the offerings that were offered at the temple were fellowship offerings where some of the offering was burned on the altar but the rest of it was eaten by the priests and by the people as a

symbol of fellowship between God and his people. Many of the feasts of the OT also included the people eating together in the presence of God.

So the picture that David is drawing by describing God preparing a table before him in the presence of his enemies is one that includes fellowship with God and safety in the presence of his enemies. It also includes refreshment. Anointing the head of a guest with oil was a kindness that hosts showed to their guests. Remember how Jesus, in the story where he visits the home of a Pharisees, said to him at one point, "You did not anoint my head with oil..." (Luke 7:46). One commentary explains, "[T]o rub a guest's head with olive oil was part of the prescribed etiquette followed by a solicitous host as he welcomed his guests." (UBS Handbook: Psalms, p.234). A paraphrase of the idea is "You welcome me as an honored guest."

Being anointed with oil in this way was valued because it was refreshing. The idea is similar to inviting a guest to use the washroom to freshen up. But as the example of Jesus and the Pharisee shows, it was also a sign of honor and failure to do so was an insult.

Finally in this verse David says, "[M]y cup overflows." There is more than enough food and drink. The table full to overflowing. The picture is like some of our thanksgiving meals where the food will not all fit on the table. David is speaking about feasting. He is describing more than enough. He is describing abundance of not only food and drink but joy and wellbeing.

And this is all happening in the presence of his enemies. The picture is that of a place of safety, fellowship, honor and abundance that is surrounded by enemies. This is a place of fullness and joy and wellbeing in the context of danger. There is a huge contrast between inside and outside. And that is the point of the verse. The enemies are there and yet David is in this oasis provided by God where he is not only safe but experiences the richness of life with God.

It is a wonderful picture to translate into our situation. We have already dwelt on the meaning of the enemies for us. That concept, as it is developed in Scripture, fits with the experience of believers in any circumstance in life. Christians in China and Nigeria are surrounded by enemies, but so we are. The greatest threats that we face in life are not physical but spiritual. Jesus says in Matthew 10:28, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Our enemies are every bit as dangerous as the enemies of believers in other places of the world. The greatest threats that we all face are spiritual, and we all are surrounded by those.

But in the midst of that danger, God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies and that is a place of abundance, a place of fullness of life, a place of overflowing wellbeing. That is the reality of every child of God. We are surrounded by all manner of enemies, but in the love and care of our Saviour is a place of safety and fullness.

The reason that this is so is because God himself is our greatest need. Fellowship with God is so fundamental to our wellbeing as human beings that, if we have it, we have what is necessary for security and fullness of life and, if we don't have it, there is nothing else that can even come close to making up for it. Salvation in Christ is our greatest need because salvation in Christ has to do with reconciliation with God. It has to do with the forgiveness of our sins and being made right with God. And if we are right with God – if God is looking upon us in favor and we have been given hearts to love him, we have what we need for fullness of life. And that is the case even though we are surrounded by enemies.

There is an obvious parallel here is the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is part of the biblical theme of eating a meal with God. In the Lord's Supper we have a table set before us in the presence of our enemies. The Lord's Supper symbolizes the provision that God provides for us in Christ as well as symbolizing our fellowship with God through Christ. It is a place of refreshment. It is a place where our cup overflows. And even though we cannot celebrate the Lord's Supper at the moment, we can remember it and we can look forward to it in the future.

But the Lord's Supper is not the only place where we experience the reality of God preparing a table for us in the presence of our enemies. We experience fellowship with God, safety, refreshment and fullness of life, in all kinds of ways as we live our lives in the presence of our enemies. We experience it in our worship services, in family worship, in private worship. We experience it when we think about God and life with God even as we are busy with our lives. There can be these oases throughout the day when we pray and when we worship God, when we delight in him in our thoughts and consider our lives in the light of God and his truth.

This is not to say that we experience the fullness of this every moment. Life is not like that. It is not static. There are ups and downs. Our struggles are not over. There are times when we feel overwhelmed by our enemies. David experienced those ups and downs as well. In Psalm 6:7 he writes, "My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes." What our text describes is something that God's people experience more or less as long as we are in this life. Life does not always feel that our cup is overflowing.

But there is something of this that is inherent in a saving relationship with God. When we trust in Jesus for salvation, there is inherent in that faith some degree of comfort and hope and fellowship with God. It may be mixed with struggles and doubts, but faith in its very nature has some degree of hope and comfort in it.

But more is possible and that is a big part of what the Christian life is about. Growing in our trust in God. Growing in our enjoyment of fellowship with him. Being gradually conformed to having our greatest satisfaction in God himself. And so what David describes when he speaks about God preparing a table for him in the presence of his enemies and God anointing his head with oil and pouring his cup to overflowing – is something that all believer experience to some extent and we have the resources in Christ through the Word and Spirit to know more of that fullness of life that he is describing.

The last verse is more of the same with different imagery again. The basic image here is moving along the path of life towards the culmination of the hope of the believer which is dwelling in the house of the LORD forever.

The original meaning of David in the Psalm referred to dwelling in the temple. The word translated “forever” in the original Hebrew means literally length of days. The concept of eternal life is revealed gradually in the Bible. It is not as clear in the OT as it is in the NT, but it is implicit in the hope that OT saints had in an eternal God. David’s hope of dwelling in the house of the LORD for length of days expresses his hope of worshipping in the temple all the days of his life. The same longing is expressed in Psalm 84:4 where another poet sings, “Blessed are those who dwell in your house, every singing your praise.”

As the Bible unfolds this longing becomes the hope of dwelling with the Lord in his presence forever. And so the way we tend to think about the end of Psalm 23 is the right interpretation. “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

And David is singing that goodness and mercy shall follow him all the days of his life. The hope is to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. The confidence is that goodness and mercy shall follow him every step of the way through his life. The word for “follow” here is literally pursue. The idea is more aggressive than following. David is saying that goodness and mercy shall pursue him all the days of his life. Goodness and mercy are not just sort of meandering along following David on his journey through life. They are pursuing him. And the meaning is that God is chasing David with goodness and mercy.

What a beautiful picture that is. God is chasing us with goodness. He is after our true and eternal good and he is pursuing it aggressively. Mercy here is the word that is more often translated steadfast love. It is covenant faithfulness – the kind of faithfulness that is gracious and merciful and slow to anger – the kind of faithfulness that pursues his people even when they are not faithful to him.

The fulfillment of this is the cross of Jesus. The cross showed more than anything else how much God was pursuing his people with goodness and mercy. The cross shows how much God was willing to sacrifice for the good of his people. And Paul in Romans 8 follows the logic of this when he writes in verse 32, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

So we have two more wonderful verses that emphasize how blessed we are as people of God. “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 forever.”

These verses make it clear that while God’s people experience danger and hardship in this life, God’s care for them and his commitment for their blessing and wellbeing is such that they should be able to go through the hardest time in this life with hope and comfort. The Bible surely does not promise that we will not suffer, but verses like this are in the Bible to assure us that if we belong to God through faith in Jesus, all is well.

We should look at a passage like Psalm 23 and ask, "What response is God seeking to elicit by what he is saying to us in these verses?" Clearly the response that he is after is trust and hope and joy and confidence in God's care for us. The words of this Psalm are intended to help us to go through the trials and struggles of this life in peace and contentment knowing that God is very much committed to our wellbeing. True wellbeing is found in him and there is nothing in heaven and on earth that can touch it.

So let us dwell on the words and images and ideas of this Psalm. Let us consciously interpret our lives in the light of them. That is what God is calling us to do by them. The Bible and our own experience makes it clear that experiencing the fullness of the rest and confidence that this Psalm seeks to encourage is not automatic or easy. God is calling us to order our thoughts according to the assurances that he gives us that he is committed to our good. We are called to believe what he says. We are called to trust. And the greatest way that he encourages us to do that is by these wonderful assurances of his love and care that he gives us in his word. And so let us seek to bring our inner life into conformity with what is real and what is true according to the Word of God.