

THE LORD PREPARES**PSALM 23:5a**

Some years ago, a 14-foot bronze crucifix was stolen from Calvary Cemetery in Little Rock, Arkansas. It had stood at the entrance to that cemetery for more than 50 years. The cross was put there way back in 1930 by a Catholic bishop and had been valued at the time at \$10,000. The thieves apparently cut it off at its base and hauled it off in a pick-up. Police speculate they'd cut it into small pieces and sold it for scrap. The 900-pound bronze cross probably brought about \$450. They obviously didn't realize the value of that cross. That's the problem, of course—understanding the value of the cross. 2,000 years ago and still today many people don't see the value of Jesus. Nor do they understand the value of His death. Thank you for making the time and taking effort tonight to reflect on the value of both Jesus and His death on the cross.

As most of us know this evening, we've been taking a careful, verse by verse look at Psalm 23 during these weeks running up to Good Friday and Easter. Psalm 23 pictures God as a shepherd and His people as sheep. And it was Jesus Himself who made the all-important connection between what He did on Good Friday some 2,000 years ago and sheep and shepherds. He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (Jo. 10:11 NLT) I won't ask you to recite Psalm 23 with me as we've done on several occasions, but I will ask you to read it in your Bible, a pew Bible, or just listen as I read it once again in its entirety this evening. Our focus this evening is on the first part of verse 5 which says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." (NIV) What light might just that one sentence shed on the meaning of Good Friday? Well, it's a reminder that...

MY SHEPHERD PROTECTS ME FROM MY ENEMIES.

David had been a shepherd when he was a kid taking care of his father's flock. Good shepherds – the ones who really care about their sheep and want to see them flourish and thrive – don't keep them in one pasture every day all year long. No, that's a good way to ruin a piece of land. You've got to move sheep around both for the land's sake and the flock's sake. So, both in Palestine and in other sheep-raising areas around the world, there was a kind of twice a year migration. In the spring, sheep were herded up to hilly, cooler areas where they often spent the entire summer months. Then in late fall, they'd be herded back down to the lowland areas and to the home barns, pastures, and enclosures of their shepherd.

When we hear the phrase, "You prepare a table before me," we immediately think of a great meal served to us on a plate on our kitchen or dining room table. But taking sheep up into hilly pastures during the summer was, in a sense, also like preparing a table for them. This new area was going to provide their nourishment for several months. A good shepherd always prepared this new area for his sheep to graze in by doing some advance research. Sheep are about the most vulnerable critters on the planet. They have no natural defenses – no sharp teeth, no claws, no speed - nothing. So a good shepherd – one who wanted his sheep to thrive – took precautions against any and all potential problems for his sheep. Like what? Like poisonous plants. He

literally walked the new pastures – pulling up, gathering, and burning – any plants that would sicken or kill his sheep. The greatest enemy shepherds had to guard their sheep against were predators: hyenas, jackals, wolves, mountain lions. Often those predators would literally be looking down on that flock of sheep from hiding places above them, licking their chops, just hoping for an opportunity to make a swift, sneak attack on the weakest in the flock. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” Can your imagination grasp now what David had in mind?

Like sheep, you and I are spiritually vulnerable and we have some formidable enemies. I can think tonight of at least three. The first one is the world. Not the planet, not lost people themselves, but instead the attitudes and values of those who have no use for God. The Bible says, “Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world.” (1 Jo. 2:15-16 NLT) A second enemy is about as close to all of us as is possible. It’s our own sin nature. We all have a natural, inner bent or inclination to do what’s wrong. The Bible says, “For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God’s laws, and it never will.” (Rom. 8:7 NLT) And then there’s Satan himself. The Bible even pictures him as the ultimate predator. It says, “Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.” (1 Pt. 5:18 NLT) The passion story of Jesus revealed the strength and cunning of Satan, didn’t it? He deceived two of Jesus’ disciples. Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter denied Jesus. Of course, Satan isn’t the evil equivalent of God, by any means, but all we have to do is look around at the world we live in, the people we know, and even into our own lives and hearts to see the incredible damage Satan can do to human beings.

We remember tonight, however, that we don’t need to live in fear of our spiritual enemies. Alert, yes, but not afraid. On guard at all times, yes, but not terrified. Our chances at survival are better than good. Because of Jesus, they’re actually excellent. What about the world? The Bible says, “The Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.” (1 Jo. 4:4 NLT) What about our sinful nature? The Bible says, “God declared an end to sin’s control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.” (Rom. 8:3 NLT) What about the devil? Again, the Bible says, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” (Jam. 4:7). In addition, we know Jesus endured temptations of all kinds. He understands all our enemies because He Himself experienced their powerful attacks. He’s gone before us. He’s prepared the way. He offers us His indwelling Holy Spirit to help us defeat the world, our own sinful nature, and even the devil himself. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” What does that mean this Good Friday? Well, it’s also a reminder that...

MY SHEPHERD PROVIDES ME WHAT I NEED THE MOST.

That new, summer pasture was like a brand, new table set for the sheep. But it was likely well-prepared by a good shepherd before the sheep ever got there. What did he do in advance, in preparation? Well, in addition to dealing with the sheep’s potential

enemies, he checked out the condition of the vegetation in the pasture itself. Did it provide what the sheep needed to flourish and stay healthy? He might add deposits of salt and other minerals in the pasture as a supplement to the sheep's diet. He checked out all the available water resources and made sure his sheep had adequate access to clean, ample water. Often, this was a labor intensive effort for the shepherd. He spent long, lonely hours and considerable physical energy just "preparing a table" for his sheep. That's just what good shepherds did.

Tonight, we gather at the Lord's Table. It cost Jesus a great deal to prepare this table for us, didn't it? Talk about "labor intensive"! It cost Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, the joy of Heaven for a season of time. It cost Jesus the misunderstandings, hatred, and rejection of many people. It cost Him lonely agony in the garden of Gethsemane praying that He wouldn't have to endure the cross. It cost Him the indignity of an unjust travesty of a trial before Pontius Pilate. It cost Jesus the unbelievable physical suffering of the cross. We've all seen, heard, or read accounts of how excruciating and horrific was death by crucifixion. The crown of thorns on His head. The whip on His back. The nails in His wrists and feet. The spear in His side. Worse than even all that physical suffering, it cost Jesus – for a period of time – spiritual separation from His Father as He bore the penalty of our sin. And then at the end, it cost Jesus, the Author and Creator of all life, the actual, literal experience of physical death. When you partake of Communion in just a few minutes, take a moment to reflect on what it cost Jesus to prepare this Table for you and me. God, in the person of Jesus, put aside His position, His splendor, His rights, His authority, and endured the cross for you and me. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." Yes, indeed. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Yes, indeed.

Every time we come to the Lord's Table, we're reminded of what we've already received, what we are receiving, and what we have yet to receive. Like what? Like no condemnation. "So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1 NLT) Like being near God. "But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ." (Eph. 2:13 NLT) Like being justified before God. "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us." (Rom. 5:1 NLT) Like being made a member of God's family. "See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!" (1 Jo. 3:1 NLT) Like never being abandoned in this life or eternity. "God has said, 'I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.'" (Heb. 13:5 NLT) You can't cover it all. The Bible says, "All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ." (Eph. 1:3 NLT)

A pastor by the name of John Dickson once spoke on the theme of the wounds of God at a university campus in Sydney, Australia. During the question time, a Muslim man rose to explain how preposterous it was to claim that the Creator of the universe should be subjected to the forces of his own creation—that he would have to eat, sleep, and go to the toilet, let alone die on a cross. Dickson said the man's remarks were intelligent,

clear, and civil. The man went on to argue that it was illogical that God, the "cause of all causes" could have pain inflicted on him by any lesser beings. Dickson thought for a minute, but he couldn't come up with a knockdown argument or a witty comeback. So finally he simply thanked the man for making the uniqueness of the Christian claim so clear. You see, what a Muslim denounces as blasphemy the follower of Jesus holds precious: God has wounds.

A final thought. What do you think goes through the mind and heart of Jesus whenever He sees us, His people, partake of Communion? Despite all the personal sacrifice that a literal shepherd undertook to prepare a new pasture land for his sheep, he found great delight in seeing them well-fed, flourishing, and thriving. I believe Jesus, the good Shepherd experiences the same emotion. Delight. Joy. Satisfaction. The Bible says, "When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied." (Is. 53:11 NLT) "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Let's bring joy and satisfaction to Jesus, the good Shepherd, tonight as we come to the table He has so well prepared for each of us.