

Psalm 119:169-176 (TAU)

The Proper Action and Outlook for Lost Sheep

I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant – v. 176

The last statement in this Psalm certainly leaves the reader of the Psalm heaving a sigh. It's not exactly what you would call a climactic ending so much as it's an honest acknowledgement. *I have gone astray like a lost sheep*. That's not exactly a shout of victory is it? It's an expression of despair accompanied with a sense of helplessness. And it leaves you saying to yourself – *how can these things be?* The Psalmist loves God's word – all throughout this Psalm he's been singing the praises of God's word. And now in the very end as his very last statement he's saying *I have gone astray like a lost sheep?*

What a contrast to the way the Psalm begins – *Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD*. There's the positive expression of faith – there's the blessing you would expect at the end of the Psalm also. But instead you go from an announcement of blessing to a pitiable cry for help. This is what sets the end of the Psalm in contrast to the beginning. One commentator notes the irony in these words: *And this is all the conclusion — "a lost sheep!" This long psalm of ascriptions, praises, avowals, resolves, high hopes, ends in this, that he is a perishing sheep.*

You've heard me say it many times in various studies of various Psalms that the thing I love about the Psalms is the example they provide for being honest with ourselves and for being honest before God. Listen to the words of another commentator on the conclusion of this Psalm:

I do not think that there could possibly be a more appropriate conclusion of such a Psalm as this, so full of the varied experience and the ever changing frames and feelings even of a child of God, in the sunshine and the cloud, in the calm and in the storm, than this ever clinging sense of his propensity to wander, and the expression of his utter inability to find his way back without the Lord's guiding hand to restore him; and at the same time with it all, his fixed and abiding determination never to forget the Lord's commandments. What an insight into our poor wayward hearts does this verse give us — not merely liable to wander, but ever wandering, ever losing our way, ever stumbling on the dark mountains, even while cleaving to God's commandments!

What I want you to see from this text today is that there's more here than just an ironic statement to astonish us. There's valuable instruction by what this text sets before us. If David, you see, was a man after God's own heart who knew and loved and served the Lord who nevertheless had gone astray like a lost sheep – how much more should we have to acknowledge that this text speaks to our condition as well. We are lost sheep who have gone astray.

A few weeks ago when we did some studies out of Isaiah 53 in prayer meeting I made the point that Isaiah is speaking with reference to the Lord's people and is including himself when we says in v. 6 *All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way.* There is a universality to the application of that text as well as our text now in Psalm 119. And yet all is not gloom and doom and defeat and despair. As I just said the value of the text is found in the instruction and encouragement it provides to every true child of God.

And so I want to call your attention to this text this morning in order to consider from it:

The Proper Conduct of Stray Sheep

I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant. Would you note with me first of all that:

I. Proper Conduct for Stray Sheep Begins with Confession

This section, like many of the others is expressed as a direct address to God. The Psalmist is praying, in other words. Note how the section begins in vv. 169,170 *Let my cry come near before thee, O LORD: give me understanding according to thy word. Let my supplication come before thee: deliver me according to thy word.*

So it is in this context of prayer that we find the Psalmist saying in the last verse *I have gone astray like a lost sheep.* And so the first lesson we may gather from the Psalmist's example is that we should confess our sins. We should make this acknowledgement about being stray sheep to God himself.

I pointed out in my introduction the universality of this statement. *All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way.* From the least of us to the greatest, this statement holds true. From the most carnal and worldly to the most godly and spiritually-minded this confession needs to be made often.

Think for a moment about the character of the Psalmist. What have we discovered about him throughout the course of this Psalm? He loves God's word. In the last section we studied we find these words in v. 167: *My soul hath kept thy testimonies; and I love them exceedingly.* Verse 163: *I hate and abhor lying: [but] thy law do I love.* Verse 140: *Thy word [is] very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it.* Verse 113: *I hate vain thoughts: but thy law do I love.*

So we see what the Psalmist loved and we see what the Psalmist abhorred and hated and the things he loved were the right things to love and the things he hated were the right things to hate. If his heart is in the right place, then, regarding the things he loves and hates then how does it come to pass that he's gone astray like a lost sheep?

The reason for such straying is the same for the Psalmist as it is for you and me. We came into this world as sinners. We came into this world with a bias against God and against God's ways and God's laws. And even though you've been saved your old nature has not been still; it clings to you. So Paul writes (and don't we know this in our experience) Gal. 5:17 *For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.*

I received a Paul Tripp devotional through my email this past week which dealt with the issue of why we find correction and confession of sin so hard. It begins like this: *It's difficult to admit to poor judgment and wrong responses. It's hard to receive correction and to confess to sin.*

He goes on to ask: *Why are these things so hard?* And his answer: *Because we all like to buy into two very seductive lies. These lies argue against any need to be dependent and they bolster the independence that tends to attract us all. The first lie is the lie of **AUTONOMY**. Autonomy tells me that I am an independent being, with the right to do what I want to do, when, where, and how I want to do it. The second lie is the lie of **SELF-SUFFICIENCY**. This lie tells me I have everything within myself to be what I am supposed to be and to do what I am supposed to do.*

Don't these thoughts from Dr. Tripp fit well with the image of stray sheep? When Isaiah says *All we like sheep have gone astray* he then interprets the imagery by saying *we have turned everyone to his own way*. We turn to our own way – that's autonomy. We become independent – that's self-sufficiency. And underlying them both is pride.

One of the reasons God has ordained church is that we may function as a community of believers who know our dependency on God and know our dependency on each other. It's when we keep to the fold under the Great Shepherd's care that we're able to avoid or overcome autonomy and self-sufficiency. And it's because of this remaining propensity within each of our hearts to be autonomous and self-sufficient that we need church.

What is the proper conduct, then, for stray sheep? The first proper thing to do is to recognize your propensity to be seduced by the lies of autonomy and self-sufficiency and realize that when you are seduced by such lies you are as a lost sheep that has gone astray. To deny such a propensity is to deny the word of God. *If we say that we have no sin*, John writes in 1Jn. 1:8 *we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*. Verse 10 *If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us*.

Aren't you glad this morning that we have such an example of true Christian humility manifested by the Psalmist? Isn't it good to know that even one who loves the Lord's ways and the Lord's word and the Lord's people and who hates every false way and abhors lying nevertheless still has such a struggle against sin that honesty compels him to say that in spite of right affections and impressive zeal he nevertheless must confess that he's gone astray like a lost sheep.

We see, then, that proper conduct for straying sheep begins with confession. Would you consider with me next that:

II. Proper Conduct for Stray Sheep Leads to Petitions for Help

There are a number of petitions in this section of the Psalm but let me direct your attention to the particular petition that is found in our text. I don't know if there's a petition quite like this one in all the Bible and yet it does demonstrate a truth that is found throughout the Bible.

Notice what it says in v. 176: *I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant.* Underscore the words *seek thy servant*. I say that this is an incredible petition because it shows you just how helpless the Psalmist perceived himself to be. Notice that he's not praying for guidance or strength in order that he might seek the Lord himself. He perceives his situation to be beyond that. He is so far gone – he is drifted so far astray that he is beyond seeking – he must instead be sought by the Lord.

As I was thinking on this petition I was reminded of the two dogs that I've had in my family over the time we've been in Indianapolis. The dog we currently have for all his faults can nevertheless be let out of the house without any fear that he'll vanish. He may go running off for a time but within a short span of time he'll return. He won't go so far that he loses his bearings and can't find his way back.

The previous dog we had for 12 years never had that skill. During the days we lived on Cecil Avenue we let him out in a fenced in back yard but once we made the move here to the house on the church grounds the only way we could let this dog out would be to take him out on a leash. A few times he managed to get out the door and whenever that happened we would have to seek him. This dog would simply follow his nose where ever it led him and wouldn't have the wit to keep his bearings. If we didn't go out looking for him he would have been lost for good.

Now I'm not an expert on sheep but I have a sneaking suspicion that sheep that managed to wander from the fold would probably bear the same character trait as that dog that would lose his bearings. The shepherd would have to go looking for the sheep. He couldn't simply wait for the sheep to find his way back to the fold.

What an appropriate petition, therefore, for a Christian who has become like a stray sheep to utilize. *Lord, seek thy servant.* I have wandered off again – I have turned to my own way again. I have been seduced by the lie that I'm independent and self-sufficient again and I need for thee, Lord to seek me again and find me just the way you found me initially.

This petition is consistent with the analogy of Scripture for throughout the Bible it is always the Lord that does the seeking. It was God that sought Adam and Eve when they were in the garden hiding. I said in one of the messages last week that this truth of the

Lord doing the seeking is what sets Biblical Christianity apart from liberal Christianity. Liberal Christianity tries to portray man's quest for God. Biblical Christianity presents God as the One that does the seeking.

So when you read the story of Zaccheus in Lk. 19 you might get the initial impression that Zaccheus is the one doing the seeking. You remember the story – Zaccheus was small of stature and he couldn't see Christ on account of having his view blocked by the crowd. So he calculated that path of Christ and ran before and climbed up into a sycomore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way (Lk. 19:4). And when Christ passes that spot he looks up and sees Zaccheus and calls him down. *Zaccheus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house* (Lk. 19:5).

And after Zaccheus pledges to give half his goods to the poor and to restore fourfold any man whom he had robbed, so to speak, Christ makes the announcement in v. 9 that *This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham*. And then in the final verse of that narrative, v. 10 Christ makes a statement that enables the reader to put the whole event in proper perspective. You remember the words of Lk. 19:10? – *For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost*.

Here is the right perspective on that passage and the right perspective on spiritual truth – the Lord was the One doing the seeking; *the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost*. A few chapters earlier in Luke's gospel we find this same truth expressed in the parable of the lost sheep. So we read in Lk. 15:4-6:

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? 5 And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 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.

You see, then, from these instances that the Lord is the seeker. And when you realize that the Lord is the seeker then the way you seek the Lord is the way the Psalmist seeks him in our text – you pray to be sought. *Lord, I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek thy servant*.

I should point out from this petition that the Psalmist never loses sight of the Lord's claim on him. Even though he has gone astray like a lost sheep he nevertheless still has the faith to know that he is God's servant. This is a prayer, therefore, that a stray sheep can use with confidence. It is true that your wandering is sinful – your being lost is inexcusable – and the devil will tempt you to believe that you've forfeited your standing with Christ. Why would Christ continue to show an interest in you when you've gone astray like a lost sheep? How can you expect anything from God when you've turned to your own way?

Let me use that question as a springboard into my final point. We've seen from the text that the proper conduct for stray sheep is confession, followed by the right petition. It remains for us to consider:

III. Proper Conduct for Stray Sheep is to Maintain the Right Expectation

When the Psalmist confessed his condition and sought the Lord to seek him, I believe he did so certainly with a high degree of humility but also with a high degree of confidence. *Seek thy servant* he prays. Do you see in that petition the recognition on the part of the Psalmist that in spite of his drifting away from the Lord he nevertheless still belongs to the Lord? He is the Lord's servant.

The very content of this petition shows the evidence of grace in the Psalmist's life. Even though straying from God amounts to turning to your own way and asserting your own independence and your own self-sufficiency – this petition shows that there remains the knowledge and desire for submission and a keen sense of dependency arising from a sense of helplessness.

In other words – when you stray and become like a lost sheep you do not – you should not lose faith in Christ. You're still the Lord's servant – you still belong to him. Some time ago in one of our studies, possibly a communion study, I made reference to Isaiah 53:6. *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way.* The thing to note in that verse, however, that is so amazing and so divine and such a manifestation of grace and love and mercy – is that the Lord's response to our going astray and turning to our own way is found in the last part of the verse: *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

It might seem like arrogant presumption to profess to be the Lord's servant when you've strayed from him like a lost sheep. But it's not presumption. There's a strong basis for your confidence. The LORD hath laid on him (Christ) the iniquity of us all. Our sins, including those countless sins of straying from him like lost sheep, were charged to him and he is the propitiation for our sins. He bore the penalty of God's wrath for our going astray.

This is how we know that the Lord will seek us when we go astray like lost sheep. He's redeemed us – we are his purchased possession. He's paid a high price for you – too high to let you get away. So our conduct as stray sheep should be governed by the right expectation and you may fully expect that the Lord will seek you and he will find you and he will cleanse and forgive and restore you.

Look at the expectation of the Psalmist in v. 171 and keep in mind that this statement is in the same section as his confession that he's gone astray like a lost sheep. In spite of his having gone astray like a lost sheep his expectation is such that he can say in v. 171 *My lips shall utter praise, when thou hast taught me thy statutes.* Another expectation is

given in the next verse – v. 172 *My tongue shall speak of thy word: for all thy commandments are righteousness.*

I will praise him and I will speak his word – this in spite of the fact that I've strayed like a lost sheep. Grace will prevail in the end. Grace will prevail for me and it will prevail through me and will lead therefore to praise and proclamation. Let me bring this study to a close by reminding you of the theme of the 119th Psalm.

This is Psalm about the Bible. If you've gained anything out of these studies of Psalm 119 I hope you've come to see in increasing measure the importance of the Bible – the importance of reading it, studying it, communing with God through it. It is through the Bible, you see, that you learn of your lost condition and you are convicted when you stray like a lost sheep.

It is through your Bible that you learn to pray and you learn to view life from a proper spiritual perspective. It is through your Bible that your expectations are formed and your confidence in God grows. What place does the Bible have in your life, then, when you stray like a lost sheep?

It is your Bible that will be the means through which God will seek you and God will find you. I'm reminded of the futility of seeking God in the wrong way from Rom. 10. In vv. 6,7 of that chapter Paul writes: *But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) 7 Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.)*

Don't those verses teach you the futility of searching for God by thinking you can somehow ascend into heaven to find him or descend into the deep to find him? He can't be found that way. He's beyond you to be found that way. But note what Paul goes on to say about what the righteousness of faith says: *But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; 9 That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.*

The word is nigh thee – that's what I want you to see and if the word is nigh thee then God is near to thee. He's as close to you as an open Bible and an open heart to that Bible. So open your Bibles – read your Bibles – be found of God in your Bibles at all times but especially in those times when you become aware that you've strayed like a lost sheep.

May the Lord increase your understanding of his word. May he increase your appreciation for his word. May the Spirit of God himself compel you to get into this word and abide with Christ through God's word.

I think it would appropriate for us to close the service this morning by singing Psalm 1. This too is a Psalm that stresses the importance of meditating on God's word.