

# The Lost Sheep

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Preacher: Ian Naismith

[0:00] Thanks very much, Aaron. Good morning, everyone. Really good to have you with us, whether in person or through the wonders of science. Does the Bible ever surprise you?

I think if you read it regularly and thoughtfully, you'll find it quite often does. You may be reading a passage you feel is quite familiar, you've read many times before, and you suddenly see something in it that you hadn't thought of in the past.

It's God through the Spirit revealing his word to us, making it real. The Bible is like a kaleidoscope. Every time you look at it, you see something a little bit different, something very wonderful.

Sometimes, though, you come to a verse when you're reading a passage, and you almost think, well, does it really say that? Does it mean what it says? And sometimes you just have to read it again, and you realize, yes, I wasn't reading it quite right.

Sometimes you're reading the context round about it, or think of other passages and come to understand it through that. But sometimes I think there are verses that are in the Bible almost there to surprise us, so that we stop and think and can reflect a bit more on what we've just read.

[1:14] And I think the last verse of Psalm 119 is a bit like that. Aaron referred to it in his prayer. Now, before we talk about it, let me just recap a little bit for the benefit of those who haven't been here, a reminder for those who have.

For the last half dozen weeks, we've been going through Psalm 119, a wonderful poem, beautifully constructed, 176 verses in 22 equal sections, with each section headed by a letter from the Hebrew alphabet, and every verse in that section starting with that same letter.

It has a wonderful theme, which is the psalmist's love for God's word, and he has eight different words he uses time and again to describe the Bible and God's laws and God speaking to us.

And he really loves his Bible. He loves God's words, God's law, what God has revealed to us. But alongside that, he has some enemies.

He has foes in high places who are out to get him. And a large part of the psalm is the psalmist praying to God for preservation, for deliverance, that he may be rescued from his enemies.

[2:30] And he feels that he can come and pray that to God because he loves God's word and because he trusts God's promises. And the impression you get very much as you read the psalm is that here's someone who sees himself as one of the good guys, and there are lots of bad guys who are out to get him.

People who in their wickedness have no time for God's law and want to destroy those who love God. And then we come to the very last verse in the psalm.

Right at the end, verse 176 starts, I have strayed like a lost sheep. And that seemed to come out of nowhere. It's completely different from what's in the book of the psalm, which is talking about the psalmist's love for God and his word and his desire to follow God.

So where does that come from? I'm going to offer two suggestions, one just now and one at the end. And you can see which, if either of them, makes sense to you.

My rule of thumb when I come to a psalm, and I want quickly to establish what it's about, is to look at the beginning, look at the end, and then look at the middle.

[3:45] Psalm 119 is a very long middle, but we'll talk briefly about the beginning and the end. In the first few verses, the psalmist talks about how blessed the people are who love God's law and obey it.

And then in verse 5 he says, Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decree, then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands.

So right at the beginning of the psalm, the psalmist is establishing with us, actually he's not perfect, he longs to be more obedient to God.

And so then he comes at the end, and he says something similar, I have strayed like a lost sheep, seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.

Now see the parallels in these verses. On the one hand, the psalmist is confessing that he hasn't followed God's law in the way he should. But he's also saying, I really love your word, I love your commands, I haven't forgotten them, I want them to be the basis for my life.

[4:56] And the verses that come in the middle expand on that in a wonderful way. I find this quite encouraging. If you just read the middle sections of the psalm, the psalmist could come across as a bit smug, maybe a bit self-righteous.

You might even think he's a bit hypocritical, because we know that no one apart from Jesus was able fully to obey God's law. But the psalmist is very honest with us.

I'm not obeying God's decrees the way I should. I've strayed like a lost sheep. But despite that, I love God's word, I trust him, I want to be obedient to him.

All of us, I'm sure, can say that we have strayed, that we have done things that are wrong, that we don't live the lives we should. I wonder whether we can also say, I love my Bible, I love God's word, I want to be obedient, do everything that God tells me to.

That's a huge challenge, but it makes the psalm seem more realistic to me, that we can identify with the psalmist, and we can take the challenge of our love of God's word.

[6:11] Now, having been through the psalm, if you've been here the last half dozen weeks, you may be wondering what's new or different in the section we're looking at today. The psalm is deliberately quite repetitive, as the psalmist comes back again and again to similar themes, and draws out new things from them.

Well, I suggest that the thing that's distinctive about these last four sections is the intensity with which the psalmist writes. It starts with talking about God, I call with all my heart.

Four times in 11 verses, he says, preserve my life. Here's someone who's in grave danger. He's in danger of being killed or believes that he is, and he knows his only hope is to be found in God's promises.

Now, rather than go conceptually through the four sections, what I want to do is to focus on the very last section in the psalm, which is called Ta, if you've got the Bible in front of you, but we'll also bring in the earlier sections and see how they relate to that.

So here's where we're going. We've got three simple headings. Hear my prayer. Accept my praise. Save my life. You've reached in this two or three verses from this, the end of the psalm, and then there's another section that we'll refer to as well.

[7:34] So first of all, hear my prayer. Verses 160 and 170, the psalmist says, may my cry come before you, Lord. Give me understanding according to your words.

May my supplication come before you. Deliver me according to your promise. The psalmist is desperate that God should hear and should answer his prayer.

His prayer, when he's in a time of difficulty and danger, he knows he needs God's help. So going back to the other section, which is the one that's headed, Quoth, from verse 145 on, he says things like, I call with all my heart.

Answer me, Lord. Hear my voice in accordance with your love. But maybe the intensity of his prayer and his desire for God to hear him is most evident, if you've got your Bible in front of you, in verse 147 and 148.

The psalmist says, I rise before dawn and cry for help. I have put my hope in your words. My eyes stay open throughout the watches of the night that I may meditate on your promises.

[8:49] Here's someone who's so focused on bringing his prayers to God, who is so eager to come before God and to lay all his concerns on God, that he lies awake at night thinking about God's promises, recognizing what God has said and claiming them for himself.

And then he's up before everyone else in the morning to start his prayers. He knows his enemies are close. He knows they've got no time for God's law. But he says God is also near and he can be completely trusted because he never changes and nor do his promises.

As the old Tim says, standing on the promises that cannot fail, when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail, by the living word of God, I shall prevail, standing on the promises of God.

I wonder how much that's true of us, that we believe God's promises, that we take God's word seriously, and that we come before him fervently, constantly, bringing the desires of our hearts, knowing that he is the one who is able to save us and relying on his strength in our weakness.

When it comes to recognising the value of scripture in modern times, one of the great examples is the man who's known as Brother Andrew. Brother Andrew is the founder of the Open Doors organisation that you may have heard of.

[10:22] He's a Dutchman, but he's best known for his book called God's Smuggler. When he went behind the Iron Curtain in the 1950s, he saw just how few people had Bibles, even a church that might be no Bible or one Bible, and he was determined that he wanted to get God's word into the hands of more people.

Christians were desperate to get Bibles, and they couldn't. So Brother Andrew started to smuggle Bibles into communist countries.

Fairly early on, one of the best-known stories is when he was travelling to Romania, he was going there in a Volkswagen Beetle, and hidden around the car, there were lots of Bibles.

And he came to a checkpoint at the border, and he quickly realised that the guards were going through every car with a fine-tooth comb. They would take spending up to an hour searching the cars for anything illegal.

Brother Andrew knew he had lots of illegal things in his car, that he would at the very best be turned back and have his Bibles confiscated, maybe even be arrested.

[11:33] So here was a situation where he had to come to God with a desperate plea, recognising that there was nothing he could do. And here's what he prayed.

He said, Dear Lord, what am I going to do? I know that no amount of cleverness on my part can get me through this border search. Dare I ask for a miracle?

Let me take some Bibles out and leave them in the open where they will be seen. Then, Lord, I cannot possibly be relying on my own stratagems, can I?

I will be depending utterly on you. So he got us some Bibles, spread them in the seat behind him, and went, no doubt, with great trepidation, drove forward to the checkpoint.

He handed over his paper to the official there. He was going to get out of his car, and the official said no. He just scribbled on the papers, handed them back, and said, You can go.

[12:30] The Bibles were open sight. Anyone could have seen them, but they weren't challenged. On other occasions, Brother Andrew developed a prayer which was something like this.

Lord, you made blind eyes see. Now I pray that you make seeing eyes blind. Despite many times taking Bibles into communist Europe, he managed to do it with God's strength and through his prayers and to deliver to many Christians the book that they most needed.

That's an unusual story. It's remarkable. In many ways, it's exceptional. We may not expect that kind of thing particularly to happen to us. But all of us are called to have this kind of faith in God.

To believe that in the most difficult and desperate situations, we can continue to trust in his goodness. We can continue to rely on his promises.

And to pray fervently for what matters most to us, knowing that God is faithful to what he says and that he will work things for our best. That doesn't always mean we get the answer we expect.

[13:46] God's ways are higher than our ways and we have to trust that he knows a lot better than we do. But James says in his letter in the New Testament, when you ask, you must believe and not doubt because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind.

Do we really believe God's promises? And do we constantly and fervently bring to him the desires of our heart? Psalmist prayer.

Hear my prayer. The second heading I've got is accept my praise. And this is verse 171 to 172. I'm going back to the section in verse 161 to 168.

Verse 171 says, My lips overflow with praise for you teach me your decrees. May my tongue sing of your word for all your commands are righteous.

The psalmist is in a desperate situation. He's in real danger for his life. But despite that, he's determined to keep praising God.

[15:01] If we look back at the section between 161 and 168, you might see there are two letters at the top. Looks like it's two Hebrew letters. It is actually just one. It's pronounced apparently sin or shin depending on whether there's a dot to the left or the right.

So if anyone was confused by that, that apparently is the explanation. What's more important though is what's in the Bible. And this section is unlike any of the others that we're looking at today because it's not made up of requests to God.

It's made up of statements expressing the psalmist's confidence in God. He says, I rejoice in your promise. I love your law.

I wait for your salvation. And then most powerfully of all, perhaps in verse 164, he says, seven times a day, I praise you for your righteous laws.

Seven times a day is probably meant to represent a continuous attitude of praise rather than a strict count every day. But despite his plight, the psalmist is determined to keep trusting and praying.

[16 : 10] During the night, he reminds himself of God's promises. He gets up early to bring his prayers to God. And then his days are filled with reflections of God's goodness to him.

Not that also his prayers, but partly highlights here reflections on God's goodness. I think one of the greatest tests of our Christian faith is how we respond when things seem to be going badly for us. When we face opposition or when tragedy strikes, when we're asking God why and we don't really seem to get an answer, can we still recognize God's goodness and praise him?

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5, rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Now I realize that's easier to say than to do and I'm very aware that some of you have suffered far, far more than I have. But in the most difficult of times, it's good to recognize that we worship a faithful God and to bring him our praise and our thanksgiving.

[17 : 26] He will never let us down and we can praise him for that. Lara Martin is, among other things, a worship leader and a songwriter.

And shortly after the 9-11 atrocity, Lara Martin visited Ground Zero in New York. I'm sure many of us have done a place where you really feel the weight of what happened on that day.

And Lara Martin, as she was there, was moved to write the song The Voice of Hope. It's one that we sing fairly regularly. Let me remind you of some of the words. And through the storm, yet I will praise you.

Despite it all, yet I will sing. Through good and bad, yet I will worship. For you remain the same King of kings.

And faced with the greatest of tragedy, faced with the most difficult situations that the world has had to cope with in most of our lifetimes, she was reminded that even in these kind of circumstances, we can bring our praise to God because we know that He is good and that He has our interests at heart.

[18 : 42] And we have the strength to do that too, even in the darkest times, to bring our praise and our thanksgiving to God for all that He is for the Lord Jesus and for His help in our lives.

That heading today is Save My Life. That's the last four verses of the psalm and again looking backwards is from verse 153 to 160.

From verse 173 the psalmist says, May your hand be ready to help me for I have chosen your precepts. I long for your salvation, Lord.

Your law gives me delight. Let me live that I may praise you and may your laws sustain me. So again, as he's done time and time again that the psalmist says he needs God's help, he pleads for it and he reminds himself of the value of God's law and how much he loves it.

As I said, the similar theme in verse 153 to 160 section is headed Resh. This is maybe the most intense part of all in Psalm 119.

[19 : 54] It's where the psalmist is really feeling the burden, the weight of what is happening to him and the danger he faces and his need for God.

So three times he says, preserve my life. He's asking for deliverance. He asks for redemption. He looks for God's compassion.

I'm not sure there's very much more I need to say about this except that God wants us to be honest when we pray. He wants to bring us, bring him our worries, our fears, our questions.

Now of course God knows all these already. God knows everything. But as a father, as an earthly father, likes his children to talk about their needs and their desires to him.

So our heavenly father wants us to express our true feelings, not to hide them or to pretend that they don't exist, to express our true feelings to him, but at the same time to trust in his goodness.

[21 : 00] To trust that he is the all-powerful God who is able to help us and he is the all-loving God who wants what is good for us. As the psalmist says, he loves us, his compassion is great and we can trust him with every aspect of our lives.

And if today some of us are going through difficult times, we have worries about the future, perhaps fears of what lies ahead. Let's recognize this God who loves us and let's be honest about our fears with him but let's put our trust in him knowing that he cares for us.

I said I'd finished by returning to the surprising confession in verse 176 that the psalmist has strayed like a lost sheep. Earlier we compared the start and the end of this psalm.

I want to finish by comparing it with a different psalm. Psalm 1 in many ways is very similar to Psalm 119. Now it's an awful lot shorter, only six verses in Psalm 1 but the overall theme is similar.

It's about those who love God's words and the blessings that come to them and contrary to that, the judgment that comes to those who ignore God.

[22 : 21] So verse 1 of both psalms, Psalm 1 says, blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked. Psalm 119 says, blessed are those whose ways are blameless.

Now we go right to the end of both of the psalms. Here's the way they end. Psalm 1 ends, the way of the wicked leads to destruction. Psalm 119 ends, I have strayed like a lost sheep.

These may not look very similar, but the two words I've highlighted, their distraction and lost, are actually exactly the same word in the original Hebrew.

I think it pronounced abad. It is a word that has a variety of different nuances depending on the context. Perhaps the extremes are in these two verses.

One, destruction. The other, someone who is lost, who is in danger, and who needs to be found. I think the contrast there is quite telling as we think about ourselves and our relationship to God.

[23 : 28] In Psalm 1, at the end of the psalm, the psalmist is talking about those who have rejected God, those he calls the wicked. And he says they can only look forward to destruction.

If they keep going on the path that they've chosen, there is going to be judgment from God at the end. Now, we mustn't think that the wicked is just kind of evil people out there and there's nothing to do with us.

What the psalmist would describe here is the wicked is anyone who rejects God's way and who chooses to go their own way. And looking at it from a New Testament context, we could say that the wicked in this context are those who reject Jesus and don't put their trust in him.

A New Testament teaches us that Jesus is the only way to God and those who don't trust in him, those who rely on themselves, will inevitably face God's judgment.

They will face the destruction that the psalmist talks about here. When we come to Psalm 119, it is clearly different. Same word, slightly different meaning.

[24 : 44] The psalmist can describe himself later in the verse as God's servant. He says he hasn't forgotten God's commands. Yes, he's gone astray. He's wandered like a sheep.

He's got himself in a pickle. He's in danger. He needs help. But he knows the shepherd and he knows that he can rely on him.

The good shepherd won't let him go despite all his failings. And of course, we know from our New Testament that Jesus is the good shepherd and that no one can pluck his sheep from his hands. Whatever we may face, if our trust is in him, we can have confidence that he will be with us, that he will protect us. That when we go astray, he will seek us out and find us and bring us back to the fold.

And we know how great his love for us is because he said the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. And of course, Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment for our sins.

[25 : 55] So I think just as I finish, there's a question for each of us. For some, perhaps the question is, are you willing to commit your life to God?

Do you know the good shepherd? Are you willing to trust Jesus to have your sins forgiven because he took the punishment and to know that you won't be counted among the wicked who will be ultimately judged by God?

For other of us, those who maybe have been Christians for a long time, maybe for a short time, the question of this passage of the whole psalm is whether we cultivate our love for God's word.

Do we treasure it? Do we read it looking for God to speak to us? Do we seek to obey it? Do we see this as the most important book in the world God?

one which can lead us in the right ways that God has for us? And we know that if that is us, then yes, we will stray.

[27 : 04] Yes, we will go wrong regularly. But we will be welcomed back by our shepherd as we confess our sins to him. Let's not forget our little season, Psalm 119.

It's been a great privilege to go through it and to think of the wonders of God's law and of God's word. But let's particularly apply it in our lives and make sure we're trusting him in every aspect and seeking to follow him.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for this wonderful Psalm that we've considered over the last few weeks. We thank you for the Psalmist and his great love for you and for your word.

We thank you that your law which to some would be seen as a burden, to him as a delight, something he can enjoy and use as the basis for his life.

I pray that you will help us to have that love for your word that the Psalmist did, that we may value it greatly, that we may spend time daily reading it and thinking about it and asking you to speak to us from it.

[28:16] We thank you there is so much we can learn, even from passages we have read many, many times over the years. We pray above all that all of us will have our trust in Jesus, that we will know him as our saviour, as the one who died for our sins, the one who is our good shepherd, and that we may know that we have in him eternal life.

We thank you for your presence today. We thank you for the privilege of being able to worship you and to learn from you. We again pray for Edmund Fiona and pray for your blessing on their work in Argentina as we give your thanks in Jesus' name.

Amen.