

The Seeking Shepherd
Luke 15:1-7
By Thomas Beam

The main theme of this chapter in Luke is the salvation of the lost, the joy of God over the repentance of sinners. The first parable, that of the lost sheep emphasizes the truth of seeking the shepherd.

The audience and purpose of this chapter 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 Pharisee's 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 did not know the Law, were the scum of the market places, 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 save those that are lost.

The parable is simple. A man had one hundred sheep which He cared for on his farm and which he brought safely to the fold in the evening. One evening he was counting his sheep as they filed past, and he realized one sheep was missing. The sheep had evidently wandered away in the course of the day and was now lost.

I want us to consider three ideas that are implicit in this scripture.

1. This sheep had foolishly wandered away from the safety of the flock.

2. It had become lost and soon found that it was surrounded by all kinds of dangers. Maybe it couldn't find sufficient grass and water for itself; the night had come and the protection of the shepherd was gone; it was in danger from wolves which prowled the countryside, 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.

3. It had put itself in danger from which there was no escape. Left to itself it would surely die.

The sheepfold is figurative of 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. The 99 sheep are a picture of the Pharisees. Jesus Himself in verse 7 says, "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance." All God's people need repentance! It was the haughty and vain Pharisees who needed not repentance for they were secure in their own good works. They refused to admit their need of repentance because they believed they had no sin. In the consciousness of God's people there is always the need of repentance, because God works in them the knowledge that they are sinners. The 99 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, even though he is only one, is a picture of the elect child of God who is by nature lost in sin and death. The parable implies that not only are God's people lost in the

wilderness of sin by nature, but throughout their life, even after they are saved, they constantly stray away. This is explicitly stated in many places in Scripture. In Psalm 119:176 the Psalmist confesses: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant for I do not forget your commandments." Isaiah 53:6 says in part, "all of us like sheep have gone astray....," and 1 Peter 2:25, "for you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd."

The chosen people of God are referred to as sheep in Scripture. This is a proper figure of speech to use because it certainly describes our spiritual condition. Sheep are one of 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 own 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 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 throughout our lives 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 who did not own up to their own sin.

By this foolish wandering we put ourselves in all kinds of dangers, we 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 our path. 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 to fear. We huddle alone and afraid

in the dark night that settles about us. Overcome with grief and remorse we cannot find 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 on sin and trusting in our own sufficiency.

The emphasis on the parable falls upon the shepherd. The shepherd forsook the 99 sheep to search for the one that was lost. The 99 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 but they didn't receive Him. But on the other hand it was not part of Christ's purpose to save the self-righteous Pharisees. He came to save those that are lost.

Imagine being that shepherd. You are filled with anxiety and concern for the lost sheep. You endure the weariness of a sleepless night, the dangers of rough country, the pain of desperate search and maybe even 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. No effort was too great, no sacrifice too large. No road too long to save those whom He loved. He came into the likeness of our sinful flesh. He made our griefs His own. He was steadfast in temptation, bore our sicknesses and diseases, braved the dangers of hateful enemies. 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 us. He entered into Hell itself and paid the ultimate price by laying down His life for His sheep. With tears and groaning He bore it all until it was gone.

But wait! There's more! He follows us wherever we wander and seeks us in the darkness 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 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 in sin and have not the strength to find our way back, He takes us on His mighty shoulders and gently restores us. He carries us easily over the rough places, holds us tightly by His Spirit, and brings us back into the fold. Christ loves His sheep even in spite of their sin.

When all this happens there is joy in heaven. This joy is in sharp contrast to the murmuring of the Pharisees were righteous in their own eyes. They did not rejoice when a sinner was rescued. But in heaven there is joy. They may be a publican of the basest sort. They may be scorned, derided and the lowliest of sinners. It may be you or me. But Christ found us and brought us home.