

pledge of salvation is repentance. And joy...in heaven, according to the word of Venerable Ephraim the Syrian, is a "a feast for God". "Repentance is a feast for God", writes the Venerable one. "Repentance, making a feast for God, summons heaven also to the banquet. The angels rejoice when repentance invites them to the supper. All the heavenly ranks celebrate, being aroused to gladness by repentance", we read in Venerable Ephraim the Syrian.

In the parable of the lost sheep, the Lord gives us an expressive image of the bringing of a lost sinner to the path of truth. The sheep that had run away from the flock is a pitiful animal. It is subject to the danger of getting into a place where there is neither forage, nor water; the danger of becoming prey of wild beasts threatens it. Thus, too, the soul which has withdrawn from God— the source of truth and grace— is also an unfortunate being, for it exposes itself to every kind of danger of the spiritual order; by delusions, by passions it is made an easy prey of the devil— the enemy of God and human salvation— who seeks, according to the word of Scripture, whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8).

The Lord shows maximum care for lost souls, which He boundlessly loves. God loves the world to such an extent that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). God gave his son up to death on the Cross, conquered death by the resurrection and after the Ascension to heaven continues to exercise providential care for sinners and indicates the path of salvation through the Church, which continues to call sinners to repentance.

Having discovered the lost sheep, the shepherd takes it on his shoulders and with joy bears it home. The same thing also takes place with the sinner who is ready to follow after Christ. The sinner must begin his repentance freely, without coercion; at first this will be difficult, for he has become spiritually weak; help for him is essential. This is where the compassionate Shepherd-Christ, by His grace, strengthens him who has decided to go on the path of salvation. The sinner no longer goes alone on the new path, but with Christ. If he falls on the way-Christ will take him on His shoulders, encourage and comfort him.

*(excerpted from: www.stjohndc.org)

Parable of the Lost Sheep



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and to save that which was lost..."
(Luke 19:10; Matthew 18:11)
"and to call...sinners to repentance."
(Matthew 9:13).*

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A parable is a short, fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle. Parables are never meant to be taken for the letter of their word. When taken literally, at face value, the entirety of its meaning is lost.

*The parable of the lost sheep was told by Jesus when the Pharisees criticized Him for socializing with sinners. Through this story of compassion, Jesus revealed his rescue mission for sinners. "Then Jesus told them this parable: 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way 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 15:3-7).

Jesus is using the image of the shepherd in His preaching, because His audience knew this image from the books of the Old Testament. The image of the shepherd, of the herdsman leading his flock, which was deeply rooted in the experience of the nomadic Arameans (Deut. 26:5 [Russian Bible]), such as were the forefathers of Israel in the conditions of pastoral life, expresses two aspects of authority exercised over men, which are seemingly contrary and often divided. The shepherd is at once a leader and a comrade. This is a powerful man, able to defend his flock from wild beasts; at the same time, he is attentive toward his sheep, knowing them well (Prov. 27:23), adapting to their situation (Gen. 33:13), carrying them in his arms (Isaiah 40:11), even loving one or another as a daughter (II Kings [II Samuel] 12:3). His authority is indisputable; it is based on devotion and love. In the ancient East (in Babylon, in Assyria) the kings called themselves shepherds, on whom divinity had laid a definite ministry—to gather the sheep of the flock and to care for them. In the Bible likewise this image is often encountered, which helps us to understand the relationship that unite Israel with God through Christ and His envoys. In the memory of many Jews, a prophecy of the coming

Shepherd was preserved. Jesus fulfills this prophecy; probably, he included shepherds in the number of those little ones, who, like the publicans and harlots, joyfully accept the Good News--The Gospel. In this sense, one may interpret the reception shown by the shepherds of Bethlehem to Jesus, who had been born in their cave (Luke 2:8-20). In ancient Christian symbolism, discovered in the catacombs of Europe and the Near East, Christ was not infrequently depicted as a shepherd, bearing a sheep on His shoulders. This symbolizes the salvation of sinful humanity, when Christ on the Cross took upon Himself our sins and cleansed them.

In the parable of the lost sheep, the Lord expounds the truth concerning how dear the conversion of a sinner is in God's eyes, and what joy there is in the heavens over those who repent. More than this, the parable emphasizes that God Himself seeks out the sinner in order to save him. Christ speaks of this also in other places in the Gospel thus: For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10; Matthew 18:11) and to call...sinners to repentance (Matthew 9:13).

This parable was spoken by Jesus in order to show the proud and self-assured scribes and Pharisees God's boundless love and compassion toward all men without exception. The scribes and Pharisees were sure that, because they fulfilled all the minor prescriptions of the Mosaic law, offering the appointed sacrifices and keeping all the rituals, they no longer were in need of repentance and acted justly in avoiding contact with those whom they considered sinners.

It is completely clear that the lost sheep stands for the sinner who is dead to virtue and blessedness, for which he was created by God. By the Holy Spirit, the Lord acts in inscrutable ways on the heart of the sinful man, who has not yet completely lost the capability for repentance and conversion to God. Jesus' attention to one sinner who repents, draws attention to itself. By this, it is emphasized that the sole