

Keep the Lights On, The Prodigals are Coming Home!

“For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears”
(Acts 20:29-31).

This lesson focuses on those that have heard the gospel before and have, at one time or another, walked in truth. But, for some reason, have walked or strayed away from it. Some slip, slide, or skid to the fringes of the Apostolic movement and don't even recognize their risky state. They are commonly referred to as 'prodigals' or 'backsliders.' Neither word seems to be explicitly found in the King James Version of the Bible. However, both are unmistakably referenced there.

Not much on the subject of 'prodigals' is found in the Book of Acts. The Church was off to an unsullied, exciting launch. Focus was on world evangelism. People put their all on the line. I'm sure there were backsliders during the thirty or so years that this book covers. However, it is not a subject that is headlined or highlighted. Certainly, Paul alluded to impending danger. He solemnly, with tears warns us to guard ourselves and the Church which God has purchased with His blood (Acts 20:28). Read his warning indicators, "Take heed" (vs. 28); "watch, and remember" (vs. 31). Those are fundamental in our continued walk with the Lord. Pay attention. Look out. Remember what the Lord has done and where He has brought you from. "So we must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it" (Hebrews 2:1, NLT).

To better facilitate our discussion on 'prodigals' we journey back to Luke 15; the 'Lost Chapter;' a trilogy of three things lost, sought, and found: sheep, coin, and son.

"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" (Luke 15:20, NIV).

I want to make a declarative statement. It is a statement of hope. One that is backed by God's Word: 'The Prodigals are Coming Home!'

Rod Parsons in *Bringing Home the Prodigals* said, "There is nothing as frustrating as seeing people come to Christ through the front door of the church and losing others in almost the same proportion out the back door."

Most commentaries will highlight that the father watched and waited. That is the typical story. It sounds so passive. I envision, knowing our heavenly Father, that he was more active than that. Before the boy saw him, he saw the boy. The father was:

1. Praying
2. Preparing
3. Persevering
4. Plundering heaven
5. Plowing through hell interceding for his son's return.
6. Picture him as weeping, an unquenchable obsession with the return of his son, or children.

Stretch your thinking and imagine:

1. Anticipation
2. Expectation
3. Hope
4. Urgency
5. Eagerness

All of those words relate very closely with "faith."

Here's a sampling of "faith" translations and verses:

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1, *NIV*).

"Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see" (Hebrews 11:1, *NLT*).

"NOW FAITH is the assurance (the confirmation, the title deed) of the things [we] hope for, being the proof of things [we] do not see and the conviction of their reality [faith perceiving as real fact what is not revealed to the senses]" (Hebrews 11:1, *AMP*).

"But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:9-11).

"(For we walk by faith, not by sight)" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

"For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37).

"Thus says the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord; and [your children] shall return from the enemy's land. And there is hope for your future, says the Lord; your children shall come back to their own country" (Jeremiah 31:16-17, *AMP*).

The word 'prodigal' dates back to the 1500's and refers to a reckless squanderer, someone that is wasteful, or a person that spends all his substance or money wastefully.

A prodigal may be a son or daughter, a brother or sister, a husband or wife, a father or mother, a friend or an acquaintance.

Advantages of the Prodigals

You may wonder, "How is it possible that there are advantages to being a prodigal?" Or, "How is it possible that there are advantages of the prodigal?" The situation seems bleak. Worse still, it is the prodigal's choice to step away from the Father's house. That is the point. It's not that they have never heard the gospel. It is that they have heard it, and either chosen to neglect or reject it. But, they know a lot about the Father's house, His people, the Gospel, and the way back home. That is certainly an advantage over those that have never once heard, seen, or felt any of that.

1. They already know the Father and what is in store at the Father's House. They won't be able to escape it. A line from a song, a memory of a sermon, an instruction from a parent, a prayer heard, etc. will one day come back to remind him. My guess is that it bombards their life more than once. They are constant reminders. The Father never gives up easily.
2. They know where they should go to church. The lost sheep was lost, knew that it was lost, but didn't know its way home. The lost coin was lost, didn't know it was lost, and didn't know how to get home. The prodigal was lost, knew he was lost, and knew his way back home.

Pastor Kent Rhoads, in Oil City, Louisiana mentioned there was a backslider he knew that went to bed each night with a full glass of water. She would take a drink and knew, should death take her in the night, it would be the last drink of water she would ever taste.

3. They have tasted of the Holy Ghost, known the power of the name of Jesus, and experienced God's inescapable and indescribable presence.
4. They know (some of) God's people; hopefully with hearts like the loving relentless father, rather than the criticizing, bitter senior brother. One man backslid for seven years, returned to church, and searched for a familiar face. He noticed an elderly lady he recognized. He walked up to her and said, "Sister Grub, do you remember me?" She quickly answered, "Yes, you backslid seven years ago and there has not been a day that has passed that I have not called out your name in prayer!"
5. They have a heightened measure of faith. Everyone is given a measure of faith (Romans 12:3). But, when you hear and read God's Word, faith is increased. It grows!

“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world” (Romans 10:17-18).

Helping Hands in the Prodigals Coming Home

1. Pray they will come to themselves.
2. Keep the home lights burning. Always make the pathway clear for them to return one day. (Don't change the doctrine!) Get the house ready for their return. Be a prodigal-friendly church. This message is a call to the church to be ready when the prodigals come home.

Rod Parsons relays a story told to him, “In a village near here, is a large old house. An elderly lady lives there alone and every night, as darkness falls, she puts a light on in the attic. Her son left home twenty-five years ago, rather like the prodigal in the parable, but she has never given up the hope that one day he will come home. We all know the house well, and although the bulb must occasionally need replacing, none of us have ever seen that house with a light on. It is for her son.”

3. Ask God to create circumstances that will cause them to look to the only One who can help. It was at the lowest point possible, in a pig-pen that the son came to his senses, causing him to find hope, and a way back home.
4. Be sensitive to times of vulnerability when one's heart will be open to the Lord. This includes sickness, sorrow, birth of a child, difficulties in the family, divorce, death, or a loss of a job.
5. Forgive, even when there isn't evidence of change. Many use rejection, isolation, and bitterness. Be like the heavenly Father: love unconditionally.

Here is an account taken from *Bringing Home the Prodigals*, by Rod Parsons: “Ernest Hemmingway wrote a short story set in Spain in which a father and son fell out to such an extent that the son ran away to Madrid. The father said he wanting nothing more to do with him. Years later, the father realized he had been too harsh and wanted to put things right. He put an ad in the Madrid newspaper: ‘Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday, All is forgiven, Papa!’ But Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father turned up at the hotel he had to force his way through a crowd: all young men, all called Paco—and all longing to be reconciled with their father.”

6. Wisely and sensitively seek ways to highlight what God is doing. Create a hunger in their heart for the things of God.
7. Speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Otherwise, it is like giving someone a kiss with bad breath. The bad breath remains, long after the kiss is gone.
8. Don't condemn. Look beyond what the 'prodigal is' to what he can become.

9. Anticipate. Expect. Believe! Maintain a sense of hope and encouragement. Some of our prodigals are not as far away as we think.
10. Understand that God is ready to bring the prodigals home.
11. Rob Parsons says, "When our prodigals do come home, pray that they meet the father first, and not the elder brother."

Rod Parsons goes on to tell a touching story: A daughter left home when she was eighteen, turning her back on her Mom and Dad, and God. She didn't get in touch with them. They didn't know whether she was dead or alive. Every night as her Dad would turn off the lights before going to bed, her mother would always request, "Leave the porch light on." Six long years passed and their daughter suddenly came home.

She said, "I so often wanted to come home, but I was too ashamed. Sometimes, in the early hours of the morning, I would drive my car onto your street and just sit there. I used to gaze at the houses and every one of them was dark apart from our house. You always left the light on...I knew it was for me."

"When you're in over your head,
 I'll be there with you.
 When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.
 When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end—
 Because I am God, your personal God,
 The Holy of Israel, your Savior.
 I paid a huge price for you...
That's how much you mean to me!
That's how much I love you!
 I'd sell off the whole world to get you back, trade the creation just for you.
 'So don't be afraid: I'm with you.
 I'll round up all your scattered children, pull them in from east and west.
 I'll send orders north and south:
 'Send them back. Return my sons from distant lands, my daughters from faraway places.
 I want them back, every last one who bears my name, every man, woman, and child
 Whom I created for my glory, yes, personally formed and made each one'"
 (Isaiah 43:2-7, *MSG*).

Study Questions

1. Where is the "Lost Chapter" in the Bible? _____
2. List the three (3) lost things found in the "Lost Chapter." _____

3. Read through the sampling of “faith” translations and verses provided in this lesson. Choose one passage (from those given) that best fits your experience/need, and write it out on the lines below. _____

4. Identify (define) the word “prodigal.” _____

5. Identify and briefly explain, five (5) advantages of the prodigals.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

6. List at least ten (10) ways we can help the prodigals as they find their way back home.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

