

“Our Servant Shepherd Savior”

John 13:1-20 & Psalm 23

by Jason Van Bemmel

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him,³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God,⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?”⁷ Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.”⁸ Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”⁹ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.”¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

¹² When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. ¹⁸ I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’ ¹⁹ I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” – John 13:1-20

Introduction: Psalm 23 – The Shepherd and the Gracious Host

Psalm 23 is the most familiar and beloved of all psalms. It paints a beautiful picture of the believer's loving relationship with and complete dependence on the Lord. We all know Psalm 23 as The Shepherd's Psalm. David was a shepherd boy and he writes about the Lord being his shepherd, caring for all of his needs and leading him in safety through life.

Yet Psalm 23 also has another metaphorical image: The Lord as gracious host, the one who welcomes and serves. It's found in verse 5:

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;*

*you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

Some people imagine this as part of the shepherd imagery, but it's not. You don't prepare a table for sheep and you don't anoint the heads of sheep with oil. This is another, distinctive metaphor, showing the actions of a powerful, generous and gracious host. The Lord welcomes us, feeds us richly, even in the presence of enemies, and anoints us, blessing us abundantly and undeservedly.

In John's Gospel, Chapter 10 unfolds and applies "The Lord is my Shepherd" through Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Now, Chapter 13 shows Jesus as the good host, the gracious serving host who feeds and anoints His own, even in the presence of the enemy.

When we looked at Jesus' teaching on the Good Shepherd in John 10, I said that Psalm 23 was important background. When Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd," He meant that He does everything the Lord as our shepherd does in Psalm 23 – The Good Shepherd leads the sheep, feeds the sheep, protects the sheep and corrects the sheep. But also, Jesus then tells us the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. So, Jesus fills up in Himself the portrait of the Good Shepherd from Psalm 23 but adds even more to it.

Likewise here, Jesus fulfills what Psalm 23 says about the Lord as the gracious host: He spreads the table before His own and He anoints them. Yet he does even more. The meal He feeds them is ultimately a picture of how He feeds them with Himself. And the anointing He gives them is not oil on their heads but washing their feet, and in so doing He teaches them a powerful lesson about who He is. As He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, so He is the host who graciously – scandalously, even – takes the place of the lowest household slave to do the most humiliating task, of washing their feet.

A. A Scandalous Humiliation

The timing of Jesus' actions at this meal are heavy with significance: He has already announced the arrival of His hour of glory. He has spoken of His coming death on the cross – that He must fall into the earth and die like a grain of wheat, and He must be lifted up, so that by dying He might bring forth much fruit and by being lifted up, He might draw all men to Himself. He has given His last public teaching and has withdrawn from public ministry to teach His disciples privately in the short time He has remaining with them before the cross.

John's introduction of this section is full of drama and heavy with meaning –

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him,³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from

God and was going back to God,⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.

As Jesus faced the coming prospect of the cross in John 12, He cried out to His Father, “Father, glorify Your name!” John tells us “Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” (Jn. 12:28) In other words, God had been consistently glorified throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, and He would be glorified in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Here, John tells us, “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” In other words, He had been loving His own throughout His earthly ministry, and now He would love them to the end, to the fullness of the purpose for which He had come.

Everything Jesus did and said was shaped by glorifying His Father and loving His own. This is what directs all of God’s actions: His own glory and the good of His people. On the cross, the purposes of God come together in a horrible, scandalous, painful, beautiful, wonderful, matchless way – God is glorified as His power, wrath, holiness, love and faithfulness are clearly displayed, and we are blessed and loved beyond words as our sins are removed and justice is satisfied, our shame and disgrace taken away and mercy and grace given to us instead.

Two other important pieces of information form the background for this demonstration of love from our Servant-Savior: Satan had already put it into Judas’ mind to betray the Lord, and Jesus knew fully who He, what authority He had, and what was waiting for Him in the coming hours. With this knowledge clearly in mind, He gets up from the table during the meal (probably right after the food was prepared and served, but we can’t be sure) and He takes off His outer garments to take on the garb of a lowly household slave.

Washing feet was a needed and yet very humble task in the ancient world. Dirt roads, lots of animals and a dusty environment made feet filthy and offensive, and they are still regarded as filthy and offensive in the Middle East today. The job of washing the feet fell to the lowest-ranking household slave. As no household slave was present at this supper, the job should have been taken up by one of the disciples. The basin of water and the towel were standing by, ready to be used. But the disciples were all too proud to do the lowly task. They all thought it was beneath them.

Jesus got up to do what none of them was willing to do, just as He was preparing to do something even more humiliating, even more shameful, which none of them was either willing or able to do.

⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” ⁷ Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” ⁸ Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.”

Most of the disciples remained silent, but as was often the case, Peter couldn't keep his mouth shut. He felt compelled to speak up and defend the honor of his Master. His question, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" is thick with indignation at the scandalous humiliation his Lord. Just a few days earlier, they had watched Mary humiliate herself in sacrificial, costly worship of her Lord. That was hard enough to take, especially the waste of the costly perfume. But this was too much. This went too far.

Jesus initially prompted Peter to simply trust Him, to respond with faith. "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Never! Peter could never wrap his mind around understanding such behavior, and so he says, with a thick layer of pride, "You shall never wash my feet." If Peter had been asked by Jesus, I'm sure he would have been willing to wash Jesus' feet. But to be expected to sit back and let Jesus wash his feet? Impossible.

Hours later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter would be unable to stand back and watch the guards come and take away his Master. He would strike out and cut off the ear of Malchus, the servant of the high priest. Then, as now, Jesus would have to rebuke his impulsive disciple who always thought he knew better than his Master. Oh, how much like Peter we can be! And yet the Lord treats us with kindness and grace.

B. A Demonstration of Salvation

Jesus then begins to explain what is being pictured by this action He is taking, and it has a two-fold significance:

1. It demonstrates that those who belong to Christ must be washed by Christ.
2. It shows that those who have been washed by Christ don't need to be re-cleaned in their entirety, but they do need to confess and get washed regularly.

This two-fold significance is seen in the two things Jesus says to Peter in verses 8-10 –

*Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me."*⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "*Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!*"¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "*The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean.*

First, Jesus makes an absolute statement: "*If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.*" If you want to call yourself a Christian and claim the name of Christ, He must cleanse you of your sin. You must come to Him for cleansing from the guilt of your offense against God, and not just for a blessing or even some nice moral instruction. You must know your need for cleansing and you must flee to Jesus as the only One who can cleanse you.

Peter then asks Jesus to wash his hands and head, being carried away by his exuberance again. Jesus takes this as an opportunity to teach on a further principle, that those who have been thoroughly cleansed do not need to be re-cleaned, but have a need for smaller, more specific cleansing. If you take a bath and then walk to your friend's house for dinner, you need to have your dirty feet cleansed, but you do not need to take another bath.

Christians have sins we need to confess, to God and often to one another. But the thorough cleansing of our sins that Jesus does when we are justified is never repeated. We are already clean. John unfolds these truths in his first letter, in 1 John 1:5-9:

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

What I find astonishing here is the last thing Jesus says and how John explains it. Jesus says, "And you are clean, but not every one of you." John then adds: "For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

Jesus knew Judas was going to betray Him, and yet he washed his feet. What does this show us? Two things:

1. **We see the incredible love and graciousness of Jesus**, not only willing to stoop and wash the filthy feet of His undeserving and unfaithful disciples, but even to wash the feet of the one who was about to betray Him for money, the one who had broken His trust and who would betray Him with a kiss.
2. **We also see that no ceremony, not even one performed by Jesus Himself, can cleanse anyone.** If any ceremony was capable of cleansing, surely having Jesus Himself wash your feet would do it. But it is faith which joins us to Christ and it is Christ alone who cleanses us, as we embrace Him by faith.

C. An Example for Servant-Leadership

This washing of feet Jesus not only taught the disciples about Jesus love and the cleansing He was about to attain for them on the cross, it also gave them a demonstration of what true, loving leadership looks like in the kingdom of God:

12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. 16 Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus is our Savior and our living example. He cleanses us from all sin and he shows us how we are to live. He cannot be our example unless He is first our Savior, for unless He cleanses us,

we have no share in Him. However, if we have been cleansed by Him, we will follow Him and seek to imitate Him.

Jesus isn't here intending to establish foot-washing as a third sacrament, as another ordinance, to be done in addition to baptism and the Lord's Supper. No, He's calling us to something much more challenging: We are to serve one another as He served us. Sometimes we might see something that needs to be done, and we might think it's below us, or it's not our responsibility, or someone else will take care of it. We may see someone we know we're called to love, but they might be just a little bit too difficult to love.

We must love as Jesus loved. We must serve as He served. We cannot allow pride or cultural standards or anything to keep up from loving as He loved, serving as He served. How can we? Only by His grace as He lives His life in us.

Has Jesus washed you? Do you have a part in Him? Whose feet is He calling you to wash?

Not everyone who is numbered among the people of God truly belongs to Christ.

I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.'¹⁹ I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he.²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.

Do you belong to Jesus? Has He chosen you? Are you His? Two key questions will reveal the answer: Have you come to Him for cleansing? And have You embraced His call on your life to receive those He sends you to love?

We come to Jesus when we come to Him for cleansing, and we follow Jesus when we follow Him in loving others to the glory of God, even to the point of humiliation and scandal.