

THE PRODIGAL SON

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)

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

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Jesus’ parable about the young man who boldly demands his inheritance, moves away from home, and squanders all his money is one of the most familiar texts to readers of the Bible. Usually it is given the title “The Prodigal Son,” although the word *prodigal* does not appear in Luke’s account. Commentators often apply other names that suggest somewhat different emphases. Various possibilities include “The Lost Son,” “The Forgiving Father,” “The Waiting Father,” or “The Two Sons.” More suggestive titles include “The Return to Life,” “The Foolish Father,” “The Widening Shame,” “The Griping Elder Brother.”

Most of us know about prodigal sons (or daughters) if we have children or grandchildren, are around adolescents, or are teachers. Once, when my wife was trying to discipline our grandson when he was little, she looked at him and said, “Listen, I am the boss.” He responded, “No, me the boss!” Jesus knew that young people often want to go their own way, are willing to circumvent family and social norms, and want to take risks. We have met them in our own households and families, at school, and at work. Perhaps we have fit the same description when we were young ourselves or still do on occasion no matter how old we are.

At a key point in the story, after the younger son realizes what a mess he has made of his life, Jesus says that he decided to go back home “when he came to himself” (v. 17). This verse reminds us how easy it is for any of us to get lost, to wonder who we really are, to do the very things we know are bad for us and hurt our friends and families. As we shall see, there are many ways to understand Jesus’ teaching.

Dear God, when we are lost, help us to be found and to find ourselves. Amen.



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.

LOST AND FOUND AND LOST AGAIN?

Jesus' story about the man who had two sons is divided into a few recognizable sections:

- 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 he 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)
 - the final point (v. 32)
1. Daniel K. Eng, “The Widening Circle: Honour, Shame, and Collectivization in the Parable of the Prodigal Son,” *Expository Times* (2019): 193–201. Susan Eastman suggests that the father is really a foolish parent who raises one rebellious son and another who is outwardly compliant but seething with resentment (“The Foolish Father and the Economics of Grace,” *Expository Times* [2006]: 401–5).

The third section makes us ask if the father (no mention is made of a mother) finds one son only to lose the other. At the end, the oldest son is furious about the treatment his brother gets after wasting all of his money and accuses his father of operating outside the normal rules of Jewish society.¹ “Look what *your* son did” he seems to say sarcastically, not “*my* brother” and he childishly refuses to go to the welcoming party in spite of the father’s pleading. We are never told if he is reconciled to his family or not.

In the gospel tradition, the parable is reported only in Luke’s Gospel, coming perhaps from his unique collection of material about Jesus and his ministry (often referred to as the L source), which was probably not available to Matthew, Mark, and John. Luke places it 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). Each story ends with a reference to joy and restoration, joy in heaven (15:7), joy in the presence of angels (15:10), and welcoming “into the eternal homes” (16:9). The parable of the Two Sons finishes on a similar positive note, “. . . we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and was found” (15:24).

 **How would you present this story as a play or a song? Look up various possibilities online under “The Prodigal Son.”²**

2. For examples also see François Bovon, *Acts, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 435–38.

SIBLING RIVALRY AND RECONCILIATION

It must be recognized that the parables in Luke 15 and 16 are not just about the loss of things: misplacement of money, wandering sheep, or inheritance. These passages are primarily concerned with alienation and reconciliation, examining the loss of a relationship with God through sin (15:7, 16), the destruction of family unity and its restoration through forgiveness and love, and the loss of trust through dishonesty and greed (16:1–10).

In the story of the Two Sons, we see the consequences of a fractured family and sibling rivalry and what they have to do with faith. The theme of alienation and the possibility of reconciliation appears throughout biblical literature. From the very beginning, readers are presented with the shocking account of Cain’s murder of his brother Abel and his consequent ejection from the presence of God (Gen. 4:1–16). Cain is not able to heed God’s advice, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen. 4:6–7).

A similar sinister connection is reported between the brothers Esau and Jacob, in that they are rivals from the moment of conception. Jacob is able to steal his brother’s inheritance by trickery, and he is completely surprised when Esau is able to forgive him when they meet years later, overwhelmed by his kindness (Gen. 25:19–33:17).

In Genesis 30:22–45:15, there is another story of the lack of family fidelity when Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery. Later, when Joseph gains power in the Pharaoh’s court, they are amazed that rather than turning them away during a famine, he welcomes them. “And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him” (Gen. 45:15).

In the context of Luke’s Gospel, it is possible to consider many different conflicts that may concern him. Obviously, he could be thinking of the hostility between the Jews and Christians that is repeatedly discussed in Acts and Paul’s letters. A parable of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel also provides insight into the story of the two sons. The anger and bitterness of the older son about the generous way in which the father welcomes back his errant brother is reminiscent of the parable of the workers paid equally in Matthew 20:1–16. In that narrative, the people who worked all day are outraged that workers who are hired at later times in the day are given the same wage. The employer remarks, “Are you

envious because I am generous? The first will be last, and the first will be last.”

? If, as Jesus, argues, God cares particularly for those who are lost, then the question is, why are we so anxious to guard our privilege if we have been found?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

The writing of this section is taking place two days after the inauguration of Joe Biden as president of the United States. Right now, the question of disunity, sibling rivalry, and forgiveness of brothers and sisters is very much on my mind. Who knows where the country will stand three years later? Will our better angels prevail or will we, like the older brother, hold a grudge and refuse to listen to the words of reconciliation?

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, of 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.” A similar sense is found in Acts 12:6–11 when an angel of the Lord leads Peter out of prison (possibly in a vision); when he escaped, he “came to himself” and said, “Now I am sure that the Lord . . . has rescued me” (v. 11).

When I was a pastor in Idaho many years ago, I talked with a father who was very angry with his son. The circumstances are unclear now, but as I recall he said something like, “If my son does such a thing, I will kick him out of the house, and he will never be able to come back home.” This kind of attitude is not unusual in families, communities, or nations. But how can a father or anyone else think this way when they realize how much they have been given, how often they have been loved, when they consider their own sin and faults and how God still loves them? In the British drama *Call the Midwives*, the midwives accept the mothers and fathers who come there regardless of their circumstances. Their purpose is to provide love and service, not judgment.

As we read the parable of the Two Sons, we can wonder about the father. Does he represent God? Is he too generous, is he unfair to the older son who stuck by him, is he foolish because he forgave his son and welcomed him back home with full honors?

But how does God treat us? Have we ever caused tension in our families? Have we turned on brothers or sisters? Have we failed to help neighbors? Have we ever been so certain that we are correct politically that those who disagree with us or endanger democracy must remain our enemies, no matter what? The father says to the elder son, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” but “this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (Luke 15:32).

 **Read 1 John 3. How do the words “God is greater than our hearts” (v. 20) apply to the parable of the Two Sons?**

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 be entitled to only 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.