

THE LOST SON

by Mark Horst

KEY VERSE:

"... But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

Luke 15:32

FAITH STORY:

Luke 15:11-32

FAITH FOCUS:

Jesus was telling the people stories (parables) and he began to tell them a parable about a man who had two sons. One of the sons wanted his share of his inheritance. So the father gave it to him and he took it and went away. He squandered the wealth on immoral things and when he was out of money, a severe famine hit. He got a job feeding pigs, but the pigs were eating better than he was. He decided to go back to his father and confess that he had sinned and that he, instead of being his son, would be willing to be treated as a servant because even the servants were better off than he was. When the son approached the father's house, he was welcomed and the father celebrated because his long lost son had returned. However, the older brother (the one who was still living at home) was angry because the father had never thrown a party for him and he was always good. But the father said "you already have all that I own. Your brother was dead and now he is alive... we must celebrate."

SESSION GOAL:

To help students understand that God celebrates when the lost people are found, and how all of us are, in one sense, lost.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Process the story and the feelings and actions of the different characters in the story.
- Contemplate their own faith journey in terms of the story and which person they identify with the most.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Chalkboard, newsprint or poster board
- 2 Bibles for each student
- 3 Paper and pencils
- 4 Party supplies—snacks, cake, balloons, games—whatever you want to do

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5–8 minutes)

Ask students: *What are some of your favorite possessions that you have at home?*

Then ask: *Have you ever lost anything that was important to you? How did you feel when you lost something valuable? How did you feel when you found something you thought you'd lost?*

As students share their responses, write them down on a chalkboard, newsprint or poster board. **After you have a substantial list ask the students:** *Have you ever celebrated all of the things you didn't lose? Why not?*

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

Discuss: *Why do we celebrate finding something, but not the things that we have never lost? Can you think of stories in the Bible that talk about losing something and then finding it again, or celebrating something that was never lost?*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (30–40 minutes)

Divide into groups of 3-5 students and ask each group to do a drama based on the scripture passage. **They can choose to:**

- 1 Simply act it out as it is told in these verses
- 2 paraphrase it into modern words but with the same characters
- 3 put it into a modern-day context and change the characters but keep the same meaning.

Invite groups to share their dramas with the whole class. **When they are done, discuss the following:**

- 1 Why did the son go away?
- 2 Where was the older brother while the son was gone?
- 3 What was the father's reaction when the son came back? Why was there a celebration?
- 4 Why was the older brother unhappy?

Share a mini-lecture on these points:

- 1 The son was tempted, just like we are today, to follow the world and have "fun."
- 2 The father (like God) gives his children free will to make mistakes
- 3 The son dishonored the father when he asked for his share of the inheritance. It would be like wishing his father was dead.
- 4 The son, after squandering all he had on sinful things, tried to make it on his own (by being a pig feeder). Being a caretaker of swine is historically significant because pigs were considered unclean animals, so being the caretaker exemplifies his low status.

- 5 The son realized that he needed his father to survive
- 6 When the son returns home, the father is overjoyed and has a huge party
- 7 The older son is upset because he thinks he has never had a party. In reality, as the oldest son, he would get double the inheritance and more than his brother anyway.
- 8 The father explains that the older son already is going to inherit all that the father owns, but he thought the younger son was dead, but now he is alive, so they must celebrate!
- 9 God celebrates when a lost sheep is found (see Matt. 18:12-14). Why? Is it only because we go to heaven? Or is it because our relationship with God while we are living on earth is just as important to God as our life after death?

...If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Matthew 18:12-14

APPLY: (7–10 minutes)

Hand out paper, pencils and Bibles and ask students go find some “alone space” to think about which character in this story they relate to the most and why. Ask them to also think about when and how we might be like God the loving parent in this story. Assure them that they will not have to share this with the whole group—this is their own time for processing.

RESPOND: (5–10 minutes)

Say: *We’ve heard in this story that God rejoices when one of his children comes home. I know that each of you are at different places in your relationship with God, and I also know that God loves you wherever you are and is always eager to give you a “Welcome back” hug. Let’s have a little party today, to celebrate God’s huge love for us!*

Celebrate and have fun!

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

The story of the lost son is a parable. A parable is a story that functions as a metaphor. Some of the parables told in the Bible are aphorisms more than narratives, such as Mark 3:24-25. The passage used in this Bible study is more of a metaphorical narrative. This means that Jesus was telling a story that had a deeper meaning. Although Jesus was telling a story about a man and his son who ran away, it is easy to see that he was relating this to the way we relate to God.

In the biblical times when this parable was told, the idea of inheritance was to keep all the family’s wealth and property in the family. In the biblical worldview it was believed that a man lives on only through his family, so if he wants his “stuff” to keep living with him then it must stay in the family line. This is evident in the Israelite law in Numbers 36:7 where it talks about not letting possessions leave the tribe. Knowing this makes it easier to understand

why the older brother is angry at the father for celebrating with the son because he has taken half of what the family owns and lost it. This means that half of the father's possessions are no longer in the family.

Finally, the reference to the pigs is a significant one. Pigs in the Old Testament were unclean animals. Pigs were considered unclean because this type of animal was sacred to other religions. Taking care of the pigs was one of the lowest jobs the runaway son could have. This shows how much he needed to go home to his father.

WORKS CITED:

The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, General Editor: Paul J. Achtemeier, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996

Harper Study Bible, Matthew and Luke; Zondervan, 1991