

iStray

Isaiah 53:6; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 7:15-19; 1 Corinthians 10:13; 1 Peter 2:24-25 ¹

I don't have any personal knowledge of sheep, but one doesn't have to look very far to see that sheep don't have a very good reputation. I found the following on a university website:

"Of all quadrupeds . . . sheep are the most stupid, and derive the smallest resources from instinct. . . . These animals, so simple and dull in their intellect, are likewise very feeble in their constitution. They cannot continue long in motion: Travelling weakens and extenuates them. When they run, they pant, and soon lose their breath. . . . They are subject to many diseases, most of which are contagious. A redundancy of fat often kills them, and always renders the ewes barren: They bring forth with difficulty, frequently miscarry, and require more care than any other domestic animal."²

Sheep frequently get lost if they aren't carefully tended by both shepherd and sheep dog. They don't really intend to get lost, but they don't pay very much attention to things, and they "just nibble themselves lost."

Keep all that in mind as you hear this word from the Lord: *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Isaiah 53:6). The London preacher, J. C. Philpot, asked long ago, "Have you [yourself] not often gone out of the path through sheer stupidity, through actual silliness of heart? Some silly lust, some stupid folly, some miserable, wretched trifle of no more real weight or importance than a straw, has drawn you aside.

"You have got out of the path and fallen into some evil which has produced great guilt . . . through some stupid folly by which you were overtaken in some heedless moment . . . which you never can forget, and which, if it has come abroad, has grieved friends, put a reproach into the mouth of enemies, tarnished your Christian character, and brought upon you misery and vexation. You did not do it wittingly, willfully, or wantonly, but . . . blundered into it through sheer silliness of mind and mere stupidity, as being off your guard and caught in a snare before you were well aware."³ Does this begin to sound familiar?

It was out of similar feeling that the Apostle Paul wrote, ¹⁵*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* ¹⁹*For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing* (Romans 7:15, 18b-19). Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian dissident who became a Christian while in a Siberian prison camp, wrote of that experience that "Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line dividing good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either but right through every human heart."⁴

Our problem goes back literally all the way to the beginning of humanity, and it is there that we can gain helpful insight. There's no suggestion in Genesis that Adam and Eve had any interest in the forbidden tree until Satan raised doubts about God's benevolence toward them:

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on July 15, 2012.

² <http://faculty.njcu.edu/fmoran/vol3sheep.htm>

³ J. C. Philpot, "The Straying Sheep and the Sin-Bearing Shepherd," a sermon preached at Gower Street Chapel, London, on July 14, 1867. www.gracegems.org/Philpot/straying_sheep.htm

⁴ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956* (1973), Part IV, Chapter 1.

“Really?” he asked the woman. “Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?”

“Of course we may eat it,” the woman told him. “It’s only the fruit from the tree at the center of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God says we must not eat it or even touch it, or we will die.”

“You won’t die!” the serpent hissed. “God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it. You will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil” (Genesis 3:1-5, NLT).

From that moment to this, Satan’s methods haven’t changed a bit. His two-step strategy continues to be: (1) create doubt about God; God’s nature, and God’s intentions; and (2), take God-given desires and twist them out of the boundaries God set for them. That’s pretty much it.

Temptation always begins in the mind, with an Eden-like rationalization that what we contemplate is either not really forbidden or that it isn’t really as bad as God says it is. Satan does his best work when we’re vulnerable, lonely, tired, sick, and discouraged, but he also does good work when we’re successful, tempting us to violate God’s law in order to congratulate ourselves on our success.

One of Satan’s favorite strategies with church-going folk is to try to get us puffed up with thinking about all the bad things we don’t do, distracting us from the grim awareness of our own jealousy, envy, anger, bitterness, gossip, selfishness, arrogance, and indifference. This strategy is often quite successful, and puts us in a situation much like this:

It was a warm summer night, and Pastor Wimmer and his wife were driving along with three year-old Micah in the back seat. “After many miles of driving in the darkness,” he wrote, “we came to a stop in a remote area. The brightness of the traffic light revealed all the dirt and dead bugs on our windshield, and Micah said, ‘Look, how dirty!’

“My wife and I didn’t think much about his comment until a moment later when we drove on—away from the light and back into the darkness. Upon reentering the darkness, we could no longer see the mess on our windshield, and Micah quickly piped up and said, ‘Now the glass is clean!’

“Before the law came,” pastor Wimmer reflected, “the dirt within us hid under the darkness. But when God gave the law, its light shined on the windshield of our hearts and revealed the filth of sin we’d collected on our journey. The law, then, is a light that shows us how sinful we really are. It cannot cleanse us or make us whole. But it does starkly highlight the true situation of our souls—and thus can lead us to Christ.”⁵

C. S. Lewis wrote that “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means.

“This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting it, not by giving in. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later.

⁵ William Wimmer, pastor of Grace Chapel Church of God, Benton, Arkansas.

“That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it.”⁶

So what are we to do? How can we avoid the traps Satan sets for us, aided by our own destructive desires? One of the best ways to resist the many faces of temptation is to intentionally counteract Satan’s two-step strategy.

The first thing we need to do—and we need to do it all day long every day—is to remember that God’s Love, demonstrated in Jesus, proves to us that God’s Law has not been given to fence us off from good things, but rather to save our earthly lives from shipwreck and our eternal lives for glory. This is always true, whether we see it or understand it in any given situation or not.

The second thing we can do, when Satan tries to get us to take our God-given desires out of the boundaries God has set for them, is to claim God’s strategic promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13: *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*

My good friend, Herb Peak, who visited with us in worship a few weeks ago, explains that verse in a way I find helpful. Herb says, “Whenever we become aware of temptation, almost in that very same moment we are also aware of how we can resist or avoid it. The first impulse comes from Satan; the second from God’s Holy Spirit. It’s as though God gives us the exit, the off-ramp, just as quickly as Satan springs the trap. If we take that exit, we receive the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13. If we don’t reflexively choose God’s way, then we usually find that it’s a long way to the next ramp.”

It’s when we don’t take the off-ramps God provides that we find ourselves lost in the wilderness . . . just like those stupid sheep. As someone memorably quipped, “sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.”

But there’s Good News here as well, “*for this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. . . . I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness*” (Ezekiel 34:11-12). “*I am the good shepherd,*” Jesus said. “*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*” (John 10:11). “*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*” (Luke 19:11).

It is God’s very nature to seek and to save the lost, and Calvary’s cross demonstrates there was—and is—no price too great for God to bring us Home. As the old gospel song, “The Ninety and Nine,” puts it, “None of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed; nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through ere he found his sheep that was lost.”⁷

My friend, you are that sheep, as am I. I frequently tell persons whose journeys have taken them into the wilderness, whether through their own foolishness, through no fault of their own, or through their own rebellion, “I don’t know when it will happen, and I don’t know how it will happen, but I know that it will happen, that if you don’t give up, the Shepherd will find you and bring you home.”

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Adobe Digital Edition, 2009), p. 124.

⁷ “The Ninety and Nine,” words by Elizabeth Clephane (1868); music by Ira Sankey (1874).

To put this another way, my favorite story in the Bible is the one we usually call “the Parable of the Prodigal Son,” in Luke 15. This is Jesus’ longest and best-known parable, and these twenty-two verses have been called “the greatest short story in the world.” It would be more accurate, though, to call this “the Parable of the Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother,” because it’s really a story about two ways of receiving those who have been lost.

You know the story. A wealthy farmer had two sons. The younger son came to his father and asked to receive his inheritance immediately, rather than at his father’s death. Such a request may have been even more impertinent in that day than it would be in our own, but the father still granted it.

I don’t know that we have to assume that the young man was a rascal when he first left home. He may have been demonstrating the kind of initiative and spunk that we value in Western culture, however strange it may have seemed to those at home. But, while the young man may have intended to become successful in worthy ways, the truth was that he was no wiser than Pinocchio, and whether or not he had mischief in mind when he left, mischief soon found him, and Jesus said that “*he squandered his wealth in wild living*” (Luke 15:13).

His father had divided up the “living,” but that did not provide the son with life. Wisdom cannot be imposed on a child, even by a father’s love. And the younger son insisted on learning the hard way that you can’t “find yourself” just by leaving home, nor can success be bought at the world’s markets.

As the months passed, the father waited for news of his son in that peculiar agony of hope and fear known only to parents. When that which is lost is a person (as distinct from a sheep), the person cannot be found until he or she wishes to be found.

After the young man had wasted his money, famine struck the land, and he found himself a penniless alien far from home. He was lonely, starving, and completely degraded.

The beautiful part of the story is that the young man finally came to himself. His pain was creative, and a moment of truth finally arrived. He saw what his own choices had done and he took responsibility for his sin against both God and his father. He decided to return humbly to his father simply as a hungry man asking for a job.

Now the kind of homecoming a prodigal can expect depends on the kind of parent one returns home to, and it was the memory of his father’s love that turned the young man’s steps toward home. “*So he returned home to his father,*” Jesus said. “*And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming.*”

This is my very favorite part of my very favorite story. How was it that the father saw his son while he was still a long way off? It was because day after day, month after month, and maybe year after year, the father had been watching for his son. His heart had been running out to the horizon and back, time after time, hoping to see the form of a man in the distance. Day after day his eyes had fooled him, but this time, he was sure!

It was considered undignified in those days for an old man to run, but he ran anyway! Before the first word of dejected explanation could be spoken, the father threw his arms around his son’s neck and kissed him. The son began his little memorized speech, but his father cut him short. He wasn’t interested in speeches or in humiliation. The father put the best robe on his son, the sign of the honored guest; he placed a signet ring on his finger, the sign of authority; he put shoes on his feet, a luxury known only to free men; he killed the fattened calf, a sign of extravagant hospitality; and jubilation was set loose throughout the whole household!

This parable shows not only the kind of repentance to which God responds, but also the way in which God responds to it. Here we get just a glimpse of God’s deep desire to forgive us. God is eagerly waiting to embrace us, His wandering children . . . and we’re afraid of what He will do if we return!

The Good News of Jesus is that when we make decisions that mess up our lives, as we all do, God sends an ambulance, not a firing squad. That’s where Paul ended up after the “woe is me” text we read earlier: *“So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death”* (Romans 8:1-2).

At first glance, though, the pardon seems to be too easy. Does God really say to us, after we’ve ruined our own lives and poisoned the lives of others, “Oh, just forget it?” No, that’s not what the story says.

If we look closely, judgment is written throughout this story. The degradation of the pig sty, the desperate awakening, the journey homeward in rags and hunger and poverty, and the broken and stammering “I have sinned,” constituted no easy pardon. The marks of the far country remained on the son’s heart all his life; but though the marks remained, the father’s love transformed them from symbols of degradation into signs of redeeming love.

Was the pardon too easy? If you and I want to know the full measure of our forgiveness, we must fix our eyes on a splintered cross that stinks of hatred and of dried blood and of death. Our pardon has been bought with a price—a terrible price. We have been cured, yes; but in the amazing economy of God’s Love, the Physician has born the full cost of our healing Himself.

At the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, Great Britain’s Derek Redmond responded to the starting gun for the 400-meter race knowing that his lifelong goal of the Gold Medal was only seconds away. But as he entered the backstretch, Redmond was sent sprawling into the cinder track by the burning agony of a ripped hamstring. By an act of sheer will, he struggled to his feet through the excruciating pain and began hopping toward the finish line.

Suddenly, a man bounded out of the stands, pushed past the security guards, and threw his arms around his son. The crowd wept and cheered as they watched the father half-carrying his wounded son as they stumbled down the stretch and across the finish line.

So how is it with you today? Do you find yourself wounded in the “far country” of the heart and spirit? Are you yearning for forgiveness and for your Father’s love? If so, I’m very happy to tell you that your Father is watching and waiting for you to turn your heart toward Home.



And as the old gospel song puts it, “If you’ll take one step toward the Master, my friend, you’ll find his arms open wide.”⁸ Far more than Derek Redmond’s father ran to him, your Father will run to you with the words, “Come on, my child, let’s finish this *together*.”

⁸ Ralph Carmichael, “The Savior Is Waiting” (SpiritQuest Music, 1958).