

The Lord our Shepherd

Psalm Ch.23 V.1-6

Introductory Questions

This is a very famous passage in the Bible. It's such a beautiful and pastoral Psalm, many believers and even non-believers like it, use it (for example, in funerals), and can even memorize the whole chapter. So, many people are very familiar with it and even many songs are written about it. But I have one question: Do people understand the true meaning of this passage? Do people enjoy this Psalm because it is very pastoral and peaceful and provides a wonderful atmosphere? Do they only recite it from their lips or do they understand its depth within their soul?

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

This Psalm was written through King David by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We don't know exactly when it was written, but we do know the whole life of David was not consistently smooth. As a youth, when he was a little shepherd, he was isolated from family in the field. After his anointing by the prophet Samuel, his father-in-law, King Saul, pursued and hunted him. In his later years, as King, his son Absalom betrayed against him and tried to become king. So, we can see that David's life was never quite good enough. It was very turbulent and he endured many evil circumstances. Yet, still, he confessed and proclaimed "the LORD is my shepherd."

So, how can David say this: "I shall not be in want?" This is NOT because all situations and conditions are favorable, but rather it because he recognized that his shepherd is Jehovah. He was very satisfied in God alone. This is how he can proclaim, "I shall not be in want." We don't have much personal knowledge about the life of a shepherd, but in Israel at that time, ALL Israelites were very familiar with this kind of lifestyle and profession. This is especially true of David, because he worked as a shepherd for the early years of his life. This was an example of a typical "3D job": it was 1) dirty, 2) dangerous, and 3) difficult. Nobody wanted to do

this job. So then, why did David make this confession of God? It's because he fully understood through his experience how much love the shepherd has for his sheep.

In verse 1, what is God revealed as? Verse 1's subject is Jehovah. The sheep do not choose the shepherd. But the shepherd, particularly in Israel at that time, would look after other shepherd's sheep and work hard when he was young to earn money to buy his own sheep. He chose these sheep himself, bought and paid for them with his hard-earned money, marked their ears with a tag, and cared for them with deep love. This is a reflection of God's great grace and unconditional love for us in that he chooses his own sheep. To the sheep, the shepherd is their absolute LIFE. Without a shepherd, the sheep always perish.

We need to understand the 2 characteristics of sheep:

1. They are powerless: They are vulnerable to attacks from external forces, for example: wolves, lions, bears, thieves, or even sheep flies and poisonous herbs
2. They are foolish: They have many internal problems, for example, their eyesight is weak, they easily lose the way, they are stubborn. Foolish AND stubborn? Wow, this is NO 답 (totally hopeless). They even eat grass and the whole roots and foolishly destroy the fields.

These two characteristics of sheep are also just like humanity (me and you). Humans think that we can do everything by ourselves, even that we can save ourselves. But just like "cast sheep" - which cannot get back up after falling down - humanity also cannot save ourselves without the grace of God.

2. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,

God provides for his sheep. In Palestine, for more than half of the year, the land becomes a harsh wilderness. So, the shepherd must prepare a place for his sheep before leading his sheep there to feed them. Shepherds need not only consider "green pastures" and "quiet waters", but also shade and most importantly pens for their sheep. So, many shepherds used the same stone pens in many places every year. In Korea, these days are summer holiday season(휴가철). It's The peak season.

This is a joy and same time one of the big burdens for many parents: If you go to the beach, children only expect the fun of playing in the water, but parents must prepare everything else: food, the shade, the place to stay, the place to wash, the place to lie down, etc.

Do you know when sheep can lie down? There are 4 conditions that need to be satisfied for this:

1. Nothing to fear (because sheep cowardly, they are easily scared and run, lifting their heads and looking around) - so they need a sense of security
2. There must be no conflict with other sheep
3. They need to be free from flies, mosquitoes, or other bugs or discomforts
4. After their bellies are fully satisfied with enough grass, they can lie down

David was a young shepherd so he understands these conditions much more deeply than the others. He also very sincerely protected his sheep, in the same way that he recognized that God abundantly loved and protected him as a Good Shepherd. In Gospel of John 10:11 Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." so, for the sake of his sheep, he can lay down his life for the sheep. And just as he said, he did.

3. he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

"He restores" means "gives life." Recall the "cast sheep" - when they fall down they absolutely can't get back up by their own power. In the same way, we also need God's saving power to help us "get back up" - out of our sin and into a right relationship with Him.

When God love us, and save us? Romans 5:8 says "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." and Ephesians 2:1 says "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins".

God saved us and gave us life. He promised us that he would never leave us nor

forsake us. But Deists say that God created the world and abandoned it. That he gave us life and left. We believe that God is alive and with us and always faithful and leads us into “paths of righteousness.”

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.

In the life of a shepherd, there were times when all the fields had been visited by the sheep, the grass destroyed, and the fields left bare. There was nothing left for the sheep to eat. The only place left was a swamp, or wetland, but the path into the swamp was very dangerous. This is what is referred to as the “valley of the shadow of death.”

There was no other choice but to brave the dangerous path to the only available field that remained, so the shepherd led his sheep down into the swamp. Like this, there are many times in our Christian lives that are filled with troubles, doubts, and dangers.

This is not always a result of sin or bad karma, but is the will of God. It is the will of our Shepherd. This is the “path of righteousness.” God has promised to never leave us nor forsake us, so we can confess, “I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

What are the rod and staff of God?

1. The rod is used to direct the sheep, or to hit the sheep to discipline them or alarm them when they lose the way. The shepherd needs to be very close to his sheep to keep them on the proper path and guide their feet. The rod is also used to count the sheep and check the quality of their skin - this means the shepherd uses the rod to check their health.
2. The staff is used as a weapon to protect the sheep from their enemies.

When the shepherd leads his sheep through the “valley of the shadow of death” this is to grow and mature the sheep. In the same way, our Shepherd, God leads

his people through the “valley of the shadow of death” and wants all his people to grow and mature in Christ. But when we walk through this difficult and dangerous path, there are two things we must remember:

1. This is not the easiest path
2. But, God is with us

So, when we walk through this “valley of the shadow of death”, we cannot fully understand God’s purpose or plan. Even though we may doubt or lose faith, we must draw close to our shepherd through the Word of his promise and our prayer.

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

Verses 5-6 show us that God is not only leading us in the past nor present time, but also until the the end of time. David proclaimed the Lord “prepared a table before him in the presence of his enemies.” What does this mean? There are 2 meanings.

First, that God resolved David’s conflict with Saul, even Absalom, and through those events, God let them recognize that he was with David during his life. However, this is not the full realization of this promise.

Secondly, in the Day of the Lord (Jesus’ Second Coming), God will completely and absolutely prepare a table before his children before his enemy, Satan, and we will feast together with Jesus in all his heavenly glory, and be declared righteous and free from all sin and death.

The first question in the Heidelberg Catechism says:

“What is your only comfort in life and death?” The answer is:
That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul,
both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil.

He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.

Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him. ”

Human beings have no power to save anyone – even ourselves. The only one who can save us is our Savior and Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ paid all the penalty for our sin with his precious blood.

In verse 6, the verb “follow” is “רדף” rādaph[raw-daf]¹ in Hebrew and it is used in the same way that a guard pursues or diligently follows an enemy. It’s just like as The Highway Patrolman, John piper says, “God is not only our good shepherd, nor only our lavish host; he is also a highway patrolman pursuing you with goodness and mercy every day of your life, and he is fast.” Originally this verb has a negative meaning. But here, it is used to strongly emphasize just how closely God’s grace and love and goodness will pursue us throughout our lives.

As Revelation 7:16-17 says,

16 Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Therefore, let us focus our eyes on our Good Shepherd, Jesus. For the sheep, the Shepherd alone is more than enough to provide for all our needs. We don’t need to worry about pasture, or pens, or shade, or enemies. If you are a true Christian, God alone, our Good Shepherd alone, is more than enough to satisfy all our needs. The Christians who can deeply proclaim and love this Psalm are truly the sheep of the Good Shepherd.

¹ A primitive root; to run after (usually with hostile intent; figuratively (of time) gone by): - chase put to flight follow (after on) hunt (be under) persecute (-ion -or) pursue (-r).

Closing Prayer (After Sermon)

We thank You, merciful God and Father, that You have brought us to know You and Your Son by Your Spirit and Word and have caused Your Word to be proclaimed to us. Grant that we, having received Christ Jesus the Lord, may live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith, as we were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

But since we, through ignorance, unthankfulness, and discontent, do not obey You as we should, we implore You, O Lord, remember Your great mercy and have compassion on us. Teach us truly to know our sins, sincerely to repent, and to amend our life. Strengthen the ministers to preach Your holy Word faithfully and steadfastly. Likewise, Lord, give strength to all civil authorities, that they may use the sword entrusted to them in justice and equity.

Keep us, we implore You, from all hypocrisy and unfaithfulness, and frustrate all evil and subtle designs against Your Word and Your church. O Lord, do not withdraw from us Your Word and Spirit, but grant us a strong faith, patience, and steadfastness in all suffering and adversity. Help and sustain Your church, and deliver Your people from opposition, ridicule, and tyranny.

We pray in particular for Pastor Heo in Hospital. Strengthen those who are weak and burdened with sorrow. Grant us Your peace through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who gave us this sure promise: "I tell You the truth, My Father will give you whatever you ask in My Name". In Jesus Name we pray Amen.

Benediction (Numbers 6:24-26, 2 Corinthians 13:13)

"The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."
"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." AMEN.