

### Lost and Found (Part 1 of 2)

In Luke 15 we read of three parables spoken by Jesus that have a common theme. They speak about things that are lost but then found. Why three parables? Are they all conveying the same message? The first concerns a lost sheep, the second a lost coin, and the third a lost (prodigal) son. In each case, that which is lost is subsequently found, resulting in much rejoicing.

On first reading they all make sense but on closer inspection, if they are to be taken literally, they don't make much sense at all!

Take the lost sheep. Jesus asks which man, if he had one hundred sheep and lost one, wouldn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go and find it. Really? Which shepherd would ever do that? No shepherd in his right mind would leave ninety-nine sheep in the *wilderness* to go and find one sheep. All ninety-nine would then be unattended and at risk. Which shepherd would pick up a sheep, put it on his shoulders and carry it home? Why would he not take it back to the other sheep?

Take the lost coin. Jesus asks which woman, if she lost a coin, wouldn't light a lamp and search the whole house for it. Really? The coin Jesus speaks of is the ancient Greek *drachma*. When Jesus was speaking, this had been superseded by the Roman *denarius* and was worth very little. Would anyone search the whole house in the middle of the night using a lamp to find a coin of little value? Which of us if finding a coin of little value would then ask our neighbours round for a celebration meal?

Take the lost son. Jesus says that a father gives his inheritance to his two sons *before* he dies and then lets one go off to spend it. Really? Which father would give his money away before he dies? Which father would stay at home and not go out searching for his son to bring him home?

You see these parables don't make sense in human terms – they must have deeper meanings. And of course they have. Jesus isn't just engaging in needless repetition but is illustrating different aspects of a similar theme. In a sense it is a single parable for Luke introduces it as: “[Jesus] spake *this* [singular] parable unto them, saying ...” (verse 3).

These three parables are a progression. They show how people come to a knowledge of the Truth and what happens if they leave the Truth once they have found it. It is important to understand what these parables are saying and also what they are *not* saying. We see three applications which we go on to develop in this and the following study, but which are summarised as follows:

1. The parable concerning the sheep shows how *Christ* finds people who are lost.
2. The parable concerning the coin moves on to how an *ecclesia* of brothers and sisters should look for and find those in the world who are lost.
3. The final parable concerning the lost son moves on to how our Heavenly Father responds to those who were found but then leave the Truth. It also shows how an *ecclesia* should respond to this same situation. So to the first parable – the lost sheep.

“Then drew near unto [Jesus] all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man received sinners, and eateth with them. And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.” (verse 1-7)

Some key things to note. Who is Jesus addressing in this first parable? He directing his thoughts to the Pharisees and scribes (verse 3). They were not happy with the fact that Jesus was “receiving” sinners. He was allowing them access to himself. In this parable we have ninety-nine sheep, one lost sheep and a shepherd. The point of this parable is simple: the *lost* sheep is a sinner. This is clear from verse 7 – the lost sheep equates to “one sinner”.

The sheep that are *not* lost are “just” or “righteous” people who need no repentance (see verse 7). Who are these people? Who are they who can claim to be just? Who are they who do not need to repent? The word ‘just’ simply means ‘righteous’. Speaking to the Pharisees Jesus said: “Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous [same word as ‘just’] unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity (Matthew 23:28).

On another occasion Jesus was dining, “and when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners? When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous [just], but sinners to repentance” (Mark 2:16,17). So the just, righteous people who *do not repent* are in fact the Pharisees and Scribes. Therefore the ninety-nine sheep are *not* brothers and sisters safe in the ecclesia. Brothers and sisters continue to repent even when baptised.

The ninety-nine don’t need saving as they don’t think they are lost! Only those who can understand that they are lost will be found by Christ. The lost sheep therefore is a sinner and someone who knows that he is *un*-righteous. The sheep is lost in the world. He started off with the ninety-nine as we all do. We all begin life thinking we are safe. Only later do some come to realise the true situation we are in – lost in sin. The man in the parable equates to Christ. Notice how the Pharisees say: “this *man* received sinners”. Jesus says a *man* went out to look for the lost sheep. So the lost sheep are *not* those who are already in the Truth, for those in Christ have already been found. They are those who understand that they are lost. Christ is looking for sinners who want to repent. The lost sheep becomes found when it *repents*.

So who are the friends and neighbours who rejoice when a lost sheep is found? They are the angels in heaven. “I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be *in heaven* over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). So when a sinner repents, it is like a lost sheep being found – and it is Christ who finds the sheep. It is Christ because he alone can help the sheep repent and achieve forgiveness of sins.

This parable is therefore about understanding the need for repentance. The ninety-nine are actually *not* safe. They think they are but in fact they are the Pharisees and scribes who think they do *not* need to repent. We have to recognise that without Christ we are lost and sinful. Christ is looking for such people. Note that in the parable, the lost sheep is *not* returned to the ninety-nine but is taken (in fact carried) to the man’s *home*. The home of Christ of course is the ecclesia which he is building. The ninety-nine sheep remain in the wilderness.

It is worth noting what this parable is *not* saying:

- It is *not* saying that the ninety-nine sheep are the ecclesia.
- It is *not* saying the ninety-nine sheep are really righteous and without need of repentance.
- It is *not* saying that the sheep is taken back to be with the ninety-nine.

The sheep began life with the ninety-nine but realised he was lost (sinful) and in so doing left the ninety-nine only to be rescued eventually by Christ. Only Christ can save a repentant sinner. If we continue to remain with the ninety-nine (believing we don’t need to repent), we will never be found by Christ.

To put it another way, if someone says they are *not* sinful, they are with the ninety-nine – the Pharisees that needed no repentance. They think they are safe, but Christ is not with them.

To finally prove the point that the ninety-nine are really those that are lost look at verse 4 again. See where the ninety-nine sheep are – in the wilderness! Sheep wandering in the wilderness are totally unprotected. The children of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness as a punishment for not believing, and so many died there. The harlot church of Rome is found in the wilderness in Revelation 17:3. These ninety-nine sheep are not safe at all. Their carcasses will fall in the wilderness (see Hebrews 3:17).

We cannot be found by Christ until we acknowledge we are sinful and repent.