



South Hill Church of Christ
1136 South Hill Avenue
PO Box 3425
Fayetteville, Arkansas 72702-3425
Voice & Fax: 479-521-6809
Lsgage129@cs.com
Web: www.southhillcoc.org

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A Table Prepared

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, 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 runs over.” Psalm 23:4-5

I was surprised when I learned who the first man was that died in the Civil War. He died at Fort Sumter and he was Union Private Daniel Hough. We would assume that Private Hough was killed sometime during the two days of continuous bombardment of Fort Sumter that began at 4:30 a.m. on Friday, April 12, 1861. Lieutenant Henry S. Farley, the first Southern cadet to resign from West Point on the approach of the war, is the man who pulled the lanyard for the first shot. However, after two days of bombardment which saw 4,000 rounds of 12- or 20- pound shot obliterate most of whatever they hit, Union Major Robert Anderson surrendered without one death and with no one even seriously injured.

Confederate General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, who led the assault on Fort Sumter, had been a student at West Point of artillery instructor Major Robert Anderson. When Anderson requested that he be allowed to strike the Union Colors at the fort and to order a 50-gun salute, the request was granted. During the ceremony a stray ember from the Federal artillery touched off some powder in a keg. The blast injured five people and killed one---Union Private Daniel Hough. Over the course of the next four years at least 618,000 others would join him (*The Civil War Third Edition*, Alan Axelrod, 2011).

On that fateful day Private Hough didn't know that his real enemy was a powder keg in his own arsenal. He would never have imagined that a spark from his own canons would ignite his death blow. This is certainly an ironic beginning to this bloody and devastating chapter in American History. Similar ironies can most likely be cited throughout this conflict and throughout history. How can we prepare for an enemy that we don't even recognize?

King David's famous Psalm of comfort and hope offers us a key to unlock the mystery of unknown enemies. God prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies...even those unknown to us. In the metaphor of the Shepherd and his sheep, this line refers to the fact that the Good Shepherd knows where to pasture his sheep. He knows the plants that could be dangerous for them to eat, even though the sheep themselves would have had no clue as to what to eat and what not to eat. What a comfort to know that even in the valley of the shadow of death God is with us. We are prepared for even unknown enemies.

The real comfort and care goes beyond our physical life though. Even though we might die physically, we are assured that "...we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2Cor. 5:1). Despite the ominous threats of accidents, natural disasters, and acts of terrorism and war, we have a God who has prepared a table for us beyond this valley of the shadow of physical death. Amen!