**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-099**. **THE LOST SHEEP AND THE SEEKING SHEPHERD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth Into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray!"*

*Matthew 18:12*

We find this simple parable, or germ of a parable, in a somewhat more expanded form, as the first of the incomparable three in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. Perhaps our Lord repeated the parable more than once. It is an unveiling of His inmost heart, and therein a revelation of the very heart of God. It touches the deepest things in His relation to men, and sets forth thoughts of Him, such as man never dared to dream. It does all this by the homeliest image and by an appeal to the simplest instincts. The most prosaic shepherd looks for lost sheep, and everybody has peculiar joy over lost things found. They may not be nearly so valuable as things that were not lost. The unstrayed may he many, and the strayed be but one. Still there is a keener joy in the recovery of the one than in the unbroken possession of the ninety-and-nine. That feeling in a man may be only selfishness, but homely as it is--when the loser is God, and the lost are men, it becomes the means of uttering and illustrating that truth concerning God which no religion but that of the Cross has ever been bold enough to proclaim, that He cares most for the wanderers, and rejoices over the return of the one that went astray more than over the ninety-and-nine who never wandered.

There are some significant differences between this edition of the parable and the form which it assumes in the Gospel according to Luke. There it is spoken in vindication of Christ's consorting with publicans and sinners; here it is spoken in order to point the lesson of not despising the least and most insignificant of the sons of men. There the seeking Shepherd is obviously Christ; here the seeking Shepherd is rather the Divine Father; as appears by the words of the next verse: For it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish. There the sheep is lost; here the sheep goes astray. There the Shepherd seeks till He find, here the Shepherd, perhaps, fails to find; for our Lord says, If so be that he find it.

But I am not about to venture on all the thoughts which this parable suggests, nor even to deal with the main lesson which it teaches. I wish merely to look at the two figures--the wanderer and the seeker.

**I. First, then, let us look at that figure of the one wanderer.**

Of course I need scarcely remind you that in the immediate application of the parable in Luke's Gospel, the ninety-and-nine were the respectable people who thought the publicans and harlots altogether too dirty to touch, and regarded it as very doubtful conduct on the part of this young Rabbi from Nazareth to be mixed up with persons whom no one with a proper regard for whited sepulchres would have anything to do with. To them He answers, in effect--I am a shepherd; that is my vindication. Of course a shepherd goes after and cares for the lost sheep. He does not ask about its worth, or anything else. He simply follows the lost because it is lost. It may be a poor little creature after all, but it is lost, and that is enough. And so He vindicates Himself to the ninety-and-nine: You do not need Me, you are found. I take you on your own estimation of yourselves, and tell you that My mission is to the wanderers.

I do not suppose, however, that any of us have need to be reminded that upon a closer and deeper examination of the facts of the case, every hoof of the ninety-and-nine belonged to a stray sheep too; and that in the wider application of the parable all men are wanderers. Remembering, then, this universal application, I would point out two or three things about the condition of these strayed sheep, which include the whole race. The ninety-and-nine may shadow for us a number of beings, in unfallen worlds, immensely greater than even the multitudes of wandering souls that have lived here through weary ages of sin and tears, but that does not concern us now.

The first thought I gather from the parable is that all men are Christ's sheep. That sounds a strange thing to say. What? all these men and women who, having run away from Him, are plunged in sin, like sheep mired in a black bog, the scoundrels and the profligates, the scum and the outcasts of great cities; people with narrow foreheads, and blighted, blasted lives, the despair of our modern civilisation--are they all His? And in those great wide-lying heathen lands where men know nothing of His name and of His love, are they all His too? Let Him answer, Other sheep I have--though they look like goats to-day--which are not of this fold, them also must I bring, and they shall hear My voice. All men are Christ's, because He has been the Agent of divine creation, and the grand words of the hundredth Psalm are true about Him. It is He that hath made us, and we are His. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. They are His, because His sacrifice has bought them for His. Erring, straying, lost, they still belong to the Shepherd.

Notice next, the picture of the sheep as wandering. The word is, literally, which goeth astray, not which is gone astray. It pictures the process of wandering, not the result as accomplished. We see the sheep, poor, silly creature, not going anywhere in particular, only there is a sweet tuft of grass here, and it crops that; and here is a bit of ground where there is soft walking, and it goes there; and so, step by step, not meaning anything, not knowing where it is going, or that it is going anywhere; it goes, and goes, and goes, and at last it finds out that it is away from its beat on the hillside--for sheep keep to one bit of hillside generally, as any shepherd will tell you--and then it begins to bleat, and most helpless of creatures, fluttering and excited, rushes about amongst the thorns and brambles, or gets mired in some quag or other, and it will never find its way back of itself until some one comes for it.

So, says Christ to us, there are a great many of you who do not mean to go wrong; you are not going anywhere in particular, you do not start on your course with any intentions either way, of doing right or wrong, of keeping near God, or going away from Him, but you simply go where the grass is sweetest, or the walking easiest. But look at the end of it; where you have got to. You have got away from Him.

Now, if you take that series of parables in Luke xv., and note the metaphors there, you will see three different sides given of the process by which men's hearts stray away from God. There is the sheep that wanders. That is partly conscious, and voluntary, but in a large measure simply yielding to inclination and temptation. Then there is the coin that trundles away under some piece of furniture, and is lost--that is a picture of the manner in which a man, without volition, almost mechanically sometimes, slides into sins and disappears as it were, and gets covered over with the dust of evil. And then there is the worst of all, the lad that had full knowledge of what he was doing. I am going into a far-off country; I cannot stand this any longer--all restraint and no liberty, and no power of doing what I like with my own; and always obliged to obey and be dependent on my father for my pocket-money! Give me what belongs to me, for good and all, and let me go!That is the picture of the worst kind of wandering, when a man knows what he is about, and looks at the merciful restraint of the law of God, and says: No! I had rather be far away; and my own master, and not always be "cribbed, cabined, and confined" with these limitations.

The straying of the half-conscious sheep may seem more innocent, but it carries the poor creature away from the shepherd as completely as if it had been wholly intelligent and voluntary. Let us learn the lesson. In a world like this, if a man does not know very clearly where he is going, he is sure to go wrong. If you do not exercise a distinct determination to do God's will, and to follow in His footsteps who has set us an example; and if your main purpose is to get succulent grass to eat and soft places to walk in, you are certain before long to wander tragically from all that is right and noble and pure. It is no excuse for you to say: I never meant it; I did not intend any harm, I only followed my own inclinations. More mischief is wrought--to the man himself, as well as to other people--from want of thought than is wrought byan evil will. And the sheep has strayed as effectually, though, when it set out on its journey, it never thought of straying. Young men and women beginning life, remember! and take this lesson.

But then there is another point that I must touch for a moment. In the Revised Version you will find a very tiny alteration in the words of my text, which, yet, makes a large difference in the sense. The last clause of my text, as it stands in our Bible, is, And seeketh that which is gone astray; the Revised Version more correctly reads, And seeketh that which is going astray. Now, look at the difference in these two renderings. In the former the process is represented as finished, in the correct rendering it is represented as going on. And that is what I would press on you, the awful, solemn, necessarily progressive character of our wanderings from God. A man never gets to the end of the distance that separates between him and the Father, if his face is turned away from God. Every moment the separation is increasing. Two lines start from each other at the acutest angle and diverge more the further they are produced, until at last the one may be away up by the side of God's throne, and the other away down in the deepest depths of hell. So accordingly my text carries with solemn pathos, in a syllable, the tremendous lesson: The sheep is not gone, but going astray. Ah! there are some of my hearers who are daily and hourly increasing the distance between themselves and their merciful Father.

Now the last thing here in this picture is the contrast between the description given of the wandering sheep in our text, and that in St. Luke. Here it is represented as wandering, there it is represented as lost. That is very beautiful and has a meaning often not noticed by hasty readers. Who is it that has lost it? We talk about the lost soul and the lost man, as if it were the man that had lost himself, and that is true, and a dreadful truth it is. But that is not the truth that is taught in this parable, and meant by us to be gathered from it. Who is it that has lost it? He to whom it belonged.

That is to say, wherever a heart gets ensnared and entangled with the love of the treasures and pleasures of this life, and so departs in allegiance and confidence and friendship from the living God, there God the Father regards Himself as the poorer by the loss of one of His children, by the loss of one of His sheep. He does not care to possess you by the hold of mere creation and supremacy and rule. He desires you to love Him, and then He deems that He has you. And if you do not love Him, He deems that He has lost you. There is something in the divine heart that goes out after His lost property. We touch here upon deep things that we cannot speak of intelligently; only remember this, that what looks like self-regard in man is the purest love in God, and that there is nothing in the whole revelation which Christianity makes of the character of God more wonderful than this, that He judges that He has lost His child when His child has forgotten to love Him.

**II. So much, then, for one of the great pictures in this text. I can spare but a sentence or two for the other--the picture of the Seeker.**

I said that in the one form of the parable it was more distinctly the Father, and in the other more distinctly the Son, who is represented as seeking the sheep. But these two do still coincide in substance, inasmuch as God's chief way of seeking us poor wandering sheep is through the work of His dear Son Jesus, and the coming of Christ is the Father's searching for His sheep in the cloudy and dark day.

According to my text God leaves the ninety-and-nine and goes into the mountains where the wanderer is, and seeks him. And this, couched in veiled form, is the great mystery of the divine love, the incarnation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord. Here is the answer by anticipation to the sarcasm that is often levelled at evangelical Christianity: You must think a good deal of human nature, and must have a very arrogant notion of the inhabitant of this little speck that floats in the great sea of the heavens, if you suppose that with all these millions of orbs he is so important that the divine Nature came down upon this little tiny molehill, and took his nature and died.

Yes!says Christ, not because man was so great, not because man was so valuable in comparison with the rest of creation--he was but one amongst ninety-nine unfallen and unsinful--but because he was so wretched, because he was so small, because he had gone so far away from God; therefore, the seeking love came after him, and would draw him to itself. That, I think, is answer enough to the cavil.

And then, there is a difference between these two versions of the Parable in respect to their representation of the end of the seeking. The one says seeks until He finds. Oh! the patient, incredible inexhaustibleness of the divine love. God's long-suffering, if I may take such a metaphor, like a sleuth-hound, will follow the object of its search through all its windings and doublings, until it comes up to it. So that great seeking Shepherd follows us through all the devious courses of our wayward, wandering footsteps doubling back upon themselves, until He finds us. Though the sheep may increase its distance, the Shepherd follows. The further away we get the more tender His appeal; the more we stop our ears the louder the voice with which He calls. You cannot wear out Jesus Christ, you cannot exhaust the resources of His bounteousness, of His tenderness. However we may have been going wrong, however far we may have been wandering, however vehemently we may be increasing, at every moment, our distance from Him, He is coming after us, serene, loving, long-suffering, and will not be put away.

Dear friend! would you only believe that a loving, living Person is really seeking you, seeking you by my poor words now, seeking you by many a providence, seeking you by His Gospel, by His Spirit; and will never be satisfied till He has found you in your finding Him and turning your soul to Him!

But, I beseech you, do not forget the solemn lesson drawn from the other form of the parable which is given in my text: If so be that He find it. There is a possibility of failure. What an awful power you have of burying yourself in the sepulchre, as it were, of your own self-will, and hiding yourself in the darkness of your own unbelief! You can frustrate the seeking love of God. Some of you have done so--some of you have done so all your lives. Some of you, perhaps at this moment, are trying to do so, and consciously endeavouring to steel your hearts against some softening that may have been creeping over them whilst I have been speaking. Are you yielding to His seeking love, or wandering further and further from Him? He has come to find you. Let Him not seek in vain, but let the Good Shepherd draw you to Himself, where, lifted on the Cross, He giveth His life for the sheep. He will restore your soul and carry you back on His strong shoulder, or in His bosom near His loving heart, to the green pastures and the safe fold. There will be joy in His heart, more than over those who have never wandered; and there will be joy in the heart of the returning wanderer, such as they who had not strayed and learned the misery could never know, for, as the profound Jewish saying has it, In the place where the penitents stand, the perfectly righteous cannot stand.