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“He Ran, and Fell on His Neck, and Kissed Him”

As the Savior was teaching in Galilee, a group of publicans and sinners gathered to hear Him. This caused the Pharisees and the scribes to murmur at the kind of company Jesus was keeping. (See Luke 15:1–2.) The Savior’s response to this murmuring was to tell three parables that deal with those who have gone astray.

First, He told the parable of the lost sheep, emphasizing the effort to find the sheep that had strayed and the joy of its return. Jesus made the application of the parable clear: “Likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:7).

Next, He told the parable of the lost coin, again stressing the effort made and the joy of recovery. Again the Savior clearly stated the application: “Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:10).

The Prodigal Son

The third parable is commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son. In this

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parable the Savior told of a son requesting and obtaining his inheritance from his father and going to a far country. There the son “wasted his substance with riotous living” (Luke 15:13). Once the money was gone, he tried working as a hired hand but still found himself in want. He even envied the swine he was sent to feed—at least they had plenty to eat. (See Luke 15:15–16.)

As he mused on his predicament, the son turned his thoughts to home. He realized that the hired servants in his father’s house lived better than he did. He “came to himself” and acknowledged that he had “sinned against heaven” and against his father. (See Luke 15:17–18.) So he resolved upon a plan. He determined to go home, being prepared to admit his errors to his father, confess his unworthiness to be his father’s son, and plead to be allowed to become one of his father’s hired servants (see Luke 15:18–19). With that speech prepared, he headed toward home.

At this point in the story, the Savior includes some important details. While the



GOD WANTS US BACK

“The tender image of [the prodigal son’s] anxious, faithful father running to meet him and showering him with kisses is one of the most moving and compassionate scenes in all of holy writ. It tells every child of God, wayward or otherwise, how much God wants us back in the protection of His arms.”

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “The Other Prodigal,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 62.

son is “yet a great way off,” the father sees him, has compassion on him, runs to him, falls on his neck, and kisses him. The son tries to give his speech but does not get far beyond acknowledging his sins. The father calls for a robe, a ring, and shoes to be put on his son, and he orders that the fatted calf be killed for a feast to celebrate the happy reunion. (See Luke 15:20–24.) The father’s joy in the return of his son is unbounded.

The Loving, Forgiving Father

All three parables speak of recovering what was lost, but the focus of the third parable differs from the first two. The third parable focuses on the actions of the father. For me, the most important aspect of this parable is what it tells us of our Heavenly Father’s reaction when we turn toward Him: He runs to embrace us.

I have seen God’s love for the returning prodigal played out time after time as I have watched people return to Him. As a priesthood leader, I was somewhat taken aback by the strength and depth of God’s love I felt the first time I listened to a repentant Church member confess wrongdoing. That feeling has returned every time I have helped someone with the repentance process.

While I served as a bishop, a man moved into our ward who previously had been a faithful, temple-going member. In the intervening years he had drifted away from God and the standards of the Church. When he relocated to our ward, he was ready to return to God. He repented and then worked to qualify for a temple recommend.

When he was finally ready, I was with him when, for the first time in decades, he returned to the house of the Lord. As we sat together in the temple, Heavenly Father’s love for him filled both of us. The embrace, kiss, robe, ring, and shoes described in the parable of the prodigal son all seemed to be rolled into one as I sat with a son of God who had come to himself, repented of his sins, and returned to His Father’s house.

Returning to God

The invitation to return to God appears repeatedly in the scriptures. The Savior told the Nephites, “How oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart” (3 Nephi 10:6). Through the prophet Malachi, the Lord said, “Return unto me, and I will return unto you” (Malachi 3:7).

In the revealed dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet Joseph Smith prayed, “And when thy people transgress, . . . may [they] speedily repent and return unto thee, and find favor in thy sight, and be restored to the blessings which thou hast ordained to be poured out upon those who shall reverence thee in thy house” (D&C 109:21).

One of the great blessings we enjoy as members of God’s Church is the opportunity to assist Him in helping His children return to full activity in His Church. President Thomas S. Monson has called on all of us to rescue those who have drifted away.¹ As we do so, we help God’s children feel the warm embrace of a loving Heavenly Father longing to welcome them back into His fold.



Over the years I have seen many loving Relief Society presidencies. One of those presidencies was exceptionally good at welcoming people into our ward and, along with other members of the ward council, finding ways that the new members could participate in ward activities. After we got to know these new people better, we were sometimes surprised to learn that they had not been very active in their previous wards. As these new ward members enjoyed the fellowship of the other members, we watched them progress in the Church. In several instances, we attended the temple with them when they received temple ordinances.

On one such occasion the father of one of these members approached me in a temple sealing room and said, “I can never thank you enough for what your ward has done for my son.” He did not need to thank us. All of us present felt the loving spiritual embrace of our Heavenly Father for this man’s son and his family.

The Older Son

Of course, the parable of the prodigal son does not end with the father embracing his formerly wayward son and celebrating his return. The father had an older son who had *not* wasted the family assets in riotous living but had dutifully stayed at his father’s side. When this older son learned of the celebration for the return of his brother, he became angry. He resented the attention and the celebration his brother had received, and he condemned him for his previous sinful ways. (See Luke 15:25–30.)

In the parable the loving father left the feast and went out to the older son to entreat him to join the celebration. His words to this son are full of love for both sons:

“Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

“It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:31–32).

In the example of this older son there is a warning for all of us. Heavenly Father’s love for all His children is unbounded, and there is no need to resent that love when it is manifested in the lives of others. There is plenty of love for us, and we share more fully in that love as we not only celebrate the return of the prodigal but also assist as many as possible to return to the fold “safe and sound” (Luke 15:27).

Conclusion

As Jesus taught the publicans and sinners, He did what all of us should do: help our brothers and sisters know Heavenly Father and come to Him. Through the parable of the prodigal son, we catch a glimpse of the love Heavenly Father has for His children, and how He feels when one of them takes steps to repent and return to Him. This is a love that “passeth knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19).

It is our privilege to feel the love Heavenly Father has for us and for our brothers and sisters as we assist in the great work of helping them come to themselves and, more important, come to God. ■

NOTE

1. See Thomas S. Monson, “Our Responsibility to Rescue,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2013, 4–5.