

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Great Creator and Lord of all, show us your power by restoring Your Church again. We are confident in You alone for this great work which will encourage our faith and empower us to do Your work in the world. Use us according to Your great plan and may we be responsive to You and humble in our attitude to all You require of us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

#### **Prayer ideas**\_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Look at some of the objects you have around you in your home. Many of them remind you of events of the past, or of people you love. Allow them to guide your prayers, and let the Lord inspire you in this way to pray about people and things in a way you would not otherwise consider.

#### **On-going prayers**

- **Pray about air we breathe.** *Pray throughout this week for the atmosphere that sustains life on 'planet earth'. We can too easily forget the debt we owe to God's amazing life system. He created it, and at least, the air we breathe is likened in God's Word to God's own 'breath', which is His 'Spirit'*
- *Pray for whatever is headline news in your own country today. Make the effort to find out more about it from the internet or from reading news items you might otherwise ignore*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessings of weather, with its 'bad' days and its 'good' days, all necessary for the seasons.*

### Meditation

Receive salvation, my friend, it may not now make sense to you  
But you will find that faith will lead you upwards, not downwards.

Follow the Lord, my friend, you may never know what will happen  
But the journey you will take will go far beyond your expectations.

Accept the Church, my friend, be vilified; you will not like the pain  
But the fellowship of believers is the most precious thing on earth.

Bear the Cross, my friend, it binds you to the suffering of Christ  
But it is lighter than the burdens placed on you by this world.

Await the vision, my friend, the Lord has things for you to do  
But you will never know them if you do not give Him time, and listen.

Rest in the Lord, my friend, there's no reward for doing right on earth  
But knowing His everlasting love is safety enough for you, forever.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Matthew 18: 10-14

<sup>10</sup> 'See to it that you do not despise one of the least of these; for, I tell you, their angels in heaven are continually in the presence of my heavenly Father, <sup>11</sup> For the Son of Man came to save what was lost.'

<sup>12</sup> 'What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes missing, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go in search of the one that

strayed? <sup>13</sup> Amen, I tell you, if he finds it, he will rejoice over it more than over the ninety-nine that never strayed. <sup>14</sup> So it can never be the will of your Father in heaven that one of the least of these should be lost.'

## Review

Our passage continues on from yesterday's reading, in which Jesus Himself introduced a child into the midst of the disciples, before speaking to them about their obligations in the Kingdom of God. Today, we read the unique passage of Scripture that mentions angels, specifically what we call 'guardian angels' who watch over children (18:10). After this, Mathew records another of Jesus' famous parables, the parable of the 'Lost Sheep'. It is a short parable and is extraordinarily well known, but it still has the power to surprise us if we are willing to look carefully at the picture painted.

One theme is clear, and this is that God places a supremely high value on each of His children. To begin with, this is shown in the proximity of the guardian angels to the Father's throne (18:10,11), but Jesus then slips quickly towards another thought, that of saving the one that is lost. It is a sudden jump, and we might well wonder why it is made. Perhaps Jesus knew humanity well enough to know that the child cradled in the arms will one day make his or her own decisions apart from a father or mother, and will sometimes wander far from 'home'. In a somewhat enigmatic way, Jesus had done something like this Himself when He left His parents wondering where He was on a famous journey to Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-50)!

What can we make of Jesus' mentioning of angels that stand close to God's throne? A thousand questions stand awaiting an answer, but there are none. If we imagine all the children of the world, it must be a rather large number of angels in proximity to God's throne, at least a billion and counting! If God protects children with guardian angels, what happens to them? Do they depart if a child is brought up a Muslim and thence decides to follow Mohammed not Christ? How controversial! Do adults have any special relationships with angels? Why do some Christians believe in a variety of angelic being including those that protect travel, and those that fight demons on our behalf? How can we deliberate on such things adequately when there are precious few Scripture that tell us about angels?

We should take simply what is said simply, for this was Jesus' way, and he almost begs His disciple to have such a childlike and intelligent approach (18:1-4). We certainly know that angels, as reported in the Old Testament, are messengers of God, who do His will and guide people on earth in His ways. This was the work of the angels met by Abraham (Gen 16:7f., 21:17f.), and by prophets (Dan 6:22). Their role can hardly be the same in the era of the New Covenant, as the New Testament suggests (Acts 5:19, 10:3, etc). The idea of 'guardian angels is marginally helped by the mention of angels that are associated with churches in the Revelation of John (Rev 2,3). We can only assume that in so far as God requires their use, they are available to Him today.

Certainly, Scripture does not tell us that angels have any primary role in the Gospel of Salvation. Whilst they certainly helped Paul out of prison, Jesus does not tell us that they are responsible for anyone entering the Kingdom; that was His task, as Shepherd. God does not dispatch messengers and helpers to get His will done, He goes in earnest search of the lost (18:12). You could say that the 'parable of the Lost Sheep' is better entitled the 'parable of the Good Shepherd'; *'if one goes missing ... if he finds it ... he will rejoice ...'* (18:12). The numbers are by way of illustration, and the heart of the parable is the work of the Shepherd and His joy at being successful; it could be one in a hundred one in ten, or one in a billion, the point is the same. God's exclusive and saving love for His own accomplished through Jesus.

The parable of the 'Lost Sheep' is one that has touched countless people in a remarkable number of ways over the centuries. For many, it is an example of the importance of individual evangelistic effort, *'it can never be the will of your Father in Heaven that one of the least of these should be lost'* (18:14). However, the story can illustrate any number of situations in which an individual wanders away from guidance, whether parental, social or religious. God is there in the midst of the wandering, seeking to bring home and restore the lost to the fold not of homes or church, but to the fold of the Kingdom.

## Going Deeper

- More about guardian angels
- Ministering angels (18:10)
- A problem in verse 11!
- One in a hundred sheep!
- Some thoughts about the parable from Ezekiel
- Salvation or Evangelism?

Matthew 18 is an extraordinary piece of scripture and contains a great deal of highly condensed teaching, with much here and in the following verses. We have already discovered that the chapter is about discipleship and the Kingdom of heaven, and the defining image is that of the child, taken by Jesus and placed in the disciple's midst to indicate to them the qualities of trust, selflessness and receptivity to which they should aspire in order to enter the Kingdom. In our passage today, the image of the child gives way to the picture of the sheep wandering away from the fold; an image of the tendency of all people to be self-centred and ignore the common good, let alone walk away from God.

### ***More about guardian angels***

When we read verse 10, however, it is not immediately obvious whether Jesus is just talking about children, or about children as representing disciples of Christ. It is important for us to know which it is because of what is said next about angels. We all know that people popularly believe in children's 'guardian angels', whether Christian or not, but this passage is surely not simply placed there by Matthew to tell us that they exist. God's word is concerned about what they do, and also the place of children in God's Kingdom. Certainly, the Bible speaks nowhere else about what might be called personal 'guardian angels'. Nearly all the angels who appear in the Bible elsewhere have some special message or task to do for God, as is clear from all the early appearances of angels in Matthew's Gospel (1:20, 2:13 etc), as well as the Old Testament angels found in the stories of Abraham and those who helped the early church (see above).

There is plenty of evidence in non-biblical Jewish writings of Jesus' day of a general belief in guardian angels commissioned by God to protect children alongside their parents in the early years of life. However, there has never been any clear understanding of the point at which these angels release their charge (after weaning? Upon formal adulthood?), or, indeed, whether they remain with people for life. We also know that early Christians debated whether wickedness and sin could drive guardian angels away (see the writings of Origen and Jerome) and also whether a guardian angel was assigned at conception, birth or baptism! As soon as you start to research this issue, these ideas bubble to the surface, and many more! However, if you look closely at our text, it does no more than state the existence of these personally assigned angels. Jesus spoke about them without any formality, and as 'continually in the presence of my heavenly Father' (18:10). We can do no other than take Him at His Word.

### ***Ministering angels (18:10)***

If you read the verses of this chapter immediately prior to this, then it is clear that children were Jesus' subject when He spoke. Jesus' strong words about the sin of preventing children from entering the Kingdom remain a sharp warning to all, but this does not help us understand anything more about guardian angels. Jesus is using this picture to say something more important to us about our salvation than merely to mention the idea of guardian angels.

Our passage begins in truth with Jesus' firm call that no disciple should despise any other disciple. It is a challenging statement, but the verse goes on to say more, and the reason for this is because '*angels are continually in the presence of my Heavenly Father*'; (18:10) so what does this mean? The writer of the letter to the Hebrews helps us understand that some angels have a special ministry of bringing salvation (Heb 1:7-14), not just a ministry of prayer and intercession. This fits with the theme of this part of Jesus' teaching, and our passage therefore means that we should not despise each other or put each other down because we are all being saved by Jesus with the ministering assistance of angels,. This is the clear message of our text; none of us has priority or status before the Father because this work of salvation is a heavenly work being done in us by God and His angels. As with all the teaching of Jesus, this is clear, direct, and challenging.

### ***A problem in verse 11!***

Enigmatically, the very next verse in scripture is awkward! Although it was part of the traditional Latin text for centuries, relatively recent discoveries of more ancient Greek versions of the text indicate that verse 11 may well have been added later! You will therefore find in your Bibles that some versions will have the words of verse 11 'For the Son of Man came to save what was lost', but many modern versions simply miss this out. This does not mean to say that this phrase does not reflect scripture, for we can find verses which are like this in other Gospels (Luke 19:10), and fits perfectly with the flow of the argument about what angels do for us (in verse 10). Their task before the Throne of Grace is to minister the salvation of Jesus, but it is entirely logical to include here a specific reference to Jesus, lest we think too much of angels and forget that the primary role in obtaining our salvation is Christ's and Christ's alone.

### ***One in a hundred sheep!***

The allegory of one sheep in a hundred emphasises the inestimable value of the 'least' in the Kingdom (or the Church), and reinforces what Jesus said when He placed a child in the midst of the disciples (18:1f.). Luke tells the same story (15:3-7) and in John's Gospel the theme develops into a considerable and lengthy discourse (10:1-16) which says a great deal about Jesus as a 'shepherd'.

In Matthew, however, the emphasis is on the individual rather than on Jesus, and tells us that the Father will do anything within His character and will to draw each person into the fellowship of the Kingdom (the Church), whatever the cost. The final line of the saying underscores this point; 'it can never be the will of your Father that one of the least of these should be lost'. This is a powerful message about the heart of God for the salvation of all, and in the context of Matthew 18, this surely includes children. Ultimately, the Kingdom is a heavenly which is made visible on earth by the Church as the gathering of God's people. The strength of Jesus' feelings about drawing people into His Kingdom and also holding them there is also indicated by His characteristically emphatic saying; 'Amen I tell you' (18:13). The most fascinating aspect of the allegory however is Jesus' plea to the disciples to think carefully about this (18:12). The whole allegory seems simple enough, but Jesus anticipates that if God's will is to be done, then it will require considerable thought and effort on our part.

### ***Some thoughts about the parable from Ezekiel***

There has been much debate about the sheep and who they are, what the ninety nine think, who the shepherd is (one is not mentioned, only 'a man' – see v12), and also whether the allegory is about reclaiming Christians who have 'left the fold' or about the nature of evangelism! It helps us to go back to the Old Testament, where the image of the missing sheep is rooted in Ezekiel 34, in which false leaders of God's people is likened to rogue shepherds who eat their master's sheep. False shepherds kill sheep, eat their flesh, sell their wool and hides and make an illegal profit from their underhand dealings, and the mischief commences in the scattering of the sheep by the shepherds (Ez 34:1-6). Ezekiel's prophecy is a very important passage of scripture which ends with an incredible prophecy about the saving works of God who is the true shepherd (Ez 34:25-30) and concluding; 'You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am Your God, says the Lord' (Ez 34:31).

### ***Salvation or Evangelism?***

Using this Old Testament prophecy, some say that the saved sheep in Jesus allegory represents the rescued people of Israel, but Jesus uses the picture far more generally than that, and speaks about it as a general principle. Those who wander from God's 'fold' in the general sense represent all who depart from His ways, and with this in mind, the allegory speaks about the general task of salvation. However, the message is surely about the enormous and great value placed by God on the individual; something which is almost unheard of in the Old Testament. The way in which Jesus tells the story is not supposed to define evangelism in the general sense, but ask us to think carefully about individuals who are loved by God and who have wandered; they are 'lost'. It suggests that we are responsible for acting as shepherds and doing Jesus' work here on earth and that we should face the responsibility of loving others as God loves them, and seeking to do all in our power to bring them back to the Kingdom. We must do this because this is God's will, and it is what Jesus would do.

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

This great saying of Jesus is devalued if we try to tie it down as a saying about certain aspects of wandering from God, such as lapsed Christians, or the Jews, for example. We all have a duty to be ready to pursue the lost as a fundamental responsibility of discipleship and Jesus does not set down rules about how this is done; He simply asks the questions that make us realise our responsibilities. If we shirk this, we neglect the Father's will; and the open nature of Jesus' allegory liberates us to apply this task to our own circumstances. Some may take the importance of evangelism for granted today, but we should remember that the activity of going out and seeking the lost was simply not part of Jewish thought. Jesus needed to give powerful illustrations of the mission of the church in order to spur it into action (with the assistance of the Holy Spirit). Also, the work of finding the lost sheep is God's. Jesus found a way of explaining this to people with this, one of the greatest of His parables. Of course, God delights to us His people to achieve His will, but if the worker starts to place self above God, then the task is compromised.

Hopefully, we will engage with God's mission and pursue the 'lost' in whatever way is appropriate within our own society, both pastorally and evangelistically. If we explain how much God loves people (see 18:13) and demonstrate this in every possible way, then we offer the hope of salvation to those who currently reject the Church (and God) and give them a glimpse of a Gospel to which they can respond. Even if it feels today as if there may well be only one sheep out of a hundred looking for ninety nine that have gone astray!

## Questions for groups

1. What is the relationship between angels and people? Can we appeal to a common understanding of angels amongst God's people today? If not, why not?
2. Share with each other in your group a brief one sentence summary of what you believe the saying about the 'lost sheep' reveals?
3. Do you feel it is sufficient to summarise the story of the 'lost sheep' as about the love of God for you and me? What else do you wish to say about it?

## Discipleship challenges

- *Have you, at any time, been something of a 'lost sheep' to the life of the church? Many people have. What circumstances or work of God has brought you back to the 'fold'? Perhaps this will help you understand what other people experience.*
- *Have there been any incidents in your own life when you have felt protected or helped by angelic messengers, in spiritual or earthly form? If you have, then give thanks to God for His help and assistance in heavenly places.*

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## Final Prayer

Great Lord, the smile of Your face means everything to me; for You have granted me to see Your face, hear Your voice, feel Your touch and speak to You in faith; not with the perfection I will know in Heaven, but with sufficient reality to know for sure that You care, and all things are possible through You. Thank You, Lord, AMEN

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