

## THE PRODIGAL WHO DID NOT RETURN

by Lester J. Start

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First Baptist, Herkimer, NY

The lost son who is the subject of my sermon is not the prodigal son of the New Testament story. This prodigal, as we all know, did go home again. When his money ran out, when his cherished independence became servitude, he went home - in some fear and trembling, and joy of joys - his father welcomed him with open arms. To be sure, his older brother grumbled a bit - thinking of the riotous living his brother had enjoyed, but the father was right - the lost son is found; there is joy in heaven.

This is the familiar and comforting story showing what we have come to expect from a loving God. It's the business of God to forgive, isn't it? To welcome back to the erring son? He is supposed to love, isn't He? Isn't His blessing something we can count on? Almost like a constitutional right? And sing almost as a patriotic conviction - God shed Thy grace on me?

I want to suggest that it isn't as simple as all that by inviting you to consider the story of another lost son, a prodigal who did not return. He is not the subject of a New Testament parable, but the object of Old Testament history. I want you to consider his bit of history as a parable - and there is ample precedent in the tradition to treat scripture as allegory - it provides a somber background for the New Testament story.

This is the story of Absalom, who rebelled against his father, King David, who went, or was sent, into a far country, was restored, but still rebelled, setting himself up as king of Israel against David, his father - who then sent out armies against him in defense of the kingdom. The ending is told graphically in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of the second book of Samuel.

What a contrast in the stories! Be merry! For this my son was dead and is alive again! Oh my son Absalom - would God I had died for thee, oh Absalom, my son, my son.

What are the differences? Joy versus tragedy is the most obvious one. And there is an almost classic sense of the tragic in the inexorable development and climax of Absalom's rebellion - made more intense by David's cry. One might be tempted to say, another difference is the New Testament God of love versus the Old Testament God of judgment. But this won't do at all. David loved to Absalom - he loved him deeply - he grieved deeply. There is one God of both Testaments and the God of Israel is indeed a God of love.

Well, the difference then is between a young man who made a little mistake and repented and was forgiven and an evil and vicious rebel who aimed at wickedness.

We like to make such distinctions, separate the good guys and the bad, the white hats from the black, but this won't do, either. For Absalom wasn't such a bad lot, you see. Much of nobility was in his spirit - he exhibited more courage and charm than the New Testament prodigal. His troubles stemmed from flawed virtues - like a classic tragedy. They really began in this way. He

had a half-sister Tamar who was fair. And Amnon, the king's eldest son, was smitten with her beauty and plotted to have her. He pretended to be ill, asked that Tamar be sent in to tend him and then he raped her. And afterwards, as the scripture puts it, Amnon hated her so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he loved her. And he cast her out. And so it is so often - the disgust occasioned by lust is directed toward the victim, not the perpetrator of the deed. Well, Absalom avenged his sister. Not right away. Perhaps he was waiting for the king to redress the wrong. But nothing happened. So Absalom killed Amnon - or had him killed - at a festival he told his servants to get Amnon drunk and then kill him. You see, Absalom's white hat isn't all that white - but he did the right thing, didn't he?

You don't kill the king's son with impunity even if you are a king's son yourself - and Absalom fled the country. But David was increasingly unhappy over the loss of his son, until Joab, the very general who later killed him, made intercession for Absalom and he was allowed to return.

But further trouble lay ahead. Just as Absalom had earlier taken the law into his own hands (in killing Amnon) he now began to criticize the law openly in the name of justice. He would stand at the gate of the court, talk with those who had business there, and say in effect - you have a good case but you won't get justice here. Now if I were judge in the land, things would be different. In this way Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. It was not long before he declared himself ruler over Hebron and then of all Israel, precipitating the war, the battle and the final events of his death and David's lament.

No, Absalom wasn't all that bad. He didn't use his rebellion as an occasion to squander his inheritance in riotous living, as the New Testament prodigal did. And there is a certain pusillanimous quality about the self indulgent prodigal who is welcomed that makes one almost agree with the elder brothers complaint, and say it isn't fair.

No, the difference isn't in the good and evil characters of the two prodigals. The difference, of course, lies in the persistent rebellion of Absalom and the repentance of the prodigal. The story of Absalom makes one point clear. There is a king in Israel; there is a kingdom to uphold; there is justice to defend. Absalom's rebellion was not simply a desire for freedom and independence. He sought to establish his own justice, his own law. His rebellion was complete - and his destruction inevitable. He who offends against heaven has no one to whom to pray. Think not lightly of evil - it will not come nigh me. Drop by drop the pitcher is filled - slowly but surely the fool is filled with evil. Think not lightly of good.

The good man is filled with merit.

Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and strength and thy neighbor as thyself, says Jesus. For hatred is not overcome by hatred but by love says the Buddha. This is an ancient truth. [Karma golden rule - do unto others - what you do not wish others to do to you] It is not that David wanted him destroyed. He loved Absalom for all his rebellion. But he had a kingdom to uphold, and Joab became the instrument to enforce it. Absalom took the law of the king, his father, into his own hands, then rebelled against it and was destroyed.

And this is the hard teaching of all great religions. There is a moral law. There is a king in Israel. There is a law of karma. Deeds determine destinies. There is the Tao, the way of heaven that man must follow. Just as we cannot break a law of nature, but illustrate it by our attempt, we cannot break the moral law of God, but break ourselves against it.

There was still law in the New Testament story. The favorite morals of Puritan ethics are beautifully illustrated. Waste turned to want. Self-willed independence turned to servitude. License became alienation from all the prodigal held dear.

But in one pregnant phrase the final difference between Absalom and the prodigal comes clear. The young man, we are told, finally came to himself and said, I will arise and go to my father. Absalom rebelled to the end.

[The phrase is interesting - it is a medical term. It means to "come to" like after one has fainted - as if one sees things and himself in a whole new light.] Why does the prodigal see the light and return to his father in joy; why is the other the scene of mourning.

Perhaps there is no answer to this question. It lies in the mystery of grace. But the one prodigal who came to, who came to himself, began to see himself as he was in contrast with what he had hoped to be. He remembered his relation with his father and what he now experienced. He asked himself what profit there was in his rebellion. He saw self-will leading to self-destruction. He moved to restore a right relationship with a world not centered on himself. He resolved I will arise and go to my father and be as a servant - that is to be obedient to his requirements of moral law.

But Absalom saw nothing wrong with his action. He did not come to himself.

It is a truism in education that the good student, the bright learner, is the one most aware of the difference between what he knows and what there is to know. It is the wise person who is most aware of his ignorance and his separation from the great body of knowledge. It is the stupid one who thinks he knows all the answers and knows all there is that is worthwhile to know.

It is a truism in religion that the good man is most keenly aware of his shortcomings in the sight of God and is most ready to confess his sins before the vision of the high calling of God to righteousness. And, of course, it is the dangerously evil man who cannot see anything wrong in himself. As the Proverbs puts it - such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eateth and wipeth her mouth and saith I have done no wickedness.

And such was the way of Absalom - he saw nothing wrong in what he was doing. He lacked the higher vision; he neglected to the standard of God in terms of which to measure his own. Perhaps his very success destroyed him. Absalom never saw the difference between what he was and what he might be in the sight of God, and so, never came to himself.

This might well be a description of faith: to see the difference between what one is and what one might be, to commit oneself to what might be. This is the difference between the son who says - I will arise and go to my father, and the one who never returns.

Whatever the occasion of the decision - eating the wretched husks of the fruit of our folly - as the prodigal son, the despair of self assertion turned to failure, a sense of alienation from what might be, a feeling of meaninglessness, ennui or sheer loneliness - the occasion sets off a contrast between what is and what might be and reveals a self not willing to wallow any longer in estrangement - but seeking to be restored, to be made whole - to become a total person, to be at home with himself, with his world, with his God.

The prodigal dreamed of home and asked, why don't I, why can't I return? And he decided, I will arise and go to my father. Absalom never asked the question - [Deuteronomy 8 warning].

“Once to every man and nation - comes the moment to decide.” Two prodigals - one returned - one did not. Two endings - one: Be merry, this my son was dead and is alive - or: Absalom, my son, Absalom - would God I had died for thee.

We are the prodigals. But remember, it is the heart and mystery of the Christian faith that in some wondrous improbable way - God did die for you - and for me.