

Protection

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.
Psalms 23:5

What does a 'prepared table' bring to mind?

You probably did not imagine a picnic with a blanket on the ground or a hot dog and drink at a ball game. Whether a formal occasion or informal, a 'prepared table' is one that has been properly set for a planned meal.

To keep this passage in context, the writer is a shepherd, yet reflecting on himself as a sheep under the care of the Great Shepherd. So, how does a shepherd prepare a 'table' for his sheep?

The ancient shepherds would lead their flock to good pastureland. In late summer the pastureland might be in the high mountain elevations. This land was known as tableland, or in our culture, mesas. (Our English word 'mesa' is borrowed from the Spanish word for 'table.')

Before leading his sheep to the tableland a shepherd would make a trip alone to survey the land. He determine where the sheep would graze and for how long. He would note water sources and plan grazing patterns accordingly.

He would not simply look over the land from a distance, but would walk through the tableland. He would search out poisonous plants and eliminate them and he would take note of areas where predators would most likely hide in wait for a weak or wandering sheep.

Just before leading his sheep to the tableland, he would return to clean leaves and brush from the water source to insure clean and accessible water.

The sheep would be brought to the rich pastureland under the care of the shepherd who had been there before, undoubtedly in the presence of predators. Yet, because of his careful planning and diligent preparation, his sheep would find safe pasture.

Our Shepherd has already gone before us and has prepared the way. Our enemy, Satan, is ever present waiting for an opportunity when we are weak or wandering. Yet, as long as we remain close to the shepherd, we will have comfort and bountiful blessings, in spite of the presence of our enemy.

During summertime sheep would often be pestered by flying insects. Not only were they tormented by their buzzing about, the flies would often get in their nose and eyes. One particular kind of fly would attempt to lay eggs in the moist mucus around their nose. The hatched larvae could infest their nasal passages causing misery for the sheep. To get relief sheep would beat their heads against trees or rocks, and rub them in the soil. Left untreated, the larvae could cause a sheep to go blind.

The solution: The shepherd would mix a salve to place on the head of the sheep. As soon as the oil was applied the flies would stop and sheep would calm down. So the Psalmist writes: "You have anointed my head with oil."

Sheep were also treated with oil, even dipped in oil, for a disease called scab. It was caused by a microscopic parasite and was highly contagious. Once contracted it could devastate an entire flock.

How does our Great Shepherd "anoint our heads with oil"? Perhaps it is the Spirit of God. All who are baptized into Christ are promised the gift of the Spirit. Whether the Spirit is the gift, or the gift comes from the Spirit, it is something that we receive upon baptism. We are promised more than a one-time cleansing. We are also given an ongoing and present aid. The Spirit does not help us only through our study of God's word; He is alive and lives within us. He helps us especially when we are spiritually weak and disabled.

As long as we accept his "anointing" we will be free of the parasite of sin and evil. Yet, we are often like a sheep that twists its head refusing the oil, or like a child refusing medicine. When we refuse the guidance and correction of God's word; when we refuse to submit to God's will; we have refused his Spirit. We do not need to understand 'how' God works in our lives, but only that He is actively working in our lives.

We will find peace at the feast God provides in this life, in the presence of our enemy, only if we submit ourselves completely to God allowing his Spirit to work in us.

Anything less grieves the Spirit.

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