

The Seeking Shepherd

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Luke 15:3 And he spake this parable unto them, saying, [4] What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? [5] And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. [6] And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. [7] I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

The main theme of the three parables in this chapter is: the recovery of the lost sinner. However, the parable treated here emphasizes particularly the truth of the seeking Shepherd.

The occasion for all three parables is found in the first two verses of the chapter. During Jesus' ministry, publicans and sinners were attracted to Him and eagerly heard Him. The Scribes and Pharisees were offended by this. Publicans were tax collectors in the hire of Rome, were often greedy and covetous, and, were despised by the Jews who considered them traitors to the cause of Israel. The sinners referred to were the common people of the land who were looked down upon by the leaders of the people because they knew not the law, were the scum of the marketplaces, the adulterers, the harlots, the petty thieves and beggars who infested the land. To the self-righteous Pharisees these people had no claim to the promises made to Abraham. The Scribes and Pharisees thought they alone were worthy to enter the kingdom. That these people were attracted to Jesus and that He received them and even ate with them was proof to the Pharisees that Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah Whom He claimed to be. The grumbling of the Pharisees and Scribes became the occasion for these beautiful parables which explain the true nature of Jesus' calling. Jesus points out that His eating and drinking with publicans and sinners was precisely the proof that He was the Messiah because He was the Son of Man, Who had come to seek and to save those that are lost.

The parable is simplicity itself. A certain man had one hundred sheep which he cared for on his farm and which he brought safely to the fold in the evening. But one evening, as he was leading his sheep into the fold and counting them as they filed past, he noticed that one sheep was missing. The sheep had evidently wandered away in the course of the day and was now lost.

Three things immediately strike our attention. In the first place, this sheep had foolishly wandered away from the safety of the flock. It had thought to make its own way in search of food. In the second place, it had become lost and soon found it was surrounded by all kinds of dangers. It could not find sufficient grass and water for itself; the night had now come and the protection of the shepherd was gone; it was in danger from the wolves which prowled the country side; or if it moved about in the darkness its life was threatened by the pits and ravines, steep slopes and dark canyons which surrounded it on every side. In the third place, it had put itself in danger from which there was no escape. Left to itself it would surely die.

The sheepfold is a reference to the nation of Israel and the 100 sheep are the people of that nation. This must be emphasized because many insist that the sheep are all the people of God while the one sheep who strays away is a picture of but one member of the church who wanders temporarily in sin. But this is not the point of the Lord, and if pressed to its conclusion, can only lead to the same self-righteousness of the Pharisees which Jesus condemns. The ninety-nine sheep are a picture of the Pharisees. Jesus Himself says: "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." All God's people need repentance. It was the haughty and vain Pharisees who needed no repentance, for they were secure in their own good works. They refused to admit their need of repentance because before their own consciousness they had no sin. In the consciousness of God's people there is always the need of repentance, for God works in them the knowledge that they are sinners. The ninety-nine sheep therefore belong only outwardly to the nation of Israel. They were externally members of the fold. They are comparable to the Scribes and Pharisees who murmured when Jesus received sinners.

But the lost sheep, though he be but one, is a picture of the elect child of God who is by nature lost in sin and death. The parable stresses that not only are God's people lost in the wilderness of sin by nature, but even during their entire life, after they are saved, they constantly stray away. This is emphasized in many places in Scripture. In Psalm 119:176 the Psalmist confesses: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments." See also Isaiah 53:6, I Peter 2:25.

The people of God are called sheep in Scripture for especially two reasons. In the first place the name "sheep" indicated the sovereign decrees of God's election. God's people are sheep because they are chosen eternally by God, are purchased as God's peculiar possession by the precious blood of Christ, and belong to God's sheepfold. Secondly, Scripture calls God's people sheep because this is a proper figure to describe their spiritual condition. Sheep are the most foolish and helpless of all animals. They need constant care; they are inclined always to wander from the flock; they cannot find pasture and water by themselves; they cannot even bear their young without assistance. They are in constant need of a shepherd.

We are all sheep who are lost in the wilderness of sin and helplessly entangled in the darkness of the night of death. We have forsaken God and His covenant and walked in our own way. By this we put ourselves in constant spiritual danger. This is true all our life long as we manifest ourselves again and again as lost sheep. God brings us to the fold, but we leave it. This is not simply true of an occasional and individual sinner, but is true of us all. We must confess this with humility and see ourselves reflected in the lost sheep of the parable. If we do not we will find ourselves on the side of the murmuring Pharisees.

By this foolish wandering we put ourselves in all kinds of dangers, starve spiritually because we have left the green pastures of God's Word, are in danger of being devoured by Satan and overcome by sin. We have no defense of our own. There is no shepherd to guide our feet. We are without the light of the Word to shine on our pathway. This happens again and again when our hearts are far from God and His truth. It happens when we wander aimlessly in the devious pathways of sin. Lost in the darkness of sin we have only trouble and fear. We huddle alone and afraid in the dark night that settles about us. Overcome with grief and remorse we know not the way back to safety. Or, more often, we are oblivious to the dangers about us and we blithely go our own way deliberately setting our hearts upon sin and trusting in our own sufficiency.

The emphasis on the parable falls upon the shepherd. The shepherd forsook the ninety-nine sheep to search for the one that was lost. The ninety-nine had no need of him. But Christ came to seek and to save those who are lost. On the one hand it is true that Christ came unto His own and they received Him not. But on the other hand, it was not Christ's purpose to save the self-righteous Pharisees. He came to save those that are lost.

The shepherd is pictured as being filled with anxiety and concern for the lost sheep. He endures the weariness of a sleepless night, the dangers of rough country, the pain of desperate search, the pangs of hunger and thirst, all in order to restore the sheep back to the fold.

What a powerful picture this is of the work of Christ for His people. The Lord went all the way, so to speak, to restore those who are lost. No effort was too great, no sacrifice was too large to make, no road too long to save those whom He loved. He came into the likeness of our sinful flesh. He endured the humility of our life. He made our griefs His own. He was steadfast in temptation, bore our sicknesses and diseases, braved the dangers of hateful enemies. And yet even all this was not enough to save us. He entered into the night of our sin, for our sins were heaped on Him. He groaned under the heavy burden of God's wrath and walked the long and shameful road to the cross. He endured every torment and willingly bore the burden of God's anger against sin. He entered into Hell itself and paid the ultimate price by laying down His life for His sheep. With tears and groanings He bore it all until it was gone.

But there is more. He follows us wherever we wander and seeks us in the darkness of our night by His Holy Spirit Whom He sends into our hearts. The parable pictures the infinite patience and love by which He follows us into the weary wastelands of sin to bring us back home. No matter how far we stray, He follows us with His Spirit and Word. This is a remarkable picture of Christ's power. He does not come into our hearts suddenly, but He leads us back gradually for the way is long and we are desperately weary of sin. He does not come with brutal language to

whip us as we deserve, nor does He weary of bringing us back, but He follows us and restores us tenderly and in love. Because we are weary of sin and have not the strength to find our way back, He takes us on His almighty shoulders and gently restores us. He carries us easily over the rough places, holds us tightly by His Spirit, and brings us at last to His own home to rest.

When all this happens there is joy in heaven. This joy is in sharp contrast to the murmuring of the Pharisees. The shepherd is pictured as rejoicing first of all. It is not strange that Christ should rejoice for Christ died for His sheep by shedding His own precious blood for them. Their return is the fruit of His grievous suffering. Christ loves His sheep; even in spite of their sin He loves them always. He rejoices when they are restored to Himself. And in doing all this Christ accomplishes the will of His Father for it is the will of God that not one should perish. Christ finds His joy in the gathering of His church which is His own body.

Also the angels are called to rejoice with Him. They are pictured in the parable as friends and neighbors. When one sinner is restored, the angels in heaven sing for joy. How sharp is the contrast with the grumbling of the Pharisees. But the angels are the ministers of God who serve the well being of the saints and are ministers to the heirs of the promise. Their joy is always in the final salvation of the church. Is it any wonder that they lift their hosannas to the highest heavens?

The Pharisees were righteous in their own eyes and had no need of repentance. They did not rejoice when a sinner was rescued. But in heaven there is joy. He may be a publican of the basest sort. He may be scorned and derided and the lowliest of sinners. He may be you or I. But Christ found him and brought him home. See, he is on his knees weeping. But the angels are singing beyond the skies.