

# Finding the One and the Everlasting Covenant

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*By David W. Smith, May 2023*

In teaching about “finding the one,” Jesus gave a parable about a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep: “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine and go into the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.”<sup>1</sup>

One important interpretation of this parable is our need to find those who are lost. I want to expand on this parable by discussing this and other layers of symbolism. There are at least three layers and they each relate to the everlasting covenant. First, the parable is about the fall of Adam and Eve, the subsequent mortal state of mankind, and the redemption of mankind through Jesus Christ. Second, the parable is about the scattering and gathering of Israel. And third, the parable is about our individual place in the everlasting covenant.

## **Hesed**

Before addressing these three layers, it is important to review the principle of *hesed*, an essential aspect of each layer. *Hesed* is a special kind of love and mercy that God has for those who have made a covenant with Him.

President Russell M. Nelson explained:

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 15:4–6, including JST Luke 15:4. Matthew also says the sheep are left at home and the shepherd is the one who goes into the wilderness. See Matthew 18:12.

*Hesed* has no adequate English equivalent. Translators of the King James Version of the Bible . . . often chose ‘lovingkindness.’ . . . Other translations were also rendered, such as ‘mercy’ and ‘goodness.’ *Hesed* is a unique term describing a covenant relationship in which both parties are bound to be loyal and faithful to each other. . . . *Hesed* is a special kind of love and mercy that God feels for and extends to those who have made a covenant with Him. And we reciprocate with *hesed* for Him. Because God has *hesed* for those who have covenanted with Him, He will love them. He will continue to work with them and offer them opportunities to change. He will forgive them when they repent. And should they stray, He will help them find their way back to Him. Once you and I have made a covenant with God, our relationship with Him becomes much closer than before our covenant. Now we are bound together. Because of our covenant with God, He will never tire in His efforts to help us, and we will never exhaust His merciful patience with us. Each of us has a special place in God’s heart. He has high hopes for us.<sup>2</sup>

We see *hesed* exemplified in the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd loves his sheep with a special love, and so the shepherd seeks after the sheep who are not in the safety of the fold.<sup>3</sup> As I review each layer of the parable, we will see how *hesed* is exemplified in each layer, which are (1) the everlasting covenant God has made with mankind, (2) the everlasting covenant God has made with the house of Israel, and (3) the everlasting covenant God has made with each of us.

## **The Fall and Redemption of Mankind**

First, the parable is about the fall and redemption of mankind. The essence of our individual natures has always existed.<sup>4</sup> “Man was also in the beginning

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<sup>2</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022.

<sup>3</sup> “But Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.” (Isaiah 49:14–15.)

<sup>4</sup> “Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age and there is no creation about it. All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the

with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.”<sup>5</sup> In this eternal state, “God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. . . . He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with himself.”<sup>6</sup> And so God entered into a covenant with us, these weaker intelligences, that He would make us like Him if we kept His commandments.<sup>7</sup> This covenant is called the everlasting covenant. President Nelson explains, “The adjective *everlasting* denotes that this covenant existed even before the foundation of the world! The plan laid out in the Grand Council in Heaven included the sobering realization that we would all be cut off from God’s presence. However, God promised that He would provide a Savior who would overcome the consequences of the Fall.”<sup>8</sup>

To summarize the everlasting covenant God made in pre-mortal life: “if true and faithful in all things, [we will] gain the same glorious exaltation enjoyed by the Father,” and this will be made possible through Jesus Christ, “the one whose atoning sacrifice would put into full operation all of the terms and

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world are susceptible of enlargement.” (“Chapter 17: The Great Plan of Salvation,” *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith.*)

<sup>5</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 93:29.

<sup>6</sup> “Chapter 17: The Great Plan of Salvation,” *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith.*

<sup>7</sup> “In our preexistent state, in the day of the great council, we made a[n] ... agreement with the Almighty. The Lord proposed a plan. ... We accepted it. Since the plan is intended for all men, we became parties to the salvation of every person under that plan. We agreed, right then and there, to be not only saviors for ourselves but ... saviors for the whole human family. We went into a partnership with the Lord. The working out of the plan became then not merely the Father’s work, and the Savior’s work, but also our work. The least of us, the humblest, is in partnership with the Almighty in achieving the purpose of the eternal plan of salvation.” (John A. Widtsoe, “The Worth of Souls,” *The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, Oct. 1934, p. 189; as cited in David B. Haight, “Temples and Work Therein,” *Ensign*, November 1990.)

<sup>8</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022.

conditions of the Father's great and eternal plan."<sup>9</sup> We see a reminder of this pre-mortal covenant in the sacrament. When Jesus instituted the sacrament, "he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my *blood of the covenant*, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"<sup>10</sup>

As part of this everlasting covenant (which is also called the plan of salvation), we were required to leave the presence of God and come to this lone and dreary world,<sup>11</sup> or to use the words of the parable, to leave the safety of the sheepfold and enter into the wilderness. To make this possible for God's children, God created Adam and Eve, who became mortal through the fall and could then have children. As a result, God's children enter mortality. However, we enter mortality in a state of sin and subject to everlasting death.<sup>12</sup> The prophet Abinadi described this as being lost: "All mankind were lost; and behold, they would have been endlessly lost were it not that God redeemed his people from their lost and fallen state."<sup>13</sup> But "O how great the goodness of our God," Jacob says, "who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell."<sup>14</sup> The way that was prepared is Jesus Christ. He is "the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by [him]."<sup>15</sup> Jacob teaches, "He cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Christs," October 1982 general conference.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 26:27–28, ESV, emphasis added; cf. Matthew 26:28b in the Latter-day Saint version of the King James Bible.

<sup>11</sup> See Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Ministry of Angels," October 2008 general conference.

<sup>12</sup> See Moses 6:48, 55; 2 Nephi 9:7–9.

<sup>13</sup> Mosiah 16:4.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Nephi 9:10; cf. v. 5–10.

<sup>15</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Nephi 9:21; cf. v. 22.

This doctrine of the fall and redemption of mankind is taught through the parable of the lost sheep. The sheep left the dwelling place of the shepherd and became lost. The sheep represents mankind who left God’s presence and became fallen (or lost). The shepherd also left his dwelling place to go find the sheep and bring it back to his dwelling place. The shepherd represents Christ, who left His Father’s presence and became mortal in order to bring God’s children back to His dwelling place.<sup>17</sup> Thus, by teaching this parable, Christ is reaffirming to His disciples that He has come to save all mankind, “even as many as will,”<sup>18</sup> because He loves the children of God (He has *hesed*) even unto the laying down of His life.<sup>19</sup>

## **The Scattering and Gathering of Israel**

The second layer of the parable is the scattering and gathering of Israel. To a mortal Adam and Eve, God reaffirmed the everlasting covenant made in pre-mortality—that if they would keep the His commandments they would receive exaltation. The scriptures call this entering into God’s rest or receiving the fulness of His glory.<sup>20</sup>

This covenant was extended to all the posterity of Adam and Eve.<sup>21</sup> The Lord reaffirmed this covenant with Enoch, Noah, and Melchizedek.<sup>22</sup> He also reaffirmed it with Abraham. Because God declared that all who came after Abraham would receive the blessings of the covenant through Abraham’s priesthood or lineage, the covenant is known today as the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>23</sup> The covenant continued through Isaac to Jacob. When Jacob received the covenant his name was changed to Israel. His sons continued the

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<sup>17</sup> See Philippians 2:5–11.

<sup>18</sup> Moses 5:9.

<sup>19</sup> See John 15:9–13; Doctrine and Covenants 138:3.

<sup>20</sup> See Moses 6:51–68; Alma 12:27–34; Doctrine and Covenants 84:24; 93:16–22.

<sup>21</sup> See Moses 6:68; Mosiah 27:25–26; Doctrine and Covenants 35:2.

<sup>22</sup> See JST Genesis 9:15; JST Genesis 9:21–23; JST Genesis 14:26–36.

<sup>23</sup> See Abraham 1:2–4; 2:9–11; Galatians 3:27–29; Doctrine and Covenants 86:8–11; 132:31.

covenant to their posterity. These three individuals—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—are known as the fathers, meaning the fathers in the covenant.<sup>24</sup> When we enter the everlasting covenant at baptism we are born into or adopted into the house of Israel. We receive additional blessings of the covenant through temple ordinances.<sup>25</sup>

Eventually the descendants of Israel forsook the covenant and thus became lost or scattered.<sup>26</sup> They became lost because they lost their identity as the covenant people of the Lord.<sup>27</sup> Gratefully, because of *hesed*, God reaches out

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<sup>24</sup> See Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022.

<sup>25</sup> “When we embrace the gospel and are baptized, we take upon ourselves the sacred name of Jesus Christ. Baptism is the gate that leads to becoming joint heirs to all the promises given anciently by the Lord to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their posterity.” (Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022.) “If a man gets a fulness of the priesthood of God, he has to get it in the same way that Jesus Christ obtained it, and that was by keeping all the commandments and obeying all the ordinances of the house of the Lord. ... All men who become heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ will have to receive the fulness of the ordinances of his kingdom; and those who will not receive all the ordinances will come short of the fulness of that glory.” (“Chapter 36: Receiving the Ordinances and Blessings of the Temple,” *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*.)

<sup>26</sup> “As descendants of Abraham, the tribes of ancient Israel had access to priesthood authority and blessings of the gospel, but eventually the people rebelled. They killed the prophets and were punished by the Lord. Ten tribes were carried captive into Assyria. From there they became lost to the records of mankind. (Obviously, the ten tribes are not lost to the Lord.) Two remaining tribes continued a short time and then, because of their rebellion, were taken captive into Babylon. When they returned, they were favored of the Lord, but again they honored Him not. They rejected and vilified Him. A loving but grieving Father vowed, ‘I will scatter you among the heathen,’ and that He did—into all nations.” (Russell M. Nelson, “The Gathering of Scattered Israel,” October 2006 general conference.)

<sup>27</sup> “When Israel was taken into captivity, they did not maintain their covenant consciousness. When we speak of those tribes being lost, we know that it was not because they could not figure out how to return to the promised land from whence they were taken. It was not that they were lost geographically; they lost their covenant consciousness. When they no longer tried to keep their covenant, they were no longer peculiar, and so they assimilated into the cultures where they found themselves. Israel did not get lost, instead they lost track of who they were.” (Kerry Muhlestein, *God Will Prevail: Ancient Covenants, Modern Blessings, and the Gathering of Israel* [Covenant Communications, 2021], 107.)

to Israel to invite them back into the covenant.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, He sent His Son to bring them back, as Jesus said of Himself: “Behold, I am he of whom Moses spake, saying: A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me,”<sup>29</sup> the deliverer of Israel.

This doctrine of the scattering and gathering of Israel is taught in the parable of the lost sheep. The sheep left the love and safety of the shepherd and became lost. The sheep represents Israel who left God’s love and the safety of the covenant and became lost or scattered. The shepherd also left his home to bring the sheep back to his love and safety. The shepherd represents Christ because He was sent by the Father to bring home lost Israel, as Malachi prophesied: “Behold, [saith the Father] I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his temple, even the *messenger of the covenant*.”<sup>30</sup>

## **Our Place in the Covenant**

The third interpretation of the parable relates to our individual place in the covenant. The fall of Adam and Eve was a result of their violation of the everlasting covenant.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, when they entered mortality, God required that they enter again into the covenant through baptism. God renewed His promise that they would receive exaltation if they were faithful.<sup>32</sup> That promise extends to all who enter mortality and become accountable before God: by entering and keeping the covenant, each person can receive exaltation. This is made possible through Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup> In the parable, each of us individually are the lost sheep being rescued from our lost and fallen

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<sup>28</sup> See Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022.

<sup>29</sup> 3 Nephi 20:23; cf chapters 20 and 21; Mosiah 15:18–20.

<sup>30</sup> 3 Nephi 24:1, emphasis added; see also Isaiah 59:20–21.

<sup>31</sup> See Doctrine and Covenants 20:18–20; 29:34–35, 40–41.

<sup>32</sup> See Moses 6:51–68.

<sup>33</sup> See Doctrine and Covenants 18:42; 2 Nephi 2:6–7, 27–28; Alma 12:22–34; 7:14–16.

state by the “Shepherd and Bishop” of our souls who loved us (He had *hesed*) unto the laying down of His life.<sup>34</sup>

Also in this parable, we represent not just the sheep being brought back by Christ. We also represent the shepherd. By bringing good tidings of good and publishing salvation (in other words, teaching the gospel)<sup>35</sup> and by providing ordinances and covenants to others, we are the shepherd finding the lost sheep and bringing it back into the fold. President Nelson taught:

The Lord has commanded that we spread the gospel and share the covenant. That is why we have missionaries. He wishes for every one of His children to have the opportunity to choose the Savior’s gospel and embark upon the covenant path. God wants to connect *all people* to the covenant He made anciently with Abraham. Thus, missionary work is an essential part of the great gathering of Israel. That gathering is the most important work taking place on earth today. Nothing else compares in magnitude. Nothing else compares in importance. The Lord’s missionaries – His disciples – are engaged in the greatest challenge, the greatest cause, the greatest work on earth today. But there is even more – much more. There is a huge need to spread the gospel to people on the other side of the veil. God wants everyone, on both sides of the veil, to enjoy the blessings of His covenant.<sup>36</sup>

One example of this comes from my own life. Several years ago I was studying records for some of my ancestors as part of a project to add sources to Family Tree. In reviewing one census record for these ancestors, I saw in their household a young man named Seth, who was listed as their nephew. Immediately and strongly the impression came that I needed to provide the temple ordinances for him. I began researching him and discovered his immediate family. There were several sons who needed temple ordinances.

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<sup>34</sup> 1 Peter 2:25, cf. 21–25; 1 John 3:16; Ether 12:33.

<sup>35</sup> See Mosiah 15:14–17; cf. 10–17.

<sup>36</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022.



After I completed the baptisms, confirmations, and the initiatory portion for Seth and his brothers, I decided to be proxy for the oldest son the next time I participated in an endowment session. Immediately and strongly the impression came that I was to be proxy for Seth the next time I participated in an endowment session. I did so, and Seth has now received all his temple ordinances.

As in the parable, I was the shepherd who went and found the one and helped him receive the covenant. I was a savior on Mount Zion, and in this way I emulated Jesus Christ in His role as savior.<sup>37</sup> Those who provide vicarious ordinances for others are emulating Christ by performing a saving act for others that they cannot do for themselves.<sup>38</sup> We do so because of our love (our *hesed*) for God and for our fellowmen.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the parable of finding the lost sheep is a parable about providing the blessings of the everlasting covenant to each person who does not currently have those blessings, whether they live on this earth or in the spirit world. The parable is also reminder of God's promise to gather Israel. Finally and ultimately, the parable is a brief summary of the plan of salvation—that mankind entered a lost and fallen state and is redeemed through Jesus Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> "How are they to become saviors on Mount Zion? By building their temples, erecting their baptismal fonts, and going forth and receiving all the ordinances, baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, ordinations and sealing powers upon their heads, in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead, and redeem them that they may come forth in the first resurrection and be exalted to thrones of glory with them; and herein is the chain that binds the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, which fulfills the mission of Elijah." ("Chapter 41: Becoming Saviors on Mount Zion," *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*.)

<sup>38</sup> See Russell M. Nelson, "Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings," April 2001 general conference.

<sup>39</sup> See note 7 and Russell M. Nelson, "The Everlasting Covenant," *Liahona*, October 2022.

By entering into the everlasting covenant with God we become the sons and daughters of the Father and of Christ according to the covenant.<sup>40</sup> In doing so we become one in Christ as He is one in the Father.<sup>41</sup> We become kings and priests, queens and priestesses, according to the order (or covenant)<sup>42</sup> of Melchizedek, which is after the order of Enoch, which is after the order of the Only Begotten Son.<sup>43</sup> To these kings and queens, the King of Kings promises, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."<sup>44</sup> "Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God. . . . They who dwell in his presence are the church of the Firstborn; and they see as they are seen, and know as they are known, having received of his fulness and of his grace; and he makes them equal in power, and in might, and in dominion."<sup>45</sup> "Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Mosiah 5:7; Moses 6:66–68.

<sup>41</sup> See Doctrine and Covenants 35:2.

<sup>42</sup> See JST Genesis 14:27.

<sup>43</sup> See Doctrine and Covenants 76:57.

<sup>44</sup> Revelation 3:21.

<sup>45</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 76:58, 94–95.

<sup>46</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 132:20.