

## **We Had to Celebrate**

*Luke 15:11-32*

We have come to part five – the last – of our summer study of the parable of the Prodigal Son, based on Timothy Keller’s Book, The Prodigal God. Over the past four weeks, we have looked at the story of the younger brother, then we put that into its context with the story of the elder brother. Then we put the story of the *two* brothers into the context of the whole chapter. Each time we saw another important part of Jesus’ message.

But we are not quite finished with this yet! There is one more context in which to consider these now familiar characters - we need to see the story in the context of the whole Bible. Jesus, of course, was immersed in the Scriptures, in the imagery of the Hebrew Bible, and in this story we could say that Jesus is giving us the essence of the whole Biblical storyline.

So, in a sense we can look at this parable as a great mountain peak, and from its summit, we can look over the entire surrounding landscape. And when we look out, I’d like to suggest three things we might be able to see from up here: 1) the human condition, 2) the divine solution, and 3) the new community.

### **1. The human condition—verses 13-17**

The younger brother’s decision making changed everything for him. But most importantly, we can see that his sin turned him into an exile from his home. Because of the manner in which he demanded his inheritance, he had disgraced his family, and the entire community would have been outraged. The result is that he had to go - he would have had to take his money and go far away, and that is exactly what he did.

When he did that, he became an ‘image’ – a symbol – of the entire human race. The Bible begins with the story of Creation. We gather from these ancient poems a very clear message: we were created for a life ‘in the Garden’. I.e., our *true* home is in the presence of God. But we have lost our home. As human beings then, we are *all* exiles.

## **We Had to Celebrate**

“Home” would be the place that truly fits and suits us. We were made to know and serve God, to live in his presence and enjoy his love and beauty. In the book of Ecclesiastes 3 we read that God has placed ‘eternity in our hearts’ – but we cannot figure out what this means<sup>1</sup>. So our human condition is to be restless... because we are never where we were meant to be while on this earth, but we have an inner pull- an urge – to find that home.

God has placed eternity in our hearts, God has placed a compass inside us that (should we listen to it) will lead us to him; but, because we want to be our own Saviors and Lords, we have lost sight of God, and the result is that we wander in this world and experience what the philosopher Heidegger called *unheimlichkeit*. That’s a German word that is translated as “eeriness” or “uncanniness” but literally it means “*away from home*.” Heidegger is referring to the anxiety and spiritual unrest that comes from never feeling completely at home in the world.

Peggy Lee sang about this experience in her song “Is That All There Is?” – everything she tried, disappointed her. You may have experienced it in a holiday celebration – Christmas or Thanksgiving just didn’t seem to be all you hoped it would be, or as you remember it from your childhood.

Last summer I read a biography of C. S. Lewis. Lewis was an intellectual giant of his time (and beyond) who moved from atheism to Christianity as a young man, and became a popular writer of theological philosophy and children’s books (like, The Chronicles of Narnia). He called himself “the most reluctant convert in all of Christendom”, because he truly did not *want* to believe; but the more he reasoned, the more he studied, the more he came to the conclusion that Christianity was the *only* reasonable Destination in his search for truth.

But I was fascinated to read that one of the ‘road signs’ that kept pointing him to Christianity was an inner sense he had from when he was a young boy of a place where there was happiness and real beauty. He wrote whimsical tales of knights and adventurers who would go out in search of this land (which he often simply referred to as “The North Land”) but he found that as he

---

<sup>1</sup> “*He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end*” (Ecc. 3: 10b)

## **We Had to Celebrate**

matured intellectually – eventually he became a professor of medieval literature at Cambridge – that longing (to his surprise) never left him. And he became convinced that there was something more to it than the flights of fancy of a young man’s imagination.

He developed the concept that our memories of things that are good are actually “memories of memories”, that is, the good things we have experienced in our lives are mere shadows of the desire within us for the *ultimate* good, for heaven. So this longing within us, a longing for that “other land” has been triggered by something we have not actually experienced on this earth. This is the ‘eternity’ that God has placed in our hearts.

Lewis wrote about this longing in his essay *Till We Have Faces*, “Do you think it all meant nothing, all the longing? The longing for home? For indeed it now feels not like going, but like *going back*. All my life the God of the Mountain has been wooing me. Oh, look up once at least before the end and wish me joy. I am going to my lover.”

Our human problem, which Lewis came to see very clearly, is that this world doesn’t address the *needs* of our heart. It *can’t*. We might say that this world *articulates* those needs, it points them out to us. But it doesn’t provide what we’re looking for. We long for a love that can’t be lost, we long for escape from death, we long for the triumph of justice over wrong. But such things will *never* be found here. Not in any fullness. So whenever we experience them, it will be with a slight disappointment, with a sense that there must be something more.

The younger brother in our parable left home to find what he was looking for. In spite of all he had, he wanted something else, he wanted control, and he left to find it. And he made a worse mess of everything.

Eventually he “came to his senses” and he realized that he needed to *go home*, but how? He was smart enough to realize that he was an outcast, so why would they ever receive him? Why would they take him back? But where else could he go? So he went home.

## **We Had to Celebrate**

### **2. The divine solution—verses 31-32.**

The centerpiece of the parable is a feast. The father throws a feast, filled with “music and dancing” and the greatest delicacies, to mark the reconciliation and restoration of his son. He confidently states that when the younger son came home, “We *had to* celebrate.” Have you considered those words? He’s saying, “There was no choice *but* to celebrate!” We had to have this feast. So why is the feast so important?

In the Old Testament, meals marked special occasions. Meals ratified covenants, celebrated victories, and marked all special family occasions and times of life transitions - such as births, weddings, and funerals. And of course, we still do that today, although perhaps not to the same extent. A wedding feast in Jesus’ day, for example, typically lasted *an entire week!*

As we talked about in our [24 Hours That Changed the World](#) series last Spring, a feast was established to mark the greatest event in the salvation history of God’s people to that time—the Passover. Passover centered around a *meal*. Why were meals so important?

In ancient times, meals were prolonged affairs that typically lasted all evening, usually until bed-time – since there was little else to do after the sun went down and after a strenuous day of labor. So evening meals became the center of family life, and so they were both a symbol and practice of intimacy.

But we don’t need to be first century people to grasp all this! It is at certain meals that we feel most at home. In a meal your body is getting what it needs – the pleasure and nourishment of food and rest. But also, at *special* meals our hearts are getting what they need as well – laughter and friendship. Even today, if you have a family reunion or some kind of homecoming (which I know many of you do) – what do you do there? You eat! In fact, a shared meal tends to be the focal point of those reunions. And it is at those great “feasts” that no matter what else is going wrong in our lives, we feel *almost* at home. *Almost!*

The feast in Scripture, and in this parable, means that God will bring us home some day.

## **We Had to Celebrate**

Jesus says in Matt 8:11: *“Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven”*. As we saw last week, because of our true elder brother, because of the work he has done, one day God will make this world home again. He’s going to wipe away all of the suffering, and tears, and death itself, and he is going to give us bodies that run and are never weary.

And when we get there, we will say something like what Jewel the Unicorn said at the end of the Chronicles of Narnia (expressing in children’s terms that long developing concept in C. S. Lewis’ theology): *“I’ve come home at last! I belong here. This is the land I’ve been looking for all my life, though I never knew it!”*

The younger brother did not expect to be brought back into the family, he certainly did not expect a feast, because he had sinned. He messed up, and expected things could never be right again. But a feast is what he gets. And the elder brother objects. Why?

Because meals signified acceptance and relationship, the religious leaders in Jesus’ day forbid believers from eating with “sinners.” To eat with someone was to receive him, virtually as family. How could you do that for someone who has rejected God? Besides that, didn’t everyone know that you *become like the people you love* and spend the most time with? If you eat with sinners, it was reasoned, you would become a sinner.

The Jewish dietary laws were extremely elaborate. They were seen as quite effective in keeping Jews from being polluted by the pagan practices of their neighbors. In fact, during the time between testaments, leading up to Jesus’ day, preoccupation with ritual purity increased, as Judea came under the boot of one set of pagan masters after another. So instead of being tables of reconciliation, meals more and more became ‘boundary markers’ between the righteous and sinners. They were the ways to ‘keep score’ as to who is with us, and who isn’t; between who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’!

But Jesus shattered this practice, as we see in Luke 15:2. He eats with the notoriously wicked and the marginalized. How can he do this? How can sinners be included in the feast?

## We Had to Celebrate

### 3. The new communion—“this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.”

Jesus leaves his own true home (Phil. 2), wanders the earth without a home (Matt 8:20), and is finally crucified outside the gate of Jerusalem, a sign of his exile and rejection (Heb. 13: 12<sup>2</sup>). Jesus experiences the exile of the human race. And he takes it upon himself; He is alienated and cast out so we can be brought home.

As we can see from the parable, Jesus calls younger brothers to repent. He does not only eat with them for the sake of “inclusiveness” or just to defy convention, but rather he calls people to change.

And we see here a foretaste of that great feast, the one that we call “The Lord’s Supper” or Holy Communion. Jesus took (as we saw last Lent) the feast of the Passover and made himself the center of it. The bread and the cup of wine became the most holy symbols of our faith – symbols of his death on the Cross. To sit at the Communion table feast you don’t have to be perfect, only repentant; ready to walk in a new life with Christ. So *anyone* can come, and anyone does come.

Think of it like this, the Ultimate son, the One who was dead and cut off, is now alive again! So *we* have to celebrate! And the way we celebrate what he has done for us, is to create a new community – not a community of the righteous, not a community of people who have it all together, and come together once a week or so to bask in our own glory, but a community of forgiven sinners, one in which *anyone* can be a part. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done, it doesn’t matter what your race or class or background is. *Anyone* can come and be a brother and a sister, because of the death and resurrection of our true elder brother, who took our exile and punishment upon himself.

But we need to respond! Salvation is experiential – the Father is calling *us* to come into the feast. It is our decision to respond or walk away. The Psalmist, too, invites us with sensory and provocative words: “O Taste and See that the Lord is good!”

---

<sup>2 12</sup> And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

## **We Had to Celebrate**

The death and resurrection of the Son, and the love of our Father, has created a new community of men and women who regularly break bread together to celebrate the new life and the union we have in common through Jesus. It is not enough just to have an individual *personal* relationship with God through Christ – Christ didn't die so that we could remain separated, and alone. We have to be an active part of the feast, the new community, the family of God – it is our joy and privilege to be just that.

This is where together we are shaped, the place where we become conformed into the image of the one who did all this for us. This is the place – where we most clearly experience 'home', until we meet together on the 'other side' and find the real thing.

Let me close with this poignant observation by C. S. Lewis on Friendship, which, to me, really summarizes the 'point' of sticking it out with each other in a fellowship like this...

In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles [Williams] is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's [Tolkien's] reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from have more of Ronald, having him "to myself" now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald... In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious "nearness by resemblance" to heaven itself where the very multitude of the blessed (which no one can number) increases the fruition which each of us has of God. for every soul, seeing him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest. that, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah's vision are crying "holy, Holy, Holy" to one another(Isaiah 6:3). The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall have."