

The Lost Son

Introduction

One of the most familiar and endearing of Jesus' parables was the parable of the Prodigal Son or more properly, the Lost Son (Luke 15.11-32). It resonates with us because we can identify with the son: we are all lost. It is one of the great reversal of fortune stories. What was Jesus' point in telling this parable? What did He wish to teach by it? Who was His audience?

Jesus's Audience

The parable of the Lost Son is the last of three "lost" parables Jesus told in Luke 15. In this chapter, Luke recorded Jesus' parable of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and lastly, the Lost Son. Jesus' audience was Jews. They were Jews who lived under the Mosaic Law, specifically, the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus told these parables in response to them. Why? Luke recorded their conversation:

¹ Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. ² Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15.1-2).

These Pharisees and scribes were grouching because tax collectors and sinners (the lowest of the low) were coming to hear Jesus and He was receiving them just as He received them. One can imagine their conversation among one another. They wanted to hear what Jesus was teaching but were incensed they had to share the same space with "tax collectors and sinners." This was the context in which Jesus told his three parables.

The Lost Son

The Bequest

¹¹ And He said, "A man had two sons. ¹² the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them.

A father had two sons and the youngest of the two asked for his inheritance early. This father loved his son and conceded to the request. Notice that both the younger and the elder son received their inheritance.

The Departure and Decline

¹³ And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. ¹⁴ Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished.

¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

¹⁶ And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

The younger son, pockets full, left seeking adventure. He was still immature and wasted his wealth in dissolute, (ἄσώτως) i.e., prodigal living. His situation worsened when a famine hit the country. When he had arrived in the new country, flush with money, he was "hail fellow well met." Now broke, he was forced to hire himself out as a day laborer. Apparently, the only job available was feeding pigs. That job failed to provide for his daily nutrition needs. He was still so hungry he wished to eat the pig's food. We must remember he was a Jew and Jesus' audience was Jews. Pigs were unclean animals so this was repugnant in their culture.

The Recovery

¹⁷ But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."'

Recognizing the gravity of his plight, "he came to his senses," (εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἔλθὼν) literally, "now when he came to himself." This is the key verse. He recognized he was without hope, i.e., lost. He acknowledged his sin against God and his family. He recognized that at home even his father's servants fared better than he. Therefore, he swallowed his pride, returned home, and made a full confession to his father. He understood his failure to such a degree that he saw himself as unworthy to be his father's son; he was willing to become one of his father's servants.

The Return

²⁰ So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

The young man's father must often have wondered about his young son. Perhaps he had received reports about him. He must have gazed into the distance many times hoping to see him returning home. One day his wish was fulfilled. Not waiting for him to arrive, the father ran to the son and embraced and kissed him. Notice we find no word of scolding. The father's acceptance was full and complete.

The Celebration

²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; ²³ and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

The father heard his son's confession (about no longer being worthy to be his son) but dismissed it. Instead, he clothed him in his best robe, ring, and sandals. He next organized a celebration feast. In other words, "Put on your tux, we're having a party." The father's dinner toast was, "My son was dead and has returned to life; he was lost and is now found."

The Elder Brother's Reaction

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. ²⁷And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him.

The father's party for his son was immediate. It began during the workday while his oldest son was still working in the field. Hearing partying and not understanding why, he asked his servants what was going on. They told him his brother had returned and his father was throwing a party to celebrate. Rather than rejoicing with his father, he became angry and refused to come to the party. When his father learned about this, he went to his son and pled with him to join the

celebration.

The Brother's Complaint

²⁹ But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; ³⁰ but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.'

Instead of rejoicing he “blew up.” He became whiny and self-centered: “I have been serving you,” “I have never neglected,” “you have never given me. . . so I might celebrate.” He referred to his brother, not as his brother, but as “your son.” He revealed his self-righteousness with his accusatory statement “your son” devoured “your wealth with prostitutes.” Remember, the father had no such remonstrance.

The Father's Reply

³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'

The father's reaction to his older son was tenderness itself. He reassured him of his importance and reminded him that all he had was his. Notice how he referred to his younger son. He did not call him “my son” though that is the way he thought of him. He called him, “your brother.” He wished to emphasize the fact that they were brothers and that his brother who had been dead was now alive and who was lost, was found.

The Meaning of the Parable

The Context

As noted above, Jesus' audience was Jews. Jesus began to tell the "lost" parables in reply to the indignant complaining (διαγογγύζω) of the scribes and Pharisees. Luke recorded:

¹ Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. ² Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

The Characters

Jesus had several characters in His story. To understand the parable, we must identify and understand the characters and what each represented.

Characters in the Story	The Correspondence
The Father	God
The Younger Son	Tax Collectors and Sinners
The Elder Son	Pharisees and Scribes
The Far Country	Wasteful, Sinful Life
Father's House	Judaism ¹

The Interpretation

The Pharisees and scribes were indignant because Jesus received tax collectors and sinners. The scribes and Pharisees were the elder brother of Jesus' story. The tax collectors and sinners were the younger brother. Like the younger son, they had gone into a "far country" of wastefulness and sin. As society's off-scouring, they understood their condition. Unlike the Pharisees they had no self-righteousness. Both groups were Jews, members of the favored nation, and blessed under God's covenants. The point of the "lost" stories was that which was lost was found. The problem of the Pharisees and scribes was they would not recognize they were lost. The tax collectors and sinners did. The Pharisees expressed scorn

and indignation like the elder brother. They refused to see tax collectors as brothers. They belonged to the commonwealth of Israel and were "sons of the covenant." God loved them, "Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours." While Jesus recognized them as being in a place of privilege, He rejoiced over those who recognized their "lostness" and came to Him, namely, the tax collectors and sinners. One must recognize he is lost before he can be found. The Pharisees and scribes refused to acknowledge their condition. Their attitude was that of the older brother. The prodigal son overcame his pride, recognized his lostness, and returned to his father.

The Conclusion

Jesus told this parable to Jews who lived under the Mosaic Law. In terms of application to us, Paul wrote, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3.23). Each of us must recognize, like the younger brother, that he is lost. The way back is through God's grace. God's grace to us is as the father's was to his son. When the son recognized his condition and headed by home the father received him. Paul wrote "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith (Romans 3.24-25). Believing the gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4) is the way back. The choice is ours: to be as the younger son and become restored or to be hardened and indignant as the older son.

¹ By "Judaism" I mean the system of government God had given to Israel. It functioned under the Mosaic Law but also required faith, for "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11.6). What is not meant is the corrupt Judaism of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes.

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