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~ **The Prodigal Son and His Prodigal Father Part 1** ~

You can learn much more about this story by doing these three things:

1. Read Luke 15:11-32.
2. Discover key cultural and historical insights.
3. Answer the reflective questions.

1. Read the text of the story.

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Luke 15:11-32 NASB	Luke 14:1-24 NLT
<p>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. 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 <i>anything</i> to him. 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.”’ 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 <i>for him</i>, 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.’ 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.</p>	<p>To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. ¹² The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.</p> <p>¹³ “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.</p> <p>¹⁷ “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’</p> <p>²⁰ “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’</p> <p>²² “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³ And kill</p>

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<p>²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he summoned one of the servants and <i>began</i> inquiring what these things could be. ²⁷ 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.’ ²⁸ But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and <i>began</i> pleading with him. 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.’ 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 <i>has begun</i> to live, and <i>was</i> lost and has been found.’”</p>	<p>the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.</p> <p>²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’</p> <p>²⁸ “The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, ²⁹ but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. ³⁰ Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’</p> <p>³¹ “His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. ³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’”</p>
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2. Discover key cultural and historical insights

These insights are from *Poet and Peasant* by Kenneth Bailey.

The Opening Scene

- For the son to ask for the inheritance was an unimaginable insult. At the best, it showed unbelievable greed and insensitivity. At its worst, it showed that he wanted his father to die.
- If a father divided his estate while he was alive, it was to settle disputes, and he would take the initiative. He would never do it under pressure. However, there is no recorded case in all Middle Eastern literature where a father does this at a son’s request.
- If a father divided his estate while living, he expected to receive benefit from that estate. It might become the property of his sons, but it was not at their disposal if the father lived.
- The younger son became the legal owner of his share. Although the story does not mention it, it is assumed that he asked his father for the right to dispose of his share. What should have never been asked for, and then, when asked for, what should have been kept for the care of his father until his death, is sold.
- In the ancient world, one would expect the father to erupt in anger and discipline his son because fathers had absolute control of their family.

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- In that setting, no father would have granted such a request without at least requesting the son to agree to care for him when he becomes old. But this father does not do this, which makes the situation so remarkable. Here is love beyond anything the world has ever seen.
- Legally, a father could not grant an inheritance if there was any duress. He could only do it if the action was purely voluntary. If there was duress, the transfer was invalid. Thus, the father had to act as if his action were voluntary. He had to hide his distress.
- If a person married an impure woman or sold property to the Gentiles, he was cut off. This was called a qesasah, “the cutting off” and showed community solidarity. When the prodigal returned, it would be found out that he lost everything to Gentiles and the family and the community would cut him off.
- The older brother receives his inheritance at the same time as the younger one. The story says that the father, “divided the inheritance to *them*.” And “*All that I have is yours.*” The older son should have loudly protested receiving his share of the estate which would have shown his disgust with his brother and a proclamation of his loyalty. But he kept silent, and benefited from his younger brother’s brashness.
- Jesus said the son sold his share “not many days” after he received it. He acted quickly because the community would turn against him for his family betrayal. He wants to get out of town as fast as he can.

In a Far Country

- We assume the Prodigal was immoral but the text does not say this. The older brother said it later, but this may have been his exaggeration. The text says he was wasteful in his spending. What he should have used for his father he wasted and spent on himself.
- Ten famines are recorded from 169 BC to AD 70. This would have been a powerful image for Jesus’ listeners.
- In a famine, there will be petitioners at the door of one with food. The way to get rid of someone who will not go away is to give him an unthinkable job.
- Not only is the Prodigal with unclean animals, he will also have to work on the Sabbath. His actions were a renunciation of his entire faith.
- The food the pigs ate was a wild carob that did not have enough nourishment for a human. Pigs could grub for its berries. Food with a high value would not be fed to pigs during a famine.
- No one was giving anything to him. The original language is in the imperfect tense showing continuous action. It means he tried begging or that no one was regularly giving anything to him. He lived with uncertainty.
- He was starving. He would receive something for his labor but in a time of famine, labor was cheap, and he would be hired for next to nothing.
- Some type of repentance is in view in the son’s turnaround, but not full repentance. He may simply be fully aware of his precarious state – of the consequences of his actions. But this is a start, and this is how God works with us. He lets us experience the consequences of our actions.
- “I have sinned against heaven and in your sight.” What was his sin? He realizes that he did not use his money as he should have – to care for his father. He has lost it all. What would have happened had he not lost it all? Would he have repented? Would he have come to his senses

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in realizing this? Thus, God uses hunger and need to drive us to see what we have done. He did not just lose his money. He did not just have a bad turn of events but now he sees the horror of what he has done. He has taken what was rightfully his father's and squandered it. Not only did his father not benefit by it, but the benefit to him is gone as well. The money had a moral responsibility attached to it.

- “Becoming a hired servant” – The Greek is *misthios*, which carries the idea of freedom to come and go in contrast to a *doulos* or a *paides* who would be attached to the household. As an independent *misthios*, he would be the social equal of his father and brother and could earn a living to pay back what he owed. He has a chance to make up for his mistake. This keeps pride intact.
- If he works as a *doulos* or *paides*, he will eat his brother's bread. This would require reconciliation with his brother, but with his plan to become a hired worker who would come for the day and then leave, this was not needed.
- He will have to face the village and deal with community disgust for what he has done.

The Son Returns

- Dignified men do not run in the Middle East. The father running to his son would draw a crowd.
- The son normally would have kissed the father's hand or feet but is prevented by the kisses of the father upon him.
- The Greek *kataphileo* can mean to kiss tenderly or repeatedly. For men, it was acceptable to kiss repeatedly.
- The father reconciles with the son at the edge of the village, and the son re-enters the village under the protective care of the father.
- The servants await a clue on how to treat the son. They are given it when the father tells them to dress the son like a king is to be dressed.
- The best robe is the father's, worn on feast days or grand occasions.
- The ring would be a signet ring.
- Shoes for his feet show that he is not a servant.
- Killing the calf means the entire community is invited. The boy is reconciled to the whole community. Calves were killed for weddings, a visit from an official, or any kind of grand occasion.

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3. Answer these reflective questions.

Why do you think the younger son wanted to leave? Was it boredom? A love for an extravagant life? Selfishness? Why do people turn away from God?

Why do you think it took so long for this son to come to his senses and return to his father? What does this say about us? Do we have to hit bottom before we come to God?

What do you think was most unusual about the father's actions? His allowing his son to leave with the inheritance? His running to the son? His banquet for the son?

Who do you know is like the prodigal son? Pray for this person right now.
