

# Hearing God's Heartbeat He Celebrates Our Return

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

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This morning we continue with our series of messages entitled "Hearing God's Heartbeat". We are looking extensively at Luke 15, especially the parable of the Prodigal Son. This chapter enables us to hear God's heart for his lost children—those who are not experiencing his love. I've asked you to pray for four persons who need to experience his love asking God to open doors for you to share his love, inviting someone to church or to our Alpha group. What is Alpha? It is a safe place to explore the good news of Jesus Christ and his love. It is a place to ask questions. It will begin on February 24.

Here is what I am asking you to do. If God provides an opportunity, invite someone to come to the first class with you. We will share the Wednesday evening meal together between 5:30 and 6:00 pm in the Activity Center. Then at 6:30 we will move to room 40 in the educational building. I will speak at the first meeting about the important life questions for which Jesus is the answer. The person you bring can decide to return for the remaining classes. You may participate with them in all the classes or just bring them to the first one. But to make them feel comfortable about coming the first time, it is important for you to bring them or meet them here.

Alpha is also open to any of you who may want to explore the claims of Jesus, or if you are searching for answers about the Christian faith. We will talk about the Holy Spirit, prayer and healing. Perhaps you are interested in those topics. You will listen to a presentation and then discuss your questions in a small group. We do need to know if you are coming and if you will bring someone with you. Please call the church office and let us know or sign up at the Alpha table in the foyer.

Our scripture reading this morning picks up with the story of the prodigal son after he has demanded his share of the inheritance and gone into a far country where he will waste every dollar on wild living. When he is broke and hungry, he comes to his senses and decides to return home. He knows he is no longer worthy to be called a son. He will ask his father to take him back as a hired man. His father sees him a long way off and runs to meet his son. He embraces him and welcomes him home. He plans for a celebration.

## **Luke 15:22-32**

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup>For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup>'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

<sup>28</sup>"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could

celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!

<sup>31</sup>" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

Coming home is one of the great themes of the Bible. Coming home implies that we have left home. In this world we all suffer a form of homesickness. Our experiences in this world convince us we are not at home. There is a deep longing in our heart for something more than what we experience here and now. We know there is something missing. We know that we are not home yet.

The parable of the prodigal son brings great insight into this longing for home. It tells us a lot about the human condition. Genesis chapters one and two tell us that we were made for the garden of God. The Garden of Eden is home. Home is the place that fits our deepest needs and desires. Home is the place where we become fully who we were intended to be. In the Garden of Eden there is infinite beauty all around. We experience creative and meaningful work. We counsel with God regarding his design and plan for his creation. We ask him all our questions. "What about the dinosaurs? How does gravity work? How did you create the universe?" We walk with God in the cool of the evening experiencing love and intimacy with him. He satisfies our deepest need to be infinitely loved. We read the story, and we know this is home. This is what we were created for.

We also know that the world we are living in is not Eden. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they rebelled the Father's authority. The prodigal son rebelled against his father's authority. Their story is our story. We are all Adam and Eve and the prodigal son. Each of us has decided to go our own way rather than God's way. The result is that we left home, and we are alienated from God. We are exiles longing to return to Eden.

There is a song from The Lion King entitled "The Circle of Life." The young lion questions his father about the message of the song. Life does not seem like a circle to him.

The food chain is more like a pyramid with lions at the top. Lions eat antelope. How is that a circle? The father replies that indeed they eat antelope, but antelope becomes a part of them. Then they die and their bodies go into the ground and help the grass grow. The antelope eat the grass. Now their dead bodies are giving life to the antelope. The circle of life is complete. It is a beautiful song, but the message is this: "You and I are nothing but fertilizer for the circle of life." We are product of a material world. That's it.

The Bible gives a much more satisfying perspective on the meaning of life. The Bible says that death was not part of God's plan. Death came when we separated ourselves from God. We were created to experience life and a full relationship with God. We know that the circle of life and death is not all there is. There is a longing in our hearts for the garden where there is no sickness, nor crying, nor death. We are in the far country, and we want to return home.

This parable also tells us what God has done to redeem our condition of homelessness. In the parable the Father represents God. He welcomes back his son and celebrates his return. Some commentators on this passage point out that there is no atonement, no sacrifice made for the sins of the younger son. In the Bible there is a requirement of a sacrifice for sins. In the Old Testament they sacrificed animals. When Jesus came, he sacrificed his life on the cross to atone for our sins. He gave his life for us. Where is the sacrifice in the story?

To answer that question let's review the context of the story. Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. The religious leaders are muttering about his behavior. They criticize Jesus for fraternizing with such persons. In response to their muttering, Jesus tells three parables. One is about a lost sheep and a shepherd who leaves his flock to find the lost sheep. The second is about a woman who loses a coin, and she goes all over her house searching for it until she finds it. The third parable is about a lost son, but no one goes

looking for him. The father is watching for him, but he does not leave home in search of his son. Obviously Jesus interrupts the pattern. Why? Jesus does this deliberately to force us to ask: “Who should have gone searching for the son?” Everyone in Biblical culture could have answered that question. It was the responsibility of the older brother to go look for his younger brother and bring him home. The first born son had the responsibility to keep the family and the estate together. That is why he was given a double portion of the inheritance. When the father divided his estate between his two sons, the elder brother became the head of the clan—even though the father was still alive. The father said to him: “Everything I have is yours.” He had already given him everything. The elder brother should have said, “Even though my brother is a fool, I will go see if I can find him and bring him home at my expense.” Since everything now belonged to the elder brother, there was no way to bring the younger brother back without it costing him something.

In telling this parable to the religious leaders Jesus was holding up a mirror to them. As the leaders of the faith they were the elder brothers. They had younger brothers and sisters—the tax collectors and sinners—who had left home. They do not care about their lost brothers and sisters and therefore they do not go looking for them. The religious leaders are like the elder brother.

Fortunately we have a true elder brother who comes looking for us. He brings us home at considerable expense to himself. It cost him his life to bring us home. Jesus was stripped naked and bore our shame and disgrace so that we could put on his robe of righteousness. He gave his life so that we could share in his inheritance of the Kingdom of God. The father could not bring us back home except at the expense of our true elder brother. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He brings us home.

What difference does this make? What is the main thing that all homecomings and family reunions have in common? A meal! Meals are metaphors that provide a glimpse at the

ultimate homecoming at the end of history. In Biblical times the evening meal was the center of family life. The family came together at sunset and ate and talked for hours until it was time to go to bed. There were no distractions like TV or the Internet or PTA or church meetings. The meal provide hours of family togetherness. It is still important for families to eat together. I've encouraged you to look at your calendar and try to schedule family meals at least four out of seven nights. This enables the family to eat the majority of their meals together each week. There is something about family meal time that meets our needs on multiple levels. Your body gets what it needs—food. Your soul gets what it needs—laughter and support and listening. Your spirit gets what it needs—prayer as you thank God for his blessings at the beginning of the meal. There is something about the evening meal that provides a way for us to feel home.

At the end of history, Jesus Christ is going to make this world home again. He is going to wipe away every tear from our eyes, there will be no more sickness or grieving, death will be no more. When he returns he will invite us to a banquet—the ultimate feast. The prophet Isaiah describes this future hope:

**Isaiah 25:6-8**

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare  
a feast of rich food for all peoples,  
a banquet of aged wine--  
the best of meats and the finest of wines.

<sup>7</sup>On this mountain he will destroy  
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;

<sup>8</sup>he will swallow up death forever.  
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears  
from all faces;  
he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.

Jesus describes the feast in these words:

**Luke 13:29**

People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.

At the end of history, God will establish a new heaven and a new earth. This new earth will be the home that we have been longing for. All of our physical, emotional and spiritual needs will be met. We will sit with God at the great banquet feast. We will experience his love and his counsel. We will experience the incredible beauty of Eden. We will enjoy meaningful and creative work. We will become all that God intended us to be. We will be home.

In the meantime, Jesus gave us a way to keep the dream alive and experience a glimpse of the homecoming. We call it the Lord's Supper. Jesus said to eat the bread and drink the cup as a way to remember him until his coming again. Jesus took the cup of wine and gave it to his disciples saying: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>29</sup>I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom." Matthew 26:28-29

Until Jesus returns to bring us home, The Lord's Supper provides us with a time of intimacy with Christ. Jesus is present in a very special way every time we take communion. The Lord's Supper is a communal experience. We take it with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We share a meal together looking forward to that great banquet with all our brothers and sisters. Meals are an important way to connect with each other. Our Alpha class will share a meal each week with their small group. Some of our larger Sunday school classes have discovered that dividing into Dinner for Eight groups helps their class grow closer together. There is something about a meal that reminds us of home. There is something about the Lord's Supper that reminds us that our true home is with God. Our true elder brother has made it possible for us to come home. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." He came looking for you and me. Have you allowed him to bring you home?