

"IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD"

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." Psalm 23:5-6.

In previous messages I have spoken of the shepherd scene in the twenty-third Psalm. In the shepherd scene we have three pictures--the Shepherd, the sheep, and the pasture. The Lord is the Shepherd; we are the sheep; and the scene of action is the pasture.

Passing from that first scene, we go to a higher one. It is no longer a pasture scene, but a table scene. In this new scene we see a banqueting table prepared by the Lord for us in security where enemies cannot trouble us. The Shepherd becomes the Host; the sheep become the guests; and the pasture becomes the banqueting table. It is good to be the sheep of His green pasture, but it is better to be a guest at His bountiful table.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." David had many enemies. When Saul hunted him like a partridge in the mountains, God prepared a table for him. On one occasion that table was the table of shewbread from which he ate. In the cave of Adullam God spread a table for him and his four hundred faithful followers. God always provided for him and his followers a table.

In the wilderness God furnished a table for His people. Elijah had enemies. One of them was Jezebel, and when he fled in fear from his enemy and slept the sleep of exhaustion under the juniper tree, when he awoke an angel had brought a baked cake and a cruse of water that he might eat and drink.

Even so today the Lord gives us our daily bread. All of our food is the gift of God. We never cease to wonder at the miracle of the food we eat. Bread is from heaven. Men may build skyscrapers, but no man can build one single grain of wheat. But one grain of wheat will not make bread. It must be planted in the soil. Men cannot make soil. They can modify it, but not make it. But a perfect seed in perfect soil is not sufficient. There must be moisture, heat and light. God must send these. All vegetation is of God. God spreads our table and does it with abundance.

So God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies--and the Christian has enemies. If not, he is not like his Saviour Who said, "If the world hate Me, it will hate you also." If we are without enemies, we might fear that we are the enemies of God. Friendship with the world is enmity with God.

The Bible abounds with figures of struggle and strife. Christians struggle, and wrestle, and battle, and fight. David not only had such enemies as Saul and Shimei; he had enemies within. There were raging, tearing lusts in David's soul. All of us know about his terrible failure, and yet when he came to God with his great cry of confession and repentance, God cleansed him and washed him whiter than snow. As an old man he looked back over his experiences and saw that even in the midst of failure God prepared for him a table of grace and mercy in the presence of his enemies. We, too, know the impulses, desires and appetites of the flesh. The flesh lusteth against the Spirit. The tug of the flesh is tremendous. If we yield to it, it degrades and defiles our lives.

Another enemy is the world with all of its pomp, parade, pageantry, pleasure and power. The world is at enmity against God. The attractions and enticements of the world, when yielded to, are fatal to the higher Christian life.

But we have other enemies--Satan and all of his cohorts. Beyond any question there is against Christians a great organized government of wicked spirits under the leadership of that master mind, that resistless force, that matchless being called Satan.

These foes did not vanish when we were saved. The flesh will war against us as long as we are in the flesh; the world will war against us as long as we are in the world; the hosts of Satan will war against us as long as they are free; yet, we have the promise of strength and support so that we need have no fear.

John Bunyan pictured Christian on the way to the Porter's Lodge. Christian saw two lions on the road. He was terrified with the sight, and half-minded to turn back, but when he plucked up courage and pressed forward. He kept on the straight way, and he found that the lions could not reach him. They could roar at him, but they could not do him any harm for they were chained. The death of Christ has chained our enemies. If we walk the straight path, they cannot do us any harm. God supplies us with strength to rise above our temptations. He imparts sufficient grace to us for us to keep the world, the flesh and the devil beneath our feet.

The enemies of our Lord and Saviour are many. They are increasing. The place of a real Christian is to prove God's bountiful provision to feed us and clothe us and take care of us right before the eyes of those who are the enemies of our Saviour and His followers.

"Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." The anointed head and the overflowing cup are generally used for our anointing with the Spirit and our fulness of blessing and joy. Both of these things are true of believers. Indeed, both oil and water are typical of the Holy Spirit and suggest a fulness in spiritual experience. The anointed head speaks of separation unto God: the dedication of the believer to Him and the consecration by the Lord to service. There is a vital connection between the anointed head and the overflowing cup, for the overflowing cup is the result of the anointing. This overflow is not waste. It speaks of a life of abounding satisfaction and of blessing to others. It is for the service of others. It means a life of joyful testimony.

The anointed head means freshness and fulness, while the overflowing cup means to be blessed and to be made a blessing. Anointing does produce freshness and joy. Our Lord was a Man of Sorrows, yet He was anointed with the oil of gladness above His fellows. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and with power. Wherever He went He brought blessing. To Abraham God said, "I will bless thee and make thee a blessing." That is the overflowing cup.

Surely the anointed head and the overflowing cup have reference to God's care for His own. "He careth for you." How does He care? He cares for you as a father cares for his child--providingly. Not one thing that is good for us, who are God's children, is withheld. He cares for you as a mother cares for her offspring--affectionately. "Yet will I not forget thee." Indeed, He has a greater affection for us than any earthly parent ever could have. He cares for you as a friend cares for a friend--faithfully. Remember, there is a Friend that sticketh closer than a brother. He cares for you as a gardener cares for a garden--attentively. He cares for you as an eyelid cares for the eye--instantly. How quickly the eyelid is lowered when the eye is endangered, and remember that God calls His people the apple of His eye. He cares for you as a keeper cares for his charge--watchfully. "The Lord is thy Keeper....the Lord shall preserve thee from all evil." Psalm 121:4-8.

This care of God extends to the minute details of life: He holds our hands; He keeps our feet; He numbers our steps; He bottles our tears; He books our thoughts; He knows our names; He hears our cries; He clothes our backs; He furnishes our food. We are dependent upon Him for everything we eat. Food comes from God's hand to our mouths.

This care is constant. "He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." The same care is ours. Night and day He watches over us. This care is perpetual. Our Lord declared He would be with us unto the end of the age. He promised, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." This care is bountiful, for it covers all our needs. He does not

mean that you shall never be in need, but that He will meet the need when the right time comes. Our trouble is that we refuse to trust in God unless we can see the loaves piled up even before we are hungry. It is easier to trust in the material supply than in the God of all supply.

Annie Johnson Flint became an orphan at the age of six. She was adopted by a man and his wife in Vermont. She had a talent for music. She planned, and undoubtedly had before her, a wonderful musical career, but then she became a victim of arthritis so that when she was just a young girl of twenty-five years she was confined to an invalid's chair when she was not on a bed of pain. Yet in her suffering she rejoiced in the sufficiency of God's grace. Among her many beautiful poems which exalt the Lord and give praise to Him there is the following:

"He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials He multiplies peace.

"When we have exhausted our store of endurance
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

"His love has no limit; His grace has no measure;
His power no boundary know unto men:
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth and giveth and giveth again."

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

The language of this Psalm is that of assurance. It begins with "I shall not want"; in its heart is, "I shall fear no evil"; and it closes with "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." It begins with an absolute negative, "I shall not want"; it closes with an absolute certainty, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

Goodness and mercy are attributes of God. There is something fascinating in the thought of goodness and mercy. God expresses His goodness in His acts of mercy. Goodness is the root of which mercy is the fruit. Goodness is the cause of which mercy is the effect. The one flows out of the other. The Lord's goodness to His people has always been expressed in His wonderful acts of mercy.

Goodness meets all needs; mercy forgives all faults. Goodness cares for the temporal; mercy cares for the spiritual. Goodness has to do with the bounty of God; mercy has to do with the love of God. Goodness leads to repentance—"The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance," Romans 2:4; mercy leads to regeneration—"According to His mercy He saved us by the washing of regeneration" Titus 3:5. Goodness convicts us of sin and makes us see ourselves as culprits; mercy offers us reconciliation and pardon. Contemplation of the goodness of the father caused the prodigal son to turn back home; but mercy ran to meet the son, to fall on his neck and kiss him, and provide a ring, a robe and the fatted calf.

"Goodness and mercy shall follow me." Goodness and mercy are two servants of the Lord. When the Lord saved me, He said to those two servants, Goodness and Mercy, "Get on his trail. Never let him out of your sight. Pursue him to glory." Goodness and Mercy are two servants of the Lord who watch over every child of God. The word "follow" means to hunt. That means that a saved person is a "hunted" one. He is hunted by Goodness and Mercy that they might load all their benefits upon him. Goodness and Mercy pursue him as if determined never to let him go. What a contrast there is with a wicked man who is

pursued by judgment and hunted by calamity!

Confidence is expressed by the use of the word "surely." There is no guess here, no perhaps. It is not probably, or possibly, or maybe, but surely. How could David be so sure? Because he had tested God in many of the hard experiences of life and God had never failed. No matter what the emergency might be, God was dependable and equal to it. Our God is always trustworthy. We sometimes fail, but He never fails. David knew that what God had been He would continue to be. The revelation of God in the past formed the basis of his confidence in God for the future. Yes, what God has been He will be. Remembering His goodness and mercy in the past, we may trust Him fully and completely for all the days that are yet to be.

Dr. Davidson and other great Hebrew scholars contend that the correct translation of the Hebrew word for "surely" should be "only." This translation would make it read, "Only goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." What a remarkable statement that is! No matter what comes to a child of God it is for his good. We do not always understand this or we would not murmur and complain so much. "Only goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" means that "all things are working together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose." This ought to fill our hearts with joy even in the midst of the hardest trials and experiences.

"All the days of my life." The care of God never ceases, the vigilance of God never relaxes, the love of God never changes. "All the days" includes dark days and light days, blue days and bright days, hard days and easy days, stormy days and peaceful days, work days and vacation days, busy days and rest days, winter days and summer days, all days and every moment until the end of the pilgrimage. Goodness and Mercy never take a vacation. You may take a vacation, but Goodness and Mercy will even then pursue you.

"And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." What an and! This is probably the most celebrated and in the rhetoric of redemption. Someone may say, "But 'all the days of my life' brings me to the end." No, not the end--the beginning! The blessed conclusion reaches beyond this life into the future. It has to do with eternity.

"I" in the house of the Lord for ever! It is good to be the sheep of the Lord's pasture. But, it is better to be the guests around His table. And, it will be best of all to be the children in His home. In the pasture, we have providence. At the table, we have friendship. In the home, we have kinship. As sheep in His pasture, He satisfies our hunger. As a guest at His table, He satisfies our fellowship. As a child in His home, He satisfies our soul.

"I will dwell." To dwell means to abide, to remain, to continue. Here we have no abiding place. How many times we move! And in how many different houses we live! Here a home becomes a broken thing with some of its dearest members missing, and if the Lord tarries some day you will be missing. The building will be there, with the same rugs on the floors, the same pictures on the walls, the chair in which you sat, the table at which you ate, the bed in which you slept, but you will not be there.

But, how much greater the joy that shall be ours when some day the Lord shall speak to our lonely hearts and bid us enter into the fellowship of the saints and the Saviour in heaven! We shall not want anything there.