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FOUND AT LAST

"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Luke 19:10

Not long ago, a recovering alcoholic told me what it was like back in the days when he couldn't "exist" without alcohol. (He has enjoyed sobriety now for about five years.)

They were terrible days. For a long time he thought he had simply fallen into a bad habit that he could break easily. And his wife believed that he was in a little trouble but she certainly did not consider him an alcoholic.

So he muddled along. He learned how to handle his problem, and his wife covered up for him when he was not "feeling well." One day, however, he realized that he needed professional help. And he got it. He also realized that he needed special help from God. He received that, too. And today he helps other alcoholics find their way to sobriety again.

While we were talking, he looked at me and said, "You know, when you're going through something like that, you're lost. That's the only way to describe it. *Lost* is the only word that covers it."

Think about that with me for a while. Maybe right now you are where this man was several years ago. Maybe you could

tell me all sorts of things about alcoholism because you are in the grip of addiction. Isn't what my friend says *lost* the best word to describe what you are going through.

Being lost is an experience that has several stages to it. Think about this: this is the stage of denial. Sometimes when my wife and I are driving through a strange neighborhood trying to find a certain street, I try to deny that I am lost. I keep a very calm expression on my face and act as if I know exactly what I am doing. Usually she admits that we are lost before I do, and she suggests that I ask someone where the street is before we get lost any further.

Next is the stage of search. *Actually* the searching stage can be broken down into two separate phases. You begin your search with confidence. You are sure that right around the corner you will find the landmark you need to regain your bearings. So you go around that corner and the next corner, and the next and the next ... and you never find what you are looking for. Then the first phase changes to the second: frantic, even stupid, searching.

I remember one time when a poor man wandered into a doctor's office while I was sitting there. He had a wild look in his eye. He said he had been wandering

around for two or three days but couldn't find his way home. I will never forget the terror-stricken look in his eye. That happens to people when they get lost. At first they search intelligently, but later they search foolishly, frantic and terrified. Will they ever find their way? Will anyone who can help them ever find them?

The third stage of being lost is the stage of utter despair. Finally the person who is lost gives up entirely, having no place to turn. Sometimes this happens to people who are lost in the woods or the jungle, a long way from civilization. Eventually they just lie down and get ready to die. They are lost and believe they will never be found.

Now, that, my friend said, is the way it is when you suffer from alcoholism. First there is a denial process-"Oh, there is nothing wrong with me; I can quit any time I want to." Then there is the stage in which a person tries to rise above the addiction. Then that develops into the foolish, frenzied phase which leads finally to despair.

Being lost can be a useful way to think about things that are misleading people these days. For example, it can be very useful in thinking about drug addiction. More and more people are beginning to recognize that drug use is not cool. Those who do cocaine or smoke marijuana or

use other drugs (uppers, downers, etc.) realize after a while that all of the mind blowing sensations they experience are actually ruining them. But what can they do once they are in the grip of something they cannot shake off? They are lost.

The Bible has good news for those who are lost, however. The God revealed in the Bible does not stand aloof in His heaven and laugh at us in our troubles. The true God is a God of love who comforts those in despair. He helps them to find themselves, and He saves them.

Pornography is another area in which people can become lost. There is so much of it around these days. Pornographic magazines with lewd cover photos are sold openly in convenience stores. There are video cassettes which are deeply pornographic and which anyone can rent. There are also forms of sexual activity which are depraved and perverse but which are presented as perfectly okay.

Those who get involved in pornography can become lost just as easily as people who lose themselves in drugs and alcohol. The pornographic sector of our society is the devil's domain, and those who get involved in it sink deeper and deeper until they don't know how to extricate themselves.

There's one more area that we can get lost in these days: the area of marriage and

the family. Husbands and wives who have vowed before God to spend their lives together in a loving relationship start to bicker and fight and to drift away from each other. Before long, one of them commits adultery. Mistrust and bitterness enter the marriage relationship, and every thing in their lives is affected. They try to help themselves for a while, but gradually every thing falls apart. If religion had played a part in their lives before, they discover that that has receded far into the background of their relationship. They don't have spiritual resources anymore to help them in their need. They are lost. They are scarred for life, and their children are hurt as well.

If you are lost in some way right now, listen closely to this. Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the living God, has come to seek and to save the lost. I say this because of what I read in chapter 19 of the Gospel of Luke. This chapter opens with the record of Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem before His crucifixion, and it tells how a man named Zacchaeus came looking for Him as He passed through Jericho. Zacchaeus was despised by his fellow countrymen because he collected taxes for the Roman government. Though he was Jewish, he worked for the empire that had conquered Israel. And he had done very well for himself; he was rich.

But something compelled him to find Jesus. Being a short man, Zacchaeus couldn't peer over the heads of others in the crowd, so he threw his dignity to the winds, shinnied up a tree, and perched on a limb so that when Jesus came by he could see Him. This is what the Bible says:

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (vv. 5-10).

Zacchaeus was lost just as many of us today are lost. He wanted to make life worthwhile for himself through material prosperity. He was willing to ignore his

own countrymen to benefit from the tax collecting power of the Roman government. And in the eyes of his own people he had fallen about as far as a person could. But somehow, even though he was lost, he realized that Jesus Christ was important, and he went to extraordinary lengths to be able to see Jesus. Then Jesus saw *him*, and He made the statement that means so much to all who are lost today: The Son of Man-that is, Jesus-came to seek and to save lost people.

Again and again the Bible assures us that God is deeply interested in people who are lost. Jesus once said to His disciples that they must search out the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 10:6). At another time, when Jesus saw multitudes of people who had followed Him, He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). God does not despise those who have strayed away from true life and cannot find their way back. In fact, John 3:16 says: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

God seeks the lost; Jesus Christ seeks the lost. How important it is that He seeks us when we are lost. When people are lost, they are not the only ones affected; those who love them are often frustrated

and terrified because they cannot find them. When a person is absent, you may say, "Bill isn't home, so maybe he is over at Tom's house. Or if he isn't there, maybe he went to the laundromat, because he said something about going there." In other words, we can figure out where absent people might be, because we know their habits. But when a person is lost, we don't have the slightest idea where they are or where to begin looking.

There's a story Jesus told that's recorded in chapter 18 of the gospel of Matthew. It's a touching description of the seeking love of God.

"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (vv12-14).

This is a beautiful picture. You may have seen paintings of the good shepherd out on a wild, stormy night, reaching down over the edge of a precipice trying to grasp his lost sheep caught in the bushes. Art-

ists have embellished this idea, and some times they have done so in an excessively sentimental way. But we can understand why: the idea of God going out to seek the lost is a mind-boggling idea; He does it because He loves us. And if He didn't do it, none of us could ever entertain the hope of being found.

If you feel right now that you are lost, if you are wandering around, confused by some sin that grips you and controls you, please understand that God is looking for you. He has sent His own Son into this world to look for you. Remember: the Son of Man came to seek and to save what is lost. At this very moment, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, is coming into your life looking for you.

I hope you are able to recognize Christ when he comes looking for you. He does this in many ways. Maybe someone has come to you and has said, "Please, I want to talk to you about your problem. I want to help you." And maybe you have said "I don't have to talk to you. I don't have a problem." If you have said that, perhaps you should reconsider. Perhaps you should talk to that person who has come to you, because within that person is Christ, seeking you. God does not let the lost alone. He does not abandon them.

And the Bible says more: Not only does God come to seek the lost, He comes to

save them. This is His special way of finding them. The kind of finding that the lost need is not merely to be set on the right path once again; they need to be restored. The lostness that the Bible talks about is the kind that ruins people so deeply that they cannot help themselves.

I began by talking with you about the lostness that an alcoholic experiences when he is a long way from God and in bondage to the drug that will not let him go. Such a lostness drags people down and down and down. You cannot simply set a person like that on the right path and expect that he or she will now walk in the right direction. The only way that such a person can be found is through Jesus bringing salvation into that person's life.

Jesus saves the lost, and He does this in two ways. First, He pays for all of the sin and guilt and corruption that enter people's lives when they are lost. Zacchaeus was lost, and in his lost condition he sinned against God and man. But as soon as he saw the Lord Jesus Christ, he began to confess his sin and to declare what he would do to accomplish restitution. This is the way it is when people are found by Jesus. Suddenly they see the depth of their sin, and they realize that without Him they are lost utterly.

Yes, I began by mentioning certain circumstances in which people are lost ut-

terly. But the Bible describes all people as those who have fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). When it comes right down to it, without Jesus all of us are lost. But Jesus finds us and assures us that our sins are forgiven through His perfect sacrifice on Calvary's cross. That's the first way He saves us, by forgiving our sins.

In the second way, Jesus saves the lost by coming into their lives through the power of His Holy Spirit. When we stray away from God, we gradually become powerless. Often those in bondage to drugs or alcohol experience a deep anguish and agony when they realize that they are out of control and that they can not help themselves. As we read the Bible, however, we learn that Christ gave Himself on the cross not only to pay for human sin but also to earn the right to send His Holy Spirit to people who need saving.

Now, this is important for every one of us. I know that this message is of deepest importance for me, because without Jesus I would still be lost. I praise Him for this salvation. And what I have just said is of great importance for you. I want to emphasize this especially if you are one of those whose life right now is in a shambles. You are confused. Your body is sick because of all the wandering you have done. Your will is like a wet rag. You feel as if your life is totally out of control and

there is no hope for you whatsoever. Jesus has come to seek and to save people like you.

What can you do? Well, I will say this: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." This is always the message from the Bible. But what does that mean specifically? Well, write to us at the Back to God Hour and tell us where you are in your life. We would like to counsel you and possibly help you to find a church home near you. Through us, God is reaching out and seeking you now. Please respond by telling us your need.

Second, find a church near you where you can be in contact with the seeking and saving God. You need the church desperately. There is no way that ~~anyone~~ ^{any person} can benefit from the salvation God provides if that person remains cut off from the church of Jesus Christ. I've mentioned that we will do all we can to help you find a church, but you might also find one on your own. Look around your neighborhood; find a church where the message of the gospel is preached continuously. Find a church where there are brothers and sisters who are eager to help you with your need. The seeking God has established His church in the world so that you can have contact with Him.

Then develop your own prayer life and your own Bible reading program. It is so

important to be close to the Lord through Bible reading and prayer. We can help you with that, too, if you want to develop these routines in your life.

In addition, if you have some special problem that is keeping you away from the living God—a problem like drugs or alcoholism or whatever—get professional help that can lead you back to sobriety. Again, we would be most happy to help you find that kind of help in your community.

What you have read today is the best news in the world. God does not let weak and trembling sinners like us wander around forever without knowing where we are going. He has sent His Son to seek us and to find us. And in the last few moments, this Jesus has come into our needy lives.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ—come to Him and experience the liberation of being found—for only He can truly save.

PRAYER

O God, we thank you from the depths of our hearts that you have not left us to wander in the darkness far away from you. We confess that we are often confused and at loose ends—we don't know where we are going and we don't know where to turn. We have strayed a long, long

way from you, and we have sinned. Please forgive us.

We are grateful that you have not abandoned us. You have searched for us even though it took the depths of divine sacrifice. Thank you, Lord, for sending your Son Jesus to the cross of Calvary for our salvation. And now we pray that we may be encouraged and strengthened as we think of your great love.

Help us to feel that, in these moments, as we have listened to your Word, we have been touched by Jesus Christ Himself. And may those of us who are far from Jesus turn to Him in repentance and faith.

Thank you for saving us, God, though we are utterly unworthy. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

This message, prepared by Dr. Joel Nederhood, was heard over The Back to God Hour, which is broadcast every Sunday in co-operation with the Christian Reformed Churches of America, in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia, and by shortwave throughout the world.

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