

# OpenTheo

## May 28th: Deuteronomy 29 & Luke 15:11-32

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The Lord's discipline for Israel's education. The Parable of the Lost Son.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 29. These are the words of the covenant that the Lord commanded Moses to make with the people of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant that He had made with them at Horeb. And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs and those great wonders.

But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand, or eyes to see or ears to hear. I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn off your feet.

You have not eaten bread, and you have not drunk wine or strong drink, that you may know that I am the Lord your God. And when you came to this place, Sihon the king of Heshbon and Og the king of Bashan came out against us to battle, but we defeated

them. We took their land and gave it for an inheritance to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of the Manassites.

Therefore keep the words of this covenant and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. You are standing today, all of you, before the Lord your God, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today.

You know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed, and you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, which were among them. Beware lest there be among you a man or woman, or clan or tribe, whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.

This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The Lord will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord will single him out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity, in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this book of the law.

And the next generation, your children who rise up after you, and the foreigner who comes from a far land, will say, when they see the afflictions of that land, and the sickness with which the Lord has made it sick, the whole land burned out with brimstone and salt, nothing sown, and nothing growing, where no plant can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abmer and Zeboim, which the Lord overthrew in his anger and wrath. All the nations will say, why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger? Then people will say, it is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods and worshipped them, gods whom they had not known, and whom he had not allotted to them. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book.

And the Lord uprooted them from their land, in anger and fury and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as they are this day. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. In Deuteronomy chapter 29 and 30, Moses exhorts Israel as they are about to enter the land.

He looks back to Horeb and forward to entry into the land and the destiny of the nation after that. Israel has just accepted and ratified the covenant prior to entering fully into the land, and now Moses discusses the implications of their accepting the covenant and its sanctions. The summons in verse 2 looks back to the summons of chapter 5 verse 1, which looked back to the covenant of Horeb.

However now they have ratified the covenant themselves. Moses recounts the history that has brought them to this point, and verses 2 and 3 recall Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 34. Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? However, despite the great deliverance, and witnessing such wonders and judgments, Israel had failed to reach a point of understanding.

Geoffrey Tague suggests that verse 4 should be translated, but the Lord did not give you a mind to understand, etc. until today. The point then would be, not as it is in many translations that Israel still didn't understand, but that now, on the brink of entering into the land, Israel has finally grasped what their fathers had not.

The Lord led them in the wilderness and miraculously provided for them within it for forty years and then gave them victory over Sihon king of Heshbon and Og king of Bashan as a preliminary taste of the Lord's empowering of them for the conquest of the land, in order that they might learn the lessons that they had failed to learn earlier on. The purpose of the wilderness wandering then was not merely punitive, it was educative. Israel couldn't enter into the land in its ignorance and rebellion, so forty years of tough training was necessary before they could be prepared to do so.

Finally, now they have received their painful remedial training and they are ready to graduate to life in the land. However, in this and the following chapter we gather that even lessons so painfully learned can be easily forgotten if they're not careful. This is why memory is such an insistent theme of the book of Deuteronomy.

If they do not remember, the lessons that they spent so much time and difficulty in learning can be forgotten with devastating consequence. All Israel is standing before Moses, formally to ratify and enter into the covenant. This isn't just the typical public gathering of the male assembly of Israel.

The women, the children and the sojourners are present too. The covenant is made with the male assembly but not with them only. The entirety of the body of Israel has to be personally present to enter into this, not just their public and representative persons.

The covenant isn't merely for the Israelites present at that time either. It's for all of their descendants. This covenant ceremony placed obligations upon generations yet to be born.

They could resist those obligations but they had no choice in coming under these obligations. The verses that follow draw Israel's attention to what they have witnessed among the nations with whom they have had dealings to this point and the idolatries of those nations. A solemn warning is given about anyone in the nation who presumptuously follows in the ways of those nations, confident that the Lord won't judge him.

This begins, as Moses makes clear, with the bitter root of a stubborn heart that turns away from the Lord. Such a heart will produce, if it's not dealt with, poisonous fruit that will lead to painful and signal judgment upon many. External conformity is not enough.

Hearts need to be ordered to the Lord. And if they are not, the long-term consequences will be horrific. This is something that the entire nation needs to be vigilant about.

If such bitterness is allowed to develop, it can lead to destruction falling upon all. And if this were to happen, all the curses that have been mentioned in the preceding chapter would fall upon Israel and the next generation would look at the destruction of the people and wonder at the cause of such a devastation. They would learn that it was the result of the people's abandonment of the covenant and turning to other gods, gods whom they had not known.

The final verse of the chapter, the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law, has been taken in a number of different senses. Some have suggested that the secret things refer to sins, as we see in Psalm 19 verse 12, who can discern his errors, declare me innocent from hidden faults? Or Psalm 90 verse 8, you have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. However I think it is more likely that it refers to the larger hidden purposes and works of the Lord in history.

There is much that Israel may be tempted to speculate about, especially when considering their future and the inscrutable ways and intentions of the Lord. Yet what they need to know has been very clearly revealed to them, so that they might faithfully observe the law and know fellowship with the Lord. It doesn't depend upon speculations.

Hebrews chapter 12 verses 5 to 15 allude to Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 8. It describes the same sort of discipline of the Lord designed to lead to faithfulness and the

concern about the threat posed to the entire community from unaddressed bitter roots of rebellion. Those verses read, And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them. But he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled. The themes of this passage in Hebrews are very similar to the passage we have just read in the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 29, Moses' concern is that Israel does not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.

They have been taught by the Lord through his discipline, the experience of the wilderness, the experience of his provision for them, his judgments upon them, should have taught them lessons about faithfulness that will stand them in good stead in the land. What might have seemed merely punitive can from this vantage point be seen to have been educative. God is dealing with Israel as his son, and it is important that those lessons be internalised and guarded jealously, that Israel not forget what it has been taught, and that it ensure that no one within the community stray from what God has taught them, because they know the devastating effects if they are not careful.

A question to consider, what are some of the secret things that we must leave with the Lord, and some of the revealed things that we should devote our attention to most closely? Luke chapter 15 verses 11 to 32 And he said, There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me. And he divided his property between them. Not many days later the younger son gathered all that he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

And when he had spent everything a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Treat me as one of your hired servants. And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And 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 servants, Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, and bring the fattened calf, and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.

For this my son was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found. And they began to celebrate.

Now his oldest son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.

But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him. But he answered his father, Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command.

Yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. And he said to him, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this your brother was dead, and is alive. He was lost, and is found.

The final part of Luke chapter 15 is devoted to the parable of the lost son. We ought to read this alongside the preceding two parables, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. In verse 3, these things are introduced with the statement, So he told them this parable.

What this chapter contains is like three parables in one. The final parable in the cycle is

that of the lost son. And there's an escalating movement as we go through.

There's a movement from one out of a hundred sheep lost, to one out of ten coins lost, to one out of two sons lost. What might have been brushed off as an acceptable loss in the first case, is seen to be far more severe in the third. These parables are also together a response to the scribes and the pharisees, and their objection to the way that Jesus eats with sinners.

In the older brother figure, at the end of this parable, something that has been in the background of all of the parables to this point, suddenly is thrust into the foreground and made explicit. Once again Jesus is showing his rhetorical mastery and his ability to tell a story with greatest effect. The parable of the lost son raises a number of questions, not least that of who its central character is.

Is it about the lost son? Is it about the father that welcomes him? Or is it about the brother who refuses to accept him upon his return? A case could be made for any of these, which might perhaps be an indication that the parable is rather more complicated than such a question supposes. The parable might be making several points at once. The actions of the youngest son with which the parable begins are truly scandalous within that society.

First of all he asks the father to divide the inheritance between him and his brother while the father is still alive. Then he presumably liquidates all that his father has given to him, and then takes that and goes into a far country. He has disowned his parents, he's disowned his family and dishonoured them.

And then, if that was not bad enough, he squanders all that has been entrusted into his hand by his father. It's important to see the themes of kinship that are playing out within the story, as the place of such themes within this parable represents a considerable and significant move beyond the two parables that precede it. Part of the point of this parable is to show that the stakes of what's taking place are the stakes of a family, of kinship, of the mutual recognition that should occur in a family between father and son, son and father, brother and brother.

And for this reason it is important that the parable begins with a despicable spurning of kinship. The youngest son ends up in a very poor state indeed. He's in a far country and he ends up working with the pigs and even desiring their food.

This is someone who has gone from the land of Israel, presumably, to a land of the Gentiles where they eat pigs, and now he wants to eat the pigs' food. Having turned his back upon his father and his family, he has now fallen as low as he could fall. The youngest son is in a sort of exile in a far country among the unclean swine, and a number of people have identified the youngest son as Jacob.

I don't think that's quite correct, even though the story does play off the Jacob story. Jacob is the youngest son and he does go into a far country, but he is a righteous son who flees on account of the threat of his older brother, while here the youngest son seems to be Israel the nation, who are a poor parody of their forefather. They've willfully chosen the way of exile, rebelling against the Lord and squandering the blessings of the covenant.

Finally, in the state of exile, the son comes to his senses. He realises that even if he were only a hired servant in his father's house, he'd be better off than he is in his current condition, and so he decides to go back, rehearsing along the way this speech that he's going to deliver to his father, a speech which, when the time comes, he is not given the time to deliver in its entirety. Most people reading this parable presume that the father is God.

A case can be made from this looking at other passages within the book of Luke. Luke chapter 11 verses 11 to 13. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? Or Luke chapter 12 verses 30 to 32.

For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

But there is another way to read this parable, and the identity of the father within it, and that is to pay attention to the many times that father language has been used with reference to Abraham in the book of Luke, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever, in chapter 1 verse 55, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us, in chapter 1 verse 73. Bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Chapter 3 verse 8. And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for 18 years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day? Chapter 13 verse 16.

Or in chapter 13 verse 28. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves cast out. Chapter 19 verse 9. Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.

And perhaps the greatest example of all, in the chapter that follows this, where Lazarus is taken to the bosom of father Abraham. Considering that this is within the same cycle of parables, it is strong evidence that the father in this parable is Abraham. As the two sons recall characters in the book of Genesis, the father could fairly naturally be



associated with their patriarchal father.

Perhaps stronger evidence still is the fact that the action of the father is that which is characteristic of Abraham. Abraham's very entry into fatherhood was related to his hospitality extended to the angels in Genesis chapter 18. In verses 2 to 8 of that chapter.

He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth and said, O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a cup of water to refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on, since you have come to your servant.

So they said, Do as you have said. And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, Quick, three seers of fine flour need it and make cakes. And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly.

Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate. Abraham's action of running to greet the visitors and also his preparation of the fattened calf are things that stand out in this passage, much as they are elements that stand out in the parable of the lost son.

The younger son returns expecting and hoping to be treated like a servant, but rather than being welcomed like a hired servant, he is welcomed as a loved son. There are ways in which this story would remind the hearer of the story of Jacob and Esau, particularly the story of two sons, and the older and the younger, and other details of the story point to that Old Testament narrative. But the details are all topsy-turvy.

Israel hasn't followed the script. Notice the greeting of the father in verse 20 is precisely the same as the greeting given by Esau to the returning Jacob in Genesis chapter 33, verses 3-4. He went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. The parable plays off the story of Esau and Jacob in other ways. Genesis chapter 27, verse 30, something that comes earlier.

As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob has scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, Esau his brother came in from his hunting. In this case there seems to be a close parallel between Esau and the older brother. The older brother comes in from the field and sees that his father has, to his mind, wrongfully blessed his younger brother and he's angry, utterly disowning his younger brother.

So on the one hand we have the positive action of Esau, when he restored his

relationship with Jacob, when he greeted him as Jacob returned to the land. But we also have the negative action of Esau hanging in the background, when he sought to kill his brother after he came in from the field to find that his father had blessed his brother instead of him. This characterization is subtle but important because the character that the Pharisees and the scribes would naturally associate with would be the older brother.

It'd be scandalized by the action of the younger brother and yet there are these troubling indications in the characterization of the different figures in the narrative that the older brother is not the good guy. Just as the younger son has to come to his senses, to come to himself, so the older brother has to come to himself to become like Esau in welcoming back the younger brother, who he feels has wronged him. But he has not yet done so.

The older brother in this story shuts himself out of the feast, rather than welcoming his returning brother. Note how he rhetorically disowns his brother. Your son.

Now in the beginning of the parable it was the younger brother who disowned his family by his actions. Now the older brother is disowning his brother and implicitly disowning his father in the process. He thinks of himself as a servant.

The younger brother sought to be welcomed back as a servant and now the older brother has been thinking about himself as a servant all the way along. We might be led to ask who indeed is the last son in this parable. We should also notice the father's insistent recognition of both of the sons as his sons and his refusal to reduce them to the status of servants.

Just as there is an inversion of the role of Jacob and Esau, there might be an inversion of the role of Moses too. Like Moses, the older brother returns to hear the sound of music and dancing, wondering what is taking place. There is also a calf involved.

Exodus chapter 32 verses 17 to 19. When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, there is a noise of war in the camp. But he said, it is not the sound of shouting for victory or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.

And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. The Pharisees and the scribes might feel anger that they would imagine makes them like Moses. They see themselves as the guardians of the covenant that these people, these sinners have broken.

However, even in his anger, Moses sought to intercede for the people to ensure that the lost son of Israel not be cast away by the father, but that he be restored and know the presence and fellowship of the father in his midst. By stark contrast, the anger of the scribes and the Pharisees is at the scandal of God's grace in restoring such an idolatrous

nation. These three parables speak of the value of those who have been lost, the need to go to lengths to find them, the incredible joy at their return, and the tragedy and loss in locking oneself out of this joy on account of one's resentment.

The climax of this story, like the previous ones, is not the act of finding itself, but the joy of the feast that follows. And the key concern is that everyone join in this joy, that it be a common joy that people share in. The previous two parables have given this expectation of sharing in the joy, rejoice with me for I have found what is lost.

And then that expectation is broken in this final case, and we see the tragedy of the son who will not recognize his brother, will not join in the joy of his father. The end of this parable leaves things hanging and unresolved. Think about the end of the book of Jonah as a similar example of this.

The resolution must take place within the actions and the response of the hearers of the parable. A question to consider, how do the themes of kinship that are at the heart of this parable help us to think better about the original situation that prompted Jesus' teaching in these parables, in his eating with sinners?