

# 2001 Advent Week 3 - Prodigal'

by John Piper

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*The sermon explores the parable of the prodigal son, highlighting the gift of joy that comes from God's love and redemption, and the importance of gratitude and gladness in our lives.*

**Duration:** 18:02

**Scripture:** Luke 15:11

**Topics:** "Redemption", "Grace"

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## Description

John Piper explores the parable of the prodigal son, reimagining the characters and their emotional journeys. The younger brother, Nikva, reflects on his shame and longing for his father's love, while his sister Hayanita seeks to bring him home. As they approach their father, the father's overwhelming love and forgiveness are contrasted with the bitterness of the older brother, Mainan, who struggles with feelings of resentment and entitlement. The sermon emphasizes the themes of grace, redemption, and the joy of returning home, highlighting that true joy and acceptance come from the father's love, not from our own works or merits.

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## Transcript

In my imaginative reconstruction of the parable of the prodigal son, I have conceived that the younger brother is named Nikva, the older brother is named Mainan, there is a daughter who is younger than both and her name is Hayanita, and in the second poem, last week, she went to find her younger brother and is bringing him home, and that's where we pick it up today. Four nights they walked and slept by day. Beneath the carob branches lay the daughter fast asleep from hard and weary nights, and keeping guard beside her lay the prodigal, his moving lips inaudible, restless and awake.

Transfixed on bloody bark and branches twixt the earth and sky where traitors used to hang with common thieves, accused of treason toward their sovereign king and in the act of plundering his wealth. The lips of Nikva spoke a wordless speech, O father, cloak this worse than naked son with rags and feed me from the garbage bags and let me live with slaves, for I have treated you with scorn and my contempt was worse than all the blame that stained this bloody tree with shame, which now with life and leaves arrayed spreads out and covers me with shade. I do not ask to sit with kings, but only shade beneath your wings.

And so the prodigal rehearsed his speech and waited for the first signs of his sister's waking. Mid-afternoon she stirred. I'll bring you water if you like, he said.

I'd like that, Nikva. All the bread is gone, you know. I know.

Let's try to make it home tonight. The sky looks happy in the west. I think we'll make it.

I'll go get your drink. When he returned, the packs were rolled and Hayanita said, I told your brother you would come. What did he say? But Hayanita hid her face as they began to walk and didn't answer him.

Some talk of pain is good, you know. I know. He said he didn't care.

Just go and waste your breath, he said. The tears rolled down her cheeks. How many years has Mainan felt this way, he asked.

Unless he's keeping something masked, he never cared. I'm not surprised. He never wrote.

To be despised is sometimes good for us. I don't deserve his pity and I won't demand his love. The way I spurned our father surely has well earned for me whatever Mainan feels.

How great his love must be that reels with hate so long. Perhaps if he believed that I have come to see how precious is our father's care and how unspeakable and rare his heart and noble is his mind, then maybe there would be a kind of softening of Mainan toward my soul. I wish for such reward, my brother.

But I fear the wrath of Mainan grows along a path far different from the one you hope. Oh, that his anger were the scope and measure of his love for all that our great father is. But gall and bitterness are not born from the thrall of mercy, nor do come from treasuring the fountain of delight we call our father's love.

There is another stream that feeds the bitterness of his good deeds. Now, as the evening came and they began to climb the rugged way that leads up to the great plateau, all conversation ceased. Below and now behind these two, ten years of emptiness burst to the cheers of every waving stalk of grain, a bubble in the wind, and feigned the beauty it possessed before it broke.

His back now to the shore beyond the western rim, the sun stood trembling on the road, the one where he had run the other way as though it were just yesterday. Before him lay what seemed a sea of endless gold. What enemy, he thought, could make a boy believe that any distant world could weave a better beauty than this place? Then suddenly he said, My face, my hair, I'm filthy, Hia.

Look at me. She smiled at him and took a long, deep breath and said, Let's go. The old man's chair rocked to and fro.

His lips moved silently as though he sang some favorite song. The glow of golden red and crimson rays had set the western field to blaze as if some cosmic cause were found for merrymaking. But no sound was heard except the rhythm of the rocking chair.

And then, above the rail, the old man saw two shapes and stopped. He thought, I know the capes that Hia Nita wears. He took the rail and stood so he could look.

And then he saw her lift her hand the way she always did, then stand and let the other shape go on. He knew, for all his soul was drawn, and there was no resisting this. He left his cane, and lest he miss a step, he jumped them all and ran, forgetting that he was a man of dignity and that his knees were bad.

He often thought, With ease some day I'll run on these and more. Is this not what they're ruined for? He stopped just long enough to see his eyes and take a breath. And then he embraced the boy and pressed his face against the foul and crusty place he used to kiss the lad goodnight and pushed his fingers through the tight and matted hair.

And there, with plain and heaving sobs, released a pain built up four thousand nights. And then the weeping son said, Father, can perhaps you make a slave of me? For I have sinned and cannot be your son. To which the great old man replied, I have a different plan.

And then to servants gathered by, he said, Bring me the ring and my best robe and leather shoes and take the fire and fatted calf and make for us the finest feast that we have ever made. For this, you see, my dead son is alive and sound. He once was lost, but now is found.

And they began to celebrate. As usual, Manon was in the field and working late. He'd been there since the crack of dawn and worked all day.

Let duty not be shirked, he liked to say, and took some pride in his long hours and liked to chide the servants that he could out-serve them every day and out-deserve them all. He heard the music from the house and saw the servants come out dancing on the lawn. His first response to songs and joy, a burst of anger.

This is not the way to serve their Lord. What holiday have they declared to frolic like a carefree child? If I must strike them, then I will, to see that they learn how to serve and to obey. What's all this racket here, he snapped.

A servant overflowed and clapped, He's back! He's back! Nikolai is back! He frowned. And in the prison shack with other thieves, may I suppose, Oh no, Sir Manon! Master chose the fatted calf and killed it for a feast and said, Bring wine and pour a goblet for my son and let all work be put aside and get my ring and finest robe with joy and put them on my living boy. The older son was stunned and stood there by the fence he'd made and would not enter.

Then his father saw him by the fence and went to draw him in. Your brother's home. Come see him, Manny.

He has changed. You'll be amazed. I'll tell you, Father, what amazes me.

That he can strut here like an honored guest, although he took your hard-earned cash to throw it down the sewers of Noah's and that you subsidized his brash and wicked reveling of horrors and made you weep behind those doors for ten years while I slaved to make a profit in this place. So take your pick, my Lord. The wicked one in there or me, the working son.

I'd like to think that all these years you have enjoyed the place. It sears the soul, Mainon, to take your rage to bed night after night. You wage a war against yourself.

Beware of other mistresses whose snare is just as deadly as the kind your brother sought. Oh, be not blind, my son. All that I have is yours and free for all time it endures.

But if what you desire is proper pay, bequests will never come that way. Come, join me at the table, son. The labors of the day are done.

But Mainon stood there like a stone and sent his father back alone. The girl was watching from the door. And as her father passed, once more perhaps, he took her hand and said, Our little girl can raise the dead.

She turned and saw the shining face of Nikva laughing in the grace of life. Then through the evening shade beyond the fence that Mainon made, she walked. His face was streaked where sweat ran down through pollen dust and met his tangled beard.

The garments that he wore for working stank. And at the middle of his fingers there were blisters on both hands. Despair seemed written on his frozen face.

In vain, he thought. He said the race and pace were all in vain. The hours, the years, the sweat, the plans, my powers for naught.

Bequests don't come that way. Then Hyanita kissed the gray and brownish coating on his cheek and said, Hi Manny, you look weak. Can I get you a drink? He shook his head.

No thanks. Mainon, it took your breath away what father said. I think I understand.

The dread you feel right now that all your sweat has been in vain, it's true. And yet, it is a gift to know bequests are free. And loaded treasure chests of grace all hidden in the ground are never earned but always found.

And dancing doesn't come that way. And happy parties are not pay. Day labor is of no avail.

The gift of joy is not for sale. You've labored not to do what's bad and now it's hard to just be glad. But Manny, look.

Your father and the servants and your brother stand inside the door and bid you come. And listen to the children drum. She took his hand.

Come. All is well. And thus, the fetters broke and fell.

He waked as from a lifelong trance and said, May I please have this dance? And now, oh Christ, with candle three, let there be light so we can see the way between two forms of death. And with that light, oh, give us breath to live again. And bring us back from pleasures in a foreign shack or from the pride of weary arm while working on the father's farm.

From demon sloth and pleasures raw or demon toil and pride of law. The pathway home from either place is opened by the word of grace. Come to the light of candle three.

Remember that bequests are free. The ticket that you have to show is this, that you are glad to go.

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