

## Luke 15:11-32 The Joy of the Father

### Introduction

There are some things in life that we are so familiar with that we take it for granted that we know everything about them. There are various tasks we perform in our homes; routes we drive on a regular basis in our cars, or routes others may travel regularly by bus or train; likewise in church familiar routines are part of what we do. The same is true with some stories in the Bible. We have read them many times and are so familiar with the storyline that the shock factor or particular emphasis of the narrative on the first hearers has been well and truly lost. Part of this is natural as we live in a different culture and country two millennia later compared with the time when Jesus was active in ministry on earth. However, we need to try and stand 'in the shoes' of His first hearers and sense something of what the particular story meant at that time to those people. The story of the 'prodigal son' begins with a title that uses an unfamiliar word in our cultural context. Although the majority of modern versions update the vocabulary here to render it the 'Lost Son'; a few like the ESV retain the older terminology. Yet the outstanding question to ask is this: which son in the story is lost? Most hearers / readers then and now would regard this as a stupid question as it is 'obvious' which son is 'lost'. I am not so sure that Jesus would agree with that assessment. It is important to ask who the audience were to whom He was speaking, prior to making a final judgement on this point.

### 1. A Picture of Rebellion (Luke 15:11-12)

(a) The social context of the story (Luke 15:1-2) *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him. <sup>2</sup>But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.* A teacher prepares their lesson plan to fit the age group of the class. It would be useless preparing an Advanced Higher Physics lesson for a Primary One class that were assigned to do a 'science' class. No-one would do that! Like wise when we look at the biblical text it is important to ask who was the first audience; for whom was this message given? What was the key point the biblical author was seeking to make? In a parable of Jesus there is usually, but not exclusively, one main point, so rather than trying to explain every detail of the story it is better to seek to grasp what Jesus intended His audience to hear when He told this particular story. In this case the main group of hearers were *the tax collectors and sinners* (Luke 15:10). They heard Jesus gladly and rejoiced in His messages concerning the wonderful grace of God. However, in the midst of teaching the larger audience, Jesus told the stories recorded in Luke 15 to address the concerns of a smaller group of people who were troubled by the increasing number of 'sinners' Jesus was attracting to His meetings. Luke 15:2 reminds us: *But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.* They were not happy that people they had written off as beyond hope of salvation were now taking an interest in God and showing up at religious meetings! Sadly some churches are like that very content with the regular few that show up week by week, but new people coming in disturb them with questions like 'why do you do this?' 'Could we try something different?' and a whole lot more inconvenient questions; After all these new people might sit in your regular pew and might even volunteer to take a turn at duties you have always done! In essence these religious leaders were struggling with the fact that God was at work changing lives. We need to ensure that we never fall into a similar trap in our generation today. Jesus knew as well as they did what

these people had done. That was not the issue; His focus, though, was on what by God's grace these people could become and this God-centred priority led to a very different form of ministry than the Pharisees could ever have entertained seriously. (b) **The serious rebellion by the son** (Luke 15:11-12)<sup>11</sup> *Jesus continued: There was a man who had two sons.* <sup>12</sup> *The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.'* So he divided his property between them. Like the other stories Jesus told the setting is very familiar to His hearers. They all knew people who had left the country to work abroad. At the time of Jesus 500,000 Jews lived in Israel but approximately four million Jews lived and worked overseas [J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 129]. It sounds very similar to Scotland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries! However, this particular situation was different. This single young man was not taking advantage of an opportunity to study or work away from home, which many younger adults have done over the years for the most legitimate of reasons. By contrast, his motivation was one of rebellion against his father and the whole way of life with which he had grown up. He was bored with life in the countryside and the simple lifestyle of people in this rural community. He wanted the faster pace and brighter lights of urban life and the removal of all the restrictions his father might have placed on his choices. The request for the share of his father's estate, something that would have fallen to him upon the father's death, was in effect saying: 'Dad I wish you were dead'. In an honour culture then and now such sentiments were anathema. In uneducated Muslim cultures today we hear a steady trickle of cases of young people, especially young women, being killed for refusing to marry the right kind of person whether with respect to social class or tribe. On occasions both the man and the woman have been killed for disrespecting the honour of their father or their extended family. It was not impossible that this outcome might have resulted had this story taken place in real life in parts of rural Israel in Jesus' day. And what is more the audience listening to Jesus would not have complained about such an outcome either! The younger son's actions were disgraceful, dishonourable and totally disrespectful for all that his father had done for him. It would not have been out of keeping had some of the audience shouted out words of condemnation against this young man for his irresponsible misconduct.

## 2. **A Pattern of Ruin** (Luke 15:13-14)

(a) **A lifestyle that brought him to ruin** (Luke 15:13)<sup>13</sup> *Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.* Now in the bigger picture we grasp that the father in the story represents God, the younger son represents sinful people out of fellowship with God and the older son a person in fellowship with God, at least in the sense of the Pharisees attending this meeting. Some people may have a moral dilemma here. Why would God the Father allow one of His children to deliberately go astray in their lives by providing or allowing him to obtain the means to engage in serious acts of sin? Surely God only ever grants our wishes if they are good and holy and right? Actually this isn't true, although it is God's preferred course of action. But there are times when God allows a person to go their own way and face the consequences of their own actions. Sometimes we will not listen to God or other people advising us in a particular way and insist on doing something that other people think is inappropriate for us. There are some lessons we can only learn the 'hard way' by being allowed to make our own mistakes. In Psalm 106:13-15: *They soon forgot His works; They did not wait for His counsel,* <sup>14</sup> *But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, And tested God in the desert.*<sup>15</sup> *And He gave them their request, But sent leanness into their soul* (NKJV). It is an encouragement to us to be careful what we pray for. God might grant us what we ask for sometimes, even though it might have been better had we not sought it. In the same way parents may permit a child to do something or go somewhere against their better judgement, hoping that the child might learn from the

experience and not make the same mistake again. Proverbs 27:6 states: *Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful* (NKJV). In other words someone who doesn't have our best interests at heart may encourage us to do wrong, but a friend will speak the truth to our face, even if it hurts, because they want the best for us. A good friend, for example, will tell you when shopping that the garment size is too small whereas someone less close might complain about inconsistency of sizes on labels in shops. It might be true but only someone close will dare say you are a '14' when you want to hear you are a '12' or whatever the figures are for you! Another point to consider here was raised in a reflection of the late Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In a context where he was speaking about promotions or new jobs in the workplace, he once said: 'The worst thing that can happen to a man is for him to succeed before he is ready. If you have longed for success in a certain area and it hasn't come, be thankful for it. It could be that one day you will be very glad you didn't get what you asked for, unlike the prodigal son.' [R.T. Kendall, *The Parables of Jesus*, p.258] In the opening section of the story it is unclear what this *wild living* consisted of. However, in the words of the older son in Luke 15:30 it becomes clear that the younger son had resented the moral restrictions of life at home and wanted to enjoy a sexually promiscuous lifestyle. Over the centuries there have always been people willing to provide a service for which others are willing to pay significant sums of money. For a young man unused to handling cash the money would have disappeared very quickly. The novelty that being the centre of attention brought would quickly pass then and now. (b) **A lifestyle that brought him to his knees** (Luke 15:14) <sup>14</sup>*After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.* This was a very foolish young man. He didn't stop and think once half the money had gone –and consider how he needed to obtain an alternative source of income in the place where he was staying. But it is no different today. How many times have we heard that people in serious financial trouble simply obtain another credit card and run up the maximum balance on that card as well. It is sobering that for many people they only begin to look up once they have hit rock bottom. It may be that the situation has to reach crisis point before their pride allows them to admit they have seriously messed up. This is certainly the case with some people with addiction issues who finally summon the courage to address the problems they face. Yet it doesn't have to get that bad before action is taken. All of us at times make mistakes. The challenge is whether we are willing to take action to correct our course of action before it is too late. Or that we are willing to heed the advice of good friends to correct our ways, before the negative consequences overshadow our pathway. Here the downward spiral of this man's life was brought to a head by *a severe famine*. It was not just a local supply issue. It was over a wide geographical area and he was unable to get out of the situation. As a result if he didn't want to die he had to take a job that under all normal circumstances he would have rejected out of hand. He had begun the first step to his recovery by recognising his need. It might be said that he had no choice but to acknowledge his plight, but there have been many people over the years that apparently could not see what should have been staring them in the face! Did the Father know what had happened to his son? We have no idea, but if he did he deliberately waited patiently for the son to come to his senses. If he knew what was going on then it would have hurt him a lot inside to allow his son to stay in his predicament. However, some people only are willing to take control of their own lives when they have finally been left to face the consequences of the actions they have taken.

### 3. **A Pause for Reflection** (Luke 15:15-19)

(a) **The wages of sin were unwelcome** (Luke 15:15-16)<sup>15</sup> *So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.<sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no-one gave him anything* This is a story to a Jewish audience about a Jewish young person, so we can take it for granted that they all recoiled in horror at the prospect of working on a pig farm. There was no lower form of employment in their eyes. Can we give him credit for doing something rather than nothing? It is a close call! However, at least he has begun to try and regain control over his messed up life. At this stage there is still no prospect of him returning home. It is too difficult to entertain the thought that he would be welcomed by his extended family and the wider village community where he had come from. He had ‘burned his bridges’ and knew that he had no right to expect anything ever again from his family. What did it take for you or me to see our need of God? for some people the disillusionment of attaining success, wealth or fame; for others a time of personal crisis forces a rethink about what is important in life; it doesn’t matter what it is as long as we are asking the question what does God, my heavenly Father, want me to do with my life? His wages are virtually non-existent and insufficient even to provide enough food to overcome his hunger pangs. For this young man it took a crisis of this proportion before he would acknowledge his father. What does it take for you and me to put our trust in God? What does it take for us as Christians to keep our eyes fixed on Him? (b) **The wisdom of the father was attractive** (Luke 15:17-19)<sup>17</sup> *When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!<sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.<sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'* On a typical Jewish farm of that era there were three types of servants employed. First of all the bondservants who belonged to the family, stayed in their home and enjoyed numerous privileges; secondly there was a lower class of man servants and maidservants employed for a time on what would be the equivalent of a regular contract; lastly there was temporary hired help, employed on a casual basis, and these came from people on the margins of society. This younger son was hoping that he might find favour as one in the lowest class of employees [S. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus*, p.219]. What a transformation from the arrogant young man who ‘knew everything’ and whose dad ‘knew nothing’ to a much wiser individual who had begun to learn his lesson, but at a terrible cost to himself –as he saw it. Actually how many of us growing up thought we knew ‘better’ than our parents at times as teenagers, but when we got into our twenties we saw just how much they had learned –or was it us that had begun to mature and grow up! Many people think that they can tell God how to improve His handling of the Universe. It is easy to be full of words –all of us can manage that. Yet wiser people recognise that humility in the light of who God is and what He has done for us is the most appropriate course of action. There is so much we will never understand about life. All kind of things will happen for which we have no reasonable explanation, but we learn to trust the Lord and acknowledge that He is in charge of our lives as well as the wider world. When we come as sinners for salvation confessing our sin and acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Saviour, or whether as believers we come asking for fresh grace and strength, it is in both cases as suppliants to an almighty God who is Lord of all. Are you looking up to Him to lead and guide you? When you make decisions about things in your family, about employment choices and a whole lot more –do you ask for His guidance to make the right choices? I hope we all do that.

#### 4. **A Plea of Repentance** (Luke 15: 20-24)

(a)**The deliberate act by the son** (Luke 15:20-21)<sup>20</sup> *So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*<sup>21</sup> *The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* Who set off first? Easily –the young man he had been walking for days to get home! In one sense that is true, but how many days had the father gone to look down the road to see if there was any sight of his errant son returning home? The father could have sent his servants with a letter to summon the young man home much earlier than the time of his eventual return. Yet the father consciously chose to allow the rebellious son to come to his senses and acknowledge his sin before returning home. For the good of his son he held back. God the Father could easily force all humanity to trust Him and obey Him, but He has chosen to work through the Holy Spirit opening our hearts and minds to see the truth of the gospel so that we freely and willingly yield to His call on our lives when we come to Christ. At the time of our conversion it usually appears to most Christians that we did the primary choosing, but as we look back we start to see the hand of God at work putting in place the circumstances that led to our heeding the Spirit's voice. God is sovereign in salvation yet we are also responsible for heeding His effectual call. Here is a beautiful picture of the grace of God to an undeserved sinner. None of us deserves to be saved, but the wonder of the Gospel is that because we are saved through the righteousness of Jesus, who died as our substitute on the cross, He accepts us because Jesus was good enough. Paul put it this way in II Corinthians 5:21: *God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him (Jesus) we might become the righteousness of God.*

Once we grasp this we will be less tempted to look down on other Christians who may have made less progress in the faith or who have been less dedicated in His service. The young man had rehearsed his lines in a plea of mitigation, expecting the worst, but amazingly the father representing God showed incredible grace and love. (b)**The decisive action of the father** (Luke 15:22-24) <sup>22</sup>*But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.* <sup>23</sup>*Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.* <sup>24</sup>*For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'* So they began to celebrate. The son having been given his inheritance was officially cut off from the family. He had no right to expect to be welcomed home or even acknowledged at his former home. However, the father had him clothed in new clothes; a useful step for someone whose one set of clothes were impregnated with pig smells! But more than that, by putting a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet the father was declaring that he was welcoming the young man back home as his younger son. He was now, for a second time, welcomed into the family. He was in effect, born again. The rejoicing was genuine but extravagant and showed the depth of welcome there was for this repentant young man. Yet this is not just a feature of this story. In the previous parable about the shepherd who finds his lost sheep, the man invites his neighbours round to celebrate the finding of the missing animal. In addition, Jesus says: *I tell you that in the same way there will be **more rejoicing in heaven** over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent* (Luke 15:7). This is an incredible verse in the Bible. It appears to imply that when someone is converted on earth that this event is announced in heaven and some kind of celebration takes place. No wonder heaven is such a joyful place when people come to faith somewhere in the world every day! But think of it personally when you trusted Jesus –your conversion was announced in some way in heaven! Our sin problem is more serious than we ever imagined, but as His people we are loved by God more than we could ever imagine possible.

## 5. **A Plan of Redemption** (Luke 15:25-32)

(a) **The problem of good son** (Luke 15:25-30)<sup>25</sup> *Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.* <sup>26</sup> *So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.* <sup>27</sup> *'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'* <sup>28</sup> *The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.* <sup>29</sup> *But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.* <sup>30</sup> *But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'* Our heavenly Father loves us all equally and it greatly saddens His heart when His children don't get on with each other. In too many churches there are cliques and factions, the in group and the rest; there is no place for that in a God-glorifying, Christ-honouring, Spirit empowered church. This man struggled with the concept of grace, that his father could love the undeserving. If we think (wrongly) God saved us, somehow, because in some way, our goodness contributed to our salvation, then the natural tendency will be to look down on those people who seriously mess up their lives. The Pharisees present that day identified fully with the older son and would see nothing wrong and everything right with his reaction to the father's actions. So when someone shows up at church who hasn't been there for weeks months or even years we don't say in a solemn voice and with a huge frown: 'where have you been?' rather we express our delight to welcome them as God does. Part of our problem can sometimes be a jealousy or frustration that other people are not pulling their weight. Peter when Jesus recommissioned him, after the resurrection, could not resist slipping back into the old Peter mode when he enquired with respect to John *Lord, what about him?* (John 21:21). We need to keep our eyes on Jesus and model ourselves on His gracious approach to people. There may be truth in what the elder son says, but what he has failed to grasp is the grace God gave that prevented him from committing all the sins his brother fell into. In church so often we prefer to hear the dramatic testimonies of former 'wicked' sinners who did things considered socially very bad, and fail to give due honour to the witness of those spared such failures. Remembering that God loves us equally will help put some situations into a clearer perspective. (b) **The grace of the generous father** (Luke 15:31-32)<sup>31</sup> *'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.'* <sup>32</sup> *But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'* Actually, as a result of the younger son pressurising his father into giving him his own inheritance, by definition, the older son received his (everything else) at the same time. Yet he had no joy in the blessings he was experiencing. His jealousy at the minor blessings poured out on his brother caused him to lose all sense of perspective. What damage can be caused to friendships when jealousy and envy force their wicked way into relationships. Let's pull out these weeds when their seeds start to grow in our hearts. By contrast may each of us seek a gracious and loving heart like the Father to needy people, so that they too might also come to share the blessings we enjoy in Christ; and do so together that this church may ever be a reservoir of grace in this community, to the glory of God, Amen.