

THE LONG ROAD HOME

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

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This guide is to be used in conjunction with *The Long Road Home: How God Forms Our Prodigal Souls* by Earle L. Wilson and Lawrence W. Wilson (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2016).

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----- ABOUT THIS GUIDE

For the next six weeks, you and your group members will study an old, old story. More than two thousand years ago Jesus told the story of the prodigal son, but its applications are still relevant to us today. Everyone can benefit from what transpired in the lives of the three central characters: the Prodigal Son, the loving father, and the resentful older son.

Those who think the grass is greener far from God will see that it isn't. The Prodigal found only misery away from home. Those who are out of fellowship with the heavenly Father will recognize the need to repent and return home.

Parents, whose son or daughter has rebelled and run away from home, will learn from the Prodigal's father the need to be patient, forgiving, and welcoming of the returning child.

Those who piously reject a repentant brother or sister who returns to the heavenly Father, will see the error of jealousy and resentment.

Using the "To Ponder" questions at the end of each chapter, along with the questions included in this guide, will aid you in facilitating meaningful group discussion. Expect a lively discussion in every session, and anticipate the working of the Holy Spirit in every heart.

TURNING AWAY FROM HOME

CHAPTERS 1-5

TO THE FACILITATOR

As you guide this session, be aware that a participant may be on the verge of deciding it doesn't pay to follow Jesus. He or she may think the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence so pray that the Lord will use this session to help that person and the entire group to recognize the folly of wandering away from God.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

The apostle Paul neared the end of his service for the Lord, assured that he had fought a good fight, finished his course, and kept the faith, but at least one of his coworkers, Demas, had not finished well. He had cast an eye upon the evil world system and found it appealing (2 Tim. 4:7, 10). Perhaps he had grown tired of the rigors and persecution associated with missionary life and just wanted to take it easy and enjoy what he thought a worldly life offered. At any rate, he made a very bad decision.

Jesus told the story of a prodigal son, who thought the grass was greener on the other side of the fence. He chose to abandon life on the farm and set out for life far from home (Luke 15:11-13). So he asked his father to give him his share of the inheritance.

In some ways the Prodigal Son reminds us of Lot, who thought the grass looked greener away from Abraham's pastures. He "looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered. . . . So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east" (Gen. 13:10-11). Like Lot before him, the Prodigal Son made a bad choice.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. In *The Long Road Home*, the authors write, “Restlessness leads us away from the Father, and we become wanderers with only the barest memory of home” (pp. 18–19). What evidence of restlessness have you seen in society? Even among Christians?
2. Why does a close relationship with our heavenly Father calm our restlessness?
3. How might adults counteract a young person’s misconception that Christianity is boring?
4. On page 27 of *The Long Road Home* the authors ask, “Why is it impossible to find satisfaction in the objects of our gluttonous desire?” How would you answer this question?
5. Do you agree that all people have a deep longing for eternal significance? If so, what accounts for that longing? What would satisfy it?
6. How do prodigals today show they have no understanding of what freedom is?
7. Read Hebrews 13:5. How can a believer be truly content with what he or she has?

WRAP-UP

Have group members suggest parental attitudes and actions that may help their teenagers love God and be content in him.

MISERY AWAY FROM HOME

CHAPTERS 6–10

TO THE FACILITATOR

Help your group members understand that you are the facilitator not a lecturer. You can do this by arranging the chairs in a circle or semicircle and occupying one of them.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Choosing to be in the wrong place can have dire consequences. The Prodigal Son traveled far from home to a distant country, where he squandered his wealth. At home he had led a peaceful life, but in the distant country he pursued a decadent lifestyle (Luke 15:13). Life became miserable. Famine covered the land, and the Prodigal was impoverished (v. 14). At home he had been a son, but in the distant land he accepted the role of a servant—a hired hand, whose duty was to feed the owner's pigs (v. 15). We can only imagine how terrible it must have been to do this if the Prodigal was a Jew! At any rate, he became so desperate that he hungered for the pods that went to the pigs. But no one let him have any (v. 16).

Long before the Prodigal Son discovered misery away from the father, Adam and Eve learned the lesson. God had provided a perfect environment for them, but their sin cost them fellowship with God, personal peace, harmony with nature, endless life, and their perfect home (Gen. 3).

Lot must have thought he made a wise choice to leave Abraham and enter the well-watered plains of Jordan close to Sodom, but soon he moved into Sodom, where debauchery prevailed. Eventually, everything Lot valued went up in smoke. He even lost his wife while fleeing the fire that fell on Sodom. He had exchanged what he thought was so alluring for sheer misery (Gen. 19:15–26).

Samson must have felt comfortable resting on Delilah's lap far from home and God, but soon his enemies pounced on him, blinded him, bound him—now shaved—and dragged him off to

prison, where he was forced to grind grain (Judg. 16:18–21). He had lost his spirituality, his strength, his sight, and his reputation. Misery had wrapped him in its tentacles.


FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Do you believe a fool and his or her money are soon parted? Why or why not?
2. What signs of spiritual emptiness do you see in today's society?
3. On page 41 of *The Long Road Home*, the authors write, "In this generation, the far country has a variety of names: entertainment, promiscuity, laziness, sexual freedom, business." Why do you agree or disagree with this assertion?
4. Do you believe it is possible to attend church regularly and yet be far from God? Why or why not?
5. Read Isaiah 1:17. What miseries resulted when Israel forsook the Lord?
6. Why do you agree or disagree that a rich, popular person who has wandered away from God is miserable?
7. How does spiritual hunger manifest itself today?
8. In what ways might a believer sell him- or herself to the world?

WRAP-UP

Read Galatians 6:1 aloud. Ask the participants to suggest ways to restore a wayward believer.



LOOKING FOR HOME

CHAPTERS 11–15

TO THE FACILITATOR

Look for opportunities in this session and every session to praise the members of your group.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

It didn't make sense to the Prodigal Son to stay in the far country and live in dire need, when back home even the hired hands had more than enough to eat (Luke 15:17). The Prodigal had learned the hard way that he should have stayed home. "He came to his senses" about that (v. 17).

In their book, *The Long Road Home*, authors Earle L. Wilson and Lawrence W. Wilson write:

The Prodigal's repentance was not mere disgust; it had turned to remorse and to recognition of his homesickness. It's interesting that the Bible does not say, "Repent or be damned," but it does record, "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). When the Prodigal began to think of life from God's point of view, he recognized that real change was possible. He was sick not only of the far country but also of being away from home. He had been awakened to the fact that a return was possible. That awakening is critical to a return home, for without repentance there can be no salvation. (pp. 74–75)

King David fell into deep sin. He committed both adultery and murder, but he came to his senses and longed to return to a favorable relationship with God. He knew he was a sinner from the time his mother conceived him. He wrote, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). Tired of carrying the burden of the sins of adultery and murder, he repented and asked God to "restore to [him] the joy of [God's] salvation" (v. 12).

The heart can never find peace except in the God of peace.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Do you believe a person is innately good? Why or why not?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that every person has a longing for heaven?
3. How would you answer someone who claims a longing for heaven is simply a form of escapism?
4. The Wilsons allege, “The Bible does not say, ‘Repent or be damned’” (*The Long Road Home*, p. 74). Why do you agree or disagree with their statement?
5. Do you think a longing for heaven can be awakened in even the most prolific sinner? Why or why not?
6. Why do you agree or disagree with the following observation in *The Long Road Home*: “We are not one self. There is a lower self and a higher self. There is a small self and a better self. There is a self in us that reaches for the stars and there is another that clings to the mud” (p. 76).

WRAP-UP

Tell at least one person this week why you long for heaven.

DECIDING ON HOME **CHAPTERS 16–20**

TO THE FACILITATOR

This session emphasizes the truth that God can enable a wanderer to return to him. God changes hearts and lives. This session may convince a wanderer to return to God or it may encourage group members to believe someone they know can return to God.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

Isaiah 53:6 counters the notion that everyone is basically good. This verse states categorically that we have all gone astray and turned to our own way. Nevertheless, as we learn from the Prodigal Son, it is possible to recognize the error of our ways and decide to return to the Father (Luke 15:17–18).

David turned from sin and urged God to forgive him (Ps. 51:1–2). The fact that God forgave him shows that no sin is too offensive for God to forgive. Indeed, he invites the wicked to forsake their way and come to him for pardon.

Humility is crucial to conversion. The Prodigal Son manifested humility by deciding to confess to his father that he had sinned against heaven and against him (Luke 15:18). Like the Prodigal, we have all sinned against heaven and others. Paul told the Roman believers, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10). We all fall short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23). There is hope, though. Christ died for our sins and he bestows membership in God’s family upon all who receive him.

The Prodigal Son displayed genuine contrition. He planned to tell his father that he was no longer worthy to be called his son (Luke 15:19). Conversion necessitates contrition. When David confessed his sin, he prayed, “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Ps. 51:17).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Do you think a believer who sows his or her wild oats is happy? Why or why not?
2. In *The Long Road Home*, the authors state, “He is calling us to the heart of the wiser Prodigal, who said, ‘Make me.’ It’s time for all of us to come home from the far country and say, ‘Father, I have sinned. I have lost my way. Make me something new’” (p. 102). How do you know from personal experience that God makes something new of every prodigal who returns to him?
3. Romans 3:23 points out that we have all sinned. What messages from parents and/or Sunday school teachers might cause children to assume this verse doesn’t apply to them?
4. Does a church member who has attended church since infancy need a conversion? Why or why not?
5. Why is humility crucial to conversion?
6. Without Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins, would a return to God be possible? Why or why not?

WRAP-UP

Challenge group members to search their hearts and determine whether they need to return to God. Recommend humility and contrition. Also, challenge the group members to pray for the conversion of anyone who has wandered away from God.

REJOICING AT HOME

CHAPTERS 21–25

TO THE FACILITATOR

Recognizing birthdays, anniversaries, and awards can be a big morale builder. Ask who celebrated a birthday or anniversary this past week. Ask if anyone received a special award this past week. Congratulate these people and wish them God’s blessings.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

The Prodigal began his long road home. “He got up and went to his father” (Luke 15:20). He was broke, broken, and famished, but he was wiser now. He had learned that the far country was not such a fun place after all. Penniless, friendless, and smelly, he had no way of knowing what awaited him at home. Perhaps he expected to receive a stern rebuke from his father, but what awaited him was a big surprise.

While the prodigal “was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him” (v. 20). In *The Long Road Home*, the authors writes, “How did the father feel when the boy left home to sow his wild oats? We do know how the father felt as he looked, wistfully, every day for his son to return. And we certainly know the mood of the father when the Prodigal, at last, came home. The father in this great story represents all earthly fathers who weep over their own prodigals and, most important, the heavenly Father who seeks to save and bless all who are lost” (p. 108).

Like the Prodigal Son, we all deserve nothing but judgment, but the heavenly Father promises to receive us and cleanse us of our sins. The Prodigal Son’s father ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. Similarly, God eagerly meets every repentant sinner with an outpouring of love.

The confession the Prodigal had rehearsed in the far country became reality at home. He admitted he had sinned against heaven and against his father and was no longer worthy to be called the father’s son. Each of us needs to remember we are not worthy to be called a child of God. We are saved not by our merits, but by Jesus’ merits—not by works, but by grace.

The Prodigal's father quickly demonstrated his acceptance of his repentant son. He began a celebration of joy. First, he provided new clothes for his son and a ring and sandals. When we became believers, our heavenly Father dressed us in a robe of righteousness and provided what we need to walk with him.

Soon a joyful celebration was under way. The Prodigal, who had longed to eat the pods intended for pigs, would enjoy sitting and eating at the Father's banquet. The unsavory scraps of the evil world system cannot begin to compare to the enjoyable abundance we find at the Father's table.

The father rejoiced because he considered his wayward son as dead but now alive, and as lost but now found. Every prodigal who comes to the heavenly Father is both resurrected and recovered (Eph. 2:1-7).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Do you think a believer can experience lasting satisfaction away from God? Why or why not?
2. Read James 4:4. Why is friendship with the world hatred toward God?
3. What spiritual application, if any, do you see in the fact that the Prodigal was still the Father's son in spite of his waywardness?
4. Can a prodigal ever wander too far from God to be accepted back? Explain your answer.
5. Should a believer feel he or she deserves God's love? Why or why not?

WRAP-UP

Instruct the group members to compile a list of blessings the Father has bestowed on them, and spend time in prayer thanking God for all he has given and done for us.

FRICION AT HOME

CHAPTERS 26–30

TO THE FACILITATOR

Be sure to thank your group members for their attendance and participation throughout this study of *The Long Road Home*. This final session focuses on the friction caused by the older son because of his jealousy. He was appalled that his younger brother received so much favorable attention, whereas he, the older son who had always worked at home, did not receive a celebration.

FOCUS ON THE WORD

The restored Prodigal's older brother had been in the field when his brother returned home. He did not know what had transpired between the father and the repentant son. However, as he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. After learning from a servant what was going on, he became irate and refused to join the celebration. His father begged him to join the festivities, but he refused. "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" (Luke 15:29). Then he complained that the father had prepared the fattened calf for the Prodigal.

Instead of calling the repentant Prodigal his brother, he called him "this son of yours" (v. 30). He also accused him of squandering the father's property with prostitutes (v. 30).

How did the father respond to this sibling jealousy? He explained that the older son was always with him and had access to everything the father owned, but he and his servants had to celebrate because the younger son was dead and was alive again; he was lost and was now found (v. 31).

Also in Luke 15, Jesus told the story of the lost sheep that the shepherd retrieved and the lost coin that the diligent owner retrieved. In each case, there was rejoicing when what was lost was found. Jesus said, "There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (v. 10).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that God keeps a watchful eye for the return of a wayward believer?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that friction in a congregation between believers can cause irreparable harm in the community?
3. How should the older brother have responded to his brother's return home?
4. Do you think the father was correct in urging his eldest son to join the festivities?

WRAP-UP

Challenge the group members to search their hearts to determine whether they are at odds with a fellow believer. If they find that they are, they should go to that brother or sister and seek reconciliation.