
Prayers

To God

In the midst of this wonderful day, Lord Jesus, breathe new life into every part of what I do, how I live, what I think and how I speak. May Your presence inspire me, Your power enthral me, Your love amaze me, and Your vision excite me; and may Your peace at the end of this day encourage me that everything is part of Your greater plan for me, for those I love and for all Creation. AMEN

For myself

Pray about your own deeper feelings about your husband or wife, or your singleness, or any other aspect of your private feelings about your closest relationships. Let the Lord your God into this part of your life and let Him be your guide.

For others

Weekly theme: Child abuse

Pray for the many people personally affect by the extraordinary abuse scandal surrounding the popular TV personality Jimmy Saville, in the UK

Meditation

Lord God,

You take me by a harder path, and lead me through it, gloriously,
So I may find the value of trusting in your guidance.

You speak to me a tougher word, and make me face my demons,
So I may receive the benefit of Your free deliverance.

You grasp me with a firmer hand, and make sure I feel Your power,
So I may know the source of all true spiritual strength.

You show me a consistent vision, and open my eyes to all truth,
So I may never shirk the power of Your unchanging Gospel.

You place me in thicker forest, and lead me through my suffering,
So I may know salvation works, in healing and redemption.

And through it all, Lord Jesus Christ, You show Your faithful love,

So I may take my rest in You, when this day ends, and forever.

Bible Passage

Luke 15:1-10

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were gathering together to listen to Jesus, ² but the Pharisees and scholars complained,

"This man accepts sinners, and He eats with them!"

³ So He told them this parable:

⁴ "if one of you has a 100 sheep and loses one of them, does he not leave the 99 in the countryside and pursue the lost sheep until it is found? ⁵ And after finding it, puts it on his shoulders with gladness; ⁶ and when he arrives home he gathers his friends and neighbours together and says,

'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep!'

⁷ "In the same way, I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who have no need of repentance.

⁸ "Or again, if a woman has ten silver coins and loses one, does she not light a lamp, sweep through the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And after finding it, calls her friends and neighbours together and says,

'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost coin!'

¹⁰ "In the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Review

Few people are unaware of this wonderful and powerful passage of Scripture. It reveals the heart of God and His passion for those who have become lost and wandered away from His love. It also lays an essential motivational foundation stone for the Lord's great commission to all His disciples to *'preach the Kingdom of God'* (9:2) and *'make disciples of all nations ...'* (Matt 28:19).

Occasionally, we find that something stirs us up, and whatever is bottled up inside of us then comes tumbling out, sometimes in ways we had not expected. I should perhaps be cautious to suggest that this is what happened to Jesus here, for how can we know Jesus' motives? But the evidence of Luke's story line suggests this quite strongly. In Luke 14, Jesus had been invited to a meal and found Himself bombarded by a series of difficult situations that forced Him to speak strongly. He had challenged Jewish religiosity (14:1-6), reminded people of God's priorities (14:7-14) and exposed the excuses people made to avoid their God (14:15-24). Lastly, He had taught about God's Kingdom in powerful but rather negative terms, warning about the price of discipleship (14:25-35).

Luke 14 is indeed a valuable passage of teaching, but imagine what Jesus felt at having to deliver this demanding teaching because of the rebellion of people who were continually challenging Him. He knew the Father's heart was full of love, but the Pharisees' questions

and the importance of His journey to Jerusalem had not provided Him yet with the opportunity to speak of this. So here, after yet another complaint directed at Him by the annoyingly arrogant Pharisees; *'this man accepts sinners, and he eats with them!'* (15:2), He did something different. Instead of launching into a further condemnation of the religiosity and false religion behind such negativity, Jesus poured out the very antithesis of gloom and doom. He gave not one but two complementary and reinforcing parables about the Father's pure, unconditional and unchanging love for the lost!

Tomorrow we will discover that at this crucial moment, Jesus went even further than this to speak of the Father's love. After these two parables, he taught one of the most famous parables of all, likening the love of God to that of a Father for a wayward son, the famous 'parable of the Prodigal Son' (15:11-32). But for today, the two parables of the 'lost sheep' and the 'lost coin' refocus the reader not on the human problem but on God's solution, which is salvation found through His searching, persistent, generous and supremely powerful love.

Before reading and studying today's passage, it is worth rolling back briefly to the end of the previous chapter, which if we allow the chapter break to disappear, gives us this;

... let those who have ears, listen! Now all the tax collectors and sinners were gathering together to listen to Jesus ...'

From this we gain an important perspective. For Jesus had finished His previous teaching by urging people to listen to Him, but it was not the religious people who did this. The Pharisees continued to complain (15:2), whereas those who gathered to do what Jesus wanted and to listen were people who wanted to hear something new about God, the *'tax-collectors and sinners'* (15:1)! Religious Jews were quite familiar with the idea that God wanted sinners to return to Him, but they were quite unprepared for the idea that they should be sought out. They were scandalised that Jesus did this by eating with these sinners (15:2), and that He told the parable of the 'lost sheep', which says that God's love does not just sit back and await people's response, it continually seeks out *'lost sheep'* (15:4-7).

We should not underestimate the power of this simple parable; it deserves to be read plainly for what it is. Throughout history, it has been a signpost at the very forefront of God's work, inviting people to discover that Jesus has come to help, to give His absolute attention to our personal problems (the *'lost'* state), to draw us out of danger, to rejoice in us and delight in us, and to take us back to the Father (15:4-7); what 'Good News'! In addition, Jesus paints a picture of our heavenly destiny not as an austere place where angelic beings swirl about in splendour to the singing of choirs, but as a place of vibrant happiness and 'party', *'rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep'* (15:6)!

All this is wonderful to hear. The 'Good News' is not put much better in the Gospels, and the final part of the parable (15:7) emphasises the personal touch. If, in the trauma of being saved, we did not think that Jesus' work to save us was a personal effort and favour, then we should read on. The act of salvation of each individual is the cause of the greatest joy in heaven (15:7)! Yes, at the point Jesus saves us, all heaven responds with a party!

The picture of joy is no less complete and radical in the second parable, that of the 'lost coin'. Here, a woman has saved up ten 'drachmas', one coin being a meagre day's wages for a labourer, and it is her duty to manage that money, to purchase food and keep the family safe. The loss of one coin would, quite simply, not be tolerated, and this is the feeling Jesus captures. A woman with a true sense of her responsibilities would surely never rest until what is lost is found, and if this is true of a woman, how much more is it true of a God who yearns for those who have wandered away from Him (15:8-10)?

Again, Jesus reports a party in heaven to celebrate the discovery of what was lost and the salvation of the individual (15:10), but apart from being a principle feature of the these parables, this repeated theme is perhaps more significant. Tomorrow we will begin to read

the 'parable of the Prodigal Son' (15:11f.), which ends with a great party and no insignificant discussion of God's love and graciousness (15:25-32). So before Jesus says more about the awful truth of the human condition and rebellion against God in this next parable, He wants us to take hold of this idea of *'party'*. He brings us a simple challenge; in our wandering, where do we truly want to end up? Are we happy to find ourselves in a pit of worldliness and despair and undiscovered by our Maker, or to end up discovered by Him, saved, and having a party?

There is so much to find in these great parables of Jesus. They highlight God's lively Gospel like nothing else, their promise of heaven is exuberant and delightful, and they expose the passionate heart of a God of love. It is hard to imagine what else anyone could want from the teachings of Jesus!

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V1 'sinners'

It is hard to translate this word in any other way, but few people know what the word really meant to those who first used it. Jewish people referred to 'sinners' as those who were in general outside the law of God because they did not keep His commands. It was sometimes used of ordinary people who 'did wrong things', but not primarily. It was used generally to speak of people like Romans and Gentiles, and those Jews who chose to live like them (tax-collectors etc.).

V4 'in the countryside'

Other translations:

'in the open country' (NIV)

'in the wilderness' (NRSV)

I raise this point because of the difference between the phrases used by some translations such as 'open country' and others which prefer 'wilderness'. The two seems rather different! But remember that within Israel, there was little difference between the two. In this often dry and dusty region, once beyond the immediate vicinity of a village, the countryside could indeed be called 'wilderness'!

Further Comments

Jesus as the shepherd

This is one of the essential Gospel passages equating Jesus with the picture of a shepherd. In Luke's Gospel so far, we only have a glimpse of this idea from his comment in 12:32,

'do not fear, little flock',

The other Gospels make the connection much stronger. Matthew gives us the parable of the Shepherd who divides the 'sheep and the goats'. This is a tough passage because of its implication that those who think they know God, in fact, do not. But we not not often

remember that Jesus here is doing His duty as God's Shepherd, as the 'ninety nine' now receive God's judgement.

John gives us a further picture of Jesus the 'Shepherd' in chapter 10 of his Gospel, where he describes a Shepherd looking after the sheep in a fold in some detail (John 10:1-16), ending with these words;

'I am the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep ...' (John 10:11)

It is perhaps in John's Gospel that we find the completion of what the Bible says about Jesus as the 'Shepherd' of the sheep.

Feminine pictures of God's love at work

It is not often pointed out that here, the work of Jesus is likened to that of a woman, searching. Together with the picture of a hen (13:34), this passage reminds us that the Bible uses both male and female illustrations of God's love, and we should not be afraid of such imagery.

The interpretation of this passage cannot support presumptions about God's personal qualities as potentially 'female' as well as 'male'. That is to take ideas in Scripture beyond what they will bear, and impose our own agenda about sexuality on the Bible. But we should not be afraid to look at the plain meaning of the text and note that God is indeed sometimes described with feminine pictures that speak of very feminine qualities. The idea should not worry us, for it is our God who made both 'male and female' (Gen 1:27), and who is responsible for all Creation.

Some rabbinic sayings

A little research into the first century yields some interesting rabbinic sayings that both shed light on what Jesus said and help us understand why it was radical. I have found two relevant rabbinical sayings current in Jesus' day:

1. *'there is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world'.*
2. *'if a man searches for a lost coin, much more should he seek the Law.'*

The first tells us something of Pharisaism, for it illustrates a hard concept of God, as one who relishes the defeat of His foes, and is delighted to see people who oppose Him perish. What an enormous contrast to Jesus' picture of God spending hours, days, years searching out those who have wandered from Him with passion.

The second is one of the many sayings of Pharisees used to get people focussed on their legal system for interpreting God's law, and it was a saying Jesus utterly rejected. He did not reject God's law, but He did reject presenting it in place of God Himself or implying that the law would enable people to find God's grace. That much is evident from the Gospel, even before we learn about Jesus' saving work on the Cross, and its fulfilment in the growth of the early church, God's new covenant people.

Discipleship

Application

A powerful illustration of salvation

This passage, indeed, all of Luke 15, is famously all about 'salvation'. The message is unique and radical, for this is where we hear most graphically in Luke's Gospel that God is a God who does not just sit in heaven and expect people to find Him. He is at work in the world searching out those who will respond to Him.

One of the greatest evangelists of the eighteenth century was Revd John Newton. He was an ex-slave trader who had a strong 'conversion' experience while at sea, which led to him leave the slave trade and become an Anglican minister, famous evangelist and hymn writer. His famous hymn 'Amazing Grace' contains this classic line, which comes as much from our Scripture passage today as it does from his own experience.

'I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see'

It is not that this idea was lost before Newton wrote it in his hymn, but his words have cemented the theology of salvation in the heart of the church, and there is every indication that despite many new hymns being written today, 'Amazing Grace' retains a high place in the affections of most Christians. However, I reckon that this is not because of the insights of Newton, but the insights of the Gospel he so loved and placed within his hymn.

Dispensing with a God of judgement.

Luke 14 and 15 deserve to be read together, and in this way, we gain a picture of Jesus' intent to replace the Pharisees' message of salvation by law with God's loving Gospel of 'salvation by love'. Salvation is not often described like this, but these verses of Scripture are perhaps best summarised in this way.

The picture of God presented here is undoubtedly that of One who has a passionate and persistent love that searches out an animal that is lost and will not stop until a coin is found. Together, these two pictures come close to the concept of love perhaps best summarised in Paul's writings, which describe God's love as all encompassing, all persistent, all embracing, and completely selfless on God's part (1 Corinthians 16:14, Ephesians 2:4, Galatians 5:22, etc.).

The strength of this picture of God's love as found in Scripture, is such that in Christian doctrine, the love of God is said to stand above His absolute justice. This is something we can perhaps never fully understand, for how can God be anything other than completely 'right' and just? In truth, the Gospel reveals the mystery of God's character which is just but absolutely loving. It is a mystery, but it is the Gospel truth. God's heart is a heart of love.

Ideas for what to do

- Do you feel yourself to be someone who has been found, or are you uncertain, thinking perhaps you are one of the 99 who has never wandered? Pray about this and ask the Lord to show you how these parables apply to your life, if they do.
- Look up in the Bible some of the texts referred to in this study that illustrate Jesus as the 'Shepherd'. Write down what this Biblical picture means to you.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What did the Pharisees miss from what Jesus said, and why did they not appreciate His teaching?
2. What does the parable of 'the Lost Sheep' teach us about salvation, and what does it teach us about the nature of God?

3. What does the parable of 'the Lost Coin' teach us about salvation, and what does it teach us about the nature of God?

Final Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for telling us that God loves us, that You love us and the Holy Spirit loves us and works for our redemption. What privileges we enjoy! What a treat to look forward to a party! What a blessing to be found in the Saviour's arms returning to heaven! Praise You Lord Jesus! **AMEN**