



The Ninety and Nine



"There were ninety and nine that safely lay in the shelter of the fold,
but one was out on the hills away, far off from the gates of gold –
Away on the mountains wild and bare, away from the tender Shepherd's care,
away from the tender Shepherd's care.

"Lord, Thou hast here Thy ninety and nine; are they not enough for Thee?
But the Shepherd made answer: 'This of Mine has wandered away from Me.
And altho' the road be rough and steep, I go to the desert to find my sheep.'

"But all thro' the mountains, thunder-riv'n, and up from the rocky steep,
there arose a glad cry to the gate of heav'n, "Rejoice! I have found My sheep!"
And the angels echoed around the throne,
'Rejoice, for the Lord brings back His own!'

"Jesus said, 'It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick.
I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'." - Luke 5:31-32

"There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." - Luke 15:7

Luke 15 begins with the observation that many of the people who gathered around Jesus were considered to be unclean sinners by the Jewish leaders. But Jesus had not come to hobnob with the spiritual elite of that day, but rather to bring "lost sheep" back into the fold. While the outcasts of society were drawn to His message, the religious leaders grew more and more determined to kill Jesus.

These highly educated Jewish men knew the Old Testament very well, but their head-knowledge had not reached their hearts. Those who considered themselves to be wise were foolish by God's estimation (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

God ordained that men could not come to know Him by human wisdom, for that might cause them to boast. As Paul said in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Today's precious old hymn was written by Elizabeth Clephane, an invalid woman in Melrose, Scotland in the late 1800s. She wrote the text for children, but it caught the eye of Ira Sankey, the well-known music associate of evangelist D.L. Moody. Ira read this lovely poem in a newspaper as he traveled to their next meeting in Edinburgh. He

tucked it in his vest pocket and thought no more about it until Mr. Moody preached his message on the Good Shepherd.

As he finished, Moody asked Sankey to sing an appropriate solo, and he remembered the poem in his pocket. Praying quickly for the Lord's guidance, he began to play his little pump organ and sing "The Ninety and Nine," composing the melody as he went along. During the invitation, many "lost sheep" responded to the call of Christ.

Jesus referred to people in Luke 15:7 "who do not need to repent." We know that everyone needs to recognize and repent from their sins, but He spoke of those who felt no such need because they were confident in their own righteousness. It is only when we realize that we are lost without the Savior that we can be saved. As David Jeremiah says,

"Lost things cannot serve their purpose; they lack the ability to return where they belong - they must be found. In Christianity, God searches for people, as opposed to other religions where people attempt to find God. The coming of God in Christ is the God of heaven seeking the lost (Luke 19:10)."

Some of my readers know that I wrote a children's book called "Where is Popo?" some years ago. The story was based on my grandson's favorite stuffed hippo who kept getting lost, and the joy the whole family felt when Popo showed up again. I likened that kind of devotion to the love that drove the Good Shepherd to search for one missing sheep. The thought came to me that Jesus always saw "the value of one," and never considered anyone to be worthless, as messed up as they might be.

The shepherd in Luke 15 left the 99 sheep in the open pasture and went to search for the one who had lost its way. His heart rejoiced when he caught sight of that lost sheep, and he even called his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!"

Jesus then told the crowds the reason for this story - so that they would understand the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents and comes back to the fold. There was complaining on earth among the Pharisees, but great joy with God and the angels when each individual "came home."

May we ever rejoice that the Good Shepherd searched for us, and if we know Him, we can say with David, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23:6)."