

When God Ran

Luke 15:20–24

The Father's love doesn't wait for us to get all the way home. It runs toward us while we are still far off, absorbs our shame, clothes us in his own dignity, and throws a feast.

THE PASSAGE

Luke 15:20–24

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

The Good Father

We left the younger son on the road last week. He was heading in the right direction, speech rehearsed, sandals not yet on his feet. This week he gets close enough for his father to see him.

But here is the text's surprise: he doesn't arrive. The Father arrives first.

"But while he was still far off, his father saw him." Seven words that change everything.

You do not see someone who is far off unless you have been watching the road. The father wasn't notified. He simply — saw him. Because he had never stopped looking.

The Greek word for what he felt in that moment is *splanchnizomai* — gut-clenching, visceral, physical compassion. It is used twelve times in the New Testament, almost always to describe Jesus's response to suffering people: the leper, the widow burying her son, the hungry crowd, the lost sheep. In every instance, the gut moves first and then the body follows.

Jesus gave this word to the Father in this parable. He is saying: the Father felt what I feel.

John's gospel shows the same divine reality from another angle. At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus groaned in his spirit, troubled himself deeply — and wept — before he raised the dead. The compassion always comes before the action. The gut moves before the feet do.

Then the father ran. In first-century Jewish culture, a man of his standing did not run — it required lifting his robes, exposing his legs, a shameful posture for a patriarch. He ran anyway. Scholars note he ran to reach his son before the village could perform the *Kezazah* ceremony — the ritual of cutting off. He took the shame on himself so his son wouldn't have to face it.

While he was still far off.

Not when he arrived. Not when the speech was finished. Not when the repentance was proven. The Father was already moving.

See also: *Psalm 103:13 — as a father has compassion on his children • Luke 7:11–17 — the widow of Nain; compassion before the miracle • John 11:33–35 — Jesus groaned, troubled himself, wept at Lazarus's tomb • Matthew 9:36 — crowds harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*

The Restoration

Notice what the father does not do. He does not address his son. He addresses his servants. He lets the commands performed around the son tell the son everything he needs to know. The restoration happens before the son can object to it.

Three gifts. Each one a public declaration.

The robe — the best one, which is the father's own. In scripture, clothing is never merely clothing. After the fall in Eden, the first act of God's grace was covering — God made garments for Adam and Eve before he sent them out. The prophet Zechariah saw Joshua the high priest standing in filthy garments before the angel of the Lord and heard the command: 'Remove the filthy garments. I have taken your iniquity away and will clothe you with festal robes.' Isaiah sings: 'He has clothed me with garments of salvation, the robe of righteousness.' The thread runs from Eden to the far country. The son came home wearing the pig pen. The Father covers him in his own honor.

The ring — a signet ring. When Pharaoh restored Joseph to authority in Egypt, he placed his own signet ring on Joseph's hand. The ring means the authority of the household is yours again. You are not a hired hand. You are not a servant. The father is not just forgiving — he is reinstating.

The sandals — because slaves went barefoot. The son came home prepared to be a servant. The sandals say before a word is spoken: that is not what this is. And there is more. Paul writes that our feet are to be shod with the readiness of the gospel of peace. The father is not just restoring his son's status. He is equipping him for the road still to come.

Then the feast. A fatted calf reserved for communal celebration — the whole village invited. The father does not forgive privately. He makes the restoration as public as the departure was. The shame was public. The honor will be public too.

Which of the three gifts — the robe, the ring, or the sandals — speaks most directly to where you are right now?

See also: *Genesis 3:21 — God clothes Adam and Eve; the first act of grace is covering • Zechariah 3:3–5 — filthy garments exchanged for festal robes • Isaiah 61:10 — garments of salvation, robe of righteousness • Genesis 41:41–42 — Pharaoh's ring to Joseph • Ephesians 6:15 — feet shod with the readiness of the gospel*

Dead and Alive

Luke 15:24 *For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*

This is the theological climax of the parable. And Jesus reaches for the biggest language available.

Dead. Alive again. The Greek word — *anazao* — means to return to life. It is resurrection language. Jesus uses it only twice in the entire gospel, both times in this parable. The Father is not saying his son was sad and is now happy, estranged and now reconciled. He is saying something happened here that can only be described as a man coming back from the dead.

Lost. Found. The same words threaded through all three parables in this chapter — the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. Each found. Each celebrated. The father's declaration deliberately echoes the earlier parables. This is the third. The escalation is intentional: one in a hundred, one in ten, one in one.

This one is yours.

The feast is an Easter party. The music and dancing the elder brother hears from the field — that is resurrection music. Something that was dead is alive. The only one who does not join the celebration is the one who does not yet understand what death and life mean.

That is next week.

See also: *Ephesians 2:1–5 — you were dead, but God made us alive together with Christ • Romans 6:11 — consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God • Luke 15:7, 10 — joy in heaven over one who repents • John 11:25 — I am the resurrection and the life*

Three Movements

Henri Nouwen spent months sitting with Rembrandt's painting of this moment — the father bent over his returning son, those two hands, one strong and firm, one soft and open, pressing gently on the shoulders of someone who came home expecting to be a servant.

He said he found himself in the younger son. The one who kept leaving — not always dramatically, not always consciously, but leaving. Choosing the far country in a hundred small ways.

Then he found himself in the elder son. The one who stayed and served and quietly built a case against grace. We will spend time with him next week.

And then a friend said something that hit him, he said, like a thunderbolt:

“Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you are called to be the father.”

That is the third movement. Not just — I am received. But — I am called to become the one who receives.

Rembrandt understood this. He painted this scene near the end of his life — after bankruptcy, after loss, after he had been the prodigal himself. Nouwen writes that the father in the painting is a self-portrait not of Rembrandt's face but of his soul — the soul of a man who had suffered enough to learn compassion. Rembrandt was the son. He became the father.

That is the journey. That is the whole journey.

Paul names it directly: Be imitators of God, as beloved children. Be merciful, as your Father is merciful. The parable doesn't just show us who God is. It shows us who we are called to become.

Where do you find yourself in Nouwen's three movements right now — younger son, elder son, or somewhere on the road toward becoming the father?

See also: *Ephesians 5:1–2 — be imitators of God, as beloved children • Luke 6:36 — be merciful, as your Father is merciful • 1 Corinthians 11:1 — follow my example, as I follow Christ • 1 John 3:16–18 — we know love by this: we ought to lay down our lives*

Saddle Up

You came in here today as one of the sons. Maybe the younger — you know the far country, you know what the pig pen smells like, you know what it is to rehearse a speech on the way home and have it cut off by someone running toward you before you could finish.

If that is you — you have been found. You have been clothed. You are not a servant here.

Maybe you came in as the elder son — faithful, present, quietly keeping a record. The father comes out to you too. We will spend time with that next week.

But either way — you have been given sandals.

Sandals in the ancient world mean you are free, not enslaved. Sandals in the Triptych mean you have a Path. Sandals in Paul's armor mean your feet are shod with the readiness of the gospel of peace — you are equipped to carry good news wherever you walk.

Being the Father and walking the Path cannot be separated. The road you walk is the one where you run toward people who are still far off. You become the one who covers shame before it can be spoken. You become the one who calls for the feast.

Flame: the Father's love as presence and power. Table: you have been fed, you belong. Path: now go.

The sandals are already on your feet.

See also: Ephesians 6:15 — feet shod with the readiness of the gospel of peace • Romans 10:15 — how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news • Isaiah 52:7 — how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger • Luke 15:25–32 — the elder son hears the music

KEY WORDS

σπλαγχνίζομαι	<i>Splanchnizomai</i>	Gut-clenching compassion (v.20) — used 12x in NT, almost always of Jesus. The leper, the widow of Nain, the hungry crowd. Now the Father. In every instance: gut moves, then action follows.
δραμών	<i>Dramōn</i>	He ran (v.20) — undignified for a patriarch. Robes lifted, legs exposed. He ran to absorb the shame before his son could face it. Every step was substitutionary.
κατεφίλησεν	<i>Katephilēsen</i>	Kissed him (v.20) — imperfect tense: kissed him repeatedly, over and over. Not a formal greeting. An outpouring that would not stop.
ἀνέζησεν	<i>Anazao</i>	Alive again (v.24) — resurrection language. Jesus uses it only twice in the gospels, both here. Not reconciled — resurrected. The feast is an Easter party.
ἀπόλυμι / εὕρισκω	<i>Apollymi / Heuriskō</i>	Lost / found (v.24) — the thread through all three parables. Lost sheep, lost coin, lost son. The third. The escalation: one in a hundred, one in ten, one in one. This one is yours.

REFLECTION & RESPONSE

Take a moment with these questions. You can write, pray, or just sit.

1. The father saw his son while he was still far off — because he had never stopped watching the road. Where in your life do you need to know that God has been watching for you?

2. The three gifts — robe, ring, sandals — each address a different dimension of who the son thought he was versus who the father says he is. Which of the three lands most personally for you today, and why?

3. Nouwen says the final calling is not to remain a son but to become the Father. What would it look like — concretely, in your actual life — to run toward someone who is still far off?

4. The sandals mean you are free and you have a road. What road is in front of you right now, and what does it mean to walk it as someone who has been clothed and fed by the Father?

You have been found, clothed, and given sandals. Now walk like it.

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