

Naomi went out full and came back empty, just like the Prodigal Son. And like the Prodigal Son, she would be Surprised by Grace. As you read through the following, take time to see parallels of the Prodigal Son to that of Naomi, the Prodigal Daughter.

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Surprised by Grace - The Story of a Loving Father

By Dwight A. Pryor

When we place a Bible passage back into its original Jewish context, it can come to life in a dramatic new way. A good example is Luke 15:11-32, often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This memorable story is a favorite of Christians everywhere. Looking at it through the Jewish eyes of Jesus' first-century audience, however, opens the parable to significant and illuminating new insights.¹

This particular parable is especially important for us as Christians to rightly understand. Typically we labor under inadequate or inappropriate images of the God of Israel. We can be almost scizo-phrenic about Him at times. We know He is a loving Father, yet He seems so stern, demanding and distant. He is "Jehovah," the Lawgiver—a kind of IRS agent in the sky who is ever examining our conduct, looking for just one infraction so He can throw the book at us.

This kind of thinking is neither Hebraic nor Biblical. It is the product in part of an unfortunate schism between church and synagogue and the resulting anti-Jewish sentiment that pervaded the Church from the earliest centuries. More importantly, it seriously impairs the very way you and I worship and relate to the God of Israel. Who wants to crawl up into the lap of an IRS agent? Who wants to practice the presence of a severe Judge who gives us an impossible law to live up to and then punishes us even for one infraction? Many Christians, I fear, suffer from this difficulty of being truly intimate with our Father in Heaven. We say the right words, but in our hearts we are uncertain and uncomfortable. A faulty image of God can cause us to miss out on the fullness and the joy of our salvation in His presence and power.

Jesus' parable in Luke 15:11-32 can deliver us from this dilemma. It shows us an accurate portrait of the God of Israel—of Yahweh (Lord), whom Jesus called "my Father." To His Jewish audience, this parable is an incredible saga of a father who at every turn surprises us by his grace. To us, it is a parable about the prodigal or lost son. We have looked at the story through twentieth-century Western eyes rather than first-century Jewish eyes. The principal player in Jesus' story is not the prodigal son. The parable is driving home a point about the father—the father who forgives, who is merciful and gracious. Let's examine the Jewish background to this beloved story.

Verse 11: *Jesus continues: "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."*

These last two seemingly simple statements were absolute shockers to the Jewish ear. Jesus has grabbed his audience's attention and aroused their emotions by His provocative description of a father's two sons. Dr. Kenneth Bailey is the past chairman of the Biblical Department at the Near Eastern School of Theology in Beirut. During his many years in the Middle East, he often would ask people, "Have you ever known a son to come to his father and demand his inheritance?" He learned that such an act was unthinkable in that culture. It would represent an unspeakable offense and the grossest insult to a father.

Dr. Bailey heard of only two instances of such a thing happening. In the first, the son was chased out of his home by an irate father. In the second, an Oriental father previously in good health, died within three months of his son's demand. The wife, who told Dr. Bailey the story, believed her husband had died of a broken heart. She said, "He died that night!"² Jesus' listeners understood that to demand your inheritance from a living father was equivalent to saying, "Father, I wish you would drop dead!"

Jewish law permitted a father, under some circumstances, to settle his estate while still living. For instance, if his wife died and he remarried, he might choose to settle his children's estate right then. This was done only at a father's initiative, however, never at a son's request. Further, the actual disbursement of the property would not occur until the father's death, since he had the legal right to the land's income as long as he lived.

In Jesus' parable, therefore, the younger son has perpetrated an unconscionable double insult upon his father. He has shamed him by demanding his inheritance—in other words, "Father, drop dead!" Then to add insult to injury, he insists upon the immediate disposition of his share of the settlement—thereby putting his father's future at risk. In just two sentences, Jesus has set in motion a startling drama that grips every Jewish heart in his audience. But what about the other brother in this story? By reading between the lines we can detect that he, too, has a "heart" problem. The elder brother, by Jewish standards, should have severely chastised his younger sibling for his disrespectful act, and then actively sought to reconcile him to the father and the family. Instead, we are told that he actually participates in the offense. He takes his portion of the inheritance! So he too has failed on two counts. Like his younger brother, he has deeply wounded his father.

Verse 13: *"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 severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself 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."*

By his utterly shocking conduct, the younger son has alienated himself from his father, his family, and even his community. The townspeople would have been outraged by his

behavior and fully prepared to exercise judgment upon him. Not surprisingly, then, we read that he quickly cashes in his settlement and separates himself from his people and his land—something of supreme importance to people in Biblical times. The prodigal son has severed every relationship and all his roots, and now he descends into wasteful living.

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"Father, I wish you would drop dead!"***

Jesus interjects a powerful metaphor into the story at this point. He says, "A severe famine comes upon the land." To people dependent upon the soil for their very survival and sustenance, famine was a terrifying specter. What does the prodigal do? He goes to a gentile, a pagan, and asks for help. Again, the historical context illuminates the story for us. In the ancient world, if someone came to you and asked for a handout or a job, the polite way of refusing them was to tell them they could take care of your pigs. It was a way of saying, "Thanks, but no thanks." This young man is so desperate, however, that he actually takes the job!

The pigs in their hunger are eating carob pods. The type of carob spoken of here grows on a small shrub and has very bitter berries. They have no nutritional value and are so distasteful that not even the pigs will eat them, except in times of famine. The lost young man longs to fill his stomach with them.

The emotions of Jesus' audience must have been on a roller-coaster ride during this tale. From disgust and righteous indignation one moment, to anxiety and even pity the next. Surely now they were empathizing with this young man's terrible fate. No money, no food, no friends and no security, exiled from his father, his family, his home, his land and his people—and even estranged from his spiritual impulses as a Jew. He is having table fellowship with unclean swine! Truly, in every respect the prodigal is lost.

Verse 17: "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.' "

"When he came to his senses" is a rabbinic way of saying, "he repented." But a subtlety here might escape you: his repentance is not full or complete. It is a partial repentance (or return) motivated more by hunger and duress than by remorse and the resolve to do right. Notice his words, "Father, I want to become a hired servant." The prodigal is devising a face-saving plan.

In Biblical times, there were bondservants, who served important positions in managing a family's estate and could even become part of the family; lesser servants, under the

direction of a bondsman; and hired servants. Hired servants typically were artisans or skilled tradesmen—independent contractors, to put it in modern parlance. They would hire out for specific tasks, be paid wages and provided food and shelter. Unlike the other servants, they would not live under the landowner's roof and therefore not directly under his authority.

The prodigal has this latter scenario in mind. He wants to return in such a way that he can maintain some pride and independence. He is willing to work. Maybe he even intends to repay his father to help repair the family breach—but on his terms. He will return, but as a hired servant; he will ask for his father's forgiveness but not for his authority. In other words, he will save himself, thank you. He does not need grace—he has a plan. Verse 20: *"So he got up and went to his father."*

Repentance is more than remorse. Repentance requires action. The rabbis taught three characteristics of authentic repentance: (1) recognition of wrongdoing, accompanied by confession; (2) the resolve or determination to stop doing wrong; (3) followed by an actual and appropriate response of doing the right thing. This young man does act on his resolve. He gets up and he returns.

Can you imagine the curiosity of Jesus' audience about what would happen next? They had been outraged by the impertinence of the younger son. They were stunned by the inaction and complicity of the elder brother. But the most surprising element in the story thus far has been the reaction of the father. He should have rejected his young son's improper request and even severely punished or banished him for his rank impertinence. But this father surprises us by his grace. Against all convention and contrary to every expectation, he shows love rather than judgment, compassion rather than condemnation. He accedes to his son's request and gives him his inheritance. This is no ordinary father. Verse 20: *"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."*

We must understand the social setting of life in the first century to appreciate how deeply Jesus has just touched the hearts of his listeners. Most of us, I suspect, visualize this story within our American frame of reference. We imagine a long, winding road leading up to a large house on a distant hill—it's South Fork and the Ewing estate on Dallas! The father is sitting on the porch, maybe having his morning coffee. As he lays down his paper, in the distance he spots a solitary figure making his way up the dusty ranch road towards the house. He calls for his wife and his binoculars. He looks, and behold—it's his son! He grabs his boots and runs to meet him.

The setting in Jesus' story was quite different really. Families did not live in isolated houses, not even farmers. They resided near one another in a cluster or complex of dwellings. Communal living was customary and socially comfortable in Bible times, but also necessary for security reasons. The fields they worked were away from the village itself. Workers would leave their homes in the morning and go out to the fields to labor. In the evening they would return.

The father in our story is part of such a community. Perhaps someone working in the fields sees the prodigal approaching and alerts the community. The report surely spreads quickly, and not only the insulted father, but likely a resentful and even angry crowd awaits the outcast's return.

But again, Jesus turns the tables on his listeners. This remarkable father does not wait for his wayward son's repentance, as one would expect. Compelled by love, he seizes the initiative. He rushes to welcome his son. In an unprecedented act of grace and mercy, the father humiliates himself before the community so his son will be spared their harsh judgment. It was considered demeaning and uncouth for an elderly person to run. But this father eagerly runs the gauntlet of the opposition, so his son will not have to pass through judgment.

Repentance is recognition of wrongdoing, confession, resolve to stop doing wrong, and then doing the right thing.

When he gets to him, he kisses his son repeatedly, the grammar here suggests. This calls to mind the social convention of sealing an agreement with a kiss between two disputing parties that had reconciled. The father by his act of unmerited mercy and favor sends a clear signal to the community that reconciliation has occurred. The offending party has been forgiven and reunited.

Verse 21: *"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "*

When you read the Gospels, you must always listen carefully to what is said, but also to what is not said. Jesus has just revealed here a change of heart in the prodigal—by what he does not say. Remember his plan? "I have sinned against heaven and against you. . . . Take me on as your hired servant." But when he witnesses his father's unprecedented love and grace toward him, he has a profound change of heart. His father's humiliation evokes the prodigal's humbling unto full repentance. He says, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son," and he leaves it there. He drops his plan and humbly submits to his father's authority.

Verse 22: *"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 fatted calf and kill it. Let's 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."*

The prodigal comes to a transforming experience of repentance. True repentance always issues into joy. The father takes his finest garment, worn only on special occasions or festivals, and puts it on his son—a sure sign of acceptance to the community. The signet

ring, a symbol of trust, and sandals, showing he's a free man, not a slave, are placed upon him. The father involves the whole community in the celebration by announcing, "Let's kill the fatted calf." A calf would feed at least one hundred people. So everyone participates in the reconciliation. The son whose sin separated him is now reconciled by his father's grace. The one who wished his father dead is now made alive by his father's mercy. He was willing to return as a servant, but his father's great love restores him as a son. Truly, celebration is in order. But there's more

Verse 25: "Meanwhile the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him."

Jesus now tells us "the rest of the story." He switches focus from the younger to the elder son. Rather than rejoicing, as expected, the elder brother becomes angry. We already knew he had a covert spiritual problem. Now we see its outworking. He refuses to go into his father's house, thereby deeply insulting his father in front of the whole community. In the end he does what the prodigal did at the beginning—he rends the social fabric and his father's heart. Again, the listeners fully expect a stern reaction by the father. And again, this remarkable figure surprises us. Rather than ordering his son come to in and show respect, the father takes the initiative and, to the shock of the crowd, goes out to the elder son.

Verse 29: "But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "

The seemingly responsible elder son again fails to do the right thing. He refuses to submit to his father and go in to his family. Instead he accuses his father of treating him like a slave, and he humiliates him by quarreling in public. He distances himself from his own sonship by referring to the prodigal as "this son of yours," rather than "my brother." Anger and resentment issue from his heart rather than repentance. He seems blind to his father's extraordinary act of grace.

In masterful irony, Jesus has turned the tables on his audience. The brother who deserved to be a slave, turns out to be truly a son; and the brother who seemed to be faithful shows himself to be utterly fickle. He has rigorously lived by the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law is far from his heart. In fact, his is a spirit of slavery, not a spirit of sonship. The prodigal was far from his father in space, but he returns an honest sinner and unites with his father in spirit. But the elder son, who physically remained with his father, all the time was distant in the spirit.

Verse 31: *"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "*

The father's great love tries to reconcile the elder brother to the family, calling the prodigal "this brother of yours." He assures his firstborn that his inheritance is fully protected, but pleads that this is a matter of rejoicing, not of rights. This is an issue of grace, not of law. The father shows his elder son the same surprising and unprecedented love that he extended to the prodigal. How does the elder son respond to his father's final, compassionate entreaty?... You will have to tell me. Jesus, ever the masterful storyteller, deliberately leaves the conclusion in suspense. In effect, He says to His audience (including you and me): "You write the final chapter of this story. How are you going to respond to the Father's unprecedented act of love through Me." Only you can write the final act to this drama.

Dear friends, in this parable please hear the words of a loving Father, full of grace and truth, faithfulness and mercy. The God of Israel, our heavenly Father, has shown unprecedented grace and unmerited love towards you. In the face of Yeshua (Jesus), Yahweh (the Lord) has shown His true countenance and character. The revelation of Himself in the written word is animated in the living Word made flesh. By His grace, we who are separated and alienated from the family of God, can return and rejoice in the Father's presence. But the fullness of His fellowship is experienced only when our repentance is unstinting.

The message of this parable is that God, at every turn, surprises us by His grace. He truly is a merciful and loving Father. Beyond both logic and law, He loves us. His great salvation is more than a legal transaction; it is a loving relationship. Contrary to a distant and stern lawgiver, the God of Israel is a father willing to run the gauntlet, even to humiliate Himself for His children. Even in our imperfect repentance, He rushes to meet us, bless us and call us His sons. Surely it is not difficult to turn ourselves wholly over to such a loving father. God says, "My sons, present to me an opening of repentance no bigger than the eye of a needle, and I will open for you gates wide enough for wagons and carriages to enter!"³ What will your response be to His initiative? May it be full of repentance and joy. In such you honor our Father in heaven.

¹ The thoroughly rabbinic background to Jesus' parabolic teaching methods has been documented in *Jesus and His Jewish Parables* by Brad H. Young (Paulist Press, 1989).

² *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* by Kenneth E. Bailey (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 162. His analysis of the parable of the prodigal (pp. 158-206) is the primary source for this article.

³ A Jewish midrash (commentary) on Song of Solomon 5:2 ("My lover is knocking. Open to me. . ."). See *A Rabbinic Anthology*, Montefiore & Lowe (Schocken Books, 1974), p. 317.