



# The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith

By Timothy Keller

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**The *New York Times* bestselling author of the forthcoming *God's Wisdom for Navigating Life* uncovers the essential message of Jesus, locked inside his most familiar parable.**

*Newsweek* called renowned minister Timothy Keller "a C.S. Lewis for the twenty-first century" in a feature on his first book, *The Reason for God*. In that book, he offered a rational explanation of why we should believe in God. Now, in *The Prodigal God*, Keller takes his trademark intellectual approach to understanding Christianity and uses the parable of the prodigal son to reveal an unexpected message of hope and salvation.

Within that parable Jesus reveals God's prodigal grace toward both the irreligious and the moralistic. This book will challenge both the devout and skeptics to see Christianity in a whole new way.

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### Editorial Review

Review

#### Praise for Timothy Keller and *The Prodigal God*

"Thrilling . . . Brilliant. Keller elegantly explains the goodness of God, redefining sin, lostness, grace, and salvation." —HeartsandMinds.com

"An amazing, thought-provoking, illuminating work." —Examiner.com

"The insights Tim Keller has about the two individuals in the story, and about the heart of God who loves them both, wrecked me afresh. Tim's thoughts deserve a hearing worldwide." —Bill Hybels, founding and senior pastor, Willow Creek Community Church

"Explain, explode, expose, explore—all of these Jesus did by telling the parable of the prodigal son. In this book, Timothy Keller shows us something of how this story actually reveals the heart of God, and, if we read it carefully, our own hearts. This brief exposition is unsettling and surprisingly satisfying. Like seeing something as your own home, or your own self, with new eyes. Enjoy and profit." —Mark Dever, senior pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.

"When it comes to the gospel of Jesus Christ, Timothy Keller is simply brilliant." —Mark Driscoll, pastor, Mars Hill Church and president, Acts 29 Church Planting Network

"Keller will be remembered as a pioneer of the new urban Christians." —*Christianity Today* magazine

"I thank God for him." —Billy Graham

#### About the Author

Timothy Keller was born and raised in Pennsylvania and educated at Bucknell University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary. His first pastorate was in Hopewell, Virginia. In 1989 he started Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City with his wife, Kathy, and their three sons. Today, Redeemer has nearly six thousand regular Sunday attendees and has helped to start more than three hundred new churches around the world. He is the author of *The Songs of Jesus*, *Prayer*, *Encounters with Jesus*, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, *Every Good Endeavor*, and *The Meaning of Marriage*, among others, including the perennial bestsellers *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God*.

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#### Introduction

This short book is meant to lay out the essentials of the Christian message, the gospel. It can, therefore, serve as an introduction to the Christian faith for those who are unfamiliar with its teachings or who may have been away from them for some time.

This volume is not just for seekers, however. Many lifelong Christian believers feel they understand the basics of the Christian faith quite well and don't think they need a primer. Nevertheless, one of the signs that you may not grasp the unique, radical nature of the gospel is that you are certain that you do. Sometimes longtime church members find themselves so struck and turned around by a fresh apprehension of the Christian message that they feel themselves to have been essentially "re-converted." This book, then, is written to both curious outsiders and established insiders of the faith, both to those Jesus calls "younger brothers" and those he calls "elder brothers" in the famous Parable of the Prodigal Son.

I am turning to this familiar story, found in the fifteenth chapter of the gospel of St. Luke, in order to get to the heart of the Christian faith. The parable's plot and *dramatis personae* are very simple. There was a father who had two sons. The younger asked for his share of the inheritance, received it, and promptly left for a far country, where he squandered it all on sensual and frivolous pleasure. He returned home penitently and, to his surprise, was received with open arms by his father. This reception alienated and angered the elder brother greatly. The story closes with the father appealing to his firstborn son to join in the welcome and forgiveness of his younger brother.

On the surface of it, the narrative is not all that gripping. I believe, however, that if the teaching of Jesus is likened to a lake, this famous Parable of the Prodigal Son would be one of the clearest spots where we can see all the way to the bottom. Many excellent studies have been written on this Biblical text over the last several years, but the foundation for my understanding of it was a sermon I first heard preached over thirty years ago by Dr. Edmund P. Clowney. Listening to that sermon changed the way I understood Christianity. I almost felt I had discovered the secret heart of Christianity. Over the years I have often returned to teach and counsel from the parable. I have seen more people encouraged, enlightened, and helped by this passage, when I explained the true meaning of it, than by any other text.

I once traveled overseas and delivered this sermon to an audience through an interpreter. Some time later the translator wrote to tell me that, as he was preaching the sermon, he had realized that the parable was like an arrow aimed at his heart. After a period of wrestling and reflection, it brought him to faith in Christ. Many others have told me that this story of Jesus, once they came to understand it, saved their faith, their marriages, and, sometimes literally, their lives.

In the first five chapters I will unlock the parable's basic meaning. In Chapter 6 I will demonstrate how the story helps us understand the Bible as a whole, and in Chapter 7 how its teaching works itself out in the way we live in the world.

I will not use the parable's most common name: the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is not right to single out only one of the sons as the sole focus of the story. Even Jesus doesn't call it the Parable of *the* Prodigal Son, but begins the story saying, "a man had *two* sons." The narrative is as much about the elder brother as the younger, and as much about the father as the sons. And what Jesus says about the older brother is one of the most important messages given to us in the Bible. The parable might be better called the Two Lost Sons.

The word "prodigal" does not mean "wayward" but, according to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, "recklessly spendthrift." It means to spend until you have nothing left. This term is therefore as appropriate for describing the father in the story as his younger son. The father's welcome to the repentant son was literally reckless, because he refused to "reckon" or count his sin against him or demand repayment. This response offended the elder son and most likely the local community.

In this story the father represents the Heavenly Father Jesus knew so well. St. Paul writes: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses" (2 Corinthians 5:19 – American Standard Version). Jesus is showing us the God of Great Expenditure, who is nothing if not

prodigal toward us, his children. God's reckless grace is our greatest hope, a life-changing experience, and the subject of this book.

## **Users Review**

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