

The Lord is my Shepherd
Psalm 23:1-6
Key Verse: 23:1

"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing."

When we begin a new year, we are full of hope, expecting that things will be better. However, unforeseen events start happening that totally disrupt our lives. This week M. Sarah Barry suddenly came down with aspiratory pneumonia. Though she was planning to deliver her message on John 17 today, she is sick in the hospital. There are some who suddenly lost their jobs without any advance notice. Some have become deeply frustrated by relationship problems that seem to have no remedy. Some have fallen into depression as they face seemingly impossible challenges. This is the real world. Behind the scenes, Satan is always on the prowl to attack God's children and devour us. So we are vulnerable. We need protection, provision and guidance. Where can we find these things? In today's passage we learn from David. He was constantly in the midst of life-threatening situations, being attacked by enemies, and faced very difficult problems. But he confessed, "The Lord is my shepherd." This is not just a poem, but an expression of his personal relationship with God. Like him, we need a personal relationship with God. Through Ephesians study we could learn the importance of unity in the church. Through a bond of peace and love in Christ, who breaks all barriers between us, we can be one and serve the Lord as his body. When we serve together in the church, however, it is easy to develop "group faith." We need a personal relationship with God. Without it we cannot stand in times of trial. Let's learn what it means to have a personal relationship with God through this study.

I. The Lord is my shepherd; I am his sheep (1-4)

Let's read verse 1. "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing." The Bible describes the relationship between God and us in many ways: Creator and creatures; Owner and servants; Father and children; Husband and wife; Bridegroom and bride, and Shepherd and sheep. Of them all, Shepherd and sheep is uniquely descriptive. This metaphor was well understood by the people of Israel. When the prophet Nathan wanted to move David's heart through a story, he chose to talk about the relationship between shepherd and sheep (2 Sam 12:3). One poor man had nothing except a little ewe lamb. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. This parable shows us the affection that develops between shepherd and sheep. Some of us can understand this when we think of our pet dogs, cats, hamsters or fish. We feel connected by an invisible bond of affection.

David says that his personal relationship with God was like that of a shepherd and his sheep. David understood this relationship through his experience of caring for his father's sheep as a boy. While tending them, he learned their characteristics. Sheep have no defense system, like other animals. Skunks emit a terrible odor that drives other breathing beings away. Squirrels scurry fast and jump through trees, so it is hard to catch them. Porcupines are covered by long, sharp needles that hurt anything that tries to touch them. However, sheep have no horn, no claws, no speed, no hiding skill, no poison, nothing. Also, they are weak and stupid. If the sheep ahead of them walks off of a cliff, they do not change course but follow him off of the cliff. They have no sense of direction. They could not find their way back home even with a GPS. They easily become fearful and spread their fear to each other quickly. In a word, sheep cannot survive without a shepherd. We are like sheep. We have no defense against the devil. We are weak physically and spiritually. We are vulnerable to disease and temptation. We are easily led astray by sinful desires that surface through our feelings and natural appetites. When challenges come upon us, we don't know what to do. Yet, we are very stubborn. So Isaiah said, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to our own way..." (Isa 53:6a). As a result, we suffer all kinds of pain and sorrows, and finally we die physically and spiritually. As sheep desperately need shepherds, we desperately need the Lord, who cares for us like a shepherd. David said, "The Lord is my shepherd."

While tending his father's sheep, David also learned a shepherd's heart. When the enemy Goliath threatened them, all the soldiers of Israel trembled with fear. No one dared to accept his challenge. However, David was different. He was not daunted at all. He confronted Goliath by faith. King Saul was surprised at his courage. So David explained,

"When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, seized it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it." Then he applied his shepherd's heart toward his people Israel, saying, "Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Sam 17:34b-37). David understood that the people of Israel were like sheep who needed a shepherd. He was willing to serve them as a shepherd, risking his own life. The Lord said, "I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my own heart" (Ac 13:22). God was pleased with David's shepherd heart, so he raised him as a shepherd for his people (2 Sam 5:2b). David reigned with righteousness, justice, kindness and mercy, which reflected the heart of God. That is why he is known as a shadow of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When David realized that the Lord was his shepherd, he said, "I lack nothing." He did not say this because he had power, wealth and fame, but because the Lord was his shepherd. People desire many things. A Samaritan woman thought that if she had the right husband she would be happy. So she tried different men, one by one, until she had had five husbands. Still, she was not happy. Like her, many people are seeking to be satisfied through romance, money, fame, power, pleasure and the like. But they are never satisfied even when they get what they wanted. It is because people are made in the image of God. Only God's presence can satisfy the human soul. So Augustine said, "God made man with an empty place inside that only God can fill and man is a restless wanderer on the earth until he finds his rest in God." We can be satisfied when we accept the Lord as our shepherd. Then we, too, can confess, "The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing."

Verses 2-4 describe how the Lord shepherds each of his people. Let's read verses 2-3. "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake." These verses tell how the Lord provides for his people and guides them, in the context of a Middle Eastern shepherd caring for his sheep. A shepherd usually wakes up around 4:00 a.m. and leads the hungry sheep to green pasture. There they graze and eat until they are completely full around mid-morning. As the sun grows hot, they begin to be thirsty. The shepherd knows this, but he does not lead them to water right away. He first makes them lie down to rest so they can digest what they have eaten. Sheep are willing to lie down when they are well-fed and safe. If they feel threatened they run away. If there is tension among them, due to competition, they become nervous and cannot rest. But when the shepherd is with them they feel secure and can rest in peace. Sheep are like babies. Without their mothers, they feel very insecure. But in their mother's arms, they feel completely content and safe and sleep well. The Lord shepherds his people like a mother. When we know that the Lord is with us we can have peace and rest well, sleeping soundly. Some people cannot sleep well due to stress, fear, conflict, tension and anxiety. Yet those who know that "the Lord is my shepherd" will find real rest, peace and security. In Psalm 4:8, David said: "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."

A shepherd leads his sheep beside quiet waters. Sheep are sensitive toward water, especially rough water. So the shepherd leads them beside quiet waters. If there are no quiet waters, the shepherd must make a quiet pool for the flock to drink from. Our good shepherd Jesus leads us to green pasture and beside quiet waters. Jesus feeds us with words of life and eternal living waters. This is Jesus himself. Jesus said, "Whoever drinks the water I give them will never be thirsty. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). Jesus also said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry..." (Jn 6:35a). Praise Jesus who leads us beside quiet waters!

The word "refreshes" in verse 3 would be better translated "restore." Sometimes, when sheep are out in the field for a whole day, they drift away from their shepherd. They get lost and forfeit their shepherd's immediate care and protection. Then they become tired, weary and vulnerable. Yet their shepherd calls them back and restores their relationship. When David was with the Lord his shepherd, he was full of grace and experienced success in everything he did. But after becoming king over the united kingdom of Israel, he became proud and complacent. He did not study the Bible or pray diligently, and he went astray from the Lord. Then he became blinded by lust and committed adultery. In order to cover it, he masterminded the murder of an innocent general Uriah in battle. David sinned greatly before God. When he was astray from God he was unhappy and tormented. Then the Lord sent

Nathan the prophet to rebuke David. David repented with tears. Then the Lord forgave him, healed his wounds, and restored his soul.

Why do our souls become weary and tired? Mainly it is because of our sins. When we are not diligent in Bible study and prayer, we drift from intimacy with God. That is when we become tired and weary. At such times, we may not know what the problem is or what to do. But God graciously calls us back to himself through his words and the prompting of his Spirit. When we hear his voice and repent our sins, the Lord forgives us and restores our souls. He guides us along the right paths for his name's sake.

Verse 4 says, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." As we live in this world, we experience many kinds of weather. Though many days are bright and pleasant, from time to time terrible thunderstorms come up and everything becomes very dark. In the same way, there are times when unexpected tragedies suddenly darken our lives. These include severe health problems, financial challenges, and relationship problems. It may even be the moment of death. When we walk through the darkest valley, it is like going through a dark tunnel that seems endless without any hope. These days some married couples are reaching a limitation in their relationship. In some cases, due to a high level of frustration, real communication has completely broken down. They have lost the joy and meaning in their marriages. Some feel that there is no light at the end of the tunnel. They feel all alone and very sorrowful. No one can comfort them. But even in the darkest valley, the Lord is with us. So David confessed, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." In the Middle East, the shepherd used his rod to beat attackers and protect his sheep. The staff was used to guide the sheep gently but firmly. A shepherd's rod and staff are a symbol of his power and authority. Sheep can take deep rest when they see the shepherd holding his rod and staff. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." (Mt 28:18). When Jesus our shepherd is with us, we do not fear, even in the darkest valley.

II. The Lord is my host; I am his guest (5-6)

In verse 5 the author changes his metaphor for the Lord and his people completely to that of a host and his guest. 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." In the ancient Middle East, showing hospitality was very important. When one was chased by his enemy, if he took refuge in the house of a strong and powerful man, he could be safe. The enemy could not harm him as long as the host protected his guest. So the Lord is a host and we are his guests. When we take refuge in the Lord, he protects us from our enemies. We Christians have enemies who hate us and persecute us without reason. They are driven by Satan, who does not want us to live by faith. The evil one continually accuses us about our weaknesses and tortures us with guilt and shame. But the Lord gives us victory over all the work of the enemy. He helps us celebrate this victory with a great feast that our enemies can only see from outside. The Lord's table is filled with the richest dishes which we can enjoy in the full assurance of the Lord's protection and blessing. The Lord anoints our heads with oil. The cup of happiness and blessing and victory are overflowing.

David realized that through all of life's experiences, the Lord was his shepherd and the Lord was his host. As he considered the grace of the Lord, he was confident, saying, "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life...." He surrendered himself to the Lord, confessing, "... and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (6).

May the Lord protect us from all harm, disease, accidents, and accusations even in the darkest valley. May the Lord provide all necessary things for us so we may abound in good works. May the Lord guide us along the right paths for his name's sake. May the Lord grant us victory in every aspect of life so that we may render glory to God. May the Lord be "my shepherd" for each of us and the shepherd of our nation in 2013.