



# LOST

PARABLES OF A  
GOD WHO PURSUES

## The Story of the Running Father

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### DEVOTIONAL

Everything was quiet. I sat very still with my Bible and journal on my lap by my front window in a picture of perfect peace. But my heart was heavy with familiar grief. I had been in church my whole life. "Amazing Grace" was as familiar to me as the lullabies my mother sang over my crib, yet somehow my image of God was less of a kind and gracious Father and more of an angry, distant judge. *How could a holy God ever accept me, one so flawed?*

I bowed my head and began to weep and pray with the kind of honesty that only comes when we are at the end of all our strength. *I know the Bible says there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, but I just can't seem to believe it. Every time I turn to You, my first impulse is fear! I give up. I can't do this on my own. Will You please heal my heart?* Over the next year, God did for me what I had been utterly helpless to do on my own. He revolutionized my image of Him.

One of the stories that meant the most to me on my journey was the story many of us know by the title, *The Prodigal Son*, found in Luke 15:11-32. I discovered that in the Middle Eastern Church the story goes by another name: *The Story of the Running Father*. The difference in the title reflects important cultural knowledge that the people to whom Jesus spoke would have known.

In the biblical story, the son demands his share of the family's wealth, leaves home and breaks his father's heart in the process. Eventually the young man finds himself destitute in a foreign land and determines to return to his father's house with the hope of working as a servant. Scripture tells us the father sees his son a long way off and runs to him. It's the image of this running father that was so powerful to the hearers of Jesus' story.

First, it was considered extremely undignified for a Middle Eastern man to run anywhere. Running was for children. Also, running required men to hike up their robes and expose their legs, which was considered humiliating and disgraceful. The reason he was running was even more significant. It was a very serious matter for a Jewish young man to lose his family's inheritance in a foreign land. If he did, and he had the gall to actually return to his village, his entire community would then bring him to justice through a custom called the *Kezazah*. Once the community discovered the money was lost, they would surround him and break a pot at his feet. Then they would announce that from that moment on he was cut off from his family and community ... as if he were dead.

But this young man's father had been watching, and even though his son had broken his heart, he had been hoping for his return. He knew all too well what would happen when the villagers saw his boy. His son would be shamed and then the pot would fall, break, and his son would be lost. So, the father did what no first-century Middle Eastern man would do: he hiked up his robe and *ran*.

He ran through the village streets as his neighbors stared in horror. He ran as young boys began running along behind, shouting and mocking him in his shame. He ran ahead of the crowd as they moved toward

his guilty, filthy son. He ran ahead of all that was reasonable and fair. He ran ahead of justice, taking his boy's shame upon himself. When he reached the boy, the father quickly gathered his son into his arms, kissed him on each cheek and called for a banquet in his honor.

*This, Jesus tells us, is what God is like. For too long my image of God was one of a tyrant, or a cold and callous judge. But now whenever I think of God, I see Him running toward me, gathering up my shame in His wake, to redeem me with His costly love. **My Father, thank You so much for running toward me. Help me rest in Your grace and trust Your great love. In Jesus' Name, Amen.***<sup>1</sup>

## OPEN IT

1. **Have you ever run away from home as a kid or have you, as a parent, had one of your children decide to do it? What caused the desire to runaway?**

## READ IT

**Luke 15: 11-24**

## EXPLORE IT

2. **How many sons did this man have? Which one ran away?**
3. **What did he ask before he left his father? What did he do with it?**
4. **What caused the son to reconsider his actions?**
5. **What did the son say to his father upon his return?**
6. **How did the father respond to his son's return?**

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<sup>1</sup> Devotional entitled The story of the Running Father by Sherri Gragg found @ <https://proverbs31.org/read/devotions/full-post/2014/05/27/the-story-of-the-running-father>

# APPLY IT

Each of the three parables illustrates God's abundant mercy towards repentant sinners and His great joy when they are reconciled to Him. But while they all illustrate the same truth, there are different emphases. The first two parables focus on God's seeking lost sinners and rescuing them and on His great joy in saving them. The emphasis in the parable of the prodigal son is on God's great love and mercy, but also on the necessary human response to experience His mercy, namely, repentance. Each of the three main characters reflects different lessons. The prodigal shows us the devastating effects of sin and the nature of true repentance. The father shows us God's great mercy towards repentant sinners.<sup>2</sup>

## 7. Which of these three parables (lost sheep, silver, son) resonates with you most? Why?

Jesus told a story about a young man who made a wrong decision and what happened to him. We call it the parable of the prodigal son. Many people consider it the greatest short story ever written.<sup>3</sup>

## 8. What about this parable resonates so much with both believers and non-believers alike?

### JUST DIE ALREADY!!!

The sons knew that upon their father's death, they would gain a sizeable inheritance, comprising the family's assets and property. But the younger son demanded his portion early. In Middle Eastern culture, such a request would be unspeakable and scandalous. Today's equivalent would be a teenager spitting in his dad's face and screaming, "I WANT YOU DEAD!" Asking for the inheritance early insinuated that the son couldn't wait for his father to die. He wanted what his father could give him now, at the expense of their relationship.<sup>4</sup>

## 9. What do we learn about the three characters (the prodigal, the father, the older brother) in the story according to verse 12?

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<sup>2</sup> Sermon excerpt by Steve Cole found at <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-72-how-receive-god%E2%80%99s-abundant-mercy-luke-1511-32>

<sup>3</sup> Sermon excerpt by Ray Pritchard found @ <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/trapped-on-a-dead-end-street/>

<sup>4</sup> The Prodigal Son a blog written by Trevin Wax found @ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/the-prodigal-son-1/>

10. Put yourself in the father's place; what are you feeling when your son selfishly tells you to drop dead?  
How can we do the same thing to God?

11. Remember that the immediate context of these parables is Jesus ministry amongst the Jewish people.  
How had Israel done similar things to God as the son had to his father in verse 12?

*The younger son's request also epitomizes the enormity and consequence of all human sin.*

***"God, we want what You can give us, but we don't want You!"<sup>5</sup>***

12. In what ways can Christ followers savor the blessing and inheritance of God without submitting to him?

13. Was it foolish for the Father to give in to the son's selfish request? Explain your answer.

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<sup>5</sup> ibid

## **RUNNING DOWN A DREAM!!!**

*Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property **in reckless living**.*

When we, as humans, head out into the far country away from God, we are capable of reaching new lows in our behavior when we face famine. Due to new circumstances, we adopt actions we would have earlier shunned as evil. Our rebellion leads us down the spiral of desperation, while God the Father, with arms open wide, continues to call us back to Him.<sup>6</sup>

**14. What would the far country afford the prodigal that wasn't available to him while in his homeland? What lessons can we learn from his example?**

**"There he squandered (devoured in verse 30) his property with reckless living"** - A graphic description of his wanton pursuit of sinful pleasure. He was spending his fortune thoughtlessly, throwing it away with a debauched (morally corrupt, intemperate, sensual) lifestyle (including prostitutes - Lk 15:30). And keep in mind that what he is squandering is 1/3 of his father's lifetime earnings!<sup>7</sup>

His sin was beginning to cost him more than he ever could have dreamed he would have to pay! Isn't that always what sin does to us? The passing pleasure of sin (Heb 11:25) blinds us to the inevitable (cf Nu 32:23) and costly consequences of sin<sup>8</sup>

**15. There is an old adage "Sin takes you farther than you want to go....Keeps you longer than you want to stay...Costs you more than you want to spend." While it is uncomfortable to confess, when has this adage rang true in your own life? What did it take for you to come to your senses?**

*"Hired" (ekollēthē in greek) means literally to glue, cement, join or fasten together and thus to unite (someone with or to someone or something). To fasten firmly together. This rebel finds a man who has a job opening, even though it is a detestable, dirty, and smelly kind of job. He glues himself to this man. What a picture of folks today that are clinging to the wrong things.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/prodigal-son-4-spiritual-desperation/>

<sup>7</sup> Commentary on Luke 15 found @<https://www.preceptaustin.org/luke-15-commentary>

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

**16. Instead of returning home to his loving father, the prodigal “glues” himself to something other than God. What things do we glue ourselves to so that we don’t need to return to God?**

*Faced with eating pigs' food, the son comes to his senses and decides to go home, hoping at most to get a job as a hired hand. When the prodigal son makes his decision to return, he knows he'd better have something good to say upon arrival. He expects his father to lash out at him for all the hurt he has caused. So, adopting the same words that Pharaoh used to appease Moses (so the plagues would stop coming onto Egypt), the prodigal plans to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." He will then tell his dad not to consider taking him back as son, but only as a hired servant. The younger son hopes that his seeming humility will work to his favor, securing him a job in his father's household.<sup>10</sup>*

**17. The son sought to appease his father by working for him. Many do this today when it comes to their relationship with God. Why doesn't this approach to God work and what does this keep us from enjoying?**

### **PAPA, I'M COMING HOME**

*The crucial moment in Jesus' story occurs as the son approaches his hometown. Jesus tells us the father saw his son while he was still a long way off. This implies that the boy was probably at the edge of town, ready to head down the main street (which was usually the road that almost everyone in the village lived on). The father had been watching diligently, hoping to see some glimpse of his son. **Earlier, the younger son had wished his father were dead.** He had publicly humiliated the family's name and honor, sold off the precious inheritance and deserted the village. He had foolishly squandered all the money, and then wound up working for a pagan and craving even pigs' food. **Through it all, the father has not stopped loving his child. He hopes to see their relationship restored. He dreams of them talking again, laughing, spending time together.** His eagerness to see his younger son again impels him to the front of the yard where he stares into the distance to see if maybe his boy is on his way home.<sup>11</sup>*

**18. The father displays the amazing grace and love of our Heavenly Father. Why does God love us so much? How can we abuse this love?**

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/prodigal-son-7-the-speech/>

<sup>11</sup> The Prodigal Son a blog written by Trevin Wax found @ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/prodigal-son-8-the-waiting-father/>

## SHARPED DRESSED MAN!!!

*The father, in Jesus' story, does more than simply accept back his son. With probably the entire community watching the dramatic events, the father orders that a robe, shoes and a signet ring be brought out from the house. The son has come from the pigs; thus he is smelly and gross. But, the father will not allow his son to walk down Main Street looking so horrid. He demands that robes be brought, as well as the ring that signifies sonship, so that the son will avoid any shame. The father bore the shame when he ran down the street. Now the son will go home, honored with the robe and shoes. When God runs to us and we fall into His arms with open abandon and surrender, truly repentant, God does the same thing for each of us. He erases our past shame and guilt, putting aside our sinful actions. The past is past. The sins are buried. The shame has been borne by the One who suffered on the cross. We are given new clothes – the ring of sonship, the robe of Christ's righteousness! We can enter His house without shame because God is our Father. Jesus is our Savior and Lord. The Holy Spirit is our Guide.<sup>12</sup>*

**19. Put yourself in the place of the prodigal. How would you feel about such a reunion? What would it cause you to do from that moment on?**

**20. The clothes, ring and banquet would be external reminders to all around of the father's grace and love. What can we do so that others might know God's grace and love for people?**

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<sup>12</sup>The Prodigal Son a blog written by Trevin Wax found @ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/prodigal-son-11-new-clothes/>

**Note: This study was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. [www.villagebible.church/smallgroups](http://www.villagebible.church/smallgroups)**