

Swallowed by a Whale

Get swallowed by a whale?

My grandmother did.

Got her leg cut off
and stayed in a nursin' home
three whole years
'fore she died.

Poor ole Jim.

He got swallowed by a whale.

Raped a little girl
just three years old.

He's been in prison now
a long, long time.

Patrice got swallowed by a great big whale.

Got bored, got a husband.

Stayed bored, got a baby.

Still bored, got a divorce.

Went to school and went to Europe;
now she done went crazy.

Whale swallowed up Miz Barton

when her husband died.

Nothin' seemed to interest her

for near on to a year;

then she took a gun
and blowed her brains out.

Bible says Jonah got swallowed by a whale.

I reckon he did.

That ain't the hard part.

Gettin' out is the trick.

Funny how some get out,

then some seems they want to stay in.¹

—Harry Lee Poe

1. This poem by Harry Lee Poe first appeared in *The Other Side* 21, no. 9 (December 1985): 21.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE LOST

Have you ever lost the keys to your car or to your house? It is such a helpless feeling. Something that is very important to you is not there when you really want it. Think for just a little while about the idea of “lostness”: what it means for something to be lost and what it means to be found.

Lostness

From time to time, I lose my keys or my reading glasses. To be more accurate, I forget where I put my keys or my reading glasses. It really does not matter how they came to be lost; the feeling is the same. For some reason, I am hard on buttons. I continually lose the buttons on my blue blazer. I do not forget where I put the buttons. One minute they were there, and the next time I notice, they are gone. My buttons have no meaning and purpose except on my coat. They are out of place anywhere else. They may still be buttons, but they do not fulfill the purpose for which they were intended if they are not on my coat. My mother-in-law gave my girls a huge canister of discarded buttons to play with when they were younger. It was full of buttons of all shapes, colors, and sizes. They did not fit anywhere else because they were made to fit on only one shirt, blouse, or coat. Purpose is a relational phenomenon, not simply a matter of activity.

I once had a ring that was given to me by an elderly cousin of my grandfather. The ring had belonged to the cousin's son who was killed in World War II. It had been the only means his comrades had to identify his body.

The ring was precious to me because the person who gave it to me was precious to me. One afternoon while taking a shower in my dorm, someone walked into my room and stole the ring. It was lost to me. When we say that something is lost, we have said more about the one who has the right of possession than we have said about the thing that is missing.

When I was a boy I enjoyed going up into the huge attic of our house. My grandparents had built the house and my father had grown up there. When my great-grandparents on both sides died, all of their things were moved up into the attic until my grandparents could go through them. They never did. On a rainy day, it was fun to climb the stairs to the attic and forage for treasure. I recall one time when I discovered something wonderful (I have forgotten what) and brought it downstairs triumphantly to show my father.

“Look what I found, Daddy,” I said, holding the object up for him to see.

“No you didn’t,” he replied with a sly grin.

“Yes, I did,” I said insistently. “I just found it in the attic.”

“You didn’t find it because I didn’t lose it. Now go put it back where it belongs,” he said.

Something is lost in relationship to the one who has the right of possession. Someone may have the right of possession to something that is not where it should be, and still it may not be lost. Something is only lost when the one who has the right to possession cares that it has gone missing. If something is missing, but no one cares, it is only junk.

Feeling Loss

Loss involves the problem of attachment. Why would people form attachments to anything anyway? Without attachment, there is no sense of loss. What we call emotional suffering often involves an experience of loss, sometimes coupled with a sense of injustice over our loss. The idea of injustice is a difficult one to explain because it presupposes the idea of justice. Why should anyone have a concept of justice? It is another one of those absolutes that we comprehend in its absence. Thus, injustice is an experience of loss—the loss of justice.

Two people could have the same experience, but feel quite differently about it because of the sense of loss. One would experience suffering because of loss, while the other would have no sensation at all because no change has occurred. The primitive living conditions of a newly discovered

tribe in New Guinea are not experienced by them as suffering. The same conditions, however, would mean suffering to a New Yorker marooned on a desert island because of the experience of loss. I have the use of only one eye. It is a condition I have had all my life. I have never known what it feels like to have two good eyes that work. I have never experienced my situation as suffering. It has always meant normality for me. I cannot imagine how awkward it must be for people to see out of two eyes at the same time. Why don't they get dizzy? I have known people, however, who have lost the sight of an eye. They have suffered greatly. In both cases it did not involve pain, but it did involve loss. We call the suffering related to loss *grief*. People can grieve the loss of anything they care about, not just other people. The loss of a person, however, represents one of the most persistent and painful forms of loss. We may lose someone to death. This was the perpetual theme of the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, who grieved for "the Lost Lenore." We may also lose someone we love to someone else that she or he chooses over us. Our children marry and leave us. Relocation for employment reasons causes friends to separate. Perhaps the loss of another person reminds us that we ourselves are the reason for the experience of loss by God.

A curious twist to the experience of loss occurs in the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*, which puts in perspective the purpose of pain and suffering. For stealing Aztec gold, the pirates are cursed with immortality. Normally, the idea of living forever would seem desirable, but it comes at a terrible price. The pirates do not feel pain or injury. Again, this would seem to be a blessing, but it also means they cannot know pleasure. They live a half life. They consider it hell. Part of the horror of leprosy is the loss of the experience of pain. Victims of leprosy can injure themselves and not know it. Pain makes us aware of our mortality, but it also points us to an awareness of a different kind of immortality: one of joy and peace in which there is no loss. Suffering can lead to a reversal of the great dread. The dread of dying is replaced by a dread of living.

It is strange how we describe many of the experiences of life as loss. We speak of losing our vision, our hearing, our health, our youth, our mind. When we lose our health, we feel bad. We can lose our shirt in the stock market or at the race track. We can lose our reputation or our job. If we did not care about the loss, then suffering would not occur. Suffering involves the loss of the good: the greater the loss, the greater the pain. Now the relativist is faced with a dilemma. If there is no absolute called goodness, then

there can be no loss of the good, and without the loss of the good, there can be no pain and suffering. Grief occurs because some good has been lost to us, and usually we know that the loss is permanent.

Feeling Lost

After World War I, a number of Americans stayed in France. They were referred to as expatriates. Writers like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald wandered around Europe for years. In turn, they wrote about people who wandered around Europe after World War I. Novels like *The Sun Also Rises* and *Tender Is the Night* capture the ethos of people trying to understand how they fit into the universe. They waste their lives in meaningless rounds of parties and empty encounters with people they do not love. They do not really seem to know what it is they want out of life, but they seem to long for something. Hemingway and Fitzgerald wrote about their own circles of friends who desperately wanted something. They lived reckless lives in an effort to brush close enough to death or disaster to taste something of life. Perhaps life would be better if it cost something? Bull fights, fast cars, and fast women seemed to be diversions to take their minds off the fact that they did not know what they so desperately wanted. The writer Gertrude Stein said of them, "You are all a lost generation."²

What Stein said about the World War I generation might be applied to most every generation, but the experience of being lost takes different forms in different times and places. Feeling lost may involve the sense that something else is missing. In *Citizen Kane*, the plot revolves around something the central figure has lost long ago and at pivotal moments in his life he longs for what is missing. When we are lost, we feel incomplete. The World War II generation saved the world from the Axis powers and came home to make up for the Depression, during which they had nothing. They devoted their lives to building a life that came to be called the "American Dream": a house in the suburbs and two cars in the garage. It was a frantic quest for success that made divorce socially respectable and produced offspring who would dismantle three thousand years of Western civilization in their own quest to "find themselves." The Baby Boomers are a lost generation. The Baby Busters are a lost generation. The Gen-Xers are a lost generation.

People have the remarkable ability not only to feel loss, but also to feel

2. Hemingway quoted Stein in an epigraph at the beginning of *The Sun Also Rises*.

lost. Feeling lost goes beyond the mere experience of taking the wrong turn in a strange city. This is a temporary experience that may be accompanied by feelings of foolishness or fear. Feeling lost has little to do with physical location and familiarity of surroundings. People can and do feel lost where they have lived all their lives. Christians would call it a spiritual issue and philosophers refer to it as an existential issue (having to do with the very nature of human existence). Feeling lost involves a general anxiety over not quite fitting in. Some piece seems missing from life, but we cannot quite put our finger on what it is. We may experience feelings of longing, but we do not know what it is for which we long.

In his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis described a sense of longing that he experienced from time to time from childhood.³ He did not know what it was. It came upon him unexpectedly from time to time and then would pass just as quickly. Different things could trigger the experience, but the things were not what he longed for, they were merely the occasion in which he had the feeling. The feeling meant more to him than anything else. It had a pain to it because the longing went unrealized. Yet, he longed to experience the longing for whatever it was he longed for. He tried many ways to capture the feeling and reproduce it, but it remained elusive until he discovered that God was the object of his longing. His experience was not unlike that of Augustine of Hippo who lived fifteen hundred years earlier. In his spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, Augustine begins by addressing God and declaring, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."⁴

People may continue to experience the longing without ever associating the longing with God. For Lewis, the longing came only from time to time. A busy person may succeed in drowning the feeling of longing in all the activity of life in the pursuit of some great goal or ambition. We can substitute the Buddha's desire for the experience of longing. We can make all the right stops, all the right connections, be at the right place at the right time, and amass a lifetime of success. Everything we touch may turn to gold. Mel Gibson described a life like that to Diane Sawyer when she interviewed him about why he made *The Passion of the Christ*.⁵ At the height of his success,

3. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955). See especially pp. 72–75; 212–38.

4. Augustine *Confessions* 1.1.1.

5. ABC, *PrimeTime*, February 15, 2004.

he looked over the edge and contemplated suicide. What he had was not what he longed for, and more of the same would never take him any closer to what it was. He was lost.

Feeling lost can express itself in a lack of purpose but with an intuitive sense that we must have some purpose. The existentialist philosophers claim that all people have three great dreads or anxieties. One of the dreads is death. A second dread is alienation or loneliness. The third dread involves meaninglessness or lack of purpose. People dread the idea that their life has no purpose, especially if they have a job where they are just a cog in the wheel of a great big machine that just goes around and around. This dread also occurs if you find yourself in some kind of a situation where you feel powerless against "city hall." When you see yourself as one insignificant person in a huge country in a great big world that is only a third-rate planet in an insignificant solar system on the backside of an ordinary galaxy in the vast universe, the question of purpose and meaning arises. Where do you fit in? What matters? Where is there meaning in all of this?

Many people try to solve this problem by pouring themselves into a career, a hobby, their family, philanthropy, or some other activity that will give them meaning and purpose. They strive to *acquire* meaning and purpose because they do not have a sense of meaning and purpose. Many people settle for a tawdry substitute for purpose: fulfillment. Fulfillment is a shabby imitation, like fat-free, sugar-free ice cream. What's the point? Purpose is at least outwardly focused, but fulfillment has retreated inwardly in isolation from the outside world. People switch from job to job during a strong economy in search of the job that will give fulfillment when the desire for purpose has been abandoned. We forget that labor has its purpose as well. We work in order to eat, clothe ourselves, and provide shelter. Thus, the quest for fulfillment distracts us from the longing for purpose and we lose our way.

Feeling lost can involve a lack of identity in which we wonder who we really are. The old norms by which we identify ourselves by family, nationality, profession, race, age, sex, and an expanding list of categories does not satisfy. When we have no sense of identity, we are lost even to ourselves. People who live out their lives in fantasy, daydreaming of an imaginary world in which they are the star, may be amusing as a fictional character like Walter Mitty, but the people who actually function that way are lost. Under the circumstances it becomes tempting to latch onto anything that will give us

an identity, whether it is our own or not. Some people latch onto causes and movements and identify themselves as a part of something bigger. Some people attach themselves to another person in a dependent relationship, deriving an identity from that other person. Some people allow others to define them by default. It is easier, especially if you do not know who you are. It is easier if you are lost.

Feeling lost involves a general sense of dissatisfaction and restlessness. All that once served to keep us satisfied and make us feel at home no longer works. We may not be satisfied with our job, our spouse, our town, our friends, our house, our car, our computer, or anything else. The United States is a nation of nomads constantly moving from place to place. In the same way, we move easily between marital relationships, as dissatisfaction drives us on to try someone else. Very few people can say with the apostle Paul, "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content" (Phil. 4:11b RSV). When people succumb to the lure of pragmatic materialism, they live in a constant state of anxiety driven by the need to acquire yet at the same time being pursued by debt and worry over whether or not the job will last in an economy that is uncertain. Anxiety afflicts not only the materialist, but also people with more lofty concerns. When we look at what kind of world the human race is making for itself, is it any wonder that people would be anxious about the environment, human rights, child prostitution, and innumerable other social ills? The human race gives us plenty to feel anxious about. If we do not want to deal with our own lostness, it should be apparent that the rest of the human race is tragically out of step. Anxiety has people by the throat. Now we are being told that our little children, preschoolers and elementary-age children, are in a state of anxiety over the survival of the planet. Anxiety is symptomatic of the age.

The feeling of lostness can fuel a variety of efforts to calm the anxiety, such as greed, lust, ambition, envy, jealousy, aggression, theft, rape, self-pity, deceit, vanity, and so many similar traits. These attitudes and behaviors provide a strategy for calming the anxiety as we seek something that will satisfy the longing. Each person seeks satisfaction in different ways: work, play, family. In each case, however, it involves some form of acquisition. We may acquire property, attention, physical pleasure, knowledge, or something else. Regardless of what it is, however, we desire it. The Buddha thought that desire was the problem with humanity. If we had no desire, we would be happy. Actually, we use desire as an antidepressant so we will not

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realize that we are not happy. We follow our desires and indulge them, thinking that we will find fulfillment in life. People yearn for the one great thing that might bring satisfaction. As the country song suggests, people look for love “in all the wrong places.”⁶ This lyric has struck a chord in the popular culture because people identify with the experience. Google identifies 2,150,000 Web sites that use this phrase. To know that we are looking for something in the “wrong” place is to suggest that we know there must be a “right” place. If lostness involves relationship, then deep at the core of the experience of lostness is the longing for love. Love is not a place, but a person. When we are lost, however, we tend to seek the great *thing* rather than the great *person*.

Many people spend their lives in a frantic quest for the great elusive thing, the key to life, the missing ingredient. Some flit from one experience to another, one lover to another, one job to another, one fad to another, in a vain attempt to find satisfaction instead of more of the same. In the frantic mode, people no longer feel lost. They have “focus.” They now have something to live for: a career, children, a reputation, clothes, the next buck, the next score. Unfortunately, when we feel lost, we rarely know what we feel. Feelings provide us with information, not truth. Feelings require interpretation, and our flawed reason usually botches the task of understanding our own feelings.

People are not like the ring of power in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. It had a mind of its own with singleness of purpose. The ring was trying to get back to its master. It wanted to be found. Unlike the ring, people work hard not to feel lost. Years ago, when I finished college, I made my grand tour of Europe with some friends. We had taken the train from Paris to Montpellier in order to meet my cousin for his twenty-first birthday. We made wonderful progress for a long way, but then the train stopped and everyone else got off. We sat alone in a railroad car on a side track, and we had no idea where we were. The train to Montpellier had left us behind. In Europe, a train may set off for a destination, but not all the cars on the train necessarily make the whole trip. Each car has a sign that states its final destination. We were making such grand progress that we neglected to learn if we were going in the right direction. Many people conduct their lives as we conducted our trip. They set off with great expectations and wind up on a side track lost. No one in their right mind sets off to get lost. Like sheep who do not have

6. Taken from “Looking for Love (in All the Wrong Places),” lyrics by Marc Almond.

any better sense, however, we lose our way in life and do not even realize it until we suddenly feel lost.

Many things can sidetrack us in life. Abraham and Sarah, the parents of faith in the Bible who are revered by Muslims, Christians, and Jews, did not set out for the Promised Land by themselves. They actually went with Abraham's father, Terah. No one remembers Terah's name, though billions of people of three faiths remember the name of his son and daughter-in-law. Terah did not complete the journey. He stopped in Haran and settled. Like a train on a side track, Terah was not where he meant to be, but he settled for where he was. Many people accept their lost condition with resignation. They are satisfied with things as they are instead of as they should be. Many things can shut down people like Terah. Perhaps it was grief over the death of his son. Perhaps old age depressed him too much to go on. Perhaps Haran seemed good enough. Perhaps it never occurred to him that he was not where he belonged. Perhaps Terah was like so many American men of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who go through "mid-life crisis." They have the dreadful feeling that they are missing something, but they do not know what it is. They abandon reason and lose direction. They become disoriented. Some men do some very strange things at this time of life, ranging from abandoning their families and running off with the high school dropout who runs the cash register at the filling station to learning to play the trombone. Which is worse? We observe their frenzy with the hope that they will "get over it" when what they most need to do is completely embrace the sense of loss rather than deny it.

When we feel lost, however, our feelings tell us that we actually belong in a relationship, that we actually have a purpose, and that the missing ingredient really exists. The longing tells us that something somewhere must satisfy.

Being Found

Jesus once told three stories about things that were lost: a sheep, a coin, and a son (Luke 15:3–32). When something is lost to us, we think of that thing. My keys were lost. The keys were separated from where they belonged. When something is lost, it is lost from the rightful owner. It is separated from the one who wants it and is desperate to find it. When we experience a great loss, we turn over every rock and stone to find that which was lost.

Jesus told these stories to explain something about himself. He explained what loss feels like to God, who created us. He created us for his joy and pleasure to express his love. He is love, but love is outwardly focused. God created us to love, and by rights, we are his.

Have you ever had something that you were trying to find, and you were convinced it just grew legs and walked off? That is what we did in the Garden of Eden. We just walked off. We walked away from where we belonged. We walked away from the One who made our lives complete and real.

Think about the lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7). The herdsman had ninety-nine sheep there in his sheepfold. Ninety-nine ought to be plenty for anybody. He was only missing one, but the shepherd was desperate to find that single one that was missing. In this experience of loss, the shepherd did not misplace the sheep or forget where he put it. The sheep wandered away. The shepherd knew very well what would happen to that sheep in the dark on the hillside far away. Wolves ranged across the countryside in that age and time. Lions had roamed the hillsides of Palestine during David's time. The cliffs, the holes, and the crevices all posed danger to that lamb. Not having his lamb was a matter of desperation to himself, but it was also in compassion and concern for that sheep out on the hillside that he left the ninety-nine safely where they were and went out to risk the danger to himself. It is no fun going out into the dark in a wilderness where wild and deadly animals roam about. It is a terrifying thing. In the same way, our Lord left the security of his heavenly home with the Father, where he was one with his Father, where he shared the power and deity of his Father. He left his home above and came into this world where danger faced him, where he knew he would encounter death—death on the cross. He did the absolute necessary thing to seek and to save that which was lost. He entered the physical world of time and space where he became susceptible to all the danger that people face. He entered the world to seek what was lost. Something is lost to the one who has the right to it. God has the right to us.

There was also a coin that was lost (Luke 15:8–10). A woman had lost a coin, but even in that day the loss of a single coin should not have been the major financial disaster that it may appear from how she acted in the story that Jesus told. She turned the house upside down and inside out looking for the coin. The lost coin does not mean much to us in our culture because we may not realize what the coins meant. A little band of gold on the third finger of the left hand today is more valuable now than when it first went

on the finger, regardless of the current value of gold. It may be just a little bit of metal, but what that piece of metal represents, no amount of money can replace. That is the way it was with these coins. The coins served the function in that culture of the wedding ring. When a young girl was married, she was given some coins by her family. These would be what would represent her dowry. They were part of her status in the world. The coins represented both her relationship to the family she was leaving and the relationship she now had with a man with whom she was forming a new family. These coins represented her marriage, they represented the support of her family, they represented her status as a married woman, and to lose one of those coins was as though part of her life had been taken away. The symbol of her marriage was missing and she felt the loss. She felt the loss deeply because of the depth of the relationship.

My wife and I once found a ring while out for a stroll on the campus of the seminary where I taught. It looked like it must be a cheap ring because it had no setting and it was silver rather than gold. I looked for markings on the inside of the band, but it was so cheap that the scrawls made no sense. Nonetheless, I took it to the lost and found desk in the student services office, where I discovered that a visiting professor from Germany had lost his platinum wedding ring while jogging. He was most upset. When we presented the ring to him, he demonstrated the rare human experience of joy. He was not joyous because of the value of the ring, which turned out to be much more than I had thought, but because of the relationship it represented. He immediately called his wife in Germany to tell her. He felt the loss of the ring until it was back where it belonged. It meant nothing to me. It was junk to me, but precious to him. God feels the loss of every single person whom he has made that does not have a relationship with him. This woman, seeking her coins and finding the missing one, is another token of how God regards what is precious to him. She turns the house upside down to find what is precious to her, and she does not stop until it is back where it belongs.

And then there is a son who had come of age (Luke 15:11–32). Here the story becomes graphic for what it means for a person to be lost. The son had in his mind who he was and what he was going to be. He had in his mind the idea of what made life good. He had in his mind what made a person important. He had in his mind how to have fun and get the most out of life. In his mind, the secret to happiness lay in getting away from the old man, cutting the ties with his family, and drawing away from his tradition.

For the son to be separated from the father hurt the father, but the story tells us that it also hurt the son. The son was separated from the one who loved him; the son was separated from the one who cared about him and wanted to help him, and there was a sorrow on both sides. The son did not sorrow until he realized just how bad off he was. The father grieved from the beginning because he knew what would happen to the young man. Nonetheless, he had to let him go.

Parents are stuck in that same situation. There comes a point when we have to let our children blow it. We have to let them fail. We have to let them try their wings and stumble and fall. It has to happen before they can finally stand on their own. The father let the son go, and he was cut off.

Lostness involves not being where we belong—cut off from where our life comes from, cut off from meaning—and the law of sin and death tells us that as long as we are cut off from the giver of life, we will ultimately die.

Finding Our Purpose

We were created for a purpose: to be children of God. As long as we are separated from God, we will never find our niche in the world. We can try this, that, and the other thing, but nothing will really answer that need for meaning until we find our home in God, because God is our meaning and purpose in life. Once we are secure with him, he opens up an entire world of possibilities for us. But that is the beginning point—to be at home with God—and then he is the one who makes the way.

Proverbs tells us, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (3:5–6). Once the relationship with God is settled, it opens up life to us with all the possibilities of what we can be and what we can do. But until that happens we are wandering lost and aimless, and nothing seems to satisfy—not that new car, not that new home, not that new job, not that new boyfriend, not those new clothes—nothing does it. It is all right for a while, but it leaves us empty. Aimlessness results from the experience of being lost. We float adrift in life without direction or connection. Somehow, we feel out of place. Lostness involves a missing relationship.

When I was a little boy my grandmother used to read me the stories of Winnie-the-Pooh. In one of the Pooh books the story opens with Winnie-the-Pooh living in the forest under the name of Sanders. That is, he had

found a sign that said “Sanders” on it, and he nailed it up over his door and he was living under it. He did not know who he was. Poor old Winnie-the-Pooh. He was trying to be something that he was not. So often in life we play games and pretend, trying to be something, but it is not real. We are only real when we finally come to the Lord, the one from whom we have been separated.

Jesus told other stories about things that were found. A pearl dealer found a pearl, a rare pearl, the most perfect pearl. He sold everything he had to attain it (Matt. 13:45–46). Another man found a treasure in a field, a rare and wondrous treasure. When he found it he realized that he must trade everything he had to gain the treasure (v. 44). He went out and bought the field to gain the treasure. Everything else paled in comparison. It was a simple matter of recognizing what was most valuable.

The coin that was special and important to one person did not mean anything to anybody else. Lostness says more about the one experiencing the loss than it says about what is lost.

The tragedy for most people is that they do not know from what they are lost. They wander through life empty, trying first one thing and then the next, but they do not know why they feel lost.

When I was a little boy my family went to Washington, D.C. I was in the fifth grade at the time. We went to the Capitol—that huge, wonderful building, gleaming white, that rises high on a hill above the city. We climbed the steps that lead up to the rotunda. There must have been a thousand of them for my little feet to climb. When we got into that huge building with the dome that just seemed to rise forever, there were hundreds upon hundreds of people milling about, looking at it and seeing the huge paintings on the wall: Christopher Columbus discovering America; Pocahontas saving the life of John Smith; Cornwallis surrendering at Yorktown. My mouth was wide open; I was staring in awe at this fantastic place, when all of a sudden I realized my momma was not there.

Did you ever have a time in your life when you realized your momma was not there? It might have been in the grocery store, it might have been at the mall, it might have been at the football game, but when your mom is not there you know you are lost. I can remember to this day the sinking feeling and the panic and the terror in my heart as I looked all around at all these people. I was not where I belonged. I belonged with my momma. I never did find her. I dashed back and forth through the crowd. There were

many “mommas” there that day, but I did not belong with them. People are always dashing around in life, trying to find the secret of life, trying to find the missing ingredient, trying to find something that is going to make it all right, and they never find it. I did not find my mother, because she found me.

On his last trip to Jerusalem before he was crucified, Jesus passed through the ancient town of Jericho. As he walked, he looked up and saw a curious sight. There beside the road in a sycamore fig tree sat a small Jewish man who collaborated with the Romans. Imagine a Jewish man in Germany in 1942 collaborating with the Nazis. It would have been the same sort of social situation. Imagine how other Jews would have felt toward the collaborator. After the American Civil War, Southerners coined the term *scalawag* to describe Southerners who accepted appointments in the provisional governments set up under the occupying Union Army. Collaborators were prosecuted by the French at the end of World War II. Resentment of collaborators is not unique to Jewish experience. It belongs to human experience.

What leads people to cut themselves off from their community? Was it simply the profit motive? Was it ambition? Was it a way to get back at other people for real or imagined wrongs? Who knows? The man in the tree had a position of great responsibility that greased the wheels of the Roman bureaucracy. He was a tax collector. Not only did he collaborate with the enemy, but he robbed his neighbors in the process. Such a person was not merely a traitor to his country, but he also violated the prevailing interpretation of the Law by his association with the Gentiles. He had lost a great deal to follow his chosen path in life. He was not lost to the community because the community did not acknowledge the loss. Yet the man in the tree wanted to see Jesus. The man in the tree experienced his loss of the community and separation from his faith. As an outcast, he was all alone. Like the son in the other story, the man in the tree knew his need and went to the extraordinarily undignified lengths for a Roman official of climbing a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Like the father in the story, Jesus took the initiative and embraced the man. Jesus did not recite the Law or lecture the man on how wrong it was to oppress his neighbors. Instead, he invited the man into a personal relationship by inviting himself home for dinner, the most intimate of all social occasions in virtually every culture. The prevailing interpretation of the Law at the time regarded anyone who ate with a tax collector as ceremonially unclean. To still the murmuring, Jesus ex-

plained why he had embraced the man: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

Saving something is not just finding it and then maybe losing it again. When you save something it is held preciously and carefully, not to get away. When I was a boy, one of my grandfather's elderly cousins gave me a dozen brass buttons that her mother had given her. These buttons had been saved by members of my family since the Revolutionary War when they had been on the uniform of one of my ancestors. We are saving the buttons. One day I will pass the buttons on to one of my daughters to save. Saving something is an intentional, ongoing activity even if it may seem to be passive. Jesus saves us, and that does not mean something that happens just one day and one moment; it begins at that moment and lasts forever. He saves us. He keeps us. We are too precious to him to ever be let out of his hands.

When my mother found me in the Capitol and took me by the hand, everything was all right. It was different. I was found. I was where I belonged. By telling the stories of the lost coin, lost sheep, and lost son, and later explaining that he had come "to seek and to save what was lost," Jesus explained why the Lord of glory would veil himself in flesh and enter into the physical world on our own terms. By entering into the physical world of time and space, God opened himself to a new kind of knowledge. The Lord of glory, who made the heavens and the earth and has knowledge of all things, acquired a new experience of something he knew. He had an intellectual knowledge of pain and suffering, but by taking on flesh, God experienced what people go through in pain and suffering. Because God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at one time, when the Son took on flesh, the Father understood through experience what it feels like for parents to grieve over the suffering and death of their children. The fact that Jesus was the Son of God did not diminish his suffering in the least. To the contrary, it seems to have heightened it.

It cost God something to seek what was lost to him. In the incarnation, God experienced what it means to be lost and to feel loss. God shared in human suffering through experiencing full humanity in the Son. It was not necessary for the Son to experience all of the divisions of the human race in order to fully identify with the ones he came to save. He did not have to be all professions, all nationalities, all races, both genders, all classes, all intellects, and all circumstances in order to identify with the fullness of human experience. It was enough that he experienced profession, nationality, race,

gender, class, and a variety of other experiences common to human life. The book of Hebrews indicates that because Jesus Christ endured the fullness of human experience, he is sympathetic with the human plight and is able to save us (2:17–18; 4:14–16).

The experience of salvation involves the restoration of a relationship, among other things. We are back where we belong with the one who wants us. We are not lost anymore to the one who values us, and we are not lost anymore from our purpose and identity. We now fit in. We have a perspective from which to deal with the rest of life confidently. When Jesus told the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, he ended each episode by describing the incredible joy of the one who had found what was lost. When someone is found, God rejoices like any parent whose child has disappeared. When children run away from home, their parents are distraught beyond description until the child is restored to them. When that happens, the joy of the parents plumbs the greatest depths of love to overflow in joy.

Joy is a rare experience that only comes as a result of a personal relationship. People give us joy. Things never do. Things may fill us with desire, pride, superiority, vanity, lust, apathy, boredom, pleasure, and a variety of other sensations, but only a personal encounter brings joy. From time to time we receive a passing and unexpected taste of joy through nature as the ever-present hand of God comes close where nature constantly declares the glory of God. The absence of joy indicates that a person is absent from God. A lost person is lost from joy.