



# HOMEBOUND

## THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

A BIBLE STUDY BY MICHELLE KAREN D'SILVA





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®HOMEBOUND: THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

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# SETTING THE SCENE

Jesus often taught eternal truths about God and His ways using parables. One magnificent such parable is the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The parable is typically understood in light of those who, in their disobedience, walk away from the Father's love. Yet it also captures their—our—momentous return to faith, aided by a God who runs to meet us personally and powerfully as we return.

Amid scenes of homebound journeys and constant battles, Jesus starkly positions God as a loving Father in this narrative. The notion of God as Father was not a new concept to the Jews. Typically, God as Father was understood in the sense of God as *Creator*, God as *Lord* and God as *Redeemer* or *Protector*.

Therefore, in the parable of the prodigal son, when Jesus calls on us to slow down, to be still and know of the Father who is near, He is addressing God as a personal being who draws near. God is seen as one who laments over wayward hearts and moves, even runs, to welcome the filthiest prodigal home.

The narrative found in Luke 15:11-32, presents a father with two sons: one irresponsible, the other hardworking, one overwhelmed at the celebration of homecoming and the other proudly refusing to partake in his brother's homecoming. The story ends with one son inside, enjoying the feast, and the other son, outside, bitterly unwilling to forgive. *Which son is really lost?*

In both sons we see good and bad, pride and humility, resentment and repentance —however self-seeking. The younger son, who has lived as a great sinner, accepts his salvation; the older son, who has kept “outwardly” obedient, is too prideful to “enter in.” Neither son is a role model, yet both, for all of their major failings and minor virtues, are clearly loved by the father.

“The parable of the prodigal son indirectly touches upon every breach of the covenant of love, every loss of grace, every sin” (*Dives in Misericordia*, Nov. 30, 1980, no. 5). These mistakes include the small infidelities into which we fall through simple weakness, or the greater ones into which we intentionally plunge in our selfishness. It is only when we let ourselves be conquered by the despair seeping out of these breaches, be it great or small, that we can truly become like the repentant son and say: “*I will arise and go to my father...*” (Luke 15:18).



# THE FATHER WHO SEEKS

*“...But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion...”*

LUKE 15:20

The younger son had done everything possible to lose his relationship with his father. He had left home after demanding his inheritance. *“Give me the share”* (Luke 15: 12), he had said. Like those who desire relationships with conditions, seeking love without commitment, he had wandered off to a “far” country. The “far” country is not necessarily a distant place to which we travel, for it exists first in our own hearts. The son desired his own version of “Freedom” perhaps waiting to break free from what he perceived as imposing rules and curfews of his father’s home.

But where can we flee from authentic love? For any freedom outside the Father’s heart is only slavery. When God is left out of our lives, enjoyment is reduced to enslavement. In the far country, the younger son’s resources ran out and his bankruptcy drove all his “friends” away. As a result, he was forced to work—a foreign concept in his father’s home. He thought he would “find himself” in the distant land, only to discover that he had “lost” everything, including his integrity. In his abjection, thinking only of bare survival, he was forced to eat the pods meant for swine.

In Jewish culture, it was forbidden by law to associate with the unclean animals. Pigs were unclean, as were those who touched them (Leviticus 11:7; Isaiah 66:17; Deuteronomy 14:8). The younger son had clearly degraded himself beyond belief. Not only had he squandered his father’s inheritance with wild living, but he had also disgraced the name of the family and community.

It is also fitting to consider that in Jewish culture, the community elders performed a shaming ritual called *kezazah* for every prodigal who squandered his father’s property and shamed his family. In this ritual, if found guilty, the boy would have been pronounced “lost” and “dead” and forced to disconnect from his family and people. The father knew that if the boy had been seen first by anyone but him, the elders would have dealt harshly with him. Determined



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to do everything possible to bring his son home and protect his dignity, the father, moved with pity, ran to bring him home, initiating reconciliation. He moved with mercy for he never stopped hoping for his lost son's return. In Luke 15:20, we read "But while he was still far off," the father felt compassion for him and ran to him.

The Greek word for compassion is "*splagchnizomai*." It means to literally be moved in one's bowels. This bespeaks the full-bodied empathy that overtakes the father's being at the sight of his returning son. When the father preempted the boy's reception into the community by running to him first, he did what our own Father in heaven did for us in sending His Son and taking on our shame. C. S. Lewis, remarking on his own late homecoming to Christ, writes, "Who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape?"

The paths on which we stray are forever well-trodden: many have taken them before us, and many will take them after us. The path that is "wide and easy" seems to stretch to a land of dreams. Entering it, one starts out with haste and anticipation: "*Who needs mercy and salvation when I can make my own heaven on earth?*"

Nevertheless, the Father is not deterred by our resistance or lack of remorse. With every symbol of restoration, He is the one waiting to embrace the one who was lost. This lavish grace of the Father is ours as prodigal children. Though we neither expect nor deserve it, the celebration is thrown in our honor. The Father glories in the return of even one lost sheep.

*PAUSE AND PONDER:*

Pause for a moment and reflect on what it must feel like to be that father. He obviously loved his son and grieved his loss. Choose from the words below to describe how you would have felt if your son or someone you loved had walked away:

- Rejected
- Unloved
- Sorrowful
- Grief stricken
- Failure
- Dejected
- Hopeful



Now imagine yourself in the position of the father as he saw his son returning. Would you have felt compassion or anger?

Jesus was illustrating the Father's heart for His wayward children. He was showing us that God allows freedom because He loves us. He was teaching us that the Father does not invade our hearts, but rather invites us in. The sense of belonging we have as being the Lord's own possession, is planted in us by God our Father and nothing can uproot it. He never stops scanning the horizon for our return, nor does He withhold compassion from those who repent and want to turn back to Him.

*Where are you at this moment?* If you have traveled to your "far" country, your Heavenly Father waits for you. He watches each day that you may return and that He may run to you with His blessing.

**SOW:**

Read Luke 15:20 again. Also read Psalm 14:2, and receive the truth that that the God of the Universe waits and watches for you to return to Him.

**CULTIVATE:**

Do you fear returning to God because of your sin? How might imagining Him as your Father who looks for you help you to turn back to Him?

**GROW:**

Write down the qualities that characterize your own father. Make a check mark next to the ones that resemble those of the father in the story. Perhaps your earthly father was not compassionate. Consider how the image of your Father in heaven can help you see compassion and heal your relationship with your own father.



***“Mercy is always a  
gratuitous act of our  
heavenly Father, an  
unconditional and  
unmerited act of love.  
God is merciful;  
His mercy lasts forever.”***

POPE FRANCIS  
*(Misericordia et misera)*



# THE FATHER WHO RUNS

*"...he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him"*

LUKE 15:20



The heart of the prodigal son had much more to discover. While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion on him. He ran and embraced him and kissed him. *What do we make of this father who runs?*

A small detail such as this can miss a fundamental mark if not understood in its proper cultural context. According to ancient thought, the manner of a person's walk "shows what he is." Dignified men in Jewish culture did not run. To do so, the father would have had to "gird his loins," i.e., to hike up his tunic and expose his bare legs in an embarrassing display. The shame that this display would have brought upon him, his family, and the whole community would have been unbearable.

Jesus was making a clear and astonishing point. God, who is perfectly secure in Himself, will not only watch diligently for our return to Him but also run, when He sees us breaking all decorum, to save us from our waywardness.





The wayward son had brought disgrace to the family and, according to Deuteronomy 21:18-21, should have been stoned to death and exiled from the community. Protecting such waywardness would also have meant death by stoning for the father. What a perfect metaphor for the Cross and Jesus' sacrifice in protecting us from eternal punishment.

Saint Josemaria writes, *"When God runs towards us, we cannot keep silent, but with Saint Paul we exclaim: Abba, Pater: 'Father, my Father!' Though He is the Creator of the universe, He doesn't mind our not using high-sounding titles, nor worry about our not acknowledging His greatness."* We suffer when we give in to sin and our suffering makes God sorrowful. But when we return to Him, His sorrow comes to an end, and our evil does as well.

**SOW:**

Read Luke 15:20 again. Also read Isaiah 54:10.

**CULTIVATE:**

What does it mean to you that your Father in heaven breaks all decorum to show His love and acceptance of you, even when you have wandered into sin?

**GROW:**

Read the son's planned speech in Luke 15:18-19. Write down what you might plan to say to God as your return to Him. Would you confess sin? Find a trusted Christian friend to help you prepare for a good confession.



***“When God runs towards  
us, we cannot keep silent,  
but with Saint Paul we  
exclaim: Abba, Pater:  
‘Father, my Father!’”***

SAINT JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA



# THE FATHER WHO BLESSES

***"...Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet..."***

LUKE 15:22

Not only did the father run towards the son, but he also blessed him, immediately saying to his servants: *"Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"* (Luke 15: 22-24) The robe, ring, and sandals are symbols of the restorative, lavish grace that the father grants despite his son's failures.

According to Sandra Micelotti in "The Robe, The Ring and The Sandals," the gifts given by the father are rich in symbolic meaning. When the father places his robe on the son, he signals his complete acceptance of the boy. He shows the whole household and community that the prodigal will be accepted back as a son, not as a servant. Servants did not wear rings or expensive garments. The ring is thus undoubtedly a symbol of this restored identity. This is the father's signet. The ring represents the father's identity: he is placing his name upon the boy once again. The sandals are provided to a boy who has returned home destitute and shoeless, again revealing the father's renewed willingness to provide for his son. Finally, the feast is a celebration that the son lives again: desiring the other's good means celebrating every day of his or her life.

Think about it: everything the younger son had hoped to find in the far country, he received in his father's home, unearned and freely given.

But perhaps the most profound gesture of acceptance was the celebration and killing of the fatted calf. Jesus seemed to place Himself in the story as the calf. It is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ that makes the acceptance of our Father in heaven even possible. Just as the party and the killing of the calf showed the world that the father had accepted the boy home as a son again, the killing of the Savior of the World shows what our Father in heaven was willing to do to save us from our sins.



For the Christian, receiving God's salvation comes with *adoption* into His family. St. Paul said in Romans 8:15, "*For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'*" The prodigal son's father would only have him back as a son and your Father in heaven has secured your adoption by the blood of His own Son. 1 John 3:1 says, "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.*"

Notice the father's description of the son's experience: my son was dead, yet he now lives; he was lost and now is found. This is the spiritual experience of every lost sinner who returns to the Father through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:1-10). Our own salvation and redemption are entirely by the grace of our Father and made possible through the Son. They are free and unmerited. We have one thing to do: believe and turn in repentance to the Father who never stops scanning the horizon for us.

We call this the parable of the Prodigal Son, but we might with equal propriety call it the Parable of the Prodigal Father, for *prodigal* means *extravagant wastefulness*. It is the Father who wastes His love, though we squander it. It is the Father who waits with His request of grace, though we are undeserving. It is the Father who invites us to a celebration of the kingdom, regardless of where we now stand.

**SOW:**

Read the whole parable again.  
Also read John 3:16, and 1 John 4:9-11.

**CULTIVATE:**

Consider what it cost the Father to make a way for you to return. Consider your adoption, made possible by the blood of Jesus, as a son or a daughter in the family of God. How does it make you feel to understand the reality of your acceptance by God because of His love for you?

**GROW:**

Share your experience with a trusted friend and explore opportunities to serve God so that you can grow in Christ.



# THE FATHER WHO FORGIVES

*Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.'*

LUKE 15:31

The older son had some commendable virtues. He was hard-working, obedient, and always present in the father's business. He was a good Jew and followed the laws. However, Jesus was pointing a stark reality: obedience is only fruitful when motivated by love. The two greatest commandments Jesus taught were to love God and love one another (Matthew 22:37-38). The older son may have lived with his father, but he lived like a stranger in his own house. He was never intimately involved in his familial relationships. He never once used the word "brother!"

Having worked his whole life in his father's fields, he is angered by the celebration of his brother's return, jealous of his father's attention and forgiveness toward his brother, and envious of the gifts the younger son receives even after such wanton squandering.

The older son represents those who always measure love in competition with others. Such tainted love leaves one steeped in bitterness and stubborn pride. When asked to come and celebrate the prodigal's return, the older son says, in effect: *"What do you want from me? Why should I celebrate when he has brought shame to the family? Where was he all the time while I worked hard? I kind of hoped he would never come back."*





Yet to the older son who fumes outside the party and accuses his father of unfairness, the father responds with patience and care. He calls his elder heir to an awareness of heritage over inheritance: "*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours*" (Luke 15:31).

It is hard for the older brother to understand the transaction of unmerited grace. He has lived his whole life 'earning' his way to the father's heart. Yet, the father offers the same freedom to the older son as he did with the younger one. He is free to choose, free to squander grace and free to reject the father's love. The father reaches out to both sons by ignoring his own suffering. He forgives both sons because he realizes that both of them are 'lost' on their own, not living like true sons.

Henri Nouwen, in his book 'The Return of the Prodigal Son' writes "Can the elder son in me come home? ... How can I return when I am lost in resentment, when I am caught in jealousy, when I am imprisoned in obedience and duty [*that is*] lived out as slavery?" The answer is Yes. It can be found in living with gratitude as a disciple and not just in response to gifts or favors received. To live in gratitude is a choice.

**SOW:**

Read over again the older brother's words and the father's response in Luke 15:25-32. Read also Psalm 103:8.

**CULTIVATE:**

Celebration belongs to God's Kingdom. God offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. He wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them. How does this statement affect how you see God?

**GROW:**

Consider someone (people) who have hurt you. How can you release bitterness and offer them forgiveness? Write down moments in your life where you doubted God's goodness or saw His mercy towards your offenders as unfair. Talk to an elder about an area you are struggling with, when it comes to offense both in your inability to see God as just and your inability to offer forgiveness.



***“The mystery of  
‘home-coming’ wonderfully  
expresses the encounter  
between the Father and  
humanity, between mercy  
and misery, in a circle of  
love that touches not only  
the son who was lost, but  
is extended to all.”***

SAINT JOHN PAUL II