

# Source

THE BIBLE IN COMMUNITY

LUKE 15

## Welcome to Source

### Our Source

The Bible is unquestionably the most important book ever written. Not only does it speak to the issues we struggle with today (i.e., wealth, poverty, work, conflict, love, sex, forgiveness, guilt, sin, time, youth, death), but it also gives us a picture of a God who created the universe and who has been orchestrating an incredible story throughout history. While we recognize its importance, we often stay away from the Bible because it often seems unapproachable.

For these reasons, we have designed Source studies to help you engage with the Bible in a meaningful and helpful way. First, we've included an **Introduction** to each book so that from the beginning you have a clear picture of where the author is headed. Second, we've added **Notes**, which help make the ancient backgrounds of the text accessible and approachable. Third, and most important, we've created **Discussion** guides for each section of Scripture that allow you to explore and apply the passages in the context of community. These elements come together to form a very simple format for each week:

1. Before each session, read the selected passages in your Bible, look over the text notes, and answer the discussion questions.
2. Come to your small group prepared to share and discuss your responses.

## Lost and Found

Jesus shared over 35 parables in the New Testament, all with unique purposes and audiences. This Source study covers three specific parables found in Luke 15 that share a common theme of something being lost and then eventually found or returned. Over the next three sessions, you'll unpack the meaning behind each of these parables and see how Jesus weaves these three parables together to illustrate the unmistakable nature of God's grace toward us. Along the way, we'll discuss strategies for reading these parables that will leave you feeling more confident when you approach the Bible.

**Session 1** - The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7)

**Session 2** - The Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)

**Session 3** - The Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-31)

Our hope is that this study will allow you to engage with the Bible in a way that incorporates the dynamics of a small group with the transformational nature of God's Word.

## Luke - Introduction

The book of Luke is actually the first volume of a longer work that also includes the book of Acts. Together, they trace the history of the Christian movement from its beginning during the life and ministry of Jesus through the first generation of the early church.

Luke was a doctor and also a Gentile (a non-Jewish person) who became a follower of Jesus and accompanied the apostle Paul on several of his journeys. There are three other accounts of Jesus's life that are referred to as Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John), and the book of Luke focuses on the story of Jesus's life from his birth to his death and resurrection. But unlike the other books, Luke explicitly reveals the purpose and circumstances of his writing in the opening lines:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. **(Luke 1:1-4)**

Luke's interest is primarily historical. He wants his audience to know that his work rests on the testimony of eyewitnesses and his meticulous scrutiny of the events he reports. But he also has a pastoral concern. Probably written around AD 62 to other Gentile believers, Luke provides assurance that what they have learned and believed about Jesus from Paul and the other apostles is trustworthy. Theophilus was probably a well-to-do patron who supported Luke while he was writing and then helped publicize his work. By addressing him, Luke follows Greco-Roman custom and lends a measure of credibility to the work.

Together with the book of Acts, Luke's work presents a powerful message to his readers. At that time, the Greeks and Romans feared that the gods were fickle and might pick new favorites at any time. But Luke's historical account shows that the true God is unchanging and can be trusted completely. It tells how God kept the promise he made to the Jewish people by sending them Jesus as their long-awaited "Messiah" or "Savior." Many of the Jews believed in

Jesus, but their nation as a whole did not. But God's purposes had been grander than just the nation of Israel: Jesus had come to provide salvation for people of *all* nations.

This theme is introduced at the very beginning of the book of Luke. Reflecting on Jesus's soon-to-come birth, Mary recalls God's ancient promise to Abraham. She says that God has "helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." But then Simeon, a pious Jew, upon seeing Jesus, says: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

The book continues to underscore how Jesus came for all people by telling of his association with the outcasts of Jewish society. It describes his interactions with "tax collectors and sinners," people rejected by upstanding Jews and condemned by the religious leaders. It highlights the Samaritans as well, a mixed breed of people with whom full-blooded Jews did not associate. In fact, the book of Luke records two parables Jesus told where a tax collector and a Samaritan emerge as the heroes. It also emphasizes the role of women in Jesus's ministry and his compassion for the poor and marginalized. Indeed, when Jesus first began to teach publicly, he summarized his ministry by saying that God had sent him "to proclaim good news to the poor... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free."

Luke also reveals God's purposes for all people through Jesus's teaching, especially by using simple stories called parables. Although some of the parables recorded in Luke are also found in other Gospel accounts, over half are unique. For example, this book records three consecutive stories Jesus told that have a common theme: a shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to search for the one that is lost; a woman turns her house upside down to find a lost coin and is not content with the nine coins she has; a father of two sons patiently waits for the one who has abandoned him to return home. In each case, a joyous celebration takes place when that which was lost was found.

The book of Luke weaves these interactions and teachings together in four main sections. The first section (1:1-4,13) tells the story of Jesus's early life and introduces the main themes of the book. The second section (4:14-9:50) describes the ministry of Jesus in and around Galilee, which was the northern area of the land of Israel. The miracles Jesus performs there

point to his identity as the Messiah. The third section (9:51-19:27) traces Jesus's last journey to Jerusalem, during which he shared many parables and answered questions about what it meant to follow him. The fourth section (19:28-24:53) describes how Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, was crucified, and then rose from the grave.

Jesus's resurrection is really the climax of the book. His growing conflict with the Jewish leadership and his journey toward Jerusalem reveal that God's plan is coming to its fulfillment. Indeed, Jesus understands his mission as standing at the pinnacle of what God said he would do all along through the nation of Israel. He tells two followers: "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." But Luke's non-Jewish readers could rejoice as well. God's offer of salvation was not extended just to the rich or to men or to the upper class or to Israel. But Jesus came for all people "*to seek and to save what was lost.*"

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## Session 1 - Notes on Luke 15:1-7

### 15:1

Tax collectors and sinners were often grouped together by the religious community as those who were distant or removed from a relationship with God based on their unscrupulous behavior. But in this setting, Luke highlights that it's these exact people that have all voluntarily gathered to hear Jesus. Their focus is on hearing what Jesus has to say.

### 15:2

In contrast, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, who are also in attendance at this gathering, have a different posture. Their focus isn't on hearing Jesus, but on questioning his judgment about who to associate with. These religious leaders have structured their lives on ceremonial laws of cleanliness and uncleanness that also dictated who they could or couldn't associate with. They would feel defiled by the intimate act of eating with a tax collector or sinner. Not so with Jesus. Jesus did not feel the same.

### 15:3

Based on the muttered criticisms from the previous verse, Jesus responds with three parallel parables directed toward "them"—the religious leaders who would be outraged by the extraordinary reach of God's love *and* the religious outcasts who believed they were disqualified from experiencing God's love.

### 15:4

As Jesus would often do, he communicates through a parable that includes elements that his audience would be acutely familiar with. While shepherding may seem foreign to most contemporary readers, everyone listening to Jesus's rhetorical question would undoubtedly respond, "Yes, we would go after the lost sheep!" because shepherds knew that the ninety-nine would be safe together (usually in the care of another shepherd), whereas the lost sheep was in danger.

## 15:5-6

Upon finding the lost sheep, the shepherd takes it home and organizes a party to celebrate with friends and neighbors. What was lost is now found. There is a repeated focus on “rejoicing.” Notice how many times joy or rejoicing is mentioned in this parable. Jesus highlights a stark contrast between the disapproval of the religious leaders and the joy God has for finding that which was lost.

## 15:7

Jesus doesn’t always provide additional commentary after telling a parable, but in this case, he explains that the rejoicing experienced by the shepherd in the parable is a direct reflection of God rejoicing when even one lost person is found. In fact, God invites everyone (v.6, “Rejoice with me”; v.7, “rejoicing in heaven”) to rejoice with him over finding that which was lost.

## Session 1 - Discussion

### Introduction

God's heart is for the lost—for those who have lost their way. Jesus illustrates this by telling a parable about a lost sheep, the first of three parables that highlights the extent to which God will pursue people. In doing so, not only do we learn something about God, Jesus also teaches us something about ourselves.

### Discussion Questions

1. Read Luke 15:1-2. What does it say about Jesus that tax collectors and sinners would gather to hear him and that Jesus would willingly eat with them?
2. Why would the religious elite be so offended that Jesus would associate with tax collectors and sinners? In your opinion, who are examples of modern-day Pharisees and teachers of the law? Who are modern-day examples of tax collectors and sinners?
3. Read Luke 15:3-7. The first parable Jesus tells in this setting is the parable of the lost sheep. The main character is not the sheep, but the shepherd. What do we learn about the shepherd?
4. How do you feel about the fact that God seems to be more focused on the one lost sheep than the ninety-nine that are safe? Is his love for the lost sheep greater than his love for the others?
5. Who do you most resonate with from this passage? Tax collector? Sinner? Pharisee? Teacher of the law? Shepherd? Sheep? Someone lost? Someone found? A rejoicing neighbor?
6. Try to summarize the main point of this parable in your own words.

## Moving Forward

While this study is called “Lost and Found,” the focus of these parables is not on the items that are lost or found. In other words, the focus of these parables is not on the sheep, the coin, or the son. Yes, they are important to the parable, but the main emphasis is on the shepherd, the woman, and the father... and the lengths they will go to in order to find that which is lost. Ultimately, we learn something about God and the measure of his grace, love, and forgiveness.

## Changing Your Mind

*But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)*

## Session 2 - Notes on Luke 15:8–10

### 15:8

Jesus continues to address the religious authorities with another parable about a woman and her lost coin. Each coin (*drachma*) was equivalent to a day's wages for an average worker. So to lose even one coin was a significant loss. Was the coin itself a rare commodity in a peasant village that functioned without a lot of circulating currency? Could the coin represent a part of the woman's dowry or a piece of jewelry? Considering the cultural conditions, many scholars have assumed that the coin was worth much more than the monetary loss of a single coin.

Given that the coin is of great value, Jesus details the lengths to which the woman goes to find the coin.

### 15.9

Similar to the preceding parable, the woman's joy and celebration over the recovery of her lost coin is not something the woman alone experiences, but she shares the joy with her entire community. She has worked hard to restore that which was lost.

### 15.10

Jesus ensures that his point is not lost on his listening audience by reiterating that there is a heavenly celebration over a repentant sinner. In other words, God delights in restoring people to a relationship with him.

## Reading Jesus's Parables

Let's discuss several questions that can help you better understand Jesus's parables.

### 1. Who is the audience?

Oftentimes with the parables in the Gospels, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees (i.e., the Jewish religious elite). But who else is he speaking in front of? His disciples? Townsfolk? The sick? The sinful? Identifying the audience helps us understand the point of the parable. For example, in Matthew 18:10-14, Jesus shares a similar parable of the lost sheep in front of his disciples. To that audience, the point of the parable focuses on God's immeasurable love for all his sheep. But in Luke 15, while addressing the Pharisees, the focus of Jesus's parables is on rejoicing (and partnering) with God in his efforts to pursue those who are lost.

### 2. What is the context?

As is the case with any passage of Scripture, you have to understand the context of Jesus's sayings. For example, it's helpful to ask questions like: Where is Jesus sharing this parable? Who is he speaking to? What's happened that has caused him to share a life-changing parable? In Luke 15, the textual clues in verses 1-2 help us understand God's heart for the lost.

Moreover, it's equally important to identify the literary context of the parable. For example, Luke records three successive "lost" parables in order to highlight the extent to which God will go in order to save that which is lost. But these parables are also recorded alongside several other passages where Jesus is reframing everyone's idea about God's kingdom. In other words, when studying any verse(s) from the Bible, it's always helpful to read the passages that come immediately before and after.

### 3. What's the main point and what is the appropriate response?

There's often a temptation to allegorize each detail in a parable in order to find multiple or hidden meanings. But to the original hearers of these parables, there was one main point and one intended response. In Luke 15, Jesus's main point was challenging the Pharisees to readjust their understanding of God's kingdom and to "rejoice with God" in the recovery of the lost.

Fortunately, as modern-day readers, we have the luxury of appreciating all the dimensions in these parables and can be challenged with Jesus's words to the Pharisees as well as comforted by God's relentless expression of grace.

## Session 2 - Discussion

### Introduction

It may seem repetitive, but Jesus follows his parable about a lost sheep with a parable about a lost coin. And in both parables, there is a common theme that describes God's heart—joy! Joy in reconnecting with those who were once lost but now found!

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the most valuable item you've lost? What did you do to recover that item?
2. Read Luke 15:8-10. Which details/characters would the original hearers of the parable have identified with?
3. From the lost sheep to the lost coin and eventually to the lost son, Jesus narrows the ratio from one of one hundred to one of ten... to one of two. What do these ratios reflect about God's relationship with those who are lost?
4. The concept of "lost" throughout Luke 15 assumes that these items belonged to God in the first place. How would you define someone who is "lost" today? Is a "lost" person someone that initially belonged to God?
5. Jesus did not share in the sinner's activities, but befriended them. In eating with them, he chose to lean in their direction in ways that were uncomfortable to the surrounding religious leaders. When have you experienced tension in leaning toward someone with different beliefs than you without compromising your own beliefs?
6. Jesus challenged the Pharisees to adjust their perspective toward those around them. How are these parables challenging your perspective about God and the way he views those who are lost?

## Moving Forward

Context is key when reading the Bible. And the same is true with Jesus's parables found in the Gospels. In Luke 15, we find Jesus challenging everyone's perception of the relentless nature of God's grace. And while God rejoices in many things, it's clear that he takes absolute delight in seeing people being reconnected.

## Changing Your Mind

*In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:2)*

## Session 3 - Notes on Luke 15:11–32

### 15:11

Jesus opens with “There was a man” similar to 15:4 and 15:8. In this parable, while there are multiple characters, the main focus is on the father.

### 15:12

Ancient Jewish inheritance laws would leave the older brother with two-thirds of the estate and the younger brother with one-third. The younger son’s request for his inheritance is unexpected since it would be customary for the inheritance to be distributed upon the father’s death. What is more surprising is that the father grants the younger son’s request—the father lets the son choose his own path.

### 15:13-14

The younger son leaves with all his possessions, including his portion of his father’s inheritance. Jesus makes clear in the parable that the son chooses a path filled with poor decisions; and his life begins to fall apart. Not only has the son purposely chosen to spend all his wealth, he experiences the unexpected realities of life (i.e., famine) that are beyond his control. And as a result, his life falls apart.

### 15:15-16

According to the law of Moses (Leviticus 11:7), pigs were unclean animals. A Jew would be considered defiled if they worked with pigs. But not only is the younger son working alongside unclean animals, he’s hoping to share their food. It’s clear the son has hit rock bottom.

## 15:17

The son experiences a moment of clarity and remembers the generosity of his father. The son considers the day laborers that his father hires and how they have been compensated enough to have food to spare. He has lost his sense of identity as a “son” and wishes just to be equal to a “hired servant.”

## 15:18-19

The son hatches a plan and begins to mentally rehearse a genuine plea of forgiveness. In effect, he has no ambition to restore himself to any type of family status. The only thing he can imagine is being considered a hired servant. With a sober realization of the choices he has made, he plans to return in humility, with no excuses, only repentance, completely at the mercy of his father.

## 15:20-21

The son heads back home in humility. And the focus of the parable shifts to the father, who has been patiently watching and waiting for his son to return. And before his son can mutter a word of repentance, the father runs to him and exuberantly showers him with compassion, love, and affection. Scholars have commented that this type of display of affection in response to a wayward son would have been uncommon. These two verses are a simple illustration of repentance (“went to his father”) and reconciliation (“threw his arms around him”).

## 15:22

The robe, the ring, and the sandals were signs of position, authority, and most importantly, acceptance. The son is experiencing an extreme reversal of circumstances from his rock-bottom experiences.

## 15:23-24

The father calls for lavish preparations normally reserved for a religious feast or a special occasion. And in doing so, the parable recalls the joyous nature of the previous two parables:

“Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep” (verse 6); “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin” (verse 9); “Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (verses 23–24).

## 15:25-27

The focus in the parable now shifts from the relationship between the father and the prodigal son to the father and the dutiful older son.

## 15:28

The older son’s anger and resentment is held in stark contrast to the father’s mercy and acceptance. The older son refuses to rejoice and celebrate with everyone else. In the same way the father “ran to his son” in verse 20, he “went out” and moved toward the older brother in verse 28. Interestingly, the brother that remained inside the family is now standing outside while the younger brother, who had run away, is now celebrated inside.

## 15:29

The older brother’s anger with the father is on public display. Why has the father overlooked his obedience and long-standing dutiful nature? Why does the father choose to celebrate the return of a prodigal son with a lavish display of affection? To the older son, none of this is fair. The father is not rewarding the deserving. But the message of the parable is not about what is fair, just, or deserved. The message of the parable is about the lavish nature of the father’s grace.

## 15:30

The “fattened calf” was generally reserved for an ornate gathering or fancy banquet. In contrast, a young goat would have been a much more commonplace meal. Again, the older brother’s concept of justice is based on what he feels is deserved or undeserved. From his perspective, the father’s generosity should be extended only to those who deserve generosity. Why should immorality hold more merit with the father than faithfulness? And in his anger, the older son refuses to personally identify with his younger brother— “when this son of yours,” instead of “my brother.”

## 15:31

In verse 12, the father responded to the younger son's disrespectful request in-kind—he gave him his inheritance. In verse 31, the father responds to the older son's outburst in-kind—"You are always with me, and everything I have is yours." The father loved both brothers. Neither the father's behavior or the younger son's return has affected the older brother's status. The robes, the rings, the sandals, the goats, the fattened calves... they were always (and continued to be) accessible to him.

## 15:32

The father invites the older son to reconnect with the younger son ("this brother of yours") and rejoice instead of expressing anger and resentment. This was a time to celebrate the return of a long-lost son. This was a time to share in the gracious and forgiving nature of the father. And with the last statement in the parable, Jesus compares being lost to being dead and being found to being alive. The three parables in Luke 15 highlight Jesus's mission to seek and to save the lost found throughout the Gospels (Luke 19:10).

## Session 3 - Discussion

### Introduction

The parable of the prodigal son is one of Jesus's most familiar teaching passages. In a few short verses, there are numerous twists in this family drama. But the parable should be more aptly labeled after the father (i.e., the parable of the loving father) for it's the father's response to both his sons that illustrates God's profound love for everyone in this world.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is your favorite element in the parable of the prodigal son?
2. Rather than refusing his son's request, the father gives his son his share of the estate and allows him the freedom to choose his own path. In the same way, do you believe God encourages or inhibits your free will?
3. The younger son's inner monologue in verses 17-20 is an example of repentance. How would you define "repentance"? And was repentance necessary for the father and son to be reconnected?
4. The older brother's anger in verses 25-30 is not unreasonable. From his perspective, the father chose forgiveness over fairness. Should there be a limit to God's grace and forgiveness? In your experience with God, is he fair in the way he works in this world and relates to people? Is he too fair? Not fair enough?
5. To the tax collectors and sinners surrounding Jesus, this parable was unexpectedly hopeful. To the Pharisees and teachers of the law, this parable challenged their posture toward others. Who do you relate to most? The younger brother? The older brother? Why?
6. The main character in the parable is the father and the lavish grace he extends to both sons. What new insights (or reminders) do you have about God's character? How could your relationship with God look different as a result?

7. The parable is left open-ended in that Jesus does not indicate whether the older son joined the celebration. And in doing so, he invites the Pharisees to decide how they want to respond to this parable. What's a practical way for you to join Jesus's mission to seek and save the lost?

## Moving Forward

These parables are easy to follow along with because you can relate with either the “sinner” crowd or the “religious” crowd. But the focus in each of these parables has always been on God, the one who goes to great lengths and makes great sacrifices to pursue lost things and rejoices when he finds them. That should be a hopeful message to everyone in that there are no limits to God's grace. And he invites everyone in the church to extend that measure of grace and joy to all who desire a relationship with God.

## Changing Your Mind

*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)*

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