The Lord is my Protector

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Preacher: Dr. Michael Staton

[0:00] This is the First Mustang Pulpit Podcast, a podcast of the weekly preaching and teaching at First Mustang.! Thank you for joining us. Thank you, Jeff, for leading us in that reading to help us to be reminded of the Lord's promise to be near His people and to lead them.

With that on your mind, turn with me again, if you would, to Psalm 23. Psalm 23.
There is benefit when you study the Bible to different ways of going through the Word. It's good to read quickly and to be able to go through chapter after chapter to be able to get a big picture and a sweeping view.
So those of us who are reading through the Bible in a year, we're doing that. We're reading four or five chapters a day, typically, and being able to get a quick run through the text to be able to see the big picture.
That's a helpful thing. It's also helpful to, at times, read more slowly and carefully and with deep meditation with what you're reading.
[1:21] It's not that one is good and the other is bad. Both have a place. It is possible in Bible study or even in preaching to go so slowly that while every single week may be helpful, you get to the end of that book and you don't really know what the book is about.

You know what each individual piece is but the whole flow of it. So, for example, if we were studying through the book of Ephesians, we could spend 18 months quite easily going through those six chapters and every week what we study would be, I pray, helpful for us.
Though, you could get to the end of it and not have a clear understanding of the entire letter. And so it's helpful to go back and just read Ephesians 1 to 6 in one setting. Both of those are helpful ways to understand the Bible, to go slow and methodical and deep and time to think but also helpful to read through it quickly to see the entire book and what the flow and argument is.
Both of those have a place in our life. If you were to just say, let's do a Bible study on Psalm 23, we could do that in an evening and there would be a good place for that.
In fact, my plan is to do that when we get through going slowly to spend one time together looking at the whole so that we understand the flow of all of it. But there's also a place in the Christian life to really slow down and to not let your eyes outpace your heart.
[2:53] To read slowly enough, carefully enough, that your heart just thinks deeply about what is in front of us.

There's a time to run. There's a time to lay down. And there's a time to walk. It's interesting in the text before, Psalm 23, 4, he says, Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We'll talk about that in just a moment. If you are late for your airplane in the airport and it's about to take off without you, that's not the time to walk.
That's the time to run. Thankfully, the last couple of weeks in traveling, I didn't have to do that. But I saw it happen. There's no way the guy I saw made his airplane.
He wasn't moving near quickly enough. But different story. There's a time to run. There's time to lie down. Last night, I got home. And we left L.A. yesterday.
[3:59] We ought to get up like at 4.30 or something and left at, I don't know, some hour I don't see very often. And we got home. And I did what old men do where you fall asleep without meaning to.

I slept once in the chair. And then I went to bed and slept once there. And then I woke up and got around and went back to bed and took a third round and woke up and didn't know what time it was. We lost two hours from California. We lost a third hour of time change. So tonight, I assure you, is a time to lie down. Green pastures or the bed, I don't care.
It's a time to lie down. There's a time for all of that. Time to run. Time to walk. Time to lie down. There's a time for all of those things.

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And that's true even spiritually. There's a time where we're moving quickly. And there's a time where we are slow. There's a time where the Lord has us in the season of a very full ministry.
[4:54] Another time where the Lord has us slowing down. One of the things that I think you know that on most Mondays, our pastoral team zooms with different pastors and theologians from all around the country.

Some of the very, very best and brightest pastors and teachers that we've got some relationships with. We Zoomed them in on Monday and they talk about doctrine and usually focus on something about preaching.
And it's just a great time of listening and learning. And the pastor that we were Zooming with last week was sharing with us this past Monday, was sharing with us that his life has been so full and so hectic.
And God's just wired him to go and go and go. And he's been in itinerant ministry for a number of years. And so every week he's just on a plane traveling every different place. And a few months ago he was diagnosed with cancer.
And so his travel has come down to almost nothing. His energy level because of treatments he's going through is almost nothing.
[5:56] In fact, he told us, he said, I've gone from trying to get 10 things done a day to if I can just get one thing done a day, that's a win. And he said last week, he said, I'm meeting with you guys. That's my one thing.

Anything else of today is extra. And he said in the course of that conversation that while it's hard for him because he wants to be running, he wants to be going and going, that the Lord clearly has him right now in a season of a very slow pace.
There's a time to run. There's a time to walk. And there's a time to lie down. And as we're going through Psalm 23, this is a time that we're purposely moving quite slowly.
Purposely striving to not get too quickly through the scenery, but to stop and to see and to examine and to meditate.
To try to understand the metaphors and the language. To try to connect with the poetry and the beauty and the theology. And admittedly, part of why this is hard for us is we have to travel to a land we're not that accustomed to.
[7:07] At least for me, I've not spent a lot of time with sheep. Not done a lot of shepherding in a literal sense in my life. And so we've got to go back and we've got to try to learn.

And it's been my job to try to help you to understand some of what is being said. And why the Holy Spirit has inspired David to write the things that he has.
And it's because he's taking what may be unknown to us, or at least uncommon to us. A very common metaphor in his day, in that time.
To simply take the role of the shepherd and to say, There is much comfort for God's people if you recognize the Lord is my shepherd.
And because those words are so familiar to us. It can be so tempting to just move quickly. But I am purposely trying to labor each phrase of this chapter into your hearts and into your minds.
[8:08] Recognizing that as we go through Psalm 23, from season to season, maybe from week to week, perhaps even from day to day, what you need to be reminded of, of who the Lord is, may change.

For you, you maybe feel like you're going through a time of discipline with the Lord. And you need to remember, as we'll look at tonight and tomorrow or next Sunday night, that part of the comfort we have is the discipline of God.
It's a comforting thing. Painful the time? Sure. Hebrews 12, 11 says that. But there's a comfort in that. When Marce and I had young children at home, we had rules.
And no child particularly likes rules. However, there is a great comfort for a child in knowing somebody wiser and smarter than me is looking out for me.
There's comfort in that. There's comfort in knowing that if they go beyond the rules, there's punishment. And not in the moment that they want that discipline, but there's comfort in a child knowing somebody loves me enough to correct me.
[9:19] Not because they hate me, but quite the opposite, because they love me so deeply. That's important. And maybe for you, it's not about discipline.

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And maybe for you, you're at a time where your soul just feels weary. And so it's helpful to remember that the Lord restores our soul.
Maybe you're at a place in your life where you just need direction. And so it's comforting to be reminded, as we studied last week, that He leads us in the paths of righteousness. Or maybe you're having a hard time understanding what is all of life about and what is all of the details of your life. What's the point of it all? And so as we left off last week, we think of these words, it's all for His name's sake. Nothing will give your day more meaning than to wake up first thing in the morning and remind yourself thoughtfully, purposefully, prayerfully, my life today is to be lived for the sake of His name.
No matter who sees, no matter who affirms, no matter who opposes, my life today exists for one reason. Bring glory to His name.
[10:36] And for so many people, they miss that simple truth. We look for our meaning in all of these things of the world. We look for our meaning in all of these things that are beyond and all the time missing, that what gives your life meaning is that when you live daily for the glory of His name.

Not yours, but His. And at other times, it's just this very first phrase, the Lord is my shepherd.
The Lord is my shepherd. Have you had the occasion where you are in a parking lot and maybe you forgot where you were parked and it's crowded and there's cars everywhere?
I don't know how people did this years ago before they had the fobs, but you ever get your fob and start pushing the lock? Not to unlock it, just to try to find out where is my car. We've all been there. Two weeks ago, when I was in L.A., I was in a rental car and I was parked in a crowded parking lot and it was the first day I was in it and I parked the car, got out of it, went to do the teaching and preaching I was doing that day, went back, and I realized I don't have a clue what my rental car looks like.
[11:53] I picked it up, drove it. I don't know the make. I don't know what model it is. I certainly don't. I don't know the license tag of my own car, much less license tag of a car I'm rented.

I don't have a clue where it is. And I'm going around pushing that thing just like an idiot, just hoping some light will come on and some, you know, noise we made.
Now, what's interesting is I was surrounded by all kinds of cars. That was of no comfort to me. For me to get where I was going, I had to find my car.
It had to be the right one. It had to be a vehicle I had access to that could take me or lead me in the right direction and destination.
And so the psalmist says the Lord is my shepherd. He's the right one to lead me. Now, that's important because this world offers you all kinds of shepherding.
[13:00] If you don't think it does, you're not watching. This world will offer you 10,000 roads. It will promise a road to happiness, a road to fulfillment.

I mean, you just watch the commercials around Christmastime, and it would appear that you're just one purchase away from finding joy and happiness. Back in my olden days when I used to play golf poorly, now I just don't play golf at all.
It's not that I play it well. I don't play it now. I used to play it poorly. When I used to play it poorly, I was every golf store's delight because I was convinced through my whole career, and I'm using career quite loosely, I was always convinced I was one club away.
Any of you golfers that foolish? Wasting as much money as I did? I was one club away. If I just had the right driver, if I just had the right putter, I'd go to the store, I'd hit it, and the salesman would say, you can't miss with this putter.
I was like, I bet you're wrong, but I'll buy it. Do you have trouble getting out of the sand trap? Yeah, I do. You lose a lot of strokes because of the sand?
[14:18] I do. You've got to try this wedge. You can't hit wrong with this. Well, give me that too. Now, the world will tell you you're just one club away, one car away, one promotion away, one dream house away, one relationship away.

This world will offer you 10,000 paths, and the world, as a false shepherd, beckons you to come, beckons you to follow.
And so we slowly remind ourselves, the Lord is my shepherd. And because the Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I need that I will lack.
And so we purposefully read these words slowly and thoughtfully, because this is more than just a promise.

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It is that, but it's a path. And a path is something that you journey on. And a journey leads you somewhere, namely, a destination, which is where following the shepherd leads us to one day be truly home with the Lord.
[15:52] So as we have already studied, it says, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
And now we come to verse 4. I'll read verse 4. We're going to look at just the first half of it tonight.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.
For, here's the because, here's the reason, here's the explanation. The conviction is, I fear no evil. Here's the ground that conviction is built upon.
For, you are with me. And your rod and your staff they comfort me.
[16:54] In verse 1, the hope is that the Lord, Yahweh, is His shepherd. And the conviction that we have nothing to fear rests in the solid bedrock of this proclamation, you are with me.

Pronouns are different. The pronouns have gone from he and his to you and your.
It's worth noting because in verse 4, we're not beside still waters. And in verse 4, we're not lying down.
In verse 4, we're led through the valley of the shadow of death. And in that hardest, darkest, driest season, it would be fitting that we go from speaking of our shepherd to crying out directly to our shepherd.
You are with me. As we go through verse 4, we'll do so this week and next week.
[18:20] I want you to notice a few things. Here's number one. The reality of dark days. The reality of dark days.

even though I walk through the valley. A shepherd would lead his sheep through valleys to get up to the mountain.
This is not simply poetry. It is that. It's more than that, though. This is drawing upon real life. This is taking the metaphor and just applying it in a very real, practical way.
This is what a shepherd would do. He leads his sheep. As we've already looked at, the sheep can't stay in one place. They've got to go to a place to get more pasture to feed.
They can't be in the same place so they wear ruts. You wear ruts, the sheep fall over. Sheep fall over, gases build up in their body, blood doesn't flow, and they can quite quickly perish.
[19:22] And so they've got to be led. And they don't stay in the same place all year long. You take your flocks to distant ranges in the summer and they move along slowly, feeding as they go, working their way up the mountain.

By late summer, they are up on that remote mountain above the timber line. That's how you would lead your sheep. When autumn comes, that early snow can start to settle on the highest ridges and so what do you do with the flock?
You take them to lower elevations. By winter, the sheep are back at the ranch where they spend the winter. The flock is now alone with the shepherd.
Springtime has left the pasture bare and they're leaving and they're going to be gone for weeks, most likely months. They stay until late autumn until the grass is gone and the chill is unbearable.
even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Now, I want you to notice that verse 4 follows verse 3.
[20:39] And before you say, well, that's obvious, it is numerically. But notice also the storyline. He's walking through the valley of the shadow of death which is not a different thing than verse 3 when He leads you in paths of righteousness.

The shepherd is leading the sheep in the paths that are straight and the paths that are high and in the valley. Same shepherd. It's not that verse 3 is a faithful shepherd and verse 4 is an unfaithful shepherd.
The sheep can't stay where they are. They have to move. They have to go down to the valleys. They have to go up to the mountains.
And they have to come back down again. And in the realm of a shepherd and sheep as far as in a literal sense there's a few reasons why you would take your sheep to the valley.
There's rivers and streams and springs there. It's a well-watered route and that's one reason. In the summer months you take your sheep on these long drives and they get hot and they get tired and

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they get thirsty so you go to the valley and they're able to be refreshed.
[22:06] The valley often has the richest feed for them. As you get these meadows along the valley at the stream banks there's a reason you lead them through the valleys.

But there's also dangers. There's predators. There's animals that are nearby. Also the valleys can often have very sudden storms.
The valleys can flood quickly. You've experienced valleys in your life. You can take the literal and quite quickly I know make that application in your own heart.
You're not immune or exempt from valleys. You've been there when the sudden storm comes up. Some valleys we see coming.
Sometimes there's warnings. Sometimes there's hints. Sometimes it's one phone call out of nowhere that changed your life forever.
[23:20] Sometimes it's one bad choice. Sometimes it's somebody else's bad choice. John 16 33 says I have said these things to you that in me you may have peace.

In the world you will have tribulation but take heart I have overcome the world. Now I do want you to notice here in verse 4 even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death in the valley is not the time to lie down.
It's not the time to quit. It's not the time to give up. It's the time to walk. You keep walking.
Spiritually speaking we don't like valleys. We prefer the smooth road. Who wouldn't? We prefer things to be pretty simple not complicated.
We prefer life to be full and joyful not sorrowful. We prefer people to be on our side not against us. We prefer to be surrounded by our loved ones not enemies.
[24:43] We prefer those who are close to us to be faithful to us not betray us. We prefer ministry to bear spiritual fruit that we can see so we can know God you're doing something with what I'm doing.

We don't prefer the valleys. We don't choose them. But you know this too we learn much in the valley.
that's where we learn so much. It's in the valley that we learn how much we need the Lord how much we depend on the Lord and I would feel safe to say if you could go back and chart the times where your prayer life was the strongest and the most consistent it was not the mountaintop it was the valley that you had to walk through.
It's in those moments you cling to the Lord. It's in the valley you open the Bible and say I must find rest and comfort.
In the mountaintop it may be that you read your Bible quickly it may be that you try to fit it in because you know that you should it may be that you pray hurriedly because you feel guilty if you don't but in the valley you say I need nothing else I must be with the Lord.
[26:07] On the mountaintop we're often prone to think of our strength it's in the valley we realize I can't make it without the shepherd.

Church we need the valleys we need them if not we become self-sufficient and self-sufficient people soon become prayerless and prayerless people are not fruitful for the kingdom we need the valley notice in verse 3 he leads us in paths of righteousness listen to the words of one author the valley of the shadow we have not left the paths of righteousness in the valley we're still walking the path that leads to righteousness this is not a detour to the purpose of God it's part of it so many times we think in terms of if the Lord is blessing if I'm faithful if the Lord is faithful then that has to mean life is easy if life is hard if life is painful that must mean either
I've left the path or God has left me the psalmist does not give you that option the psalmist says he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake and still I will walk through the valley the valley of death in the days of deep darkness do not mean we have left the paths of righteousness don't think the shepherd has abandoned you in the days of the valley even though I walk through the valley and here he says of the shadow of death interpreters split a bit here on how to best understand what is being meant here let me show you two different ways that this is interpreted both of them lead to biblical ends some some see the valley of the shadow of death speaking of a valley of darkness that we walk through dark valleys meaning that we all experience pain and grief and loss times where it feels like the sun is blocked and we're living there in that shadow of darkness it's worth knowing that even though we belong to God and he is our shepherd and even though he provides for us we still walk through valleys and that's certainly true it may be for you that

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in a day of loss or in a day of grief or maybe in losing a loved one in a time of sorrow it may be that at first you felt like people rallied around you and at first it seemed like everyone was aware of your pain at first people remembered and at first people seemed to go out of their way to comfort you and it's not that your friends or your family stopped loving you it's just that as time marches on sometimes the fullness of people calling and coming by and bringing food and sending cards checking on you gives way to real life and now you feel a bit alone you maybe find yourself trying to navigate this loss of your life when a memory comes to mind and in an instant you're plunged into the valley or though it's not truly there you in your mind get a whiff of the cologne of your husband or the perfume that your wife wore and in a second you're plunged into the valley even in those dark days be reminded that he is with us some take the valley of the shadow of death to just speak of times of loss that it's the emphasis here is on the shadow not that it's death itself but it's the darkness of life that we go through and it's true we go through that and when we go through that let us remind ourselves he is with us there's a second way though that some interpret the valley of death and that is to take it more of a literal suggestion just as certain sheep would eventually die so do we we all have to face death
Hebrews 9 27 appointed a man to die once after that the judgment Psalm 90 verse 12 teach us how to walk in wisdom because our days are short if you understand it in this sense what David is saying is don't face death without facing God don't come to the end of your life without knowing the Lord is your shepherd and the reality is that in your life you're going to experience both of those things you're going to experience the shadow the pain the darkness but the truth is you're also going to come to a time where you experience the very end of your physical earthly life both are true nobody is getting through this life without pain and nobody is getting through this life unless the Lord comes back for his church without first facing death when you go through the valley of the shadow of death here's your declaration
I fear no evil whether it's the shadow of a hard world that I must walk through whether it's the shadow of opposition or persecution I will fear no evil or whether it's your final last days your last moment and it's your true literal death we fear no evil nothing to fear for God's people nothing to fear R.C.
[33:06] Sproul once once said I'm not afraid of death though a bit anxious about dying I get that so do you I'm not afraid to close my eyes and wake up in glory that's not a problem the way that we go to glory can make us nervous at times for sure but here's the promise though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death there's two things I want you to connect here one is you're still being led verse three by your shepherd and two you need not fear you need not fear you say well what if what if somebody wants to harm me what if somebody wants to injure me what if somebody turns against me what if the evil of somebody else seeks my demise here's the promise I fear no evil

I don't fear man he says I don't fear the systems of this world I don't fear what somebody can do to me and even if that valley of the shadow of death leads to your actual true literal death in that moment no fear for the people of God why for you are with me now let's just talk real for a moment most of us in this room would say I trust God today but I don't know if I have the faith and the grace to truly look death in the eye and make it well let me comfort you for a moment you don't need that grace today it will be provided for you you need the faith in the
Lord today you need your hope and trust in the Lord today you must have the assurance that he is your shepherd today but you don't need the grace for tomorrow he'll give you grace today and when that day comes and when you face the true shadow of your death or even the reality of your own death in that valley the shepherd is still present with you and in that moment he will provide for you exactly what you need so I'll just say in my own life in my own life if you said are you ready to be with the Lord you bet if he wants to rapture us out of here tonight I'm in if he doesn't I've got some things I'm looking forward to I've got a lot of life I'm looking forward to if he allows it I've got not one but now two grand babies on the way in an unrelated note
I'm looking for a part time job I've got lots of things that make me smile these days but one of these days maybe decades from now maybe a week from now one of these days I will face death and I don't know that I have the grace today in the sense of I don't know what's waiting for me here's what I do know I know who's waiting for me in that place that's the comfort we have you don't need to know all the details of your life you just need to know the Lord is your shepherd you don't need to know the details of the shadows you will walk through you just need to be reminded you are with me that's the comfort

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I mean in an earthly sense in an earthly sense the Lord gave me a wife on May 18 1996 which is 28 years almost 28 years so more than half my life I've been married and when we got married I had no idea what if the Lord would give us 28 years I had no idea what those would look like I had no idea what our life would look like and I've got to confess to you I really in my life I've spent zero time worrying about what life would look like because she was with me that's just a temporary thing because one day death will part us I may go before her she may go before me if I go before her I'm in trouble I've been instructed not to let that happen she's supposed to go first I'm not supposed to be a part of that process so that marital comfort that marital peace is real it's true though it just points to a greater reality because our marriage is not the ultimate my relationship with Christ is ultimate her relationship with Christ is ultimate not the marriage the marriage is a beautiful thing it's a precious gift from the Lord but it's just something that points to something even greater well here's the spiritual reality

[38:45] I don't know when my valley's coming and I don't know how long it will last and I don't know how dark it will be and I don't know what it will take from me I do know this in that darkest hardest loneliest place the Lord is my shepherd and he is with me and with those two truths here's what you do in the valley what's your verb in verse 4 what's the first verb you come to say it with me we need some English even though I walk church when you come to your valley you walk with your shepherd you keep moving with him you keep looking at the steps he's left for you you keep trusting you keep walking looking at his word seeking him in prayer recognizing the nearness of the spirit participating you keep walking you keep walking you keep going you don't lie down in fear because you need not fear why because he is with me you walk through the valley it's an interesting reality to be able to understand that the valley you go through is still the path of righteousness this is not the abandonment of God in fact it may just be it's the time you sense the nearness of God more than any other time in your life now as a church here's what you have to remember there are times you're walking your mountaintop and the person beside you walks the valley which is why the church must be a place of prayer and service and grace and love

I'll be honest with you though my life has challenges and headaches and deadlines and all those things I never come to church on the Lord's Day sad never and it's not because I'm holy it's because I'm just on the Lord's Day reminded not only that we're here to worship the Lord but I just think to myself that when I walk into this sanctuary I'm surrounded by hundreds of people who love and trust the Lord and are walking together walking together and no matter what my week has been like I just can't I just can't get over the joy of knowing not only is the Lord my shepherd but like a sheep in the metaphor

I'm a part of a flock that's walking together it's an amazing reality I mean it would be enough to just say the Lord is my shepherd and it's one sheep and one shepherd that would be enough but he's done so much more for us yes we have the Lord and yes that's our greatest gift but he's also brought us into a family that's why congregational worship is something we should never take lightly we're a bunch of sheep rescued by the shepherd held by the shepherd following the shepherd some on the mountaintop and some in the valley but as believers all of us walking the paths the Lord has for us our shepherd is sovereign he's sovereign over the still waters and he's sovereign over the valley and one of the lies the enemy will try to get you to buy into is that when you go through your valley that your shepherd has abandoned you don't fall for it he's as sovereign over your winter as he is your spring and we trust him and because we trust him we fear no evil is it because there's not evil around us of course there's evil around us when David pens this he understands there are predators in the valley there can be jagged cliffs in the valley we're going to look at next week the shepherd has a rod and he has a staff and it's for a reason it's not decoration it's to protect it's to defend it's to discipline it's to rescue there's real threat in the valley but what do you do you keep walking with the shepherd trusting him driving out fear for one bedrock reason for you are with me and as long as that's true you keep walking give me 60 seconds and we're done there are some of you in here tonight

I may or may not even know the situation I don't even necessarily know who I'm speaking to right now I just know this there's some of you in this room tonight and you're in your valley and it's dark here's what you do this week you walk with your shepherd you move with your shepherd you read his word you cry out to him in prayer you gather with the flock and you keep moving reminding yourself that in your darkest deepest pit it would be impossible for you to be alone for he is with you and as you reach out to the shepherd you just know this that he is with you and his rod and his staff

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they comfort you you've not been neglected you're being led in paths of righteousness and the shepherd who was sovereign besides still waters is the same shepherd who holds you in the valley and he is still with you brothers and sisters in the valley keep walking with Jesus with you and with you and with you and with you and and for you and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and and fathers and fathers and and fathers and and fathers and fathers and and and

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