

April 2019

Dear neighbours,

I was wondering what subject I might take for the 99th letter and it occurred to me that what would be most appropriate would be the parable which the Lord Jesus Christ told mentioning 99 sheep. It is one of a trio; where the general theme is "lost and found", but where the emphasis throughout is on the happiness it brings to find something that's gone missing.

Luke 15 is where you will find it in the Bible and I would seriously recommend that you read it for yourself. A sheep goes missing; a coin goes missing; and a young man goes missing. Of course the Lord was a brilliant teacher and starts with the least valuable, then the next and then finally, at considerable length, the most valuable.

Sheep follow their noses to the next bit of attractive pasture. They have no idea of possible dangers. So they fan out wide and one disappears from sight and possibly finds itself on a ledge from which without help it cannot escape. The shepherd soon discovers the loss so puts the others safely in a pen and sets out to locate and rescue the sheep. He is prepared to leave the ninety nine; prepared to give time and energy to recovering the sheep. We all understand the feeling.

But the point is not the bother the lost sheep causes but the delight in its return. "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" (Luke 15. 5-7).

When it comes to heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ speaks authoritatively, for it had been, and is, His home.

The second illustration in this trio concerns a woman who has lost a valuable, perhaps even gold, coin. Again, we're very sympathetic. It's happened in some way or other to us all. So she has the place to bits, moves everything there is to move, uses the brush and dustpan, puts the light on to make sure to see something glittering, and looks, and looks and looks until at last she does find it.

She isn't cross about all the inconvenience; just glad to have found the coin.

Again, this is the Saviour's conclusion. "When she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Luke 15. 9-10).

Again, the Lord Jesus Christ speaks as someone who knows His subject and, like all pupils, we instinctively recognise when teachers know what they are talking about.

But the climax of the story concerns a missing young man. On the principle that people are more precious than animals and things, a sheep and a coin, the thrust of this illustration is more detailed.

Number two brother in the manor house knows that he will, one day in the dim and distant future, receive a share of the inheritance. So he asks his father for it now, in advance. After all, something might happen to him meanwhile and he would never get the advantage of it!

Now in family life no father would probably ever give in to such a request. The parable is designed to give us an idea of the difference in our heavenly Father's way of thinking from our own. After all, His thoughts are far above our thoughts and His ways than our ways (Isaiah 55.8).

The young man can't wait to get away from home with all his inheritance to spend. It illustrates that we all tear ourselves away from our roots in God, in whose image we are made. Despite the fact that we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139.14) and that every good gift cometh from the Father (James 1.17) we still misuse our lives when we put a distance between ourselves and Him.

So, off he goes. And so long as his money holds out he is the life and soul of all his peers and very popular. But, just at the very time when his resources are running low, a famine hits the land. Things get very hard. His friends only wanted him for his money and desert him. Getting a job is very difficult.

At last he got a job feeding pigs. It was the ultimate degradation; for no Jew would have anything to do with swine. Worse still, it was made clear to him that he wasn't to touch the pigs' swill, their husks. They were more valuable than he. Ultimate degradation takes many forms and our own experience will be what hurts most. To be, or think that you are, a reject is utter ruin.

You **must** read the story for yourself! I can only give you the drift. But the turning point, the life-changing moment, arrives when one day he comes to himself. Perishing with hunger he thinks of former good times and that even the lowliest servant has enough to eat back home. He resolves to make the long journey home, starving. Putting pride aside, he rehearses what he will say; he will just be a servant in the household if dad will have him. Unbeknown to him, his father had been looking out for him all the while he had given his family no thought; he spotted and recognized him instantly.

His father's joy is to reinstate him to sonship. "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hands and shoes on his feet. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and be merry: for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15. 22-24).

Not everyone is pleased. Many deridingly say, that we have "got religion." The elder son had meanwhile enjoyed his "space" without his younger brother around. He was definitely not welcome back as far as he was concerned. But it was the Father's welcome that counted. The younger son had not actually been dead; but he might just as well have been for all the contact there had been.

Life can be outrageously hard and we dread to think of our mortality. But when we come to ourselves, realise our predicament, and wish to return to the Lord in sorrowful repentance for the mess we have made of our lives and the abuse of His gifts, we learn from this extended parable that we will be welcome back to Him. We do not need to fear the repercussions. And in our hearts we know that this is true. For, when a child goes missing, we know it's too bad to be cross and to scold; just simply to have the child home safe and sound is the cause of joy and relief. Our reaction is not to be cross. We might have been cross in other situations but the loss of a child was different. Sheer delight at the return of the one who was lost – we all understand that.

So it is when we return to our heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ. It's all rejoicing. In the parable there were still problems to be faced – the reaction of the older brother; the loss of the inheritance. But of our heavenly Father's welcome back there is no doubt – all the heavenly inhabitants rejoice as it is so welcome to Him. It will not absolve us from all ongoing problems. But we will be like a child at home, never doubting that we belong and are loved and are cared for.

Yours affectionately,