

## I Will Seek That Which Was Lost

*For thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day.*

*And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel.*

*I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment.*

—Ezek. 34:11–16

By this prophetic word of God, we comprehend the essence of His seeking and caring love. God created mankind in His own image. However, the Fall corrupted the perfection of God's work, and as a result we are all prone to sin, evil and perdition. Isaiah writes, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6). God so immeasurably loved, and still loves, His created mankind that He gave His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus, to be the ransom payment for the sins of the entire world. Thus it is God's will that no person would perish, but that all would receive eternal life with Him in heaven.

Despite the fall into sin, all children born into this world are believers, and are righteous children of God because of Christ's redemption work. Jesus says that their angels always see the face of the Heavenly Father (Matt. 18:10). Baptism does not make someone a child of God. But in baptism, God establishes the covenant of good conscience with them. Baptism is not the place of new birth as it is often taught in our time.

God's wants all people to be in unity with Him. And God's kingdom, as a mother, cares for all His children. But God's opponent, the enemy of souls, causes the death of childhood faith in many people by sin's destructive power because the care that only the mother—God's kingdom—can give is not present in their lives.

### **God Dwells in His kingdom**

God has a kingdom here on earth. Apostle Paul describes it as "Jerusalem which is [from] above is free, which is the mother of us all" (Gal. 4:26). John was able to see that kingdom in his Revelation on the Isle of Patmos, writing, "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Rev. 21:2,3). A person can only enter this kingdom through the door.

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Jesus, himself, says, "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9).

In the parable of the vine, Jesus teaches of the important living relationship between the Lord Jesus and His kingdom. He says that whoever does not remain in Him will dry up, and like an unfruitful branch, will be tied up and thrown into the fire to burn. At the beginning of the parable, Jesus emphasizes the kingdom of God, saying, "I am the true Vine, and my Father is the husbandman" (John 15:1). God cares for both His kingdom and its inhabitants primarily through His gospel. Jesus says, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (John 15:3). We are still able to hear the cleansing words of Jesus in God's kingdom, and this is a paramount and precious matter.

God opened this understanding to Martin Luther. In explaining the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed, Luther clearly illustrates the proclamation of God's Word as the work of the Holy Spirit:

"The Holy Spirit leads us first into the fellowship of the saints, the bosom of the congregation, through whose mediation He preaches to us and leads us to Christ. You see, neither you nor I can truly know the least bit about Christ and receive Him as our Lord unless the Holy Spirit offers it to us through the gospel and lays it into our bosom as a gift."

God lives in His own through His Holy Spirit. For this reason, Peter gives a high testimony of God's children, writing: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

### ***God Seeks Those Who Are Lost***

God sent His Son to free the sinners of this world. Jesus, himself, says, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost" (Luke 19:10). He is the Good Shepherd, who gives His life for His sheep, who knows His sheep, and whose sheep know Him (John 10:11,14).

Demonstrating the importance of even one lost sheep, Jesus relates the parable of the shepherd who had a hundred sheep. If one sheep is lost, the shepherd will leave the other ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one, searching for it until he finds it. And when he has found his lost sheep, he puts it upon his shoulder, takes it home, and invites all his friends together to rejoice that he found the one lost sheep. Jesus says that in the same manner, God's angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents (Luke 15).

Even one person is important to Jesus. In the work of God's kingdom, large groups of listeners are not most important. Considering this matter with our carnal mind, we might think that God performs an inordinate amount of work for little return on investment. Jesus also relates a moving narrative about the Prodigal Son and his return to his father's house. The father lovingly receives the son who had wasted all his inheritance, and whose temporal and spiritual life was utterly bankrupt. The father directed his servants to dress the son in the best robe, and said, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry" (Luke 15).

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Through the Holy Spirit, God gives His children the duty to preach about reconciliation. For this reason, we are servants who proclaim the gospel to all people on Christ's behalf. We, ourselves, have permission to believe. And we also to relate to others how God made His only Son, who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf so that we could be righteous and acceptable before God (2 Cor. 5:18–21). Jesus' mission command is still in force today: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

### ***A Child of God Can Stray***

A child of God can stray from the kingdom of God and the Good Shepherd's care. There are many examples of this in Scripture. King Saul repeatedly disobeyed the instructions of the prophet. In defiance, his heart became hardened and he did not humble himself to be obedient and childlike. Saul lost the gift of faith, and did not receive the grace to repent (1 Sam. 13,15). Even David, who became king after Saul, fell into serious sins and lost his faith. God rebuked David through the prophet Nathan. But David recognized his condition and humbled himself to repent (2 Sam. 11, 12:1–13).

Two of Jesus' own disciples lost their way. Judas, who betrayed Jesus, was a disciple that Jesus personally selected. Judas saw the godly power of Jesus through His miracles, and had been able to share in His merciful love. In spite of all this, sin overcame Judas' heart to the extent that he betrayed Jesus. We aren't able to see what took place in the heart of Judas, but Jesus knew. Penitence came too late, and Judas could no longer find place for repentance.

When he denied Jesus on Maundy Thursday night, Apostle Peter also fell away from the place of a child of God. Although he had sworn to follow Jesus even unto death, he did not have strength to confess his Savior when the threat from the world was greatest. But Apostle Peter's heart was not hardened. He knew and felt what he had done. Peter saw the loving face of Jesus that night, and the resurrected Lord Jesus sent greetings to Peter. Peter repented of this fall, and was able to become a child of God once again (Matt. 26).

The danger of being lost is real, and these portions of Scripture remind us of this truth. For this reason, Apostle Paul advises: "the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned." And, "hold faith, and a good conscience, which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck" (1 Tim. 1:5,19). Apostle Paul's warning is still timely for us today.

God's children live in this world, but do not follow the ways of this world. There have always been many things in the world that take away our peace of conscience and freedom of faith. In regard to our faith, the dangers of our time are especially connected to the pursuit of entertainment and pleasure, as well as an individualism that glorifies a person who is self-sufficient and independent in all things. Sinful life enters through all of our senses. In addition, our culture emphasizes an ideal of success, especially economic success, which is often at the expense of our own wellbeing and that of the people closest to us.

### ***The Wounded One Needs Care***

Sin harms us all. We are never so valiant in the battle against sin that we are not wounded in the fight. In life's final stages, we wage this battle within our own hearts. We are inclined to sin. All the influences of sin and, actually, sin itself, dwell in our flesh and blood. For this reason, the enemy of souls often overcomes and wounds us. The Holy Spirit of God becomes -sorrowful and our conscience begins to ache.

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We cannot care for these wounds of soul and pains of conscience alone, but we need the twofold care of God's kingdom: grace and truth. Grace above all, so that the wayfarer wounded by sin, bleeding and barely alive, is revived by the Good Shepherd's care, and once again receives strength to believe and endeavor to keep faith and a good conscience. God's Word says that His grace is wholesome, and teaches us to reject all ungodliness—to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world (Tit. 2:11,12). The advice of God's kingdom is grace care. We must remain trusting in His grace and its teaching power.

Caretakers are human and fallible, and often stumble in the work of caring for one another. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the position of God's kingdom or the significance and power of its grace care. This faltering was particularly evident in caretaking meetings some decades ago. Discussions concerning these meetings have been initiated in the public sphere, and often from sources outside the kingdom of God. The goal of these discussions is not only limited to analyzing past events, but also to change the position and authority of God's kingdom in the lives of believers. These discussions also seek support for ways of life contrary to God's Word.

On the other hand, in caretaking situations it is essential to openly talk about sin, wounds to the soul, and offenses between people. Most importantly, we are able to clear up matters between all parties involved, and wash sins and offenses away in Jesus' name and blood. God's grace does not teach us to treat any person in a way that offends human dignity. We pray that God would give us the mind and strength to see every person as our neighbor, and to relate to others as Jesus teaches in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The kingdom of God is always a kingdom of grace, where all sins are forgiven according to Jesus' command. God's grace and forgiveness are immeasurable, as Jesus reveals in His instruction to forgive not only "seven times a day, but seventy times seven." As often as brothers or sisters return and repent, forgive them. We, ourselves, have had our personal debt of ten thousand talents forgiven. We are likewise obligated to forgive others (Matt. 18). The gospel is the medicine God uses to care for people wounded by sin. God works through us, His unskilled and clumsy children, to perform this care.

Thus we pray for the tenderness to listen when another person opens their heart and talks about matters that wound their soul. In this situation, using God's grace and truth, we become caretakers for their soul. The sequence is especially important: first grace, then truth. A song of Zion clothes in poetry the attitude we need when approaching a friend who has been deceived and wounded by the enemy of souls:

"Savior, give me Your compassion; give a mind of tenderness to approach a wavering traveler humbly, and in friendliness; that I speak in truth and wisdom to a straying, stubborn pilgrim.

Help me overcome impatience. Give me words that free and heal. When I think the cause is hopeless, give me faith that will not fail. May I speak in love to sever bonds of bitterness and anger.

Give me strength that I could boldly speak the Word of grace each day. Let me never cause offenses, or demand, or push away. Lord, preserve us all in mercy on the way to heaven's glory." (SHZ 366)

***God Strengthens the Weak***

The kingdom of God cares even for the weakest one. Apostle Paul advises, “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification” (Rom. 15:1,2). According to God’s Word, brotherly love is never the cause of evil befalling our neighbor. Paul discusses the importance of this matter, and how it relates to our lifestyle and outward endeavor of faith. He warns us not to offend weak ones in God’s kingdom through our freedom of faith: “Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend” (1 Cor. 8:13). Thus Paul exhorts us to love one another’s undying souls so much that we do not act in ways that cause offense, even if a matter is not outright sin.

The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. But because we are earthly and carnal, we do not always have the strength to comprehend this and cling to it. Paul writes, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (2 Cor. 4:7). God’s strength is powerful in the weak. We are weak children of God, but our security is in what His Word says about our Savior: “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15,16). When God is able to keep us as one who is poor in strength, then we have the desire to live according to the counsel of His Word. God will protect us even in amid temptations (Rev. 3:10).

When a person becomes rich in himself and dependent on his own strength, he feels no need for the grace care of God’s kingdom. But God loves even this sort of person, and speaks to him personally, as His Word teaches regarding the servant of the Word in the Laodicean church:

“I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Rev 3:15–22).

May the sermons of God’s kingdom lead the hearers of the Word to behold the sacrificial work Jesus performed on our behalf! May the power of the Holy Spirit invigorate the spoken Word of God and the gospel to encourage God’s children in their endeavor of faith! For all of us, it is vital that God opens our

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eyes of faith to see our source of power and might. All of God's children need this sermon of faith and the strength of the gospel: the mothers and fathers who ask amid the changing needs of a growing family, "Do we have enough strength? Do we have strength to believe?"; Young people, who are powerfully tempted by the world; One who battles against doubts of the mind and human wisdom; One whose faith life is threatened by the rush and demands of success in our time. Our children and young people also need the strength of the gospel in order to see the importance of dwelling in God's kingdom and rejecting this world's temptations.

The Good Shepherd encourages and gives security, saying, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one" (John 10:27–30).

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