

THE INCREDIBLE STORY OF GOD'S AMAZING LOVE

ACT 3: THE FULFILLMENT

RESCUING THE LOST (The Lost Sons)

Luke 15 (NIV)

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: "...There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ "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. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ 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. ²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² "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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² 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.' "

Jesus' parables of lost and found.

1. Something is lost: **The younger son.**

"Father, give me my share of the estate" ... So he went.

*"I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found." —Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son**

2. Someone is searching: **The father.**

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Each little step toward the center [of the picture—the embrace of the father] seemed like an impossible demand, a demand requiring me to let go one more time from wanting to be in control, to give up one more time the desire to predict life, to die one more time to the fear of not knowing where it all will lead, and to surrender one more time to a love that knows no limits. And still, I knew that I would never be able to live the great commandment to love without allowing myself to be loved without conditions or prerequisites. The journey from teaching about love to allowing myself to be loved proved much longer than I realized. —Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*

3. Something is found: **The younger son.**

"Let's have a feast and celebrate...he was lost and is found."

This invitation to a meal is an invitation to intimacy with God.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*

4. Something is lost: **The older son.**

The older brother became angry... the father went out and pleaded with him... "and everything I have is yours."

There are many elder sons and elder daughters who are lost while still at home. —Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*

I now see that the hands that forgive, console, heal, and offer a festive meal must become my own. —Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*

For more reflections on the story, Kenneth Bailey's "Prodigal Son Parable" four part video series on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d8hF84qMPg>), and Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS—WEEK OF MARCH 22, 2020 THE FULFILLMENT—RESCUING THE LOST

CONNECT

- In a practical sense, how are you doing? How is the COVID19 affecting you?
- On a scale of 1 (low) -10 (high), how would you rate your level of anxiety? How would you rate your level of gratitude?

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

When times are uncertain and we feel isolated and alone, the best thing we can do is share our hearts, our gratitude, and our hope with each other. Consider this deeper sharing as an opportunity for God to cleanse your soul as you grow in your love and appreciation for one another. At times like these, it is a profound gift to have people who will listen, encourage, and celebrate our spiritual growth!

Opening: Take a moment in silence to sit quietly, breathe deeply, and open your heart to the Holy Spirit.

Share:

- In a spiritual sense, how is your soul? What word would you use to describe the condition of your soul right now?
- Reflecting on the past week: Where do you see evidence that God is always present, God is always at work, and God is always making things new?
- How could this become a time of deeper humility, surrender, and sacrifice for you?
- How can we pray for one another? Make your prayer requests specific and personal to what you need spiritually, physically, or emotionally or how you desire to be involved in the needs of others.

Pray: Spend time praying for one another. Ask each member to pray for just one other person in the group until everyone has been prayed for once.

Group Debrief: What did you see or hear as you shared and prayed together that would encourage the group? Did this time together have any impact on how you would rate your levels of gratitude or anxiety?

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION: Questions to stimulate discussion

- Read Luke 15:1-2; 11-32 aloud. What surprised you in this week's passage or message?
- What did you learn about the character of God from this parable? How does that comfort you today? How does that challenge you today?
- How does this parable answer the Pharisees objection in 15:1-2?
- What's the lesson for you today in this parable?
- How is spending time alone each day with Jesus changing how you deal with the current health crisis?
- Whom do you sense God is inviting you to "welcome" in the midst of this pandemic? What are creative ways we can extend the welcome we have received from God to others who may feel lost during this time of social distancing?

PRAYER and BENEDICTION

Pray: As you have shared together, how can you now pray for one another, the church, and the world?

Closing Benediction: Ask someone to read Psalm 23 aloud.

DAILY PRACTICE: Continue to spend time with God daily in Solitude, Scripture and Prayer (download new Reading Plan from the website). Ask God to show you how to pray for yourself, others, the church, and the world. Keep a journal of your prayers and any insights you receive from your time alone with God.