

Savoring God's Word

A Meditation on Luke 15:1-6

by Jan Johnson

www.janjohnson.org

FINDING INTIMACY WITH GOD:
When You Need to Sense God's Love and Acceptance

- If you've attended one of Jan Johnson's workshops on Scripture meditation, this may have been the passage that was used.

This meditation exercise is especially for those wishing to *build intimacy with God*. If you wish to have a group meditate on the passage together, the instructions for the group leader are in italics. If you wish to use it alone, ignore those instructions. This meditation roughly follows the pattern of *lectio divina*, but also includes elements from the Ignatian style of Scripture meditation. For more information about how to meditate on Scripture, see [Savoring God's Word](#) or the CD [Meditating on Scripture](#) (scroll to the bottom).

WARMING UP (5-10 minutes)

Before answering the "quiet question" below, reflect in silence for a few minutes. To help center yourself, try the following:

- Breathe in and out deeply a few times. Relax your neck and move it around. Then let your arms go limp and relax the legs and ankles. Relax each part from the inside out.
- If a distraction interrupts you (remembering you need to call a friend), turn the palms of your hands up as they rest in your lap and offer that distraction to God. Turn your hands over to signify your receiving God's peace.

After you've quieted yourself, ask yourself the following question to help focus your thoughts for meditation on today's passage: **What does it feel like to be found when you've been lost?**

Take a few minutes to reflect. It's OK if nothing comes to mind right away. Just enjoy God's presence.

Group leader: After your group has had a chance to greet each other, read the centering instructions above (see bullets). Then ask the "quiet question" above. Sit together quietly for a few minutes, repeat the question and ask group members to share their thoughts in a sentence or two. Anyone who wishes to pass may do so. After group members share, thank them and comment that it's helpful to hear the variety of ways that God speaks to people.

READING the PASSAGE (15-20 minutes)

Read silently the passage printed below, noting the explanations in the right column.

Group leader: Ask a group member to read the passage below aloud. Suggest that other group members might want to close their eyes and listen.

LUKE 15:1-6

THE CRITICISM

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes *sinners* and eats with them."

THE RESPONSE

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.'

ITALICIZED WORDS & PHRASES

SINNERS Pharisees had no social or business dealings with those they called the "people of the land." They considered these people "sinners" because they didn't keep the law.¹

LEAVE THE NINETY-NINE IN THE OPEN COUNTRY Many commentators suggest the shepherd didn't abandon the 99, but left them in a sheepfold or with another shepherd. The text, however, speaks of leaving them in open country and mentions no other shepherd. Jesus may have intended for the rash behavior of the shepherd to underscore the theme that God pursues each person madly and passionately. If so, this story would have been a shocking comeback to the Pharisees who didn't like Jesus associating at all with sinners, much less God running off to save them.

If you haven't read the notes in the right column, read them silently now. Take a minute to consider the following questions.

Group leader: After the passage is read, ask group members to read silently the explanations in the right column and then to jot down answers to the questions below. After a few minutes, have them choose one question and share their answer to that question in a sentence or two. Or they may pass, if they wish. Explain that this is not a time for discussion, but for reporting responses to the questions.

THE EAGER, ENTHUSIASTIC SHEPHERD

1. Look through the text above and underline phrases that show the eagerness and enthusiasm of the shepherd. Here are two examples to get you started: "go after the lost sheep" (vs. 4); "joyfully puts it on his shoulders" (vs. 5).

THE CRITICISM and the RESPONSE

2. Jesus told this parable to respond to the criticism of the Pharisees that Jesus ate with tax collectors and "sinners." Contrast the shepherd's behavior with the Pharisees' behavior.

- The Pharisees were eager to:
- The shepherd was eager to:

3. What do you think Jesus was trying to say through this parable to the Pharisees who criticized him for eating with tax collectors and "sinners"?

4. Read "Cultural Cue: The Heart of the Shepherd" below. When have you had that kind of heart -- searching earnestly for someone or something?

5. In what situations, if any, do you wish God would "find" you and restore you to tranquility?

¹William Barclay *The Daily Bible Study The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1956), p. 206.

If any of the above questions are too difficult, hold them before God for a few minutes and then go on. Don't worry about getting an answer, but be open to what may come to you in the next few days.

PICTURING the PASSAGE (10-15 minutes)

Before reading the passage again -- aloud this time, consider this cue. Use it to set the scene for this scriptural event may have occurred.

CULTURAL CUE: THE HEART OF THE SHEPHERD

Shepherd Phillip Keller, who has spent many hours searching for lost sheep, explains that if a shepherd doesn't arrive in time to rescue a "cast" sheep, it could die. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, frantically struggling to stand up, the sheep feels gases build up in its belly and blood circulation is cut off. It cannot right itself. "This is another reason why it is essential for a careful sheepman to look over his flock every day. If one or two are missing, often the first thought to flash into the shepherd's mind is, *One of my sheep is cast somewhere. I must go in search and set it on its feet again.*"²

WORD MEANING CUE: "LOST"

In Jesus' day "lost" did not mean what it has come to be in recent days: those who are not trusting Jesus for salvation. "Lostness" is about losing one's way and there are many kinds of "lostness" in which we are all engaged. We might lose our way in a situation, a relationship, a skill or in how we relate to God. That means that the "lost" sheep may be you in some way.

CONTEXTUAL CLUE: "THE 99."

This story is a parable not an allegory (a parable has one meaning; in an allegory each significant item represent something else). When people mistakenly view this story as an allegory, they think "the 99" must be "the saved" in contrast to the "lost" sheep. (See Meaning of Word cue above.) But Jesus described the "the 99" not as saved but as "those who don't need to repent" (v. 7). How could this be? We *all* need to repent for *something!* But sometimes we don't *think* we need to repent, especially when we compare ourselves to someone in trouble. The unrepentant 99 have stopped searching and seeking; they no longer want a different way in life. Indeed, the 99 were probably looking down their noses at the dumb lost sheep because it had so much to repent of while they did not. I confess I have been one of "the 99": sitting in judgment of people who were searching but still very messy!

Read the passage again -- aloud, this time -- and close your eyes. Keep in mind the distinctive call of the shepherd, which the sheep recognized and responded to. This is the voice that guides them to their watering place everyday, whose staff untangles them from brambles and wild roses, whose voice brings them to shelter before a storm hits.

Group leader: Have group members read this cue silently. Then have a group member read the passage aloud while the others picture the passage.

SOAKING in the PASSAGE (5-15 minutes)

Consider now the all-important question that should be addressed whenever Scripture is read, How is my life touched today by this passage? Read the passage aloud again and ponder

²Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), pp. 60-61 of large print edition.

the following question for about five minutes: **What word, phrase, scene or image emerges from the Scripture and stays with you?** If you latch on to something right away, set that aside for a minute and see if anything else emerges.

Here are some examples of scenes, or images that might emerge:

- the shepherd looking for the lost sheep
- the lost sheep being found (you may wish to picture yourself being carried on the shoulders of the shepherd)
- one of the ninety-nine sheep being left in the open country (you may wish to picture the shepherd continuing to search for the lost sheep in the rain)

After a few minutes, write about the word or phrase or images that resonate within you from the passage.

Word or phrase: _____

Scene or image: I hear . . . , I see . . . _____

Group leader: Have a different group member read the passage aloud and then state the question printed in bold. Have the group sit together quietly and then fill in the one of the blanks above. After a few minutes, ask group members to read what they've written. Remind them that they may pass if they wish.

PONDERING the INVITATION (5-15 minutes)

Perhaps God is offering you an invitation in this passage to enlarge your understanding in the next few days. In what way might that be? Sit quietly together for a few minutes, pondering this question: **What do I need to know from this passage?** Be open to the quiet, but don't feel pressured to come up with an answer.

Group leader: Read the above instructions aloud and after a few minutes, repeat the question printed in bold. Ask group members to respond by saying, I SENSE THIS PASSAGE CALLING ME TO: and then completing that statement with a short phrase. Anyone who wishes to pass may do so. Encourage them to listen respectfully and prayerfully to other group members.

PRAYING (5-10 minutes)

Take a few minutes to respond to God about this. **How do you feel about what you sensed (or didn't sense)? What is it you most want to say to God at this time?**

Group leader: After allowing a few minutes for private prayer, ask group members to pray for the person on their left according to their response in "Pondering the Invitation." Anyone wishing to pray silently may do so, saying, "I'm praying silently," and close their time of prayer by saying, "Amen."

DAILY LECTIO:

If you wish, use the above format to meditate on God's word between group meetings. You may wish to focus on today's passage everyday this week (try using a different version of the Bible besides NIV) or use the following passages:

- Luke 15:8-10 (the woman's persistent search for the coin)
- John 10:11-17 (Jesus as the good shepherd)

- Revelation 7:16-17 (a time when the Lamb is shepherd and no one will ever thirst)
- 1 Peter 2:21-25 (walking in the steps of the Shepherd and Overseer)
- Ezekiel 34:12-16 (God bringing back strays)
- Psalm 119:168-176 (how a strayed sheep behaves upon return)

###