

# THE SHEEP THAT COULDN'T FIND ITS WAY HOME

By Paul Penno Jr.  
August 10, 2013

Matthew 18:12-14<sup>1</sup>

This is a story that Jesus told. This foolish sheep didn't know why it got lost. It probably was its own fault. Evening was coming on, and the shepherd and all the others had gone home, and our one lost sheep was left behind.

It had no idea which way to go. Perhaps it was stuck in a bramble bush and couldn't get free. When it was bleating in fear, there was no one to hear its cry, except perhaps some wolf might hear. And that would be terrible.

The sun was going down, and the idea of staying out there in the wild was terrifying. Oh, if only that wonderful man who is our shepherd would just come and find me! He leads us beside the still waters, and makes us lie down in green pastures of lovely grass. I am sure he doesn't want me to be lost like this, out in the wild.

But the lost sheep could do nothing to help itself. No way could it manage to find its way home. If nobody came to save it, it must die.

Meanwhile, the shepherd at home is not happy.

When he gets there with his 99 sheep and counts them, he realizes that one is lost. It would be

terrible to leave it out there, maybe to starve or die of thirst, or worse, be eaten by a wolf.

The sun is going down, and night is coming on. He is tired from a long day of hard work. His wife is so happy to see him come home and probably tells him, "Darling husband, I am so glad to see you come home. I have cooked a lovely supper for you—just what you like. Hot soup and corn bread, all your favorite things. It's all ready, so just come."

But the shepherd says, "No, darling, I can't. I have just counted my sheep and one is missing. I can't leave it out there to perish alone, I must go find it."

"But dear husband, you are tired and hungry, and look, there are black clouds gathering and the sun is going down, and the wind is beginning to blow. A storm is coming up. It would be dangerous for you to go out in the dark, looking for just one lost sheep. Don't you have your 99 safe here? Are they not enough for you? Why risk your life for one?"

"Oh, I could never sleep tonight, and I could never enjoy my good supper, thinking about that one lost sheep. It's in distress. I must go and find it."

So off the good shepherd went, into the dark, stormy night.

The wild storm came. The wind howled. Only by lightning flashes could he see his way. Over the crags, and down into the valleys, the faithful, loving shepherd went on. Finally he heard the faint sound of the lost sheep bleating in the darkness, afraid. The shepherd was so happy at last to find it.

Do you think he scolded it angrily? "Why have you been so careless to get lost like this? You made me miss my supper and my good night's sleep, you

---

<sup>1</sup> 619 "Lead On O King Eternal" 545 "Savior, Like a Shepherd."

naughty sheep. I wish I could beat you. Serves you right—now you must walk home!” Do you think he said things like that?

No, the sheep was wounded, as well as faint with hunger. The shepherd put it on his shoulders and carried it home! Heavy load back up those mountains.

And when he came home, he was so happy he called his friends and neighbors and asked them to have a party with him. This was great fun! A sheep had been lost, but it was found again. Everybody wanted to join in.

Why did Jesus tell this story? And it was about something far more important than one lost sheep. It is about you, and me, being lost and found. He is singing songs because He found you. Are you singing, too? And wouldn't you like to spend your life helping Him find some more lost sheep?

We are so much like sheep, which don't know which way to go unless a shepherd guides them, and they get lost easily. And wolves love to eat them. We don't know which way to go, and we get lost easily as we wander away from Jesus. We need Him with us all the way, every hour of every day.

He says that “the sheep hear His voice as He calls His own sheep by name, and He leads them out” (John 10:4). And we know the Voice of our Savior. When Satan tries to call us aside, we know that his voice is not that of our Shepherd.

Jesus would not be happy if we followed Him only because we are scared. He is happy when we follow Him because we love Him. He said, “I am the

good shepherd who is willing to die for the sheep. ... I am the good shepherd ... I know My sheep and they know Me. And I am willing to die for them” [that's you and me] (verses 11-15).

What's the point of this story? Jesus is not waiting for us to find Him. He is not some great earthly king or president that nobody can visit, unless they get invited. Nor is He like some busy doctor in his office who never has time to go out looking for sick people to heal. Jesus searches for sick people! He is looking for us! He takes the first step.

Millions of Christians have questions about the character of God: (a) is He Someone we must seek and find? Or (b) is He Someone seeking and finding us?

How we think of Him is important to our present earthly happiness, and to our eternal destiny, because if (a) is the truth, we don't know where to go to seek and find Him, which means, ultimately, we are lost.

All pagan religions are built on the premise of (a); and to many Christian people, especially children and youth, the idea is ingrained in us that God is like a doctor in his office—we can't conceive of one with his bag of medicines going door to door, knocking, “Anybody sick here, can I help?” He stays in his office! You've got to go and find him.

The Bible revelation of the character of God is (b): Jesus says, “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost” (Luke 19:10). His parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost boy (Luke 15:3-32) are clear; even the story of the prodigal son emphasizes the seeking love of the

father—the lost boy would never have said “I will arise and go to my father” unless the seeking love of the father had drawn him (cf. John 12:32, 33).

Our children and youth must not be given the idea that God is like a doctor deep in his sanctum sanctorum office, hard to find! The seeking love of the Father and the self-emptying love of Christ must be made plain early and through their teen years. An outward profession based on fear is empty; it's the heart that must be won by the truth of His love.

But doesn't the Bible say, “Seek ye the Lord, while He may be found”? Yes, but it adds immediately, “Call upon Him while He is near” (Isa. 55:6). The Hebrew word “seek” is *dharash* (“Inquire of, make inquisition”). There are two words for “seek”: *baqash* which is Saul seeking his father's lost asses (1 Sam. 9:3). King Saul asks his servants to “seek” (*baqash*) him a pagan witch, “that [he] may go to her and inquire of her” (*dharash*). So, Isa. 55:6 really says, “Inquire of the Lord while He is near.” The Bible idea is the nearness of the Savior, not His farness!

And there is one more little point in this wonderful story. The Good Shepherd not only looks for His lost sheep, but He keeps searching “until He finds it.” In looking for you and for me, He never gives up.

Maybe there is someone you love that you are praying for. You pray and pray, but it seems that nothing happens. The Good Shepherd didn't stop searching!

Sometimes children pray for old grandparents; they love them. But grandparents are old and don't change easily. But this story that Jesus told helps

us understand. Jesus never gives up even on old people. So don't stop praying for them. Old people can change. Often we don't know what's in their hearts, but the Savior knows.

And sometimes we pray for our parents, and it seems backwards, for usually parents are the ones who pray for their children. But that's good—let children pray for their parents! Often they are lost as much as other people are lost.

And remember that your prayer is in God's computer and will never be lost!

Doesn't your heart say, with mine, “Thank You, dear Savior, for finding me. Thank You for giving up everything in order to come and find me. And now I choose to give myself and my whole life to You, because of Your great love for me.”

#### **The Man Jesus Met on the Road**

Once there was a man who was doing everything wrong. Not only was he doing wrong things himself, but he was trying to stop other people from doing what was right. He got so bad this way that he tried to put people in prison who were doing what was right.

The amazing truth is that Jesus loved this terrible man. Inside, he didn't totally 100 percent want to be bad, because deep in his heart he was honest. He was doing all his badness because he had been taught the wrong way since he was a little boy. Jesus knew that if only he could be brought to see the truth, he would change from being a bad man to become a very good man through believing the truth about Jesus.

The man's name? He was Saul of Tarsus, a member of the great Jewish leadership that had crucified Jesus. He was taught to think of Jesus as a man who deceived the people. That was a false idea, but Saul believed all the lies that had been told him. The Bible says that "Saul tried to destroy the church; going from house to house, he dragged out the believers, both men and women, and threw them into jail" (Acts 8:3). We would sort of not like such a man, wouldn't we?

But he could not destroy the church even if he tried ever so hard, because those "who were scattered went everywhere preaching the message" (verse 4). The more Saul persecuted the church, the more new people joined it.

Jesus wasn't afraid that Saul would actually stop the gospel from going everywhere, for He knew that nobody could stop it. But Jesus was concerned for Saul himself. Not only was he going to be lost if he kept on in this bad way; he was ruining his own life now, because deep in his heart he knew he was on the wrong way. So Jesus decided to do something.

While Saul was on his way to the city of Damascus, intent on dragging Christians to jail, Jesus Himself decided to stop him on the way and ask a simple question: "Saul, Saul! Why are you persecuting Me?" Until now, Saul had never realized that Jesus was not dead any more; He was risen! Saul tells us what happened:

"Who are You, Lord?' I asked. And the Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you persecute'" (Acts 26:14, 15). Saul had never understood that in persecuting the people who believed in Jesus he

was really persecuting the Son of God. For the first time he began to realize that he was terribly wrong.

Jesus told him that if he kept on doing this bad thing, it would be the hardest thing he had ever tried to do. "You are hurting yourself by kicking back, like an ox kicking against its owner's stick." Maybe there was a farmer right there beside the road trying to plow with his ox and using a sharp iron goad or stick to prick the lazy animal to walk faster. If the ox hangs back he hurts himself; it's easier for the ox to just keep on doing his duty, go forward, rather than to hang back. This is how Jesus tried to help Saul to see himself as he really was—he was fighting against God! That's hard work.

What Jesus said makes sense to everybody. Fighting against God is the hardest thing any person can ever do. In contrast, Jesus said that following Him is the easiest thing—yes, that's what He said! Listen!—"Come to Me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest." Some children have been taught that if they follow Jesus, it is the hard way to go. Never! "The yoke I will give you is easy," says Jesus; "and the load I will put on you is light" (Matt. 11:29, 30).

#### **Why It's So Hard to Fight Against God**

Did Jesus love Saul of Tarsus for trying to hinder him like this on his way to Damascus? Or should Jesus have said, Don't try to hinder him. If he wants to go the wrong way, we'll find someone to take his place. Goodbye, Saul. Is that what Jesus said?

If someone tried to save your life, wouldn't you be thankful? Jesus met Saul and asked him this question, and told him he was ruining his life by

kicking against the stick. But it wasn't Jesus who was making his way "hard." Jesus simply told him that the way he had chosen to go was the "hard" way, not the easy way. That was that!

The Holy Spirit was convincing Saul deep in his heart that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, the Savior. But Saul didn't want to believe the truth. He was fighting the Holy Spirit. While trying to sleep at night, he must have been having nightmares, and would wake up in fear. Then he would choose again to go on in the way he had chosen, and "persecute Jesus." But deep in his heart he was constantly fighting against the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and he learned how that's the hardest thing any one can do.

Jesus doesn't say, I will give you a hard time. No; those who refuse to come to Him are the ones who have a hard time; they have made their way hard.

What He says is true! In the long run, it's easier to be saved in God's kingdom, than it is to be lost.

But many people have tried to twist what Jesus said backwards. They say it is hard to follow Jesus and it is easy to follow Satan. They think the path to heaven is hard, uphill all the way with all kinds of rocks and setbacks in the way. They think God has made it hard to be saved, that the path that goes downhill is the easy one. They think God just stands back and lets us keep on going the wrong way—which really means that He doesn't care if we're saved or lost. But He does care!

Yes, the Bible may say that the Good News is very good; but doesn't Ellen White say it is not as good as that? Ellen White never contradicts the Bible,

and certainly not the Lord Jesus Christ. It is possible for us to read into her writings our own Arminian ideas that we have nurtured all our lives. Thus we can read her like the ancient Jews read the Old Testament with a veil upon our heart (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14-16).

It is possible to take words, phrases, clauses, sentences, from Ellen White and string them together to give the impression that she is denying what Jesus said about His yoke being "easy" and His burden "light." But she did say very clearly:

"Do not conclude that the upward path is the hard and the downward road the easy way. All along the road that leads to death there are pains and penalties, there are sorrows and disappointments, there are warnings not to go on. God's love has made it hard for the heedless and headstrong to destroy themselves . . . And all the way up the steep road leading to eternal life are well-springs of joy to refresh the weary."<sup>2</sup>

The path that goes downhill, the way the world follows, is the hard way because there are all kinds of obstacles along the way to warn us, "Don't go on!" The Lord loves us so much that He has put those obstacles in the path that leads to hell.

It's all very well to say that it's easy to be saved, "if you believe the Good News." My problem is that I find it hard to believe. The most difficult thing we have to "do" is to believe. We have all been born, bred, trained, nurtured, and conditioned, in unbelief. We wake up every morning afresh as an

---

<sup>2</sup> *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 139.

unbeliever, and need to humble our hearts anew to choose to believe.

A thousand times a day we need to choose again to believe what the Lord says. “I die daily,” says Paul (1 Cor. 15:31). Israel could not “enter in” their Promised Land because of unbelief (Heb. 3:12-19; 4:6), and that is our problem still today.

Our battle is not the battle of works, but always “the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12), in other words, learning how to believe!

How can I learn to believe? “God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3). In other words, the Lord has granted each of us the capability to believe. The word “measure” is *metron*, like a vessel for measuring a liquid. In other words, He has “dealt to every man” a capacity for believing. No one can accuse Him in the judgment day that He withheld that “measure.”

No human being can possibly believe until first of all he hears the unadulterated Good News. No one has a self-starter. You cannot originate faith within yourself apart from understanding the cross and God’s love. We cannot make our own atonement apart from that revelation.

Even faith itself is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8). “How then shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher . . . [of] glad tidings of good things! . . . Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:14-17).

The moment you hear the smallest whisper of that Good News, make a choice immediately to believe it. Don’t delay even a moment

Do we never have a battle to fight? Yes, we do have a terrible battle to fight, but it is not where we have often supposed it is—with obedience and hard works that we don’t know how to do. The real battle is with ingrained unbelief.

Fight it! Get on your knees, wrestle your way through that maze of darkness to the light beyond. If it takes time to fight the battle, it is time well spent. If it takes hours, even days, of fasting and prayer, you will emerge a victor. The struggle is well worth while. And if we decline the struggle, we must always endure the painful conviction of our sin of unbelief.

I need help in fighting that battle! You can get the precise help you need in the Bible. David had to fight the same battle over and over again. Read his Psalms. With one single exception, each one wrestles its way through unbelief to a choice to believe the Good News. Make your choice to believe, even in what appears to be total darkness, and then you can say with him, “O Lord, truly I am thy servant, and the son of thine handmaid: thou hast loosed my bonds” (116:16). Then you will find your feet set on the solid rock, and you will have a song to sing for ever afterward (40:1-4).

But all this “battle” does not mean that it is harder to be saved than to be lost, or easier to be lost than it is to be saved. All the angels of heaven are on your side; the Holy Spirit is striving against your flesh; Christ as the Good Shepherd is seeking you

and trying to bring you back to His fold again; you have constant evidences of His grace. All this is making it easy for you to be saved, *if you will choose to believe.*

But if you choose not to believe, you face a wearisome struggle to stifle the convictions of the Holy Spirit. This is His constant pleading—don't crucify Christ afresh. *That is difficult for any honest heart to do!*

In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* we read of Christian asking the way to the Celestial City. Evangelist points and asks, "Do you see yonder wicket gate?" "No," says Christian. "Do you see yonder shining light?" Then he wisely replies in behalf of all of us natural-born unbelievers, "I *think* I do." Says the Evangelist, "Keep that in your eye, so shalt thou find the gate."

If you have difficulty seeing the shining light, for sure there is one place where it is not quite as dark as all the rest "Keep that in your eye."

And all along the way that leads to heaven, the Lord has put nice rest places for us, refreshing water of life, delicious fresh bread of life to feed us. Even the sacrifices we are called to make for Jesus become easy when we realize that Jesus is yoked up with us. He says, "Take My yoke and put it on you, and learn from Me, . . . and you will find rest" (Matt. 11:29). Whatever sacrifices we think we make in order to follow Jesus are "easy" when we remember what He sacrificed for us!

Someone who was wise has said that if we don't resist Jesus as we go along through life, He will

lead us all the way into His everlasting kingdom. This reminds us of how much He loves us!