

Lost and Found

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as Alastair mentioned, my name is Callum. I'm a student at Edinburgh Theological Seminary across the road, and I work here part-time for St. Columba's.

And I want to begin before we jump into Luke 15, just with a brief apology that I've just got back last night from a week at camp. I'm absolutely exhausted. I've got camp hangover. But hopefully together we can battle through this text and find out what God is teaching us through it, and we'll pray that His Spirit will help keep me awake.

So if you have a Bible, Luke chapter 15, if you want to follow along, that might be helpful. Luke chapter 15. It's one of the most perhaps well-known chapters in the Bible. It's got one of the most well-known parables anyway, the parable of the prodigal son.

And in Luke 15, we actually have Jesus telling us three stories, three parables. He tells us about a shepherd who goes looking for his lost sheep. He tells us about a woman who goes searching carefully for her lost coin.

And he tells us about this father who is looking out in the distance for his lost son. I'm sure you all can relate to the feeling, the experience of having lost something.

[1 : 0 6] For me, it's something I experience on a regular basis. Every day I'm losing my phone, my wallet, my keys, my bag. Maybe some of you have pets. If you have a dog, you can perhaps relate to the feeling of searching for a dog that's managed to escape.

I was staying last year with some friends, and they had this wonderful dog, this beautiful dog, this friendly dog. But this dog, the second you leave the door open, it would shoot out the door, and it would run away.

And usually it would just run a few gardens away and find something interesting to sniff, and it would get excited by that, and it would stop. But there was one occasion when I was staying there, this dog managed to escape for a good four hours.

And we were out looking throughout the surrounding towns, through the woods, through the local gardens, and down by the canal, and all the sorts of places this dog might like to go. And I wonder if you can relate to that feeling of a long, hard search for something, something you're afraid of losing.

And this dog, we eventually found alive and well six hours later. This dog was a bit of an idiot. It was fine. It was safe, but we found it. And even if you don't have pets, I'm sure you can relate to that feeling of searching for something you think is lost, something you think is gone.

[2 : 1 4] And in Luke chapter 15, we have a picture for us of Jesus as a Savior who's on the search for lost people. And that's maybe something that seems obvious to you if you're a Christian.

Jesus searches for lost people. But I think it's something we have to return to. We have to remind ourselves of. It's a wonderful truth. And that's what we're going to do this evening. We're going to think about it at two brief points.

First of all, that Jesus is a Savior who reaches out to the lost. Maybe that seems obvious, but it's something Luke wants us to grasp in the whole of his gospel. And here, Jesus tells us three parables, three stories that are related to each other to make the same point.

I think sometimes we can rip parables out of their context. And it's helpful for us to think, just first of all, why is Jesus telling us these stories? Well, we see in verse one, it says that now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes, these religious leaders, they grumble, saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them. In other words, these religious leaders are not happy about the company that Jesus is choosing.

[3 : 21] They're not happy about the kind of people that Jesus is spending time with. Tax collectors and sinners in the ancient Near East, in Israel, were seen as people to be looked down on.

They were seen as sinful. They were seen as unclean. They were actually seen as scum. See tax collectors, it's hard for us to get our head around today. Maybe it isn't. But in the ancient world, particularly, people who collected taxes would collaborate with the Roman authorities.

They were seen as people who were betraying their nation. And not only is Jesus teaching this kind of people, he's spending time with them, he's eating with them, he's hanging out with them.

And the point Luke makes in his gospel time and time again is that these are the kind of people Jesus has come for. People that society might have written off, people who are social outcasts, people who are morally and spiritually broken.

And we see these Pharisees and the scribes, these great religious leaders, these people who think of themselves as great, people who think of themselves as morally altogether and sorted out, people who think that salvation is all about me and my performance.

[4 : 27] We see them grumbling. We see them complaining about the kind of people that Jesus is with, the kind of company that he's choosing. People who are essentially the down and outs, the dregs of society.

So that's the context to these three stories. I think it's helpful to have that in our minds as we break them up and look at them. It's this question, what kind of people has Jesus come for? And I wonder how we would answer that this evening.

Sometimes we think it's people who are like us, people who are religious, people who go to church, people maybe who are morally respectable. This is why Jesus tells us these three stories, a story about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son, two lost sons.

We'll come to that. And rather than working through them individually, I want us to think about them together kind of side by side, because really I think these three stories are driving home the same point. In each story we're being shown that Jesus is a Savior who has a heart for lost people.

The first one is the shepherd who has a hundred sheep, but he leaves them all behind and goes off in search of this one lost sheep. And then he tells us another story about this woman who searched diligently and carefully through her house for a lost coin.

[5 : 39] And then we have the parable of the prodigal son, the son who wanders off, who wastes his life away, but his father is still looking out for him from a distance and welcomes him back with open arms.

You see, each of these stories begins with something that's lost and ends with something found. The key point in these parables is not that God is our shepherd, it's not that God is our father.

These are wonderful biblical truths. But the main point I think being made here is about God's heart for the lost. He will actively seek out lost people.

Maybe this evening here in St. Columbus there is a lost sheep that God is guiding back into the flock. Or maybe one of your colleagues at work or your friend at uni or school is a lost coin that God is searching for.

We're very quick, I think, to write people off as beyond the pale. In our minds sometimes we tell ourselves that a certain person is too far gone for God, that that person would never come to church.

[6 : 39] That colleague at work would never respond to the gospel if I started explaining it to them. Jesus says in Luke time and time again, I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.

This is what we see when he's with the kiosk later on in chapter 19. He says, the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. And if we take a step back from Luke and we look at the whole Bible we see that this is really the big story of God's plan for redemption.

We go all the way back to Genesis to the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve created in a good world, a world free from sin, a world where they're both free to enjoy a relationship with God and with each other.

And Genesis 3 is this point where that is broken, where that perfect world is distorted and evil comes into the world through sin. The point there is human beings mess things up and disobey God and as a result become lost.

But can you remember the first thing God says to them? The first thing God says to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3? It's not words of judgment. It's not words of anger or condemnation.

[7 : 44] The first thing God says to humanity after the fall is, where are you? Where are you? God seeks out humanity. That's incredible when you stop and think about it.

They have rebelled against God which the penalty God has told us is death. God could have instantly obliterated us. That's not to say that our sin doesn't matter to God. It's not to say that Adam and Eve, their sin was something to be swept over.

But sin is a massive problem to God. But his first words to humanity, where are you? He seeks us out. And this is what the rest of the Bible is all about.

It's God's rescue plan to bring lost people back to himself, to seek out people who have actually turned away from him. You see, God wants to take people like you and me, people who have rejected him, people who are flawed, people who are inconsistent, people whose hearts have turned away time and time again.

And he wants to bring us back. And that's an incredible, incredible thing to remind ourselves of. Our Savior reaches out to people who are lost. We read in Isaiah 53, our Alistair read it to us.

[8 : 54] We all like sheep have gone astray. We've all turned to our own way. There's no one who seeks God, Paul says in Romans chapter 3. All have turned away.

They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one. That's the reality that without God's grace in seeking out lost sinners, we are all in that state.

Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. This is the theme in Luke repeated time and time again. He came to seek and save lost and broken people.

In other words, Jesus didn't come for those who think they've got it all together. He didn't come for you if you think that you're morally sorted out. Jesus came for those who are broken, for those who are failures.

And maybe he's seeking out people here this evening. Maybe you already know Jesus as your Lord and Savior. And maybe he's using you to reach others. So that's the first thing I want to think about in Luke 15.

[9 : 54] God searches for people who are lost. The second thing we learn in Luke 15, and I think this is the key point, he absolutely rejoices when we are found. You see, Luke is building this great contrast for us between the grumbling of the religious leaders, the complaining of the Pharisees and the scribes in verse two, with the absolute joy and delight of God.

This chapter, when you look at it, when you break it down, is absolutely full of God's joy. That's the central theme repeated time and again. In verse five, after the shepherd finds his sheep, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing.

And when he comes home, it tells us he calls together his friends and his neighbors and he says to them, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost sheep. I tell you, Jesus says, in the same way, there'll be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who do not need repentance.

We see the same thing in verse nine. The woman finds her coin, she calls together her friends, she calls together her neighbors, and she says, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost coin.

In the same way, I tell you, verse 10, there's rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. We see the same thing again, a third time with the prodigal son.

[11 : 09] He returns home. The father says to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it.

Let's have a feast and celebrate. It's a vivid picture of joy. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.

So each of these parables actually has the same ending. It ends in the same way to make the same point. God experiences phenomenal joy when the lost are found. And I want to think just briefly about why that is.

Luke 15 tells, I think, two key things here. First that God rejoices because of our repentance. There'll be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. Verse seven and verse 10.

But what does that actually mean? Well, literally the words in the Greek, it means to change your mind. When you repent, the Bible tells us, you're effectively saying before God and before the people around you that you were wrong.

[12 : 08] It's saying that God was right. It's an acknowledgement that we need a change of direction. And that's what we see with the prodigal son. He's gone off his own way.

He's taken with him his share of the family money, and he's really a picture of having completely rejected his father. And he's wasted away by partying and wild living.

So this guy, he ends up working in the field with pigs, which for Jews is a picture of ultimate humiliation, ultimate brokenness. It's a guy who has completely ruined his life.

And we see that he's so hungry at this point, he's desperate to have some of the food that the pigs are being fed with. But verse 17, we have the turning point. This is his moment of repentance.

He says, when he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hard servants have more than enough food, and here I am starving to death. I will set out and I will go back to my father and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

[13 : 05] I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your servants. See, this is the thing. This is the point. Repentance is not about having your life together.

Repentance is not about somehow becoming perfect and then God will accept you. It's never about what we can do for God. Christians were very good at twisting repentance into something that it's not.

We like to make it all about our own performance. Repentance is for people like the prodigal son. It's people who come to their senses and realize that we are in the mud with the pigs.

It's when we realize how much we need God's grace, how much we need his mercy. It's a recognition that we can't ever possibly do it by ourselves. And I think the point in Luke 15 is that that kind of repentance, that kind of acknowledgement brings God incredible joy.

You see, repentance is like powerful evidence of God's grace. It's when we hold our hands up and recognize that he is Lord, that it's his authority in our lives.

[14 : 08] Maybe you feel this evening that there's nothing that you could do to make God happy. Maybe you feel like there's nothing you could do in your own life to bring God joy. But the Bible tells you here in Luke 15 that your repentance, that your individual repentance brings incredible joy to God.

There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. We bring God incredible joy when we repent. We are incredibly precious to him. And these parables, I think, teach us that one small insignificant person, like you or me, makes a massive difference to God.

His heart is full of joy at the thought of one sinner repenting. So God rejoices because of our repentance. Secondly, God rejoices because of reconciliation.

In other words, they're bringing back together of two people that have been apart. Another way of thinking about reconciliation is picturing something that you've got back that you thought was lost.

And for us, it was that dog, that stupid animal that had run away. The first emotion we felt when we found this creature was not anger. It was not frustration. It was pure joy.

[15 : 14] It was joy to find this dog alive and well. And the whole point of these parables is that if this man feels this much joy at having his lost sheep back, if this woman feels this much joy at having a lost coin back, if this father feels this much joy at having his lost son back, how much more joy do you think God feels when a lost sinner comes back to him?

I wonder if you ever feel that nobody really values you in a deep way. It's easy to feel like that sometimes. We can feel surrounded by people in our lives. We can have lots of friends and colleagues. But we can feel that maybe nobody cares about us in a deep, deep way.

Maybe some people here this evening are feeling that. God is telling us something profound and wonderful with these parables. He's telling us that you are more precious to him than you can possibly imagine.

He's telling you that your individual repentance and your reconciliation to him mean the absolute world. We have a God who seeks out lost sinners and who absolutely rejoices in their return.

So just briefly, how should we respond to these parables this evening? I think there's two clear pictures of application for us. We have the younger son, first of all, the prodigal son.

[16 : 27] I think in verse 13, we have one of the best illustrations of someone thinking that we can go our own way, that we can find happiness and fulfillment and contentment by turning our back on God.

I think most people today would say they want to be happy. I think you'd struggle to find someone who doesn't want to be content in life. I wonder if you've heard of a guy called John Rockefeller.

I've maybe mentioned him here before. He was a guy at the end of the 19th century. He controlled most of the oil in the USA. And if you adjust for inflation, he was worth over \$400 billion in today's money.

This is a guy who's pretty rich. He's got all the material possessions he could possibly want. And someone once asked this guy this question. He said, how much money is enough in terms of contentment and satisfaction and happiness and purpose in life?

And his response is really interesting. He said this, just a little bit more than I have. Just a little bit more. And if we're honest with ourselves, we're truly honest with our hearts, I think that's so often our answer to contentment in life.

[17 : 33] If I could just have a little bit more. And when we think like that, even if we don't live a wild lifestyle, even if we don't quite mirror what the prodigal son does in this story, we're effectively doing the same thing.

We're so quick to turn our back on God's and find that contentment, that joy, that fulfillment in other places, in our own desires, in our career, in money, in sex, in family, saying to Gustin Poole like this, he said God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him.

The problem is we so often try to find that rest in other places. There's a reason that we're drawn to the party lifestyle. But when we look at the prodigal son, we have this clear, clear picture that if we turn our backs on God, if we try to find that in other places, this is ultimately where desires leave us.

We're crawling around in the mud with the pigs. Some of us this evening would hold our hands up and say that we've been there. Maybe some of you this evening feel like you are there.

Maybe this is the point in life where you acknowledge that you need to turn back and say, Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you, Luke 15 is teaching us that when we do that, he welcomes us back with open arms.

[18 : 54] But this is not just a story about one son, it's a story about two sons. And I want to think very briefly, because I think I'm tired and running out of words. The second son, he teaches us a hugely important lesson.

I think in the church, perhaps a lesson that's more important for us. Look at verse 25. It says, The older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, Your brother has come. Your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound. But this is the thing, he was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, Look, these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a young goat that I could celebrate with my friends.

But when the son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. And he said to him, Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.

[19 : 54] It was fitting to celebrate and be glad for this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. Now, do you see what's significant about the older brother's response?

I think the point in Luke 15 is that he is not joyful. This is someone who is not ecstatic at the return of this lost son. In fact, he's angry. He's bitter at the father's joy.

He doesn't think that the lost son is worth it. I think this chapter is meant to give us, the reason it's here is to give us this sobering window into the hearts of the Pharisees.

That's why we read about the context in verse one. But I think as well, it's a window into our own hearts this evening. There's a danger we can be a lot like the older brother, especially if we've grown up going to church, if we've grown up here in the gospel, if we've grown up in the kind of familiarity of Jesus that we're thinking about this morning, we can be a lot like the older brother, we can think that we feel entitled to God's acceptance in some way, because we go to church because we're consistent, because we've performed, because we've earned it, because we haven't gone off the rails like so many others.

And I think this parable should deeply, deeply challenge us. It should make us ask, do we long to see this place filled with people like the tax collectors and the sinners of this world, the down and outs, the people we might think of as broken, people who might make us uncomfortable.

[21 : 18] You'll find as you read the Gospel of Luke, that's the kind of people Jesus is all about. The point of Luke is to present Jesus first and foremost as a Savior, a Savior for all kinds of people, a Savior for whom nobody is beyond His reach.

I think it was Bilbo Baggins in the Fellowship of the Ring who said that not all those who wander are lost. We're very quick to write people off, and there's truth in that quote. There's not all those who wander are lost.

That's what we see in the Prodigal Son. See, this evening, no matter how distant you might feel from God, no matter how far away from Him you might feel like you've wandered, the truth of the Gospel is you are never too far gone.

We have a Savior who has a heart for the lost. He reaches out to people in darkness and brings them into His glorious light. We have a Savior who absolutely rejoices at the return of a lost sinner.

It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found. Let's pray. Our Father, we come before You this evening, and we thank You and praise You for the powerful love You've shown us through Jesus Christ.

[22 : 34] We praise You that You are a God who searches out lost sinners. You are a God who knows the heart. You know every thought that goes through our mind. You know all our guilt, you know all our shame.

Lord, you know when we are distant and far away. And Father, we pray that if we feel that way this evening, You would draw us back to Yourself. Lord, that Your Holy Spirit would work in our hearts, that, Lord, You would help us in our struggles with sin and with temptation.

Lord, help us to be people who love You more, people who live for You. Give us the desire and the heart for this place to be filled with lost sinners.

Father, we thank You for the power of the gospel to change and to transform lives. We pray to You, Lord, that we would share the joy You experience at the return of lost sinners.

Lord, make us a people who are so joyful, so enthusiastic, so exuberant about our salvation. Lord, we pray that You would ignite our hearts this evening with joy and with love for You and for one another.

[23 : 34] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to conclude our time of worship together by singing. I'm going to sing the hymn, Bless the Lord, O my soul, ten thousand reasons.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, worship His holy name, sing like never before, O my soul, I'll worship Your holy name. We'll stand together please and we'll sing to God's praise.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul, worship His holy name, sing like never before, O my soul, I'll worship Your holy name.

The sun comes up, yes, a new day dawned. It's time to sing Your song again.

Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me, Let me be singing when the evening comes.

[25 : 15] Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul, worship His holy name, sing like never before, O my soul, I'll worship Your holy name.

You're rich in love, and you're slow to anger. Your name is great, and your heart is kind.

For all Your goodness I will keep on singing. Ten thousand reasons for my heart to fight.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul, worship His holy name, sing like never before, O my soul, I'll worship Your holy name.

And on that day when my strength is failing, The end draws near and my time has come.

[26 : 55] Still my soul will sing Your praise on ending. Ten thousand years and then forevermore.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul, worship His holy name, sing like never before, O my soul, I'll worship Your holy name.

I'll worship Your holy name. I'll worship Your holy name.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy. To the only God our Saviour be power, glory, majesty and authority.

No and always. Amen.