In the movie *City Slickers*, Billy Crystal plays a baby boomer who sells radio advertising time. On the day he and other fathers visit his son's school to tell the kids about their work, Crystal waxes philosophical about life’s journey:

Value this time in your life, kids, because this is the time in your life when you still have choices. It goes by so fast.

When you're a teenager, you think you can do anything and you do. Your twenties are a blur.

Thirties, you raise your family, you make a little money, and you think to yourself, "What happened to my twenties?"

Forties, you grow a little potbelly, you grow another chin. The music gets too loud; one of your girlfriends from high school becomes a grandmother.

Fifties, you have a minor surgery—you'll call it a procedure, but it's a surgery.

Sixties, you'll have a major surgery, the music is still loud, but it doesn't matter because you can't hear it anyway.

Seventies, you and the wife retire to Fort Lauderdale. You start eating dinner at 2:00 in the afternoon, you have lunch around 10:00, breakfast the night before, spend most of your time wandering around malls looking for the ultimate soft yogurt and muttering, "How come the kids don't call? How come the kids don't call?"

The eighties, you'll have a major stroke, and you end up babbling with some Jamaican nurse who your wife can't stand but who you call mama.

Any questions?¹

There were none. And what a cynical, if even a little bit true, picture of life’s journey! But **whatever the course** your journey takes, the clock keeps ticking and moments fly by. Sometimes life feels like a Sunday drive, sometimes like a prison sentence, sometimes like a roller coaster, sometimes like a merry-go-round, sometimes like a grind. Sometimes life feels the way I once heard a pilot describe long flights: *“hours of boredom punctuated with moments of sheer terror.”* Any way you cut it and whatever the experiences along the way, life is a long and winding road.

As we continue our *Summer Songs* series, I invite you to open your Bible to maybe the most well-known song of all: **Psalm 23**. During this series we’re unpacking a psalm, connecting it to a popular song from our culture, and learning how to sing the Christ-life in our day. In spite of the fact you mostly hear this psalm in connection with funerals; the funeral home doesn’t own it. The psalm is a song for all of life’s journey. **Let the music begin ...**

Having been a Beatles fan since I was a kid, I had to get one of their songs in the series somewhere. Though this is not my favorite Beatles song, it was a **number one hit** in 1970. It came off the *Let It Be* album, was their last number one song, and the last hit before the group broke up and each Beatle went down his own long and winding road apart from the others.

Most of you know their stories. They all did a solo act for a while. Paul started a new band called Wings and kept the hits coming. A few years ago his long-time wife Linda died of cancer. He’s been remarried and divorced since then, is 71 years old, and still making music today. John was murdered on a New York street in 1980. George died of cancer in 2001. Ringo is 73, has been married and divorced a time a two and still does concerts now and then. Their lives have been long and winding roads—some longer than others.

So are ours. And I think a lot of folks who have lived a long time would tell us that **more important** than the length of life’s road is the company we keep in the journey. David would agree with that, I think, and that’s what spawned his song we know as the 23rd Psalm. **Hear the word of the Lord ...** *(read the text)*.
Did you notice David’s companion in the journey? He introduces Him to us in the very first stanza of his song: “The Lord is my shepherd.” Doesn't that seem like an appropriate metaphor for a man who shepherded a lot of sheep in his early years? Why wasn’t David with the rest of his brothers when Samuel came to anoint one of Jesse’s boys to be the new king? Because David was out taking care of his daddy’s sheep. While much of the time, shepherding was pretty peaceful, there were moments of danger in there too: wandering sheep, wolves and bears looking for a leg a lamb. In fact, sheep are pretty much a tragedy waiting to happen. Australian writer, A. B. Patterson, has written about merino sheep which, in his words, “display a talent for getting in trouble and a genius for dying that are almost incredible.” David understood that about sheep, understood the role of the shepherd. And if Psalm 23 is, as I suspect, the reflections of a mature old man, across the years David had come to understand himself more as a sheep and God more as a shepherd. “The Lord is my shepherd.” That’s David’s companion on the long and winding road of life. And the whole psalm is saturated with God’s presence.

As one scholar points out, the Lord shows up at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the psalm:

Verse 1: The Lord is my shepherd ....

Verse 4: For you are with me ....

And verse 6: And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Or, to put it in short form: “The Lord ... with me ... forever.” Don't you like the sound of that? “The Lord ... with me ... forever”—as shepherd, as traveling companion, and as host. Every step, every experience, the whole journey through—“The Lord ... with me ... forever.” Do you feel the rhythm of it? Do you hear the melody? Say it with me: “The Lord ... with me ... forever.” It'll sing. And its lyrics lend a confidence with which you can travel the long and winding road of life.

Though this song begins in the serenity of lush, green pastures and still, quiet waters, it was probably born in the valley of the shadow of death. Notice

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2Cited in Ann Spangler, Praying the Names of God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 190.
3James Limburg, Psalms for Sojourners (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 52.
the intensity of David's language in the valley. He moves from third person language to second person language, from reflection to personal address, from "the Lord is my shepherd" to 'you are with me." Did David write this song in the valley?

He didn’t begin this song in the valley. He could have. David starts plenty of other songs with the blues. Why not this one? Well, maybe David wrote this song as an older man. He certainly writes as one who’s been around the block a few times. He’s been in the valley before, so he doesn’t let the shadows hide the light. It may be bad now. The valley may be as dark as the bowels of a cave. The chill of death may be in the air. But David’s lived long enough to have perspective, long enough to realize that the valley won’t last forever, long enough to whistle in the dark. He is, after all, passing through the valley, he says. Things have been better before. Things will be better again. So he finds confidence and hope in the valley by prayerfully reflecting on the way the Lord has been with him his whole long and winding road of life.

II

The Lord has been with him in the good times. Listen to him sing: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside the still waters, He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake."

What a peaceful scene David remembers: acres and acres of green grass lying as a carpet on the hillside. He may remember taking off his shoes, kicking them aside, and wiggling his toes in damp, cool grass kissed by morning dew.

He looks at the waters. They are playing catch with the sun. The sun throws them her rays of light, and the waters catch those beams and throw them back in all directions. Such a scene is inviting, so he gets closer to the waters and peers into them. He sees himself in every detail as if the waters were a mirror. Well, one doesn’t often see water this still, so he picks up a rock on the shore—the flattest, roundest rock he can find—and skips it across the glassy surface. "Maybe I can break my record today," as he counts the skips: "One-two-three-four...."
Pretty soon he gets tired of skipping rocks, so he reclines on the cool grass and listens to the morning symphony. The whippoorwill calls in the distance. Bobwhites soon join the chorus. Leaves rustled by the wind add percussion. And cattle grazing in a nearby field fill in the bass.

What a peaceful scene! You been there—in places or circumstances that just drip with peace and satisfaction and serenity? It's in times like these that the Lord restores our souls. And the Lord gives us these kinds of times in our life's journey. Times when we know that we have everything we need. Times when we are walking in righteous paths. Times when we get a glimpse of heaven and can join Louis Armstrong and sing What a Wonderful World.

- It’s late Christmas Eve, you’ve been to the Christmas Eve service, the kids are in bed, the fire is crackling, and you sit in front of the tree sipping hot chocolate and so very thankful for God’s mercies.

- It’s the quietness of a hospital room on the evening after you’ve had your first child. The baby lay sleeping in her bed. And you feel a warmth you’ve never known in your life.

- It’s the best round of golf you ever shot or the biggest fish you ever caught. It’s a walk-off hit in the bottom of the ninth, a basket at the buzzer, the winning touchdown as time is running out. It’s nailing your solo or getting an A you really needed in a class that’s really hard.

- It’s the word announcing your long awaited promotion.

- It’s laying on the white sands of a beach, feeling the ocean breeze, listening to waves tumble on the shore and the sounds of children laughing and seagulls squawking, enjoying the fact that you don’t have to go to work today.

- It’s the doctor saying, “It’s not cancer after all. You’re going to be just fine.”

- It’s the Razorbacks winning a National Championship.

You name the circumstances, but you just feel so blessed and so loved and so very, very well. Our Jewish friends have a word for this; they call it shalom.
Psalm 23 teaches us how to sing these times to the Lord. Whether we’re looking back in gratitude or whether we’re in the midst of such moments, when we learn to sing Psalm 23 in these times, we’re reminded anew of the Lord’s guiding, caring presence in our lives. And we’re ablaze with confidence and trust in the Shepherd Lord who gives us everything we need. *The Lord ... with me ... forever.* The Lord is with us in the good times.

### III

**But, of course, all of life is not ice cream and candy, is it?** Life is not always marked by peace and tranquility and shalom. There’s danger out there too, lurking in the valley of the shadow. Notice how David changes key: *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 staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.* There’s danger out there all right—death and darkness and enemies hiding in the bushes. David is no escapist, and Psalm 23 is no escapist song either. Just as some moments in life’s journey can be very, very good, other moments can be very, very hard. Some moments of life must be prayed in minor chords; happy pop gives way to the blues. And David shows us that God is with us in those times too.

He is with us in the dark valleys. He’s with us when death knocks at our door. He’s with us when we get that middle-of-the-night phone call telling us mom has died. He’s with us when the biopsy says cancer. He’s with us when our eyesight grows dim, our hearing grows faint, and a cane or a walker or a wheelchair become as necessary in our lives as food and drink and shelter. He’s with us when enemies gather around us. He’s with us when the divorce papers are served. He’s with us when the pink slip bears our name. He is with us when there’s too much month at the end of the money. He’s with us when the criticism comes. He’s with us when we don’t make the team and don’t get the scholarship. He’s with us when a friend betrays us. He’s with us when we are overwhelmed by a job that seems impossible to do. He’s with us in times like these. You say, *But these circumstances are so dark.* Yes, but the Lord is with you. As Corrie Ten Boom, a Nazi concentration camp survivor, liked to say, *When the Lord is hiding you under His wings, it can get pretty dark.*

The Lord is with us—even in the dark times. And when we learn to pray this part of life’s long and winding road, somehow, some way, we experience
His presence in a way that gives us comfort, confidence, hope, and everything we need. We may just realize that in spite of such circumstances our cup overflows. "The Lord ... with me ... forever."

IV

And when we learn to sing this prayer in the good times and the bad times of life's journey, we are reminded that God will be faithful to the end. "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

God is not fickle. He will not pull the rug out from under you at the last minute. He will never leave you or forsake you. God will be, God is, faithful to the end. You may change your mind about people in this life: you thought she was a friend, but she turned out not to be; you thought he'd stay married to you till death do you part, but he found somebody else and bailed on you; you thought your boss was a woman of integrity, but you found out differently. People change—and not always for the better. People you trust may let you down. People you love may decide to quit loving you back. I'm not so cynical to believe that there are no people you can depend on, no people who won't let you down when you lean on them. I have some friends like that, and I hope I'm a friend like that. But anybody who's lived any length of time knows that you can't count on everybody.

But David reminds us that you can count on God. He is not fickle. He does not leave us or forsake us. He won't divorce us or bail on us or change His mind about us. Sometimes He's hard to find. Sometimes we wonder if He's got our back or not. There are even moments when we feel like He lets us down. But that's in the moment.

David had those moments too: "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long will my enemies be exalted over me?" David had his moments.

Jeremiah had his moments: "Lord, you have deceived me, and I am deceived."
Job had his moments: “Even today my complaint is bitter; God’s hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find Him, if only I could go to His dwelling! I would state my case before Him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what He would answer me....” Job had his moments.

And you and I have our moments too. But that’s when we remember that life is more than any particular moment. Life is a long and winding road; it’s all the moments strung together. And like David, when we are looking back on life with the perspective of our many years, even the most difficult moments we had will be swallowed up in the faithfulness of God. David’s prayer will be ours: “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” God is not fickle. He will not pull the rug out from under you at the last minute. He will never leave you or forsake you. God will be faithful to the end. I’ve stood over the deathbed of too many Christians, some just old and worn out, others stricken by cancer and disease. I’ve shared the 23rd Psalm with them, and as they stare death in the face, I sometimes ask, “So, is Psalm 23 still true?” “Yes,” they say, “still true.” And as my 90-year-old Uncle Doc added on his deathbed, “And that’s why I’m going to die with a smile on my face.”

No matter where your long and winding road takes you, put your hand in the hand of our shepherd God and you will never walk it alone. God is with you, and God is faithful to the end—“The Lord ... with me ... forever.”

V

Casey Alexander writes of working with a woman named Mary who was stricken with Huntington’s disease, an hereditary degenerative brain disease that slowly isolates its sufferers by loss of speech, inability to control movements, and eventually dementia.

This once vibrant, active woman slowly deteriorated. When Casey began to work with Mary she was able to tell him a lot about herself. That changed over time. It got to the point where Casey would try to guess, often wrongly what Mary was trying to say to him.

Casey knew that Mary loved the 23rd Psalm so they’d recite that together as best they could. She’d shout the words with gusto though her version was
condensed to these words: “My shepherd! Green pastures! No evil! With me! Anoint! Cup! Mercy!”

As the months passed and her disease worsened, Mary’s recitation of the psalm was reduced to two words—just two. And though she could only say two words of the psalm, those words said it all: “With me!” she muttered, “with me!”

That was enough for her. And it will prove enough for us all on the long and winding road of life:

“The Lord … with me … forever.”

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John Scott McCallum II

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