

### **Part 3: The Guest and the Host**

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  
My whole life long.  
Psalm 23: 5-6

#### **Lesson 1: God is a generous giver**

There are three verbs present in the fifth verse of Psalm 23: preparing, anointing, and overflowing. God is an active host, giving while we are receiving.

Gibson asks us to reflect on what God is like to you: "Is he like the most generous of fathers, who lays the stocking on your bed or fills it over the fireplace while you sleep, so that you wake up to a wonderful world of generous bounty and to presents round the tree in a house crammed to overflowing with good things? Or is God like the head teacher with his rule book in hand and his watching eye ready to catch you at your next misdemeanor?" (p. 112).

In the spirit of the Christmas analogy, imagine if "Santa Claus" gave a child a lump of coal because they were a "bad kid". Healthy people wouldn't do that to a child. Some of us still wait to see if God will bless or curse us depending on how good we were this year. "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11-13)

The receiving that God provides is in every season and every place in our lives. In the greenest pastures and darkest valleys, by still and turbulent waters, at tables with friends and at tables with enemies, when we walk in right paths and when we wander off of them, God prepares and showers us with gifts that are copious and extravagant.

Unlike many other hosts in the Bible who rely on servants to provide the food, He directly prepares, serves, and sets things in order for us to benefit from. These gifts are overflowing; they are not the bare minimum to get by and survive. We get to enjoy God's gifts without fear of them running out.

The good shepherd not only feeds us, He anoints us. To anoint in Biblical times has several meanings in different contexts: to set apart for a divine purpose, to consecrate, authorize, commission, equip, give blessing and share hospitality. It was a common hospitable practice in this culture to anoint the head of honored guests as a gesture of respect and welcoming. God demonstrates this gesture of inclusivity, love and respect in front adversaries.

When people tell you that you are a black sheep, one that is inferior, weird, broken, unlovable, unlikable, not a welcome or worthy of belonging to the flock, Jesus wants to elevate you at His table. And He wants you to bring other people to the table to feel this same sense of belonging and abundance.

I appreciate Gibson's perspective on this verse regarding dealing with enemies. The imagery that is provided is that of a table, not a sword. A table is an opportunity for connecting with other people. He suggests that Psalm 23:5 is less about humiliation and spitefulness, and rather an invitation. Tables can be opportunities where relationships can be restored if others want them to be.

Notice that it does not ask us to anoint and posture ourselves in the presence of our enemies. We can be confident that God is there doing that on our behalf. Tearing down, seeking revenge and competing is unnecessary in a place of acceptance and abundance. Whether your enemy wants to be present at this table does not need to be a concern, because you are being anointed regardless of their actions. Judas sat at the last supper of Jesus, and also left early to betray Him.

#### Psalm 27

The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
Whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;  
Of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me  
To devour my flesh-  
My adversaries and my foes-  
They shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me  
My heart shall not fear;  
Though war rise up against me.  
Yet I will be confident.

One thing that I asked of the LORD.  
That I will seek after:

To live in the house of the LORD  
All the days of my life,  
To behold the beauty of the LORD,  
And to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter  
In the day of trouble;  
He will conceal me under the  
Cover of his tent;  
He will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up  
Above my enemies all around me,  
And I will offer in his tent  
Sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody  
To the LORD.

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,  
Be gracious to me and answer me!  
“Come”, my heart says,  
“Seek his face!”  
Your face LORD, do I seek.  
Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant  
away in anger,  
You who have been my help.  
Do not cast me off, do not  
Forsake me,  
O God of my salvation!  
If my father and mother forsake me,  
The LORD will take me up.

Teach me your way, O LORD,  
And lead me on a level path  
Because of my enemies.  
Do not give me up to the will  
Of my adversaries,  
For false witnesses have  
Risen against me,  
And they are breathing  
Out violence.

I believe that I shall see the  
Goodness of the LORD  
In the land of the living.  
Wait for the LORD;  
Be strong, and let your  
Heart take courage;  
Wait for the LORD!

## **Lesson 2: God pursues us throughout our life**

David, the writer of Psalm 23 and 27, did not have an easy life. David had to live as a fugitive for years due to threats from King Saul, evading his armies and being separated from his family. There were significant strains with his children who violated and murdered each other. King David is not an exemplary human being; he used his power to assault Bathsheba and kill her husband Uriah. Despite repentance, he faced significant consequences of his actions for multiple generations. And yet he still produced Psalm 23, where he proclaims that goodness and mercy shall follow him all the days of his life.

God extends goodness and mercy to King David, and to us. Because God is good and merciful, He follows us all the days of our lives. We can choose to not follow the path the shepherd is going, leading us into potential dark valleys of our own choices, yet He is always there pursuing us. Psalm 145:9 states that “The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.”

Sometimes it can be hard to imagine goodness and mercy being present in our lives or in the lives of others going through traumatic experiences. Sometimes trauma is unfair and doesn't seem to have a reason.

In graduate school I read a book called “Treating Trauma in Christian Counseling”. This discussed some of the worst abuse I've ever heard in my life, so incredibly disturbing that you had to wonder if some of the types of abuse they addressed were conspiracy. The studies of real people they counseled kept me up for weeks and still disturbs me today.

At the beginning of the book, they used an analogy referencing Mount St. Helens. Some of you may have been around when Mount St. Helens erupted in 1980. My family was living in the Yakima region and described their experience of the sky turning black and ash falling from the sky. 520 million tons of ash covered the state, 57 people lost their lives, 150 square miles of forest were leveled, approximately “7,000 big game animals and 12 million juvenile salmon were lost” and damages cost around \$1 billion (Casey, 2015).

I don't have this book with me any longer, but I remember it talking about the growth that occurred in the area after the eruption. The authors claimed that some areas grew back stronger than before, and some birds returned to the area that had not been seen for a while

prior to the eruption. They used this as an example of post-traumatic growth that can happen even after significant devastation.

When I did my own research into Mount St. Helens, I could not find this bird they were referencing. And it's important to note that much of the land is still recovering. A local ecologist Charlie Crisafulli states, "In some places, it doesn't even make sense to talk about recovery. We are talking about new landforms and there is no possibility of returning to precovery." Yet, new growth occurred, with some areas being richer than prior to the eruption. Some areas were protected due to ice. "Biological legacies", which are the living beings that survive environmental disturbances, were present within the first year, such as prairie lupine, alder shrubs, pearly everlasting, alder trees, American robins, savannah sparrows, horned larks, gophers, deer mice, and others. Spirit Lake may not be "better", but scientists say it is more "productive" with bigger fish and more insects."...overall, Crisafulli and others would argue the areas hit by the blast are doing just fine - more diverse and species-rich than the old growth forest that dominated for so long and healthy by most standards. Invasive species, a fear early on, have not proven to be a problem" (Casey, 2015).

New life that has developed from the eruption does not make up for the devastation, just like lessons learned after trauma do not make trauma "worth it". Trauma is not goodness and mercy, but goodness and mercy is present in spite of the trauma.

Devastation in our lives does not mean that God is not there. Trauma does not mean a complete absence of any goodness in our lives.

As I am wrapping up my time here in Spokane, where I have lived for fourteen years, it has felt like a long, dark valley with occasional moments of reprieve. Many of the reasons I moved here in the first place feel contaminated by ash. I've tried to clean up the mess but the ashes either keep coming or new life is not growing at the pace I am needing.

Despite the grief and pain, there are several areas of my life that have grown better than before I moved here. Through EWU and Whitworth, I have gotten to be a therapist. I believe I have been able to make a difference in people's lives. I became a mother. I deconstructed and then reconstructed my faith, becoming a Quaker; this community with its guidance, love and support will follow me forever. And while I have learned more lessons than I have wanted to learn, I *have* learned them, and have grown and matured quite a bit since I was nineteen. While everyone experiences trauma differently, I rest in this verse: Romans 8:28 says "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

Even in green pastures and the darkest valley, goodness and mercy were there. God was there *all* the days, and will continue to be there wherever I go. The pain isn't any less, but I don't have to experience it alone. My life is not desolate. I have experienced growth, and I am hopeful.

### **Lesson 3: Our true home is where God resides**

The last verse of Psalm 23 differs slightly depending on the translation you are reading. The King James, New King James, NIV and other translations reference dwelling in God's house forever. Some versions, such as the CEB and NRSV discuss dwelling in God's house "my whole life" or "as long as I live".

Opinions on the afterlife are diverse between Quakers, as well as Christians as a whole. Some believe there is no Heaven, some do, some believe that we go to sleep after we die and wake up in a new place after the second coming of Christ. I'm not qualified to have an in-depth theological discussion on the matter, and while I believe in eternal life after death, I find some comfort in a Quaker view that what is most important is to focus on how to live and dwell with God in the present.

Whether we fall asleep or transcend into heavenly places after death, I don't believe it is God's plan for us to white-knuckle through life, counting down the days where we can finally leave this earth and go to a better place.

God created us to dwell in Them, and we can experience that in the here and now if we take the time to listen and be present. On this journey we can dwell in God's house, praying the Lord's Prayer that His Kingdom come, and His will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven (Matthew 6:10). God is continuously pursuing us, giving Himself as goodness and mercy that we can lean into, access and be present with at any time. How amazing is it that God is there with you and pursuing you wherever you are, in any geographical location such as the Pacific Northwest, New England, or anywhere else. He is there in any spiritually desolate or thriving place, waiting for us to rest in Him.

May we dwell in the house of the Lord today, tomorrow, and forever, and express gratitude for green pastures, still waters, God's rod and staff, perfume and wine, and the opportunity to dwell with the Creator of the universe who is goodness and mercy.

References:

*The Lord of Psalm 23: Jesus Our Shepherd, Companion, and Host* by David Gibson (2023)

[Mount St. Helens: 35 years after eruption, nature returns - CBS News](#)