



Parents of Prodigals

By Dan Kohn

PARENTS OF PRODIGALS—THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE VALLEY

Monica was the second of three children in a quiet and loving home. When she turned 16 something else turned too. Once bubbly and fun, Monica had become a distant, angry child.

This wasn't an overnight transition, however. For about two years, Monica's parents, Kevin and Sheila, found themselves out of answers when it came to dealing with their daughter's rebellious attitude and spiteful words. Even the school took note of the unfortunate changes that had evolved during that time.

Monica's involvement in drinking and partying went against well-established family values and rules. As with the family's principals, there was a lack of respect for discipline as well.

Monica's two under-age drinking charges hurt Kevin and Sheila deeply. But greater was their anxiety during those nights when Monica never came home. Her only answer—"I have a right to be with my friends"—only aggravated the situation more.

It was a painful two years. The distance between daughter and parents steadily widened.

Days after her 18th birthday, Monica left home with someone she called her "boyfriend," even though he was an unknown to either Kevin or Sheila, or the other two children.

Now, it has been another painful two years. Monica has not been heard from since the day she slammed the front door and ran to the waiting car in the driveway. She never even turned around to say, "goodbye."

Maybe someday that phone will ring and a connection will be made again. Maybe there is still hope.

THE WALK IN THE VALLEY

Out of broken hearts and fractured homes can be heard a cry—a cry for those now lost or absent who have chosen a distant journey from parental love and broken the relationship. There is grieving over those who have chosen the life of a prodigal (a lost and wandering child who is distant from the hearts and home of a loving parent or parents).

Yes, they have wandered from their parents, from values, and from the respect they once knew at home. They are adrift in a dark world. Often they keep company with strangers or casual friends who are like-minded and who support the prodigal's choice. Yet, these individuals do not know the pain experienced by those who still live in that distant home where the prodigal came from—and who anxiously wait for word of their loved one with longing hearts.

There are a lot of Kevins and Sheilas in today's world.

Perhaps it started as a small, almost inconceivable crack in the love foundation of the parent-child relationship. But over time it split and became a chasm widened by various fault lines whose origin to this day remains unclear.

Sadly, the conversation about the causes for the chasm never took place, nor did the one that was focused on bridging the gap. These remain unknowns to parents who desperately would like to know so their journey of pain could move toward completion.

What was done was done. The fault line was established. Old issues and bitter accusations only drove the wedge deeper between human hearts, minds, and souls. In some distant, unreachable place is the prodigal—unseen and unheard from—yet, still loved.

Yes, the prodigal is still loved! A reservoir of forgiveness is still available to this wandering child. Yes, even in the valley there is still love.

Battle wounds are slow to heal—both for the parent(s) and for the prodigal.

What is missing and what is longed for is something the prodigal alone can address. He/She is one-half of the restoration.

A key question lies before each parent: Am I ready to heal? Yet, there are other questions that echo in the silence and are interwoven with prayer:

- Does the heavenly Father hear me?
- Where was He when past battles were taking place?
- Where is He now?

What echoes in the mind of so many parents of prodigals are the mournful cries of the ancient psalmist:

“Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let Your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy” (Psalm 130:1-2).

Replayed are snapshots from the past where love and laughter filled hearts in a home now filled with emptiness and despair. These memories are not illusions. No, they are real, and they're found in the scrapbook entitled, "shared family time."

But the heart now aches because there are no new, joy-filled memories to add to this scrapbook. Too many empty pages remain after the last memory together. There is the tragic feeling these pages may never be added to again.

But the loving parent never gives up hope! The door to the heart remains open to welcome home the prodigal. This, too, is vital as love remains.

Still, questions linger—normal questions for such a time as this:

- What went wrong?
- Who was *in* the wrong?
- Far more importantly—what can I do now to heal the wrong that's been done?

Where did I go wrong? This is the haunting, oft-spoken monologue of a frustrated and grieving parent. It is a vital question when it comes to the beginning of healing.

In a past that cannot be changed is the agony of the pain *from* that past. But this is not where a parent's life ends—consumed by the pain of the past.

Within the person is the pain recorded on the mental tape, which has been almost worn out by replaying. It's the tape labeled, "personal failure." It's loaded with harsh words, bad timing, and those in-your-face stinging words that just won't erase.

Unanswered questions also remain. The prodigal is the messenger who holds those answers. The prodigal is the one who has chosen space instead of grace. No answers come. The additional wound of silence only grows with each passing day. This is intensified by the unfairness of it all—by what is so out of control it cannot be fixed by the wounded parent.

Each day there remains the hope that today the phone could ring. Better still, the front door might fly open with the cherished words—"I'm home!"—rushing in. What is feared though is another yesterday of empty hope and silence. Time is a very slow healer.

When will the dark days end and the valley level out?

When will the healing start?

These are turning-point questions when the parent is ready to look toward that different journey—the one that God desires to direct.

THE WALK UP THE MOUNTAIN TOP OF LIGHT

Hope does not die—nor does love. And at the very center remains one's hope in God.

There is a New Testament passage that offers comforting hope to the parent who does not even know what to ask of God:

“But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will” (Romans 8:25-27).

The Holy Spirit connects with the Father when a parent does not even know what to pray for. This means God is always aware of a parent's pain and the need within that pain. And the next verse is even more hopeful for the parent who wants assurance of G-O-D as **Good Orderly Direction**:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

The good “purpose” of God extends to both parents and to prodigals. God sees past the current woundedness. He sees a wholeness that can come out of this brokenness for both individuals and relationships. In the middle of God's will, there is both the greatest peace and the greatest power to face each day in His control.

The struggle is not fully over. Yet, there is light shining through those gray clouds on the walk up the mountain out of the dark valley.

Today's gray clouds of silence have replaced the previous stormy turbulence of darker days now growing more distant. There remains a cloud of loneliness. Yet, it has replaced the dark intensity of past anger. Now there is a realization this past anger was founded in an unexpressed fear of rejection or a fear of inadequacy. There is even that deepest fear, which thinks about the loss of this wandering child—perhaps, forever. Such bouts with fears remain, but they are slowly yielding to more consistent days inspired by a renewed faith. And it is a faith in what God is fully capable of achieving—the miracle of reconciliation.

Storm clouds sometimes still move in. Yes, the disrespect, the disappointments, the ungratefulness, the frustration of not finding a fix before that last slam of the door are still recalled. It is true that emotionally heavy memories are stored—often for a lifetime, but now the pain within them is ebbing away. God is also at work here. Angry words are not retrievable. And the shrapnel of explosive encounters can persist for a long time.

With that being said, however, there is now an appreciation of a refreshing reality. *No one is responsible for changing an unchangeable past.* Learning from that past is now a mission—a journey toward a different future.

Yes, the parent's heart still bleeds love!

There is so much to pray for. Consistent prayer is the great gift parents can still give their lost and wandering child. Parents of prodigals can become very creative in their prayers. There is, indeed, so much room for prayer.

Now when that ancient psalm is recalled, a different verse comes to mind:

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I put my hope” (Psalm 130:5).

Often a parent prays for one more chance to replace words spoken in anger with a new language of love. There is still hope of honestly saying, “I’m sorry.” And there is the appreciation that God answers prayers in His time and in His way. A healing parent accepts this truth regarding God and prayer.

Now there is a new focus when it comes to replaying that old tape—the one that previously only retriggered a flood of shame. Now tracking back over those memories is done as part of the practice of a different conversation.

Yes, there is preparation for the prayed-for conversation with the prodigal. Repeated words of grace and love are rehearsed to better position the parent for a real conversation—a conversation only God can bring about. There is much value in such memory work.

There is also a closeness with God that is regained. This, too, is in His plan. I reflect on the reality that God chose me to be the parent of this prodigal child, and God does not make mistakes. Even for such a time as this, I am still this child’s parent. God planned it that way.

This is why self-forgiveness and the experience of God’s forgiveness are so precious. Here is healing thread woven in the fabric of love. There is also the renewed appreciation that each parent is worthy of a second chance in light of such forgiveness.

There is room for forgiveness and to be set free from what cannot be changed. There is the chance to reflect on all Christ has done to grant this forgiveness. There is also the realization we cannot forgive ourselves. Christ has done that work on our behalf. Self-forgiveness is an outcome of Christ’s complete forgiveness.

Understanding Christ forgives all sins prompts the parent to accept forgiveness for their sins and the sins of the prodigal. The parent’s child is also a child of God who is eligible for His amazing grace and the unconditional love made real by Christ’s out-stretched arms on the cross—“This is how much I love you!”

When it comes to healing, it is essential that parents accept they have no direct control over the prodigal. Their focus is on what is happening within them. A sincere effort is being made to relieve their guilt. This inner cleansing is necessary, so they are equipped to fully welcome home the prodigal if and when that prayed-for day arrives. In the meantime, reducing their emotional load is healthy and something God delights in making possible.

Thoughts come alternately in the spirit of speculation and doubt. The parent wonders what the prodigals might be thinking at this moment in time:

- Does the prodigal ever think with longing about what is happening at home?
- Does he or she ever wonder how mom and dad are doing? Are there fleeting thoughts of curiosity, of love, of forgiveness?
- How many times has the prodigal raised that receiver and begun to dial the number home?
- Is there a longing for home?
- Is there a longing like our own for a renewed love and relationship?
- How is God working in this child’s life now?

The frequency of tears is far less. Oh, they still come. And sometimes, at a moment unexpected, a memory that has not totally healed brings a tear. Sometimes, it's a whole shower of tears, but now there is cleansing taking place.

It's normal to still struggle with the pain and the questions, but they do not linger like they use to. This is normal when it comes to God's work in us. There is something else parents can do and that is turn in a new direction when it comes to healing. They can set aside the tough "why" questions and surrender them to God. (Chances are fairly strong they won't be fully answered by the prodigal anyway.) On the healing side of pain is a new door. It leads to a place where the focus is turned over to *Who*.

- Here is now a completely different focal point for life.
- **Who** is the unchanging God in all of His sovereignty and love?
- Who am I in His presence and purpose now?

The answer to these two questions is the same one Job faced when God came to him in his pain and longing (Job 38-41). God reminded Job (as He can the parents of prodigals) that He is still in charge of the universe, and He is still in love with His suffering children. He also reminds us that both parents and prodigals are His children equally. Who we are in God's presence are loved children in the hands of a gracious God. The prodigal is held in those same hands. This can also be added to the list of actions parents can do to prepare their hearts for reconciliation with the prodigal. Reconciliation is within God's plan of goodness.

The free will of the prodigal may defy such a plan, but the Spirit of God does not stop in His effort to stir the prodigal's heart and mind in that Christ-centered direction.

Sometimes, what is most desired is what is outside of one's control—another open conversation starting with "I love you." There have been so many unspoken dialogues with the distant, unseen prodigal. Parents need to be prepared to share words of love if the prodigal called or walked in the front door today.

God keeps the parent focused on the healing work still to be done. This leads to yet another valuable prayer from the heart of the parent: "God, keep me attentive to the work which *I* can do and toward acceptance of what cannot be changed."

The work is ongoing. The Spirit is bringing about new awareness of truth and the freedom found there alone. Lies and illusions have no place in this time of spiritual renewal.

There is indeed serenity in the prayer by that name. "The Serenity Prayer" contains words of special guidance for parents of prodigals:

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

There is also a lesser-known prayer related to "The Serenity Prayer" that holds direction for parents:

"God, grant me the serenity, To accept the people I cannot change. The courage to change the one I can; And the wisdom to know that is *me*."

Within these two prayers is an outline for sorting out what can and cannot be done by parents. The road, though up hill, is easier to climb when the burdens of what cannot be changed are removed.

And, here is another prayer from the heart of a parent of a prodigal:

“Yes, oh God, if there were just space for one more face-to-face conversation a bridge could be rebuilt! Yes, God, I promise to let grace dominate. Just give me the chance to share the words—the ones You have helped me rehearse a hundred times as a part of that hope—the hope of reconciliation through Your intervention.”

Each day there is readiness to change the pattern. There is willingness and preparedness to ask safe questions of the prodigal. In this strategy, ample room is given for a “bridge” to form in the relationship again:

- How can I be most helpful to you now?
- What can I as a parent do differently to make our relationship work?
- What next steps are you willing to work on to increase the chances our relationship can heal and grow stronger?
- How are you and God doing? Are there questions you have about Him I can help answer?
- Do you know we have forgiven you?

What has been set aside is the need to share personal pain. Sharing personal pain and grievances would likely only start putting up walls when it comes to understanding and the hope for reconciliation. Reconciliation is the goal—a God-centered goal.

God will provide ample room for the sharing of a parent’s story later. It, too, is a part of the healing as God directs.

When conversation with the prodigal is ready to take place, room should be given for silent space—a love space where answers not yet ready to come aren’t required. In that space, there is time to just wait, listen, and learn by observing from a place of silence. Here, living out patience is the message of love.

When there is a sincere effort being made to foster reconciliation, time is given for active listening. It’s all about a “listen-listen-listen-understand” game plan:

- **Listen** to the prodigal’s view of what has taken place and what’s now happening
- **Listen** for his/her emotions.
- **Listen** for what need(s) have not been met (central to these are unconditional love, security, and hope).
And then—
- Share a statement and/or question to help you **understand**, such as this: “What I hear you saying _____.
Is that right? Help me **understand** your point of view even more.”

There is longing to hear the hidden story and the unknown or unsuspected issues of the prodigal. It cannot be demanded. It can only be prayed about, and that includes the ability to make that grace space available for its eventual sharing.

In love there is no room for demanding. There is no room for a record of wrongs. Love never fails. What abides is faith, hope, and love, and “*the greatest of these is love*” (1 Corinthians 13:13b).

Often the love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13 is read in an effort to learn about love—God’s true love. It applies when considering the prodigal too, even while he/she is still wandering, and especially when love is expressed face to face again. God’s Word offers direction and reassurance to move from the weight of personal pain and loss to the wait of His promise in what has become a favorite verse of mine:

“But those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

How many times have hope and relief been found through Him in those precious words? And there is another verse from the psalmist where God bids us seek Him in troubled times:

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

And how can one not find comfort in that verse that both refreshes and fosters resiliency at the same time? These are words from the Savior Himself: *“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28).

Deep and continual are the parent’s prayers the prodigal has not given up on God. There is prayer the Holy Spirit is at work in the prodigal’s life—for His divine work to be done in his/her heart, mind, and soul. May the prodigal’s love for God be rekindled and never fail.

God has not forgotten His lost child. He is ready to forgive and welcome this wandering child home! God knows all about love and prodigals. He has watched them run from Him ever since the first prodigals fled the Garden—where perfect love was first broken by rebellious children.

God knows all about prodigals and their need for His presence in their lives. He is ready to offer grace. His outstretched arms on the cross are evidence of that unconditional love. And how far the love of God reaches!

Christ Jesus came for sinners. He came for prodigals whom His Father yearns to bring back to His family. Christ gave up His very life for the sake of forgiveness of sinners and prodigals. Jesus’ love extends to all who wander away from God. Indeed, there is joy in heaven over *“one sinner who repents”*—who comes back home (Luke 15:7a). There is joy in heaven over each parent who returns to a fully dedicated focus on Christ. And there is the same joy over every prodigal who returns as well.

Each of us is, in our own way, a prodigal. We, too, have run from Him, rebelled against Him. In the multitude of our sins, we have rejected and walked away from the One who loves us. And, by God’s good grace, we have known the joy of forgiveness He has graciously shared.

The story, this remarkable parable, comes back now with personal impact. Jesus told a story of a prodigal son, and it holds a timeless message:

“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 famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed 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 back to his father. But while he was 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 us 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” (Luke 15:11-24).

This is a parent’s prayer—that the day will come when the family prodigal comes to his/her senses. This is the hope, the prayer, and the miracle that rests in what can still be accomplished in the prodigal by God, the Holy Spirit.

Just as the heavenly Father has welcomed us back from our wandering and our lostness, so, too, does He show His unending love and willingness to forgive the prodigal.

And therein lies the hope that the prodigal will find his/her way home through the mercy of God. Yes, the heart is now ready to share grace and forgiveness with the prodigal. God has prepared the parent’s heart for this precious giving: for-give—for you I *give* the gift of love again! And, in the meantime, prayer is still offered in the prodigal’s behalf. The parent knows that God is doing for this child what the parent cannot do personally.

The heavenly Father is fully able to accomplish what a parent is unable to do. It is time to let go of what cannot be done through human effort and let God do His miraculous work.

Our prodigal son or daughter is in His hands today! This is the prayer of the hope-filled parent(s) of the prodigal:

“Dear God of love, my prayer is for the one I still call my child. I trust he/she is within Your view and that as Your child You have not given up on him/her in the midst of his/her current circumstances. Each day I pray, please turn his/her heart toward the home of those who love him/her and who want to begin our journey together again anew. Prepare me as well to receive him/her back into my heart and arms. Thank you, gracious Father for Your love. Amen.

P.S. The phone rang today. It was Monica! Her first words were precious—“Can we talk?”

Author Note:

Dan Kohn is a Christian author with 33 years of counseling experience. He currently works in jail ministry in central Wisconsin where he deals with prodigals on a daily basis, many of whom are ready to come home.

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