

BACK TO GOD

“Love”

October 2, 2016

Awakenings that people experience along their spiritual journey:

1. Awakening to Longing
2. Awakening to Regret
3. Awakening to Help

Finding your way back to God is a life-changing moment,
but it's also a life-growing process,

4. Awakening to Love

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

Luke 15:21 (NIV)

“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.”

Luke 15:22 (NIV)

Each gift sent a powerful message:

- The robe was a symbol of rest.
- The ring was a symbol of security.
- The sandals were a symbol of acceptance.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old is gone, the new is here!”

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...”

Ephesians 1:7 (NIV)

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...”

Romans 8:1 (NIV)

“...nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God...”

Romans 8:39 (NIV)

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...”

Galatians 3:26 (NIV)

“Every time you feel hurt, offended, or rejected, you have to dare to say to yourself: 'These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting belief.’”

–Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*

***God, if you are real, make yourself real to me.
Awaken in me the awareness that I am your unconditionally loved child.***

Leadership Tip!

Take a moment to assess how your group is doing in the area of ACCEPTANCE. Has your group fallen into any bad habits that make it harder for new members to fit in? Always strive to create a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere for ALL.

FINDING YOUR WAY BACK TO GOD – *Awakening to Love***STARTER QUESTION:**

Have you ever been in a situation where someone was convinced you were someone else (a case of mistaken identity, or even being a victim of identity theft)?

How did you react?

What were some things you got out of the sermon this week?

MAIN IDEA:

When we find our way back to God, we discover our identity as a *deeply loved, unconditionally accepted* child of God.

This awakening to being loved is not only something that happens when we initially find our way back to God. Finding God is certainly a life-changing moment when it first occurs, **but it's really the start of a lifelong growing process.** And just because we've come back home doesn't mean that everything is "fixed" --- we sometimes forget who we are and lose our identity, so we have to come back home yet again!

KEY SCRIPTURE:**Luke 15:21 (NIV)**

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

This statement by the prodigal son contains three key elements:

- A confession of breaking God's laws,
- A confession of violating family rules or norms
- A self-assessment of where he stands because of his actions.

Why is understanding these 3 elements so important to the point Jesus makes?

Share a time when had to humble yourself because of something you said or did?

How did admitting being wrong make you feel?

In the parable we are studying, the son has returned home but he's still living with a mistaken identity. Maybe you have felt that way before, or even feel that way now. Despite having found your way back to God, you still have mountains of pain and regret.

Sometimes we feel so burdened with shame, we doubt that God will embrace us.

Matthew West has a great song called "Grace Wins" that profoundly captures this feeling:

*"Here come those whispers in my ear, saying 'who do you think you are?'
Looks like you're on your own from here, cause grace could never reach
that far."*

Why are we often able to forgive others, but struggle with forgiving ourselves?

Paul reminds us that we have no reason to feel this way. You are not condemned. Bye, bye, shame!

Romans 8:1 (NIV)

*"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ
Jesus..."*

Once we come home, God treats us in a way that is far beyond our own expectations. Look back at the parable and see how the father reacts when his lost son returned:

Luke 15:22 (NLT)

*"Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and
sandals on his feet."*

He doesn't just restore his son to where he was before he left -- "You can have your room back, and dinner is at five." -- He gives him three symbolic gifts:

The robe, a symbol for rest – You belong.

The ring, a symbol for security – You matter to me.

The sandals, a symbol for acceptance – You're mine.

Then he goes over the top and throws a big party too!

Why is it that we often struggle to believe God loves us deeply?

Coming to the realization that we are beloved sons and daughters of God gives us the identity we've been seeking for so long.

Author Brennan Manning says it this way:

“Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion. God’s love for you and his choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that, and let it become the most important thing in your life.” - Brennan Manning, Abba’s Child

FINAL THOUGHTS:

How do you relate to the love expressed in this parable?

Awakening to love in this way causes you to stop saying, “I don’t deserve this,” and start saying, “God loves me deeply after all.” Your new identity changes how you think about God, about yourself, and about others.

Read this scripture as a group:

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, either the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38-39 (NIV)

How can our group love you?

How can our group pray for you?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 1:7, Galatians 3:26, Romans 6:4