

# WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

# 1

The central theme of the Bible is that we were intended to live in moment by moment friendship with God. This connection with our creator is the place where all the deepest questions of life find their answers. That relationship has been disastrously broken but the message of Jesus is that God has a rescue plan. We'll see how the Bible explains that rescue plan and how we can connect with God.

- How do you think of God?

Jesus often told stories or parables to communicate deep truths about God. One of his best known stories is about a father and his two sons. Jesus was addressing the ultra-religious people of his day who were criticising him for spending time with people who they looked down on as unworthy or downright bad. In this story, Jesus shows how greed and immorality isn't the only way to be far from God.

First read through the story in its entirety (in the left column and overleaf). Then re-read it one paragraph at a time, answering the questions as you go.

**Luke 15:11-13** To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die'. So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living.

**14-19** "About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'

**11-13**

- What did the son ask for?
- Why was this so outrageous?
- Why do you think the younger son wanted to leave home?
- What was the younger son's attitude to his father?
- What was the father's attitude to his son?

**14-19**

*For the people who first heard this story, pigs were considered spiritually "unclean". Feeding pigs was a job for the lowest of the low.*

- What did the younger son discover?
- How did this change his attitude?
- What did the son decide to do?

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**20-24** "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and now has returned to life. He was lost but now he is found.' So the party began.

**25-28** "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.' The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him.

**29-32** "But he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'

His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'"

#### 20-24

The son would have been regarded as spiritually "unclean" because of his contact with the pigs and thought to have brought disgrace on his family. The community might even have stoned him for the shame he caused his father. However, the robe, ring and sandals represent forgiveness and full restoration to the family.

- How did the father respond when his son returned?
- When did the father accept him back?
- What does this tell us about the father?
- How does he describe the change in his son? What does he mean?

#### 25-28

The father's house is the place of the father's love and authority. The younger son walked out, but later, the elder son refused to go in.

- Why was the elder son so angry?
- How does the father respond?
- What does this tell us about the father?

#### 29-32

- What reason does the son give for his resentment?
- What word does the older brother use to describe his relationship with his father?
- What do we see of the older son's view of and attitude towards his father?
- How does this attitude compare with his brother's?
- How does the father answer his son?
- How does the older son's description of his brother compare with the father's description of him?

Jesus doesn't tell us how the story ends. But in the older son, he has painted his self-righteous listeners into the plot. Their response to Jesus' parable would act out the ending of the story!

In this story, Jesus shows us how we can be equally lost in the pursuit of pleasure or the pursuit of self-righteousness. The sons were only interested in what they could get from their father. By contrast, at every point in the story, the father is willing to give all he has to both of his sons regardless of their attitude towards him.

- What has most stood out for you from looking at this parable?
- What do we learn about God's character from the father in the story?
- Which son do you identify with most? Why?

In the parable, the attitude expressed by the sons towards their father represents the heart of the problem between us and God. In the next study we'll explore further why God matters and why ignoring him is a bad plan.