

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY
RESOURCES

The Prodigal Brother

MAKING PEACE WITH YOUR PARENTS, YOUR PAST
AND THE WAYWARD ONE IN YOUR FAMILY

SUE THOMPSON



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The Prodigal Brother

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Contents

CHAPTER ONE	
We Are All Far from Home	1
CHAPTER TWO	
A Troubled Life	11
CHAPTER THREE	
Journey to a Distant Land	27
CHAPTER FOUR	
Pharisees Among Us	43
CHAPTER FIVE	
Dancing As Fast As I Can	61
CHAPTER SIX	
Sitting By My Spring of Injustice	75
CHAPTER SEVEN	
First We Must Grieve	93
CHAPTER EIGHT	
If You Don't Love Your Brother	109

CHAPTER NINE

Trust and Gratitude Will Carry Me 129

CHAPTER TEN

The Light Will Reveal All 141

CHAPTER ELEVEN

My Machine of Hideous Beauty 155

CHAPTER TWELVE

Climbing the Mountain of Forgiveness 169

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

On the Summit with the Father 187

Notes 203

We Are All Far from Home

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. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men 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 men." So he got up and went to his father.

But while he 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. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 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 is found." So they began to celebrate.


Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

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

—LUKE 15:11-32





used to travel with an evangelist who had been a cocktail waitress in Las Vegas. Whenever she told the story of her lonely and sorrowful life before she became a Christian, people were on the edge of their seats. She had a wonderful, honest sense of humor; crowds would howl with laughter over her stories about her naive attempts to explain salvation to the busboys, waitresses, and blackjack dealers with whom she worked. She would end with a powerful call to those whose lives were as misused and as broken as hers had been, urging them to come and meet the Master, the One who could make all things new.

Not everyone has a personal story like my evangelist friend, of setting off for a distant country to squander his or her life, but we thrill to hear exciting testimonies that play for us again the story of the prodigal. There's nothing we love more than to hear of a dilapidated life given a fresh chance. It's the expression of an eternal hope within us; that God is so loving toward us He will enable us to open just one eye, even halfway, to see where we are and where we need to be and then give us the strength to make the walk to His mercy.

Because of this, we often make celebrities out of folks who have a captivating testimony. When I was a new believer in the 1970s, it seemed that church services and Christian radio and television programs were filled with dramatic accounts of tormented lives turned around by Jesus Christ. Those who had been raised in stable, God-fearing families and had invited Jesus into their hearts at a young age often felt that, in comparison, they had nothing to share. Their histories weren't as impressive as "I Was a Mafia Hit Man" or "How I Experienced Complete Ruin Before I Found the Lord."

It took some of us a while to realize that brief, simple testimonies of childhood conversions are as powerful and as impressive as accounts of a life wasted. When God prevents a journey of emptiness and pain, He tells a parable of promise. We've come to realize, too, that we are all prodigals, regardless of our stories. We must all come to our senses wherever we are and walk toward that cross on the hill.

There are two brothers in the parable of the prodigal son, and we usually focus our attention on the younger one. Now there's a testimony! Demanding his share of the family wealth, he ran off to another country, spent it on wild living and prostitutes, and ended up so broke he fed pigs just to get by. As all parents of prodigals pray their children will do, he came to a stinging realization of how good it had been at home—that even the men his father hired to do menial work had far more than he did. “No one gave him anything,” the story tells us, and in such a pitiful state he longed to be treated as simply and as generously as a field worker on his father's land. The younger brother was broken by the consequences of his decisions and saw this clearly enough to head for home.

The older brother, though, who stayed home and never demanded anything of his family, holds little interest for us other than to invite our scorn: Why isn't he happy that his brother came home? Why can't he rejoice with the father? Time and time again when the story is read, the older brother's reaction is used to illustrate pride, haughty superiority, ungratefulness, and much more.

A friend wrote me after I gave her my thoughts about this parable. She said, “I think the brother who stayed at home should

have been slapped. He had an attitude that was less honorable than his brother who thoroughly repented, had a submitting experience, and came with honor and respect for his father. The prodigal son may have been arrogant, cavalier, lazy . . . but he knew how to repent and then submit. I am sure he became the model of what we are supposed to be after we turn from our sinful lives.”

I don't disagree with my friend's visceral reaction to the response of the son who stayed, the one I call the “prodigal brother” because like the prodigal son, he, too, had a journey to make. He is there as a shadow in the bright light of the ultimate point of the story. His pained behavior provides a contrast to the deep compassion the father has for the son who has returned home.

But parables can have many dimensions of meaning. We can view them from the front and see what appears to be all there is, but walking around the story and standing at the side or in the back we see details that were not visible to us at first. There was an immediate context to the relationships Jesus was describing in the parable of the lost son. No one who heard Jesus tell the parable missed that God was calling to the sons who had left the family, and that He was shedding light on the conceited attitude of the Pharisees. They were the “older brothers” who had stayed within the fold and who claimed the inheritance of Abraham and Moses, but their hearts were blind to God's desires and intentions. Jesus described their vanity in the parable of the Pharisee who stood apart from the tax collector in the temple and proclaimed in prayer, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men . . . even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11). Their pride is evidenced in the older brother's refusal to enter the house where

the younger brother was being celebrated. The Pharisees saw themselves as truly *better* than everyone because they adhered to all the rules of a rule-making tradition. They could barely bring themselves to associate with the unclean, uninitiated masses and would avoid them or, when this was not possible, openly express disapproval of their condition.

I have no problem seeing the “frontal view” of this parable. It is clear to me that Jesus wanted to show His listeners that the Father desired His lost sons to return because He loved them. He also wanted the “older brothers” to understand the spirit of the Law and the Prophets and rejoice with the Father when wayward children come home. But I understand the older brother. I relate to him more than to anyone else in the story. Like many who share a similar tale, I had a sibling who, at an early age, gave his life over to drugs and alcohol. His impairments, his inability to thrive rightly, affected my family in the most profound ways. He was the prodigal and I was the dutiful older child who stayed at home.

My brother’s story is woven into my own. I can trace deep roots of unforgiveness in my life to my attitudes regarding my family. I am aware of my natural tendency to compartmentalize my feelings and can easily track this to the need I had as a child to protect my heart from the troubles at home.

Most dismaying, I also recognize the weight of sin in my life, particularly where it springs from the well of my family’s dysfunctions. My need to prove that I am worthy of recognition, that I won’t degenerate into helplessness—these sins of arrogance, pride, and contempt I feel most heavily when I remember my family life.

I'm not proud of these attitudes. They are the fallout of destructive experiences, and I hate how they linger. I wish I were a far more compassionate, forgiving human being with an empathetic understanding of how difficult parenting can be. I do not have children, but I know that no matter how great parents might be, children can decide to be foolish and hateful. In spite of all the good a mom and dad can provide, some kids have to learn the hard way.

We who embraced the good parenting and tools and made good decisions may not realize that our stories, though vastly different from that of the prodigal child, have the same ultimate result. We need forgiveness too! But more than the younger brother, we older brothers need help to see all that's happened and recognize our need for forgiveness. The younger son had to come to his senses; so must the older son. I tend to think our job is a bit harder. The younger brother didn't have to look very hard to see the wretchedness of his condition and throw himself at his father's mercy. We big brothers and sisters have a less obvious predicament. Though our misery is not barefoot and hungry, it is nevertheless a product of a particular kind of starvation.

Lots of challenges in a family can create a prodigal: substance abuse, mental illness, physical sickness, learning disorders, or any other problem that forces parents to focus on one child more than another. It could be the unfortunate weakness of parents who are simply incapable of making the painful decisions necessary for the family's well-being. Sometimes parents just don't know what to do, even though we think they should. We cling to an illusion that our parents ought to have been prepared for what assailed them; thus our childhood judgments can smolder cruelly

in the ashes of their failures. If I have any insight, if I have any light to shed upon the deeper issues of growing up among the agonizing problems of a family affected by a child who is an alcoholic or drug addict, I share them out of the knowledge that I am not alone. We need help to find our way to the Father's door. I can tell you of my own travel home, and maybe it will help you.

To be sure, Jesus' story of these two brothers and their father does not mirror my family circumstances point by point, for my brother never came home with repentance and humility. In this particular tale, I see myself in the older brother, a Pharisee, an embittered child, even if all of the other parts of the story don't quite fit. I can hear the words of the Master to *me* in a powerful way through this parable.

Let's look at the two brothers. We know about the journey of the lost son, who came to his senses and made the decision to return to his father and plead for nothing more than a place among the family servants. His journey home began the moment he realized he had wasted everything he'd been given and wished he could put his hand in the pigs' food and fill his stomach. He packed whatever little he had left and set out to return to his father's house. Remember, he was in a "distant country." He had to find his way home, a journey that would take many days—perhaps weeks or months. As he sought a ride with a caravan or walked alone through the famine-ravaged land, he must have had a lot of time to think about what he had done, what it said about his character, what reception he might face. I can imagine that with each day he traveled, he became more and more aware of how foolish he had been and maybe a little frightened that he would experience the rejection his culture demanded.

The older brother also had a journey to make, possibly a journey of the heart, where he saw the relationship with his father that he longed for but had become too hardened to have. The older son stayed physically close by while he moved further and further away from intimate connection with his father, and he allowed angry judgment to overtake him. Jesus does not tell us anything about the family or how personalities played out. Because we usually see only the direct view of the parable, we don't naturally assume that the father, representing God the Father, had anything to do with the older son's refusal to join the celebration of his brother's return. But if we read it as the story of a family, if we read it while standing in the field with the older brother, we can identify our reasons for the frustration shown at the father's jubilation. We who are prodigal brothers—the good kids who stayed behind—can explain without hesitation why we prefer to be out in the field rather than inside the house, where there seems to be nothing but constant mourning over the younger brother's absence and, as is often the case, little to no acknowledgment that our presence is valued for its own sake.

For many reasons, we prodigal brothers could not rejoice with our parents when the younger son returned because we knew what would happen. Our joy was tapped out after years of watching our brother or sister come home with a sob story designed to elicit relief. We watched with dismay as our parents, filled with a desperate love we could not understand, gave their all, believing it would make a difference. Today we see that our conclusions about them gave us nothing but fuel to keep the fires of resentment burning.

What is our payoff, prodigal brothers, for fanning our flames

of hurt and bitterness? We, too, have to set down the pail in our hands and come to our senses. We can never go back and change the past. What we can do is change the direction in which we are heading. We can stop just long enough to see we're stuck in the middle of a field we created with our pain. We can decide to enter our Father's house.

"Home," wrote Henri Nouwen, "is the center of my being where I can hear the voice that says, 'You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests'—the same voice that gave life to the first Adam and spoke to Jesus, the second Adam; the same voice that speaks to all the children of God and sets them free to live in the midst of a dark world while remaining in the light."¹

Whether a person squanders a life in wild living or in smoldering resentment, he or she is far from home. Failure to let go of past hurts can exhaust us in ways we do not recognize. The Father has come to plead with us to lay down our heartache and resentment. He calls us to release the bitterness and judgment we've carried for so long and join in the festivities that belong to us, too. The house is so close we can hear the party from where we stand, toiling away, hoping to be noticed. Let's walk toward the door where the Father will meet us with open arms.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 37.

Chapter 2

1. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, p. 82.
2. Jane Ryan, *Broken Spirits Lost Souls: Loving Children with Attachment and Bonding Difficulties* (Lincoln, Neb.: iUniverse, Inc., 2002), p. 33.
3. Ibid., p. 109.
4. Ibid., p. 4.
5. Web site: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychology, www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/conduct.htm
6. Ibid.
7. Jane Ryan, *Broken Spirits Lost Souls*, pp. 116, 206.
8. Ibid., p. 206.

Chapter 3

1. Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), p. 98.

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