

# THE AUTUMN OF THE SOUL

## The Season of Release

### Seasons of the Soul (Part 1) | Luke 15:11-13

#### Once Upon a Time

Happy New Year to all of you. I am personally excited to be here and embarking with you upon a fresh study of one of the greatest stories of all time – what history has come to call the Parable of the Prodigal Son. As some of you may know, the word “prodigal” literally means “wasteful.” Bible editors have entitled Jesus’ most famous parable as if it was basically a morality tale about a wasteful kid. That, however, is like saying the Star Wars saga is about spaceships that crashed or that Gone With the Wind is about a house that burned. Of course those things happened, but the story is so much bigger, more embracing and interesting than that.

Jesus’ parable is one of the biggest stories ever told. It tells us about the human condition and the heart of God and – as we’ll explore this month – four crucial seasons through which our souls move – or don’t – and why that matters so much. We’ve entitled the first of four episodes in this series, The Autumn of the Soul: The Season of Release. Picture a great tree releasing a leaf in order that new life can ultimately be born. Jesus begins the story this way: **“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. (Luke 15:11-12)**

My own sons were home for Christmas this year. As any of you who are parents will understand, there were conversations about money – mostly about how my money might become their money! All I can say is that transfer of resources occurred! But that was OK by me and Amy. When you love your kids, letting go of a bit of cash to help with their travel or school expenses isn’t hard.

This story Jesus tells is NOT a tale like that. This is not a normal family interaction he is describing. The people listening to Jesus tell this story back in the first century would have known how “not normal” this scenario was. The son in the story is asking his dad not for pocket change but for his share of the estate. In a world before stocks, bonds, bitcoin, and a massive consumer products industry, the word “estate” largely meant “land.” According to ancient Jewish tradition, when a father with two sons died, two-thirds of his land would be given to his eldest son and a third of his property to the younger son (Deut 21:17). By asking for his share of the estate, the younger son is effectively saying to his father: “Dad, I wish you were dead!”

Now, we know from other historical records that, on rare occasions, a father might choose to divide up his estate holdings while he was still alive. By law, however, he always retained use of the land and proceeds from it for as long as he lived. A family’s long-term economic viability and social status depended on the conservation and expansion of land-holdings. Think how much conflict still rages in the Middle East over

land. But here is where the drama goes from upsetting to outrageous.

Jesus tells us that, **Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. (Luke 15:13)** In a world where “all you have” is shorthand for “real estate,” how is it that this kid takes “all he had” and goes traveling with it? There’s only one explanation. The son has converted the property to cash. He has shrunk the family’s estate and standing by at least 33%. He has said, in effect, “If you won’t do me the courtesy of dying, old man, then at least live on a third less than you have so that I can do what I want.” And, as Jesus describes, doing what he wants involves going to Vegas and losing everything.

Have you ever wondered how people remembered Jesus’ parables for the few decades it took before they were written down? Because they were not dull. In all likelihood, the people first listening to this tale would now be looking around at each other and arguing. What kind of a kid does this? What kind of a father lets him?! How’s the older brother letting this happen? For good or for ill, Jewish society was built on the unquestioned authority of patriarchs and on the unquestionable value of land. Dads ruled the roost. Kids waited their turn. Real estate was everything.

So, if you are the Dad in this story, is this a good day? No, it is not. I’m imagining all of this, of course. It’s not explicitly in the text. But, given human nature, I don’t think it’s a reach. Your youngest kid doesn’t give a whit about you and is displaying such appalling judgment and poor character that it has to be shredding your heart. You’ve got very good reason to think that this child of yours is going to make huge, wasteful mistakes in days ahead – profoundly costly to him and to you. Your eldest son (and probably your wife) are apparently not speaking to you at this point. Your neighbors are gossiping and posting about what a weak idiot you are and what a threat to the social order your family is. This is a painful, lonely, humiliating, fearful time.

### **Let It Go**

Remember, Jesus doesn’t tell dull OR irrelevant stories. He wants to help us better understand the human condition and the heart of God. So, while it’s not the MAIN point of this parable -- more on that in weeks ahead -- perhaps one of the reasons Jesus tells the story the way he does is to show us just how familiar God is with what we’re calling the Season of Release.

There comes a time in most of our lives – and often many times -- when we must let go of something or someone we deeply value. This past Friday, a guy in one of my small groups shared the misgivings he was feeling about a college-age daughter who will be leaving in a few days to spend a semester abroad. He gave me permission to share this story. “Not everybody is good out there,” he said. “She’s probably too trusting. I can track her on Find My Friends. But if something happens to her, I can’t BE there. For all I am excited about her experiencing and learning, it’s really hard to let go.”

I went scuba-diving last week, as I've done bunches of times. I'm swimming through a coral reef tunnel in the Florida Keys. I'm watching all these gloriously-colored fish and the figure of my son and his girlfriend gliding before me. I'm thinking, "Is there anything better than this? I could do this so much more!" But, ten minutes later, I am back on the boat, coughing up fluid from my lungs, the result of a condition called immersive pulmonary edema. My brother, a surgeon, tells me I will not be doing any more scuba diving. That era is past for me. I need to let it go.

Each week, some of us come to a moment like this. Like the father in Christ's parable, we stand at some door watching the back of someone or something we have loved receding ever-further down the driveway. We didn't get into that school or onto that team that we wanted so badly. That cherished person has drifted away or died. The relationship or marriage is over. The kids have moved on. That job is gone. Our body won't let us do this anymore. It's time to sell the house. You need to stop driving. That person whose best interests you've tried to manage or protect is now beyond your control. The well-laid plans or dream you had – it's not going to happen.

The feelings of loss or anger or anxiety that rise in such moments can be overwhelming. Is there any spiritual muscle harder to exercise than the one that RELEASES something or someone beloved – when you know the risks... when you feel they're not ready... when you see more potential if they didn't go away... when it leaves a hole in your heart or your life as they do... when you believe you know better and just may be right?

How did the Father in Jesus' parable let the younger son go? Upon further study of the Scriptures, we might also ask: How did God let Adam and Eve make their poor choices? How did he bear with the Israelites as they wandered and blundered over the years? How did Jesus let the Rich Young Ruler or zealous Judas simply walk away? How did he release all of the glories of heaven to become a servant of human beings (Phillip 2:5-8)? How, when they got him so wrong, when they did him so wrong, when they hung him on a cross, did Jesus release the right to get even?

Renowned advice columnist, Ann Landers, once wrote: Some people believe holding on and hanging in there are signs of great strength. However, there are times when it takes much more strength to know when to let go and then do it.

### **Reasons for Release**

There are a variety of reasons God may call us to a season of RELEASE. Sometimes, we need to let go to let others **fly**. When I left the United States to go live in Belfast, Northern Ireland, at the height of the Troubles there, my grandmother researched bomb and bulletproof vests. When I entered seminary there, she looked into business school applications. She was afraid for my life and my future but she did not hold me back. And what I learned and the ways I grew in Belfast set me on wing toward the life I have today – one I'd never have had had I not so fully left home.

Other times, I think, we need to let go to let others **fail**. In his wonderful book,

Necessary Endings, Dr. Henry Cloud observes that many of us hold onto people for too long, trying to protect or manage their lives, when it ends up hurting us and them. Cloud writes: Loyalty is important, one of the most important character traits we can have. But loyal love does not mean infinite and/or misplaced responsibility for another's life, nor does it mean that one forever puts up with mistreatment out of inappropriate loyalty. "There is a difference between helping someone who is disabled or otherwise infirm versus helping someone who is resisting growing up and taking care of what every adult (or child, for that matter) has to be responsible for."

In no area is a willingness to let people go more important than where addiction is involved. Cloud says: "When a spouse says to an alcoholic, 'you need to go to AA,' that is obviously not true. The addict feels no need to do that at all. But when she says, 'I am moving out and will be open to getting back together when you are getting treatment,' then all of a sudden the addict feels 'I need to get some help or I am going to lose my marriage.'" The same is true with other problematic behaviors of people not taking feedback and ownership. The need and drive to do something [different] has been transferred to them. Cloud concludes: "A plan that has hope is one that limits your exposure to the foolish person's issues and forces him to feel the consequences of his performance so that he might have hope of waking up and changing."

Would the younger son in Jesus' story ever have truly come home – or ever recognized it as home – had he not been permitted to go to the distant country and fail so miserably there? We live in a nation where being a helicopter, bulldozer, or tow-truck parent, spouse, or boss is called "being loving." But is it? Who do you and I need to let go so they fly? Who do we need to release in hope of a redemptive fail?

Let me close by observing that there is one further reason God may be moving you into a Season of Release right now. He knows that sometimes we need to let go in order to be free. In one of his most famous songs, the rock artist, Sting, sings: "If you love somebody, set them free." Well, here's the truth: God loves you. He has bound you to certain covenants and commitments out of that love for you. He has called you and me to run with perseverance the race marked out for us (Heb 12:1). He doesn't want us to be quitters. But God's ultimate goal for us is freedom. In numerous biblical passages, God makes it clear that he doesn't want us to live enslaved, burdened lives. He wants us to know his truth so that we can be set free (John 8:32).

Releasing things and people from our need to have them be a certain way NOW before God is finished with them (Phil 1:6)... Releasing our need to be celebrated for all the good we have done or are doing (Matt 6:1-18)... Releasing our requirement that the blessings we've known in the past must continue to define our present (Isa 43:19)... this is part of the pathway to the freedom God wants for us.

I like the way Brazilian novelist, Paulo Coelho, puts it: "Closing cycles, shutting doors, ending chapters - whatever name we give it, what matters is to leave in the past the moments of life that have finished." If you want a happier New Year, It is important to let certain things go. To release them. To cut loose... Don't expect to get anything back, don't expect recognition for your efforts, don't expect your genius to be discovered or

your love to be understood..."

In other words, be more like the Father in the parable Jesus tells. Everything in Jewish society would have said to that parent: Clench... control... command that kid to do your will. Yet how freely he lets the end come to one era of his household. How freely he continues to love this child who is not mature enough to know yet what an amazing parent he has or to love Him as he's worth. How freely the Father lets go and waits for his beloved's return.

All-loving Father, thank you that this is not just a story, but the truth about the way you love us. I do not know what season each of the precious people in this room may be passing through right now, but YOU do. If there is anyone here who needs to let someone go so that they might fly... or who needs to release someone in hopes that they might fail forward... make that clear through the touch of your Holy Spirit. Having met you today, help each of us to go from this place able to live, love, and serve more freely than when we came. For this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.