

The Prodigal's New Clothes



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 4:1–8; 25:25–34; Luke 15:4–32; John 11:9, 10; Rom. 5:12–20.*

Memory Text: “ “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” ’ ” (*Luke 15:32, NIV*).

W. Somerset Maugham wrote a short story called “Rain” about a missionary in the South Seas who “converted” a prostitute to the gospel. He poured himself, heart and soul, into seeking to win her, though at times his methods seemed harsh and unforgiving. In fact, he insisted that she return to the United States (from which she was fleeing) in order to finish out a jail sentence, all despite her desperate pleas to spare her from the torture, degradation, and ignominy that awaited her in prison. Doing her jail time, the missionary insisted, was just part of the process of repentance that she needed to go through, and thus she had to return.

The story ended, however, unexpectedly. The missionary killed himself, his mangled corpse found washed up on the beach. What happened? Apparently, spending all this time with the prostitute, he fell into sin with her and, unable to forgive himself—he killed himself instead.

What those characters needed was what we all as sinners need—a personal experience of the grace and assurance that Jesus revealed in the parable of the prodigal son.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 4.*

Same Parents, Same Food

“ ‘There was a man who had two sons’ ” (*Luke 15:11, NIV*). In this parable, the two sons born to the same father represent two character traits. The older son apparently demonstrated loyalty, perseverance, and industry. The younger one was, no doubt, unwilling to work, unwilling to be accountable, and unwilling to take his share of responsibility. Both were from the same heritage. Both probably received identical love and commitment from the same father. One son was, it seemed, faithful; one was disrespectful. What caused the difference?

What other stories does this remind you of? *Gen. 4:1–8, 25:25–34.*

It’s a strange phenomenon, is it not, one that is seen all the time. Two (or more) siblings from the same parents, living in the same home, have the same teachings, the same love, the same *food* even, and one becomes spiritual, faithful, and determined to serve the Lord, while the other, for whatever reason, goes in the opposite direction. However hard to understand, it does show us the powerful reality of free will. Some might see something significant in the fact that it was the *younger* of the two brothers who rebelled, but who knows the reason why he did what he did?

Read *Luke 15:12*. What lesson can we learn from how the father reacted to the son’s request? What does that tell us about how God relates to us?

The text does not say what kind of dialogue ensued between the father and the son or whether the father remonstrated with him, asking him to reconsider, asking him not to be so rash, asking him to think through his actions. Most likely he did, but in the end, the son was given the “portion of the goods” that were his, and off he went. All through the Bible, we can see this same principle: God allows human beings the freedom to make their own choices, to go their own way, and to live as they want. Of course, as we all know so well, our choices come with consequences, consequences that we don’t always imagine or foresee.

What have been the results of some of your own free choices lately? Not so easy to turn back the clock, is it?

Spreading His Wings

Picture the father as he watched his emboldened son put things together in his backpack, ready to leave home. Maybe he asked his son where he was going, what his plan was for employment, or what his dreams were for his future. Who knows what answers the son gave. They probably weren't encouraging, at least to the father. The son, meanwhile, was more than likely ready for the good times ahead.

After all, why not? He was young and adventurous, had some cash to spend and a world to see. Life on the family farm probably seemed dull and boring in contrast to all the possibilities that the world presented to him.

Read Luke 15:13–19. What kind of repentance do we see here? Does it seem like a true repentance, that he's sorry for what he did, or that he is sorry only for the *consequences* of what he did? What hints are there in the verses that could give us the answer?

It's hard to know how this story might have turned out had things gone well for the prodigal. Suppose he found ways to keep the money flowing in and to keep the good times coming? It's not likely, at least from what we see here, that he would have been coming back "on his knees," is it? Who among us, at times, hasn't been really sorry, not so much for our sins but for the consequences of them, especially when we get caught? Even the hardest pagan is going to be sorry he committed adultery if, in the process, he picked up herpes, gonorrhea, or some other sexually transmitted disease. There's nothing Christian about sorrow for the pain that comes from our wrong choices, is there?

What, then, about this young man? Though there's no question the terrible circumstances he found himself in brought about a changed attitude that might not have otherwise occurred, the thoughts of his heart, as revealed in the texts, do reveal a sense of true humility and a realization of the fact that he sinned both against his father and against God. The speech he prepared in his heart did seem to show the sincerity of his repentance.

Sometimes we need the bad consequences of our actions to awaken us to the reality of our sins, don't we? That is, only after the suffering comes from our actions do we truly repent of those actions and not just from the results. What about yourself and whatever situations you're facing now? Why not choose to avoid the sin and spare yourself all the sorrow and the repentance that (one hopes) will follow?

You Can Go Home Again

In the early part of the twentieth century, novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote a literary classic, *You Can't Go Home Again*, about a man who leaves his humble family origins in the south, goes to New York, makes it big as a writer, and then seeks to return to his roots. It wasn't an easy transition; hence the title of the book.

In the story of the prodigal, who is the one who makes the long journey in order to be reunited with his father? Contrast that to, for instance, the parable of the lost sheep and lost coin (Luke 15:4–10). What might be the important difference here?

Perhaps, in the two other parables, the lost objects didn't even know that they were lost (certainly the case with the coin), and they couldn't make it back even if they tried; whereas, in the case of the prodigal, he walked away from the "truth," as it were, and it was only after he was in the darkness (*see John 11:9, 10*) that he realized just how lost he was. All through salvation history, God has had to deal with those who, having light, have purposely turned away from that light and gone their own way. The good news of this parable is that, even in the cases of those who turned their backs on Him after knowing His goodness and love, God is still willing to restore them to the position that they once held in His covenant family. Though, just as the young man chose of his own free will to leave, he had to choose by his own free will to come back. It works the same way with all of us.

What's interesting, too, about these parables is the context in which they are being told. Read Luke 15:1, 2. Look at the different people who are listening to what Jesus is saying. What a powerful message it should be to us all that, instead of giving warnings about end-time apocalyptic events or about doom and judgment upon the unrepentant, Jesus gives parables showing the Father's earnest love and care for all of those who are lost, regardless of the situation that led to their being in that position.

Have you known people who have walked away from God? What hope can you take from this story that all is not lost? How important that we all pray for those who still haven't learned the lesson that the prodigal so painfully did.

The Best Robe

As we saw, the son himself had to make the decision to return. There was no compulsion on his father's part. God forces no one to be obedient; if He didn't force Satan to be obedient in heaven or Adam and Eve to be obedient in Eden, why do it now, long after the consequences of disobedience have wreaked havoc on humanity? (*Rom. 5:12–20, 21*).

Read Luke 15:20–24. How does the father react to the son's confession? How much penance, how many works, how many acts of restitution was the son required to do before the father accepted him? What message is in there for us? See also *Jer. 31:17–20*.

The son did confess to his father, but you can get the impression from reading the text that the father almost didn't hear it. Look at the order: the father ran to meet his son, fell on him, and kissed him. Sure, the confession was fine, and it probably did the son more good than the father, but at that point the son's actions spoke louder than his words.

The father, too, told the servants to bring "the best robe" and place it on the son. The Greek word translated "best" (from *protos*) often means "first" or "foremost." The father was giving him the best he had to offer.

Think of the context, too: the son had been living in poverty for who knows how long. He probably didn't come home dressed in the finest of apparel, to say the least. After all, he had been feeding pigs up until then. The contrast, no doubt, between what he was wearing when he was embraced by his father (notice, too, the father didn't wait until he was cleaned up before throwing himself on him) and the robe that was placed on him couldn't have been starker.

What this shows, among other things, is that the restoration, at least between the father and the son, was at that moment complete. If we see "the best robe" as the robe of Christ's righteousness, then all that was needed was provided for right then and there. The prodigal had repented, confessed, and turned from his ways. The father supplied the rest. If that's not a symbol of salvation, what is?

What's fascinating here, too, is that there is no "I told you so" from the father. There wasn't any need for it, was there? Sin reaps its own wages. When dealing with people who come back to the Lord after falling away, how can we learn not to throw their sins up before them?

The Father's Own Garment

Ellen G. White, in *Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 203, 204, adds an interesting detail to the story that's not found in the texts themselves. Describing the scene of the father approaching the son as he humbly comes home, she writes, "The father will permit no contemptuous eye to mock at his son's misery and tatters. He takes from his own shoulders the broad, rich mantle, and wraps it around the son's wasted form, and the youth sobs out his repentance, saying, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.' The father holds him close to his side, and brings him home. No opportunity is given him to ask a servant's place. He is a son, who shall be honored with the best the house affords, and whom the waiting men and women shall respect and serve.

"The father said to his servants, 'Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.' "

What insights does this reference give us into the story as a whole, and what does it tell us about God's character?

The father wants, right away, to cover up the shame of the son's mistakes. What a message for us about learning to let the past go, to not dwell on others' past mistakes or our own. Some of the worst sins are not known now, but one day will be (*1 Cor. 4:5*); like Paul, we need to forget what's past and press toward the future (*Phil. 3:13, 14*).

Read Luke 15:24. What does the father mean when he says that his son was dead but is alive again? How are we to understand those very strong words?

In the end, there's no middle ground in the ultimate issues of salvation. When all things finally and totally wrap up (*Rev. 21:5*), and the great controversy is ended, all human beings either will be eternally alive or eternally dead. There's nothing in between.

Certainly something to think about as we make our daily choices, both good and bad, as did the prodigal son.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Lost and Is Found,” pp. 198–211; “A Great Gulf Fixed,” p. 260, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “The Last Journey From Galilee,” pp. 495, 496, in *The Desire of Ages*; “Parables of the Lost,” pp. 100–104, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3.

“Mark how tender and pitiful the Lord is in His dealings with His creatures. He loves His erring child, and entreats him to return. The Father’s arm is placed about His repentant son; the Father’s garments cover his rags; the ring is placed upon his finger as a token of his royalty. And yet how many there are who look upon the prodigal not only with indifference, but with contempt. Like the Pharisee, they say, ‘God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men’ (*Luke 18:11*). But how, think you, does God look upon those who, while claiming to be coworkers with Christ, while the soul is making its struggle against the flood of temptation, stand by like the elder brother in the parable, stubborn, self-willed, selfish?”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 140.

“Strength and grace have been provided through Christ to be brought by ministering angels to every believing soul. None are so sinful that they cannot find strength, purity, and righteousness in Jesus, who died for them. He is waiting to strip them of their garments stained and polluted with sin, and to put upon them the white robes of righteousness; He bids them live and not die.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 53.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Discuss more the question of how siblings from the same parents, the same home, and the same environment can go in such different spiritual directions. How are we to understand that?
- ❷ How do you help those who—having turned away from the Lord, gone into the world, and damaged themselves and others in the process—want to put their past behind them but can’t, because no matter which way they turn, the results of their past choices stare them right in the face? What hope, what promises, or what help can you give them?
- ❸ It’s one thing to know that you are messed up, as did the prodigal. What about those who have “left their father’s home,” so to speak, and things are going quite well for them? Let’s be honest: not everyone who leaves the Lord winds up feeding pigs. Some end up owning the pig farm! What can be done to help them realize that, despite their circumstances, they have made a fatal choice?

Finding Faith

by SONIA SOMUAH ASANTE

I grew up in Ghana. When I was 17, I went to live with my aunt, for my mother left Ghana to work in another country. We were Christians but not Seventh-day Adventists. A friend was studying at Valley View University, the Adventist university in Ghana. She suggested that I complete my high school studies at the university so I could qualify for admission to the university. I knew the school was a Christian institution, but I knew nothing about Adventists. I decided to apply to study there.

I was surprised to learn that we had worship every evening in the dormitory and attended church on Saturday. I wondered what strange people these Adventists were. I didn't mind the dormitory worships, but it was hard to start going to church on Saturdays. For me religion was a Sunday activity.

At first I worried that I was disobeying God's will by going to church on Saturday. But my friends helped me understand that Saturday was God's chosen day of rest, not Sunday. They helped me understand the principles behind other practices of Adventists too.

During a Week of Spiritual Emphasis, the pastor invited students to surrender their lives entirely to God. I responded to his call. I studied the Bible with some friends, and in time I was baptized, along with more than 50 other students.

My mother accepted my decision, but my aunt worried that I had joined a cult. During my next school break, I returned home to talk to her about my new faith. She was convinced that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a cult, not a church.

I graduated from high school and enrolled as a university student at Valley View University. I pray that my family will want to know more about my new faith and will understand what I believe. I want to see them in the Adventist church one day.

Your mission offerings help support Valley View University and many other schools around the world. Last year part of a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering went to help the university build a new church on campus. Thank you for all you've done to make it possible for me to study at an Adventist university, where students like me can find Christ or develop a deeper faith while we're still young.

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