

Loving a Prodigal... and Still Surviving

At the age of twelve, your daughter, with tears in her eyes asked Jesus into her life. Throughout the following school years, she achieved excellent grades. As she grew she stayed faithful and sought to obey God. During a summer camp, she committed to a future of full time Christian service. Perfect? Parenting complete and wrapped with a pretty ribbon? Not necessarily. Life is a continuous journey. Along the way there will still be many obstacles, temptations, discouragements, and points of decision. A child must decide, day in and day out, which road they will take. Frequently this is a road away from the straight and narrow. A parent does all they can to encourage the right road, but often their heart gets broken.

It just doesn't seem to make sense. You shower them with kisses, pick them up when they fall, read them nighttime stories, attend their sporting events, take them to church, help them with their homework, care for them when sick, buy them clothes and gifts and good things to eat. You gave them everything you could materially, emotionally, spiritually. But they waste it. That's what prodigals do, they waste. Prodigals waste potential, waste abilities, waste health, waste future, and sometimes waste their lives. After all you gave, it just doesn't seem fair.

And then you start to wonder. Don't the books say if you do the right things you get the right results in parenting? Don't the experts tell us that if we do this or that we can expect a reward in the end? Doesn't Scripture say if you; "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."(Proverbs 22:6)? Not exactly, it's not that easy, you don't have control. But what about Proverbs 22? This is one verse that requires careful exegesis. The verse appears to promise that if we raise our child right, they will turn out right? Right? Wrong. Let's back up. Proverbs is in the category of Wisdom Literature. Wisdom Literature is not hard and fast, it describes "tendencies"—what usually happens—but can be thwarted. Proverbs are not promises! If we treat Proverbs 22:6 like a promise, it will be in conflict with the rest of the Bible! This kind of poor exegesis is sadly quite common, and only multiplies feelings of guilt for a parent.

There simply are no guarantees. No matter how perfect a parent you are, no matter how wonderful an environment you create, your child may revolt. Think of Eden. God was the perfect father, He did everything right, and His kids were in a literal paradise! Yet those very children damned the earth and all mankind. You may be an A-plus parent, you may have created a wonderful home, but your

children might choose to damage their future as well. Still yet, many parents are under a strange illusion that they do control the outcome. Here we must ask ourselves, can we do a better job than God? If God's children rebelled, what's to make us think ours won't? And it wasn't just in Eden His children defied Him. Scripture is chock full of God lamenting the waywardness of His children, Israel. Remember Egypt? As soon as He finished the powerful lesson titled; "Who is God", and illustrated it with mighty plagues, parting of an ocean, and destruction of the greatest army on the planet, His children burned their notes and built a golden calf! It didn't stop. Generation after generation His people wandered away from Him ad nauseam. ("When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. Hosea 11:1-2)

The rebellion against the perfect Father continued through the prophets and the judges and the entire Old Testament, and then into the New Testament as well. Jesus could be viewed as a pretty good teacher and quite a good discipler as well. Actually He was the best ever, perfect. Yet Jesus had a disciple named Judas Iscariot, the very one who betrayed and sold Him. As can be seen, having a wayward child is quite a common situation for God. Therefore, if our children are wayward, it is reasonable to conclude, it has nothing to do with us being good parents. If we have a prodigal, the only thing it means is that we have the very same experience of God Himself.

But that being said, it is still anything but easy. Having a prodigal is agony beyond description. It means lying awake at night. It means moving about daytime in a deadened daze. Even if we don't feel the guilt, we feel pain on two more critical levels. First, we feel blamed. Society can be harsh, but then church folk can be judgmental as well. Some may remind you of Proverbs 22:6. They may casually infer that if you had really loved your child, if you had really followed God, if you really had wisdom, things would have turned out quite differently. They are completely oblivious to the fact that any success in parenting goes back to a simple issue— grace. Amazingly, some of the judgmental types may never even have had children of their own! So although you have managed to get out from under the guilt, you may not be able to get out from under the blame. This can be very discouraging, especially since you have one other pain always at your doorstep; grief.

When it comes to prodigals, grief has the capacity to skin, filet, and eat a parent alive. Grief can consume everything. To lose a child is to literally lose a part of

yourself, a very precious part. The grief seems to lurk deep in one's bones. Many parents never recover from this, but grief is a journey with an intended destination. Certainly there is shock, denial, anger, a dead feeling, but then we must arrive at meeting God on a deeper level and in a more profound way. Certainly good children bring glory to God, but a parent with a prodigal, who is faithful, reflects God's glory on a totally different plane. The positive end of the parent of a prodigal is that they are humbler, more merciful and gracious, more aware of their need for God, and for that matter, more real—priceless qualities indeed.

So how can the parent of a prodigal get there? Though I am still on the road myself, there are three things I can share. First, we must let go. We must grieve and move on. When a child is running from God we tend to torture ourselves with trying to figure what we could have done differently, or what we can do now. In most cases what we need to do is admit we really have no control. Free will is free will, it is up to them and them alone. If we can't let go we will find no peace—there is a mysterious release when we leave a situation in the Hands of God. Our child should know where we stand, and that the door is always open to the repentant hearted, but we will not be entangled with them any longer. This is Scriptural, when we sin, our Heavenly Father allows the rift. He refuses to be a door mat, or an item at our disposal.

Second, Pray. Yes, I am sure you have already. But don't give up, though you surely will be tempted to over and over. Prayer often seems meaningless, but it is precisely in those times that our prayers of faith are most potent. In prayer, things are being moved, whether we see it or not, that is a definite promise of Scripture. At very least, our prayers are changing us.

Prayer takes many forms. You may be the type that fasts and dedicates to intensive intercession. Or you may be the type who cannot do that, the emotional drain would be too great, and you are already in emotional jeopardy. It may be all you can do to simply raise your empty hands to God as a gesture to say; They are yours, O Lord, Thy will be done. Prayer doesn't necessarily need lots of words to be heard. I believe either prayer is equally received—keep at it.

Finally, find joy. As mentioned, you have traveled a hard road; guilt, blame, and grief have taken their toll. Your joy-quotient is likely at the bottom of the scale. Too many people stay down there too long, and then find they can't get out. Find ways to enjoy life and celebrate what God has given to you. Go places, do things, think things, say things that will lead to joy. Eventually you will have a little joy to

share, find safe people who appreciate it to share with. And always hold on to the idea that the game is not over yet. My brother was a prodigal like few I've known. Though raised in a wonderful Christian home he chose the way of rebellion, drugs, alcoholism, even prison. My parents agonized and prayed. Both of my parents are gone, but both kept praying for him, all the way to their graves. A few years back my brother had a stroke. One eye was blinded and after time was thoroughly useless. The doctor talked of removing it. My brother attended a healing service. His eye burned, then watered. Then a miracle—he could see! There was also a side perk. God healed his rampant alcoholism that same moment. For the last few years of my brother's life he spoke about Jesus and praised God all the time. My parents never saw it this side of things...BUT...

God gives us all a Call. We all have a choice. No one can make the choice for anyone else. Your family may have heeded the Call and obediently headed for Ninevah. But one of your own may have chosen to sail, as God's prodigal Jonah, in the opposite direction, to Tarshish. Supposedly they sail away from the presence of the Lord, but actually toward a storm. They may be in the boat of rebellion, they may have already been tossed out, or they may be in the muck and slime of the fish's belly. It's between them and God now. Will they acknowledge God as God? You can't say. Who are you to say? The task for you is plain and simple—to follow the Call—to joyfully serve Him in Ninevah.

I close with the prayer/poem from Ruth Graham, late wife of Billy Graham and mother of a prodigal as well.

“...let them be cold, ill;
let them know terror;
feed them with thistle, weed, and thorn;
who chose the company of wolves,
let them taste the companionship wolves give to helpless strays;
but oh! Let them live--wiser though torn!
And wherever, however far away they roam,
follow and watch and keep
your stupid, wayward, stubborn sheep,
and someday bring them home!"

(Amen and amen.)