

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

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September 15, 2012

“Can anybody in the world repeat the 23rd Psalm and claim that the Lord is [his] Shepherd?” Or “Is saying that a reserved privilege only for people who have done things right?” Or, in stronger language—can sinful people who have wasted their lives in evil-doing, say that “the Lord is my Shepherd” and make that claim? There is nothing in the Psalm that says, Warning! Don’t say this unless . . . !

Natural human love goes in search of God the exact opposite of the Good Shepherd idea. All heathen religions are based on the idea of God being about as elusive as a cure for cancer. People imagined that He is playing hide-and-seek and has withdrawn Himself from human beings. Only special ones are wise or clever enough to discover where He is hiding. Millions go on long journeys to Mecca, Rome, Jerusalem, or other shrines, searching for Him. The ancient Greeks outdid all of us in building magnificent marble temples on their highest hills in which they felt they must seek Him.

Agape is the opposite. It is not humans seeking after God, but God seeking after man: “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

The shepherd left his 99 sheep that were safe and risked His life to find the one that was lost; the woman lit a candle and searched her house until she found the one lost coin; the Spirit of God searched for the heart of the prodigal son and

brought him home. There is no story in all the Bible of a lost sheep required to find His shepherd! This upset all common human ideas.

The Bible comes on stage with a breath-taking message of hope. It assures us there is a personal God, a Heavenly Father, a Creator-Saviour, who actually loves this “crazy,” cruel, selfish, violent, immoral, devilish world. This Good News outweighs all the bad news because He is the source of a love that is positive, active, and by its nature has to be effective.

The best-known words in many languages are these: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”¹ Most of us find it hard to hug a filthy, repulsive human being. God is hugging this planet to His heart, bad and dirty as it is. He is like a father embracing a prodigal son, taking the evil into Himself and purging it. This love is the most stupendous truth that mankind can contemplate.

This new idea astonished the sophisticated world of New Testament times. Probably as great a percentage of population then as now believed in a Supreme Being, but both Roman aristocrats and slaves found it incomprehensible that God actually cared for worthless humanity. If He did, how could He watch such injustices as slavery, political corruption, and the gladiatorial bloodshed in the Coliseum, and not *do* something?

¹ John 3:16.

Imagine the stir raised by the apostles when they insisted that God actually *loves* mean, selfish, cruel, bad people. Not that He loves their badness, but He loves *them*. “He loves slaves, gladiators, prostitutes, murderers, rapacious tax-collectors, cruel emperors?” asked the Romans. “Yes,” said the apostles. “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.”² This was a radical, revolutionary idea for people who had looked upon God as indifferently patronizing to good people and hateful to the evil ones.

By His uplifted cross and on-going priestly ministry, Christ is drawing “all men” to Himself to repentance. His gracious love is so strong and persistent that the sinner must resist it in order to be lost.

Why is this true? Because He has given Himself for “every man,” yes, He has given Himself *to* every man.

When He died on His cross, He did more than save good people; He died for “the ungodly.” “When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). It may be hard to say it, but that includes the worst sinners on earth!

The idea that Christ is running the special “shop” of salvation here, and He stays inside like a shopkeeper until the sinner takes the initiative to come seek Him out, is not what the Bible says!

(1) Christ is the Good Shepherd who does not wait for the lost sheep to try to find its way home again;

² Verse 17.

He always goes in search of it: “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (John 10:11). The lost sheep may be lost out on the hills on a wild, stormy night; no matter. The Good Shepherd leaves His “ninety and nine” and at the risk of His own life goes out in the wildest storm imaginable through the mountains “until He find it” He goes “after that which is lost, until He find it” (Luke 15:4).

(2) “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

Don’t imagine that you can save yourself, or that you have grown up on the right side of the railroad tracks so you are naturally almost saved on your own; if the Lord were to leave us to ourselves, we would be hopelessly lost.

“The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” Think of a shepherd of sheep; he has had a hard day, he is tired and hungry; his wife has cooked his favorite roast for supper; but as he counts his sheep, he finds that one is not there; it’s out somewhere in the mountains.

A wild storm is brewing; she says, “Come and rest and eat your supper, you have 99 sheep, are they not enough for you?” But he can’t rest and eat; one sheep is lost.

So out in the wild storm he goes, maybe looking all night, cold and hungry; he must find that one sheep! And who is it? You personally, and me personally.

Such an overturning of ancient values could never convince people unless solid evidence backed it up. The apostles must prove that they did not invent such a love from their own imagination. Evidence

there was, and it was incontestable: when the Son of God was executed by cruel Roman soldiers, He did the unthinkable—He loved and prayed for His enemies, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”³

No one could remember that anyone had ever before said anything like that. For all the world to see, Christ had demonstrated that “God is love,”⁴ a genuine kind that humanity could not fake. Now the world was on its way to being turned upside down.⁵

No creature from Mars could have aroused more astonishment than this new idea—a love that depends neither on the beauty of its object nor on its goodness. It is a love that not only loves ugly and mean people without value, but that actually creates value in them. When people heard about this, they demanded to know more.

The best thinkers of that day had praised the love of the Greek Alcestis for Admetus as the supreme revelation of divine goodness—she was willing to die for a *good* man. The apostles said no, that’s not the real thing: “The proof of God’s amazing love is this: that it was *while we were sinners* that Christ died for us while we were His enemies.”⁶

Jews and Romans looked at one another in amazement. If there was a God, the ancients imagined Him residing in lofty isolation, waiting for humans to seek Him out. Christ revealed Him in

³ Luke 23:34.

⁴ 1 John 4:8.

⁵ Acts 17:6.6

⁶ Romans 5:8, 10, Phillips.

stark contrast as a personal Saviour “come to seek and to save that which was lost.”⁷

Paul was obsessed with this great idea: “The righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach)” (Romans 10:6-8, RSV).

That “word of faith” is as closely related to *agape* as a negative is to a photographic print. Faith is the response of an honest human heart to this tremendous revelation of *agape*, and Paul’s point is that this tremendous “word is near you.” Have you heard the News? There’s the evidence: God has already chosen you and sought you out where you’ve been hiding from Him! The Good Shepherd is always on safari looking for us.

Jesus said, “Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest . . .” (Matt. 11:28). “All you.” No restriction. Is the sacrifice of Christ only “provisional”?

It’s provided, but “provisional” implies that it’s not true unless you make it true by your “acceptance.” Did God ask our permission before He gave His Son for us? Did Christ die for disbelievers as well as for believers? Weren’t all of us unbelievers when He died?

What is the “deep theological truth hidden here”? It’s the “the third angel’s message in verity,” the

⁷ Luke 19:10.

“most precious message” of “much more abounding grace.” It’s what alone can forever cure the disease of lukewarmness. Nothing but an explosion of gratitude to Him can deliver us from lethargy. We can experience it only when we fully appreciate the extent of Christ’s sacrifice. That’s why we are told to direct the world’s attention to the uplifted cross. The Evangelicals can’t do it and the Roman Catholics can’t, because their doctrines make it impossible. *We must do it.*

Neither Calvinism nor Evangelicalism nor Arminianism could fully recover the Bible truth of justification by faith because the third angel’s message of the cleansing of the sanctuary had to come before the 1888 message could come and proclaim justification by faith more clearly.⁸ In God’s great timetable, a people must be prepared for translation, not just for death.

Not semantics, but truth is at issue. We cannot rewrite Romans 5:18 to make it say—“by the righteousness of one an offer of justification came to all men *provisionally*.” A mixture of gospel and legalism can’t lighten the earth with glory. Why?

(a) This false gospel cannot “see God as love” in the sense of *agape*. It sees Him giving Himself conditionally, reservedly, “provisionally.” If He did

⁸ “The third angel closes his message thus: ‘Here is the patience of the saints; here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.’ As he repeated these words, he pointed to the heavenly sanctuary . . . to the most holy place” (*Early Writings*, p. 254). The genius of the 1888 message was the joining together of that truth with a clearer view of justification by faith.

not legally justify all men, He must reserve the punishment for their sin to inflict it on them later—as if He had never died for them. *And that denies the cross.* But the truth is that He did die for all men because He loved “all men.” The lost die for their unbelief.

(b) This mixture of gospel and legalism sees the gift of Christ as a mere “offer.” It sees the human race born with that original “condemnation” “in Adam” still hanging over their head. Christ’s sacrifice was only *provisional* and accomplished nothing unless the sinner obeys. If he doesn’t, then Christ didn’t truly pay for his sins, He only *offered* to—the sinner must pay for them. In reality, this popular “Christian” view boils down to the essence of the Hindu idea of *karma*—every person must pay for his sins. They must be told that *Christ* has paid for them. But how can we tell them if even we don’t believe it?

Christ *did* give Himself unconditionally, unreservedly, totally, thus dying every man’s second death. That is *agape*. There is no need for any human being to die the second death except for his unbelief. Christ has already “exhausted the penalty,” and paid the price of his sins.⁹ *The lost put*

⁹ “Justice demands that sin be not merely *pardoned*, but the *death penalty* must be executed. God, in the gift of His only-begotten Son, met both these requirements. By dying in man’s stead, Christ exhausted the *penalty* and provided a *pardon*.” *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 340; the penalty “exhausted” was for “the whole race of men” (p. 343). “He took in His grasp the *world* over which Satan claimed to preside as his lawful territory, and by His wonderful work in giving His life, He restored the *whole race of men* to favor

themselves in double jeopardy. Telling the sinner the truth about the character of God does not encourage him to continue in sin; it's the only way he can find genuine deliverance.¹⁰

(c) In effect, logically, the “merely offer” view tells the sinner: “You were born under condemnation and you are still under it as though there were no second Adam, no Savior, until you do something first to repent and obey. Christ only offered you a lifting of your ‘condemnation’ on condition that you first accept and obey.”¹¹ The result? The “believer” can never have the confidence that he has made a sufficient response and his best response can't justify him. What follows: lukewarmness, doubt, anxiety, and impotence in the face of temptation.

(d) The “merely offer” view cannot see the Good Shepherd *saving* the lost sheep; it only has Him *offering* to save it. The Good Shepherd truly saved the lost sheep, but allowed it freedom to resist and reject the Shepherd after He had found him. The lost sheep in the parable is not a wolf; it's the entire human race.¹²

with God” Ellen G. White, “Christ Our High Priest” (Manuscript 50, 1900).

¹⁰ Ellen White wisely says that the most effective way to help men, women, and youth to overcome sensuality and sexual immorality is to present to them the cross of Christ: “One steadfast look to the Saviour uplifted upon the cross will do more to purify the mind and heart from every defilement than will all the scientific explanations by the ablest tongue . . . This is my teaching of moral purity” (Letter 102, 1894).

¹¹ See *Adventists Affirm, op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹² “This world is but an atom in the vast dominions over which God presides, yet this little *fallen world*—the *one lost*

(e) The “offer” view is also forced to see the prodigal son differently. If he is “under condemnation” until he takes the initiative to come home, he cannot be a family member, a son; he is a stranger. But the biblical view sees the prodigal as still being a son even while he was rioting and then in the pigsty—a son, indeed, *although a lost one*. Did the father “make” him a son only when he came home?¹³

The Bible view tells the prodigal, “You are a child of God ‘in Christ’ by virtue of His sacrifice as the second Adam, and He has elected you since He gave Himself for you on His cross. But you have wandered away and sold your birthright. Now, realize and appreciate your true status in Him. Let His love draw you home where you belong, by virtue of His already adopting you ‘in Christ.’ The legal justification *is* His “adoption” of the entire human race “in Christ.”

(f) Can a legalism view truly see every loaf of bread stamped with the cross? The Bible sees that “stamp” as far more than mere physical life: it is the “verdict of acquittal” “in Christ” which alone has

sheep—is more precious in His sight than are the ninety and nine that went not astray from the fold. Christ, the loved Commander in the heavenly courts, stooped from His high estate, laid aside the glory that He had with the Father, in order to save the *one lost world*,” *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 190, 191. “He has left the courts of heaven, where all is purity, happiness, and glory, to *save the one lost sheep*, the *one world* that has fallen by transgression,” *The Desire of Ages*, p. 693.

¹³ The word “power” in John 1:12 is *exousia*, which means “authority” conferred on the sinner when he believes.

made life tolerable or joyous for any human being, “saint or sinner.” Thus every meal the wicked have ever eaten has been an unrecognized sacrament.¹⁴ “God has wrought out salvation for every man, and has given it to him; but the majority spurn it and throw it away. The judgment will reveal the fact that full salvation was given to every man and that the lost have deliberately thrown away their birthright possession.”¹⁵ This is the seed of a greater evangelism that will transcend all egocentric motivation—“the beginning” of the loud cry message.

The problem with saying that the Lord is your Shepherd is that you immediately obligate yourself to follow where the Good Shepherd leads you! His destination is “home,” His Father’s house, where you will be welcome for the coming, no matter who you have been.

Just believing and saying that “the Lord is your Shepherd” will strengthen your faith because you realize that you do not deserve the blessings that are wrapped up in that blessed psalm. Immediately you will sense that they are conferred on you undeservedly and are given to you through the much more abounding grace of the Shepherd of your soul; and that is step one toward salvation in eternal life.

Your self-pride is washed away in the tears of repentance; just simply realizing how unlimited is your debt of gratitude becomes a step toward Christ. “He who comes to God must (1) believe that

He is, and (2) that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).

But people still have problems with the Good News. The idea of God playing hide and seek with us has strangely infiltrated the church today. “It’s up to you to build and to maintain a right relationship with God. He did His part a long time ago; now the ball is in your court. If you don’t have the perseverance and the energy to ferret Him out of His hiding place, too bad; He has someone else waiting to take your crown. And if you fail in your search, He’ll hardly bother to wave goodbye to you.”

What a travesty of truth. Christ loves us so much that He seeks and pursues us all our lives.

Doesn’t the Bible tell us that it is our job to “seek the Lord”? Do the Old Testament “seek-ye-the-Lord” texts contradict Jesus’ New Testament parable of the Good Shepherd seeking us?

Even the Old Testament texts that *appear* to give that impression do not do so in context. The sin of the ancient Jews was twisting Scripture to fit their old covenant ideas. Jesus came to reveal a “grace [that] did much more abound.”¹⁶ Unless we understand we will forever wallow in a subtle form of legalism, paralyzing our message to the world so that we win only a few of those we could otherwise win.

Look at Isaiah 55:6: “Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.” The Hebrew word translated “seek” (*darash*) does not

¹⁴ Compare John 6:53 and *The Desire of Ages*, p. 660.

¹⁵ E. J. Waggoner, *The Glad Tidings*, p. 14.

¹⁶ Exodus 21:24; Matthew 5:38-42; Romans 5:20.

primarily mean seek, but it means “pay attention to,” or “inquire of” (compare its use in 1 Samuel 28:7).¹⁷ Isaiah says, Pay attention to the Lord “while He is near.” He emphasizes His nearness, not His farness. There is no Bible statement that reveals God as indifferently waiting for us to arouse Him from lethargy, or that He wants to hide Himself from us. Our “seeking” is always represented as a heart-response to His initiative in seeking us.

The true gospel gives a beautiful and powerful reason for serving Christ: “The love (*agape*) of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.”¹⁸ The original language implies that those who sense Christ’s love find it impossible “henceforth” to go on living for self:

“It is not the fear of punishment, or the hope of everlasting reward, that leads the disciples of Christ to follow Him. They behold the Saviour’s matchless love, . . . and the sight of Him attracts, it softens and subdues the soul.”¹⁹

The pure gospel reactivated in the 1888 message provides a deep peace, and it grows in a heart that

¹⁷ King Saul asks his servants to “seek” or “find” him “a woman who is a medium.” This is the common word that means “seek.” It is not *darash*. Next he says, “that I may get her and inquire of her.” That is *darash*, which is translated “seek” in Isaiah 55:6.

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15, KJV.

¹⁹ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 480.

has been delivered from that subliminal fear that shadows us from the cradle to our grave.

Sometimes rage or bitterness erupts from the murky depths of our unknown selves like a volcano we thought was extinct. Molten lava pours forth from deep subterranean emotional fires.

Often they have smoldered from our infancy, yes, perhaps even from conception—like the child who realizes that he or she was the product of lust, an unwanted pregnancy. Can a fetus share somehow the bitterness of its pregnant mother? After birth the unwanted child can wonder, “Where was God when this happened?”

A child’s parents may not have realized how they were destroying his or her sense of healthy self-respect by fault-finding or pressure to earn their love. Many of us carry a crushing load of guilt and alienation which stems from infantile traumas that are in no way our fault. Alcoholism, drug addiction, constitutional depression, sexual degradation, can often find their roots in infancy. Some say that homosexuality is triggered there.

And there are traumas of rejection that can devastate our adult lives, like the death of a spouse, or worse, divorce. Does the gospel have good news for us?

Yes—justification by faith! It gives you peace with God, as though you had never sinned *and as though no one else had ever sinned against you*. It enables you to forgive others, because you sense their guilt is corporately yours as well. It is practical healing for wounded emotions, always penetrating deeper, and blending into sanctification. And it is

ministered by a High Priest who is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities.”

The best modern translation of High Priest is Divine Psychiatrist or Divine Psychologist. He is on duty 24 hours a day; never takes a holiday; and He is so infinite that He gives you His full attention. You can feel like you are the only patient He has.