

"The Prodigal Son Speaks!"

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Father's Day

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Luke 15:11-32

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."'"

"So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-the best one-and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so

that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Hi, my name is Joseph. You know me as the "Prodigal Son." Some say my story is one of the most famous and most beautiful short stories in all the world. Of course, it wasn't a story to me. It was my life. And what a strange and wonderful life it's been so far. I told my story to a man named Jesus once. He told me something I've never forgotten. He said that the way my Father loved me is identical to the way that God loves me. The way my Father loved me is identical to the way God loves you.

Let me tell you about my Father. He was a good man. Most farmers are, you know. Honest and hardworking, with a humility that comes from working in partnership with the land, as well as, relying on the Creator to produce the right amount of rain for things to grow. My Father was very successful. He had a large farm with lots of servants. His farm fed a lot of people and earned him considerable wealth. I think he liked that fact that he provided for us and the servants so well. Men are like that, you know. And my Father provided for us in abundance.

When I told that to Jesus he said that God's like that, too. God enjoys providing for us in abundance. Jesus said that while God was creating the earth and everything that is, God had the joy of a small child saying, "Look what I made!" God kept saying, "It is good! It is good! It is very good!" God has provided for us in abundance - with the gift of creation itself, the harvest that feeds the world when it's shared. God also gives us the gifts of beauty and creativity, the gifts of human love and friendship. A man named Paul once said that God has blessed us with *"every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."* I'm not sure what all he meant by that but I think it's pretty complete - "every spiritual blessings" is ours. God has blessed us with spiritual peace with God, being united with our Creator. God has blessed us with unconditional love - unconditional! God blesses us also with constant companionship, through the gift of the Holy Spirit - God with us and in us. We're never alone!

God is always with us! God, like my Father has provided for us in abundance.

Well, I didn't really appreciate that. I didn't understand how good I had it down on the farm. So I asked my Father to give me my share of the inheritance. Under Jewish law a man was not free to distribute his money however he desired. In the Torah, in Deuteronomy 21:17 it states that the oldest son must received 2/3's of the inheritance, the younger one must received 1/3. So even though I was the youngest son and would only get 1/3, that was still a lot of money.

I asked my Father for my inheritance early and you know what? He gave it to me. Was that a wise move on his part? Tough to say. He must of known that I was not very likely to spend it wisely. In fact, do you know what the word, "Prodigal" means? I had to look it up. It means "extravagantly wasteful." Not just a little wasteful, but extravagantly wasteful. Thanks a lot! I'm the Extravagantly Wasteful Son! What a title!

Well, I got that title the old fashioned way - I earned it! I took my inheritance and spent it all in dissolute living. "Dissolute" means immoral living. I totally wasted my inheritance. I could have used it to buy my own farm or my own sheepfold. I could have built a nice house and started a family. But I wasted it all. I don't think my Father was terribly surprised. He knew me pretty well. And therefore he knew I'd have to learn this lesson the hard way. It seems that my Father, much like God, gave me the freedom to choose my own path. He gave me the freedom to make mistakes, to fail - in order to help me learn and grow. I suspect that's part of good parenting sometimes - allowing children to discover truths for themselves, even if that means they learn it the hard way.

Illustration. I know a Father who did that yesterday. He has two incredibly wonderful sons, and his sons were arguing over something. They wanted their Father to step in and solve the argument. Their Father didn't, hoping they'd work it out for themselves. But they weren't able to, which resulted in a lose/lose situation for them both. Later they debriefed about it. Their Father gave them a little bit of coaching. And when the exact same situation came up a few hours later, they handled it like skilled mediators and negotiators, resulting in a win/win situation. Their Father was very proud of them and even proud of himself a little

bit.

Illustration. I saw a drawing once that illustrates this point. On a big piece of paper someone wrote, "Learning Experiences." Underneath were two categories of learning experiences - Successes and Failures. Below the words "Successes" and "Failures" there were tally marks, where someone had looked back at the learning experiences of their life and totaled up how many of those learnings came from their success and how many came from their failures. There were about 3 under "Successes." And about 103 under "Failures." We learn a lot more from our mistakes and so sometimes God and parents allow us to make those mistakes so we'll eventually get it right.

Well, I took my inheritance and I went about as far away from home as I could find. I went to a distant country, far, far away. I was far away from my home, far away from who I really was, far away from my true self, far away from God, too

It's was a little like what happened to Adam & Eve after they ate the forbidden fruit. They went and hid from God. Finally God says, "Adam, where are you?" Now, God knew where Adam was! You can't hide from God. God knew where Adam was, but Adam didn't know where Adam was! Adam didn't know how far he had fallen. I finally realized how far I had fallen when I hit "rock bottom." Do you know what rock bottom was for me? It was when the only job I could find was feeding pigs. That's just not kosher for a Jew! I was so hungry that I wished I could eat what I was feeding the pigs. It was then that I knew how far from home I really was and where I needed to be going. I needed to be "going home to the place where I belong." A great spiritual writer (Soren Kierkegaard) once said, *"And now with God's help I will become myself."* That's all I wanted to be now - myself. That's all we ever really need to be - ourselves - who God made us to be.

Well, as I was making my journey home all I could think about was what I would say to my Father. I had squandered 1/3 of all he had ever made in his entire life. It was all gone. It was all my fault. And now I had to face him. I practiced my confession - "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to even be called your son. Just take me back as a hired servant. I just want to be home!" But you'll never guessed what happened. I came up over the hill. My Father's farm

was still a long way off, but I could see it now. It felt so good to see it again. And as I stood there to gaze at it, suddenly I saw someone running, running down the lane in my direction. It wasn't a boy running - too big for that. It wasn't even a young man running, and yet he was pretty fast. And then I saw who it was that running towards me. It was my Father. I ran towards him, too. We met and he gave me the biggest bear hug, the warmest, most wonderful embrace I had ever felt. Can you imagine what that felt like for me? Such a moment of forgiveness! Such an expression of unconditional love! I can see why Jesus said it was God-like, for it truly was a sacred moment, the best moment of my life.

And then to top it off, my Father decides to throw me the biggest party that old farm had ever seen. He put new clothes on me - the finest robe he had, a gold ring and new sandals - an extreme makeover from head to toe. And he had this huge calf he was saving for a special occasion. And this was the special occasion, me! Me! He threw the best party ever for me - because I was now home. He thought I was dead, but now I was more alive than I'd ever been before in my life. I was home and I was loved.

Jesus said, God loves like my Father. When we turn to God in sincere, humble prayer God is so delighted to receive us home that they throw a party in heaven. "The angels rejoice, he said, when we come home to God."

Boy, if God loves like my Father loves me, we're all in great shape. My Brother didn't get it. My Father tried to explain it to him, but he just couldn't understand it. Love doesn't always make logical sense. I hope he understands someday. In fact, my wish for my Brother is the same for all of you. That you would know the embrace of God.

When Jesus told me that God loves like my Father loved me that day, my heart was strangely warmed. As if God was hugging me, just like my Father did. May you know that, too - how truly, how deeply, how completely God loves you. Amen and Amen.