

A Fresh Start

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[0 : 00] to me, if you could keep your Bibles open there at page 1048, as we look at that together. And what's much more important than anything I say in the next 20 minutes or so is that each of us hears God speaking and has an encounter with him. So it's my custom to pray before we have a sermon here at St. Silas, have a talk. So let's pray together now.

Heavenly Father, the Bible says to know that you are God, for you made us. And so, Lord Almighty and loving Creator, we thank you for making known to us what you are like through your word. Speak to us now, we pray. Help us to know you and to respond rightly to you.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So the story we had read there is one of the most famous stories that Jesus told. And it's incredible that just one story can contain so much, encapsulate so much about the essence of the Christian faith. It's been called the gospel within the gospel for over a thousand years. But the setting is very important for us.

By this time, Jesus has been having an extraordinary impact. He's living this majestic, magnetic life. And people are just drawn to him. And the religious people are becoming convinced.

This is the one we've been waiting for. This is a man sent from God to put things right. And then comes the real shock with Jesus. It's that he spends his time with people who have nothing at all to do with religion. And the religious crowd don't like it at all.

[1 : 40] We see that in verse 1 of chapter 15, just the very beginning there, that it's the tax collectors and sinners gathering round to hear Jesus. Now the tax collectors at that time were an infamous corrupt crowd.

And these people who would have been rebellious from kind of God's commands are gathering round Jesus. And so then we hear in verse 2 that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law start muttering.

Now they're the religious people. They're the people of moral conformity. Offended. Self-righteous. As they look at this rebellious crowd who get Jesus' time. And so they mutter, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

They're scandalized. That's the setting for this incredible story. Three key people to think about, if you like. God and what he's like.

The religious people who are looking down on others. And the irreligious people. The rebels. The people from the wrong side of the tracks. We take those three groups into the story.

[2 : 49] First, Jesus describes a shepherd searching intently for a lost sheep. Then he describes a woman at home who loses a silver coin and she searches intently until she finds it.

And then he tells this third story. And we're going to follow the story by looking at four scenes, if you like. Four places in which the story takes place. And the first place is the home.

Scene one is the home. And in this home we hear about three main characters. There's the man and he's got two sons. So the father in the story represents God.

And the sons represent those two groups in Jesus' midst in the audience and how they're treating God. There's the religious crowd and the rebellious crowd.

Just as today these two sons they each represent different ways that you or I might treat God.

There's the younger son. Who runs away. And there's the older son who stays at home.

[3 : 48] So we see that all's not well in the home in verse 12. The younger son said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. So clearly this is a landed man.

What normally has to happen for a son to get his inheritance? The son is saying, I wish you were dead. I'd rather you were dead and I had your stuff now than that you were still here heading the household and limiting my fun.

It's the point where the Middle Eastern dad is perfectly entitled to slap his son across the face and tell him to get out. But the response comes at the end of verse 12. So he divided his property between them.

Can you imagine this estate that maybe had taken generations to build? Orchards that had been planted by ancestors. And the father is willing to cut off part of it and sell it so that his younger son can have what he wants.

He should have rejected his son for this shameful attitude. Instead he grants his son the freedom to reject the father's love. And so in verse 13 he leaves.

[5 : 02] 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. It's just a picture of how we treat God.

And it's a very powerful picture because it's a picture of home. And home is very important to us isn't it? You get used to a place that you live. You get used to the buildings and the streets and the shape of things.

You even get used to the weather. You get used to the people. I've got a friend who's a diplomat and over the last 15 years he's often been in different cities around the world moving for just a few years at a time.

And it's very important to him and his family when they move that they get the pictures from their home in the UK up on the walls in the rooms that they move to as soon as they arrive just to give them a taste of home just so that it starts to feel familiar quickly.

Home is very important to us. So do you see the picture Jesus painting for us here. He's saying that for us as people created by a good God who is a good father our home is to be with God.

[6 : 16] And so if you don't know God if you don't have a personal relationship with God then the message of the Bible is come home. Maybe you're even here this morning and you don't know God and you feel a bit dislocated in life.

A bit like there's something missing. Well come home to God. But at this stage in the story the son doesn't want to go home.

He wants to leave home. And in that decision Jesus gives us a picture of how we treat God. We want the good things that he gives us but we don't want him.

We want the gifts without the giver. And so we leave. some of us are very vocal in the way that we leave God. You know there are people who are and you might be someone who is proud to say I'm an atheist and you try and persuade people that there is no God.

That it's a load of nonsense this Christian stuff. You're better off without it. You leave out the front door. You want nothing to do with God. Perhaps for more of us in Scotland today we don't leave so adamantly out the front door but we just slip out the back door when it comes to God.

[7 : 29] So we might say well you know I've got nothing against God. You know there might be a God. There might be a good God. But when it comes to looking at the pattern of our lives we clearly don't live with him at the center of our lives orbiting around him.

And if God really is the source of everything good in our world then we're enjoying the good things of life in Glasgow. You know the holidays, the home, the friendships, the sport, the music, the career.

We're taking the good things from him and we are not acknowledging him as the giver. Because fundamentally we want to be in charge of our lives.

We don't really want to say to God thy will be done because we want no my will be done. I want to make my own mind how to live. And that means every one of us is a bit like that younger son in the story.

And we follow his story in scene two. Scene two is the distant country. Let's pick things up again in verse 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.

[8 : 43] It's going well isn't it? As he throws off the shackles of his home life in exchange for presumably plenty of wine, women and song. He's living the dream.

But it doesn't last very long. I don't know if any of you remember Eric Clapton unplugged. He had a song, Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out.

And that's what this son discovers really when things take a turn for the worse. Verse 14, After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need.

Then it gets worse. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

You just imagine, can't you, that first audience of Jesus hearing him tell the story there. They're Jewish people. They have nothing to do with pigs. And they'd be shuddering at this idea of this young man who'd left the family home.

[9:41] Verse 16, he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating but no one gave him anything. He's envying the pigs. That is rock bottom.

And he realizes, things are so bad now, I will be better off working as a slave for my dad. That's the reasoning of verse 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. So then he writes, a coming home speech.

He thinks it's worth a shot. And he sets off back to the estate. And on the way, you can imagine him rehearsing his speech. He knows that by rights, his father wouldn't even be willing to be in the same room as him.

He's shamed his father. What would the neighbors think of the way he treated his dad? Getting the estates divided up, squandering what he had. But he's got his speech prepared.

[10:43] Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But just make me like one of your hired servants. So that at this point, we're given a picture of what it might look like for any one of us to start a journey with God again.

However tentative. You don't have to have got your life in order. Clearly he hasn't got his life in order. You don't have to have resolved that from now on you're going to keep the Ten Commandments and go to church every week.

None of that. You might just be willing to take a first step on the road back to God. A step of talking to him. Of asking him for help. That's what this son wants to do.

Perhaps for you, that step is just being here this morning. And the genius of this story that Jesus told is that it gives us a chance to hear what the living God is really like.

Remember that first audience muttering away about Jesus and who he welcomes. What they expect of Jesus is to find that God's door is firmly shut to people who have turned away from him.

[11:56] And when they hear this story about the son and how he's treated his father, I wish you were dead so I could have the estate and leave, they expect the man here to behave like any self-respecting Middle Eastern man would do and banish the son.

And yet here is the son making his way back up the road again. What a chancer. What a nerve. And that brings us to our third scene, the roadside.

So picture the son trudging, exhausted, emaciated, in rags, finally reaching the road that used to be so familiar to him, the road home.

practicing his speech, Father, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. And then he looks up and in the distance he sees a flicker and it's somebody running towards him.

Verse 20. 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.

[13:02] We get the impression from the way Jesus tells the story that the father has been watching day by day, standing watch for his son. And he runs out this respectable Middle Eastern man.

Now, I don't know much about Middle Eastern culture but I'm told Middle Eastern men who are respectable never run. Okay? This is extraordinary what the man does. So overwhelmed by his love for the son, he humiliates himself to welcome the son who ran away.

Sorry. It's a very powerful story. And the son, the son doesn't know what to do. So I think he seems to lose control.

He just blurts out the speech anyway. He says, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But his father says to him, well, he turns to the servants and says, quick, get the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. What's going on? He's completely restoring the son. And in verse 24, he says, this son of mine was dead and is alive again.

[14:13] He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. And that picture of deep joy, that picture of celebration is the picture Jesus is giving us of the heart of God's character.

I don't know what words you would use today to describe God, but lots of us would use words about God like powerful, creator, mighty, holy, just.

Some of us might use words like loving, good, wise. But I wonder how many of us when asked to describe God would use the word happy about God.

Jesus says, God is happy. It's the climax of all three of the stories Jesus tells here. He is happy when people like you and me turn back to him.

He's as happy as a shepherd who has gone searching for a lost sheep and finds it. And he calls to his friends and says, rejoice with me, I found my lost sheep. He's as happy as a woman who loses a silver coin and then finds it and says to her friends, rejoice with me, I found my lost coin.

[15:22] And it's this great discovery that moves somebody to be willing to give up a life away from God where you get to make your own choices about how you live.

What would move you to be willing to come under God's fatherly care? Well, to hear that this is the kind of father he is, that he is so joyful that you would return to the family home, that he is full of forgiving, longing, costly, humiliating love for us.

It moves you to turn back to him. Love that was shown just a short time after Jesus told this story when he died the death we should have died on the cross to deal with our sin in our place so that God could have the joy of welcoming us back.

That's the humiliating love that God shows us. And that joy runs like a thread through the three stories so that the shepherd finds the sheep and he calls to his friends and says, celebrate with me. I found my sheep. And then the woman finds a lost coin and she tells her friends, come and celebrate. I found my lost coin. And then we hear about this party. And did you notice as well, well, if you just look back in the chapter, we didn't have the other stories read, but the story of the lost coin, she finds the coin and then in verse 10, Jesus says, in the same way I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

[16:54] Now, of course, it's God who's in the presence of the angels of God rejoicing over one sinner who repents. We hear in verse 7 with the lost sheep, there's rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.

But those stories aren't about people repenting. They're about someone finding something that was lost. They're not about people making decisions to turn back to God. And then we get this story, the story of a boy who really does decide to turn back to God, of a sinner who repents.

And instead, Jesus says, verse 24, and again in verse 32, this son of mine was lost and is found. It's two sides of the same coin.

When any of us is willing to step back towards God, we're promised that he will engulf us with this unconditional love and acceptance that moves us to repent, to come home.

And at the same time as we have that change of heart, it's as though we were lost and precious to God and he has found us. Both things going on at the same time.

[18:02] But there's an epilogue to the story and that's seen for outside the party. The oldest son has been at home the whole time. He's a good kid but it turns out he's just as lost as the younger son who ran away.

He comes in from a hard day's work in the field and he hears the party going on, the music, the dancing, the celebration. So he calls one of the servants to ask him what's going on and he's told, it's your brother.

He showed up and your father has killed the fattened calf to celebrate that he's got your brother back. But the older brother becomes angry and he won't join the party.

So again, it's time for the father to show that he loves his son so much he's willing to be shamed by their behavior. Instead of leaving the son to sulk outside, he leaves the party with everyone there so that he can go out and plead with the son.

You can see how the older son views the father in verse 29. 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.

[19:15] But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him. So who does the son represent there?

He represents the religious people in the audience with Jesus. They are the moralistic people, the churchgoers, the Bible people. But they've missed that Christianity is not about rules to keep from a God who will judge us harshly.

It's about knowing the unconditional love of God as your heavenly father. They've missed it. And churches are full of people like this today. Older brothers.

There's a bit of the older brother in so many of us. There's a bit of the older brother in me. People who start to think the Christian faith it's just about obeying God so that you get accepted by him. And as soon as you start thinking like that you start looking down on other people. We heard Gordon earlier didn't we describe him that journey he had to go through as a Christian where he started looking down on others and had to be corrected in his thinking.

[20 : 23] And when you start thinking like that you don't just look down on other people you resent God because you've missed that his love for you is the unconditional love of a father.

And when an older brother like that encounters the grace of God shown to a younger brother like this he finds it hard to join the party because he resents that God would have mercy on this other person and show this kind of humiliating sacrificial love for someone who doesn't deserve it.

It's exactly what those muttering Pharisees had got wrong. So the parable ends with that appeal from the father to the older son. He's outside the party and he says my son you're always with me everything I have is yours but we had to celebrate and be glad because this son of this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. That's the appeal. It's the final scene of the play. And the curtain falls and the audience is left with this challenge.

What will you do with this Jesus? And that's the question that we're left with this morning. This is Jesus what are you going to do with him?

[21 : 43] Some of us hear the story and we're more like the older brother. We need to be challenged by it because older brothers are in grave danger. You can be a very morally upright person but you can still be very lost.

You can be someone who thinks well I think there probably is a God but you know I'm alright. I've done more good things than bad things. God's going to accept me because of the way I've lived. And if that's how you feel then you can be in grave danger because you can be at home but have completely missed the relationship with the father.

But some of us need to hear this story because we're more like the younger brother that you know you haven't been the person you ought to have been. And if you're the younger brother then consider the picture Jesus gives us of God's love for you.

That no matter how little you've thought of God before in your life there is not a day in your life that has gone by when God has not been looking intently at you longing that you would set off back to him.

And wonderfully he is waiting today for the moment you do turn to him he will run towards you in love to embrace you as his child. The story is told of a girl in Brazil who left her family home in rebellion to go and live in the city and for the family who she left behind the weeks turned into months and eventually the dad ran out of patience in concern for his daughter and so he went to Rio to try and find his daughter and he asked around in the bars and the nightclubs and he found people had seen her but hadn't seen her for some time and in the end he tried something in desperation so the girl the daughter was out one night her life having fallen into a terrible mess from the mistakes she'd made and she was stunned as she looked down at a table in a nightclub and saw a little card and it was a picture of herself on the card so she picked up the cards with a picture of herself on and saw they were all over the nightclub they were just scattered around and when she turned it over it had this message wherever you are whatever you've done it doesn't matter come home that's the message

[23 : 59] Jesus gives us here and you might think well I couldn't possibly go back to God after the way that I've lived but the message is wherever you are whatever you've done come home you think no you don't understand I've done some terrible things I've been a man of the world whoever you are whatever you've done it doesn't matter come home no not for me I'm a Muslim I'm an atheist I'm an addict wherever you are whatever you've done come home be moved by the Father's love for you his unconditional acceptance to turn back to him and know him as your Father back home today now to give us some time just to reflect on Jesus' words there in Luke 15 that story we're just going to hear a song now written by a member of our church family Greg that is inspired by the thinking of that younger son as he turns away from that far away land and heads home so that song will be performed for us just as a chance to reflect on the story you