

Psalm 23:5 - A table among enemies

This verse reminds us of the victory of God, which means that His people are ultimately safe from any opposition, and the recipients of incredible blessings from Him. And it ultimately points us to the grace of God, who has changed His people from being enemies to being His children.

David gives us a simple picture: there's a crowd of enemies, and he is in the midst of them but he's perfectly safe because God is with him. In fact, he's more than safe, God is laying out a feast for him, vindicating and honouring David, even as his enemies look on, angry and frustrated but unable to do anything about it.

Enemies

Since sin entered the world, and we separated ourselves from God, people have been divided against one another. Labelling someone an enemy might seem a bit extreme for most of us, most of the time, but we all experience opposition, and sometimes it is intended to hurt us in some way.

God's people are brought into a great conflict when we associate ourselves with Jesus (John 15:18-20, 2 Timothy 3:12, 1 Peter 4:12). We may experience this at a cultural level (things happening in the world around us that are wrong, or that are directly aimed at us as followers of Jesus), and at a personal level (Matthew 10:34-36). Ultimately, it's a spiritual conflict (Ephesians 6:11-12, Revelation 12).

Jesus assures us that He will be with His people, and victorious over those who oppose Him. Paul pictures this in Ephesians 3:10, in a verse that sounds a lot like Psalm 23:5.

A table

Ancient Near Eastern covenants involved a stronger party offering protection and provision to a weaker party, in exchange for their allegiance and support. (It's one of the main ways God explains His relationship to His people in the Old Testament – the word is used over 250 times.) When a covenant like this was made, it would typically be ratified and celebrated with a meal hosted by the stronger party, and that's what David is describing here.

God does this to show His greatness, His superiority over all other powers: Israel wasn't a mighty nation but they had a mighty God. But God also acts this way because He simply loves being with His people. The ultimate expression of this is the meal Jesus gave us to remember Him by (Luke 22:19-20).

Oil

Olive oil was used an ointment to make one's face shine, indicating health and happiness (Psalm 45:7, 104:15, Matthew 6:17). So a host could make their guest feel welcome when they arrived by giving them some to put on (Luke 7:46).

More significantly, anointing oil was put on various objects and people, marking them as for God's exclusive use – and this became associated with the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Samuel 16:13). Jesus, the ultimate anointed one (Luke 4:18-19), promises the gift of His Holy Spirit for all His people, so that they would be empowered to do what He did (Acts 1:8).

Cup

It's said that in some cultures there was a practice of a host putting a cup in their guest's hand, and then elaborately pouring in so much wine that it overflowed. The host was saying that, whilst they were in this house, their guest would lack for nothing, and would even have an abundance (see Psalm 23:1).

This may mean material blessing but Jesus redirected our attention from present riches to future ones (Matthew 6:19-20). The poorest Christian has more than all the world's billionaires combined, because they have Christ, and eternity with Him in a limitlessly good new creation.

Where are we in this picture?

If we've been a Christian for a long time, we may be so assured of our place with God in the image used here, rather than among enemies, that we forget that we once were God's enemies. Paul makes this really clear in (Ephesians 2:1-7, and 12-19).

We didn't have a seat at this table, we were God's enemies in what we did and said and thought. And yet God Himself brought us in to be with Him, welcoming us, sitting us down for an abundant feast, now and forever. He has paid for the whole thing by the body and blood of His Son on the cross!

This is why Jesus tells us to love our enemies, because that's what He does.

Questions for group discussion

- How did Sunday's sermon increase your affection for God and awareness of His goodness?
- What is helpful about the image found here of God and His people surrounded by enemies? What could be unhelpful?
(Note: this wasn't a message about responding to enemies, but here's a summary of the biblical position on this: "Rather than calling us to passivity, Christ calls us to make a resolute commitment to a) do no harm to anyone in thought, word or deed; b) forgive those who may have wronged us, c) initiate peace-building measures wherever

required; d) be willing to suffer shame, pain and persecution for the sake of truth and righteousness, and e) love one and all without discrimination.” Joshua Kalapati, *South Asia Bible Commentary*)

- David uses three images to speak of God’s loving care: a table, anointing oil, and an overflowing cup. Which of these are you particularly aware of; or aware of your need of? You could spend some time as a group praying for each other to receive what God has promised, especially His Holy Spirit.
- The Bible is emphatic that God takes pleasure in being with His people. What examples in the Old and New Testaments can you think of which show this, and how aware of this truth are you in your own relationship with God?
- God reconciled us to Himself and now calls us to be involved in this ministry of reconciliation for others. How could you tell someone there’s a seat at this table for them? How might the Holy Spirit empower you to do this? How will you share God’s riches with others?
- It would be great for you as a group to take communion together. You could read some of the verses referenced here, or others such as 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.