



## *The Lost - Restoring a Sense of Urgency*

*By: Dr. George O. Wood*

A few years ago many Christians united for an evangelistic campaign by displaying bumper stickers stating, "I found it." An opportunity to witness was provided when an observing person would ask, "What did you find?"

Some nonbelievers mounted a countercampaign. Their bumper stickers read: "I never lost it." In our culture, their view prevails. We live in a day of religious syncretism in which one person's belief is as valid as any other's. The idea of people being lost and needing salvation holds offense.

During my pastorate in southern California, a young couple who were relatives of persons in the church went camping in the desert at a popular place for dirt bikers and other wilderness lovers. The parents became busy setting up camp and did not notice that 3-year-old Laura had wandered off. When the mother realized the child was not in sight, she called for her. There was no answer. Hours, days, and weeks later and after the efforts of hundreds of volunteers, there still was no answer. If Laura was kidnapped but was still alive today, she would be a teenager. She would have no memory of her real family, but her parents would still know that she is lost. Likewise, God alone knows how lost people are--even those who have no sense of lostness.

Jesus reveals the heart of the gospel in Luke 15 with three short stories: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. He knows all humanity is lost and in need of being found (cf. Luke 19:10) That's why He tells these stories of how people become lost in three different ways. Taken together as one unit, the stories give a full perspective on God's mission and ours in reaching the lost.

### Carelessness

The lost sheep illustrates the person who moves away from God unthinkingly, head down, one clump of grass at a time. The sheep wanders on from one feeding place to the next, eyes only on what immediately lies ahead. It is short-sightedly unaware that it is not where it should be and all the time has been straying farther and farther from the flock and the shepherd's care. The sheep never intended to get lost.

Similarly, people get caught up in the cares and riches of this life. I've seen families in our church become moderately prosperous, buy a camper, begin missing church on Sunday, and before long wander away altogether from the flock of God and the Good Shepherd's care. Many are lost because they never look up and ask: "Where did I come from? What am I here for? Where am I going?"

### Carelessness of Others

The lost coin represents those lost through negligence or bad treatment from others. The coin cannot bleat like a sheep for help, nor find its way back like a son. It has been done in by the mishandling of someone else.

People become damaged through victimization in a myriad of ways. The perpetrators of their sorrow give them a broken concept of God.

## Carelessness of Others

The lost coin represents those lost through negligence or bad treatment from others. The coin cannot bleat like a sheep for help, nor find its way back like a son. It has been done in by the mishandling of someone else.

People become damaged through victimization in a myriad of ways. The perpetrators of their sorrow give them a broken concept of God.

Jesus warned His disciples not to cause offense or stumbling to a little one. How many young people in our churches have been lost to the faith because of the poor example of older saints?

## Personal Choice

The son is deliberately lost--unlike the sheep or coin.

Zelma and Ira Stanphill stated the gospel as clearly as anyone ever has when they composed the words and tune to "There's Room at the Cross for You." Soon after, Zelma left Ira, backslid, sang in nightclubs, and had an affair with a show business personality. Five years later she was killed in an auto accident while driving from a nightclub singing engagement. No one knows in those seconds of dying if she had a chance to make it safely back to the Cross.

Her lifestyle represents all those who once sat in our pews, sang hymns, prayed with us, but then went out from us. Oh, for a revival in which all our lost sons and daughters come home!

Persons without the Lord are lost because they are ignorant of God, unlike God, and distanced from God. They are lost in all three senses of Jesus' stories: by their own carelessness, by the carelessness of others, and by their own deliberate decision.

If we fail to perceive the lostness of those around us, we have no sense of urgency. There is no business as usual when someone is lost.

## GOD WANTS THE LOST TO BE FOUND

Who is concerned about finding the lost? God himself!

The lost are His: the sheep, the coin, the son. Each shows a different aspect of the work of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in salvation.

## JESUS SEEKS

Jesus is the Good Shepherd looking for the lost. The prevailing idea of Jesus' day was that God might possibly receive a penitent sinner, but He would never go look for one.

But Jesus searches for the lost sheep until He finds it (verse 4). The woman also searches for her lost coin until she finds it (verse 8).

Love is not satisfied by a favorable percentage between those who are safe and those who are lost. With the sheep, 99 percent were safe; with the coin, 90 percent; and with the son, 50 percent. Who wouldn't settle for those kind of church-growth statistics. What if 99 percent of the people in your town were inside the church?

Souls, however, are not digits or percentages. When one child has died, it is not tactful to say to a father or mother: "Oh well, you have others left." The Lord seeks one life, and so must His church.

The Christian and the church are not really sharing Jesus' mission and passion unless they go and look, not simply stand and receive.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT SEEKS

The Holy Spirit's activity is to seek that which cannot help itself. Like the lost coin, humanity is lifeless and has no ability to respond to God except the Spirit draws it.

I prefer to see the story of the woman searching for the coin as an allegory. The lit lamp is the church (cf. Matthew 5:14). The Holy Spirit wants to take the lamp and go look.

It's no easy task searching for the lost. It involves effort. But what if the lamp has gone out?

## THE FATHER WAITS

The sheep and the coin may be returned without their consent, not so with people. The rebellious son is far more difficult to find. First he must come to himself and then to his father.

The lost son's problem is that he attempts to spend his father's resources outside of his presence. Augustine said it well: "A darkened heart is the far country, for it is not by our feet but by our affections that we either leave Thee or return to Thee."

Bruce Larson put it this way: "The far country is the place where you become disillusioned with who you are. You are in the far country at the point where you are disappointed with the world and say, 'Is this all there is?' And the Father says, 'Of course not. Come home' " (Larson, 1983, 230).

## GOD REJOICES WHEN THE LOST ARE FOUND

The shepherd, the woman, and the father all rejoice and want others to share their joy when the lost are found. Only one person does not rejoice: the elder son. He represents every religious person whose relationship with God has grown lukewarm. He is the individual who has never agonized for a moment over a missing prodigal. He never shares the father's heartache, nor does he share the tears of joy when the missing come home.

The elder son represents the church which can go with business as usual in the Father's house, never be concerned with the lost, and never bend any effort to find them.

In 1982, Thomas Keneally wrote the bestseller *Schindler's List*--the true life story of Oscar Schindler who employed and saved the lives of over 1,200 Jewish individuals in Krakow, Poland, from 1939 to 1945. Those on his list were saved from the ovens of Auschwitz and other concentration camps. At the end of the war, his mission successful by all human standards, Schindler was beside himself because he did not do more.

We should ask: "Who is on my list?"

Recently I visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. Lining the walkways are trees planted to remember the "righteous Gentiles" who saved the lives of Jewish people. I found the tree in honor of Oscar Schindler.

Will there be a tree planted in the eternal garden that has your name on it, "A Righteous Christian"--someone who participated in saving the life of another? After all, Jesus has a list called the Lamb's Book of Life.

As the Assemblies of God, will we be content to say, "We were the instruments God used to put 30 million people on the list"? Or will we say, "There are hundreds of millions more and there is one more"?

A true Pentecostal church is never content with the number of persons on the list. Rather, it shares God's passion for people who are still lost.

## REFERENCES

1. Bruce Larson, Luke, *The Communicator's Commentary*, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 230.

© George O. Wood

Reprinted from *Enrichment* journal Q4, 1997, used with permission.

Dr. George O. Wood is the General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God.