

Lesson 4

Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Holy Gospel: Luke 15:1–3a, 11–32

Luke 15 is the Bible's "Lost and Found Chapter." Jesus told stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son, and all of them show the love God has for lost sinners and His eager concern for their return to Him.

51. What was the situation that prompted Jesus to tell these parables?

52. One man, reading the opening paragraph of this parable, said, "Wouldn't you know that it would be the younger son?" Why? Why did the father in Jesus' story give in to his son's foolish request and let him just take off with all he had?

It's not too hard to imagine the scene as the young man "squandered his property in reckless living," surrounded by plenty of "friends" and involved in lots of "fun." But his money ran out, as it usually does in such a situation, and so did his friends, as is also usually the case. Hard times came, the young man was reduced to feeding pigs, and he was even ready to fill his stomach with the pods the pigs were fed, though they were barely digestible and provided no nourishment for people.

53. How would Jesus' listeners feel about this young man's degradation?

54. What brought the young man to his senses? What significance is there in the fact that the prodigal son was ready to say, "I have sinned against heaven and before you"?

55. What does it say about the father in the story that he saw his returning son while he was still a long way off, ran to him, and embraced him and kissed him, even before the young man was able to say anything to him about being sorry?

The English Standard Version gives this story the traditional title, *The Parable of the Prodigal [Wasteful] Son*, but it surely fits into the lost-and-found concept, for the son was lost to his father for a time. Jesus added to the impact of the father's reception of his lost son by including the reaction of the older brother in His story.

56 What does the older brother's reaction say about his feelings toward his brother? toward his father? about himself?

57. In the setting that prompted this story, what did Jesus' including of the reaction of the older brother add to the point He was making?

58. What does this parable teach us about God? about us?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 12:1–6

According to the superscription of his book, Isaiah was God's prophet in Jerusalem during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His call to be a prophet is recounted in the sixth chapter. His book provides us with some of the loftiest formal prophetic literature in all of the Old Testament. Because of his assurances of God's rescue of "a remnant" and his detailed description of the Suffering Servant, the promised Messiah, Isaiah is called "The Old Testament's Evangelist."

Some suggest that Isaiah was a member of the ruling aristocracy, a court official, an adviser and confidant of kings, and perhaps of royal blood himself. If he was, he did not go along with the official line that approved and promoted perfunctory worship of Yahweh in the temple while overlooking injustices and pagan practices in the general society. As God's prophet, Isaiah pronounced scathing judgments against such perfunctory, hypocritical religion (see Isaiah 1:10–20).

Politically, the kingdom of Judah was under the threat of mighty Assyria. Isaiah encouraged confidence in the Lord's help and discouraged trusting in political alliances. The Assyrian conquerors swallowed up Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and came against Jerusalem. Isaiah encouraged Hezekiah to trust the Lord, and in response to the pagans' arrogant blasphemy, God's angel went out and slew 185,000 Assyrians and forced their withdrawal from Jerusalem. Isaiah, however, did prophesy Judah's ultimate doom under God's judgment. The first section of Isaiah, chapters 1–39, ends with his pointing to Babylon's being the instrument of Judah's downfall.

Included in Isaiah's prophetic message was a word of hope that described the rescue and return of a remnant from bondage and exile. Today's Old Testament Lesson, chapter 12, concludes such a section in Isaiah with songs of praise.

59. "In that day"—what day? (See Isaiah 11:1, 10–12, 15–16.) In that day, what will be the basis of the praise that is given to Yahweh?