

## Psalm 23 & Ephesians 2:11-22

Have you ever thought how strange it is that Psalm 23 is so popular in Australia? So well-recognized? It's part of our public religion. People ask for it to be sung at funerals, but also at state occasions.

Yet the picture it gives of the shepherd is so different from what many Aussies see every day of our lives. We see stockmen, Jillaroos, jackeroos. Their flocks of sheep don't number up to a hundred. But thousands! They don't lead the sheep. They push them from behind. They don't know each sheep by name. To them sheep are just ewes, rams or lambs - or a number on a tag. They don't lock them up for the night and sleep in the barn with them. They don't carry a rod or a staff but perhaps a whip or even a cattle prod. The only time they touch the sheep is not to nurse them to sleep, but to tag them, to perhaps shear them, or to give them an injection.

Yet, we love Psalm 23 with its talk of a shepherd who knows the sheep, cares intimately for them, rescues them, feeds them, and protects them. Of course in another way that's how Aussie shepherds behave. It's just that they don't do it like these guys did.

Of course Psalm 23 is not about how to look after dumb animals.

It's about the LORD. It takes that selfless, intimate, caring picture of the Middle Eastern shepherd as a mind-blowing picture of the only true and living God. The God who took the motley Israelites as his own flock. He chose them from among all the nations to be his own people and to be the sheep of his pasture, as Psalm 95 reminds us. He kept them safe from their enemies. He promised them an eternal party with him that would

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make their enemies jealous. And all as a free gift. Just because he loved them.

But are we right to think it's about us?

This all turns on the answer to the question: "Who is the shepherd and who are the sheep?"

It was an astounding 1000 years after King David sang and wrote Psalm 23 that Jesus of Nazareth hits the headlines for doing exactly what God as the shepherd of his people did for Israel. He gave his people rest. He fed them in a desert place. He held back the forces of death by healing the sick.

So, Jesus is the Good Shepherd as he made clear and explicit - the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd who in order to rescue and provide for his beloved sheep laid down his own life for them.

But still we have to ask the question:

How does this really apply today - if at all? Can Jesus be my Good Shepherd here on the other side of the world and 2 millennia later? If I want to testify with King David:

***23:1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.***

***23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;***

***23:3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake -***

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Am I fooling myself? Is it possible for Aussies to sing this and it be true for them?

Or is Psalm 23 like Shakespeare - impressive language expressing impressive thoughts, but really from a bygone era?

Our epistle today gives as clear an answer as the Bible ever does.

Did you notice how these words of the Apostle Paul continues to speak of “you” and “us”?

e.g. v11: ***remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth,***

and compares those ones with

***those who are called "the circumcision"***

In v17 He speaks of ***you who were far off and those who were near;***

What's going on here?

The greatest division in the human race is not between those of different genders, between those of different educational standards; between those of different races; between those of different colour; between those of different locations, different languages, different religions or different ages.

It's between Jew and non-Jew!

Between Jew and Gentile.

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Between those who have the Law of God and those who do not.

Between those who were chosen by God to be his own special people and those who were not.

And this matters.

Listen to how he describes the huge disadvantage of those who are not Jewish: (v 12) - ***without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.***

These words are a sober lesson that if we are not Jewish, no matter how many times we might sing Psalm 23 with all the passion and longing we can muster it can never be true for us. It belongs to the Jews. We are not Jewish. So, we have “No hope” of being close to God. In fact we are “without God”. His ears are deaf to us. We do not belong to him.

I am so grateful for the word “BUT”

Because listen to this:

***2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.***

***2:14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.***

The exclusion from God is over.

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The racial hostility we see play out in the parable of the Good Samaritan is broken down. No matter whether Jewish or Gentile, it's God - not we ourselves - God has drawn us foreigners into membership of his own people. So now we - who have no birthright as children of God - are treated as honoured heirs of all the promises of God. We are just as close to him, he is as intimate with us as he was with the believing Jews. In fact - even closer.

Because this is the important point:

All this is ONLY, ONLY because of Christ!

Listen again to v13 ***But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.***

Whether Jewish or Gentile by background, it is ONLY "in Christ Jesus" that God welcomes us to himself. REPEAT

NOW God Openly says: "These are mine"

NOW God Empowers us who were without hope and without God in the world to testify "The LORD is my Shepherd".

Jesus says about us who once were far off from God: "Father, I died for this one to bring them to you. They had no hope. They were without you. They were not yours. They did not know your or my loving shepherd-like care and blessing. They were barred from claiming to be yours. But when I died on the cross I paid to reconcile them perfectly to you. They can now sing truthfully "The LORD is my shepherd"

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Friends, sisters and brothers - belonging to God, knowing him as our Good Shepherd, being forgiven by him, having the certainty of the resurrection to eternal life, being a member of God's forever family is all because of Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul my life my all”