



## **CROSS TRAINING:** What price would you pay to get a (real) life?

**Week Four:**  
*A Brief History of God*  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

### **Preparing for the Text**

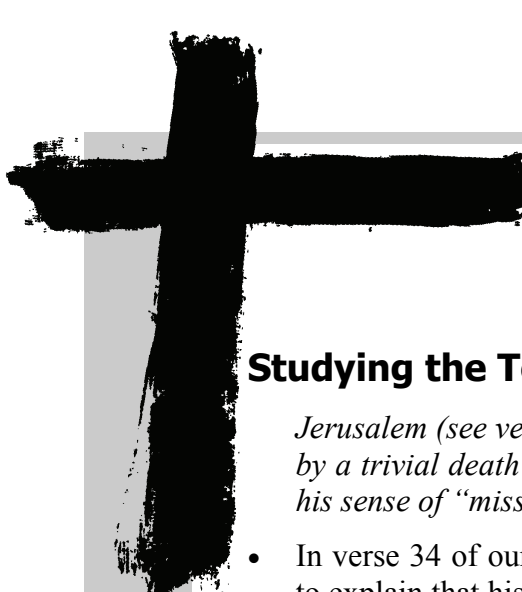
Knowing that we will be studying one of the most familiar stories of the Bible in this session, it will probably prove helpful to invest some time in the opening icebreaker questions as a way of grounding the discussion of the text in some of our real, flesh-and-blood experience. Rather than allowing our study to become dominated by the repetition of conventional interpretations and commentaries on the parable Jesus tells to describe the patient, compassionate love of God, we will want to do everything we can to read this gripping story with fresh eyes, open ears and receptive hearts. With this purpose in mind, use a few minutes to allow your small group or class to discuss the following questions:

- What is your *earliest* memory of a time when you or a loved one seemed to have become lost or physically separated from parents or family, and what stands out in your recollection of that experience of being “lost” and then “found?”
- Knowing that “coming of age” in our culture usually involves a fateful decision to leave home, what were the important early “milestones” indicating that you had assumed full responsibility for making your own way in the world – i.e., when did you know you were really “on your own” after first leaving home?
- Anticipating the story Jesus tells about a loving father who throws a reunion party for a prodigal son who finally returns home, what recent experience do you have being treated with kindness, mercy and compassion by someone who had every reason to “chew you out?” What kind of impact did this have on you?

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### **Studying the Text:**

Responding to the public criticism of others regarding the way he was willing to openly befriend people of poor reputation and questionable behavior, in Luke 15 Jesus tells a series of three parables that seem to clearly emphasize the exhaustive search God has initiated in seeking to find those who have been “lost.” But while each of these three stories highlight the passion of a God who does not wish to remain forever separate from us, the narratives also make it clear that the ministry of Jesus is characterized by a deep joy that echoes the divine “party in progress” at the heart of the universe (“there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents,” verse 10). The contrast between this vision of a heaven filled with exuberant celebration and rejoicing and the all too common experience of churches marked by judgmental attitudes and critical spirits is perhaps a clue that we may at times have more in common with the angry and resentful older son of the story Jesus tells in verses 11-32. With this cautionary note in mind, read the introduction and parable regarding a



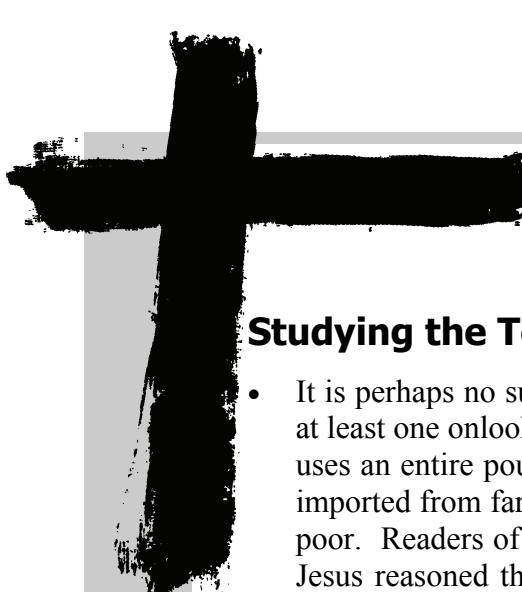
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## Studying the Text (continued):

loving father who has two sons (Luke 15:1-3, 11-32), and then discuss the following questions with your group:

- It seems that our cultural predisposition to “rugged individualism” would lead us to assume and affirm that the departure of the younger son is the best or only way for him to discover his identity. By contrast, Jesus tells his story in a patriarchal culture that would see the young son’s request for a premature share of the family inheritance (see verse 12) as an arrogant and selfish act that would bring shame on his entire household and community. Literally acting as if his father has already died, the younger son has announced in a very public way that he does not wish to be burdened any longer with the demands of relationship to those all around him. But curiously, instead of punishing and shunning this younger son who is publicly humiliating him in this fashion, the father described by Jesus allows the son to sell his portion of the family land and leave for a distant country without an objection (see verses 12-13). In similar fashion, the father abandons his own dignity when his wayward son finally returns home destitute and desperate for food and shelter, *running* to welcome the prodigal and quickly ordering up an elaborate celebration feast that would presumably allow the *entire* community to once again accept his son without criticism or hesitation (verses 20-24). In summary, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out, this unusual father seems to care more about reunion than his own reputation: “The prodigal is saved, though not in isolation. He is saved by being restored to relationship with his father, his family, his clan, his village – who are also saved by the father’s willingness to be a really poor patriarch . . . the reconciliation of this community means more to him than his own honor.” *As you apply this description of the redemptive impulse within the heart and ministry of Jesus to your own family, church and community, what would have to be different if you were to fully embody this same commitment to reconciliation with others?*
  - If the younger son in the story sought to define himself, by himself, in leaving his father and home far behind in his departure for a distant country, the character of the elder son in the story also demonstrates very little apparent desire for living with joy in the presence of the father. Resentful and angry to learn that his father has thrown a communal party to rejoice over the return of his younger brother, this older son also acts in a fashion guaranteed to publicly humiliate and shame his family. Refusing to enter the home to join the party, the embittered elder son is seen to be no less a slave than his younger brother had been because he cannot seem to enjoy any relationship with the father who tells him “Son, you are always with me, and *all that is mine is yours*” (verse 31). But once again abandoning his honor by leaving his place as the host of the party to go outside to plead with this angry son, the father described by Jesus will apparently sacrifice his dignity if he may yet salvage a relationship with his beloved child. He will do whatever might be necessary to keep his *whole* family together. *Remembering from verses 1-2 that Jesus told this story to the Pharisees and scribes who were openly critical about the way he had welcomed obvious sinners as his friends, in what ways does the joyless obedience and resentful anger evident in this elder son reflect your own life at present? Is there any sense in which you are attempting, like the elder son, to do the right things in your life not so much because you love the Father, but because doing them seems like the best strategy for ending up with the good outcomes and material blessings that have become a primary interest for you?*
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## **Studying the Text (continued):**

- In Pastor Timothy Keller's powerful little book on this parable (*The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*), he notes that the story shows us that at root, the two brothers are *both* alienated from the father: "Neither son loved the father for himself . . . they both were using the father for their own self-centered ends . . . Jesus, though, shows us that a man who has violated nothing on the list of moral misbehaviors [like the *elder* son, see verse 29] can be every bit as spiritually lost as the most profligate, immoral person [like the *younger* son, see verse 13]. Why? Because sin is not just breaking the rules, it is putting yourself in the place of God as Savior, Lord, and Judge just as each son sought to displace the authority of the father in his own life. . . . Jesus does not divide the world into the moral 'good guys' and the immoral 'bad guys.' He shows us that everyone is dedicated to a project of self-salvation, to using God and others in order to get power and control for themselves. We are just going about it in different ways. Even though both sons are wrong, however, the father cares for them and invites them both back into his love and feast." *Curiously, Jesus does not provide us any ending to this story that fully resolves the elder brother's refusal to join his father in celebrating his younger brother's return. Why do you think that Jesus ends his parable in this way? If you recognize any part of the elder brother's reaction as your own, is there something you must do to contribute an appropriate ending to this story as Jesus told it – i.e., is Jesus asking you to respond in some new way?*

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## **Applying the Text:**

Listen again to the story Jesus has just told us. One son is lost for a time to his generous father, distant and rebellious while debasing himself on a journey of so-called "self-discovery." His elder brother turns out to be just as lost even though he never left home because his so-called "obedience" shows itself in the end to be a joyless and self-centered life of obligatory duty. Yet in dealing with both of these boys and their short-sighted insistence on abandoning the ties of relationship within his family, the father of these self-destructive sons insists on taking the initiative to receive and restore them to full reconciliation and the blessing of their birthright. Isn't this, in effect, a brief history of God's patient, seeking, love for us? And if that is true, perhaps the most immediate point of application will be for us to carefully reflect on the text to discern whether the present circumstances of our lives show us to be living after the pattern of these sons. To quote Timothy Keller once more: "One of the ironies of the parable is now revealed. The younger son's flight from the father was crashingly obvious. He left the father literally, physically, and morally. Though the older son stayed at home, he was actually more distant and alienated from the father than his brother, because he was blind to his true condition." The good news of this story is that even now there remains a self-effacing Father who has come running to receive you and usher you into a place of deep joy.

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## **Praying the Text:**

As you close this session, offer time for group members to receive prayers of intercession. Perhaps there are "younger" and "elder" children who wish to be received once again into the full love and favor of the Father, living and serving with restored joy.