

Back from the Far Country

The Journey of Praying a Prodigal Home

By James Banks



“How’s your son?”

“He’s OK, thanks. Could be better, could be worse. See you around!” I said rather abruptly. It was a bumper sticker of a conversation in a supermarket parking lot. My friend had been telling me how his son was an honor student at his university—and wanted to know about my own son. I couldn’t peel myself away quickly enough.

The whole truth was I had just returned from sitting in a courtroom in my son’s college town. Too much partying. Too little studying. What started out as a “good time” for him turned into a tough year for all of us.

Parents of prodigals know how these awkward conversations go. When other parents share good things about their kids’

achievements and it's your turn to respond, you find yourself searching for words. You walk away wondering where you went wrong.

Even talking to God can be difficult. When you're the parent of a prodigal, you know you need to pray. But sometimes you feel so tired and discouraged that you may wonder if it makes any difference. You find yourself repeatedly covering the same ground in your prayers: "Please, Lord, do something! Please Lord, change her heart!"

And if little seems to change, you find yourself praying with David, "How long, Lord, how long?" (Ps. 6:3, italics added).

Crushed Dreams

Few things challenge a parent more than praying for a son or daughter who is walking away from God. We dreamed different dreams for our children. My wife Cari and I prayed for our son before he was born, asking God that he would know and love the Lord with all his heart, mind, and strength (Luke 10:27). We held him in our arms and gave him to God before we even left the hospital. Parents don't hold their child for the first time and say, "This one will grow up to be a prodigal."

Ours was a loving home where we shared Jesus with our children, raised them in church and Sunday school, disciplined them, and taught them right from wrong. We never saw the prodigal years coming. But even through our crushed dreams, God was faithful. He helped us learn life-changing truths about His kindness in difficulty, His undeserved mercy, and the importance of persevering in prayer for those we love.

Prodigal Lessons Learned

Here are some of the lessons He has helped us learn along the way:

1. God loves our children even more than we do.

He wants us to pray passionately for them, reaching for what He alone can do. Jesus said that His mission was “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Others may judge them, but Jesus loves our kids so much that He died for them. He calls us to join His search-and-rescue mission to bring them home.

That’s why prayer matters so much. Try as we may, we can’t change their hearts. Only God can. “. . . no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). He alone knows the way back from the “far country” (Luke 15:13, KJV) where hearts hide. Only He can reach them when our own efforts have fallen short; He knows exactly what it will take to turn their hearts to Him.

2. God wastes nothing.

The choices our prodigals make challenge us and break our hearts. But they don’t discourage Him because “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

History tells us that Monica pleaded with her son Augustine not to sail to Rome. She anxiously prayed about it because she was deeply worried that the corruption there would take him even further away from God. He lied to her and left without her knowledge. The very thing she prayed wouldn’t happen, did. But it was in Rome that Augustine came to Christ and became one of the most vital witnesses in all of history.

The Kingdom of God was greatly impacted because of a mother’s prayers, even though there were times it seemed her prayers were getting nowhere. When we pray for prodigals, we live “by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

3. God's silence doesn't mean He isn't listening.

When a Canaanite woman came to Jesus, desperately asking for help for her daughter, "Jesus gave her no reply, not even a word" (Matt. 15:23, NLT). Jesus seemed to deny her requests, but she persevered in asking until He finally responded, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted" (Matt. 15:28). Parenting prodigals prompts us to pray more than we ever have before, helping us learn new dependence on God.

When answers to prayer seem slow in coming, the love He's placed in our hearts for our children compels us to call out to Him again and again. Our love for our children brings us to our knees, the best position for help to come because "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5, NKJV). As we pray for our children, we become conduits of His grace and Spirit into their lives.

4. God changes our hearts when we pray.

When our children are lost and making bad choices, it's easy to become frustrated and angry—especially if we didn't stumble over the same things. When my son struggled with substance abuse, it hit me directly in my pride. I didn't realize how critical I had been in my spirit of those who struggle with that challenge. I felt I was somehow "above it." Because I didn't struggle with it, I thought he shouldn't, either.

It took awhile for God to show me that my own pridefulness was equally destructive. It led to anger at my son's actions, and that became a stumbling block for him to come closer to God. No matter how much I reasoned with him or "preached" to him about his need to change, an edge remained. I was reminded that "human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (James 1:20).

But spending time on my knees softened my heart and changed

me, helping me to understand my need for repentance, forgiveness, and grace. The change in me helped soften my son's heart, as well.

5. God is faithful and gives us His peace as we pray.

Parents of prodigals carry more than their share of worries. They know what it's like to think the worst when the phone rings in the middle of the night and their child hasn't come home. They also know the pain of standing by and watching their children live through the dire consequences of their actions. But even in the middle of heartache, Jesus' promise of peace remains: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

There is a peace only Jesus can give. Our deepest need is to be in union with Him so that we can receive it and appropriate it in the most difficult moments. When nerves are raw and emotions tense, simply taking time in His presence by praying and resting in the promises of God's Word changes everything. "For he himself is our peace" (Eph. 2:14). His peace "exceeds anything we can understand" (Phil. 4:7, NLT). The peace of Christ guards our hearts and minds as we live in Him.

There is no better way to love our children than through our prayers. As we pray, we move in God's strength and ability to make things happen. We stop depending on our own strength. Even when our inadequacies overwhelm us, His power is "made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Nothing is too hard for Him.

I'm deeply grateful that after many years of our very imperfect prayer, God in His mercy has saved our son and brought him home from "the far country." Today, our son lives for the Lord and is free from his addictions. The change has been so significant that I, with my "little faith" (Matt.

6:30), sometimes can hardly believe it even when the answer to my prayers is standing right in front of me.

Not long ago, when I was worrying about my son, I reminded him that we have a powerful adversary. "You're right, Dad," he responded. "He has power, but he has no authority."

I cling to the truth that Jesus told us, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given me" (Matt. 28:18). And He still "welcomes sinners" (Luke 15:2).

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