

THE LOST YOUNGER SON

Luke 15:11-32:

And He said, "A man had two sons. 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. 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. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 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. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 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! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' 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. 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.' 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; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 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.

"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And 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.' But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 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; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.'"

As in the first pair, each story in the second double parable has an inverted structure. The most significant element missing from the second pair is the lack of closure in the second parable. The younger son has reconciled with his father, but the second story ends without our knowing whether the older son has done the same. Bailey sees this structure in the second double parable:

- 11 1 "And he said, 'A man had two sons'" (introduction)
- 12 A A son is lost: "give me the share"
- 13 B Goods wasted in extravagant living

- 14 C Everything lost: “he had spent everything”; “he began to be impoverished”
 15 D The great sin: feeding pigs for Gentiles
 16 E Total rejection: “no one was giving anything to him”
 17 F A change of mind: “he came to his senses”; “I am dying here”
 18 F’ An initial repentance: make me a hired man (I will repay)
 19 E’ Total acceptance: his father “ran and embraced him and kissed him”
 21 D’ The great repentance: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son”
 22 C’ Everything gained: a robe, ring and shoes (restoration to sonship)
 23 B’ Goods used in joyful celebration
 24 A’ A son is found: “this son of mine was dead and has come to life”
 25-26 A The older son comes
 27 B Your brother is safe; a feast
 28 C Father comes to reconcile
 29 D Complaint 1: how you treat me
 30 D’ Complaint 2: how you treat him
 31 C’ Father tries to reconcile
 32 B’ Your brother is safe; a feast
 A’ ??? (Missing?)
 1’ ??? (Implication?)⁵

Whereas the first pair of parables could be easily distinguished (one was about a lost sheep; the other about a lost coin), this pair is more unified. The stories appear as one parable. The two “lost” elements appear in the same story: “A man had two sons.” As noted earlier, Jesus seems to compare the lost sheep and the younger son to the tax collectors/sinners and the lost coin/older brother to the scribes/Pharisees. In the second parable in the first pair, the lost coin was found by the woman, which would challenge the scribes and Pharisees to let themselves be found by Jesus. In the second pair, the older son is not only challenged to be reconciled to his father, he is also challenged to be reconciled to his brother. Therefore, the scribes and Pharisees would be challenged to be reconciled not only to God but also to the tax collectors and sinners who are returning to God. Thus, the two lost elements – the younger son and the older son – appear in the same story so that the scribes and Pharisees might be reconciled to the tax collectors and sinners. The scribes and Pharisees would do this by celebrating the return of the tax collectors and sinners instead of grumbling about it.

Just as the shepherd “has” sheep and the woman “has” coins, the father “had” two sons. The younger son makes a request that would have been unthinkable in that culture while his father is alive and in good health. He asks for his share of the estate. He would normally be entitled to his father’s wealth upon his death, but not before. In making this request, the younger son is saying that he wishes his father were dead. Bailey says that in all Middle Eastern literature from ancient times to the present, there is no case of any son asking for his inheritance from a father who is still in good health. Bailey, who maintains that peasant culture in the Middle East is virtually unchanged since the time of Christ, writes of his research concerning the request made by the younger son in this parable:

For over 15 years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son’s

request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has almost always been emphatically the same.

Bailey says his conversations with these people go something like this:

“Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?”

“Never!”

“Could anyone ever make such a request?”

“Impossible!”

“If anyone ever did, what would happen?”

“His father would beat him, of course!”

“Why?”

“This request means – he wants his father to die.”⁶

A father would be expected to explode in anger at such impudence, but this father grants the request. Literally, he divides his “life” between his sons. In this culture, a man’s estate, which primarily meant his land, was his life. Here is a love that grants freedom to the one who has spurned the very love that releases him. Here is human love that looks like divine love. It is the first in a series of shocking responses on the part of the father. Whereas the shepherd and the woman of the first double parable did nothing that wouldn’t be expected of someone in their shoes, this father is full of surprises.

Where is the older son in this scene? The father “divided his wealth between them.” The older son would be expected to protest his brother’s actions, act as a mediator between his father and his brother, and refuse his father’s offer. His inaction indicates a fractured relationship with his father that becomes more apparent later in the story.

Whereas the shepherd and the woman call together their friends and neighbors to rejoice with them for finding that which was lost, the younger son in this parable “gathered everything together.” He gathers together not friends but things, possibly to convert his inheritance into cash, and he does so not to rejoice with friends, neighbors and family but to leave them. He leaves “not many days later” because the community would be incensed by his disposition toward his father, his inheritance and his community.

The younger son goes on a journey to a “distant country.” Such a description would remind first century Jews of the journey their ancestors made to Babylon, the “far country” (Isaiah 39:3). Jerusalem was sacked by Babylon in 586 B.C. and the Israelites went into exile. The prophets, particularly Isaiah, looked forward to the return from exile (Isaiah 40:1-11, 52:1-13, 54:1-3). The way Luke and the other gospel writers tell the story, a greater and grander return from exile is under way as sinners gather around Jesus. The messianic feast is under way. With the coming of Jesus, the long night of Israel is over. The long night of humanity is over. Isaiah looked forward to this day (Isaiah 60), and all prophetic talk about the return from exile finds its ultimate fulfillment in the conversion of men and women to Christ and their eternal reign with him.

In the far country, the son squanders his estate with “loose living,” a phrase that implies a carefree approach to life but doesn’t necessarily imply sexual immorality. After he has spent everything, he finds himself in a position of need. But famine has struck the land, making it difficult for him to meet his need. In the far country, he has no friends or

family to turn to, so he, literally speaking, “joined” himself to one of the locals. In this way, he is like the tax collectors, who joined themselves to the Romans. A Middle Easterner would politely dispatch with an unwanted hanger-on by giving him a job he knew that he would refuse. This citizen sends the son into the fields to feed swine, considered to be unclean by Jews. Surprisingly, the son accepts the job. He left his family and community only to join himself to a foreigner and defile himself by feeding unclean animals.

He is so hungry that he wants to eat the pods that the pigs are eating, even though they probably had no nutritional value for humans. The story portrays him, in a sense, as wanting to become a pig. Beyond the paltry wage he was paid for feeding the swine, no one was giving him anything. By contrast, in the preceding context, food is plentiful at God’s table (Luke 13:22-14:35), and Jesus is receiving sinners and eating with them. In the preceding context of the story, the son’s father has shown himself to be gracious, dividing his estate among his sons at the younger son’s ghastly request. The son finds himself in need and defiles himself while seeking to meet his need, yet he is still wanting.

At this point, the son, literally, “came to himself.” Earlier, he left home, but now, he comes to himself. Before he comes to his father, he comes to himself. A recovery of some rationality is implied. He recognizes that even his father’s hired men have more than enough bread. So he formulates a plan. First, he will get up, or “arise.” He is apparently formulating the plan while seated and envisions getting up. Also, he has descended to a low point spiritually, emotionally and physically. The story is suggestive of a resurrection of sorts.

The son envisions confessing his sin to his father, acknowledging his unworthiness and asking to be treated as one of his father’s hired men, who were hired on a daily basis (Leviticus 25:50, Job 7:1). He does not ask to be a slave, which would have necessitated a much closer relationship with his father. As a hired man, he would be able to live as a free man, independent of his father. Although he has decided to return to his father, confess his sins and declare his unworthiness, this does not mean he is repentant. In fact, the description in verse 20 of his position when his father sees him suggests that he is not repentant. When he comes to his father, his father sees him while he is “still a long way off.” The word translated “long” is the same one that is translated “distant” in verse 13. The son went to a distant country, and though he is returning to his father, he is still distant. He is still, in some sense, in that country. This suggests that the son is not so much interested in reconciliation with his father as he is in feeding his stomach. Certainly, his plan will allow him to keep his distance. His plan appears to be utilitarian.

The experience of the son, again, echoes the experience of Israel. Although Israel returned to the land 70 years after its journey to Babylon, it never returned to its former glory and continued to be subject to occupying powers. In the minds of the Israelites, they were still in exile, looking for redemption (Luke 2:67-79, 25-38). More significantly, they were far from God, according to Jesus. Although they had returned to the promised land, they were “still a long way off.” They needed to return to God. When Matthew and Mark portray John the Baptist as baptizing people in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:6, Mark 1:5), they’re saying that the people, though living in the land, in essence need to re-enter it. As John said, they needed to repent, like the younger son in the parable.

When the son returns to the village, the community would be incensed because of his treatment of his father and his community. He would have to face an angry mob as

word spread of his return, exposing himself to verbal and perhaps physical abuse. His father, though, sees him and has compassion on him, as God has compassion to gather exiled Israel (Isaiah 54:7). Motivated by compassion, he runs to his son, probably to protect him from the mob. Even now, a Middle Eastern nobleman never runs anywhere. To do so would require him to hike up his long, flowing robes. When the father runs for his son, he is publicly humiliating himself. Such is the compassion of this father for his son. In embracing and kissing his son, the father is preventing him from falling to his knees and kissing the hand or the feet of his father. The kiss is a sign of forgiveness and acceptance. When Absalom, a wayward son, returned to his father and prostrated himself before him, King David kissed him to signify forgiveness and acceptance (2 Samuel 14:33).

The words translated “embraced him” would be literally translated “fell on his neck,” as the synonymous Hebrew words are translated in Genesis 33:4 (New American Standard Bible). In that scene, Jacob returns to his brother Esau, from whom he stole the birthright. How will Esau receive Jacob? Jacob bowed before him seven times while coming near to Esau. “Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” Likewise, in Jesus’ story of familial reconciliation, the father, when his son was approaching him, “ran” to him, “fell on his neck” and “kissed him.”

In response, the son brings forth the first part of his rehearsed speech, but he never gets to the request concerning becoming a hired man. Jesus does not say that the father interrupted the son. We’re left with the impression that the son simply decided not to make the request he had earlier planned to make. He must have changed his mind. The only thing that has happened between when he formed the plan and now is his father’s outrageous demonstration of compassion. The compassion of his father has changed the son’s mind. He does not say that he wants to be only a hired man, independent of his father. If his father is this compassionate, maybe, just maybe, he would want to be a son again and his father would accept him as a son again, though he is not worthy to be called one. It all depends on what the father does next. The father has shown his love for his son. The son, at the least, has not spurned his father’s love. How will the father react? The son wants to know.

The father instructs his slaves to act quickly, before the crowd acts and before the opportunity passes. Earlier, the father engaged in three highly symbolic actions: He ran, he embraced his son and he kissed him. Now he orders his slaves to put the best robe on his son, a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. These actions are also rich in symbolism. The robe would have been the father’s. By clothing his son with it, the father honors him and ensures his acceptance by the community. The ring, probably the father’s signet ring, symbolizes trust and authority (Genesis 41:42; Esther 3:10, 8:2). Earlier, no one was “giving” anything to him (verse 16); here, the father orders his slaves to, literally, “give” him this ring. The sandals signify that he is a free man living in his father’s house. The slaves, in putting sandals on the son, are acknowledging that he is their master. The father doesn’t want a hired man. He doesn’t want a slave. He wants a son.

Finally, the father orders that the fattened calf be killed and that a party be thrown. The fattened calf would have been reserved for special occasions (1 Samuel 28:24), and the entire community would be invited to partake. Members of the community, then, are to be invited to reconcile with this boy who insulted them. The

father sees his son's return as reason for a lavish party that involves the entire community, "for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." From the perspective of the son's relationship to his father and his community, he was dead. The son wished his father dead and killed the relationship. The resurrection that was foreshadowed when the son envisioned getting up, or "arising," and going to his father is now complete. Although the son left of his own volition, the father considered him lost. To make such a horrendous decision to leave, the son was not thinking right. He was disoriented. In this, also, we see that the father was searching for his son, as the shepherd was searching for the lost sheep and the woman was searching for the lost coin. To say that this son has been found is to say that his father was looking for him. When the son was still a long way off, he was still lost. The father ran out to him, searching for him.

When the father says "let us eat and celebrate," he is like the shepherd and the woman in the earlier stories, who gather people to celebrate the finding of that which was lost (Luke 15:6, 9). The complaint about Jesus was that he receives sinners, probably as a host, and "eats" with them. Here, the father receives his sinner-son, hosts a party and gathers the community to "eat" with the young man. The father, like the Lord in Psalm 23, has prepared a table for his son in the presence of his enemies, who would have abused him had he not intervened. The father, humiliating himself in front of the community, risks rejection by the community. Indeed, it's a costly banquet.

Repentance played a prominent role in the first two stories, and it does in this one as well. The story portrays repentance as having taken place, for the celebration ensues, just as it did in the two previous stories. When the son returned home, he still hadn't repented; he was still a long way off. He was not interested in repenting. His father's love changed him. It dismantled his pride. In the first story, the shepherd bore the burden of repentance, placing the sheep on his shoulders. In this story, the father also bears the burden of repentance. He humiliates himself in front of the entire village. His son should have been exposed to shame; instead, the father is shamed. The father bears the burden of his son's shame. "Repentance finally turns out to be the capacity to forego pride and accept graciousness."⁷ Although the boy said he no longer wanted to be his father's son and then no longer thought himself worthy to be called his father's son, the father's love convinces him that he is a son.

The father's dash to receive his son resonates with the incarnation and crucifixion. Satan and his angry mob would bring charges against us. God in his compassion left his heavenly home to take on human flesh and die on the cross, bearing our humiliation and shame. Like the father in the story, God in Christ forgives, accepts, honors, trusts, liberates and celebrates us. As the father in the story clothes his son with his best robe, God clothes us with "garments of salvation" and wraps us with "a robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10). We have been clothed with Christ himself (Galatians 3:27). "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" (Romans 8:33) No one, least of all Satan.

If the younger son's visit to the far country echoes the story of Israel, which went into exile to the far country, and if the father's dash to greet his son resonates with the incarnation and crucifixion, then the incarnation and crucifixion are also pictures of a sort of exile. Jesus voluntarily went into exile. He left heaven for earth, the far country. And he took the exile as far as it could be taken – to a hill outside Jerusalem. There, he was exiled from God. He went into exile for Israel and all humanity. While the younger son

was still a long way off, while he was still in exile, the father ran for him. “But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Identifying with the younger son

The younger son is like the lost sheep in the first story, and both are like the tax collectors and sinners in verses 1 and 2. Perhaps the younger son is in some ways like us as well. Some of us have left God. To us, God posed a threat. We were afraid that he would impose his will on us, so we wished him dead. In fact, we treated him as if he were dead, as if he didn't exist. Perhaps we even began to believe he didn't exist. We've insulted God in this way. We've killed the relationship. Perhaps we've killed other relationships as well and burned a few bridges. Amazingly, when we wished God dead, he didn't explode in anger, and he didn't stop us. He let us go, though we spurned the very love that granted us freedom.

We gathered everything that God had given us – our time, our talents our resources – and took them somewhere else. We went to the far country and lived it up. We indulged ourselves. We spent everything on our own pleasures. We squandered everything. We got ourselves in deeper and felt our need more intensely. Perhaps we joined ourselves to some shady characters. We've taken desperate measures to meet our needs, even longing for the “pods” that can't satisfy us for a second. No one has given us anything; they've just taken. The far country has ravaged our heart. Maybe we've felt a little dirty. Maybe we've felt dead. Maybe we've felt lost.

If we find ourselves in the position of the younger son, what does this story tell us? It tells us to come to our senses, to come to ourselves – to look around at the mess we've made of our lives and to be desperate enough to think that maybe God, who we turned our back on, can help. Say to yourself, “I will go to God.” It could be the first hint of a spiritual resurrection. At first, you may not want God for himself but only for what you hope he can do for you. It doesn't matter. The son wasn't condemned for his less-than-perfect motives. Neither will you be condemned. If you find yourself in need, go to God, even if you feel as if you're “a long way off.” You don't need to formulate elaborate plans to protect yourself from a God who you think won't accept you or to win his favor. Don't offer yourself as a hired man. Confess your sins, and cast yourself on the mercy of God.

As you're approaching God, what do you see? You see an angry mob gathering. There are some who would mock you for your failure, most of all Satan and his charges. They'll want to beat you up. You're still “a long way off,” far from God, but you're moving in the right direction. Jesus sees you, and he feels something. It's not anger; it's compassion. When Jesus sees you, he feels compassion. Now look, here he comes, hiking up his robes and running for you. With one hand, he's holding onto his robes, and with the other, he's reaching out to you. The desperate look of love on his face as he races to meet you before the mob does its work comes into focus as he draws near. He stumbles, becoming entangled in his robes. He humiliates himself before all creation in order to get to you. He bears your shame. He showers you with forgiveness and acceptance.

Now, do you want to be a son? A daughter? Look how he honors you and trusts you and liberates you. His astounding love, such as you have never seen, begins to break

through your resistance to him. But wait, that's not all. He calls for the fattened calf. He says, "Let's party! I got my son back! I got my daughter back!" You were lost, but the Father has found you. You were dead, but the Father has given you life. And know this: He was looking for you all along. While you were still a long way off, Jesus ran for you.

Questions

1. Do you think that you have in any way viewed God as a threat?
2. Is there any way in which you have gathered what God has given you (your time, talents and resources) and taken it elsewhere? If so, describe this experience.
3. If you have in any way chosen a lifestyle of indulgence, do you think you have in any way been damaged by such a choice? If so, how?
4. Do you think that thoughts that God will not fully accept you keep you from moving toward him and casting yourself on his mercy? If so, describe these thoughts.
5. Picture Jesus running to greet you with a look of desperate love in his face. What does this image do for you?
6. After answering the preceding question, what are your thoughts about being a son or daughter of God?
7. Picture Jesus throwing a party for you. What does this image do for you?

⁵ Bailey, 159-60.

⁶ Bailey, 161-62.

⁷ D.O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), Fortress, 171.