**THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD**

Psalm 23:1-6 Sara Ryu

Key Verse 23:1 10.04.2021

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

Two weeks ago, we finished our study of the book of Revelation, and then last week, we celebrated Easter by studying Mt 28. Now, we turn to the book of Psalms for a brief interlude before jumping into our study of 1 John. The Psalms is a book of poetry. It contains all different kinds of poems—personal, national; Messianic prophesy, lamentation, praise. This Psalm we’re looking at today is one of the most well-known, both by believers and non-believers. It is also one of the most personal, written by King David. I pray that no matter how well we might think we know this Psalm, no matter how young or old we are, God might help us to hear his word with new and humble hearts; to marvel at the richness of the promises to which David witnesses; and to be able to sing this Psalm as our own through faith in Christ Jesus.

**First, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want” (1)**

David begins*:* “*The LORD is my shepherd*…” This is the foundational confession: “The LORD is my shepherd”. David starts his song with “The LORD”. It is literally the first word. He starts with God, and he is implied in relation to God.

Who is “the LORD”? The LORD of the Bible is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. He is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Contrast “the LORD” with the very next word, “my”. The LORD is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, “me” is particular, discrete, mortal, and limited. At the same time, “my” and “me” tends to be the whole universe for most people. For most people, “me” = “the LORD”. But here, David recognizes the LORD, and recognizes himself: There is “the LORD” distinct from me and outside of “me”.

What is the relationship between “the LORD” and “me”? David says, “the LORD is my shepherd”. Here he’s making a statement about a committed relationship and identifying himself in and through that relationship. It’s like Ian might say, “Jemmie is my wife,” or I might say, “Sophie is my friend.” “The LORD is my shepherd” is a statement about relationship, and also about position. It sets “the LORD” above “me”; he is David’s head. And that means David is under the LORD. “The LORD is my shepherd” also means “I am the LORD’s sheep”. This is a remarkable self-identification for a grown man, let alone a king.

The Bible often describes mankind as sheep. A sheep is a clueless, helpless animal. It has no self-defense and it is non-predatory. It can’t see further than 2 m ahead of itself. When it falls down, it can’t get back up unassisted. A sheep cannot flourish without a shepherd.

In contrast to this biblical anthropology, we tend to think of ourselves not only *individualistically*, but also *self-sufficiently*. To be called a “sheep” is like an insult for most people today. This aversion to “sheep”-likeness is also due to Enlightenment and post-modern influences (e.g. Kant, Nietzsche[[1]](#footnote-1)). “The LORD is my shepherd” is probably the statement to which sinful modern man is most hostile, and also, most strange/unfamiliar. “I don’t need anyone to take care of me,” we might think. “I can educate myself and find my own way through life…”

But in the Bible, we are sheep. We need a good shepherd. But here is the problem: there are also bad shepherds, thieves, and hired hands. The bad shepherds feed only themselves, not their sheep. (Ezekiel 34) Thieves and robbers steal, kill and destroy. (Jn 10: 10a) The hired hand abandons the sheep at the moment of danger, saving himself while leaving the sheep to the wolf. (Jn 10:12) Moreover, there is Satan, the devil, who is a murderer and father of lies. (Jn 8:44)

On top of that, sheep are stubborn and headstrong, wandering away from the shepherd. “We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way…” (Is 53:6)

Considering this, it is a remarkable statement indeed: “The LORD is my shepherd…”

As we saw earlier, there are better and worse shepherds. What was life like with the LORD as his shepherd? As they say: “Happy chickens lay happy eggs”. Or you can tell the shepherd by the condition of the sheep. David said, “I shall not be in want.” He was the happiest sheep. Perfectly content, in perfect peace with his past, and perfect trust for his future. He had perfect security.

“I shall not be in want” is different from, “I don’t need anything,” and also still different from, “I have everything I want.” Rich people still want. Contentment, peace, and security are not products of possession (having certain things). Even people who have gotten the coronavirus vaccine cannot say “I shall not be in want.” Who can say “I shall not be in want”? I am reminded of apostle Paul who similarly said, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” (Phil 4:12) What is this “secret of being content”? Who can say, “I shall not be in want”?

David said, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.” This means, “The LORD is my shepherd, *therefore* I shall not be in want.” Or: “I shall not be in want *because* the LORD is my shepherd.” What does this mean? Let’s take a look at David’s autobiography with God, in verses 2-5.

**Second: pastures, paths, valley (2-5)**

Let’s start by reading these verses together: “*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 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 overflows.”*

In these verses, David is talking about how the LORD shepherds him throughout his life. There are many situations, or stations here. How many do you count? What are they? (3. “green pastures and quiet waters”, “paths of righteousness”, and “the valley of the shadow of death”)

These stations are each very different. “green pastures and quiet waters” sound so nice. It reminds me of Edvard Grieg’s piece “Peer Gynt Suite No. 1, Morning Mood” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rh8gMvzPw0).

David didn’t just say, “I am in a green pasture, I am by quiet waters.” Rather, he attributed it to the shepherd, “*He* makes me lie down in green pastures, *he* leads me beside quiet waters, *he* restores my soul.” He acknowledged that it was God who led him to the pleasant and good places, cared for him, and gave him rest and restoration.

This implies that David had been weary and in need of rest and restoration. Sinful man does not have gratitude without having experienced destitution. A person who has always lived in plenty and comfort doesn’t say, “thank you”. But a person who has experienced want and fear knows that they cannot take good things for granted. They are not “givens”, but they are “given” and have a giver. It is like David is confessing here, “I was hungry, and he fed me; I was thirsty, and he watered me; I was weary and he restored me.” The LORD made the difference.

Next, David says, “He guides me in paths of righteousness, for his name’s sake.” Now there is movement and a direction. The LORD leads David out of the green valley and the quiet waters to paths, headed somewhere.

“Guided in paths of righteousness” contrasts greatly with “wandering aimlessly”, “going in circles”, “coincidence” and “going with the flow”. “He guides me in paths of righteousness” indicates David’s trust and faith in God’s sovereign leading over his whole life. This is again quite remarkable. Do you believe your life is a coherent story, and that you’re headed somewhere, and that you are on paths of righteousness?

On the one hand, this can be a common “intention” of new age philosophy—that you are writing your own story, that it’s a good story, and that it will end up well. There are some people who schedule and plan, sketching out their paths. But can you or anyone really be certain where you’re going? And then on the other hand, I think a very common feeling in everyday life is the feeling of going nowhere. Relatedly, there is the fear or concern: am I on the right path?

When David says, “He guides me,” it indicates that David is *following*. It is different from, as we said before, saying, “I am on the path of righteousness.” David has a sense of being guided by the LORD, as his shepherd, who is distinct from himself, knows better than him and is above him. Things didn’t go the way *David* thought or planned. *But* David *submits* to the LORD’s guiding voice. The LORD is not some vague entity to David, but the dominant presence in David’s actual life. David yields to the LORD. And that’s what gives him confidence, “He guides me in paths of righteousness…”

What makes a path the right path? We usually evaluate the rightness of a path based on how much benefit “I” get from it, how much it serves my goals or my success. But David said, “He guides me in paths of righteousness for *his name’s sake*.” The paths of righteousness might not lead to “my name’s sake”. It might even *cost* “my name’s sake.” But the confidence David had was that as he followed God, his life would not dishonour God, but glorify God.

This is a kind of faith and trust that cannot be “empirically disproved”. It is life stronger than death, and does not shrink back. Even if *I* die, it is for God’s name’s sake. This reveals that doubt is deeply self-centered and self-preserving. Again: the rightness of a path is not determined by the extent to which *I* like or dislike it, or the extent to which it serves *my* gain or causes *my* loss. Rather, David could say, “He guides me in paths of righteousness, for *his* name’s sake,” as one who followed the LORD, as his sheep.

Where does the path of righteousness, in fact, lead? Let’s read verse 4: “Even 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.” What’s the third station? “The valley of the shadow of death.” This is the very place to which it seems like the paths of righteousness *shouldn’t* lead! It is the very place where one feels totally alone and helpless, surrounded by evil and the threat of death. It is the very place where David might have been tempted to say, “I’m terrified, because you abandoned me.” But David says in this place, “I will fear no evil, for you are with me…”

Notice something: it’s here in the valley of the shadow of death (or some translations say “the darkest valley”) that “He” becomes “you”. The general “he” becomes the very personal “you”. The darkest valley didn’t make David farther from God, but closer to God.

And David says, “You are with me.” How did he know that? What do you know about the life of David? Yes, on the one hand he was the king of the golden age of Israel. But on the other, he had a hard, painful life. For much of his youth, he was pursued by the murderous former king Saul. Then he was betrayed by his own son Absalom, who tried to take the kingship from under him. Many occasions his life was on the line. How could he know that the LORD was with him in the darkest valley?

Some people say that Psalm 23 should be studied in conjunction with Psalm 22. Psalm 22 is what is known as a Messianic Psalm. It contains prophecies of Jesus, and indeed, the very prayers of Jesus: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?” “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint…”, “They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.” (Ps 22:1, 14,18) Jesus was forsaken in the darkest valley. He was crucified on the cross. He is literally *with* his sheep in the valley of the shadow of death. Just as David was pursued, plotted against, denied, betrayed, mocked, and unjustly charged, so was Jesus. More than that, Jesus was the innocent one, crucified and buried. There is no valley too dark that he is not there. Because Jesus went through the valley of the shadow of death forsaken, his sheep are not. I think this is what changed David’s “he” to “you”. The darkness fixated his gaze upon his shepherd. He saw beyond the painful circumstances and the people that seem to be inflicting them. His comfort became not what his shepherd did for him (e.g. feed him, guide him), but “*You* are *with* me*”.* If you look at Psalm 22, it says that the author is David. But, as far as we can tell, David was never actually in such circumstances in his life, for example, that he might say others were casting lots for his clothing. Rather, it is the Spirit of Jesus by which David is writing this Psalm. Through the valley of the shadow of death, David was truly *with* the LORD, with the spirit of Jesus dwelling in him.

David continues, “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” “Rod” and “staff” refer to the 2 instruments of shepherds, literally, for shepherding their sheep. A rod was a shorter, heavy, club-like instrument, and the staff was longer and thinner, with a hook at the end. The rod was used to fight off wild animals, and to discipline the sheep. The staff was used to direct the sheep, and the crook at the end could be used to rescue sheep who had wandered off. In other words, the rod and staff weren’t particularly soft or pleasant instruments. They butt against the sheep’s head and legs, chiding and correcting them. But, David is *comforted* by them. Why? Because they are the very sign of God’s presence, care, and sovereignty. David saw beyond the hardship and pain, beyond the people’s intentions, to see even what was going on through people, as *God*’s rod and *God’s* staff. He wasn’t subject to people, but to the LORD, who even through that hardship, was disciplining him in love.

The valley of the shadow of death is where a sheep can be most tempted to doubt the presence, capability, and goodness of the shepherd. It is where the sheep can be most tempted to abandon the shepherd. And it is where the confession, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want,” is most challenged. But it is also where the faith it takes to claim this is really extraordinary and pleases God. This is faith, real faith not sight. Wherever we are in our lives, whether in green pastures, or paths of righteousness, or in the valley of the shadow of death, God grant us faith to be able to say, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

Let’s read verse 5: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” When David found God with him even in the valley of the shadow of death, and confessed it with faith, he had confidence, furthermore, of God’s pleasure and God’s reward. (Heb 11:6) “A table” is even more than “green pastures and quiet waters”. It’s a feast. If the latter is an organic local salad with Evian water, a table is a feast of meats, delicacies and wine. The LORD is preparing a table for his faithful sheep!

The LORD has enemies, so his sheep have enemies. The enemies attempt to divide the LORD from his sheep. But God chooses to thwart the enemies through his faithful sheep. “Anointing with oil” was symbolic recognition of chosen kings, prophets, and priests. David was anointed with oil by the prophet Samuel, in recognition of God’s choosing him to be king. But this here, “You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows,” is David’s personal recognition of God’s choosing of him for *God’s* purpose and for enjoying God’s victory.

Not too long ago, we studied Joseph’s life story in Genesis. Joseph’s life had really gut-wrenching, heartbreaking dark valleys. He was sold by his own brothers into slavery. He was a slave in a foreign land. He was unjustly imprisoned and served sentence for at least 3 years. But in his story, it is written: “The LORD was with Joseph” (three times! Gen 36:3, 21,23). Eventually, he became the Prime Minister of Egypt, and God chose him to preserve the people of that nation in the midst of a devastating 7-year-long famine, and to serve the salvation of his brothers. At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph says to his own brothers who had sold him into slavery, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good; to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Gen 50:20) This was Joseph’s confidence that God chose him for his purpose. This faith in the LORD helped Joseph to overcome any despair, self-pity, or resentment (towards his brothers and towards God). I can imagine Joseph, too, saying like David, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want…You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

**Third, “Surely goodness and love will follow me” (6)**

Finally, David concludes his Psalm, looking toward the future. Let’s read verse 6: “Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” How can anyone be sure that goodness and love will follow them all the days of their life? And at the same time, isn’t this what everyone wants, longs for? As we have seen, David isn’t just being naïve; nor is he being escapist. He is making a statement of faith, having experienced pleasant *and* unpleasant stations in life. “I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” This is the confession of a sheep who has found the purpose of the shepherd. The LORD shepherds so that his sheep might dwell with him forever. It’s like David, looking on his life, and considering God’s leading, realizes, “Aha! This is how the LORD has been leading me! To dwell with him, forever.” Through his life, the LORD has been shepherding David not only to realize that, but also to realize that dwelling with the LORD is eternal life. So we come full circle to verse 1: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

This passage was so difficult for me. Even as a so-called believer, I found it so distant from me, I could not confess the words as my own. In particular, the past couple years of my life have been like a valley of the shadow of death, full of the threat of evil. I have felt alone, and I doubted the presence and love of God. I doubted that I am on the paths of righteousness. But looking back over my life through struggling with this Psalm, I see the guidance and presence of the LORD, my shepherd. My sinful nature is precisely that of a sheep who goes astray, wandering on my own, and following thieves, robbers, and hired hands. Left to my own devices, I would be killed and destroyed. But the LORD has made me his sheep, and he my shepherd, in Christ Jesus. Exactly as 1 Peter 2:24,25 says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” At this precise time in my life, evil, my enemies, and my sinful nature threaten to devour me, through my doubt. But it is for this very moment, to which my shepherd leads me to confess, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be want…Even 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.” At this moment, to confess this is itself to defeat my enemies and to win. It is to find the LORD, who is above all my life and above all things, as my shepherd, who is working in all things for his good purpose.

John 10 is like the Psalm 23 of the New Testament. But whereas Psalm 23 is told from the sheep, David’s, perspective, John 10 is told from the shepherd’s, Jesus’ perspective. Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (Jn 10:11)

At the beginning of this passage, we considered how we are *all* sheep who have gone astray. We are all sheep following thieves, hired hands, and surrounded by wolves. How can Psalm 23 ever be ours? How can any of us say, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want?” Jesus died to redeem us as his own sheep. The Psalm 23 life is the very righteousness which Jesus purchased for me and for you. May Jesus’ death and resurrection have power to break through our sinful unbelief and pride so that each one of us can confess with faith, like David, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

Let’s read verse 1 one more time: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

1. Kant, in his essay “What is Enlightenment”, wrote: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed Nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance…*Dare to know! (Sapere aude)*”. Nietzsche despised the “herd instinct” (the need to obey and conform) of the masses. The higher man, for Nietzsche, is the strong and independent individual. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)