

The Lessons of the Prodigal

By Anne Richardson

The lessons of the prodigal are tough, but they will bring remarkable change to our spiritual life.

How many messages have we heard on the Prodigal Son? Always, it seems, from the perspective of the prodigal, not ever from the parent's view-a father in this case.

A multitude of Moms and Dads are presently walking a mile in this man's shoes, myself and my husband included. The Bible doesn't tell us much about the father in the parable. We don't know anything about what he thought or felt day-to-day in the absence of his son. There is, however, one thing we do know about this man.

He had faith.

Let's surmise a little. I think it would be safe to say that for the first while his reactions spanned an entire spectrum of emotions-everything from sorrow to outright rage at his son's foolish and selfish choice. But somewhere along that uncertain road, he learned to trust God.

Why? Because no one has more backslidden children than God.

He undertsnds on the deepest, most personal level. And certainly, by His example we can know that one of the lessons of the prodigal is love. Agape love.

Without it, the prodigal son's father could never have responded the way he did the day he saw his son "still a great way off" making his way back home. The Scripture describes how he "had compassion, and ran and fell on his son's neck and kissed him." We see no sign of bitterness or resentment in the heart of this father. Instead, he called his servants to dress his long lost son in the best robe and to kill the fatted calf for a time of celebration.

Of course it's only natural that he would rejoice to have his son back- but let's be honest. The journey with a prodigal isn't quite that smoothly paved. We may have the promise that they will reach the desired destination if we have done our part and trained them in the way they should go- but the road that leads there is filled with bumps and twists and turns.

Sometimes....it even seems like the road has been completely washed out. Faith is our only sure navigator. It is the vehicle that transports us safely over those washed out places and buffets us against the rough bumps and wrenching twists.

But God is with us. He is not only with us, He is for us!

I want to pause here to say thank you to the Author and Finisher of my faith, Jesus. Because long before my daughter ever took a detour, He began to prepare my heart for the days ahead. The Scripture he quickened to me at the beginning of 2007 was Jude1:20 “ But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost”.

As time went on, He continued to speak to my heart about faith and trusting Him. I realized more than ever before that I also needed an extra measure of the love that is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. Patiently, God waited while I struggled to grasp the lessons intended for me in my daughter's backsliding.

Before I could hear the voice of my Lord, I had to learn to silence my own.

Talk about an emotional roller coaster! In those first weeks, I couldn't believe it was happening. I have always had absolute confidence in the Word of God, but this...this seemed to contradict the unshakeable truth I had placed all my hope in concerning my children!

What I had failed to consider is the deceitfulness of the human heart. Somehow it had slipped my mind that Alex was “shapen in iniquity” and that she, too, must encounter the age old struggle between flesh and spirit. It is a reality for each and every one of us-even our children. Unfortunately the outcome is not part of the inheritance. It isn't something we can pass on to them. They must work it out for themselves. Like physicians we hand to them the prescription for a spiritually healthy and victorious life. Just as the outcome of a medicinal prescription depends upon the taking-the prescription of God's Word produces fruit only via the ‘doing” or obeying of that prescribed Word. Our sons and daughters must “work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.”

The essence of the prodigal is summed up in the following Old Testament verse:“A deceived heart has turned him aside and he cannot deliver his soul nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?” (Isaiah 44:20)

So.... As parents we must understand that once our child detours away from the road that leads to Jesus, the god of this world doesn't waste any time to start weaving his web of deception. Subtly and purposely he begins blinding their eyes from the goodness of God. Immediately, the battle becomes spiritual. Our greatest weapon is FAITH!!

The cry of my heart has become, “Lord, give me the faith of Abraham! The faith to stagger not at Your promise- even if the time should be long until the promise is fulfilled.” Abraham's story has become a comfort. The questions that once hovered around my mind like vultures were chased away as I began to comprehend the great unity between faith and our love for God.

And consider how after ten long years of awaiting the promise, God asked Abraham to do the unthinkable: “Take now your son, your only son, Isaac whom you love and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burn offering.”

Like Abraham, we must also be willing to lay our sons and daughters on the altar- and to trust that the outcome will be according to the promise. And once we have done this- we must take up our shield daily and meet every doubt with the Word of God! When our heart becomes overwhelmed by things we see or hear, we must run immediately to the Rock. These are fiery darts aimed at destroying our confidence and faith.

I remember one such day when my focus slipped out of the faith realm and into the discouraging reality of the present. Despair began to grip my heart like a vice and like Peter who took His eyes off Jesus as he stepped out of the boat and into the stormy seas... I felt myself sinking. In those moments- a silent cry was launched from my heart and God quickened to my mind Psalm 127. As my fingers flipped quickly through the pages until I found the verses, my eyes filled with tears.

“Except the LORD build the house, they labor in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.”

Who but God can know the fear that sometimes grips our heart over a backslidden child? Not only did this psalm encourage me to keep on trusting Him- it contains the very words I have prayed over my children for years- that the fruit of my womb would be His reward....

“Lo, children are a heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.

Another day, in a moment of wavering- I told God that I trusted Him, but what was I to be ‘doing’ in the meantime... you know... while I was waiting for His promise to be fulfilled, Funny, I know. But, boy, this trust lesson has not been easy for someone who is by nature a compulsive “fixer” and “doer”. Once again God directed me to His Word. This time to Exodus 14:13, “Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.”

Only those who trust can truly stand still.

How awesome is our God! How longsuffering! Throughout history he repeatedly conveys the same message to His people- that the place of faith is the place of rest.

“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God for he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.

And what are the works that we must cease from? The works of human reasoning

and self reliance: The works of worry and doubt that come with trying to figure things out for ourselves.

While we are waiting for the return of our sons and daughters we must stay in the Word. But as we read it and hear it preached it simply must be mixed with faith or it will profit us nothing.

“For we who have BELIEVED, do enter that rest.”

As much as we love our children. God loves them more!

"Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child. " Psalm 131:2