

You anoint my head with oil

Well as many of you know, we are spending this summer together in Psalm 23 – this psalm that is known and loved by many, and for good reason.

As I said 7 weeks ago, in our introduction to this summer study, one of the reasons I love this psalm and have come back to it again and again – every summer of my adult life – is that no matter what’s going on in my life, I always find myself addressed in this psalm. Named. Located.

And I would dare to say that I’m not alone in this. That you – every one of us – are named and located in this psalm.

Which means God wants to meet us – **you** here – in this psalm.

Wherever we find ourselves.

In a place of need... or in bounty.

In a moment of decision... and in the wake of decision...

In need of renewal... or thankful for renewal.

In a dark valley... or face to face with enemies.

In the mystery of God’s grace, this is a psalm that God has used and continues to use to find me and lead me to Himself.

And, in same way, as we’ve walked slowly through this psalm, many of you have shared how God has used this psalm to find you and lead you to Himself – in needed ways.

And not just through our Sunday teachings, but in personal moments of coming back to this psalm.

If God’s met you in this psalm this summer, I hope you won’t keep it to yourself – but will share with me or with others.

But we’re not done yet – we still have two more Sundays with this psalm. And so, as we come again to another part of this psalm – specifically, the latter part of verse 5 (“*you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows*”) let’s read and hear the psalm as a whole together.

Read it with me – Psalm 23 – a Psalm of David

*The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness **for His name’s sake.***

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
For You are with me;
Your rod and your staff,
They comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup overflows.*

*Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Let’s pray.

Now one thing we’ve named here and there in this study is the **uniqueness** of this psalm – in that it’s not as much a prayer that teaches us how to pray – not in the traditional sense of a prayer with **petitions**.

There are no petitions in this prayer.

Nor is this psalm particularly **instructional** – in the sense of commanding or directing us. There are no commands or instructions in this psalm – at least not explicitly.

Which is hard for some of us who are wired to always come to scripture looking for direction or instruction. For **God’s assignment** for us for today... For a divine “to-do”...

And I’m sure we’re **all** like this at times. We find ourselves in a place where we just want to know **what God wants US to do**.

Which is **a good thing** to want. Let it be said. It is good and right to want **to know what God wants** of us and for us.

But Psalm 23 offers of something else – something that **we need** – maybe even **more** than direction and instruction.

And this something else is the grace of **revelation**.

Psalm 23 is a sustained revelation **of God** – of what **God** is up to in us... in our lives... today and everyday...

It’s not as much about what God wants **US** to do, as it is a glimpse into what **God Himself** is doing – all the time – in grace.

- *He is seeking to provide for us – and to lead us to trust Him.*
- *He is seeking to restore and renew us – to address the deep reasons for our unrest – that keep us from lying down in green pastures...*
- *He is seeking to guide us in paths of righteousness.*

- *And to comfort us in the dark valley – with his rod and staff – purging and protecting us, correcting and redirecting us.*

All that to say, Psalm 23 is not as much instruction as it is **revelation**.

A revelation of **what we can trust God** – our Good Shepherd – **to be up to** in our lives – all the time – wherever we find ourselves.

Which is a gift, isn't it? Because, as this psalm acknowledges, our days and lives are full of weighty decisions, exhausting demands, complicated relationships, dark valleys and lurking evil.

And in each of these moments and experiences, our call and need is to **trust** the grace of a God we cannot see.

Which is hard. Incredibly hard at times.

And yet, in the grace of God, this psalm doesn't just call us to **trust God** in every season, but, in a way that we need – this psalm ***pulls back the curtain*** – and gives a glimpse of **what our unseen God is doing** in the dark... in the valley and in times of decision, in our brokenness and wayward days.

Which is what helps us to trust – not just knowing the character of our God, but knowing something of His Ways, His desires and pursuits...

And in the process, it gives us eyes to see – to recognize – the presence and work of our unseen God... our Good Shepherd.

But as Glen explained last Sunday, **the metaphor shifts in verse 5.**

“You prepare a table before me in presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

Although we often think of Psalm 23 as ***the Shepherd’s Psalm*** – and us God’s sheep – in verse 5, David, the psalmist, exchanges the image of sheep for that of **fugitive**.

And there’s something necessary about this.

Because this is sometimes, maybe often, ***where we find ourselves***.

Not as much in need of provision, or guidance, or comfort – but in need of repentance and rescue and restoration.

In truth, yet again, it is a gift that the Psalm makes this shift – because for all the ways we are like sheep – short-sighted, easily led astray, defenceless against attack, and utterly dependent on the wise care and leadership of a good shepherd – ***we are also, at times, the outlaw. The one who chooses to be lost, and who leads others astray.***

At times, we are ***the dangerous ones***.

As verse 5 implies, the danger is not always just ***nearby*** – threatening from outside.

It is, at times, ***in us***.

Or more precisely, it is, at times, ***US***.

We are not just sheep who need to know and trust our Shepherd, we are, at times, ***the dangerous ones. Fugitives*** who’ve sinned against God,

others and ourselves – in thought, word and deed (as the ancient confessions read).

Sometimes in ways ***we never imagined.***

But often in ways ***so familiar.***

We’ve betrayed a loved one. Perpetuated a lie that benefited us and diminished another. We’ve denied others to indulge ourselves. We’ve used people and worshipped things. We’ve trivialized the glorious and glorified the trivial. We’ve rejected God’s will for our lives, called God’s truth a lie and defined what is good for ourselves. We’ve run after false comforts and abandoned our deepest commitments. We’ve traded in the grace of life with God our Father for the fleeting pleasures of the far country, or the false-security of religious rule-keeping.

At times, we have been and ***are*** the dangerous ones.

Fugitives who’ve sinned against God, others and ourselves – in thought, word and deed – ***or all three and more...***

If I’m honest, though I know this of myself – more than I wish – I don’t know if I’ve ever really understood this part of the psalm – understood the meaning and impact of this metaphor shift in verses 5 and 6.

But something Eugene Peterson once wrote has opened this up for me – and drawn me to where others also highlight this.

Glen quoted it last week, but it’s worth coming back to again.

Peterson explains,

"In the ancient desert culture, if a man committed a serious crime, usually murder, and was in danger of his life, he fled to the uninhabited desert. The law of the desert was inexorable against that man. It was the law of blood revenge that would seek him out unremittingly. A murderer would be hunted down until found out. And if he was not discovered, the threat would be transferred to his son and wreaked on *him*. The desert was the home of the fugitive, but it was a horrible home, a home of fear, danger, and certain death."

I suspect we all know something of this experience – the fear, danger and death-dealing consequences that our sin brings.

And with this comes a sense of despair... and scarcity.

Psalm 23:1 says, "*The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*"

But in the wilderness of our sin, we find ourselves **bereft, empty** – and convinced that we do not have what we need.

In the wilderness of sin, we feel deeply the ache of **not having enough** – and maybe even *more so*, of **not being enough**.

Which only perpetuates our sojourn in the wilderness of sin.

It is amazing how sin – our desperate attempts to **gain** what it not rightfully ours, or to **attain** what is to be ours but through the wrong means – either way, it is amazing how, for all that our sin gets us, it also has a way of robbing us. Leaving us **all the more bereft**. And not just of what should be in our hands, but in our souls...

Peterson continues,

"But there was one huge exception to the unfriendliness of the desert for this man cursed by a past of sin and hunted down by the law of blood revenge, and that was **the custom of open hospitality**... **Every wanderer in the desert, whatever his character or his past, was received into a shepherd's tent as a 'guest of God'**

(the Arabic term), furnished with food, and kept inviolate [free from harm]. **The shepherd host took responsibility for his safety.**

This custom still prevails today in Bedouin cultures." (102)

It's amazing. But even better than that – **this is God's custom!**

According to Psalm 23:5, this is how our God treats us when we find ourselves in the wilderness of sin...

Or more accurately, when **God finds us** in the wilderness of sin.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

The image is startling and powerful.

Of a fugitive – us – who've committed a serious crime – against God, others and ourselves – in thought, word and deed – and into the wilderness we've fled... Running for our lives... Afraid of being found. Just wanting to hide.

But here in the desert, we are **found** by someone who invites us in – fully aware that our avengers are on our heels – and instead of judgment, our Host prepares a table – a meal – a feast – for us...

During which – our avengers appear – but they are held at bay by our Host - while we are **fed a meal we don't deserve; anointed with oil** – declaring us an honored guest; and **our cup filled to overflowing** – an intentional gesture meant to affirm to us that **while in this tent** and **with this host**, we will have all we need.

What an incredible scene! What an incredible picture of grace!

But what about justice and repentance?

Right? I don't if your mind and heart run there – but mine does.

What of justice and repentance and restoration?

Especially if the God who is our Refuge in the wilderness of sin is the same God who is our Shepherd – namely, YAHWEH – the God of Exodus.

Right? That's what verse 1 and 6 of this Psalm tell us. The LORD who is our Shepherd and the LORD who is our Refuge is none other than

YAHWEH – the God revealed in the Exodus!

Clearly, this is a God of Justice. A God who will not let injustice go unpunished. A God who hears the cry of the suffering and comes in grace to rescue them.

How can this God simply welcome us into His tent and lavish us with a feast in the presence of our enemies?

Is this the whole story of God's grace?

Well no – not according to this psalm (or the rest of scripture) – and this is where we need to understand and celebrate the incredible meaning and implications of this simple phrase in the middle of this verse – “**You anoint my head with oil.**”

In the metaphor of the Psalm, it clearly speaks of the gracious hospitality of God – our Host in the wilderness of sin.

But anointing with oil means far more than just that.

And King David – the writer of this psalm – **knew** this well.

In truth, later in life, when David would have composed this psalm, David probably thought of his own life in **two halves** – two halves divided by a **day** he would never forget. **The day the prophet Samuel came to anoint his head with oil.**

1 Samuel 16 tells the story. King Saul – originally chosen by God – has turned from God’s ways – and so God will not allow him to continue as Israel’s king.

And so, God says to Samuel (**1 Samuel 16:1**),

“How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.”

And he goes. And when the time comes, Jesse presents each of his sons to Samuel – from the oldest to the youngest – but the LORD tells Samuel it is not any of these.

So Samuel asks if Jesse has any other sons. And he does – David, the runt – whom he didn’t even consider worthy of inviting along. David is sent for.

“Then the LORD said, ‘Rise and anoint him; this is the one.’

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David.”

Let me read that again.

*So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and **from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David.***

Notice the meaning of the oil and the anointing – it was just **a sign** – a sign of something so much greater – of **God’s Spirit** – **the Empowering Presence of God Himself** – coming upon David with power - *from that day on...*

Not **random power**. Not flashing ‘**Hey, I can do miracles**’ power.

*But power **to do what God commands**.*

*Power **to walk in God’s ways**.*

*Power **to do what it is that God had called him to do**.*

And this anointing forever changed the course of David’s life – as a declaration of God’s sovereign grace, empowering David to follow after God’s ways.

Not that David would always live in this power.

As David’s story attests, God’s anointing is not **a magic wand** that forever makes us holy. Rather, it is the promise of God’s power for those who seek to live with God as their Shepherd and their Refuge.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

In the grace of God, when God find us in the wilderness of our sin – when God finds us in our fugitive wanderings – God doesn’t just offer us the grace of refuge in his tent. ***He offers us Himself.***

It’s astounding. From the scarcity of our sin and where it leads us – God, in grace, offers us ***all we need*** – and not just to fill our cup, but to renew our hearts – to fill us with the very life and empowering grace of God Himself – by the Spirit.

Which leads us to repentance, empowers us to make amends, and sets us on a new path...

“You anoint my head with oil”... to cleanse and bless us, to give us a new calling and empower us for it.

This is what “*You anoint my head with oil*” meant to David.

And this is **what God offers to us today** – and everyday – in Jesus... to cleanse and bless us, to give us a new calling and empower us for it.

In truth, this is the gospel, ***isn’t it?*** A gospel we **all need**.

Because we’re not just sheep, are we?

We are, at times, **fugitives** – the dangerous one – in need of rescue, repentance and restoration.

And this is exactly what God offers us in the gospel.

A gospel that you and I are invited to embrace and receive again today.

The gospel of Jesus Christ.

Remind me what the title Christ means? It’s the same as the Hebrew word Messiah.

It means “**the Anointed One.**”

That’s right! Jesus is the Anointed One.

The One on whom the Spirit of God dwells – and the One who offers the Spirit to us...

This is the gospel!

In the grace of God, **Jesus** – the Anointed One – has perfectly lived for us – and died for us – that we – you and I – rebels and fugitives that we are – would find refuge in God’s tent, forgiveness of our sin, and be filled with the empowering presence of the Spirit – through Jesus.

Is this what you need today?

Then come to Christ today and live...

→ Invitation to the Lord’s Supper