

Like a lost sheep

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev Alex Cowie

[0 : 00] Well, now we want to turn back to the psalm, and we want to focus on the last section, but particularly the last verse.

And that is Psalm 119, and verse 76. Now, I have to say to you, I'm very on edge because my two feet are standing above the floor, and there ain't much room for manoeuvre.

So, if you see me looking uncomfortable, it's because I am. So, hopefully that will not detract at all from the Word. So, Psalm 119, verse 176.

I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments.

And what I've entitled this is quite simply, the lost sheep needs to be brought back into the way.

The lost sheep needs to be brought back into the way. That summarizes what is said in the verse.

Now, this last section of this very long psalm ends in a remarkable way, because from 169 through to the end, they're all virtually petitions and pleas to God.

[1 : 36] Let my plea come before me. Let my plea come before me. Let my plea come before me. Let my plea come before me. Let my plea come before me.

Deliver me according to your word. See that? They're petitions, they're pleas with God. And what's interesting about this is that the psalm writer has spent all the verses up to there extolling the word of God and the law of God and its place in the life of the believer.

That was true when he wrote it, it was true down through the ages until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's true to this day. The place of the law of God, the word of God, the precepts of God is a big place in the life of the Lord's people.

And that's what makes this psalm helpful to us. But what is particularly arresting is, notwithstanding that he has talked about his love for the Lord's law and precepts and statutes and so on, and how he has extolled the God of the law, he himself comes down with a bump and he says, I have gone astray.

He, obviously, from the psalm, recognised that the law of God rebukes us, it convicts us, it corrects us, and it teaches us.

[3 : 20] And he has expressed his love for that law more than once in the psalm. Perhaps you young ones can take a peek at it on a Sunday afternoon and look and see how many times he says he loves the law of God.

And for all that he says about it, in an almost amazing way, he says, I have gone astray. Here is a prophet of God.

Here is a man of the Spirit of God. And he says, having said wonderful, true things about the law of God, his finishing shot in this long psalm is, I have gone astray.

I've gone astray from your ways, Lord. And see, if we go astray from the Lord's ways, effectively we go astray from the Lord himself. That's a fact of the matter.

So, hopefully, as we're thinking about the Lord's Supper, and meeting around his table, this will be a useful preparatory service with that in mind, considering ourselves in the light of this text.

[4 : 38] The first thing we're going to notice is his confession. He says, I have gone astray like a lost sheep.

He had come somewhere along the long line of writing this psalm under the power of the Spirit. He had come to realize that in relation to that perfect law of God, he had gone astray.

Though he said wonderful things, which suggested he had a lively interest in it, and in doing it in his life, yet he had come to see his personal waywardness, and his sin in the Lord's sight.

He realized, for so we discover, that he had gone astray. And he confesses it here, in this last verse, that he had sinned against God, that he had really lost his way.

Now, I wonder how many of you thought, when I started off, and I talked about the lost sheep, needs to be brought back into the way, whether you thought it was going to be a purely evangelistic sermon.

[5 : 51] I'd be interested to know. I'll not ask for a show of hands. But, you can be forgiven for thinking that. But see, it's not about that. It's about a man in whom the Spirit was working.

And who had to say this about himself. I have gone astray like a lost sheep. And he realized, this was a serious business.

What I want to do, first of all, is I want to pick up the imagery, of the lost sheep. You know yourselves, the Bible uses images, from the animal world.

And the sheep, is one we know very well. Jesus called his people, my sheep. They hear my voice, and they follow me. But let's look at the imagery here, and remind ourselves, you see, that, that, although we're familiar with this, we can lose sight of the fact, that we ourselves, professing, the Lord, and, and to all intents and purposes, following the Lord, we can go astray.

in our spiritual life, in our Christian life. Okay, to go back then, just to think about the imagery, of the sheep.

[7 : 12] It's a familiar image, in the Old Testament scriptures. And it's interesting, it's a sort of thing, to have a look at, another time. It's interesting, you see, that when Jesus declared himself, to be the good shepherd, it wasn't something, totally new, disconnected, from anything else.

It was spot on. Connected, with the Old Testament, part of the Bible. If you go back, to the long life, although Jacob thought, it was short enough.

If you go back, to the long life, of Jacob, the chief shepherd, in his day, in his family. And you read, in Genesis 48, verses 15 and 16, he says there, of the Lord, that the Lord, the Lord, shepherded me, all the days, of my life.

And he says, in the next part, he says, the angel of the Lord, literally, the Malach Yahweh, the messenger, of the Lord. And that's a name, for, the son of God, before he became man.

He appeared, as a servant, of the Lord, as the, this is the servant, of the Lord, the Malach Yahweh, or the servant, in other references, of the covenant.

[8 : 41] And, even, in his pre-incarnate days, way back, in the days of Jacob, the pre-incarnate, son of God, was shepherding, the sheep.

He was, looking after them. And it's a wonderful reference, that, in Genesis 48, there, in verses 15 and 16. Because, Jacob knew, the shepherd care, of the Lord, and he distinguishes, the Lord, from the, from the servant, the messenger, literally, the messenger, of the Lord, the son of God, who appeared, and who led, and who pastored.

And, he refers to himself, though he was a shepherd himself, he refers to himself, as a sheep, whom the Lord, fed, and led.

Now, some expositors, of the Bible, refer to sheep, as silly creatures. But, that is, simplistic.

Maybe some of you, for all I know, have kept sheep. You know more about sheep, than I do. And, the fact of the matter is, they're not silly. In their own, animal way, they, know, what they're doing.

[9 : 55] They have a kind of knowing. It might be, it might to us, appear, stubborn, that they're determined, to hurt themselves. But, in their, own, animal way, they have a kind of knowing, and they know, what they're doing.

If they want to get over a fence, they'll find the weakest place. Anybody, who has dykes, will know, that they'll work out a way, to get over that dyke, if the grass is greener.

So, the point I'm making is, the, the use of, sheep, is deliberate. It's off the spirit. As indeed, it's off the spirit, in other places, which of course, I'm flagging up a few of.

Isaiah 53, verse 6, which you'll all know very well. All we like sheep, have gone astray, not as a flock, simply, that each one, has turned, to his own way.

And, see that, is so sheepish, so to speak. It's sheep like. They'll, they'll, they'll do their own thing. Sometimes they'll go, as the flock.

[11 : 02] But, often you get them, doing their own thing. Especially, if you get ones that are, very adept, at going over dykes, or through fences, and so on, and so on.

And, you see, this is relevant. Because, the, the psalmist is saying, like a lost sheep, he's confessing, like a lost sheep, I went astray.

I remember, years ago, up in the north, they had a glebe, where I was, and, the first, year we were in, it was okay, second year we were in, they said, the minister needs to take the glebe back,

because, all the ministers here, had some sheep.

So, I, beautifully, we got a few sheep. And, for me, coming from a fishing background, it was great, because, I learnt more, about pastoral work, studying the sheep, than many is a book written on pastoral work.

And, it helped me to understand, the saviour, in his tenderness, and patience, in his wonderful, readiness, to, to take us from where we're at.

[12:18] I, like a lost sheep, went astray. And, see, again, those of you who know this, better than me maybe, you'll see them, at feeding time, in the winter, when they've got to get some extra, you know the greedy ones, you know the shy ones, and so on, and so on.

So, he's, he's into this. He's not using this, in a random way, about himself. And, one of the things, that anybody who knows anything, about sheep on the loose, can tell you, is that they're always looking, for some better grass.

They're always on the move. And, it doesn't matter, if they're going further, and further away, from their shepherd, and from security, and the care, of the shepherd.

It doesn't matter, they're on the move, there's something better. And see, that's so, like us, as people, even, in whom God is working.

We go off on tangents, we, we, we get an appetite, for something, we don't stop to think, where's this going to end at? We just get on with it, and then, and, we move away, almost imperceptibly, from the shepherd's care, and the security he gives.

[13:48] And, clearly, what the psalm writer is saying here, in his confession, is that, he, he wasn't thinking, as deeply, on his relation to God, and the law of God, that kept him, from going astray.

And, he did go astray. And, he sinned, and came short, badly. He doesn't tell us, what exactly, but he tells us, enough, here tonight, to know, that this man, of God, went astray, like a stubborn, lost sheep.

Again, for those who know, the sheep scene, you'll, you'll have, maybe there's a shepherd, or two, for all I know, again, you'll have, you'll have pulled one, out of, have I ever tried to take him, out of a bramble bush?

And, they've gotten themselves, a few smiles there. They're getting stuck in, what are they doing? Well, actually, see, in at the bottom, of the bramble bush, that grass, is sweet.

Ah, but what about, the bramble bush? What damage is going to do? How quickly, will it tangle, in the wool? Very quickly. And then, suddenly, the sheep, is in trouble.

[15:06] Some of you, may have seen them, on the cliff tops, I've noticed, on the way in. They'll, they'll go down, and down, following the grass, as good, and sweet, things like that, when we're not thinking.

And, suddenly, they're stuck, they can't get back up, and they dare, go down, for it's a long way, down to the sea. I, like a lost sheep, went astray.

Perhaps, you've even seen one, in a bog. What on earth, is it doing there? Well, actually, the bog, was between it, and that, see that ridge, of sweet grass, out there?

It's making for that. Aye, it's like sin. Looks sweet. But, it's not. And, so, when we apply, this first point, as confession, we can see, I hope, that we need to take, stock, of ourselves.

Sorry, if I play on, an intended, we need to take, stock, of ourselves, in preparation, for remembering, that holy death, of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

[16:24] And, the fact is, we can be hiding, things from other people. We can be hiding, sin, nobody else knows, you know God knows, but, well, actually, he'll forgive me, somewhere along the line.

Sins like that. The lost sheep, doesn't look, at the consequences, of the direction, it's going in, or the danger, it's getting into, it just goes.

And, he says, I was like that. There's all, sorts of things, that can entangle us, in our own minds, our, our attitudes, shift from the law of God, and we, justify, the wrong, course of action, we get into trouble.

And, it's important, in thinking of this first point, that we, resolve, to, to examine ourselves, in the light of the word, and to turn, to the good shepherd himself, and simply confess, I, like a lost sheep, went astray.

Second thing, I think it's fair, to derive from the text, is, his petition. Seek, your servant.

[17 : 46] I love this, because, to me, when the Lord, is asked to seek us, he finds us, he saves us, and he restores us.

There's a four pointer, for the minister, watch him, and he'll come up to that. But, but, but see what I'm saying, don't, don't miss the point. When he's asking the Lord, to seek him, he knows, the Lord will find him, where he is.

And, it's where he is, the Lord's going to take him from. Seek your servant, means, find your servant, save your servant, picture the sheep, and the bog, and it's up to its neck.

It hasn't got long, to go. Seek your servant, means, find your servant, too. And it means, save your servant, and it means, restore, your servant.

The poor, self-confessed, lost sheep, the writer, is ready to cry out, seek your servant. Sadly, sometimes, it takes long time, for us to do that.

[19 : 00] But, it's a healthy thing, and, to my mind, this is no better time, than this evening, in preparation, for the Lord's Supper, to take this to heart, and to say, now's the time, and to plead with him, for such help, as we need.

But, see, it's really wise, for us to do that. Because, if we don't do that, and we go on in sin, unchecked, it'll get worse, we'll get into, more and more trouble, until at last, we'll, almost ruin ourselves.

We, ought to be, wait. The classic example, in the Bible, even the children, knows the life of David. He had everything, but not quite everything.

It was always something, extra. And that's, what sin does. Always, it's like the sheep, in the grass, that went into the bog. Saw that ridge, a lovely sweet grass.

Couldn't get to it, quickly enough. But the bog got it. And, sins like that. The eyes are, surely this is not me, don't blame me.

[20 : 14] Right, come on then. We need some. So, you see what I'm saying here? We've got to, work on this. We've got to, recognize, seek, seek, your servant, find your servant, save, your servant, restore, your servant.

Don't let me, go headlong. Don't let me go down. Don't let me, go out. He wants, to be saved, by the Lord.

And the wonderful thing, is Jesus, as we were singing, what a friend, we have in him. All our sins, and griefs to bear. What a privilege, to carry everything to him. And see, when we go astray, he's there for us.

All right, we're going to hurt ourselves, but the wonderful thing is, he'll heal us, he'll restore us, he'll bring us back. Now see, and I'm speaking to the boys and girls, too here.

We're living in, difficult days, for your young minds. they're exposed, they're exposed, they're exposed, to all sorts of things. You hear stories, on the television, you see images, you ought never to be seen.

[21 : 31] And I'm not saying, that's careless, as in the part of the parents. You can hardly turn the box on. But there's something, that's not helping. And see, the battleground, for us, and our well-being, is the mind.

And often, doubts come into our minds, about God, and about the Bible. And see, what you need to do, is take that to Jesus, and say, Lord, seek me, find me, save me, and restore my confidence, in you.

The truth, in Jesus, saves us. And the truth, in Jesus, keeps us. He is the good shepherd, and let us have confidence, in him.

One last thing. I'm not used to, a service, that goes on an hour. I go on, too long. So I'm having to trim, my sails here. The third, and final thing then, is his affirmation.

And it's there too, I think. His confession, his petition, his affirmation. For I do not, he affirms this, you see, for I do not, forget, your commandments.

[22 : 56] I did not forget them. And here, what we see here is, that he, he, can affirm, though he went astray, he can still affirm, I do not forget, your commandments.

The sheep of the Lord, when they, go astray, they sin against light, spiritual light, and spiritual knowledge. And it's always worse for us, because we're, we're, we're refusing the light, the Lord gives us, and the knowledge he gives us, of the danger, of the spiritual bog, or the spiritual precipice, the cliff, and the, the hundred foot drop, that's going to damage us.

The light, of the word of God, directs us, not only how we may glorify, and enjoy him, but how we may be kept, from sin, and harm, it is the worst kind, of self harm, sinning, against the light, and the knowledge we have.

And, it, it may seem, a bit of a puzzle, a bit enigmatic, to say, in his affirmation, I do not forget, your commandments, at the end of the verse, and at the start of the verse, he says, I have gone astray, like a lost sheep, the two seem, just, poles apart, but, my dear friends, the reality is, these things, can happen to us, they can happen, we, we can be in this, this contrary position, and, herein, there is the reality, if you like, of the experience, of the flock, of God, I think, Paul puts it, as I understand them, in Romans 7, very rightly, the good, that I would do, I find myself, not doing, and, and here, would you believe it, the evil, that I don't want to do, I find myself doing, now, Paul, wasn't advocating, okay, don't worry about it, just go with the flow, no,

Paul, called himself, a wretched man, a wretched boy, a wretched girl, a wretched woman, because, I'm not doing, what I should do, we, we, we, we take Paul, and we're not to use him, as a good excuse, well, Paul was like that, no, no, there's a war going on, Lord, seek me, and find me, and save me, from losing, in that war, and restore me, so that I'll not offend you, that I'll not be inflicting, on myself, misery, take me up, from where I am, yet again, and those who are, more experienced, in the Christian faith, isn't it true, that when you sing, if it's not, Psalm 40, or the equivalent, in a hymn, which I don't know, so well, when you sing,

[26 : 09] Psalm 40, he took me, from a fearful pit, and from the miry clay, and on a rock, he set my feet, establishing my way, isn't it true, Christian friend, friend, who's been in the faith, a long time, every time, you sing it, every time, you mean it, because it's as true, as ever it was, and the very first time, you sang it, with grace in your heart, and light, in your understanding, every time, you say, that experience, was the fearful pit, the bug for the sheep, the cliff top, that was zoom, the bramble bush, that was, choking the life, out of the beast, every time, you're delivered, and you sing, something like that, Psalm, it hits you again, he's done it again, he's taken me, from that place, and you know, where you are right now,

I don't, and frankly, I don't need to know, but you know, before the Lord, and whatever, is amiss, in your own life, take to him, put right, say to him, what we were saying, earlier on, in the petition, seek me, and save me, save me, by finding me, and restore me, put me, in the right path, again, I confess, my own, sinful, waywardness, bring me, bring me, back into the narrow way, and Lord, keep me there, and it is a time, for self-examination, for honest, self-assessment, some people think, in fact, your minister, made a wee, blend, and I'm going to get back, on him here, he said, who's come to preach, at us, no, I haven't come, to preach, at you, we're all, under the same word, the minister, is not preaching, at you, he's expounding,

God's word, as faithfully, as he can, and he's preaching, to himself too, there are times, when you're preaching, the truth, as a minister, you're overwhelmed, with a sense, of I am thee, it's not good, me, bad you, Steph, we're all, in this together, we're all, to seek, to help each other, to grow, in the grace, and the knowledge, the experience, knowledge, of the great shepherd, himself, the Lord Jesus Christ, and let's be clear, on that, so what areas, have I strayed into, which have involved me, in sinful, thoughts, or words, or actions, you know the story, about words, they're only words, but words, do a lot of damage, don't they, and you'll know, the story, about the lady, who spoke very badly, about the minister, and he was on his, way to see her, he came in to see her, and he scolded her, for it, and later, he was, on his deathbed, and she came, to see him, to tell him, how sorry she was, she had said, so much bad, against him, some of you, will know this, and he gave her, a pillow, and he said, open that window, cut open, the pillow end, and shake it out, and of course, it was a feather pillow, and all those, hundreds, and hundreds, of feathers, went everywhere, on the wind, on the wind, and he said, see, these are your words, they've gone everywhere, and wherever they've gone, they've done damage, and sometimes, we have to say to the Lord,

Lord, I've said, what I shouldn't have said, and I'm, I'm going to sort that out, I'm asking you, to forgive me, and I want grace, to put it right, with whoever, that's what I mean, by close, personal, self-examination, and honest, self-assessment, the Bible tells me, and you, that, if we confess our sins, he is faithful, and just, to forgive us, our sins, and to cleanse us, from all unrighteousness, and when he does that, he distorts us, 1 John 1, 9, so it's good for us, to know, we have in the shepherd, of the sheep, one who has done all, that needs to be done, to deal with our sin, and wonderfully, to heal, and restore us, so let's not live, like the sheep, gone astray, and going further astray, let's have out in the open, before the Lord, those things, wherein we have sinned, to deal

with them, and let's use this verse, to do what has to be done, to confess the shepherd, as we ought to, to petition him, for deliverance, and restoration, and to affirm, with a better understanding, our allegiance, to him, our allegiance, to him, amen.