

41. The Joy in Heaven

Luke 15:1-10

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

The Lord we love and serve has a heart for those who feel their lost condition, for those who are outcasts of society, and for those that others tend to despise and look down on as being unworthy of God's grace. At this point in his narrative, Luke has for us a number of stories beginning in chapter fifteen with a shepherd's devotion to a lost sheep (15:1-7), a poor woman sweeping her house for a lost coin (15:8-10), a lost prodigal son (15:11-32), a dishonest manager (16:1-8), a rich man and a wretched outcast (16:19-31), ten lepers (17:11-19), a dishonest judge (18:1-8), the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14), the story of Zacchaeus (19:1-10), and lastly, the parable of the ten minas (19:11-27). Each of these passages shows us something of God's heart for the lost and hurting and His desire for the disciples to partner with Him in reaching them.

The Attitude of the Religious Elite

In chapter fourteen, verse 25, Luke tells us that Jesus and the disciples were on the road and traveling with a large crowd. Often, whole villages in the north used to travel together to Jerusalem to the three yearly feasts of the Lord that every male of age was required to celebrate. Passover was drawing near, i.e., the very Passover on which Jesus knew that the leaders of Israel would reject and crucify Him. It is possible that the crowd was crossing the border between Samaria and Judea for, at the border, there would have been several tax collectors who needed time to talk and check the bags for the taxing of the crowd. It seems that Jesus took time to eat with them and teach His Word while they listened. □

The Lord saw the dismissive attitude and hatred that gripped the Jewish religious leaders as they watched Him mixing with and enjoying the company of the tax collectors and common folk. This disdain was not directed to those who were lost, but it was contempt for Christ Himself for welcoming them:

¹Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:1-2).

The way the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were mouthing these words was with much venom and disgust. Verse two tells us that they *muttered* together about Jesus. The Greek word *diagongyzō* is used, a stronger word than the simple Greek word *gongyzō*, which is used more often in Scripture. The stronger word means to complain or grumble aloud. They were voicing their disdain so much that those whom He was seeking could hear their disgust and venom. I'm sure Christ's heart went out to the tax collectors and "sinners" when they all listened to the grumbling of the religious elite. The prophet Ezekiel had spoken many years previously about the very undershepherds that were before *the* Shepherd of Israel.

⁷Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: ⁸As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, ⁹therefore, you shepherds,

hear the word of the Lord: ¹⁰This is what the Sovereign Lord says: **I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock.** I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. ¹¹“For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: **I myself will search for my sheep** and look after them. ¹²As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. **I will rescue them** from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵**I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down,** declares the Sovereign Lord. ¹⁶I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. **I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak,** but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice (Ezekiel 34:7-16).

Jesus is the One Who has come to seek and save those who see their need. Later, He said, “The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost” (Luke 19:10), viz. the very people that the religious elite had abandoned and took no effort to bring them back to the sheepfold. The religious divide could not have been any wider. These religious men did not just hate the tax collectors and “sinners,” but they also hated the One Who had come to reach them.

Question 1) Do you remember a time when you felt far away from God or felt a lack of purpose in your life? What was your greatest fear? What kind of things concerned you the most?

We will cover the first two parables with this study, saving the Parable of the Lost Son for the next study. Scripture does not tell us to whom He was speaking the three parables, but all likely heard the parables as they rested on the journey, i.e., the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, the tax collectors, and the “sinners.” Some of the time, Jesus spoke directly to the religious; while at other times, He spoke directly to those far off. □

To the religious elite, the tax collectors were seen as turncoats. They were making money hand over fist by working for the Romans in taxing their Jewish brothers and sisters. They are sometimes ranked with prostitutes (Matthew 21:32), as the lowest of the low. The word, “sinners,” is translated from the Greek word *harmartolos*, which speaks of one who is not careful about the observance of ceremonial duties, an irreligious person. The term was used of either an immoral person or a person whose occupation was not ceremonially clean. Many of the population had given up on trying to keep all the rules and regulations that the Oral Law and the traditions of the elders had imposed on the general population. The rules were so numerous and nonsensical that it became a heavy burden to the people.

Many felt alienated and estranged from God. When Jesus came preaching about God's love for the lost and unloved sinners, they were drawn to Him like bees to honey. We don't know what He looked like, but his personality was and is attractive, “He is altogether lovely” (Song of Solomon 5:16). When the ordinary people looked at the Scribes and Pharisees, their scowls showed no godliness at all. They had no accepting attitude. The people did not see God's love in

religious leaders. People know when they are loved. When they looked at Christ, He had (and has) an inviting heart, and He welcomed sinners eagerly by often enjoying their company. The Greek verb translated as "receive" means "to welcome favorably" and "to look forward, to wait for." The orthodox Jews had written off the tax collectors and sinners as worthy of the fires of hell, but God is gracious and extends kindness to all people. He takes the initiative in seeking those who are alienated from Him. □

But God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him (2 Samuel 14:14).

What a beautiful truth the above passage of Scripture communicates to us, the creator of the universe has devised ways of reaching out to each of us. God has arranged situations in your life and mine so that, through the painful trials we undergo, He reveals Himself to us. These trials are used by God to shake us out of spiritual lethargy, thus forcing us to wake up to the reality of a God Who is seeking for us to come closer to Him in our experience. He does not want us to be estranged from Him but to desire a deep relationship and intimacy with Him. Sometimes, the pain is of our own making.

A year before I came to Christ in 1977, I went on a trip traveling overland across Europe into Asia and then on to India. Traveling to that part of the world, I had to have all sorts of vaccinations against various diseases. The doctor warned me not to drink any alcohol for at least twenty-four hours afterward. The trouble was that my friends wanted to take me out that night. As I couldn't drink alcohol, I went and ate a large chunk of Hashish (strong resin of marijuana) to get high that night... a stupid move! To make matters worse, my friends promptly took me to the pub where I drank half a pint of beer, the very thing the doctor had advised me against. I started to space out and had to leave because I felt like I was dying!

I managed to make it home and began crying out to a God in Whom I had always thought I did not believe. My spirit left my body, and I was close to the ceiling on the other side of the room looking down at my frame on the couch. Having departed from my body, I began pleading for my life, promising God I would give Him my life if He would let me live. God heard me, and I came back into my body. (Do not try this at home!). God was merciful to me, and several months later, I finally heard the Gospel and responded. God used my foolishness to awake me to the reality that I was a lost sinner and needing God's grace.

Question 2) Do you remember a time when you felt that God was seeking you out or calling you? Was there an event that God used in your life to get your attention?

God is at work with each of us reading these words. He is "*Emmanuel*," which means God with us. The Lord is a God who is near and not far away. He is calling, wooing, searching, and seeking us to draw us closer to Himself. He welcomes sinners, such as you and I. This is the heart of the God of the universe: He loves all people. This love for the ordinary people like you and me was the criticism of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, i.e., that Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them (v. 2). To show them what the Father's attitude is toward the poor, broken, and downcast of the world, Jesus shared three parables with them. □

The Parable of the Lost Sheep.

³Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent (Luke 15:3-7).

In England, we have many sheep. Lamb is as popular as beef in the English diet. We tend mostly to use sheep dogs to help in the work of shepherding the sheep. In the Middle East, though, the shepherding work was only done by the shepherd. Sheep are known to be foolish creatures. Outside of the shepherd's protection, the lost sheep are easy prey to the beasts of the wild, for sheep have no defense mechanism at all. Sheep will find a nice patch of grass and go from one tuft of grass to another, not looking at how much distance the sheep were wandering from its shepherd. God says that we all resemble sheep, **"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all"** (Isaiah 53:6).

The only way for the Middle-Eastern shepherd to turn his sheep from its wandering was to put a stone into a sling and aim just a few inches ahead of the sheep. The sheep would be startled and turn back from where it was wandering to see how far away the shepherd was. Sometimes, God allows a near-death or a painful experience to frighten us to return to Him. It may have been a scary thing if it has happened to you, but if it awakes us to spiritual reality, then the medicine has done its work. King David was a shepherd in his early teens. He was the one who killed Goliath with a sling and stone. He learned his skill with a sling in this way. The Israelites were so adept with a slingshot that 700 of them could sling a stone at a hair on the battlefield and not miss (Judges 20:15-17).

Jesus puts before the crowd of listeners, but especially to the Pharisees, a rhetorical question asking them as to how much is an acceptable loss to them. **"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"** (Luke 15:4). "What is the right thing to do?" is the rhetorical question. In their minds, each of them would be making value judgments. First of all, being a shepherd was the most unholy profession to a Pharisee. This picture began to force the Pharisees to think of themselves as shepherds. Would it be acceptable for a shepherd to lose one sheep? Each of them in their minds would put themselves into the picture, not knowing where Jesus was going with the story. The value judgment they were forced to make was that, yes, it was the shepherd's responsibility not to lose a single sheep. The Pharisees, Scribes, teachers, and elders before Him did not want to think of themselves as accountable for the sheep.

It is highly likely that the shepherd would only discover he had lost a sheep when they were counted during the late afternoon when he would take them to a well to drink. As there were often several flocks from different shepherds in a village, they would meet at sunset to remove the stone covering the well and water the sheep (Genesis 29:1-3). We are told, though, that this shepherd left the ninety-nine in the open country to go after the lost sheep (v. 4). The shepherd

who cared for his sheep would worry about a wolf getting among the ninety-nine sheep and killing many, so wouldn't it seem an unwise thing to do? Should we presume that the shepherd left the ninety-nine in the care of others? Or was the flock left in the sheepfold with no shepherd at the door? This shepherd in the story was frantically looking for his lost sheep, hunting in the caves and crevices in the land, going back over where he had been, for it now was growing dark. Later in the parable, the other shepherds and their families would rejoice when the lost sheep was brought home. □

Question 3) What do you think is the main point behind this parable? In what ways does the character of the good shepherd remind you of the nature of our Heavenly Father?□

The Pharisee and teachers of the law did not care about the sheep that were out of the sheepfold. Jesus was contrasting how different the character of God was from them. The Good Shepherd of Israel is a God who seeks out and would not rest until He tracks His lost sheep down and safely brought it home. No one is disposable to God. He values highly each one of us that have wandered away. When he found the lost sheep, he does not put a lead on it to drag it home, but he puts it on his shoulders, a picture of tender love and care. He carries us when we are tired out and heavy laden. He gives us rest (Matthew 11:28). God is like the shepherd who will leave the ninety-nine sheep and search relentlessly for the one that is lost. This kind of care was shocking to the Pharisees, i.e., a God who searches out those in rebellion and sin against Him? What kind of God is like this?□

Are you out of fellowship with the Father? Do you sense some distance between you and Him? He has not wandered off. He is a God who is always near. He is tracking you and seeking you and will not rest until you cry out to Him. **“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21).** For those of us who are Christians, it should be our greatest joy to see a person coming to know the Savior. We are most like our Father when we rejoice at seeing one who turns from sin and self-pleasing and comes home to the God who has sought him. Isn't this what we see at the very start of the passage at which we are looking? Jesus was welcoming sinners. He was laughing and enjoying relating to the lost, and had pleasure in their company. This kind of happiness among those far off from God was what made the religious leaders so mad that they were grumbling and moaning about him. He was having fun, rejoicing with those that the Pharisees despised.□

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.”

¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:8-10).

In the parable of the lost coin, we read of a woman who lost a coin. Again, this offended the minds of the Pharisees because He was asking them to think like a woman. Something was lost, and this time, it was a silver drachma coin worth a day's wages. It is possible the coin was part of

the woman's dowry and one of a set of ten coins. One commentator mentions that, perhaps, these ten coins hung on her wedding headdress, comparable to us as a wedding ring to a new bride. □

The typical Israelite home of the time had one window not much more than eighteen inches across. There was no concrete floor; it was of beaten earth covered with dried reeds and rushes. The coin was lost among the dirt and reeds of the floor. To find anything in the house required the woman to do whatever it took to find that which was lost, yes, even get down on her knees in the dirt of the floor. She lit a lamp; she swept throughout the house, picking through the dust and the reeds on her knees, searching diligently for that which to her was precious. When only the dirt was left, she painstakingly swept it up. The woman did not give up the search until the coin was found. When the coin was found, the woman called her neighbors, and they celebrated together. □

Question 4) How do these two parables make you feel when you consider how valuable you are to God? How do you think the tax collectors and “sinners” felt after hearing these two parables?

The name *Jesus* means, "the LORD saves, or the LORD is salvation." The Lord is not a reluctant Savior, but He is relentless in searching for His lost sheep. Again, it is the same as the rejoicing over the found sheep, i.e., a party and celebration took place. Jesus again shocked the Pharisees by telling them, “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). There are no scowls like the Pharisees on the face of God toward a repentant sinner. God's rejoicing with the angels comes up twice. The Lord we serve cannot contain His joy at those lost coming into an intimate relationship with Him, and the angels are those who are rejoicing with Him. “The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing” (Zephaniah 3:17).

There is singing and, more than likely, dancing, when one sinner repents and turns to the Lord. No Pharisee had ever thought of God as being like that. We are talking of a God who searches diligently for something He values as highly precious. As Jesus shared the three parables about what was lost, the people listening stood aghast. The character of God Jesus was describing was alien to the Pharisee's but gladdened the heart of those far away from God. Each of them took a step closer to the God who loves sinners. The Lord rejoices with the angels. □

What about you, dear reader? We may think we have found Him, but the truth is that God has found us. He has been searching diligently for each of us as those who are precious to Him. Sometimes, He has been lighting a lamp for us to see better. Sometimes, the Lord puts obstacles in our way to turn our direction so we may be found. However, what He cannot do is force His way into our lives. What He can do is to use the mess of our lives to awaken us, like the stone thrown in front of the sheep, to bring our attention to the God Who waits patiently for us to turn toward home. That is what we will study in the Parable of the Loving Father, more commonly called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32, the climactic third story in this trilogy of parables.

Prayer: Father, thank You for diligently searching for each of us. Let us never again wander from Your care. Lord, it humbles us to think that You rejoice with the angels upon seeing us turn toward You. Your kindness and grace amaze us. Amen!□

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