

The lost sheep

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[0 : 00] Turn to the gospel according to Luke chapter 15 and reading verses 3 to 7. Luke's gospel chapter 15 and verses 3 to 7.

And he spake this parable unto them, saying, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance.

Now we're looking at this fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, which contains three well-known parables. And these parables were all spoken, we believe, at the same time by Jesus.

And we saw last week that the three parables form a unity. They're like three musical instruments making a different sound, yet playing one tune.

And that one tune that they are playing is this, the yearning of God over the lost sinner and the joy when the sinner is found.

[1 : 38] The theme of all the parables is this being lost and then being found, and they form a unity. But we also saw that they are complementary.

In other words, they are showing to us how the triune God is involved in our salvation. So the first parable is speaking to us about the work of the Son, who is the seeking shepherd.

The second parable is speaking to us of the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the quickening spirit. And the third parable is speaking to us about the work of the Father, who is the welcoming Father, the one who welcomes the sinner back to himself.

And at the same time, they are showing us different aspects of the sinner's condition. The first parable is showing us how the sinner is willfully lost.

The second parable is showing us how the sinner is helplessly lost. And the third parable is showing us how the sinner is hopelessly lost.

[2 : 49] And so there's this complementary nature of the three parables. And we also saw that there's a sequence in these parables. And that sequence is that the sense of joy increases in each parable.

The first parable is one in a hundred. The second parable is one in ten. And the third parable is one in two. And in each case, the joy is increased because of the greater value of that thing which is found.

And so there's this connection then between these parables. And we've got to take them together in order to see the whole picture. And they were all spoken, as we saw, to rebuke the Pharisees.

The trouble with the Pharisees, you see, was that they would have nothing to do with the publicans and with the sinners. They would have nothing to do with the tax collectors and the sinners.

But in contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus mixed with these people. He ate with them. He spoke to them. He tried to help them.

[4 : 01] And what Jesus is showing us is that this is what is right. Because Jesus came into this world to help sinful man. He came to help those who are sinners.

That's the whole purpose of his coming. And to stay aloof from them, as the Pharisees did, would be out of keeping with his whole mission, with what he came to do.

And therefore, he came to save men. And he must associate with those whom he came to save. He must get down to their level.

He must work with them. He must work among them. And therefore, when the Pharisees said with scorn, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

They were speaking the truth. And they were speaking the gospel. This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. Well, that's exactly true.

[5 : 00] That's what he does do. Jesus Christ is not like the Pharisees. He's different from them. He's got compassion. He's got concern. And therefore, he mingles with sinners.

And he tries to do them good. And so, the parables were spoken to rebuke the Pharisees. And to show what Jesus is really like.

And what God is really like. And this first parable, which we're going to look at today. The parable of the lost sheep and the shepherd. The parable of the good shepherd focuses, as we said, on the work of the good shepherd in receiving lost men and in rejoicing over them.

It is focusing on the work of Christ. And we'll look at it under three simple headings. First of all, we'll see the sheep as symbolic of the lostness of man.

And then we'll see the shepherd as symbolic of the seeking savior. And then we'll see the celebration party as symbolic of the joy that is in heaven over the sinner coming home.

[6 : 10] Well, first of all, the sheep as symbolic of the lostness of man. It was a very common sight in Bible lands to see the shepherd and the sheep.

The sheep was very useful in these lands for food and also for clothing. And therefore, they were plentiful. And shepherds and sheep were to be seen all over the countryside.

And the Bible has taken up the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep as an illustration of the sinner's relationship to God. And so we have quite often in Scripture this image, this picture of the shepherd and the sheep.

And the sheep is a picture of man. And the lost sheep here is a picture of fallen man. And that's what we need to look at, first of all, how this lost sheep resembles fallen man.

A sheep is helpless without a shepherd. That's what this parable is telling us. It is, first of all, prone to go out of the right way.

[7 : 30] It is prone to leave the right place. It is prone to wander away from the fold and away from the flock. All we, like sheep, have gone astray.

We have turned everyone to his own way. We have left the fold. We have left the shepherd. We have gone out onto the mountains.

We have become alienated from God. We have turned away from our Father's home. That's a picture of man. That's a true picture of our lostness.

Remember what Peter says in his first epistle. For ye were like sheep going astray. But now ye have returned to the shepherd and bishop of your souls.

That's a picture of lost man. He's like a sheep. He's left the fold. He's left the shepherd. And he's wandering out in the mountains. That's a picture of him.

[8 : 33] The sheep gets easily lost and easily led astray. It is vulnerable. The sheep can be easily led astray.

There is confusion and ignorance and an incapacity in a sheep to choose the right way. It easily goes astray. And that is the picture then we have of man in his lost condition.

He's just like a sheep. Remember how Jesus described the people in his day. He saw them, we are told, as harassed and helpless.

Helpless. Scattered like sheep without a shepherd. That's how he viewed the multitudes when he was here upon earth. And what an accurate picture that is of man in his lostness and in his need. Alienated from God, away from the father's home, away from the fold, and wandering further and further away. That's the condition of man.

[9 : 42] And a life of disobedience is indeed a wandering further and further from the fold. Turning your back on God means that you are going further and further away from him in your life.

Just as the sheep wanders further and further from the fold. That is the condition of the sinner. And also, the sheep has a tendency to be stupid and unthinking.

It's wandering on from one patch of grass to another. And never thinking where it's going. Its eye is only on what is immediately ahead of it.

If it sees another patch of grass, it goes on to that. And it doesn't think of how far it's wandering. It's short-sighted, really.

It's unaware of its danger. And it goes on like that until eventually it is lost. And that also is a picture of the sinner.

[10 : 50] He's drifting on through life. He's going from one pleasure to the next. And that's what keeps him going. He's satisfied for the moment in what he enjoys.

And he looks forward to the next thing he can enjoy. And he never breaks out of that mold. His whole life is just a drifting on from one pleasure and one thing to another.

And he never stands back and thinks, where am I going? What is my destiny? What am I accomplishing in life? Where will this get me? He never thinks of that. He's a tendency to be stupid and unthinking, just like the sheep. And then thirdly, the sheep is utterly defenseless. He is exposed to danger from all the wild animals that roam about on the mountains.

He's exposed to the lion and to the bear and so on. As we read about that in the Old Testament, how David delivered his sheep. How he saved his sheep from the lion and from the bear.

[12:00] And so the sheep is a defenseless animal. It's utterly defenseless. It's exposed to the wild beasts. It's exposed to the elements.

It can't really defend itself. And so is the sinner in that condition as well. The sinner is a defenseless creature. He's exposed to the dangers.

He's exposed to the devil. For the devil is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. And he devours sinners. They think that they are saved from him.

They don't think anything about him. But he's devouring them like a lion. And they're also exposed to the false teachers. To every wind of doctrine.

That's how our Lord compares the false shepherds, the false teachers. They are like wolves, preying upon the sheep. And they're devouring the sheep.

[12:59] And the sheep are defenseless against them. Every new doctrine that comes, they're led astray by it. And they're defenseless, therefore. And this is a picture then of the lostness of man.

Man in his lost condition by nature. He is in this kind of condition. He's a sheep going astray. He's a sheep lost in the mountains.

He's wandering there without direction. And he's likely to be ultimately lost. Unless someone comes to save him. And that brings us on, secondly, to look at the shepherd as symbolic of the seeking savior.

The shepherd as symbolic of the seeking savior. These parables, as we have seen, are in a sense a comparison between a Jesus and the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, you see, were supposed to be the shepherds of Israel. They were the shepherds of the flock. But they weren't really acting as shepherds.

[14:15] Remember that chapter we read in Ezekiel, chapter 34 in the Old Testament. How God speaks there about the shepherds of Israel who care for themselves and not for the sheep.

All they're interested is in themselves and what they can get. And they're not interested in the sheep. And then God says, I myself will be the shepherd. I'll take over the duties and responsibilities of shepherds.

Because all these shepherds of Israel have failed because they were interested in themselves and not in the sheep. And that was true of the Pharisees. They weren't really concerned for the lost sheep.

They weren't concerned for these tax collectors and sinners. They didn't have a shepherd's heart. But Jesus has a shepherd's heart.

God has a shepherd's heart. Just as a shepherd loves his sheep, so Jesus loves the lost ones. So God loves the lost ones.

[15:20] And that's a picture we have here of the shepherd going after the lost sheep until he finds it. It is one sheep and yet it has got all the concern and care of the shepherd.

So that he exposes himself to danger. He sacrifices himself for the sake of this one sheep that is lost. And he goes after it until he finds it.

The love of the shepherd for his sheep. And this love that we see here is a love that is distinguishing in its object. It's a singular and a particular love.

It's not a vague general love. The shepherd doesn't say, oh I love all my sheep. I hope this sheep will come home. I hope it will be found out in the mountains.

No, that's not the kind of love that this shepherd has. What benefit would that be for a lost sheep out in the wilderness, out in the mountains, if that was the kind of love?

[16:25] And there are many people today who are saying to us, smile, God loves you. It's a general kind of love that they are talking about. But the love that is spoken of here is a distinguishing love.

It's a particular love. It's a definite love. I have loved thee with an everlasting love. Therefore, with loving kindness have I drawn thee.

It's a love that has been set upon the sheep. A love, a particular, a distinguishing love. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his son.

And he foreknew them in the sense that he loved them from the foundation of the world. He elected them. He chose them. He died for them. And he goes out to seek them.

And so therefore, it's a definite and it's a particular love. There are some people who accuse us perhaps of saying that the atonement was only meant for God's people.

[17 : 35] That the sacrifice that Christ offered was a particular sacrifice, a limited atonement. Well, we could say that those on the other side are also limiting the atonement.

Because if Christ died for none in particular, which they say that we can't say that Christ died for anyone in particular. He died for all men in a vague sense.

He offered himself for all men. And if men will believe, then they will be saved. But that doesn't guarantee that any will be saved. It doesn't guarantee that any will be saved.

But if you say that Christ died for his sheep, he laid down his life for his sheep, then you have the certainty that those sheep that he laid down his life for will certainly be found.

That they will certainly be reclaimed. That not one of them will be lost. And therefore it's a glorious salvation. It's a definite salvation. Christ will not be the loser in any way of those for whom he died.

[18 : 44] The lost ones, they'll all come to him. Because he's got a definite and a particular love for them. A love that made him lay down his life for them.

And therefore it's a particular love that is spoken about here. And it's a love that is definite in its purpose. Because it says he will go after them until he find them.

He will not rest until he has found them. He came to do a particular work. And nothing will stop him accomplishing that work. He will go to any length.

And he will make any sacrifice to save the sheep that he came to save. His heart is set on it. And nothing will stop him saving that sheep.

Remember how it was said of him. He set his face steadfastly to go up to Jerusalem. Because he knew what he was doing. And he had a definite purpose to accomplish.

[19 : 43] Yes, his search is not half-hearted. His search is whole-hearted. He endured the cross, despising the shame for the joy that was set before him.

And what was that joy? Not the joy to return to the father's house. There may be an element of that in it. The joy that he would experience in returning to the father's house.

But the greater joy would be to reclaim those sheep that he died for. For the joy that was set before him in restoring sinners from the waste of sin to the waste of righteousness.

For the joy that he would have in bringing back the lost ones. That was the joy that was set before him. And for that joy he endured the cross, despising the shame.

And so it was that love that he manifested to us. And it's also, thirdly, inexplicable in its nature.

[20 : 47] Why should he love the sheep in this way? Why should he love the sheep? One sheep in a hundred? If it was told today, the experts would say to us, write it off.

What's the worth of going after one sheep in a hundred? Write it off. Concentrate on the ninety and nine. Try and fatten them up. And you'll not feel the loss of that.

That's what they would say. But not the shepherd. Know his love is inexplicable in its nature. He goes after the one sheep that is lost.

Out in the mountains, he exposes himself to danger. He sacrifices himself in order to bring home this lost sheep. And look what he does with it.

He lays it on his shoulders. He lays it on his shoulders. And what's a shoulder? It's a symbol of man's power. It's a symbol of man's strength.

[21 : 45] And this is what Christ did. He undertook everything for us. He laid us on his shoulders with our debt, with our sin, with our liabilities.

And he took it all on his shoulders. And that's where he's got his sheep. He put the sheep on his shoulder and brought it home to the fold.

And that is what Christ does in his inexplicable love for his people. Who his own self bear our sins in his own body on a tree.

There was no one to help him. There was no one to undertake the work with him. His own self bear our sins in his own body on a tree.

Could it be any clearer that he undertook all the work himself from first to last? His own self. No one else to carry the sheep.

[22 : 43] He did it. He bear our sins in his own body on a tree. And he makes our cause his own. He identifies himself with us.

He puts us on a place of security. On a place where he carries us to the end of our days. On his shoulders. And he brings us back to the fold and to the flock and to the father's house.

Yes, it is symbolic of Christ's work. The shepherd is speaking to us about Christ. And then thirdly and lastly, the celebration party is symbolic of the joy in heaven.

When he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost. 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 shepherd calls together his friends and his neighbors. He can't keep the joy to himself. He must share it with others. He must share this joy.

[24 : 03] And so he organizes a party. And he's got a party in his home. And this party is a real celebration. Rejoice with me. They're glad to share that joy with him.

And he shares the joy with them. And so they have a great party to rejoice over the fact that the sheep has been found. Well, Christ says, I tell you similarly, there's joy in heaven.

Joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance. In this first parable, it is not specific as to what, who is rejoicing.

It says there's joy in heaven. In the second parable, it says there's rejoicing amongst the angels of heaven. And there's rejoicing in the third parable, in the Father's heart and in all who join with him.

But here it just says joy in heaven. A general joy in heaven over one sinner that repents. Joy throughout heaven over one sinner that repents.

[25 : 16] Now it's difficult for us to maybe understand what is meant by more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance.

In other words, there's no rejoicing over them. These are people like the Pharisees who are self-righteous and who feel they haven't any need of repentance.

There's no joy over them. But there's joy over the one sinner who repents, rather than over the ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance.

There's no rejoicing over them. But there's rejoicing over the one sinner, over the one sheep that comes home. There's a great party, a great celebration to rejoice over the sinner.

And you can see the individuality of it. You may say, what am I in the midst of this vast multitude of people? What am I amongst the crowd? Well, the thing is this, that although no one may think much of you, and although the state may not think much of you, and you may just be a number as far as the state is concerned, as far as God is concerned, you're an individual, and you matter, and you're significant.

[26 : 39] That's the great thing about the gospel. You matter. You are significant. You're not just a number to God. You're an individual. You are his property. You belong to him.

And he's reclaiming you for himself. And therefore, there's joy over one sinner. The individuality of it. You are significant.

God is out searching for you. Jesus Christ came to seek you. You individually. You are important to him. You are significant.

You're a creature made in his image and in his likeness. You are his property. He's seeking you.

That's the important thing. The individuality of it.

One sinner. Yes, there's cause to rejoice over one sinner. The corridors of heaven will resound with music and with song over one sinner who comes home.

[27 : 40] And if you've got any reservations this morning about the welcome you might receive, get rid of them. Because there'll be a party in heaven if you come home today.

If you return to the Father's house, if you return to the foe, there'll be more rejoicing over that than over anything else. That's the glory of the gospel.

That's the wonder of God seeking of sinners. He's seeking them today. And he sent his son to seek them and to save them. And that is what we can be assured of.

We can be assured that there'll be a welcome. And we can be assured that if one sinner today realizes that he's out there in the mountains, that he's wandering aimlessly, that he's away from the shepherd and away from the Father's house, if he turns his face homeward today, there'll be rejoicing in heaven.

There'll be a party in heaven today if one sinner turns his face homeward and realizes that he's lost without the shepherd, that he's lost without God.

[28 : 48] What a homecoming that will be. Well, my friend, if you are known today that you are one of those who are drifting aimlessly, if you are without any purpose, if you're exposed to all the forces that are about in this world, and you feel that you're not going anywhere or not doing anything, well, why not today acknowledge that you are lost, that you are lost without the shepherd, that you are lost without the Father, that you are a helpless sinner, that you are a hopeless sinner, and come home today, and turn your face to the Father's house, and turn your face to the fold and to the flock again.

Yes, there's need of repentance. We all need repentance. We need a change of mind and a change of heart. There'll be rejoicing in the Father's who sinned.

There'll be rejoicing in the Son. There'll be rejoicing in the Holy Spirit. And there'll be rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who changes his mind, who realizes he's wrong, who desires a different life, who wants purpose in his life, who wants to come back.

Oh, there'll be rejoicing today. May you be that sinner who will give cause for rejoicing in the corridors of heaven today. May God bless his word to us.