

O Little Town of Bethlehem
Home for Christmas series
by Chris Famisaran

Thank you, Ben. Good morning, everybody. How are you all doing? Are you in the Christmas spirit yet? We're working on it.

Let's pray. God, we thank you. As we continue to journey, Lord, on the home ultimately. And our destination is to be with you as we look through scripture, as we look through the story of your birth. Lead and guide us in Jesus name. Amen.

I love O little town of Bethlehem. It's a reminder of the humility that Christ displayed coming into this world. The God of the universe chose to be with men and women, to be united with his people, but came to earth in a fashion that, well, in many ways I would call it a security risk because he's a baby with Rome wanting to get rid of him because he could be a potential threat. If you read other accounts, we see that Jesus life was at risk from the very beginning.

But going back to a little town of Bethlehem, and I kind of, I went back and I asked Google, how did this song come about? And it was written back in 1868 by Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal priest who ministered to a church in Philadelphia in 1865, shortly after the Civil War. On Christmas Eve, he traveled to Jerusalem, sorry, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and attended a service at the Church of the Nativity. And in this quiet beauty of Bethlehem, this evening truly impacted him. And so two years later, based on this experience, he wrote a poem and he shared it with his Christmas program. His organist, Louis Redner composed the tune St. Louis to accompany the words, and it was then sung by a kids choir at the Holy Trinity Church during Christmas of 1868. And all of these, this whole poem, this song is based on Micah 5.2, where it prophesies that out of Bethlehem, though small, will be the birthplace of the Messiah. And ultimately, as we see, it's a very famous and popular hymn or song that is sung worldwide and now over in different tunes.

And as I was thinking about this song, I then dove even deeper. What did it mean to be coming from Bethlehem? You see, Bethlehem is a very small village, didn't even have walls. It's probably about five or six miles south of Jerusalem. And at the time there was maybe a couple hundred people in this little town.

And the meaning of Bethlehem, I had to remind myself as well as I read. Do you know what Bethlehem means? The house of bread. What did Jesus call himself? I am the bread of life. Bethlehem is the name of it. House of bread. We also see too that Bethlehem also was the birthplace of King David and associated with his line from the tribe of Judah. You can find that in 1st Samuel 16, verse 1. And it fulfills the prophetic prophecy that out of this small little town the Savior of the world would be born. Humble beginnings.

And yet Bethlehem as well, it was in a very good area for agriculture and shepherding. As we know, shepherds are a theme throughout Scripture and especially in Jesus life. Who visited Jesus first? The shepherds, of course. Bethlehem being under Roman rule, we see why Joseph and Mary, the Roman emperor, decided, I want to know how many people are under my kingdom, how many people do I have influence over?

Of course, everybody had to pack up, go home. That's why they went to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem. And so we see a small town. Small. And what we would probably say insignificant is also the birthplace and one of the most, if not one of the most significant points in history where God became flesh here on Earth.

I had to think about it too. Why, you know, why would Joseph leave? More than likely, he was a blue collar worker, he was a carpenter seeking economic opportunity. He had to leave his little hometown. And yet when the country said, you got to go back home to find out, to take the census, packed some things up. He took his bride and there his pregnant, pregnant bride and went back home.

O little town of Bethlehem. Joseph went on a journey. I wonder what it would be like to travel all the way back to Bethlehem with a pregnant wife. They had no fancy cars, no fancy buses, of course. I feel like back then too, women,

men, they just. They were different. I feel like we're so soft compared to them. But here, out of there, out of Bethlehem, the Savior would come.

I want to talk now about another journey, another humble journey. I want to go to the book of Luke, chapter 15, and I want to look at a story that some of you are thinking, how does this tie into Christmas?

And here are some passages as well. If you're joining us for the first time here or online, in the description, there is a link to the notes. If you have your notes here, go ahead and pull them out. We have opportunities for you to write into them, but we see that there is another journey of going home, Luke 15. And in Luke 15, Luke 15 is unique because we see the parable of the lost sheep that is found in other passages. You also have the parable of the lost coin. But the parable of the lost son is also only found in Luke. And we see three themes where the first two, the sheep and the lost coin. Those who had influence over found it and they what they rejoiced here. Though in Luke 15, we take a longer look at a story that has several scenes. And so, act one, starting at verse 11, Jesus says there was a man who had two sons.

The younger one said to his father, father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them. How do you think the father felt at that point? Because in order to receive an inheritance, what normally has to happen, the father has to die. Son, you want me dead already, huh? Ouch. I'm only a son, I'm not a father. But I can only imagine how painful it must have been. And actually, if you really think about it, this son is being so disrespectful at that point.

What could the father have done? Could have had him killed. You think about it. What a dishonorable, disrespectful son. But the father relents. He probably has to sell off a portion of his property, thus lowering his economic viability to give to his son. And the son grows up on a farm. Does he know how to budget? Does he only know of what's outside of the farm? Has he managed money? Those of you who know the story know well, it's not going to go well for him.

Let's go to the next scene. So, verse 13. Not long after that, so quickly he got his stuff together. The other son got together all he had and he set off for a distant country.

And there was. What did he do? He wasted it. Or as he squandered in the NIV says, *he squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything there, there was a famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to the citizen of the country, who sent him to feed to the field to feed his pigs.*

Now, let's just assume that Jesus is telling a parable of a Jewish individual. How does that go over? Well, not very well. Normally, you know, if he had money, he would never even be near the pigs.

But he's desperate because in verse 16, he says *he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.* So we see in these various acts, the first act is that, look, he's got a maid. He's being taken care of. He does not have any wants, he's fine. But ambition, perhaps dreams or greed got the best of him. And so he goes and he asks for his father for his inheritance.

And he takes all of that money that his father, I'm sure, had probably worked so very hard to grow to enable his to care for his family. He takes it and he wastes it. And there's all many kinds of ways that I'm sure we could think of. But he was able to take care of his friends, people that he was connected to. They probably ran him dry very quickly. Then he had nothing what to do. He probably had a little bit of pride in him. So I'm not going to go back home yet to admit defeat.

But then he realized his only prospect is to feed pigs. He's back on a farm again, working for somebody that is not his family. I'd imagine that this person probably didn't have much sympathy for this young kid. And he's there, he's feeding pigs, working for somebody that was not his father. And then verse 17, Love it. He says, *when he came to his senses, verse 17, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare? And here I am, starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.*

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and he went to his father.

And I love this passage because it shows something that I think that maybe we need to a little bit of more do a little bit more of sometimes. And that is, **when was the last time you set aside time for reflection?**

The younger son had plenty of time for reflection as he was feeding these pigs. Amen. He thought about his life choices and he realized, hey, you know, yeah, it may not have been the city, but I was cared for, I was taken care of. I had everything that I needed back home.

When was the last time you took time for reflection? I think reflection in life is very important because it helps us avoid problems, avoid pitfalls, to think back on the actions and the decisions that you have made. Well, let's not do that again.

You know, I've been a pastor for over 20 years. Yeah. And I think more about my failures than my wins. And I think back more about let's not do that again, or even let's not do what that person did. There's a lot that we can learn. And to be fair, I think sometimes we don't like to admit this, but failure is a part of life. There's a difference, though, between continuously failing and not learning your lessons versus learning your lessons from your failures. Nobody's going to be perfect. Nothing is going to be handed to you. Sometimes you have to work hard. You have to also Learn the lessons along the way. And this young man learned a very important lesson. He had it good, but now he has to take on an act of faith because he's thought of his script as far as what he's going to tell his dad. But what can the dad do? He could reject it. He could say, you've left, you didn't want to be around us. I had to sell off portions of my land. I'm not able to be able to succeed as much as I used to be because of your decisions and your actions. Talk about actions, how it affects family. We'll get to that in a second.

So verse 20. *So he got up and he went to his father.* And I love this passage because it says, *but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with what? Compassion.* Love for him. *He ran to his son, he threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

Do you think this was the response that the son had in mind? As far as what would happen? I doubt it. The son begins to talk. The son said to him, *Father, I have sinned against heaven and I've again sinned against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*

And I love this because he sees that the younger son. **The younger son's repentance will now lead to restoration.** Okay, the younger son's repentance will lead to restoration. He owned up to his behavior.

There's a story told of a young man. It's a common story of Jonathan who. He grew up in a Christian home. But when he got to college, he finally had freedom. He left home and he could do whatever he wanted outside of his parent's influence. But he starts to rebel and he goes down a dark path. If he had all that which he had been looking for now at his fingertips, drinking especially. But he also loved a little gambling in his life. What happens to it when you mix drinking, gambling, poor choices because you always think the next one, next one will be done. Or the next one, I'm going to hit it big. And his life spiraled. He did horrible in college. Cut from his job, he was asked to leave from his apartment. And ultimately his friends abandoned him. And he was stuck in his car, driving around, what am I going to do? Where can I go? And as he was sitting in his car, it was cold, it was frigid. He could see his breath hitting the windshield and staying there. He was reflecting and he remembered his father's words. You can always come home. You can always come home.

He pulled his phone out and he called his parents. Imagine, they said, dad, I'm sorry, can I come home eventually? Well, of course they said yes. But he then had a little bit of warmth in his heart again, a little possibility. He took his key, he put it in the ignition, he turned it. And what happens? Nothing. He's already. He had this little high. But then he was brought back down to reality. Now he's in the valley of despair. My car won't start. And of course, he has no money and he has only a little bit of battery left. He calls his dad, dad, my car's broken. Can you please come get me? His mom and dad get in their own car and they drive several hours north. When they see him, they hug him. They say they love them. They love him. And he was surprised because they didn't scold him. They brought him home. And it was

there that he decided, okay, I've reflected. I don't want this life anymore. And he went into rehab. It was a hard. Not a hard decision, but a hard path because he had to make choices in his life. But eventually, the thing is, at least when he was in, he finally saw the destruction that he had caused, not only for him, but also for his family, and ultimately was able to turn his life around.

Unlike the prodigal, this young man had squandered his life. But his turning point came around when he remembered that his father said, you can always come home. And that his father's love meant more than the ability to be on his own. And his parents also mirrored the response *that the father also does as he shares with the prodigal son. So while he was a long way off, his father saw him. He was filled with compassion. Father, I have sinned against you, against heaven. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Verse 22. But the father said, quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.*

You see this ring that he puts on the finger? It's not just a ring. It's significant because it says that this is my son. He's protected, he's loved, he is cherished, he's not to be harmed. In many ways, he's saying, he's being renewed, he's being restored. Everything that has happened in the past, I have forgiven him. He puts on a good robe, he clothes him, he holds him, he kisses him.

And I love it. Where he also says, verse 23, *bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate for this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and he is found. And so they began to celebrate* the son who, as we're going to learn later, his reputation got back home even though he was in a distant country.

Think about that. And yet they chose to celebrate. When someone makes a decision to turn their life around, are you happy or are you sad? Unfortunately, not everybody has warm, fuzzy feelings about this situation. The older brother has a different opinion. Verse 25, it says, *meanwhile the older son was in the field and when he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he says to one of the servants and asked him, what's going on? The servant said,*

you brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.

Wouldn't you be happy? The son, though, says, verse 28, *he became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and he pleaded with them. But he answered his father, look, all of these years I have been slaving for you Parents. How would you love to hear that from your son? I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. And yet you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours doesn't even call him his brother or by name, when this son of yours comes back who squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.* Little bit of resentment there.

Now listen, if you're an older child, you get it. I'm kidding. Kind of. Kind of. I have three siblings. I'm kidding. I love you. No, but I mean, my father, he told me, like, I expect more out of you because you're the oldest. And it's true. In the culture that I grew up, I was the responsible one. Always had to make sure that everybody was obeying, work hard, set an example, blah, blah, blah. And what did it get me? More love. But you know, I feel. I'm not saying I'm not resentful to my siblings. Don't get me. That's not the impression I'm saying I love my siblings and we have a really great relationship. I'm so happy that we're so close.

Every week, every Wednesday, We call it Waffle Wednesday. I think I've shared it before. We send at least a one to two minute clip and just a little bit of life updates. What's going on in our lives. Yesterday my sister sent a picture of a car that was filled with stickers. And of course, we had to give our comments and our thoughts.

I love the fact that even with technology, I can always send a quick blurb no matter what day or time. When there's been a time where I needed to pick somebody up from the airport or whatever, I happily did it. Cherish your family. Cherish your siblings. Don't be like the older brother and the father. He hears this because what the son is saying is not loving.

The father pleads with him. My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again and he was lost and he was found.

In truth, both of the sons are prodigals. Well, How's the older son a prodigal? The older son is a prodigal because he wasted all of the love and generosity that his father had also lavished on him. Think about this, okay? His father treated him with dignity, taught him how to live, to have priorities. But you could see the selfishness in the younger son when he says, you didn't even give me a little goat so I could celebrate. With whom? My friends? He doesn't see that the son, the younger brother, yes, he made mistakes and yeah, he soiled the family's name and reputation. He must have been a well known guy to have a report back that his son has been acting in a way that is unbecoming. The son heard about it. How resentful when it comes to the holidays. Sometimes it breaks my heart when families are in conflict with one another and there's going to be times where maybe, yeah, you may get together with family.

And I want to encourage and challenge you to not be resentful. And ask yourself, why does my heart feel this way? Instead of my son, my brother, coming home, I am going to be angry because I've done it the right way. Should he not have rejoiced and said, my brother is finally home. My closest relationships are with my family. I love and cherish my family, my parents, my sibling. And if things are not right, I feel awkward. I don't like it because I know what it's like to not talk to somebody sometimes even for years. And I look back and I realized how ridiculous I was because I was petty, I was resentful and I lost years. Years. I'm ashamed of how petty I was.

So lead with love. Check your heart. Why do I feel this way? And if so, have the courage and the faith to go and talk to that person and work things out.

How can we celebrate restoration without resentment? How can we see and celebrate somebody who's made a positive decision? Tell them, that's awesome. Check your heart. Why do I feel? Am I jealous? And if I'm jealous, why am I jealous? It's not necessary.

The Williams sisters. Serena Venus, one of the greatest tennis players ever, right? That dynamic duo of sisters, they grew up in the same household,

trained by their father. They also became two of some of the greatest, if not the greatest tennis players in history. But their relationship was not without tension growing up because, you know, as siblings, we have little rivalries, right? Don't tell me you didn't have a rivalry with your sibling growing up. They made themselves. They made each other better, though, by how hard they worked. And yet that rivalry got in the way of their relationship when comparison and sometimes perceived unfairness got in the way. True love, okay? True love roots for people who succeed. If someone in your life is succeeding, tell them, that's awesome. And rejoice, support them. Comparison is the thief of what joy. Try not to compare yourself with others because you are unique. You are you. And so as we move forward, okay, shift your perspective. If someone you love has gone down a bad path, that's brought destruction in their life and they're truly changed, rejoice with them, celebrate with them. Pray and check on your heart and be grateful. The older brother himself forgot what. He forgot all that he had and his blessings. So lead with love now.

The last thing I want to share is this. **There's always a way home.** The son, the younger son. It took a lot of courage to go home. But I'm also reminded in John 14:6, where it says, Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, life, no one comes to the Father. Sorry, I'm reading verse seven.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know me, know my Father as well. From now on, you will know him, and you have seen him. Jesus comforts the disciples, if you know the way, if you know the Father, you know the way home.

May you know God who will prepare, who is preparing a home for us. We can always go home. It may be that your earthly home is challenged. And I'm not going to deny that you should just let everything go when maybe it's not time yet, or if it's not safe to go home. Okay, does that make sense? You can forgive and love somebody, but sometimes you need to also protect yourself. Because if that person has not changed or is destructive, you want to help them, but you also can't go down that same destructive path. But love your family and where needed, forgive one another. And may it be a time this Christmas, a time of renewal, to be together. You noticed. What was the older son's response? We don't know.

Because it doesn't say, did he go into the celebration or not? And that's a question that I think was that. That it was intentionally left out? Because that's the question that was for the early church. And it's the same question that we have here today.

Are we going to celebrate when somebody returns to the fold? And I hope and pray that it's a yes. And I not only to the fold, but also in your homes and your families, have the courage to have those conversations, to work through things and to grow together. **I want you to reflect now of the three main characters, the father, the older son, the younger son, and the parable of the prodigal, who do you identify with the most?** Are you a parent right now, hoping and praying your children will return, literally or here into the church, wherever? Are you the older son who's got a little bit of resentment in their heart? Or are you the younger son, the younger child, scared to return home? I hope and pray that we can take something from each of these individuals. May you have the courage to go home to seek amends, but also the father as a parent to love bring back. And may we not be petty and resentful like the older son.

The challenge this week, I'm gonna ask you to do something that's gonna be really hard. Cause I practiced it this morning. **Choose someone you resent and forgive them.**

This morning, I pulled out of my home, out of the lot, went up the street, and was about to make a left turn, and there was an Acura TL behind me, black, and the light turned green. We had to wait for a couple of cars to pass by, and I turned left. But apparently the Acura TL behind me didn't think that I moved quick enough. This person, literally, I was in the left lane, went on the right lane, and then quickly got past me and then turned into the left lane right in front of me. It was like, dude, we've got another mile till we get onto the freeway. Why? Sometimes I feel like I have to practice forgiveness every day when I drive. Amen. I practiced it every day this week. I want you to choose someone you resent and forgive them. Can we do that?

All right, my friends, there's Always a way home. Even if it's a humble journey when it comes to Bethlehem, like Joseph and Mary with young baby Jesus about to be born.

Even though it may be a humble home, out of humility, even a humble place can serve as a place where something awesome, unimaginable can happen. Like in Bethlehem. Or perhaps you're feeling sadness, you're feeling uncertain, you're feeling, will I be accepted again? The Father loves and desires that all of the children come back home.

Let's pray.

God, we turn to you when it feels like we can't go back. We know at least with you, you are full of love, you are full of grace. And we know through you we can find peace and we can find comfort. Lord, there are some who are sitting here, maybe feeling they're in that spot. I'm so scared.

But I want to give them an opportunity now to say, lord, I am sorry for the life that I have lived and I choose now to follow you. Lord, There are some of us maybe who feel like the older brother and need to say, lord, work on my heart. Help me, Lord, to forgive those that I need to forgive. And Lord, I know there's a number of parents who are praying and love their children and want the best for them. But every child has the ability at some point to make decisions for their lives.

We pray that you will help them to have faith for their as they long for their children to return, but to live as a model example of what the Father displayed in Luke 15, Lord, your love knows no bounds. Help us not to forget that to you we can always come and find grace and a new life. These things we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Grace and peace, everyone.