In Yunnan, spring is an especially beautiful season. Many hillsides come alive with camellia and peach blossoms. The mornings are still misty but the cold wintry chill is gone. People sit out in the warm sunshine to chat. The rains are still some weeks away and the farmers are happy to sit and chat with one another. It was on one such spring day when my student told me about his goats. He used to look after goats during the spring school vacation though he was no longer a goatherd. If he had not mentioned his background, I would never have guessed that this eloquent medical undergraduate sitting next to me was once a goatherd. Goats used to dot the wilderness of highland Yunnan years ago.

Wen smiled as he told me about a time in his boyhood days when it suddenly became fashionable for every household in his village to have a little flock of goats. The village got together and bought several hundred goats at a good bargain price and soon there was much bleating in the air.

During the school holidays, he had to take his family's goats out to the pasture. Later, some families found the returns from the goats not worth their time and effort. After all, not everybody liked goats' milk. They were not like those who lived up on the mountains who relished goat produce. The lowlanders ate mutton only in winter as it was considered too "heaty" a meat for warm summer days.

His Uncle Jin came over one day and declared that he was giving their little flock to Wen. Uncle Jin's goats were added to his. He was now in charge of a whole herd of some 30 goats. These were herded together in a small bamboo stable. The bleating increased for a while as they competed for space but they soon settled in for the night.

The flock looked well in the morning when he came to bring them out. But as soon as he led them out of the gate he was in trouble. "One group went east and the other went west!" His goats turned left and walked on. His uncle's animals turned right and trotted the other way.
He recalled the trouble he had trying to bring the 2 flocks together. At night they behaved as if they were one flock but in the day they showed that they were not.

"We Christians are sometimes like the goats that I used to rear. On Sundays, we all appear to be so obedient in church but on Mondays, we stray into our own ways. I now know that the Lord has a hard time keeping us together in His flock," he smiled as he made this analogy.

Wandering away from the God who loves us
Some time later, I read Psalm 107, which described how the people of God wandered away from Him. This Psalm is a beautiful hymn that describes God's steadfast love in the settings of a wandering and imprisoned humanity. It seems like a ballad or a musical social commentary on the people's psyche. After reading Psalms 107, I drew this chart in my journal to bring out the patterns of wandering.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4-9</th>
<th>Journey out into the desert</th>
<th>He led them by a straight way</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-16</td>
<td>Trapped in chains</td>
<td>He brought them out of darkness and gloom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-22</td>
<td>Trapped in rebellion</td>
<td>He sent forth his word and healed them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-32</td>
<td>Journey out into the seas</td>
<td>He stilled the storm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let Them Give Thanks

Notice that the 4 segments of this psalm are arranged in a somewhat box-like pattern. There are 2 outward bound journeys and 2 inward imprisonments. The 2 outer segments are symbolic of the wanderings to the ends of the ancient world and the 2 inner segments tell of being trapped within. All 4 describe the pain of leaving the presence of the Lord.

Looking at the map of Israel, you will notice that on the west is the Mediterranean Sea (or known in ancient times as the Great Sea) and on the eastern side is the desert wilderness. In Psalm 107, the writer describes the two divergent routes that people took. Some people just wandered away from the Promised Land (implying that the people had wandered away from God). They almost perished in the desert. Others went to the sea for adventure; for business. They saw the wonders but they also came face to face with the storms of life.

I paused and asked myself, "What makes me wander away from God's
promises? What adventures and dreams take me away and out of God's presence?

After graduating from medical school, I had this idea that if I travelled far and wide, I would find myself. Most of my close friends in church thought I was very irresponsible for I had just started courting Lay Chin (we were from the same church). I then volunteered to serve in a jungle camp in the Mekong area as part of my national service for a year. After that, I took almost 6 months to backpack through India, Pakistan, Turkey, the USA and Europe. Except for a brief few weeks in the USA with Lay Chin - she was doing her post-graduate studies in Michigan - I was alone most of the time. I hardly spoke to anyone except to ask for directions as I backpacked around the globe.

One night, somewhere in the former Yugoslavia, a couple in their 70s sat in the same coach. It was late in autumn and there were very few passengers on that train. The old man, whom I figured to be a wise man for he had white hair and looked very sober, came up to me and said, "Young man, are you travelling alone?" I said, "Yes"

He then held his wife's hands and said, "Young man. You are never alone. Your eyes tell me that you have someone who loves you very much." The couple then went back to their seats.

That night, as I thought about Lay Chin and about our Lord Jesus Christ, I knew it was time to go home. Nothing very dramatic. But the Lord found me. I was reminded of the words in Psalms 103: 11-13:

\[
\text{as far as the east is from the west,} \\
\text{so far has he removed our transgressions from us.} \\
\text{For as high as the heavens are above the earth,} \\
\text{As a father has compassion on his children,} \\
\text{so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;}
\]

When we wander and when the Lord speaks to our hearts and touches our lives, let us do as the Psalmist records in verses 8, 15, 21, 31: "Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to mankind."

However we do not always have to leave home to get away from God. Psalm 107 is carefully and skillfully crafted. The Psalmist, in broad strokes, describes the vastness of the world and how people walk into it. The 2 sections of people on the move form the external framework. One group goes into the desert and the other to the ocean. But, cocooned in the middle of the psalm are descriptions of inward experiences. One group rebelled against God's word. They broke some laws and ended up in prison. The next group did not break any written laws but they broke their relationship with God because of sinful ways. One group broke God's Laws. The other group broke faith.
One group spurned the counsel of God. The other endured afflictions because of their iniquities. The former is sentenced to imprisonment and hard labour. The latter punishes itself and draw near to the gates of hell. These groups illustrate the 2 journeys of inward imprisonments and bondage.

I used to work as the doctor of the largest prison for drug addicts in Singapore. These were what we called "hard core" addicts - most were in and out of prison for 3 or more times. One day, I had to attend to a young convict - a young man in his 20s - who had already been imprisoned on 4 previous charges. He was in the sick bay suffering from heroin withdrawal. After a couple of days, he got over the withdrawal, realized that he was in prison and would be spending the next 4 years in this place. He went berserk, cried like a mad man, sat in a corner near the toilet and became very quiet. Our staff thought that he was more or less settled. Suddenly and to our horror, he took handfuls of feces from the toilet bowl, smeared them on his own face and began to stuff them into his mouth.

Sin can bring on punishment and unless we find forgiveness, we go on punishing ourselves in terrible ways. I was pleasantly surprised to read the words of a very much-admired man, ex-American President Jimmy Carter, on forgiveness. He wrote, "forgiveness is a basic foundation of my faith. Without the knowledge that I can be forgiven, it would not be possible to face my own shortcomings frankly. Without forgiveness, I could not confess to a God whose standards embody perfection, or learn how to forgive myself or others."

Paul knows this and so he argues vehemently when the Christians in Galatia were falling back into legalism, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified…. Formerly when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. How can you want to be enslaved to them again? …. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." (from Galatians 3:1-5). Unable to find forgiveness, the prisoner in the cell chose to shove feces into his mouth.

In Psalm 107, there are 2 outward journeys and 2 inward imprisonments. The Psalmist uses these 4 metaphors to declare that God will redeem His people from the ends of the earth and from the depths of sin and guilt. It is only when I waited in silence that I realized I was so very prone to wander, and that I frequently allow myself or place myself into bondage through sin and unforgiveness. John Piper wrote, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."

Returning and waiting for God who knows our needs

Coming back to my conversation with my student, I asked him, "How did you get the two flocks to finally behave as one?"
"Oh, eventually they had to become one because I was the only one who looked after them. One of the important things to do is to find out what they really need. When the goats were thirsty, they would readily go to the water. When they were tired, they would be more willing to return to the stable. Finding out their needs, I could get them to move with me with less difficulty. But I had to know their needs."

Wen paused and added, "When I first heard about God who sent His only begotten Son to die for us, I knew in my heart that this was true love because he came alongside us, knowing our needs, died for us and made us one with him. God knows that we are spiritually parched and thirsty. Jesus is the living water. He knew that we are tired. Jesus calls the weary to rest in Him."

He went on to say that for him, a key point in evangelism is getting alongside his classmates, knowing their needs and finally showing that Christ can meet their deepest needs. "We all want to go our different ways, walk in our own habitual manner but what we really need is to follow Christ. He is the Good Shepherd."

Henri Nouwen wrote, "I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found." He continues and writes about the lostness of the elder son and the lostness of the younger son (from the Parable of the Prodigal Son) - "Both needed the embrace of a forgiving father … the hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed at home". God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them (1 John 4; 16). Waiting on Him prevents me from wandering needlessly or staying at home ungraciously. Waiting helps me be a real part of His flock."