

POWER

"... the gospel ... is the power of God unto salvation ..." (Romans 1:16)

THE PRODIGAL SON: A YOUNG MAN WHO CAME TO HIMSELF & CAME HOME TO HIS FATHER (PART 1)

by Wade L. Webster

At twenty-two verses, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the longest parable that Jesus ever told. It may also be the most loved. It certainly attains to the first three. Robert Smith, in **Handfuls on Purpose**, called it "the prince of parables," Trench called it "the pearl and the crown of all the parables," and Charles Dickens praised it as "the finest short story ever written" (Butler 508). I am convinced that you will come to agree with their assessments the more that you study this parable.

The Rebellion of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-16)

The parables of Jesus were always based on things that *could* happen and often were based on things that *had* happened. It is interesting that the Parable of the Prodigal Son begins with "a certain man" (King James Version, Luke 15:11). The word *certain* adds an interesting element to the parable. Jesus did not merely say that "a man had two sons." He said that a "certain" man had two sons. Was this parable based on an actual event? We do not know. But, it is certainly a possibility. At least, we know that it has happened thousands of times since. Some even suggest that the parable was based on a well-known story that was told among the rabbis. However, if it was, Jesus gave a very different ending to it. The prodigal son did not come home to condemnation. He came home to compassion. Furthermore, at the end of the story, it is the elder brother who represents the Pharisees, and not the younger brother who represents the publicans and sinners, who is standing on the outside. I am pretty sure the Jewish rabbis would not have ended the story that way.

Someone observed that there are actually three sons in the parable: the prodigal son, the proud son, and the perfect son. Of course, the third son is the Son of God who is telling the story (McGee 186). Let us listen to Him as he tells this story.

The Prodigal's Demand

And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods

that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. (Luke 15:12)

Please note that it was the son that approached the father about dividing the inheritance, rather than the father that approached the son. Had the father approached the son, it would have been a very different matter. There would have been no shame in that. Although the goods were generally divided when the father died, or at least thought to be approaching death, it was the father's prerogative to divide his goods at any time that he wanted to do so.

The request of the younger son for the inheritance to be divided before the death of the father was far from respectful. In fact, it could not have been more disrespectful (Butler 511). It was as if the prodigal son was telling his father that he was tired of waiting on him to die (512). By his actions, the younger son brought shame upon the whole family and especially upon his father (MacArthur 47). The father would have especially borne scorn for having reared such an ingrate.

Please note that Luke records that the father "divided unto them his living" (Luke 15:12). The word translated as living "is a translation of bios, the Greek word for life" (MacArthur 52). The father divided his life to his sons. He gave them everything. It seems likely that the inheritance which both boys received was substantial. After all, clues within the parable suggest that their father was very wealthy. For example, we read of hired servants, fancy clothes, jewelry, and a calf fattened for special occasions. MacArthur especially noted that a fattened calf, available for use at any time, was the "kind of luxury only a very wealthy family could afford" (48-49).

According to Jewish law, in the case of two sons, the elder son received two parts of the inheritance and the younger son received one part (Deu. 21:17). Thus, the older son received two-thirds of the father's inheritance and the younger son received one-third. Likely, the younger son liquidated his inheritance for the equivalent of pennies on

the dollar (MacArthur 57). Dunam notes that "gathered all together" (Luke 15:13) had the meaning of "having sold everything off" (135). The prodigal son cared nothing about the sacrifices that his father and forefathers had made in order to obtain the holdings. He cared nothing about keeping the property in the family. He simply wanted cash to fund his journey to the far country. The prodigal son's actions could not have been more calloused.

The Prodigal's Departure

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey.... (Luke 15:13)

It seems clear that the younger son already had his travel plans at the time that he demanded his inheritance. What little delay there was between getting the goods and going to the far country was likely due to the need to liquidate his inheritance. Once he had the cash, the prodigal son hit the road. One can only imagine the father's heartbreak as he watched his son walk away. No doubt, the father knew that the son had a hard road ahead. He gave him his request, but he knew that leanness would likely follow (Psa. 106:14-15).

No doubt, the father hoped against hope that when his son lost everything, he would wake up. He prayed that his son would live long enough to come to his senses and to come home. Thankfully, this father's prayer would be answered.

The Prodigal's Destination

...into a far country.... (Luke 15:13)

Like Jonah of old, the prodigal son determined to flee as far from his father as he could (Jon. 1:3). Jonah's destination had a name Tarshish; the prodigal son's did not. It seems clear that the prodigal son wanted more than to be out of his father's house. He wanted to be out of his father's sight.

The Jews listening to this parable would have readily understood the far country to have been Gentile country (MacArthur 57). They would have understood it to be a place where God and His will were not sought (Psa. 10:4), a place where pagan passions

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prevailed (Eph. 2:3; Rom. 1:18-32). Evidently, this is what the prodigal son wanted. After all, when he got there, that is what he did. He wasted his substance in riotous living (Luke 15:13).

The Prodigal's Dereliction

...and there wasted his substance.... (Luke 15:13)

The prodigal son showed extremely poor stewardship of what he had been given (cf. Luke 16:1-4). What it had taken his father and forefathers years to accumulate, he went through in a moment. The Greek word translated as *wasted* means to scatter abroad. Winnowing wheat is sometimes used to picture the term. When wheat is winnowed, the wheat and the chaff are thrown up into the air to separate the two. The heavier wheat falls to the ground and the lighter chaff is blown away. In much the same way, the prodigal son threw his money around. In a short time, like the chaff, it was gone. Gary Inrig said that the prodigal "scattered his money like a sower scatters seed" (17). What was the prodigal son sowing? Wild oats, of course (Gal. 6:7-8).

In the long ago, Solomon, one of the richest men to ever live, declared, "Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven" (Pro. 23:5). Like the chaff in the wind or an eagle to the sky, the prodigal son's substance flew away.

When the prodigal's goods increased, there increased also those to eat them. Again, Solomon declared, "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?" (Ecc. 5:10-11). As long as the money lasted, the prodigal son was surrounded by people. However, when the money was gone, there was no man to help him (Luke 15:16).

The Prodigal's Debauchery

...with riotous living. (Luke 15:13)

Riotous living is living without restraint. Peter wrote, "For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you" (1 Pet. 4:3-4; cf. Eph.

5:18). Please note the expression *excess of riot*. This is riotous living. It is that which is characterized by the things listed—lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries. In today's vernacular, it would include social drinking, modern dancing, and fornication. Please note the reference within the passage to the *excess of wine*. This does not mean that a little wine is acceptable. It rather refers to the fact that excess is naturally connected with wine. By nature, wine lessens inhibitions and leads to excess. It does not have to be connected with riotous living, but it usually is.

It is interesting to note that the elder brother charged his younger brother with wasting his living with harlots (Luke 15:30). Although we do not know how he obtained this information, or even if it was true, it certainly falls under the description of riotous living. It is worthy of note that the father does not correct the elder brother on this point. MacArthur suggests that if the charge had been false, Jesus would have pointed it out. After all, it would have further shown the hard heart of the elder brother, who represented the Pharisees in the parable (61).

The Prodigal's Destitution

And when he had spent all.... (Luke 15:14)

No doubt, the prodigal left home with his pockets full of cash. Likely, he believed that he could eat, drink, and be merry for many years, if not forever (Luke 12:13-21). However, the money did not last as long as he thought. As already noted, he was winnowing it like wheat.

It should be noted that riotous living is expensive living. Concerning wine, which is a key ingredient in riotous living, Solomon wrote, "He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich" (Pro. 21:17). Two chapters later, he wrote, "Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh: For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags" (Pro. 23:20-21). In addition to the physical costs of riotous living, there are societal, emotional, and spiritual costs.

The Prodigal's Danger

...there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. (Luke 15:14)

When the prodigal son took his journey to the far country, he probably did not plan on a famine. If he did envision a famine, which I doubt, he did not envision a long or "mighty" one. Like many people today, he had not

prepared for a rainy day or, as was likely the case here, a rainless day. Not only was he personally facing hard times, but so was the country that he had made his home. He thought that the grass was greener in the far country; but now, it was much browner (McGee 179).

Likely, things were much harder for the prodigal son in the far country than they would have been for him in his own country under the same circumstances. As you know, provisions were made for strangers and for the poor in the land of Israel (Ruth 2). However, no such provisions would have been made in the far country. In the far country, it was every man for himself. The mighty famine in the land posed a very real danger for the prodigal son. As the text makes clear, it was difficult for him even to find work.

The Prodigal's Desperation

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. (Luke 15:15-16)

With his money gone, and a mighty famine in the land, the prodigal son was forced to find a job. Evidently, it was with some difficulty that he did so. Likely, the famine had dried up the jobs along with the earth. The term *joined* carries with it the idea of glue (cf. Mat. 19:5-6). It seems that the prodigal found a wealthy landowner and stuck to him like glue until he gave him a job (MacArthur 72). MacArthur noted that the term *citizen* likely spoke of Roman citizenship. It referred to a "privileged person" or a "wealthy foreigner" (71).

Not only did the prodigal have to take a job, he had to take the only job available. After all, beggars cannot be choosers. He had to take a job slopping hogs. Pig-slopping was not a desirable job for anyone. MacArthur noted that it "required no skill whatsoever." It was a job that was generally given to the mentally and socially deficient (73). This young man who had all the promise in the world and who had been the life of the party was now in a job reserved for those who were mentally and socially deficient. Furthermore, there could not have been a job more detestable for a Jewish boy than this job. The prodigal's taking this job shows just how desperate he was.

I think that it is interesting that this boy

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who had been wallowing for months in the mire of sin was now forced to slop hogs. Daily, he was forced to smell their stench and to watch their wallowing in the mire. No doubt, as he stomped through the mud and the muck slopping the hogs, the mire splashed into his eyes and into his mouth. It was on his hands and in his hair. It was caked on his clothes and underneath his fingernails. He was forced to face firsthand the prodigal or pig-like lifestyle that he had been living since he left his father's house. It is interesting that Peter would later describe other prodigals in this same way (2 Pet. 2:22). Amazingly, over time, the prodigal came to see the position of the pigs as superior to his own. They had food, albeit husks, and he did not (Luke 15:16).

The Pharisees would have been glad for the story to end here, with the prodigal son in the pigpen. After all, that is where he deserved to be, as far as they were concerned. Of course, the Lord was not satisfied to leave him there. The Lord wanted to get the prodigal son back to the father's house (Inrig 17-18).

The Repentance of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:17-19)

Probably, the only regret that the prodigal son had when he left home was that he had not left sooner. He was fully confident that he would be happy in the far country; and, perhaps, for a short time, in a worldly sense, he was. After all, there is pleasure in sin. However, the pleasures of sin are seasonal (Heb. 11:25), and the season is very short.

One day, as he slopped the hogs, the prodigal found himself hungering for the husks he was feeding them. His belly was empty, but his heart was full, full of regret, that is. That day, his eyes turned toward home. Like Jonah, in the belly of the fish, he looked back in the direction from which he had come and from which he might reasonably expect help (Jon. 2:1-7).

His Reason

And when he came to himself... (Luke 15:17)

There is a certain madness and blindness connected with sin (Ecc. 9:3; 2 Cor. 4:4; 2 Tim. 2:26). For a time, the prodigal son was taken in by the devil's travel brochure (Heb. 3:13). He was blinded by the bright lights of the far country. However, he eventually came to see the far country for what it was a pigpen instead of a playpen.

Once the prodigal son came to himself and started thinking soberly, coming home to his father was not far behind. The far country no longer held the appeal that it once did. He

now longed for home.

His Remembrance

...he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! (Luke 15:17)

Although the prodigal son found a job in the far country, it was not a very good one. It evidently did not pay very much. After all, as he fed the hogs, the prodigal son found himself wanting to fill his belly with the husks that the swine were eating (Luke 15:16). He was hungry, really hungry. Suddenly, the prodigal son remembered the hired servants of his father. He remembered how well his father's servants were paid and how much bread they had. He recalled that they had bread and to spare. Soon, the thought would enter his mind to go back and work for his father. His father had "many" hired servants. He hoped that his father would take on one more - him.

Amazingly, it was the memory of his father and how well his father provided for his hired servants that motivated the prodigal son to begin the process of going home. It was the remembrance of his father's goodness that brought him home (Rom. 2:4). How much difference a little time makes. The prodigal son likely left home resenting his father's commands, but now his heart remembers his father's care.

In the sixteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus told about a rich man who lifted up his eyes in torment and called out to his father Abraham. Abraham called upon him to remember how good his life had been. He said, "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things" (Luke 16:25). I can almost hear Abraham doing that with the prodigal son in the pigpen. For the rich man, it was too late. However, for this young man, it was not. He had not yet died although he was nearing it. The gulf had not yet been fixed for him (Luke 16:26). There was a great distance between him and his father, but the gap could be closed. The prodigal son still had time to go to his "father's house" (Luke 16:27).

Memory is a very powerful motivator. It can instantly take us back to a better time and place. Although the prodigal son was not physically home yet, in his mind he was already there. He was lost in thought. He was remembering the comforts of home. Mentally, the prodigal son may have been remembering the smell of fresh baked bread. Maybe he was recalling how soft or how big the rolls were. He could see the butter glistening on top. Perhaps he could almost

taste them. For a moment, he forgot that he was standing in a pigpen slopping hogs. How differently he now saw his father's house. It was not the restrictive and suffocating place that he thought it was the day that he struck out for the far country.

His Resolution

I will arise and go to my father... (Luke 15:18)

The prodigal, now in his right mind, knew what needed to be done. He knew that he had already spent too much time in the far country. He knew that he needed to get up and get going. He knew that he needed to leave the far country for the father's house. He was resolved no longer to linger, charmed by the world's delights. Things that were higher, things that were nobler, these things had allured his sight.

Like the church at Ephesus, the prodigal son needed to remember from whence he had fallen, repent, and do again the first works (Rev. 2:5). How humbling it must have been for the prodigal son to return to his father. He had left home so proudly; now, he was returning so humbly.

His Responsibility

...and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee (Luke 15:18).

The prodigal son took responsibility for his own actions. He did not accuse his father of being a "hard man" (Mat. 25:24) or of driving him to the far country. Furthermore, he did not accuse his father of favoritism or unfairness. As you know, his elder brother would later do so (Luke 15:28-30).

The prodigal did not plan on going home and telling his father, "You have sinned." In like manner, he did not plan on going home and saying, "We have both done wrong. Let's clear the air." He planned on going home and saying simply, "I have sinned" (cf. Exo. 10:16; Num. 22:34; Jos. 7:20; 1 Sam. 15:24; 1 Sam. 15:30; 1 Sam. 26:21; 2 Sam. 12:13; 2 Sam. 19:20; 2 Sam. 24:10; 2 Sam. 24:17; 1 Chr. 21:8; 1 Chr. 21:17). He was going to take full responsibility for his actions.

It should be noted further that the younger son did not blame his older brother for his actions. He did not say, "My brother is a hypocrite," or "My brother is arrogant." Obviously, both of these things were true. However, they would not have taken the responsibility off the shoulders of the prodigal son. After all, every man must answer for himself (2 Cor. 5:10).

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Deuteronomy 5:32

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Please notice also that the prodigal did not plan on adding the conditional word *if* to his confession. He did not plan on saying, "If I have sinned" or "If I have said or done anything that has offended anyone." He knew that he had sinned. He knew that he had said and done things that were wrong. He was not hedging on his confession. It seems to me that many people today could learn a thing or two from him in this department. It is interesting to note that under the Mosaic law, if a man did that which was forbidden by God, even if he did it in ignorance, he was held accountable. The law declared that he had "certainly" trespassed against the Lord (Lev. 5:17-19). There was no doubt about it.

Finally, it is worthy of note that the prodigal son had sinned both against heaven and his father. They were naturally linked together. After all, it was God that commanded children to honor their parents (Exo. 20:12; Deu. 5:16; Eph. 6:2). It is interesting that heaven is listed first. First and foremost, the prodigal's sin was against his heavenly Father. I am reminded of David's statement in the fifty-first psalm. We read, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest" (Psa. 51:4; cf. 2 Sam. 12:13). Had David not sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, his wife, the nation, and a host of others? Obviously, he had. However, first and foremost, his sin was against God (cf. Gen. 39:9). The same holds true regarding the prodigal son.

His Remorse

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thine hired servants (Luke 15:19). The prodigal son no longer felt entitled. He no longer felt as if the father owed him something. He no longer was making demands of his father or speaking of what was rightfully his (Luke 15:12). Please note that the "give me" before he left home (Luke 15:12) became "make me" when he returned home (Luke 15:19). The prodigal son humbly confessed that he was not worthy to wear his father's name. No doubt, the Bible student is reminded of Jacob's prayer to God as he prepared to meet his brother Esau. We read, "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands" (Gen. 32:10; cf. Luke 7:6-7). In like manner, the prodigal did not feel worthy of the least of his father's mercies.

The prodigal son did not come home requesting to be a son again although that is how he would be received. For that matter, he did not even come home requesting to be a slave. Although few, slaves had some rights and privileges. At least, they had some security. Hired servants had no privileges or security. They were hired from day to day. The prodigal son was simply asking to work for his father. At least in his father's house, he would not have to slop hogs.

His Return

And he arose, and came to his father... (Luke 15:20). The prodigal son did not merely resolve to get up and go home, he actually did so. He followed through with his resolution. Sadly, many do not. How often have we visited an erring member and heard them say, "I'll be there Sunday." However, when we looked for them, we could not find them. They did not follow through with their resolution. Someone has noted that the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. To his credit, the prodigal took the first step.

Inrig noted that "there is no harder place to go" than back to "where you have failed" (19). I believe that there is great truth in this statement. The prodigal went back to where he had failed and faced his failures head on. How hard it must have been to come home smelling like a pig and wearing the rags of failure (19). Yet, he did.