

The Table in the Wilderness

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 has been a source of great comfort and strength for God's people across the centuries. Although in modern times it has become more of a funeral psalm, it is in fact a psalm about **life** — real, resilient life. It doesn't promise a life of ease, but it does give an honest view of the joys and trials of life in a broken world. There are still waters, but also dark valleys. There are wonders to enjoy, but also wilderness wanderings. It doesn't promise the absence of suffering, but it does assure us of the Shepherd's sustaining presence and provision **through it all**.

Every line in this Psalm deserves a deep dive. But in keeping with our series, we will focus on verse 5, where the Shepherd becomes the gracious Host who sets a table in the most unlikely place.

This is not a table on the other side of trouble — it is a table **in the midst of it**. Right where enemies surround and the wilderness presses in, our Shepherd prepares provision, fellowship, and overflowing joy.

This answers the doubting question Israel asked in the desert: "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?" (Psalm 78:19). Many of them quit too soon. But David, the shepherd-king who knew the desert firsthand, boldly answers, "**Yes — He does it for me.**"

Church, this is good news for every one of us walking through a wilderness season. Whether it's health struggles, family pressures, financial strain, ministry fatigue, or spiritual dryness, the Shepherd does not abandon us to the desert. **He hosts us there.**

As the old saying goes, we are either coming out of a trial, in the middle of one, or heading into the next. But here is the great comfort of Psalm 23: no matter which season we find ourselves in, the Shepherd is right there with us.

Main Idea: In the wilderness of suffering and opposition, our Shepherd-King prepares a table of bountiful provision and intimate presence—if we will press in and sit with Him instead of quitting like Israel.

Let's look closely at verse five and see what the table reveals about suffering, God's resources, and our responsibility to persevere.

First, The Table Speaks of **the Reality of Suffering in Our Pilgrimage**

Notice where this table is prepared: **“in the presence of my enemies.”**

David is not just writing poetry from a palace. He lived this. As a fugitive fleeing King Saul, he hid in wilderness caves and strongholds while armies hunted him. Enemies were all around him. Betrayal, exhaustion, and fear pressed in from every side. Yet right there, God prepared provision and protection. David knew the wilderness was real, but it was not the end of God's care.

Think back to Israel in the book of Exodus and Numbers. God had delivered them dramatically from Egypt, but in the desert they grew hungry, thirsty, and discouraged. Again, instead of trusting, “they spoke against God, saying, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” (Psalm 78:19).

Psalm 78 paints their tragic cycle: rebellion, judgment, shallow repentance, brief revival, and then relapse. They quit in their hearts. They longed for Egypt instead of pressing forward to the Promised Land.

We are not so different. Like the Israelites, we face similar struggles and temptations. Life is a pilgrimage, not a vacation. As Eugene Peterson reminded us in his classic book on discipleship, we are pilgrims, not tourists. Tourists look for shortcuts and highlights. Pilgrims commit to what he called “a long obedience in the same

direction”—a lifelong commitment to follow Jesus faithfully, day after day, even when the path is hard.

The Bible everywhere shows that perseverance is a key mark of God’s people (Hebrews 10:36-39). But too often we quit too soon. Galatians 6:9 exhorts us, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

Marriages need this long obedience. Parents raising children in the nurture of the Lord need it. Young people with big dreams but facing temptation need it. Pastors in the daily grind of ministry need it. And every believer walking through deep valleys needs a fresh baptism of perseverance.

Some of you are in a wilderness right now. Maybe this week has been especially hard. Maybe the season feels long. Let me encourage you: the table is not only on the other side. It is prepared in the presence of your enemies.

Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? They did not escape the fiery furnace but they met the Fourth Man *in* the fire and His presence sustained them (Daniel 3). Jesus Himself prepared the table of the Lord’s Supper on the night of His betrayal and ate with His flawed disciples. He walked through the ultimate wilderness for us.

Don’t quit too soon, church. The wilderness is real, but the Shepherd knows the terrain. Greater still, He doesn’t just guide us out — He sets the table right in the midst of it all.

Notice secondly that, **The Table Speaks of the Resources of the Shepherd to Provide**

Look at what the Host does: “You prepare a table before me... you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

Every word here reveals the lavish hospitality of our Shepherd. The word “table” speaks of **bounty**—not scraps for survival, but a feast of acceptance, relationship, and honor. In the ancient world, sharing a

table meant covenant friendship. Our God spreads a full table for us even in barren places.

Joni Eareckson Tada has lived in a wheelchair for more than fifty years after a diving accident left her quadriplegic. She has also battled chronic pain and cancer.

Yet she testified: “God permits what He hates — this wheelchair — to accomplish that which He loves: Christ in me, the hope of glory. Jesus Christ is ecstasy beyond compare, and it is worth anything, anything, to be His friend.”

Beloved, as Joni discovered, the Lord doesn't always change our circumstances, but He always wants to change us in the circumstances. In the wilderness of suffering, He prepares a table. He doesn't always remove the enemies or the pain, but He spreads a feast of His presence right there in front of them. And somehow, in ways we can't fully explain, that table becomes enough. More than enough. Our cup can overflow — even there.

The word “**prepare**” speaks of **foresight and care**. Our Shepherd is never surprised by the wilderness. Providence hides in hardship. Look for God's provision there. He sent manna and water for Israel despite their grumbling. He sustained David with encouragement from Jonathan and protection in the caves. And in Christ, He has prepared everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

Next comes tender hospitality: “You anoint my head with oil.” A good host would anoint a weary traveler's head with refreshing oil. Our Shepherd does the same — acting as both tender Shepherd and gracious Host. He pours oil on our wounds, refreshes our weary spirits, and honors us as His guests right in the wilderness.

And then comes the glorious climax of the verse: “My cup overflows.” This is abundance—grace upon grace. Not just enough to survive, but joy that spills over.

Who is this Shepherd? The Lord Jesus Himself — the One who became flesh, the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10).

During His earthly ministry, Jesus fed thousands in desolate places. He is more than a miracle worker; **He is the very sustenance we need.** On the cross He prepared the ultimate table through His broken body and poured-out blood. And one day soon He will welcome us to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).

We won't always understand the why of suffering. But one thing is certain: under the tension and pressures of life, we best discover that the Shepherd Himself is all we need.

When we feel alone in the daily grind, **He sees. He knows.** And He rewards the faithful — both now and in the life to come. A long obedience in the same direction is never wasted.

So quit striving in your own strength. Come feast on what He has already prepared: His Word that sustains, His presence that comforts, His people who encourage, and His promises that anchor us.

Lastly, The Table Speaks of Our Responsibility to Sit Before His Transforming Presence.

Notice the personal invitation: “...**before me...**” (v.5).

The table is prepared *before you*. This is intimate. This is personal. But a prepared table does us no good if we refuse to sit down. Israel stood in their unbelief and complained. David chose to sit. He goes on to declare, “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Psalm 23:6). The word “dwell” here carries the idea of sitting, remaining, and abiding.

Why does the Lord allow the wilderness at all? Deuteronomy 8 gives us the answer. As Israel wandered in the wilderness, God humbled them, let them hunger, and fed them with manna they had never known before. Why? Moses tells them: “*that he might make you*

know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus quoted this same verse in His own wilderness temptation (Matthew 4:4).

The wilderness is a classroom. Our hearts are idol factories — they constantly look for something or someone other than God to satisfy us. We can easily turn good things (comfort, success, relationships, even ministry) into ultimate things. The wilderness strips those idols away. It reveals how quickly we complain when our “daily bread” feels insufficient or delayed. God allows the wilderness so we discover that we need **more** than daily bread from His hand — we need to taste and see that **He Himself** is the Bread of Life.

Jesus said in John 6:35, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” The wilderness teaches us that manna in the desert was never the main point. Jesus is. When we feast on Him — when we “sit and soak” in His Word — we find that He is enough, even when the wilderness doesn’t end.

Look again at our text. David writes that the Shepherd “makes me lie down in green pastures” (Psalm 23:2). Why? Sheep don’t just graze and run—they lie down to chew the cud. They bring the grass back up and digest it thoroughly. That’s a picture of biblical meditation. As Psalm one also explains, God doesn’t just bless Bible *readers*—He blesses Bible *meditators*.

Because this practice is so vital, let me briefly share three keys to meditating on the Word, (drawn from Robert Morgan’s helpful work on the subject):

- **Ponder** it — Think deeply about what God is saying. Don’t just read the Word — let the Word read you. One of the best ways to do this is to write down your reflections. As John Piper has said, there are “eyes in your pencil.” Writing helps us see what we otherwise might miss. It turns reading into discovery.

- **Personalize** it —Rephrase the verse in the first person, especially when the meaning allows. Preach it to yourself. In the wilderness, declare with David: “The Lord is **my** Shepherd; **I** shall not want. He makes **me** lie down in green pastures...”
- **Pray** it — Turn the Scripture into prayer or pray in response to the word.

These three practices — pondering, personalizing, and praying the Word — turn Bible reading from a duty into a life-giving encounter with God. They open our hearts to the Shepherd’s voice so He can meet us at the table.

Think about the contrast in Psalm 1. There we see a tragic progression: the blessed man does *not* **walk** in the counsel of the wicked, nor **stand** in the way of sinners, nor **sits** in the seat of scoffers. That sitting represents a settled posture of compromise—lingering in the wrong company until it shapes your life.

But the same word “sit” becomes a blessing when it is turned toward God. The one who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night is like a tree planted by streams of water (Psalm 1). As Jesus also teaches in John 15, when we abide in Him we bear much fruit; when we try to do life on our own, we wither.

In Revelation 3:20, Jesus stands at the door and knocks. He says, “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” In the ancient world, sharing a meal meant deep friendship and communion. Jesus is saying, “I want to sit with you. I want to give you daily, life-giving intimacy.”

We may never consciously say, “Lord, stay out,” but in practice our lives often hang a spiritual “Do Not Disturb” sign. The door is shut by endless screens, by worries that consume our thoughts, by good things — even ministry — that crowd out the best thing. We’re too distracted, too tired, or too self-sufficient to open the door and sit with the One who knows us best and loves us most.

The table is set. The Host is knocking. Will we hear His voice and open the door each morning?

So when the Shepherd says, “You prepare a table before me,” He is calling us to sit. To stay. To abide. To choose the long obedience of daily walking with Him. This is how we are renewed in the wilderness. This is how we press in instead of quitting. This is how we discover the Fourth Man in the fire and experience the overflowing cup.

Let me shift gears for a moment because **this call to “sit” has powerful implications for our marriages.** Elizabeth and I have been married for 38 years now, and we still delight in one another. But we have to be intentional. Research has shown that the average married couple spends only about **35 minutes per week** in conversation — and much of that is about schedules and errands.

Often on date nights with my bride, I look around the restaurant and see couples sitting physically at the same table but with their faces buried in their phones. They’re together, but they’re not *sitting* at the table with each other. No eye contact. No real conversation. No lingering in one another’s presence. That is the negative kind of sitting Psalm 1 warns about—settling into distraction instead of relationship.

But when we choose to put the phones away, look into each other’s eyes, and truly sit at the table together—talking, listening, laughing, praying—we experience the Shepherd’s provision even in the ordinary wilderness of daily life.

Marriage thrives on this kind of long obedience in the same direction: choosing presence over distraction, day after day, and year after year. As Adrian Rogers put it, “The great miracle is not love at first sight... but love after a long, long look.”

The table is prepared before you, husbands and wives. Will you sit down together?

When couples tell me that sitting at the table together now feels awkward, it usually signals a slow drift. Life, busyness, screens, and

especially unresolved offenses build walls brick by brick. They lose the habit of being known and safe with one another. This is more than a scheduling problem—it reveals a drift from the very purpose of marriage, namely the oneness that reflects the eternal love within the Trinity (Ephesians 5:31-32). Marriage is meant to be a living picture of Christ and His church.

The good news is that intimacy can be restored. Revelation 2:1-7 gives us the pathway the church at Ephesus needed, which applies first to our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationship with others. John counsels: **Remember** the love you once had, **repent** of what has come between you, and **do the first works**—return to the simple practices of pursuit, conversation, prayer, and presence that once drew you close.

Even when it feels awkward at first, keep showing up at the table. Love with actions and the feelings will follow. Jesus meets us there. He is able to rekindle love, trust, and delight in our marriages as we draw near.

Whether we are in a dry spell in marriage or a broader wilderness season of life, when we stay and sit at His table we discover the Fourth Man is still in the fire. His presence refines us, renews us, and gives peace that passes understanding.

Beloved, if you are in a challenging season right now, hear the encouragement of Scripture: God has not forsaken you. Jesus was forsaken so you would never be. Even when the circumstances don't change as quickly as we would like, He meets us right there at the table. He sustains us. He works all things for our good and His glory. Keep going! The table is spread. The Shepherd is right there with you.

Conclusion

Psalm 23 ends with confident hope: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The table in the wilderness is a foretaste of the eternal table. Jesus has prepared it through His death and resurrection. And He's inviting every one of us today: "Come. Sit. Dine with me. Don't quit."

If you have been faithful but tired, let Him refresh you with the oil of His Spirit and fill your cup with overflowing joy in the daily rhythm of communion with Him. Take your seat at the King's table and feast on Him.