

## The Parable of the Lost Sheep

When I was a new and enthusiastic Christian in my mid teens, I often found myself locking horns with my dad. Dad was a well educated, extremely intelligent, scientific type. He invented things, and then marketed them. He even represented Australia one year at an international inventor's forum in Switzerland. He could wipe the floor with me in any argument. He was articulate, and erudite - knowledgeable about pretty much everything.

One of the things he often tried to browbeat out of me was my belief in a personal God. "Do you have ANY idea of the incomprehensible size and nature of this universe???" he'd rail at me. And then he'd harangue me with scientific information about planets, galaxies, the distance between the stars, the ever expanding universe, and how we'd barely scraped the surface in our knowledge of it. And then he'd say if there's a God, that created all this, God would be so much BIGGER, so much GREATER than all of this, and how could I POSSIBLY believe that this God would even be aware of our infinitesimal planet, never mind the microbes upon it....

I said to him once, "Dad - use your own logic. If God is mighty & powerful & intelligent enough to create all of this, surely that same might and power and intelligence would enable him to know his creation."

And I'd look inwardly to Jesus to whom I related as a friend, and then back at my dad and his rhetoric and I'd just shake my head and say, 'Dad, I've met Jesus....' And he'd stalk off.

And so we come to the parable of the lost sheep. It's the simplest and most straightforward of all of Jesus' parables. It's the story of a shepherd who, on returning his flock to the fold, discovers that one of his sheep is missing. He drops everything, leaves the flock behind, and searches for the lost sheep until he finds it.

In Jesus' time, the prevailing understanding of God's nature, was that God delighted in those who lived by the countless laws and practices imposed by the religious leaders of the day, and that God was harsh towards sinner, and would judge and punish them. The Jews had developed a warped understanding of the nature of God, believing him to rejoice in the destruction of those who did not obey the law.

In this simple, yet powerful story, Jesus counters this incorrect understanding and tells us something about the true nature of God and his love for us.

So what does divine love - God's love - really look like?

- For a start, the parable shows us that God's love is ***an individual*** love.

The ninety nine sheep were not enough. One sheep went astray on the hillside, and the shepherd could not rest until it had been brought home. I don't think it would matter how large a family we had – if one child was separated from the rest of the family, a parent could not rest until that one child was found.

I remember losing track of our three year old son in the Easter Show crowd one year. He was out of his stroller. One minute he was holding my hand, and the next he had disappeared. I went into an instant panic. I left Jay with our other child and dove into the crowd. I could not rest until I found him. I did - he'd only gone a short distance. But those few moments when I couldn't find him were awful.

God's love is the individual and sacrificial love of a parent, but oh so much richer and deeper than we could possibly imagine. God has gone to extraordinary lengths - even to enduring the death of his own son - to make a way back for us, into his embrace.

One of the concepts people often struggle with is this individual love of God. Many can come at the fact that God loved the WORLD enough to give his life for it, but they struggle with the concept that God loves them *personally* that much.

It's not until we come to know Jesus as we would an intimate friend, that we begin to experience this love for ourselves. If we wanted to stretch this little parable a bit, we could say that unless the sheep was prepared to stand still and let the Shepherd gather it into his arms, he would not find himself in the shepherds embrace, and back in the warmth of the fold. We need to be responsive to the love of God.

- The parable also shows us that God's love is a ***patient*** love. Sheep are pretty thick, and are capable of getting themselves in all sorts of scrapes. Most people usually have little patience with others who get themselves into trouble through being stupid. "It's their own fault" we say. "They brought it on themselves," we say.

I remember having that reaction to a news item a while back. Some canyon jumper out in the bush had misjudged a jump and fallen down a cliff, breaking both his legs. He had to be winched out by chopper. I remember thinking to myself "What an idiot! What do you expect if you go jumping over ravines without a harness?"

Thank God that He is not like that. We all make foolish choices from time to time. But God in his mercy and grace, loves even the most foolish of us, even when have no-one but ourselves to blame for the trouble we might find ourselves in.

➤ This story also shows us that God's love is a **seeking** love. The shepherd was not content to wait till his sheep found its way back. The shepherd went out and searched for it.

God pursues us. When we sin, or cool off, or go through those times when we find ourselves ignoring God, God doesn't wash his hands of us. He pursues us, woos us, draws us, until we come back to him. God never gives up on us.

➤ God's love in this parable is also shown as **rejoicing** love. In God's love, there is nothing but joy. No recriminations. No receiving us back begrudgingly, or with conditions. Remember the Prodigal son? We see this same element of God's love in that parable. Pure rejoicing and total forgiveness when someone has a change of heart towards God and returns home.

I think there are times when people keep God at arm's length, because they don't feel good enough to come to him. Perhaps there are things in the past they remember with shame. Perhaps there are things in their present they live with in shame - all of which prevent them from responding to God. This parable - in fact the whole of Scripture - tells us that God is absolutely delighted when a person 'outside the fold' turns back to him.

This parable also appears in the Gospel of Luke, and the closing verse of the story as it is told in Luke is this: "there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner (person) who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!"

So, the shepherd loves the 99 sheep who were all there, safe in the pen, but the delight of the shepherd over the one who came home, for that moment, makes everything else pale into insignificance.! That's how excited God is, when someone says to him - "God - here I am. Will you take me back?" or "Here I am - can I join you?"

If we come to God - just as we are, warts and all - he forgives and forgets. He puts all our mistakes, regrets, shortcomings, everything - puts it all behind us, and receives us with pure joy.

➤ Lastly, in this parable, we see God's love as **a protecting love**. It is love which not only seeks, but saves.

Love can sometimes have a down side. Love can spoil. I know a lady who has a 32 year old son who still lives at home. He's never worked. He doesn't need to. Mum always gives him everything. She feeds him. She buys his clothes. She gives him money to spend. She's bought him cars. She's bailed him out when he's received traffic fines. He's totally dependent on her, and she encourages it. A mutual friend commented to me once –“How's this man ever going to cope if she dies?? He's never learned to fend for himself!”

God isn't a Santa Claus. He's not there as a heavenly dispenser of all we ever ask for. God's love is a protecting love which helps us to grow. It refines us, develops and strengthens us. It makes us increasingly like Jesus. It's a love which makes us into the person we were meant to be.

Sometimes being loved by God is not always pleasant. Refining can be painful. But always, God's love for us works for our good.

Romans 8:28 tells us, “Everything works for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.” Everything works for good – such is the love of God.

Such a simple parable, yet it teaches us such deep truths about the love of God.

This morning, may we be encouraged to trust ourselves more fully to our God whose love for us is so *individual*, so *patient*, so *seeking*, so *joyful*, and so *protective*. May we come to him, now, just as we are.

*Let's pray.*