

## **Bible and the Headlines: Waiting at the Gate**

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In this season of family celebrations, the absence of a child, in some families, is felt more than the presence of the children who are gathered. This effect is demonstrated in some of the post-Christmas headlines. Here are three such stories.

From the other side of the pond, the BBC on December 28th carried, “Mum's 27-Year Wait For Global Explorer To Come Home.” The ‘global explorer’ was the woman’s son who in 1998 announced his intention to walk home to England from Chile without using any form of transportation. He thought the journey would take twelve years. His mother told the reporter, “I've carried on buying him a Christmas present every year . . . he will have quite a few to open!” Though now in Central Europe, his mum is not making any plans to go to her son but insists his trip is over when he walks through her front gate.

PEOPLE on December 28 announced, “The Bachelor's Jade Roper Says Late Son, Whom She Lost in a Miscarriage, Showed Up in AI-Generated Family Christmas Portrait.” The reality star used ChatGPT to create a Christmas portrait of her family. In addition to her husband and three children, “. . . when the chatbot created the image, an extra person appeared in the picture — and Jade said she believes it is her late son, Beau.” Prior to this photo, each year the family celebrated Beau’s birthday in absentia.

The December 29th edition of the Belfast Telegraph featured, “Missing Man’s Dad Vows to Confront ‘Stonewalling’ Witness Who He Believes Could Crack 20-Year-Old Case.” The man’s son disappeared on New Year's Day, 2006. His father, “. . . does not believe his son fell into the River Lagan, and suspects he was murdered.” The son’s body was never found, and no one has ever been charged. The father thinks that after twenty years it is time for the people who last saw his son to tell what they know.

In the Old Testament the missing child narrative involves Jacob’s son, Joseph. He was bushwhacked by his brothers and sold to human traffickers (Gen 37:28). His father was shown Joseph’s blood-covered clothes, so Jacob assumed wild animals killed Joseph (Gen 37:32-33). The Bible tells us, “As a sign of grief, Jacob put on haircloth, and went on weeping for his son day after day” (Gen 37:34). Many years later, when Jacob was told Joseph was alive and living in Egypt, Jacob did not believe it (Gen 45:26). Father and son were eventually reunited in the land of the Pharaohs (Gen 46:29).

In the New Testament, Jesus used the example of a father’s vigil for his missing son as a teaching point for his disciples (Luk 15:11). In the parable, the son cashed in his inheritance and moved to a foreign country (Luk 15:13). The son wasted all his money and decided to go home, even if it meant being a hired worker for his dad (Luk 15:14-18). Unbeknownst to the son, the father never stopped searching the horizon for him, “And while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luk 15:20). To this father it was like his son had come back from the dead (Luk 15:32).

The headlines show the dedication of parents to their children. Jesus’ parable builds on that human drive and asks us to imagine how much more our Heavenly Father longs for each of His children to come home. God does not want any of His children to be missing at His family reunion (2Pe 3:9).