

## THE NINETY AND NINE

*The Ninety and Nine* tells the story of lost sheep, of a loving shepherd, and of a great celebration.

It came into being as a poem written by Elizabeth Clephane. Locally known as The Sunbeam, Elizabeth was a woman who spent most of her money on charitable causes. She had her brother George in mind when she wrote the poem, which, like her other poems, was not published until after her death.

After its publication in *The Children's Hour*, various magazines and newspapers often reprinted the poem.

During an evangelistic meeting at the Free Assembly Hall in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1874, Dwight Moody preached a sermon on "The Good Shepherd" and asked his music director, Ira Sankey, to close the meeting with an appropriate hymn. Sankey had earlier seen Elizabeth's poem reprinted in a newspaper and had cut it out and stuck it in his pocket. He'd even tried to share it with Doctor Moody, but the evangelist had been absorbed in reading a letter.

Now on the spot to offer a fitting song, Sankey couldn't think of anything appropriate from his repertoire. Remembering the poem in his pocket, he pulled it out and prayed to God, asking Him to help him sing so that the people might hear and understand. Creating the tune as he sang, Ira Sankey presented the tender lines of Elizabeth's poem. As the final notes of the song faded away, a collective sigh arose from the congregation and, with tears in his eyes, Doctor Moody leaned over the organ and asked where Ira had gotten that hymn. He replied that it was the one he'd tried to share with him when they were traveling on the train, but that he had not heard Ira's words. The tune has remained exactly the same since that first solo presentation.

Shortly after that service, Mister Sankey received a letter from a woman who had been present at that meeting. She was Elizabeth's sister, and she thanked Ira for having sung her late sister's words.

Although the hymn is largely forgotten today, at one time, *The Ninety and Nine* appeared in almost every hymnal, including the Methodist Hymnal. I have fond memories of singing this song as a child. It reminds me of Christ's parable of the lost sheep and of Luke's gentle reminder that "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Perhaps the time has come to return *The Ninety and Nine* to the canon of hymns we both treasure and sing with joy.

The text of the poem...

### The Ninety and Nine

There were ninety and nine that safely lay  
in the shelter of the fold,  
but one was out on the hills away,  
far off from the gates of gold —  
away on the mountains wild and bare,  
away from the tender Shepherd's care,  
away from the tender Shepherd's care.

"Lord, thou hast here thy ninety and nine;  
are they not enough for thee?"

But the Shepherd made answer:

"This of mine has wandered away from me,  
and although the road be rough and steep,  
I go to the desert to find my sheep,  
I go to the desert to find my sheep."

But none of the ransomed ever knew  
how deep were the waters crossed;  
nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed thro'  
ere he found his sheep that was lost.  
Out in the desert he heard its cry —  
sick and helpless, and ready to die,  
sick and helpless, and ready to die.

"Lord, whence are those blood-drops all the way  
that mark out the mountain's track?"

"They were shed for one who had gone astray  
ere the Shepherd could bring him back."

"Lord, whence are thy hands so rent and torn?"

"They're pierced tonight by many a thorn,  
they're pierced tonight by many a thorn."

But all thro' the mountains, thunder-riv'n,  
and up from the rocky steep,  
there arose a glad cry to the gate of heav'n,

"Rejoice! I have found my sheep!"

And the angels echoed around the throne,  
"Rejoice, for the Lord brings back his own!  
Rejoice, for the Lord brings back his own!"