

# BIBLE BACKGROUND

## JOURNEY 1: *HOMEWARD BOUND*

### *The Prodigal Son Returns*

**KEY PASSAGE:** Luke 15

**KEY WORD:** Joy

**KEY VERSE:** Philippians 4:6–7

**KEY THOUGHT:** Discover the joy and peace of God's love and forgiveness through Jesus.

## A FRIEND OF SINNERS

As Jesus went from place to place in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, it became apparent that He had no problem associating with those branded by the religious community as *unclean*. The people the Pharisees regarded as unworthy were the ones most receptive to the Messiah. The outcasts of society were drawn to His message of love and forgiveness, while the Jewish leaders resented His popularity and grew determined to destroy His influence among the people. With the tax collectors and the sinners gathered round and the Pharisees complaining, Jesus shared with the group three simple, yet profound, parables that taught what it meant to be *found*.

## THE LOST SHEEP

Sheep herding was the number one occupation among the poor people of Judea. Every sheep was important to a good shepherd. Each one depended on his watchful eye for protection and provision. Each one had to be accounted for because each one was valuable to the one who owned the flock. Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who had a flock of 100 sheep. One of them wandered away and was considered lost. So valuable was this one sheep that the shepherd left the 99 in the wilderness to search for the one that was lost. The shepherd was obligated to his master to see that all sheep under his care were returned safely to the fold. When the lost sheep was found, the shepherd laid it on his shoulders, returned home and called his friends and neighbors together to celebrate. Jesus declared that there would be more JOY in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 just persons who refuse to ask for forgiveness.

## THE LOST COIN

There was no paper money during the time Jesus lived, only coins. People lived in houses with dirt floors or cobbled stone floors. A coin could be easily lost on such flooring and could be difficult to find. Jesus told the story of a woman with 10 coins who lost one of

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them inside her house. She lit a lamp to search every nook and cranny. These coins could have been all the money she had in the world. She could not afford to lose one of them. She swept the entire house, searchingly, carefully until she found that missing coin. She called her friends and neighbors together so they could rejoice. Likewise, Jesus said the angels rejoice in heaven whenever one sinner repents.

## THE LOST SON

Just in case the Pharisees had missed the point of the first two parables, Jesus told a third parable about a man who had two sons.<sup>1</sup>

- According to Jewish law, the older son was to inherit two thirds of his father's estate. The other third was to be divided among the remaining children. Since it appears that there were only two sons, the younger would have been entitled to only third of his father's holdings.
- When the younger son asked for his portion early, he was going around the Jewish law. Any Jew who heard Jesus telling this story would have recognized the motives of greed the younger son was showing. Such a request revealed the son's disrespect for his father. Perhaps the neighbors feared this young Jewish man might sell his father's land to a Gentile in order to secure the money he needed for his riotous living.
- The younger son foolishly spent his inheritance and was left with nothing. The only work he could find was a job feeding pigs. For a Jew, this would have been a great humiliation because swine were considered unclean and were forbidden as food.
- At this point, the son began to realize how wrong he had been; he decided to return to his father. He only hoped that his father would accept him back as a hired hand.
- This "lost son" perhaps was convinced that he had given up any right to be called his father's "son." He would be willing to do anything just to be part of his father's household again, even if it were as a simple servant.
- The Bible records that while the young man was still a great way off, his father ran out to meet him (Luke 15:20). As the Jews listened to this part of the story, they would have been surprised and angry to hear that the father ran to meet his "prodigal son." Wealthy landowners did not go out to meet *anyone*; servants did that. They failed to see the love and forgiveness that motivated the father.
- The father kissed his son and welcomed him home. The son admitted his wrong and declared his own unworthiness. How could he expect his father to ever forgive him?
- Then the compassionate father called for the best robe and sandals and a ring for his finger to demonstrate his forgiveness and restoration to the family. A fatted calf was killed and a great celebration was held because the son who was lost had come home.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from the *Children's Ministry Resource Bible*, pp. 1313–1314.

- When the older son heard the music and the dancing, he learned that his younger brother had returned. He then demonstrated his own lack of compassion and became angry. He refused his father's invitation to come and join the celebration.
- He was quick to point out that he had never left his father. The father responded that all he had belonged to the older brother. Even though the older brother had never abandoned the father, his lack of compassion for his lost brother revealed his true heart.

## A WORD PICTURE OF THE HEAVENLY FATHER

This parable is not just about the lost son who received restoration, but it also provides a beautiful word picture of a Heavenly Father who eagerly awaits the return of those who have gone their own way. The publicans and sinners heard the parables and understood that they were the lost souls who needed the love and forgiveness of a heavenly Father. The Pharisees and religious skeptics acted like the older brother, jealous and unforgiving, wanting to keep the knowledge of God to themselves. They had missed the meaning of the parable and failed to recognize the Messiah who had delivered it.

## A REASON TO REJOICE

God's forgiveness is a powerful concept that can transform a life. Sin grieves the Heavenly Father and separates Him from fellowship with His children. Jesus came to restore that fellowship by paying sin's penalty of death. On the Cross the blood of Christ flowed down to form a river of redemption. When a person repents and receives the gift of forgiveness provided by Jesus, the power of sin is cancelled in his/her life. The Bible describes God's forgiveness in this manner:

- **God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west!**  
Psalm 103:12— *He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities, for as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*
- **God shows to His children great compassion.**  
Psalm 103:13— *As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.*
- **God puts our sins behind Himself and does not look upon them.**  
Isaiah 38:17— *... but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back.*
- **God delights in forgiving His children. He casts their sins into the deepest sea.** Micah 7:18–19— *Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us, and will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*

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- **God blots out the sins of His children and covers them as a cloud would hide them.** Isaiah 44:22— *I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.*
- **God will not remember our sins.** Hebrews 8:12— *For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.*

The joy and peace that comes from being fully restored to fellowship with our Heavenly Father surpasses all understanding. He buries our sins and remembers them no more. He gives us His presence so that we need not be anxious for anything. He has promised to be with us wherever we go. The Apostle Paul understood this kind of joy and peace when he wrote the following verses in Philippians 4:4–7:

**Verse 4:** *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*

**Verse 5:** *Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;*

**Verse 6:** *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*

**Verse 7:** *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

There is no true joy or peace apart from knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord.

# TEACHING PLAN

## JOURNEY 1: *HOMEWARD BOUND*

### *The Prodigal Son Returns*

<b>KEY PASSAGE</b> Luke 15	<b>KEY VERSE</b> Philippians 4:6–7
<b>KEY WORD</b> Joy	<b>KEY THOUGHT</b> Discover the joy and peace of God's love and forgiveness through Jesus.



### INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

**A. CONNECT** the Big Room experience with the Bible story by asking the students questions about what they saw.

- “Which character was upset about having lost something?”
- “Why was this object so important to the person?”
- “What might be the consequences of having lost this item?”
- “Describe the scene when the item was found.”

**B. MAKE REAL** the concept of value and loss by setting up a situation in your classroom in which you personally have lost something that is very valuable to you (*perhaps a treasured picture of your child or grandchild, a wedding ring, your car keys, your wallet or purse, etc.*). Hide it well but make sure it can be found.

- **EXPLAIN** the situation to the students and ask for their help in finding the lost item.
- **DESCRIBE** your emotional connection with the item.
- **GRIEVE** over its loss as you review the consequences if you can't find it.
- **BE** overly joyful when the item is found. (*You could even celebrate by bringing some goodies to share with the students.*)

Then **EXPLAIN** how what we have just experienced here in class illustrates what happened three times in today's Bible passage when something that was lost

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was found. **ASK** the students to figure out what Jesus was trying to teach His disciples.



## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE PASSAGE: Luke 15**

Briefly **EXPLAIN** how Jesus had been rebuked for associating with what the Jews called *publicans* and *sinners*. **DESCRIBE** how Jesus used parables to make His teaching come alive. In today's lesson He is going to use three different stories to illustrate the kind of joy that comes when something lost is finally found. **EXPLAIN** that Biblical parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings.

### **A. THE LOST SHEEP—Luke 15:3–7**

**DISCUSS** the responsibility of the shepherd. Talk about why sheep wander away.

**Verses 3–4:** How many sheep did the shepherd have?  
How many got lost?

**Verses 5–6:** What did the shepherd do when he found the sheep?

**Verse 7:** How is this like joy in heaven?

### **B. THE LOST COIN—Luke 15:8–10**

**DESCRIBE** the plight of the woman and the value she placed on the coins.

**Verse 8:** How many did she have? How many did she lose?

**Verse 9:** What did the woman do that shows how important the coin was?

**Verse 10:** How do the angels feel when a sinner repents? [*Point out that this is the verse that tells us what happens in heaven when any person accepts Christ as Savior.*]

### **C. THE LOST SON—Luke 15:15–32**

**SET** the scene of the son wanting to leave and taking his inheritance with him.

**Verse 13:** Did the son spend his money wisely? How do we know?

**Verses 14–16:** How did his new life turn out?

**Verses 17–19:** How did he “come to himself?”  
What did he decide to do?

**Verse 20–24:** What did the father do when the son came back home?

### **D. THE FATHER—Luke 15:20**

**Verse 20:** How did the father know the son was coming home?  
(*waiting and watching*)

**Verses 22–23:** What did the father do for him? (*robe, ring, shoes, food*)

**Verse 24:** Why was the father happy? How is he like our heavenly Father? How big is God's love?



## TABLE TALK 1: TOSS A SMILE! (Younger Students)

**ASK** the students to come together with their table group leader. They can stand or sit in a circle. The leader will appoint one student to begin by smiling. That student then wipes the smile off his/her face and throws it to another student. No one can laugh, smile, or talk unless the smile has been tossed to them. If a student laughs, smiles or talks out of turn, then that student is out of the game. Allow play to continue until only one student is left.

**HAVE** the table group leaders challenge the students to share the source of their joy with at least one person every day. **EXPLAIN:** Joy is contagious! When you have it, others see it. We must always let the joy of Christ show on our face.



## TABLE TALK 2: JOY! JOY! JOY! (Older Students)

**HAVE** the students gather into table groups and **DISCUSS** the following questions:

- In all three parables what was the reason for celebrating?
- What harsh words did the father have for his lost son? (*none*)
- Why did the father behave in this manner? (*his love for his son*)
- What did the robe represent? (given to the guest of honor) The ring? (*a symbol of authority*) Sandals? (*a slave usually did not have sandals to wear*)
- What did the three gifts tell us about the father's forgiveness? (*complete, total*)
- How is this kind of forgiveness like God's? (*Our sins are buried and forgotten by God.*)
- Describe how the angels react when a person finds salvation in Jesus.
- How would you think God the Father reacts to sinners being saved?
- How does a person figure out he is lost? (*sorry about sin, feelings of emptiness and loneliness, negative consequences of sin, etc.*)
- How can a person get found by God's love? (*call out to God, confess sin, place faith in Christ*)

**HAVE** the table group leaders challenge the students to share the source of their joy with at least one person every day.



## THE CROSSROADS

- **EXPLAIN** how each one of us is like this prodigal son who went his own way.
- **SHARE** the plan of salvation. If available, use the iodine solution or the illustration using snow powder to demonstrate what God does with our sin.

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- **INVITE** any student who is not sure about his/her relationship with Christ to come and speak with you privately.
- **ASK** the students to pray for someone they know is lost.
- **CLOSE** in prayer as you share the plan of salvation.



## SCRIPTURE MEMORY: *PHILIPPIANS 4:6–7*

*[We will be working on these two verses every week during this spring quarter. Please allow time to work on these two verses a few minutes each week. For whatever lies ahead for all of us, these verses will give strength, hope, joy and a peace that passes all understanding. How significant it is to have a young person learn this now.]*

- **EXPLAIN:** The apostle Paul wrote a letter to tell the Christians at Philippi how to find their joy even in the middle of difficult times. That book is called *Philippians* and it is found in the New Testament.
- **ASK** the students to locate the book in their Bibles and find the passage.
- **REMINDE** them that every single one of us will go through difficult times at one point or another during our lives. If we can repeat these verses during those times, we will be able to see how God can give us peace and joy as we go through situations that are difficult.
- **HAVE** students get into groups of two or three and practice saying the verses to one another.
- **BREAK** the verses up into the following phrases so that they will be easier to memorize.

### Verse 6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything  
by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving,  
let your requests be made known to God.

### Verse 7

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

- **PROVIDE** a piece of paper with the verses written out in these phrases. The students can draw picture to represent key words. This will help them to visually relate to the verse.
- **CHALLENGE** the students to memorize these two verses and say them out loud every single day for the next three months.



## BIBLE LEARNING PROJECT: *Key Verse Memory Frames*

**Supplies:** cardboard frames, preprinted Philippians 4:6–7 key passage inserts, self-adhesive magnets, glue, Q-tips<sup>®</sup>, bowls, markers

- Distribute markers, glue, Q-tips<sup>®</sup> and bowls among the class.
- Provide a frame, a preprinted key passage insert and a self-adhesive magnet to each student.
- Instruct the students to glue the key passage to the frame and affix the magnetic strip to the back of the frame.
- Read and discuss the quarter's key passage with the students.

**ENCOURAGE** the students to memorize these two verses. **EXPLAIN** how we all at one time or another become anxious or worry about something. If we do what these verses tell us to do, then we can have joy and peace in our hearts.



## A LOOK AT THE BOOK

Joy comes from knowing Jesus. To make sure our students know how to explain the plan of salvation, allow them time to do the following:

- **Younger Students:** Draw a picture to represent the scene described in Luke 15:20–24 where the father runs to meet his son. Or, draw a picture to illustrate the angels rejoicing in heaven when someone receives Jesus as Savior.
- **Older Students:** Arrange these verses in the correct order to explain how someone who is *lost* can be *found*.
  - » Ephesians 2:8–10
  - » Romans 6:23
  - » Romans 10:13
  - » John 14:3
  - » Romans 3:23
  - » Romans 5:8
  - » Romans 10:9–10



## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is a shepherd's responsibility? (*feed and care for every sheep*)
2. What did the shepherd do to find the lost sheep?
3. What did the shepherd do when the sheep was found?
4. Why was it so hard for the widow to find the lost coin?
5. What do the angels do when a sinner repents? (*rejoice*)
6. What did the younger son ask of his father?
7. What did the father do?
8. What happened to the young man?

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9. How did he come to himself?
10. What did the son intend to tell his father when he came back home?
11. What harsh words did the father have for his son? (*none*)
12. How did the father greet the son?
13. What was the response of the older brother?
14. What did the father tell him?
15. Describe what it means to have *the joy of Jesus* in your heart. (*to know that no matter what happens, Jesus is always with you and will make all things work for your good*)
16. How does a person who is *lost* become *found*? (*plan of salvation*)