

The God Who Seeks

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10 ESV).

“[She] forgot me, declares the Lord. Therefore, behold, I will allure her” (Hosea 2:13b-14a NIV).

INTRODUCTION

Is there anything better than to be pursued by the one you love?

Lots of religions teach you to chase after God. Only in the book do we learn of a God chasing after you. Do you believe that? Even Christians believe the lies pumped into our ears every day. I’m not good enough. I’m not pretty enough. I’m not smart enough. I don’t keep the rules enough. I’m too harsh when I shouldn’t be. I’m not stern enough when I should be. If you really knew me, you wouldn’t love me. You’d be shocked. You’d be disappointed. You’d want to run away. My God knows you better than you know yourself. And he loves you. He loves your quiriness. I once knew something that was, lets just say “a bit much.” And someone said to him, “we want you to be you, nut not YOU you.” I’m here to tell you, God loves YOU. He loves when you do well, of course. But he loves that when you don’t do well, you want to do well. And when you don’t even want to do well, He knows that you want to want to do well. And, get this—when you were your most defiant; when you were sowing your wild oats and wanted to have nothing to do with him—he loved you then. In fact, he loved you with every fiber of His being, and he wanted you (no, not “a cleaned up, better version of you, one that finally pleases him, and maybe then he’ll love you). No, he loved and wanted YOU you.

Hear this verse and hear it well: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost.”

And when we are ignorant, he runs to us to give us light.
And when we are dead, he runs to us to give us life.

And when we are lost, he chases us down til we are found.

And when we are distracted, he comes to us to give us reason to choose him.

And when we are defiant, when we are defiant—when we are at our worst—he says to himself, “they must not know what they’re missing. Let think of ways to make myself known. I won’t give up. I won’t.”

Do you believe that?

I hope you will after our lesson this morning. The God who seeks. He seeks those who want Him and know it. He seeks those who are lost and know it. And he seeks those who are lost and need him but don’t know it.

HE SEEKS THE SAVED

We all know the central verse for our lesson this morning: “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” But did you know that our God also seeks the saved? A good husband will continue to date his wife after they are married. It’s important. And sometimes marriages have rocky moments; just as parents and children have rocky moments. And even though you remain married, or remain a family, you find yourself in situations where one or both of you are in need of some serious TLC. My God pursues the One He loves...and not just when you are out of the sheep pen.

To his own people, God declared “You will seek me and you will find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13). And you do. I know you do. You and me both. “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (James 4:8). We see this pattern in Scripture. “If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:6-7).

We believe that. We move an inch, and he moves a mile. We tell him we know we are weak; we know we are dust. We know we don’t have what it takes and we need you, Father. We need you. And he runs to us. He wants us to want him. And He wants to live in those who want him.

It was Isaiah who gave us this powerful line from the Holy One:

“For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isaiah 57:15)

He seeks those who want him. Those who need him and know it. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” promises 1 John. And it’s not just forgiveness. It’s not just a one-off giving of mercy. David, the former shepherd boy, describes what life is like in the pastures of a Holy God. And not all translations bring this out, but the end of Psalm 23 actually reads this way: “surely goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

My God is in hot pursuit of every one of us who know his name, who treasure his name, when we call out his name. To give us all the blessings promised to those who belong to Jesus Christ. To give you hope and a future. To whisper confidence in your ear when you lack confidence. To remind you that you are safe in his arms of love. That He will never leave you nor forsake you. That he provides more than we can ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us. Yes—my God the great lover continues to pursue you, the bride of Christ.

But the story gets even better.

HE SEEKS THE LOST

He seeks those who are lost and know it. You know that in Luke 15, Jesus gives us a parable about lost sheep. Because it’s the first of three parables about lostness, that is where we are trained to go when we think of lost sheep. But Matthew’s version is even more stark than Luke’s, so I’d like us to compare them. Luke 15:3-7 and Matthew 18:11-13. Here is the parable:

Suppose you had a hundred sheep, says Jesus in Luke’s gospel, and you lose one of them, don’t you leave the 99 in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until you find it? It’s a beautiful image. The open country sounds tranquil and safe. They’ll be fine. And how the sheep got lost is anyone’s guess.

But in Matthew’s version, Jesus makes it clear that the lostness is the sheep’s fault: the man has a hundred sheep, “and one of them goes astray.” So what does the shepherd do? Well, says Jesus in Matthew, he leaves the 99 “on the mountains” as he goes in search of the one that “went astray.” The Greek word used for “on the mountains” refers to the scary, unsafe, rocky crags with steep slopes. We can read too much into a

parable, trying to make parallels to everything and end up ruining the point. No, Matthew is not saying that if you are in his sheepfold, he will leave you on the unsafe precipice to find for yourself. The parable is not about the 99. It's about the one. Even more, it's about the one who is a shepherd in search of the one. Matthew says the shepherd adopts a one-track-mind for the sheep that went astray. There is no hint of anger, only concern; no hint of punishment, only a desire for safety. He can picture the poor sheep, all alone, who may be in an even more precarious situation than the 99. So the shepherd runs to the sheep. “If he finds it,” says Jesus, “truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.” Luke says he throws a party. “When he has found it,” says Jesus in Luke, “he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’”

This is where the story gets interesting. Jesus uses the parable to say “there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.” There are a number of interesting lessons to draw from this verse, but also a number of interesting questions to ask of this verse. How can it be a parable about repentance when all the action in the parable is on the part of the shepherd? Do you see that? All the sheep did was get lost! And the shepherd does the noticing, then the searching, then the finding, then the saving, then the rejoicing.

The next parable in Luke 15 is similar. A woman has 10 silver coins. She loses one coin, and does everything in her power to search high and low until she finds it. And when she does—she hosts a party for all her friends and neighbors to rejoice over finding her coin. “Just so,” says Jesus, “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Again, how do you get repentance from that parable?

Here's how: we focus way too much on ourselves. We do. One of my constant pet peeves is when I hear someone describe the plan of salvation with 5 steps. And every one of them begins with me and ends with me. God's plan for redeeming humanity begins with a God who so loved the world, that he gave his only son, and it ends with a God who promises to return to set things right. It includes a Son who willingly shed his blood. This son calls to us to receive his free gift of grace. Then, of course, there is our faithful response, and by his grace, the promise of God's Holy Spirit who transforms us from the inside out. Getting clear on this is helpful even when discussing “our faithful response.” Sometimes we talk about repentance like something that starts with me and ends with me. As I pull myself up with my own bootstraps and God is really impressed with how magnificently I repent, so he owes me pardon!

No--I can only hear the Word of the Lord because the Lord has spoken, and he moves heaven and earth to get that Word to reach my ears. I can only believe because God

has worked in the life of my mother and father, and their mother and their father, and every bible class teacher and even the billboard signs and one-liners in TV commercials, and in the beauty of nature and in the kindness of the lady at the check-out counter that tells me there is goodness and beauty in the world and I want more of it. Don't you see—all the sheep in the story do is get lost, and know they need to be rescued. Jesus is saying, “Rejoicing happens when you are found.” And all the sheep did was refuse to hide. To be waiting in the field for the master to arrive.

The story of the return of the lost is the story of a seeking God. A God who came to seek and to save that which is lost.

He seeks those who are lost and know it. “I don't know which way to go, but I know you do, dear God.” “I don't know how I got so lost, but I know you can find me, O Lord.” “I don't know which way is up, but I know I am never beyond your sight. Please find me, O Lord.”

Wherever you are, listen close: you cannot go so far that my God cannot find you. And when he does, he will run to you. He seeks the lost who know they are lost, and rescues them.

But the story gets even better.

HE SEEKS THE BETRAYER

He seeks those who are lost and *don't* know it. Those who are lost because they willfully made them so. Those who scorned God's love. Those who asked for their share of the inheritance too early. Those who spit on God's gracious gift and walked out the door. Oh yes. I'll show you.

I'd like you to turn to Hosea chapter 2, verse 14, as I tell you about a “therefore” kind of love. “Therefore” is a conjunctive adverb that means “for that reason.” It is not “in spite of” but “because of.” Your action is the ground upon which I will act.

Hosea chapter 2. verse number 14. If you have a King James, or a New King James, or a New American Standard, or a New International Version – whatever. You all have the same introductory word: “Therefore.” You need to underline this word. You need to draw a star around it, leave yourself little notes around the house saying: “Therefore: Hosea 2:14.” Why do I say this? Because that word “therefore” means the action that follows is based on the action that precedes. If I say to you “You let me borrow 50 dollars, therefore I will pay you back 50 dollars,” you understand, don't you, that my

action (paying you back 50 dollars) is based on what precedes (that is, you paying ME 50 dollars). When we say the word “therefore”, we mean “I’m going to give you what you deserve. My action is based on your action.

So what is Hosea talking about that makes this word “therefore” so significant? God’s people, the children of Israel, entered into a covenant with God. They made a marriage vow to be faithful to God. But instead, his people went after other gods. Committed adultery against God! You can hear God crying, beginning in verse 2:

Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband... (5) Their mother has been unfaithful and has conceived them in disgrace. She said, ‘I will go back to my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink... (8) She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold—which they used for Baal.

In these verses, we are supposed to picture God as a scared, frantic rejected husband, pacing the floors. God goes through a list of ideas “I wish punish them, I will take back what is mine, I will ruin her vines and fig trees” – and as we all know, there is a time for punishment, and God DID show punishment, and He will again. I’m not arguing against that at all. But let’s not forget we’ve got a big “therefore” coming up. While God is pacing the hallway, wondering where his dearly loved wife could be, thinking of all the horrible places, and horrible people she could be with, God says this in verse 13:

I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewelry, and went after her lovers...”

Then, do not miss this in your reading. It is as if there is a sudden break – and God, the rejected, dejected husband realizes the scope and magnitude of the problem:

...but she forgot me...

You can picture him, standing in the doorway of the kitchen, holding a half-glass of milk, staring out into the empty closet, where her clothes once hung, and her suitcase once sat. He glances at the wall with all the happy looking pictures from Christmases of yesteryear, and memorable family vacations. He stares at the empty bed, with thoughts turning back and forth from the pain of imagining her with other lovers, and the coldness of her side of the bed with her gone.

To “forget” (*sakah*) God doesn’t mean they couldn’t remember His name was YHWH, or that they once were married. It means God is intentionally overlooked, not thought about, “and thus not allowing something to shape a response.”¹

My wife has left me, says the Lord. She is with some other man, or men. She lives horribly, she acts defiantly, she treats herself and everyone else shamelessly. *And she doesn’t even think about me any more.*

If at this point, you expect the response “therefore, I will cast her out, and never let her in again” – that’s understandable. Or maybe your response would be “therefore, I will stop worrying about it and move on, she’s out of my life and will never come back. That’s fine by me!” That’s understandable too. It’s entirely natural. But this is no natural story. This is a supernatural story. One that has no parallel. We are talking about the faithful, trustworthy, generous, always seeking God. After surveying the situation, considering the possibilities, even deciding on proper punishment, God looks way into the future, considers the fact that his wife *does not even know his name anymore*, and says this:

“Therefore, I will allure her.” Let me modernize that language for you. I will “charm” her (CEB); “I will speak romantic words to her” (ERV); “I am going to court her” (EHV). “That is why I am going to win her back!” (GW). Let Peterson have his way with words here in *The Message*:

“And now, here’s what I’m going to do: I’m going to start all over again. I’m taking her back out into the wilderness where we had our first date, and I’ll court her. I’ll give her bouquets of roses. I’ll turn Heartbreak Valley into Acres of Hope. She’ll respond like she did as a young girl, those days when she was fresh out of Egypt...Yes, I’ll marry you and neither leave you nor let you go. You’ll know me, God, for who I really am...I’ll have mercy on No-Mercy. I’ll say to Nobody, ‘You’re my dear Somebody,’ and (you’ll) say ‘You’re my God!’”

The story is more remarkable than we think. It’s remarkable enough that he doesn’t say “Good riddance! Get what you deserve”, but instead gives us grace. The story is more remarkable because God doesn’t say “Although you have sinned”, or “In spite of the fact that you have sinned.” He says “Therefore.”² I will love you, says God, because

¹ J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), Kindle [p.219 of 962]. See Jeremiah 18:15: “My people have forgotten me; they burn incense to worthlessness.”

² Dearman: “Where there was prostitution, adultery, and a kind of naïve heedlessness, even so, or nevertheless, these things will be overcome with a renewed courtship.” [Kindle; p. 220 of 962].

your decision to leave me, to hurt me, and to forget about me, shows that you more than anyone needs to be loved. You rejected God, and did not remember how to get home, or even where home was. And you were quite willing to stay in your sin and ignorance. Therefore, God sought you out, offered you everything and more, and took you home. And not only that, he wants to renew his wedding vows. He says he'll *woo* Israel and speak to her heart, enticing her out in the desert. That's where their relationship began. That's where Israel first vowed to keep covenant with God. And that Valley of Anchor—that's where Akin's sin brought judgment on all the people. It didn't take long after the wedding for Israel to rebel. But God wants to reframe their honeymoon memories, and turn that Valley of Anchor into a door of hope.

You find me, I dare you, any such parallel story in all the great world religions. At the moment of the betrayal, Jesus called Judas “friend.” The same Peter who denied even knowing Jesus within eyesight of the man in his time of trial, he was invited to breakfast, and given a calling by the man He betrayed. My God is a lover who remains a lover. He pursues his bride when she is safe in his arms; he pursues his children who wander and know they need his rescue; and he pursues those who have scorned him, and don't even know how much they need him...he looks for ways to make himself known again, because he can't stop pursuing the one his soul loves.

And that's you. That's you.

Isn't this our God? He's not the God who is always angry with you. He's not the God who abandons you. He's not the God who only loves you when you please him. He's a lover who will fight for every single person made in His image, who will fight for his bride, and who will run after every lost soul—even you. Even you.

Hear Isaiah 57: “I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry, for then they would faint away because of me—the very people I have created. I was enraged by their sinful greed; I punished them, and hid my face in anger, yet they kept on in their willful ways. I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners, creating praise on their lips. Peace, peace, to those far and near, says the Lord. And I will heal them” (Isaiah 57:16-19).