



A Spiritual Encouragement Message **March 23, 2021**

Understanding the Joy in Heaven **By Oscar Velazquez**

The Old Covenant offers two primary reasons why God acts in history to save. He does so because of His love for His people. He saves “for their sake.” This is the message of Jeremiah and Hosea (Hosea 11:1-4, Jer.3:12, 4:19-22, 8:18-22, 13:17, 14:17, 31:20). But Ezekiel and Isaiah tell some more of the story. Ezekiel records the word of the Lord as follows: Therefore, say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name... and the nations will know that I am the Lord... when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes (Ezekiel 36:22-23). Read this article checking with your copy of the Bible, since it's way more important than my comments on it.

Verses 32-36 then affirm that God was not acting for their sake but rather that the nations will know the power of God to restore.

Isaiah echoes the same theme. In his later chapters again and again is the Holy One who will reach out to save (Is. 41:14, 43:3, 43:14, 47:4, 49:7).

Interestingly hand and hand, love and holiness are brought together in Isaiah 43:3-4.

So Jeremiah and Hosea told the people that God is love and out of His compassion He would save for their sake. But Ezekiel and Isaiah told them that God is also holy and out of concern for His holy name He would save for His sake. David in his Psalm 23:3 also said that God acts to save for His name's sake. So there, the shepherd no doubt does love His sheep. The long search for the lost animal can hardly be empty of that emotion and feeling. But at the same time, his integrity as a shepherd is critical to Him.

Now you have and understand two reasons why in Jesus' parable written by Matthew, the shepherd finds the lost sheep and rejoices over it (Mt. 18:12-14) The sheep is as good as dead if it was not for the shepherd finding it. Yet there is no record of moving the sheep. It is only in Luke's writing of the parable that the carrying of the sheep home to the village is mentioned (Lk.15:4-7). The shepherd calls in his friends. If his motive for saving the lost sheep was strictly that of love, he would spend the evening petting, feeding, and grooming the lost sheep like a man who had just found a lost, much beloved dog (western view). But the shepherd has preserved the honor of his respectable name. The

community has not witnessed his saving efforts. So he calls them in that they might know of and remember the kind of shepherd he is. "Rejoice with me" ("Share my joy"). But because I have found my lost sheep. For Jesus, in these parables, repentance means acceptance of being found and restored. Sadly, many sheep lack this these days. The ninety-nine are last heard of in the wilderness. The point is not that they are abandoned. But there can be little rejoicing in the village of the ninety-nine, for the simple reason that they are not yet at home. There is no rejoicing in the banquet hall over the presence of the older son while he is still in the courtyard shouting and complaining at his father (Lk. 15:11-32). In heaven, the angels of God can be quietly joyful over the fact that the location of the ninety-nine is known and they are expected. Full joy will only be possible when they are brought home to the shepherd.

Then humankind is likened to a lifeless lost in the dark coin, lost and nearly hidden on the floor of a dark room (Lk.15:8-10). My wife and I had the privilege to travel with Jolene and Dillard Harwell and witness the archaeological excavations of the first century homes in the city of Chorazin in the hills just above Capernaum, among many others. The floors of these early fishermen's homes were covered with flat, black basalt stones taken from the sea of Galilee. Cracks between the stones are naturally wide. The windows on the black basalt stone walls are very small about six inches high and placed above eye level. No wonder that the parable reports the lighting of a lamp, the sweeping of the house and the diligent search. Notice that her friends and neighbors did not know she lost a coin, neither knew how many she had. She made it known and rejoiced publicly for her integrity. The high price she paid to find the lost coin was not in vain. Without her efforts and value for the coin it would remain lost. That caused her joy. You see, it's her diligence to find it being paid off that caused her to feel and share her joy, the lifeless coin did nothing to be found.

The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus and the Pharisees, and the Scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So Jesus with the parable (all three parables are one and the same) answered to them, I not only receive them, I receive them with joy (Lk.15:1-3). The reason for His joy is our focus. It's impossible to explain the whole chapter in a short article.

The father rejoiced because he found his lost son and restored him with compassion, when the lost son was still a long way off (Lk.15:20). After all, the lost son was still just thinking about himself, planning how to get fed and learn a skill to survive his hunger (Lk.15:16-19). If that selfish thinking was repentance, then the Egyptian Pharaoh was repentant too (Ex.10:16-17).

Accepting the compassionate, costly love of the father is repentance in this parable (Lk. 15:22-24). The animal killed and the feast was because the father moved running to find him and to restore him. Even the servants understood that (Lk.15:27). But the older brother lacked compassion, as the Pharisees, and in his anger misunderstood the reason for his father's joy (Lk.15:1-2, 28-30). The father joyfully celebrated that he restored his dead son to his family, descendants, and community after he found him (Lk.15:32). The lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son did absolutely nothing to be found, but received the love and integrity of the shepherd, the woman, and the father, who then joyfully celebrated that they found that which was lost.

In a like manner, our God and Father joyfully finds and restores us through Jesus (Hb.12:2), out of compassionate love for us but also for His Holy name's sake.