

# Straying Sheep Restored

Preached At Galeed Chapel, Brighton, on Wednesday  
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*"I have gone astray like a lost sheep, seek Thy servant; for I do not forget Thy commandments" (Ps. 119:176).*

This text falls into three parts. First, there is a confession, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep;" second, there is a prayer, "Seek Thy servant;" and third, there is a profession, a protestation, "For I do not forget Thy commandments." And if the Lord will help it may prove a profitable meditation for us to notice these three points.

The first every child of God makes; there is a confession: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep." A silly stupid sheep getting into the hedge, tearing itself, or driven by some dog, some temptation. O how true it is! And how humbly, as rightly honest, will every child of God here join in this confession! We have gone astray in our affections; these have often carried us away like the wind from God, foolish affections, affections set on some vanity; something dangled before our wandering silly eyes has bewitched them and carried us away in our affections; we have proved to be unfaithful to a good God. It is a solemn confession to make, that often where love for the Lord should have been, there has been love for some vanity. And this going astray has often been a sudden thing, like a sudden powerful blast coming down upon a lake and lashing it into waves and foam, so something wrong, something of the world has suddenly come and carried our silly hearts away from the Lord, and we have gone astray forgetful that God would resent the going aside from Him, forgetful of the word of grace bestowed upon us, forgetful of His great kindness to us year after year, His forbearance and longsuffering. Forgetful of these things, we have gone speedily, foolishly, and wickedly astray from the Good Shepherd, from the safe fold, and wandered away where we have been exposed, and have exposed ourselves to dangers. We have wandered and gone astray from the Lord in our judgments often. Judgment is very important. When we judge some passing thing to be solid, when we judge some good thing to be not good, when we call light darkness and darkness light, when we are disposed to quarrel with God's ways and think them not equal, when we call that lovely which brings death, and that gloomy which brings life to us, this is a wrong judgment, and what child of God has not made this wrong judgment sometimes? That sin did not die with the Israelites of which the Lord charges them saying, "Ye say that the way of the Lord is not equal." It lives in us, there is a readiness in us to think that His ways are neither kind nor wise. It is natural to us, as natural to us so to judge as it is for us to breathe. We have gone astray. Some of you may at times in your memories and in your consciences go back to moments and to circumstances when you did form wrong judgments of God and of His Word and of His ways, and thereby went astray like lost sheep. The fold was too straight, the pasture did not quite suit, the Word of God was not pleasing in some things to us, and we went astray.

We have gone astray from the throne of grace. Restraining prayer is going astray from the throne of grace. Who has not done this? Though we prize the privilege of prayer, what backwardness there is in us to pray! Though the Word of God directs us where to go, to whom to pour out our hearts, to make known our requests, yet what wicked backwardness there is to this living profitable exercise! Gone astray then from that posture, that good posture that is so profitable because it brings the soul to deal with God. You who know what it is to deal with God, what it is to get your heart near, to have your mouth open, to feel that God is the first and the last and the best and the All and in all; to feel by moments that there was not a care that you could not cast on Him, not a sin that you did not confess to Him, nor a want that you were not enabled to lay before Him. To have felt all this and then to have gone astray from it and turned unto yourself, this, this is folly; this, this is sin. I have gone astray from the throne of God's heavenly grace. How many of you must now lay your hands on your hearts and say in God's sight, "We have gone astray like lost sheep in this particular?"

And it is to be observed, as some of you must have observed it in your own cases, that when we have gone astray from the throne of grace we have lost simplicity of mind, we have lost directness of aim, we have had that which James reproved, "a double mind." There has been a consequent instability, a trying to get the world in, something in it, for ourselves, and lean upon our own arm, and trust to our own heart, while perhaps all the while keeping up the form and readiness to say as they said of old in Jeremiah: "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we." As if you stuck to your confidence and your profession even while your heart is far from Him. Nobody knows but the people who prove it what fearful hypocrisy there is in us. Nobody can tell till he learns it for himself, the painful thing that this hypocrisy is, a double mind. Talking as if we thought of the Lord, as if we knew Him, as if we could pray to Him, and yet the heart far from Him, so that we have honoured the Lord with our mouth but our heart has been far from Him. Some of us have been like Ephraim: "When he saw his wound he went to the Assyrian and called upon King Jareb" to help him, who could not heal him nor cure him of his wounds; that is what some of us have done betimes. We have gone astray from simplicity.

We have gone astray from faith, faith in the bleeding Lamb, faith that has said in our hearts: "Now none can do what you need but God; none can manage you but God; none can supply you but Himself." And although we acknowledge this to be true, this has been so damped by sin, turned aside by sin, that it may be said for the time, we have gone astray from believing. It is a great thing to believe what you believe. It is a great thing to believe in God practically. Lip confession is easy; practice of the heart is another matter; and every child of God proves that there is a readiness and an unwillingness to follow that word: "We walk by faith, not by sight."

We have gone astray from this and we have gone astray from love to Jesus Christ. That love that once warmed our hearts, that made us feel none was like Him, none could be compared with Him, none could come and occupy His throne with our consent, none could do for us what Christ did, none so shone in our hearts as Christ. He was the best and the altogether lovely, and then what a change! What a solemn thing it is to go away from love! You get on to your bed of ease, and where will your love be? you may say, "I shall not give it up." Yes, but when you get easy, when you put your coat off, when you wash your feet and get to bed, then even though the Lord Himself should come and say, "Open to Me My sister, My love, My undefiled," you would say,

"I have put off my coat, how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet, how can I defile them?" We learn painfully what sin is in us. Gone astray from love, love to the dear Lord Jesus Christ, love to His great name, to His glorious Person, to His finished work, to His intercession, to His power which alone could help us. We have gone astray like lost sheep from this.

We have gone astray from the Bible. "O no!" you say. Well, let me put the question to you. Do you read it? Say today, have you read it as you used to do? Have you taken it up as God's own and only Word? Have you, as Hart enjoins you, have you joined prayer with each inspection? Have you felt, "Now this is God's Word, may He speak by it to me, drop a little in like an incorruptible seed to bring forth fruit in me for His praise and my good?" Have you looked at the old promises that you have had and said, "These are precious?" Has your mind run to circumstances and said, "Now these are likely to change, and what shall I do? This stream may dry up, what shall I do?" Then you have gone astray, gone from the very Word of the living God that bound you to Him, that gained your ear, that made you believe, that humbled you, that made His fullness your supply, and His greatness your object of worship, and you have gone astray. Astray from His promises to you, astray from His precepts, astray from that word of which the apostle speaks: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom and spiritual understanding."

Well, it is a solemn confession for a sinner to make; and if you feel that you can use this confession as your own, it will be a great mercy to find access to the throne of grace, there to make it. It won't avail if you make it to man while your heart may be far from feeling it. But to make it before God, to be saying: "O that I were as in months past! O that the days would come again when God would shine upon my spirit, that the days would come that I should renew my strength!" I have gone astray like a lost sheep. If any of you are now ensnared, caught in some trap or in a hedge that is tearing you, or wandering after vain things that cannot profit you, mind this, your great mercy will be humbly to go before Almighty God and make this confession: "I once was different, but have gone astray; once as I thought near the Lord; once at the throne of His heavenly grace; once with my eye single and fixed on Himself, with my faith as I thought settled in the dear and only Saviour of sinners." Now go, poor sinner, as you can and make this confession. You will be ashamed, you will be covered with shame; but it will be very wholesome and the issue will be good.

Now look in the next place at the prayer: "Seek Thy servant." Here he is, far off, entangled, torn, stupid, silly, lost, cannot get back. No, you can get wrong, you can let an idol in, you can follow some idol, but you cannot get right. He who first commenced must come again; He who sought us first must again seek us. Therefore this suits us: "Seek Thy servant." And this means several things which I would like prayerfully to notice, and the first is a conviction that only God can do for you what you need, He and He alone can restore you. You would like one day to be able to say, "He restoreth my soul. I have gone astray, Lord seek me." There is a conviction that it is only God can do it, that there is utter helplessness in us with respect to restoration. And the other is, now the eye is on sovereign grace. There is no despair here; there is a fervent cry: "Sovereign grace can abound over sin, infinite love can bring me back, almighty power can deliver me out of my present state and from all snares and all sin." There is a conviction of this in your soul.

Thirdly there is a desire to be restored." As if he should say: "Lord, I am not at home; I remember the fold I was in; I remember the times when I got near to Thee; I remember how my heart warmed to Jesus Christ at times, how beautiful He was in my eyes, how precious to my soul; how filled with hope I was; how I gazed on Him at times, saw Him to be the very Son of God, to be Almighty God. Now Lord, do, do bring me back again, restore my soul. The years that the palmer-worm and the canker-worm and the caterpillar and the locust have eaten, restore. They barked my tree and made it white. Now Lord, do come again." Can you feel this? And then again there is a directness in this. There is no going to Syria now, there is no running into yourself, there is a directness in you heart, "Lord come." As I sometimes have said, I will say again. Your prayer, your faith, will take a short cut and get, if possible, near to the Lord: "Seek Thy servant."

And when the Lord does seek His servant and begin a work of restoration, we have to notice first, how the Holy Spirit comes and buoys the soul up, carries it forward to the throne of grace on the wings of His own inward intercession. How He helps the infirmities of a sinner, says to him: "The Lord is good. Take with you words and say unto Him, take away all iniquity and receive us graciously, so will we render the calves of our lips." There is this work of the Spirit, the divine Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, who carries the soul as it were out of itself, and yet the soul goes along with the prayer: "O come to me! When wilt Thou come to me?" This Holy Spirit in carrying on this work of restoration does bring good news from a far country. You will say, "The blood of Christ my soul can cure; the blood of Christ can bring peace to my heart and conscience. It can restore all that I have lost; it can bring me again to cleave close to Him who was crucified." And that sight of the blood of Christ will fill your mouth with arguments, as Job says: "I will fill my mouth with arguments." Not excuses, no. God will take care that you shall have no excuses when He will restore you. You may in a bad state feel you do well to be angry; you may feel, "Well, I ought not to have this; I would not have that." You may justify yourself before God when you are in a bad state, but not when He is restoring you. I know both sides. Excuses? O how prolific they are, how ready to come to your lips; how ready they are as we would speak! But when the Lord turns things then these have gone, and now all we can say is: "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned and done this evil in Thy sight, that Thou mightiest be justified when Thou speakest and be clear when Thou judgest." Ah God is before us! This, this is the God we must seek to, and by the energy of the Spirit we go on praying, "Seek Thy servant." By the teaching of the Spirit we go on pleading the blood of Christ. By the grace of the Spirit we begin to cast an anchor again into that which is within the veil, and again perceive a moving of our whole hearts to the blessed God of all grace: "Seek Thy servant." What a mercy it is that He will do it!

Now objections may come to some: "We are in the dark; we are lost on a mountain; we wander and the Lord is against us; the Spirit is fighting against us; we get reproofs; we get feelings in our consciences that the Almighty is displeased with us." Well, who would contradict you? Who would say you are mistaken in that? I would not. What I would say is, that your conclusions are very wrong if you conclude that the Lord will not restore you, that He won't bless you. He does fight against backsliders; He does reprove those who have vexed and grieved His Holy Spirit, and fights against them with His Word. "No wonder either," you will feel when you are restored. "No wonder that He should do it." How richly you deserve that He should speak against you! You little think that He is calling you His dear son, when He is speaking against you; you little

think how His heart is to you. But you learn that later. Nevertheless, notice His reproofs, they are very solemn. Yet I would not be without the experience I have had of the weighty penetrating reproofs of the Almighty for all the world. O how healthy they have been to me! What wholesome work they have accomplished in my conscience! Clear, clean work God will make when He is restoring a person that is seeking Him. "Seek thy servant" on the mountain.

"To bind up that which was broken, to heal that which was sick, to bring again that which was driven away," this is the work, the work of God, the work that the covenant ensures, the work that the promise ensures, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee;" and the work that God intimates in Isaiah. He said, "Where is He that put His Holy Spirit within him? Where is He that led him as a horse through the wilderness, that he should not stumble? Where is He who did all these things?" O says the Lord, "I am that blessed God;" and faith begins then to lay hold of Him. You will find this in your souls as God seeks you; your faith will begin to lay hold of Him, and He may say to you, "Put Me in remembrance." Then you will say, "Lord, remember Thy holy promise; I have dishonoured it, I have doubted, I have feared, I have looked to the creature instead of Thyself, I have looked to man in heart, I have leaned to my own understanding and have gone astray like a lost sheep. Now remember Thy holy promise." And this is faith's grasp of the promise in a time of trouble; it is faith's boldness with God in a time of affliction when you feel you have sinned and gone astray. And this is what nature cannot understand. How one who says "I have gone astray" can go in prayer and supplication to the Lord and put Him in mind of past things so that he feels he cannot leave the throne of God. He must be there. An energy is put within him, the Holy Spirit's energy, the power of Christ's resurrection. That resurrection power that once, and more than once, brought you out of the grave, must again be exerted to bring you from your present condition. "Seek Thy servant."

And here, dear friends, one would like to say a word or two about the love of God. "According to the love of the Lord to Israel," loving a faithless sinner; not letting go His eternal hold of a faithless sinner, but coming from time to time with renewed tokens, with fresh evidences, with new touches of His love and His goodness so as to restore the sinner. "Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For since I spake against him I do earnestly remember him still; therefore my bowels are troubled for him I will surely have mercy upon him. I will restore unto him the years that the canker-worm and the palmer-worm and the caterpillar and the locust have eaten." What a wonder this is! "Love divine, all loves excelling." And He will make you so want it, and so pained for it, that you will say you have no rest till it comes. "My heart is pained for this love, nor can it rest without it." Bless God for any touches and any drawings toward returning. "Seek Thy servant." Seek Thy servant and bring him back from the bad place to which he has got himself. You may have fallen into a pit; you may be as it were surrounded by wolves and they may threaten to devour you. O but there is a secret surrounding power and protection that will preserve you always. But then there is the terror. "Seek Thy servant," put again on me the best robe; that is, give me again a sense of being justified. Seek Thy servant by again applying to me the atonement; bring fresh pardon, purge away guilt, and cause me to remember what the blood of Christ is, what it did, what it can do.

Some may say, "But then you leave out all who have never had that." Well, I would not leave them out, because God won't leave out seekers. If you have never had it, well what a mercy it is to be panting for it! I opened my mouth and panted for Thy Word. My soul fainteth for Thy

salvation; but I Hope in Thy Word." "Seek Thy servant," bring me again into Thy chambers, O mighty King! Bring me into the banqueting house that Thy banner over me may be love. Bring me to Thy footstool. Bring me to the apostle's glorying: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." And sinner, "the blood of Christ thy soul can cure." There is no cure for sin but that; no healing but that. No peace but that which the blood of Christ gives; no reconciliation but in the atonement of Christ. This will bring you from the ends of the earth, if you are there; from your distractions, your fears, your guilt, your sense of evil, of hypocrisy and all kinds of sin. The blood of Christ will cure you of everything and bring you to feel "the peace of God which passeth all understanding," and feel too that it "keeps your heart and mind by Jesus Christ." Leave you out? Why my friends, as long as God loves a sinner He will make that sinner long after Him, and ultimately bring him to heaven, whatever lacks he may be feeling, whatever distances, whatever backslidings and wanderings he may make confession of; the blood of Christ will answer all and cure his soul. "Seek Thy servant." Can you prefer this petition? Can you go to God with it, with all the guilt that you feel and the wanderings you confess? Can you, have you, courage given you to go to the throne of grace with the blood of Jesus Christ, confessing that it and it alone can do you good? Go then and press your case; "urge thy suit through all unfitness," and the day will come when you will say: "The blood of Christ has wrought the mighty cure, I have it and all is well."

Now look at the protestation: "I have gone astray, but Lord, my memory and my conscience hold Thy Word. I do not forget it, I do not forget it." Well, what a mercy that is! You may say, "My memory's bad, but what is sad, can folly still retain. O fill it Lord, with Thy sweet Word, and it will there remain." But this is a particular thing, not general. The Psalmist had had some big words. He had had some divine cautions, he had had some instructions, and he had disregarded them. They had had no influence upon him; he just broke through the hedge. He would have his own way; he would seek his own lovers, as the Lord speaks in Hosea. He would go just where he thought well, and this brought him into trouble. It brought him to a distance, into a snare and into a pit; drove him on some mountain of darkness and foolishness. Now there he remembers a prodigal son had his father's injunctions and instructions, but away he went, broke through the hedge, never thinking of the serpent that would bite him. So has it been with us and now hunger and thirst, and with none to give us bread and water, we remember things. Memory is used by the Lord to be an instrument for good to the soul. It is used by the Spirit to remember sin; it is used by the Spirit to remember the Word of God, as here: "I do not forget Thy commandments. I do not forget how they came to me." Some deed we have done. Christ said: "Remember how thou hast received and heard." Do you remember how the Word came to you? The Thessalonians remembered and Paul reminded them of the manner of entering he had unto them, and how that the Word of God wrought in them effectually. Do you remember how a certain Scripture spoke to you, what it brought to you? It brought God before you and Christ and the Spirit and the gospel. It told you of a way of escape from the wrath to come; of the throne of grace where you were invited and where at times you were favoured to go, and there found a good God. You remember the Word of direction: "This is the way, walk ye in it." The Word of support, that the Lord held you up and held up your goings in His paths. The Word of promise that He would be an abiding source of supply to you and in you. You may remember these things; how such things came. You remember their influence. O the sweet influence of some Scriptures on our hearts! How they drew our affections to God; how they endeared the Lord Jesus; how great and precious they made the gospel! O the influence of some words, how wonderful it was! It would not leave

us as it were, but like a light penetrating, a life pervading, a power moving and gathering us up. The influence we must remember. We do remember the sweetness of it. Sometimes you say: "How sweet the memory of those hours is!" How sweet the memory of certain Scriptures in the influence of them, when your heart softened, when you loved the Lord, when you hated yourself, when you could give up everything, when you could fall into His hands, when you could say to Him: "Into Thy hand I commit my spirit. My times are in Thy hands, and I do not want them anywhere else. Take me, take my heart, take my affections, take me as I am, a lost sinner; give me Thy grace and Thy goodness and Thy love and Thy mercy." The influence was very great and we remember it. You cannot forget what it was in you and what it accomplished in you when it, as it were, came straight from heaven into your heart.

We remember the expectations that the commandments of God wrought in us, when a promise came telling us that the Lord would guide us with His eye; telling us that He knew the things we had need of; telling us that we were "redeemed, not with corruptible things as silver and gold, from our vain conversation received by tradition from our fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ;" and we remember these things. What expectations we got! O will the Lord guide me? Then I shall not go astray. Does He know what things I have need of? Then He won't let me lack. Every word, as it were, will come back into your memory with a new life and a new influence, so that you say: "I do not forget these things.

And then a present influence is two-fold. First, how sorry you are that you ever forgot them! How grieved you feel that these things ever lost their powerful influence upon your soul, and how sorry you feel that the warm living expectations that you had wrought in you have died away! You remember and are sorry. Then you remember them too as a plea: "Lord, remember Thy holy promise. Didst Thou say to me that? Didst Thou give me that? I have forgotten it, but Lord, I remember it again. Make it good, make it over again, and fulfil it." And it is good when faith believes that the Word of God is capable of more fulfilments than one. When you have had a fulfilment then it is as full as ever. You have had some sweetness out of it; it is as great as ever and it abides. "I do not forget Thy commandments." Then you are not indifferent, you are not careless about things; your soul is anxious and concerned, and you wonder if the Lord will kindly come and restore you to the days of your youth, and bring you again to walk up and down in the ever blessed name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And those who have not had this, who cannot say, "Now we remember what words came to us, we remember what influence they had upon us, we remember what warm expectations they raised in us"-I say, some may not be able to say such as that, and yet they may say: "We do remember some things. We remember invitations, at least one that drew our souls after the Lord Jesus, and then we sunk back and an indifference came to our spirits. Now we remember and wish we could have again what we had when that invitation first fell upon our hearts from heaven." Go with that. "Whereunto you have already attained, mind the same thing, walk by that rule." Your rule is not some experience that you have not had, but some experience that you have had. Mind that, and O if you can put your hand on one word of the holy gospel and say that there was a time when that became to you a living word so as you had never felt it before, plead it, plead it; name it to the Lord; put Him in remembrance of it; and as you are enabled to do that by the Holy Ghost who gave it to you first, you will find it will grow in your memory. It will grow in your affections. It will grow to your faith. Your faith will grow up to it, and you will plead it

before the Lord; and the day will come when He will fulfil it in you. May the Lord help us to confess and to pray and to remember. Amen.