

THE PRODIGAL SON

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Feb. 27	Ps. 28	Lord, Hear My Prayer
T	Feb. 28	Matt. 11:25–30	Come to Me, You Weary
W	Mar. 1	Matt. 14:13–21	Jesus Shows Compassion
Th	Mar. 2	Ps. 71:1–12	I Take Refuge in the Lord
F	Mar. 3	Ps. 71:13–24	I Will Proclaim God’s Wondrous Deeds
Sa	Mar. 4	Luke 15:1–10	God Rejoices When Sinners Repent

MAIN IDEA

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father demonstrates how only God meets and exceeds the expectations of those who return to God.

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Luke 15:11–32

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’” (Luke 15:21)

PREPARING TO LEAD

- Pray for participants and for yourself as leader. Reflect on lesson 1, “The Prodigal Son” (Participant’s Book, p. 1).
- Familiarize yourself with the context of the Scripture. This parable could be titled “The Lost Son,” and it is the last of three parables, coming after parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.
- Provide Bibles, Participant’s Books, Worship Leaflets for lesson 1, name tags, paper, and pens.
- On newsprint or a board, print the following open-ended prompt: A time when I felt separated from God was . . .
- Obtain six Lenten candles and arrange them in a line. Also get a means to light them.
- If you have access to multiple copies of the hymnal *Glory to God*, you may want to substitute the hymn “There Is Now a New Creation” (#774) for the hymn in the worship leaflet.
- Step 6 offers additional options from which to choose.

LEADING THE LESSON

Opening Worship

1. Gathering

- Greet participants and provide name tags. Form pairs and ask participants to tell their partner their response to the open-ended prompt. Emphasize that it is not necessary for them to share details, but they might want to briefly give the situation. In the full group, ask one or two volunteers to report. Introduce any newcomers.
- Distribute Bibles, Participant's Books, Worship Leaflets, pens, and paper for lesson 1.
- The lessons in this quarter suggest that participants respond in a journal. If possible, contact participants in advance and suggest that they bring a tablet or a paper journal. Provide writing paper for those who do not bring one.
- Formulate and get consensus on some simple ground rules for the study (for example, welcoming diverse points of view, maintaining confidentiality, and so on).

2. Morning Prayer 1

Worship Leaflet, lesson 1

- Light five candles, noting that today is the second Sunday in Lent. After a moment, extinguish one candle, leaving four burning.
- Encourage participants to settle into silence.
- Invite volunteers to lead portions of Morning Prayer from the Worship Leaflet, beginning with the Opening Sentences and ending after the Hymn.

Teaching Tip

The Gospel of Mark provides the basic structure for Luke. Scholars speculate that Luke also used what is called the Quelle source (Q). Roughly a fourth of Luke's account is shared in common with Matthew. Another 25 percent is material unique to Luke—dubbed the L source—and it includes the birth and infancy stories, the resurrection accounts, and some parables, including the Prodigal Son.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 15:11–24

15:11 Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

Bible Study

3. Scripture Reading

Participant’s Book, p. 2

- Read the passage round-robin style, with each participant reading one verse in turn.
- Option: Form three smaller groups or pairs, and assign to each pair or group one of the sections of the parable as described by the author. Have them read their section aloud in turn:
 - the account of the younger son who demands his share of the inheritance, his subsequent fall into “dissolute living,” and his return home (vv. 11–19);
 - the compassionate reception of the father when sees his son coming and plans a welcome (vv. 20–24);
 - the angry response of the elder son who feels cheated by the generous response of his father (vv. 25–31).

Have the full group read the final point in verse 32.

- 4. Lost and Found and Lost Again?** Participant's Book, p. 3
- If your group did not use the optional Scripture reading activity, invite participants to review the three sections of the parable. Also ask them to quickly review the information in this section of the lesson and in the Scripture Notes. Discuss:
 1. In the third section, the mother of the two sons is not mentioned at all. Why do you suppose that is the case? What do you imagine the mother would have said about her sons?
 2. How do you respond to the way the elder son reacted to his brother's return? Luke does not indicate that he and his brother were ever reunited. Do you think they might have been?
 3. What do you think of the idea put forth by Susan Eastman (included in the footnote) suggesting that the father is really a foolish parent? Do you agree, or disagree, and why?
 - Review what the author tells us about the L source, as well as the information in the teaching tip. Luke places this parable at a key point in his narrative centered around the theme of "lost and found": the lost sheep (15:3–7), the lost silver coin (15:8–10), and the lost position of trust (16:1–13). Form three smaller groups or pairs, and assign one of these passages to each. Ask them to read the assigned passage. In the full group, have each summarize their passage and read aloud the verse referencing restoration.
- 5. Sibling Rivalry and Reconciliation** Participant's Book, p. 4
- The parables in Luke 15 and 16 are not just about the loss of things, misplacement of money, wandering sheep, or inheritance. Ask:
 1. Instead, what does the author suggest is the focus?
 - Again form three smaller groups or pairs to review other Scripture passages that address the theme of alienation and the possibility of reconciliation, and assign one of the passages from Genesis the author cites to each small group or pair. Also ask the group to review Scripture Note 3. In the full group, ask each pair or group to briefly summarize the alienating event and the point of reconciliation, if reconciliation occurs. Then turn the group's attention to Luke, and a consideration of the many different conflicts that may concern him. Invite participants to name those cited by the author and any others that come to mind. Discuss:
 1. If God cares particularly for those who are lost, why are we so anxious to guard our privilege if we have been found?
- 6. Stepping into the World** Participant's Book, p. 5
- In Jesus' parable, the younger son began to think of family unity again when he realized what he had lost, "when he came to himself." These words point to repentance—turning around and

coming back to the right path—of returning to the road back home. They also could mean “when he came to his senses” or “when he snapped out of it.” The author recounts a story of a father who threatened to kick his son out of the house and never let him back in if he took a certain action. Discuss:

1. How do you respond to this story? Are there actions a child might take that would result in you responding in that way? What factors might enter into your decision whether or not to take such a harsh action?
- Invite the group to consider the father in the parable. Discuss:
 1. Do you think the father represents God? Why or why not?
- Invite group members to place themselves on a continuum in response to this question, with those who agree with the following statements to stand in a line on the far left, and those who disagree on the far right. Those who are ambivalent or who see nuances in the statement should find a position somewhere in the middle. Have them respond to the first statement, then ask volunteers to explain their position. Then proceed to the second statement.
 1. The father is too generous; he is unfair to the older son who stuck by him.
 2. The father is foolish because he forgave his son and welcomed him back home with full honors.
 3. If there are those in your group with limited mobility, you may want to adapt the activity, asking for a show of hands on whether they agree or disagree, with volunteers among those who are ambivalent or who discern nuance offering their reasons.
- Invite participants to reflect in silence on how God treats us, and then to respond to one or more of the following in their journals:
 1. Have I ever caused tension in my family? What was the result?
 2. Have I ever turned on a brother or sister? What happened?
 3. Have I ever failed to help a neighbor? What was the circumstance?
 4. Have I ever been so certain that I am correct politically that those who disagree with me or endanger democracy must remain my enemy, no matter what? How do I explain my stance?
- Choose between the following optional activities for exploring the Scripture:
 1. Invite participants to take on the role of the father, younger son, or older son. Invite volunteers to describe how they are feeling or why they took the actions they did.
 2. Emphasize Luke 15:17, “when he came to his senses.” Ask participants to identify what catalyzed this turning point, and challenge them to identify similar moments in their own experiences. What change resulted from this turning point?

3. Have participants read the parable of the workers paid equally in Matthew 20:1–16 and compare the attitudes and emotions of the workers with those of the older son.

Closing Worship

7. Morning Prayer 2

Worship Leaflet, lesson 1

- Invite the participants to turn to the Worship Leaflet, and enlist volunteers to lead remaining portions of Morning Prayer.
- Begin with Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession, pray the Lord's Prayer, and end with the Dismissal.
- Bless participants as they leave, saying “(Name), go forth, accept God's loving embrace,”
- Extinguish the four remaining candles, encouraging participants to offer silent prayers as the tendrils of smoke loft upward.

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. The younger brother's request would be seen as deeply disrespectful. The elder son also shows disrespect when he grows angry at the father's forgiveness. When there were two or more sons in an Israelite family, the firstborn son was to receive “a double portion of all that [the father] has” (Deut. 21:17). Thus, the younger son in the parable would have received one-third of the inheritance (Luke 15:12).
2. The details of the younger son's “dissolute living” are not spelled out, but the fact that a boy from a Jewish family has ended up tending ritually unclean pigs and was willing to eat the food from their troughs indicates that he has hit rock bottom.
3. In the ancient world it was considered dishonorable for men to run. Yet the father abandons all social pretenses and runs out to greet his son with joy and compassion. When the father reaches his son, he “put his arms around him and kissed him.” This is the language used to describe Esau's welcome of Jacob (Gen. 33:4) and Joseph's welcome of his brothers (Gen. 45:14–15). These brothers provide a striking contrast to the elder brother's non-welcome of his returning brother.

ENGAGE YOUR LEARNERS DURING THE WEEK

Send an email or a text:

1. Suggesting that participants read 1 John 3 and ponder this question posed by author: How do the words “God is greater than our hearts” apply to the parable of the Two Sons?
2. Encouraging them to revisit the open-ended prompt from the beginning of the lesson, pondering how they have experienced God exceeding their expectations upon their return.