

The Joy of Being Found: A Reflective Analysis of Luke 15:1-32

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1. Introduction

Basic catechism teaches us that God created us in his image and likeness to know Him, to love Him and to be with Him forever. We are in this earthly sojourn with a definitive end. The ultimate destiny or *telos* of our life is God Himself. But in this journey from our Creator and back to Him, between our birth and death, there is a tendency in us to get lost. All of us have experienced this reality. However, we can't get lost for eternity. There is a God, who is our Creator, who seeks us until he finds us. The gospel of Luke 15 is the story of the unconditional love and boundless mercy of our God.

2. The Significance of Lk. 15: 1-32

The gospel of St. Luke is known as the gospel of outcasts due to its special predilection for the so-called last, least and lost of the society.¹ Specifically, chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke is considered as the heart of the third gospel because it reveals the central theme of the Lukan narrative. The three parables have artistically constructed unit with a single theme which tells us that God is a compassionate Father.² The parables make a revolutionary paradigm of our understanding on the nature of God. Down through the centuries, God was understood as a Being, who loves the righteous, hates and punishes sinners. These three parables reveal to us that God is a passionate lover of humanity in spite of our failures. God loves

sinners and the sins that we commit never destroying God's interest in us rather it makes His love all the more intense.³

3. The Socio-Political Background of Luke 15

This passage presents to us the social discrimination that was very prevalent in Jewish society at that time. Chapter 15 begins with this context: "Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."⁴ Both the prostitutes and the tax-collectors were looked down by the Jewish society. They suffered low social status and self-esteem. They were considered the betrayers of the nation because the tax-collectors squeezed their people for the Romans as well as for their gain. In the first century, the prostitution was flourishing business in Galilee. The occupying forces namely the Roman soldiers satisfied their sexual desires through these local women. Therefore, the Jews viewed the tax-collectors and prostitutes with great aversion.⁵ But Jesus welcomed these people wholeheartedly.

It is very important to note that in the ancient East, the rich people used to feed those who are needy as a sign of their generosity and novelty. But they never dine with them, it was below their dignity whereas, Jesus welcomed them and dines with them. Such breaking of the evil social customs pushed Jesus into the bad books of Pharisees and scribes. Nevertheless, for Jesus this fellowship was an expression of giving them the new life; it was a manifestation of God's compassion and forgiveness.⁶ Jesus used parables to communicate this message because He wanted to defend the gospel and also win over his opponents. He wanted to convince them that God's salvation is inclusive of all without any separation between righteous and sinners.⁷

4. Lk.15:1-32: The Parables of God's Compassion

In the parable of the lost son, we come across a phrase: "His father saw him and was filled with compassion."⁸ The Greek verb that denotes compassion in the original is *esplagkhnesthe*. It refers

to the physical seat of emotions it can be one's own heart, the guts or bowels.⁹ It transcends the realm of feeling pity for the other. The feeling of compassion inspires us to enter into the life situation of the other and feeling pain with him/her. All these three parables depict a God who relentlessly searches for one who is lost. 'A God who is in search of the man.' We see that when Jesus encounters people of this sort their sorrows and worries become that of His. He experiences the joy of finding. He says: "There is a joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."¹⁰

4.1. The Lost Sheep

The notion of the Good Shepherd is very much close to Jesus' heart. The prophet Isaiah mentioned in his writings the immense love of the Good Shepherd for his flock: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosoms, and gently lead the mother sheep."¹¹ The parable starts with posing a question: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"¹² It is quite clear that no human beings would go after a lost sheep leaving the ninety-nine who are not strayed. Nonetheless, when he finds the sheep throwing a party to friends and neighbours. It would require another sheep to celebrate this happiness. It goes beyond human thinking but He celebrates the joy of finding the lost sheep.

The focus of the parable is not only the gracious willingness and initiative to seek out the lost but also to celebrate the joy of finding.¹³ The parable of the lost sheep invites our attention to the outcasts of Palestinian society of first-century namely, the tax-collectors and prostitutes. The Pharisees and scribes consider them as lost forever and beyond redemption. Anyhow, Jesus through his examples like calling Levi as one of his apostles, visiting the house of Zacchaeus, dining with the tax-collectors and prostitutes proved that they were lost but now He has brought them back to His flock. God is a compassionate shepherd who cared even for the one who goes astray and put all the effort to bring him/her back into his bosom.¹⁴

4.2. The Lost Coin

The central figure in this parable is the woman who undertakes a relentless search to find the lost coin. The Gospel of Luke is also recognized as the Gospel of women due to the importance this gospel has given them. All through his writing, Luke made sure a gender complementarity-the tendency to balance both male and female. When we analyze some examples this conscious effort of Luke becomes clear for us. In the first chapter, God's revelation to Zechariah and Mary, Simeon and prophetess Anna, and the son of widow of Nain and the daughter of Jairus, the man searches for the lost sheep and the woman searching for the lost coin.¹⁵ This parable underlines the prime importance of women in the domestic arena. This parable assumes women as the keeper of the family matters like the need to light the lamp to search properly using a broom might have used the branch of a date tree etc.¹⁶ It also emphasizes the single mindedness of women, for the moment forgetting everything else and embarking a relentless search with great perseverance. Thus the author used feminine metaphors to contradict the age-old thinking that the nature of women as inferior to man.¹⁷ The Lukan Gospel does its best to give an equal status and dignity to women along with men. Thus, the author draws out the conclusion that Jesus is going beyond the exclusive attitude to women and communicating to the readers that God is like a woman who searches for the lost with her full heart, like a mother. Now, we could raise a question did not mention a female character in the parable of the lost son or why does not Lukan gospel tell the story of a mother who searches her lost son? The answer speaks about the woman none other than Mary who lost Jesus in the temple.¹⁸

4.3 The Lost Son

The parable of the lost son is considered as the pearl and crown of all the parables. The scholars have suggested several titles like the prodigal son, the waiting father, and the elder brother, a dysfunctional family and its neighbours, etc. However, the most suitable title for the majority is the parable of the compassionate Father, since he

is the central figure of this story and represents the compassionate heavenly Father.¹⁹ This parable deals with universal characteristics of human life such as freedom, responsibility, estrangement, longing, return, grace, anguish, and reconciliation.²⁰ This parable describes the entire salvation history in a nutshell. The character of the youngest son depicts the humanity which always wants to live independently of father's will and often goes astray; this presents the fall of humanity.²¹

In the context of first-century Jewish culture, the younger son is breaking all the traditions of the land. The youngest son inherits one-third of his father's property. That he gets in due time by serving the family business and taking care of the parents. Here, he was not ready to serve the family or his parents. In a way, he considered his father as good as a dead, goes astray from him to a distant land.²² His relationship with the prostitutes which was accused by his brother and his presence at the pigsty depict commercial and cultural contamination.²³ He rejected his father and involvement with the prostitutes was his attempt to satisfy his appetites and aspirations at all costs.²⁴ Finally, "he comes to himself."²⁵ The idiomatic expression in Greek denotes his repentance, reminds him about his glorious days when he was in communion with his father.²⁶ This twist in the parable speaks about a universal truth that human beings remember God, only in adverse circumstances such as famine, natural calamities, etc.²⁷

In his wretchedness, the prodigal son was quite sure about one thing, the compassionate love of his father. "So he set off and went to his father."²⁸ The evangelist presents to us the father who was waiting and longing for the return of his dear son.²⁹ The father spotted his son from a distance indicates this fact of constant vigilance.³⁰ As soon as the father meets him, he runs embraces and kisses him again and again or kissed tenderly. The Greek word used to indicate the verb running is *dramon*. It means 'exert oneself to the limit of one's powers.' Here, the father's compassion is not based on son's appeal; instead, the father is moved with compassion while he was at a distance.³¹ The opening of arms in embrace implies opening

up of one's personal or private place for the other. It signified the unconditional acceptance by the father.³² In the Mediterranean culture, the kiss also implies unconditional forgiveness.³³

The son returns home dirty and contaminated. He is ritually unclean and smelly, yet father hugs and kisses him. By embracing him the father is also contaminated but this magnanimous gesture of the father covers the contamination of the son. It symbolizes the truth of God's compassion on humanity through the person of Jesus. Jesus expressed it tangibly by allowing himself to be touched by the woman who was suffering due to hemorrhage. Jesus also touches the lepers.³⁴

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."³⁵ The son started his confession but he couldn't complete it due to the interruption of the father. The compassion of the father transforms his guilt feeling to actual repentance.³⁶ The orders for the best robe, ring on his hand, shoes on his feet, killing the fatted calf, are the manifestations of the compassionate love of the father in the form of forgiveness.³⁷ The best robe indicates the redeemer's righteousness which the believer puts on when he is justified; the ring indicates the seal of the spirit and shoes implies the unconditional forgiveness and invitation to walk with God in the newness of life.³⁸

The eldest son demonstrates that though God is ever ready to forgive the failure of humanity, we are not ready to forgive each other. When he hears about the return of his younger brother and the celebrations in his honour, he takes a stand of refusal to participate in the banquet which is a public insult against the father.³⁹ His unwillingness to enter into the house shows his alienation from the father and his younger brother.⁴⁰ Though he was living in his father's house, he didn't have a genuine relationship with him. His understanding of love was conditional. His relationship with the father was based on merit and reward.⁴¹ He considered himself self-righteous because he obeyed all the laws and stayed in his father's house. But he failed to understand and experience the compassionate heart of his father. The eldest son who appeals to his merit and virtue

depicts the self-righteous attitudes of the Pharisees and scribes.⁴² The Father wants him to give up his self-righteous, jealous and heartless ways. Father's exhortation 'to rejoice with me' is a heartfelt cry towards the eldest son to be compassionate like the father.⁴³ This parable is a powerful exhortation to be compassionate like the father. God's loves for the sinner has no bounds. The tendencies of being self-righteous and selfish alienate oneself from God and his/her fellow brethren who stand in need of our compassion.⁴⁴

5. The Critical Analysis

When we critically analyze these three parables, we observe certain features are common that points to a single theme that runs through all the three parables.

5.1. Diligence

The search is made until the lost is found. The person who is engaged in search has this single focus; he/she is restless until the aim is achieved. It implies God's merciful heart that awaits and searches lost humanity. If one is lost and he/she is not found, it is not because God has not found him/her but due to his/her refusal to be taken back. God respects human freedom, once he/she takes a single step, God runs to him/her with his compassionate and unconditional love.⁴⁵

5.2. The Joy of Finding

The celebration that is depicted in all the three parables speaks about the joy of heaven over a repentant sinner. It is a sign of hope for all those who consider themselves lost forever. No one is beyond God's redemption. However, wretched sinners that we are, how far we have gone away, how much we have contaminated ourselves by being engaged in filthy pleasures of the world, lost all the dignity and lost everything to the extent of being in pigsty, yet God is there to embrace us, restore our lost grace and blessings and to celebrate our homecoming.

5.3. The Joy of being Found

The only reaction of one who is being found is that of gratitude and humility.⁴⁶ In all the three parables nothing is mentioned about this. It is because the joy of one who is being found goes beyond human expressions. The person who is soaked in the compassionate love of God has nothing to express but being in the presence of God, being in the father's house thinking about his mercy and being merciful like the father.

6. The Hope for Lost Humanity

God created human beings in his image and likeness and also endowed them with freedom to choose good and evil. The gift of freedom and free will can be considered as the greatest gift that we have received from our Creator. The greatness of our freedom is that we have the freedom even to choose the creator who has given us the gift of freedom. It is true that freedom makes our existence meaningful and distinguishes our existence from the existence of all the other creatures.

The other side of the reality is that the same gift can be a curse if one does not properly exercise this gift of freedom. The history of humanity showed this tendency from the very beginning itself. A tendency to choose evil than good. Every human being undergoes the struggle to choose between good and evil. Often we have failed. But our Creator, the compassionate Father, understands our fragility and respects our freedom. The parable of the lost son clearly depicts this fact. The father waits for his son. In the case of the lost coin and the lost sheep, the woman and the shepherd go in search of the lost. But here, he waits for his son to return. But when he takes a step God runs and embrace him to his bosom and celebrates his return.

The world in which we live promotes the materialistic culture that promotes the maximum pleasure principle. Ultimately, all of us feel emptiness. This emptiness creates a sense of meaninglessness in our life. Many people end their life because they are unable to face this emptiness. Only God, Our creator can fill this emptiness because

He is our final destination, to be in communion with the Father and spend our eternity in our Father's house. Lk. 15: 1-32 is a sign of hope for broken humanity. It fills our life with hope. These parables empower us to face the challenges of our day to day life. In our loneliness, despair, darkness it assures us, our father awaits us. Let us get up and return to him. His compassion awaits us.

7. Conclusion

The world religions speak about man's search for God. The uniqueness of Christianity is that it speaks about God's search for the man. Lk. 15: 1-32 is a revelation too because it breaks all our traditional understanding of God especially, God as a static reality, the unmoved mover. However, this parable depicts a dynamic God who is full of compassion and love. It is said even if all the Bibles in the world are destroyed, but a page that contains chapter 15 of Luke remains then evangelization will be continued. It is indeed true; we could summarize the entire biblical message into these thirty-two verses defining God as Compassion incarnate who is ready to suffer with the broken humanity.

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Endnotes

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² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Double Day, 1970), 1071.

³ Donald G. Miller, *The Layman's Bible Commentary* (Georgia: John Knox Press, 1982) 119.

⁴ Lk.15:1-2 NRSV

⁵ Jermy Duff and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *Meeting Jesus: Human Responses to a Yearning God* (London: Bookmarque Ltd., 2006), 60.

⁶ A. Joseph Lazar, *Growth in the New Testament: A Lucan Perspective* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2008) 295.

⁷ Lazar, 295.

⁸ Lk.15:20 NRSV

⁹ Duff, 74.

¹⁰ Lk.15:10 NRSV

¹¹ Is. 40:11 NRSV

¹² Lk.15:4 NRSV

¹³ Fitzmyer, 1075.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Duff, 43.

¹⁶ Duff, 44.

¹⁷ Duff, 47.

¹⁸ Duff, 48.

¹⁹ Fitzmyer, 1083.

²⁰ Lazar, 294.

²¹ Miller, 121.

²² Duff, 58.

²³ Duff, 62.

²⁴ Duff, 62.

²⁵ Lk.15:17 NRSV

²⁶ Lazar, 302-303

- ²⁷ Duff, 64.
- ²⁸ Lk.15:20 NRSV
- ²⁹ Lazar, 307.
- ³⁰ Duff, 71.
- ³¹ Lazar, 307.
- ³² Duff, 77.
- ³³ Lazar, 307.
- ³⁴ Duff, 79.
- ³⁵ Lk.15:21 NRSV
- ³⁶ Lazar, 308-309.
- ³⁷ Lazar, 309.
- ³⁸ Lazar, 311.
- ³⁹ Lazar, 313.
- ⁴⁰ Lazar, 314.
- ⁴¹ Lazar, 314-315.
- ⁴² Lazar, 317.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Lazar, 320.
- ⁴⁵ Miller, 119.
- ⁴⁶ Lazar, 320.
