

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows. (Psalms 23:5)**

What does a 'prepared table' bring to mind?

You probably did not imagine a picnic with a blanket on the ground or a hot dog and drink at a ball game. Whether a formal occasion or informal, a 'prepared table' is one that has been properly set for a planned meal.

To keep this passage in context, the writer is a shepherd, yet reflecting on himself as a sheep under the care of the Great Shepherd. So, how does a shepherd prepare a 'table' for his sheep?

The ancient shepherds would lead their flock to good pastureland. In late summer the pastureland might be in the high mountain elevations. This land was known as *tableland*, or in our culture, *mesas*. (Our English word 'mesa' is borrowed from the Spanish word for 'table'.)

Before leading his sheep to the tableland a shepherd would make a trip alone to survey the land. He determine where the sheep would graze and for how long. He would note water sources and plan grazing patterns accordingly.

He would not simply look over the land from a distance, but would walk through the tableland. He would search out poisonous plants and eliminate them. He would also take note of areas where predators would most likely hide. Then, just before leading his sheep to the tableland, he would return to clean leaves and brush from the water source to insure clean and accessible water.

Because of his careful planning and diligent preparation, his sheep would find safe pasture.

Our Shepherd has already gone before us and has prepared the way. Our enemy, Satan, is ever pre-

sent waiting for an opportunity when we are weak or wandering. Yet, as long as we remain close to the Shepherd, we will have comfort and bountiful blessings, in spite of the presence of our enemy.

During summertime sheep would often be pestered by flying insects. One particular kind of fly would attempt to lay eggs in the moist mucus around their nose. The hatched larvae could infest their nasal passages causing misery for the sheep. For relief sheep would beat their heads against trees or rocks, and rub them in the soil. Left untreated, the larvae could cause blindness in sheep.

The solution: The shepherd would mix a salve to place on the head of the sheep. Or, as the Psalmist writes: "You have anointed my head with oil."

Sheep were also treated with oil, even dipped in oil, for a disease called *scab*. It was caused by a microscopic parasite and was highly contagious. Once contracted it could devastate an entire flock.

How does our Great Shepherd "anoint our heads with oil"? It is likely by the Spirit of God. In baptism we are promised the 'gift of the Holy Spirit' in addition to our cleansing from sin. God's word was delivered through the Spirit. The Spirit also intercedes for us in our prayers. He undoubtedly assists us in ways unknown to us.

As long as we accept his "anointing" we will be free of the parasite of sin and evil. Yet, we are often like a sheep that twists its head refusing the oil. When we refuse the guidance and correction of God's word; when we refuse to submit to God's will; we have refused his Spirit.

We will find contentment at the feast God provides, but only if we submit completely to God and to His word allowing his Spirit to work in us.

Anything less is sure to grieve the Spirit.