

## The Lord Our Shepherd.

Luke 15: 1-7.

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It is ever soothing to the spirit to ponder the character of the Lord Jesus as our Shepherd, in whatever aspect of that character we view Him; whether as "the *good* Shepherd," laying down His life for the sheep; or "the *great* Shepherd," coming up out of the grave, having, in the greatness of His strength, deprived death of its deadly sting, and the grave of its victory; or lastly, as "the *chief* Shepherd," when, surrounded by all His subordinate shepherds, who, from love to His adorable person, and, through the grace of His Spirit, have watched over and cared for the flock, He shall wreath the brow of each with a diadem of glory. In any or all of these stages of our Divine Shepherd's history, it is happy and edifying to consider Him. Indeed, there is something in our Lord's character as Shepherd, which is peculiarly adapted to our present condition. Through grace we have been constituted "the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand;" and, as such, it is a shepherd we specially need. As *sinners*, ruined and guilty, we need Him as the "Lamb of God;" His atoning blood meets us at that point in our history, and satisfies our utmost need. As *worshippers*, we need Him as our "great High Priest," whose robes, the varied expression of His attributes and qualifications, most blessedly prove to our souls how effectually He fills that office. As *disciples*, we need Him in His character as Teacher, "in whom are hid *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." But, as *sheep*, exposed to countless dangers in our passage through this dark wilderness, in this "gloomy and dark day," we truly stand in need of the friendly voice of our Shepherd, whose rod and staff give security and stability to our footsteps as we journey onward to the heavenly fold.

Now, in these verses that I have read for you, we find the shepherd presented to us in a deeply interesting stage of his gracious work; he is here seen *in search of the sheep*. The parable derives peculiar force from the fact that it was put forth, together with the parables of the *lost* piece of silver, and the *lost* son, as an argument in favour of God's gracious acting towards sinners. God, in the person of the Lord Jesus, had come so very near to *the sinner*; that legalism and Pharisaism, as represented by the scribes and Pharisees, took offence at it. "This man *receiveth sinners*, and eateth with them." Here was the offence of which Divine grace stood charged at the bar of man's legal, proud, self-righteous heart. But it was the very glory of God — God manifest in the flesh — God come down to earth thus to receive sinners. It was for that He came down into a ruined world. He left not the throne of His Father to come down here to search for righteous people; for wherefore should He search for them? Who would think of going to look for anything but that which was "*lost*?" Surely the very presence of Christ in the world proved that he had come *in search of something*, and, moreover, that that something must have been "*lost*." "The Son of man came to *seek* and to *save* that which was *lost*." The soul should greatly rejoice in the fact that it was as a *lost* thing that it drew forth the grace and pity of the shepherd's heart. We may inquire what it was that could have drawn the heart of Jesus towards such as we are; yes, we may inquire, but eternity alone will unfold to us the answer to the inquiry. We might ask the shepherd in this parable why he thought more about the one solitary *lost* sheep than he did about the ninety and nine which were not lost at all. What would have been his answer? "The *lost* one is my object, it is valuable to me, and I *must* find it." So it was with the merchantman, who surely is no other than Jesus: he alone could see, in that which lay buried in the bowels of the earth, an object which was worth everything to him; Jesus alone could see, in a helpless sinner, an object for which He thought it worth stooping from His Father's bright throne to save: —

"He saw me ruined in the fall,  
Yet loved me, notwithstanding all;  
He saved me from my lost estate;  
His loving kindness, oh, how great!"

We may well wonder at the mystery of Christ's love to the Church; it will be a subject of wonder to angels and saints for ever. But while we can never solve the profound mystery, nor fathom the depths of redeeming love, how sweet to the poor sin-harassed soul to know itself as the object of such love! Yes; it is at once soothing and elevating; moreover, it is the only true basis of real holiness and devotedness of heart to God. "We love Him *because* He *first* loved us." God must have the first place in redemption, seeing the whole plan had its origin in His eternal mind; it emanated from Him. The poor, silly, straying sheep could never devise a way for its return to the fold from which it had gone forth. How could it, when the very same disposition which had led it at first to wander would make it a wanderer to the end? How could the disposition which at first led the creature to revolt from under the hand of his God ever engender a spirit of subjection, or a spirit of confidence afterwards? Impossible. Hence the force of the words, "*Go after* that which is *lost*."

In these few words we have the grand action of redemption, and the attitude of God therein. God, in redemption, is emphatically and pre-eminently *the* seeker, and not the *sought*. This we are taught in Genesis 3. The words, "Where art thou?" fully show us God "*going* after that which was *lost*." Man had fled away from the face of God; he had indeed "gone astray," — he had sought to find a hiding-place, not in, *but from* God, behind the trees of the garden: and when the blessed God came down to visit man, He found Himself quite alone, as far as man was concerned; and, moreover, He had, thus *alone*, to begin again, not merely to create but to redeem. In creation, it was Omnipotence acting upon unresisting matter; but in redemption, it was boundless love and grace dealing with a rebel heart and a wined creation. Hence the grand inference involving a truth at once most simple and sublime, namely, GOD IS SEEN AS MUCH MOVING ALONE IN REDEMPTION AS HE IS IN CREATION. Man was not in the scene when God called worlds into existence; he was not there when the finger of Omnipotence set yonder sun in the heavens to run its great annual course; he was not there when a bound was set to the angry billows, that they might not pass the Divine decree. No; man was not there, nor could be: he was then in the dust of the earth, and could take no part in the grand transactions that were being developed; and yet, such is the wild infatuation of the human heart, that, although redemption must be admitted to be a more difficult (if it be allowable to speak of anything as difficult in reference to God), a more god-like work than creation, yet he will vainly and presumptuously intrude into that scene where God is, in solitary dignity, carrying out the vast plan of redemption — a plan in which He alone could act. "No man can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him, for the redemption of his soul is precious, and it ceaseth for ever." Redemption is too precious a work for God to give into the hands of anyone; He himself must have *all* the joy, all the glory of saving poor self-destroyed sinners. Just so is it in these verses which we are looking at. The shepherd is *alone* in the pursuit.

The sheep knew nothing about the loving anxiety of the shepherd's heart; nothing of the motives that had led him forth in this self-denying search. No, these things were unknown to the sheep. The shepherd did not seek the co-operation of the sheep in his search, such would have been useless. The sheep was wandering away from the fold, and would have wandered on till overtaken by the wolf, had not the tender heart of the shepherd led him to seek it amid the wild labyrinths of the desert. And oh, what unwearied grace breathes in the words "*until he find it!*" Jesus, our gracious Shepherd, would not

allow Himself to be baffled in the work which He had undertaken. He came fully prepared to meet all the obstacles that stood in His way; He was fully aware of all that lay before Him ere He could lay His hand upon the *lost* one. He knew that He had to encounter all the malignant opposition of Satan, who would dispute every step of the way with Him. He knew what enmity existed in the heart of the very creature He had come to seek and to save; and, above all, He had fully before His mind the cup of ineffable bitterness, which was prepared for Him at the cross, even the hiding of God's countenance; the three darkest hours that had ever passed over the soul of an intelligent being, more terrible to His divinely sensitive soul than all the sorrow and trial He had encountered at the hand of man or Satan.

Did He, then, shrink from encountering Satan? Nay, He, as "the stronger man," penetrated into the very heart of the strong man's palace, and spoiled him of "all his armour wherein he trusted." "By death, He destroyed him that had the power of death." Did he grow weary of man's ceaseless and deadly enmity, or was He driven back by it? No; He moved onward in all the Divine fortitude of love, bursting through maze after maze of human opposition, until at last, when man had poured forth all the deadly Satanic poison that was in his heart, and had nailed the heavenly Shepherd to the cursed tree, He graciously breathed the prayer, "Father, forgive them," and poured forth the *blood*, by virtue of which the prayer could be and was answered.

Further, did death drive Him back from His purpose of mercy? No, "He met its deadly sting;" it was to Him indeed a terrible sting, yet He bore it, and, by bearing it, robbed it of all its power to sting the soul that believes on Him. Did the grave "the horrible pit and the miry clay" — deter His soul? No; he went down into the very heart of the grave, into the innermost parts of the kingdom of death, and there shook it to its very centre; and, as if the realms of death had already felt the rumblings of the tremendous earthquake by which they were about to be shaken, the grave opened its mouth to set free from its grasp its long-held prey, just as the Prince of Life was about to descend into it. In a word, nothing could stop the Divine Shepherd in His search for "that which was lost, *until He found it.*" This is truly Divine. God, in creation, could not be hindered in the accomplishment of His great designs, but compelled matter to yield to the power of His voice; and then, when Satan had marred creation, and God was called upon in the vindication of His name to ascend the loftier heights of redemption, we may follow Him in His wondrous upward path from height to height, until we hear those soul-stirring words, "I *have found* my sheep which was *lost.*" Blessed announcement! "I *have found.*" It is the full triumph of redeeming love over all the power of Satan.

And mark here two important features of our shepherd's love, namely, *uncomplaining* and *unupbraiding*. We hear not a syllable about all his trouble in searching for the sheep, the time, the distance, or the labour involved. Not a word. On the contrary, the impression left on the mind by those verses is, that the shepherd considered himself amply repaid for all his trouble when he had the stray one once more within his grasp. So it is with our "Good Shepherd," "who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame." What joy? The joy of being able to say "I have found." There was no such joy in creation; all that God could say in creation was, "I have made;" it was reserved for the more glorious and sublime scheme of redemption to admit the higher note, "I *have found.*" The former was said, as it were, at *this* side of the grave; the latter, at the *other* side. Creation left man within the reach of Satan's arrows, which can wound in all places on this side of the grave; redemption brings us beyond the grave, and, as a consequence, beyond the reach of Satan's arrows.

Again, the love expressed in these verses is an unupbraiding love. The shepherd does not reproach the sheep, nor begin in anger to *drive* it home. Ah, no! the heart — the tender, compassionate, sympathizing heart of Jesus is seen here — the heart of Him who, standing amid the mighty wreck of human things, and contemplating the sad and wide-spread desolation which Satan has caused in God's

creation, could shed a tear of deep pity for the misery which He alone, by and in resurrection, could alleviate.

And where, I would ask, do we find the loveliest exhibition of this unupbraiding love? At the first meeting between the Lord and His apostles after the resurrection; yes, there we see it indeed. Instead of reproaching them for what they no doubt felt to have been a base desertion of their dear Lord in the hour of His deepest anguish, His words are, "Peace be unto you." Oh! what a thorough confounding of Satan is here! what a calm conviction that Satan was the grand cause of all the mischief, breathes through those words! Incomparable grace! May it bind our souls, beloved friends, to Him who is the great fountain and channel thereof.

But what does the shepherd do with the sheep? Does he rest satisfied with merely having found it? No; there was something far beyond this: to find it was but the first step as regards the application of the shepherd's love and care to the sheep; it was but the beginning of the wondrous journey of this once lost but now found sheep. The sheep, as we read, was away in the wilderness; the shepherd found it, and it would be an important question as to how it was to be conducted home; nor does the shepherd leave this question long unsettled; for he no sooner finds the sheep than he puts it in the most secure place, "*he layeth it on his shoulders.*" How? complaining of the weight, or the trouble? Oh, no: he layeth it on his shoulders *rejoicing.*" How little the sheep knew of the deep emotions of joy which were filling the soul of the shepherd. It would probably augment his trouble by kicking, plunging, and struggling to tumble off its place of security and rest; but no matter for that, the shepherd had hold of it, and therein he rejoiced. A loving heart and a powerful shoulder could surmount all obstacles. And how simple and sweet is the application of this to our adorable Shepherd! "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end," is the testimony of the Spirit about Him. The love of Christ was not a love that could be exhausted, or in the least degree cooled or lessened by personal experience of the unloveliness of the object; He knew what He could and would make of His Church, even "a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing," and, He stopped not short of the grand consummation of the Church's beauty and glory "in the dispensation of the fulness of times." This is the true principle of love. If we were in the habit of dwelling on what Christians *will* be, and not what they *are*, *i.e.*, in themselves, our love would be of a purer and more permanent character.

But what security we have expressed in the words, "He layeth it on his shoulders!" This is the place of the weakest believer in Jesus. He is on the shoulders of Him who had power to burst asunder the gates of brass — Him who has vanquished Satan, death, and hell, and who, consequently, cannot meet with any opposing power equal to His own. Hence His own comforting words, "No man is able to pluck them out of my hand." Surely we may say, in the triumphant language of the apostle, "Who shall separate us?"

Finally, observe the words, "*Then he cometh home.*" Here we have the highest point in this truly interesting and evangelical narrative. There could be no calling together of the friends and neighbours *in the wilderness*. No; the wilderness is the place for drawing forth Divine love in seeking, and Divine power in saving the lost; the wilderness must be the scene of the shepherd's anxiety and toil, because it is a place of danger to the sheep. There is something particularly beautiful in this little narrative; so natural, yet so Divine. The shepherd could not bear to let the sheep off his shoulders *until he got home*; he knew there was no one in the desert that could have any fellowship with him in his joy; there were wolves there, but that was all. He had to wait until he found himself and his precious charge within the quiet walls of his happy home, and then came the outburst of real joy. There was neither enemy nor evil current, nothing to interrupt the hallowed scene in which the heart of the shepherd rejoiced, in fellowship with his friends, over the sheep, for the salvation of which he had toiled so hard.