Welcome Home!

Plain teachings from the story of the Prodigal

George Everard, 1871

[Luke 15:11-24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke 15.11-24):  
"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.

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.

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.' So he got up and went to his father.

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.

The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

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 fattened 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."

1. The Track of the Sinner

The voice of the Son of Man is the sweetest note ever heard in this world of evil and discord. It brings . . .  
hope to the despairing,  
power to the helpless,  
pardon to the guilty,  
consolation to the sorrowful,  
yes, life to the dead.

This world of ours is a very sea of trouble. Multitudes have lost all heart. Whatever joy they once possessed, it is theirs no more. They are burdened, oppressed in spirit, and see no way of escape. It has all come about through sin — this is the source and spring of it all; and no mere human voice can still these angry waves. But the voice of Jesus can — it spoke eighteen centuries ago, and men and women heard it and rejoiced, and rose above sin and sorrow and care — to a holy and blessed life, and to peace and fellowship with God. It speaks to us still in this England of ours, and it is the very voice we need. There is not a sore in our social life, not a broken, sorrowful heart — but that voice can heal.

Of all the words the Savior ever spoke, none have proved more full of saving health than this story of the prodigal son. It tells of God's free love to the wretched and the lost. It tells of a gushing stream of compassion and tender mercy to those who might expect nothing but a just condemnation.

Picture to yourself the scene when the story was told. Around the great Master are gathered the outcasts of the city. "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear Him." [Luke 15:1](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke 15.1). Thieves, perchance murderers too; men and women whose feet have never trodden the temple pavement, but who have walked all their days in ways of wickedness; the ragged ones, those who feared the light of day, and many such like are there. Gladly do they hearken to the gracious words that fall from His lips. His sympathy for their woes, His readiness to welcome them, His Words of kindness, so unlike any which ever they have heard before — these have won their hearts and drawn them to Himself.

Not far off, just standing on the outside of this circle of listeners, are some of our Lord's old enemies, the Scribes and Pharisees. They are filled with envy as they see around Christ those whom they despise: they would not that He should show kindness to such as these. They have their objection ready. "The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered — This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!" [Luke 15:2](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke 15.2). Why does this Man mingle with the basest and the worst?

Nor does Jesus reject the reproach: He glories in it. They might reckon it a matter for scorn, but He delights in it. As if He would say, "Yes, you speak truly. I do receive sinners — and always shall.

For this I left my Father's house,  
for this I came down from Heaven,  
for this I have lived and for this I shall die.

I came to seek and to save those who are lost — it is my chief joy to bring such to repentance. Where should the faithful shepherd go, but over the distant hills to bring back the wandering sheep? What does the woman do, but seek diligently for her piece of silver until she find it? And shall not I labor to restore these who have gone so far astray? Shall I not seek after these bemired though they be by sin — yet pieces of God's silver, made in His own likeness, and partakers of His immortality?"

Such is the aim of Christ in the two first parables given in Luke 15. The third parable goes a step farther. It is to reveal the love of our Father in Heaven, set forth over against the dark background of man's guilt — and thus gives another reason for the Savior's dealings. That which the Father delights in, surely the Son delights in also.

Thank God for that bitter scoff of those self-righteous men, which drew forth from the Savior's lips such precious words of hope and consolation!

The story of the younger son's departure from home is given in a few words. "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. 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."

Here is a household where there are two sons. The one is well content by daily toil to assist his father in the field, and to enjoy the quiet comfort which their home affords. But not so the other. He is restless and dissatisfied — he will not endure home restraints. He has no liking for hard work, and imagines that it would be a paradise of delights could he only have liberty to live as he pleases. This craving soon finds expression — he will leave home if he can. So he goes to his father with an ungracious request. He will ask that he may have beforehand the portion of his goods that one day will fall to his lot.

The request is not denied. It is evident that his heart is gone, and it may be best to allow him to accomplish his purpose.

The young man has now the power to do as he will. He gathers together all that he possesses — and turns his back upon the home of his youth. No recollection of a parent's kindness, no entreaties of those about him, can change his purpose or stay his footsteps. So he departs; forgetful of all the claims of duty, religion, or filial affection — no doubt all the while building up in his imagination many a castle of expected enjoyment. To some far-distant land he journeys, where he will meet with no check, and where he will be far removed from the restraint of a father's eye.

And now that he has reached the far land, he stops not a moment to consider his way. He plunges headlong into every excess. He drinks the poisoned draught. He rushes on madly in the company of harlots and in riotous living. For a while he seems to have found what he sought. Evil passions are indulged — the sun shines upon him; friends flock around him. The still, small voice may sometimes whisper in his ear, but he regards it not. The language of his heart is "Begone, dull care! Begone, all gloomy visions of ill! Begone, all prophets and harbingers of woe! Tomorrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant."

But we stop here. For the present we will track his footsteps no farther. We will hearken to a few lessons that his course may teach us.

Perhaps the first lesson we should gather is this — that a spirit of discontent is the parent of much misery. True contentment is a rare jewel, and he who possesses it has great wealth. It sweetens the saddest lot, when in the midst of much that is painful a man can see the hand of love appointing all, and can say,

Your way, not mine, O Lord,  
However dark it be!  
Lead me by Your own hand,  
Choose out the path for me.

But on the other hand a dissatisfied, unhappy, restless spirit leads the way to many a fall. It was the case with this young man. The cause of all the evil that happened to him began here. He yielded to the temptation to seek a change of lot — he imagined that he could be happier elsewhere than at home.

Take a young person placed in a position where there is every opportunity of doing fairly well. Your work lies plain before you, and it is evidently God's will that you should give yourself to it. But no!  
there is something trying;  
there is a cross to bear;  
there is someone whose temper causes you discomfort;  
there is something you desire that you cannot have;  
there is confinement that is irksome to bear.

So you are ready to say in your heart, "At all hazards I must escape from this. I will make a change!" So that you are in great danger of throwing away your present advantages; and in escaping from one evil — most likely you may find others tenfold worse.

Nay, my young reader, be not so hasty. Stay and think awhile. Are there no others whom you know whose lot is far worse than your own? Is there nothing in your position that should make you really thankful? Is there no one desirous of promoting your welfare? Is there not a means for self-improvement?

I am not saying that you should always be where your are and what you are at present — but I want you to do nothing in a hurry. Think of the future as well as the present. Think of the wishes of friends as well as your own. Seek guidance from above — ask God to show you the right path. What is a few weeks or a few months discomfort — compared to the peace and comfort of your whole life? Trust your Father's care. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your steps.

Another lesson from the story of the wanderer. The natural heart wishes to be independent of God.

The younger son desired to take his future life into his own hands.

He could provide better for his own comfort and happiness;  
he would escape from all control;  
he would live as he thought best.

It is thus with man. He turns his back upon his Creator, his Preserver, his Redeemer — he will be a God unto himself. He says in his heart, "I do not want God. I will yield to no other master than my own will. My lips are my own — my money is my own — my life is my own — who is lord over me?"

Some years ago, one Sunday morning, a man was walking with his little girl through some pleasant fields in the suburbs of London. He walked along, inwardly congratulating himself on his own happy condition. Said he to himself, "I have a good wife, I have obedient children, I have means enough and to spare, I have a comfortable home, and best of all, I am my own master, I have no one to control me." This last thought was especially pleasant to him — that by his position he was independent of anyone to check or control his movements.

Meanwhile a storm began to gather — the sky was overcast and gave sure signs of a deluge of rain. So he turned homewards. But he was compelled to seek for shelter on the way, and he went into a large building used for public worship. The preacher was just entering the pulpit. The text arrested his attention: [1 Corinthians 6:19](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1 Cor 6.19), "You are not your own!" The sermon told how man was created by God's power, purchased by the blood of the Lamb; that believers become the habitation of the Spirit. Hence they are no longer their own property, but are bound to yield themselves up to the service of God. The man said to himself, This is very strange. I have been thinking of my own good fortune in having no one to control me, and now the preacher tells me that I am not my own.

He purchased a Bible, and searched it to find the text. He soon found it, and much beside that reached his conscience, and he learned that he had indeed a Master in Heaven.

Happy is every one that learns the same lesson! It is a blessed thing to cast away the proud spirit of boastful independence, and to be willing to be as a little child. It is a haven of peace to the soul, in everything to lean upon a Father's care, and to be obedient in everything to a Father's will.

But we learn in the story, that men depart into a far country. That far off land has its different provinces, and each wanderer, according to his taste, chooses one or another. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.

One goes to the province of Moab, the land of worldly pleasure.

Another turns his feet toward Sodom, the region of lust and passion.

Another seeks rest in Babylon, the abode of sheer carelessness and indifference.

Another goes to Rome, the dwelling place of superstition and error.

Another to Crete, the isle of deceit.

Another to Athens, the city of vain curiosity.

Another to Tyre, the land of merchandise.

But in all these paths, one thing is alike — men forsake God, the fountain of living waters, and are hewing out for themselves broken cisterns which can hold no water.

Dear reader, if you are walking in any of these paths, if you are living in forgetfulness of your Father in Heaven — oh, think of the ingratitude of such a course! What would you feel if you had a child to whom you had shown every possible kindness, and that child were to leave you, and never give a thought of all you that had done for his welfare? Would it not grieve and pain you? Should you not think your child very ungrateful? And does not your Father in Heaven mark your ingratitude? Is it not a sorrowful complaint which he utters: Hear, O heavens, and give ear O earth — I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his owner, and the donkey his master's crib — but Israel does not know, my people does not consider."

Ah, my brother, my sister, when you forget your God, when you live as if He were not, when you will not listen to His loving words or come to His footstool in prayer — you know not how deadly is your sin — you know not how great is the wrong you do to yourself.

But more than this — like the son in the parable, you are wasting your precious substance. Your Father has given to you many and great gifts — He has given you life, health, sight, hearing, speech, power of thought and memory. He has given you friends, and means of living, and some influence over others. He has given you above all, great spiritual blessings — especially the gift of His Word, the gift of His Son, the gift of His Spirit, the promise of everlasting life to all who will accept it.

And has He not given these blessings carefully to be employed as talents — to be laid out at interest for Him, that at length He may receive His own with interest?

Yet you are throwing all these precious gifts away! You are not using them in a way that will bring lasting benefit!

You leave the soul uncared for, and are employing your powers of mind and body for those things which cannot profit. You are laying up no treasures in Heaven. You are neglecting gifts that might become to you a source of endless blessedness. Yes, the very gifts you now possess, will by and by bear witness against you for your abuse of them. Thus by your sin — your blessings will be turned into a curse.

Oh, be wise in time — truly wise! Pursue no further the track of the sinner — turn from it and pass away. Enter by the strait gate. Walk in the narrow path. Jesus will guide your feet into the way of peace, and His love shall assist you all your journey through.

2. Bitter Fruits!

See a noble ship setting sail beneath the blue sky. A pleasant ripple is on the wave, and no sign of approaching storm darkens the horizon.

But look again. See a strange contrast. See that very ship, her masts all gone, her timbers broken, her sails rent, her rudder lost! Who could have foreseen in that gallant ship, the wreck she has now become?

Just such another contrast do we see in the young man of whom our parable tells us. With high hopes he leaves his father's roof; with firm step he goes forth fearlessly on his career of boastful independence. At an early stage of his sojourn in the far country, it is still the same. He has no lack of means or friends. If conscience chides him for a moment, the thought is soon lost in some fresh scheme of pleasure. But see him after a few months have passed. Oh, how changed! Where now his self-confidence, and the friends of his prosperous days? Where now is that full lap of self-indulgence for which he has yearned? Where is it all?

Look at that haggard form!

Look at that dull, lustreless eye!

Look at those torn and tattered garments!

Look at that base employment, so different from the filial service of his home life!

Above all, see that wretched, weary heart, so full of painful recollections of the past, so dark, so hopeless as to days yet to come! The way of the transgressor is hard!

He who knows full well the misery that follows a course of evil doing, has given us the picture as none else could have done: "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."

Yes, great indeed was the change!

Once he was in the land of plenty — now he is in a land where a mighty famine rages.

Once he was a son beloved — now he is a slave uncared for by any.

Once he was surrounded by all the comforts of a happy home — now he is lonely and desolate.

Once a father's table was spread for him — now in vain he hungers after a few of the carobs cast to the swine.

Once from his father's wardrobe, he could obtain all the clothing that he needed — now with scarcely a rag to cover him, he is exposed to every chilling wind that blows.

The whole scene tells the tale of the wages of sin. It teaches us of that untold depth of loss and wretchedness and unrest to which the sinner falls. "The wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, to the wicked." "Many sorrows shall be to the wicked."

It is a true witness. More especially would I ask any young person who reads these words, to ponder the lesson.

In this present life, how often do we see the bitter fruits of a godless life?

"The sinner is not a happy man," was once said to me by a wicked man in such a tone that I shall not soon forget it.

"For forty years I had everything and enjoyed nothing," was said to me by another, who had been living without God.

The story of Lord Byron is well known. After years spent in every excess, he came to the conclusion that, could he have his choice, he would rather never have been born. What was the fruit of thirty years spent for the world and evil? Hearken to his own words:  
"My days are in the yellow leaf,  
The flowers and fruits of love are gone:  
The worm, the canker, and the grief,  
Are mine alone."

How often does sin bring in its train disease, poverty, beggary, and the sorest distress! You might find many a young person whose life has opened fair for more than ordinary comfort and usefulness; but by-and-by sin has changed it all. The best friends have been lost. Character is lost — money is lost — doors are shut which once were open; and perhaps the young man or woman is hedged in, and hedged up, by difficulties from which there seems no escape.

Oh, the misery, too, of that intolerable sense of shame which oppresses many a one that has fallen!

"I've lost my way! I've lost my way!" said a young girl in a London Hospital, bitterly weeping and covering her face with the bed-clothes, ashamed that anyone should see her. A night at Highbury Barn had turned her aside from the right path; and now she is reaping as she has sown.

Many a young person carries about the wreck of a constitution once good, but ruined by excess. Many a home has been robbed by drink of all making it worth the name, and it is now but a poor shelter where a few miserable ones drag on together a miserable existence! Many a prison cell, is tenanted by those who, but for their own willful misdoings, might have lived and died in a position of comfort! Yes, and you might go to many a cemetery or churchyard, and stand there by the side of a new-made grave; and from that grave a voice from the dead might reach you: "I am here as a warning to the light and heedless! Young man, young woman, learn of me! I forsook the guide of my youth, I drank the poisoned cup of sin, and now I lie hopeless, in this cold, dark grave! Oh, that you who pass by might learn to avoid the paths of the destroyer!" But in the misery, the gnawing lack of that young man, I see a picture also of the restless upbraiding of the conscience.

Conscience is as immortal as the soul. You may drug conscience, and for a season lull it to sleep. You may quiet your accuser for the moment by the draught of unbelief. "Tush! Shall God see it? Who knows if there is a God?" Or perhaps you may still its voice by some false expedient, by a wrong estimate of your own character, or by comparing yourself with others who may be worse.

But it will be in vain. By-and-by that sleeping foe will awake like a giant refreshed with wine. He will terrify you by assaults which you cannot withstand. When Elijah met Ahab in the field of Naboth, how soon conscience awoke: "Have you found me, O my enemy?" Elijah would have been no enemy to him, had he not had a foe within — the memory of his deed of blood. When Joseph's brethren were in trouble, after some twenty years of slumber conscience was aroused: "We are truly guilty," say they, "because of our brother."

Oh, take heed of stilling the voice of conscience! Listen to her, and she will do you good! She will show you your sin. She will make you humble. Reject her, if you will — yet you can never escape her. She will turn to be a witness against you in the Great Day.

The story may remind us also of three sore evils, beside those I have already mentioned, as the sure results of a misspent life:  
soul-desolation,  
soul-hunger,  
soul-bondage.

There is soul-desolation. The prodigal was utterly desolate while in the service of the hog farmer. He had none to care for him — he had none to help him. Such a time comes to every sinner. I do not mean that he may not still have kindly friends around him, but I mean that in his inner spirit he will feel alone, desolate, abandoned.

Look at Cain, how he felt this. The curse of God made him feel all alone in God's world, "You have driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from Your face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that finds me shall slay me." His feeling of utter desolation conjured up a fear that everyone would rise against him.

Look again at King Saul. Again and again has he disobeyed God, and now he is left — left to himself to reap the fruit of his half-heartedness and rebellion. Was there ever a more sorrowful complaint than that which he utters to Samuel? What a desolate heart was that which prompted the words — "I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answers me no more. Therefore have I called you, that you may make known unto me what I shall do." But what can the spirit of man do to help in such a case? Why then do you ask of me, seeing the Lord is departed from you, and become your enemy?

Sometimes this desolation comes out in a dying hour, sometimes in days of trouble. Well do I remember the words of a woman, years ago, who afterwards sought the Lord and found Him. When I went into her cottage, she said, "I am in great trouble — we cannot pay our rent, and we shall lose all we have. But the worst is, that I have no God to go to."

What a contrast here to the experience of the true Christian who can testify how the Lord stands by His servants in all their afflictions. An aged Christian, not far from eighty years of age, had been telling me of her great losses and sorrows — how one child after another had been taken away, and how others were hopelessly afflicted, and then she added, "Good-bye. I can say the Lord has been round me like a wall of fire. His everlasting arms are beneath me. He has said that He will never leave me nor forsake me, and I know that He never will."

What a contrast between the Christian and the child of this world! Those who hate the righteous shall be desolate. The Lord redeems the soul of His servants; and none of them that trust in Him shall be desolate.

Then with this there is soul-hunger, soul-need, soul-beggary. It is not a hungering after righteousness, though, thank God, it sometimes leads to this. But it is the soul feeling its utter emptiness — the deep cavern resounding with its own vacuity. "I am starving to death!" No man gave unto him. The poor soul in its misery stretches out its withered hand to every passer by — but it is in vain. If anything is given, it does not and it cannot satisfy.

Be sure of this — no created power, no man, no angel, no saint can ever really content the heart of the man that is robbed of its God. We read in the favorite old allegory of cartloads of good materials being cast into the slough of despond — and yet it remained as bad as ever.

Still more is this true of man's heart. Pour in the brightest hopes, the richest treasures, the sweetest enjoyments, the highest honors that all creation can afford — and yet the cry will still be give, "Give! Give!" There is a craving, a longing yet unfilled. He who alone can fill the soul is unsought and unknown. The soul is made for God, and until it finds Him, it must ever be restless and disquieted.

And then there is soul-bondage. The son was a slave, and a shameful service was his. A child of Abraham — a keeper of swine! What lower degradation could there be?

Believe it, real liberty is that of the spirit that can rejoice in God's love, and is renewed in the image of the Savior!

A true freeman was the old slave who was lashed to death for being a Christian, and who died praying for the forgiveness of the brutal savage who stood directing the lash.

So the most real bondage is that which tyrannizes over a man's conscience and will. "The chains which men wear, are upon their own souls. They are slaves by the vile passions they cultivate, by the detestable thoughts they think, and by the inhuman deeds to which they have sold themselves." The Master has said it, and it is true: He who commits sin, is the slave of sin.

But there is a depth beyond this. In the parable, as we see by-and-by, the evil is arrested. Sin runs not its full length.

But what if there is no such arrest? What if the sinner dies as he has lived? Ah, there is the terrible problem! Unchangeable, perpetual, intensified a thousand-fold in that future doom — is all the misery that sin brings here.

Perhaps you cannot reconcile with God's perfect goodness the eternal condemnation of any of His creatures. But how do you reconcile with it the intolerable misery that sin often brings now? For that misery has something of infinity about it — it goes to such a terrible depth. It pervades all the vast capacities of an immortal soul. Can the soul die? Is not the immortality of man one of the very first principles of true religion? If one man ceases to exist, then why not all? Is there one glimpse in Holy Scripture of any change ever being made after the great day of final judgment? Shall that parable of the future state given in Luke 16 ever be reversed? Shall any cross the deep gulf, into Abraham's bosom? Who know best, our clever theorists — or the Lord of Heaven? Oh, never, never risk your eternity on the groundless hope of a change after death!

The wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment.

Cast the unprofitable servant into outer darkness.

Our God is a consuming fire.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

In the time of harvest I will say to the reapers: Gather first the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them!

"From Your wrath and everlasting damnation, good Lord, deliver us."

If such are the bitter fruits of sin in this life and the next, blessed are those who early choose the path of life. Blessed are those who, like Joseph, and Samuel, and Josiah, and Obadiah, and John the Baptist, and Timothy — begin in early days to seek the Lord.

It is the truest wisdom.

It is safety and strength.

It brings untold joys in the present life.

Instead of self-reproach in the remembrance of past years, which they must ever feel who have given their best days to sin and the world — there is a calm thankful joy for the grace and mercy which preserved them from the snares of youth.

My young reader, why wait a single day before you embrace the offer of God's love in Christ? If anyone were to offer you, in time of some perilous disease, a specific which would preserve you from danger of an attack — would you wait and delay accepting such an offer? If anyone were to offer you a valuable present — would you find an excuse for not accepting it until some future time? And why delay receiving that grace which alone can preserve you from the contagion of evil which is so destructive to souls? Why delay accepting the precious blessing of God's love and everlasting life, which will be a blessing to you in both worlds? And will not yours be a brighter crown if you serve the Lord right onward through life — from its beginning to its close? Forever blessed is he who at any time through life's day of conflict becomes, by God's grace, a true soldier of the Cross. But tenfold blessed is he who from youth to manhood, and from manhood to old age, still fights bravely under the banner of the Redeemer, against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Another thought shall conclude this chapter. Very deeply should the followers of Christ compassionate those who are yet in their sins. Oh, that God might give us eyes to weep, and a heart to feel for those who are bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

Behold that wretched child of sin who has forsaken the Guide of her youth, and may soon utterly perish in her own corruption. Ah, trample not upon her! She is your sister — she is fashioned by the same creating-hand. The door of mercy is yet open to her, and by your means perchance she might rise to a new and holier life.

Behold those multitudes of young men and young women, whom we see each Sunday in our large towns, casting aside all modesty, all fear of God, and with light and giddy footsteps profaning God's holy day. Is there nothing you can do to rescue some of these from the vortex of unhallowed pleasure?

Behold the friends and relations who are about us, and talk with us pleasantly by the way-side — and yet whom we know to be strangers to God, and if they die as they are, we feel sure would die unsaved. Shall they reap the bitter fruits of a life spent without God, without a word being spoken, or a letter being written, that might awaken them to consider their ways?

Think of your own blessed condition — pardoned, reconciled, sanctified, kept by God's power unto everlasting life — and then ponder the awful position of those who continue in the bondage and condemnation of sin. Think how Christ mourned over such, and follow His blessed example.

Did Christ o'er sinners weep?  
And shall our cheeks be dry?  
Let floods of penitential grief  
Burst forth from every eye.

He wept that we might weep:  
Each sin demands a tear.  
In Heaven alone no sin is found,  
And there's no weeping there.

3. Turning over a New Leaf

Blessed affliction — how much we owe you! Since sin is on the earth, it is as well that there is sorrow also. Affliction's wounds are healing. Affliction's stroke often arrests the sinner in his course of sin. "Before I was afflicted I went astray — but now have I keep Your law."

It was thus that the younger son came back to his father. He had tasted the bitter fruits of sin. He had sown his wild oats — and reaped a harvest of wretchedness and woe.

His means exhausted,  
a mighty famine raging,  
food sufficient for his need denied to him —  
he now for the first time begins to reflect.

He comes to himself — he speaks to his own heart. Where am I? What have I done? Why thus have I been grieving my father and wasting my precious substance? Were it not better to return home? Can I be in greater misery than here? So he makes a resolve, and keeps to it.

"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.' So he got up and went to his father." [Luke 15:17-20](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke 15.17-20)

It is very instructive to place this part of the story in connection with the preceding parables, especially with that of the Shepherd seeking the lost sheep.

What is the first cause of this change — this turning homeward? Were the story of the prodigal to stand alone, we might imagine that the man himself might arise to a new life — but it is far otherwise. It is the work of the Good Shepherd restoring the lost one — it comes from the free grace of God in Christ Jesus. The Savior comes to seek and to save the wanderer, tracking his footsteps o'er hill and dale, o'er the dark mountain, o'er the wild and barren desert. He finds him near unto perishing. He puts forth His helping arm, and brings him home to His safe and happy fold. It is all His work. He opens the door of salvation by dwelling among us, and dying a ransom for our sins. He calls aloud in words of mercy, bidding the sinner come to Him. He sends His ministers to do His work — to go forth everywhere to tell of His love. He sends the chastening rod to awaken reflection. Above all, He sends His own blessed Spirit, the Comforter . . .  
to seal instruction upon the heart,  
to enlighten,  
to convince of sin,  
to reveal His own love and mercy, and  
to constrain the unwilling footsteps to turn to God.

But for the grace of that ever blessed Spirit, never would a single soul accept the free offers of a Savior's love. Unless drawn by Divine love, never would man turn back to the God whom he has forsaken.

A very beautiful parallel to this story of the prodigal is found in [Jeremiah 31:18-21](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer 31.18-21), and brings out the work of God's Spirit in turning the sinner to himself. "I have surely heard Ephraim's moaning: 'You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the LORD my God. After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth.' Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him," declares the LORD." [Jeremiah 31:18-20](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer 31.18-20)

But let us endeavor to trace the path, step by step, by which the Spirit of God leads home the sinner.

The sinner comes to his senses. Hitherto there has been a kind of madness. As Solomon has declared, there is madness in men's hearts while they live. Sometimes, yes, very frequently, it is a sober kind of madness, but nevertheless the strangest delusions take possession of the mind.

What would we think of one who would take up a few pieces of straw, and weave them into a sort of garland, and imagine he was wearing a king's crown? Or of one who would gather up dust from the floor of a hovel, and imagine it were gold? Or of one who would spend all his means in providing for his comfort during a single day or week of his life — and leave the future without any thought? Surely we would not be wrong in saying that reason was dethroned. Yet what are men doing? Think of the amazing pains which men will take to gain a little present wealth or distinction — or to add to their enjoyment during this short life. And what is it all in the sight of that great future that stretches on and on far away beyond all possible conception, into that long eternity which is before each of us?

Men see things out of all proportion.

The world is everything — the soul is nothing.

Man's favor is worth all effort to obtain — God's favor is but an airy phantom.

This little life is all important — the long life beyond is unregarded, or left the chance.

But when the Spirit comes, all this is changed. A new light arises. A man sees things in some measure as they truly are.

When a man comes to his senses, he begins to think. He considers his ways. He ponders the path which he has been treading. He thinks over the past, and then looks on to the future.

Reader, never despise a thought!

Who can tell the harm done by an evil thought?

It may stick to you like pitch!

It may turn your desires in a wrong direction.

It may ruin your prospects in life.

It may prove the destruction of the soul.

In its effects it may injure hundreds or thousands!

But who shall tell the blessing that may come from a good thought planted within by the Spirit? It may grow and grow, and blossom and bud and bring forth fruit that may fill eternity with gladness and praise! Such a thought is a messenger from Heaven — a bird of paradise. By all means lay hold on her and retain her.

A young man who for many years had been neglecting the house of God, met with a severe accident. A large bale of goods fell upon him from an open window, near one of the London docks. He was thrown down from the wagon which he was driving, and carried to the hospital. Though in great danger of his life, for some weeks he seemed utterly indifferent to his position. He seemed careless and hardened.

But one day the chaplain noticed a great change. He was humble, penitent, and desirous of hearing God's Word, and from that time sought the Lord and walked in His ways.

How did it come about? He heard a little boy, on a couch not far off, repeating the Lord's Prayer, and it awakened a thought of his early days, and the instruction he then received, and this led to his conversion.

A thought cherished and retained, became the means of his salvation.

I might name another example. A young man had been brought up in worldly society, and was accustomed to spend many evenings in scenes of amusement. On one such evening, his eye glanced toward the clock over the fireplace. The thought arose, no doubt implanted there by God's Spirit: Why should I thus waste my days? Is this the way in which time ought to be spent? He began from that evening to study God's Word. He shortly after entered the ministry, and for half a century was a faithful witness for Christ.

Let me say here how earnestly I would ask the undecided to stop and think. If I could only persuade you to do this — quietly to think what you are, what you are doing, how you are living, how you are preparing for years to come — for your future life, for death, for the great eternal world beyond — how thankful would I be! It would be worth to you more than hearing a hundred sermons without it. David tells in one short sentence the spirit of true repentance: "I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto Your testimonies."

But what was the particular thought in the mind of the young man? It was a comparison of his own lot with that of his father's servants. It led him to see plainly that it were better to be the lowest of these — than to abide in his present condition.

A similar thought often leads to a new life. The sinner compares his own position with that of God's people. They have a peace within, but he knows it not. They are safe in the keeping of the Good Shepherd, but he has no sure defense for a single moment. They have bread enough and to spare, even the bread of life eternal; but he feels within an aching void, which the world can never fill.

I once saw two pictures in a room. They were beautifully painted, and were intended as a contrast one to the other.

The one represented a young lady dressed in the height of fashion, and surrounded by every luxury which life could afford, and beneath the picture were the words, "All is vanity and vexation of spirit."

The other picture was a very different one. It represented one like a monk, with pale and cadaverous features, in a dark and gloomy cell, and in the background something like an altar.

In place of this latter picture, rather would I substitute a likeness of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, sitting at the Savior's feet, her countenance all alight with holy joy and gladness in the nearness of her Lord; and thus more suitably might the other motto be written beneath — "Peace which the world cannot give."

Be sure of this — there is a contrast, a marvelous contrast between the humblest Christian and the most prosperous of the children of this world. Believe it or not, God does make a difference even here between those that fear Him, and those that live for themselves. The young person in a Sunday class who works hard through the week, and who has but scanty wages — and yet has Mary's spirit of love to the Savior — is far more to be envied than the lady of rank or wealth who wears not the signet ring of Heaven's nobility. Be sure of this — that palsied man, a tenant of a poor house living there as a daily witness of the power of Divine grace, stands in a far nobler position, is in truth owner of far greater possessions, than the tenant of a lordly mansion and inheritor of vast estates, who lacks the one thing needful.

But good thoughts are useless, unless they lead to something further.

"I am not without thought of these things," perhaps you say. And yet you never go beyond thinking. But the younger son was not content with thinking over the matter — he made a good resolution. He made up his mind to return home, and confess to his father how greatly he had sinned against him.

Do not think it useless to make a good resolution. It is true that "the way to Hell is paved with good resolutions," but these are good resolutions for the future — not for the present, and they are made in a self-trustful spirit. But the way to Heaven is paved with good resolutions suggested by the Good Spirit of God, made in dependence upon God's help, and then kept by His grace.

A clergyman in Suffolk, whom every one loved and valued because of his singleness of purpose and consistent life, died a few years ago. Two papers were found in his study that had been written by him — one at the beginning of his Christian life, and the other a little before his death. The former was a very long and particular statement of his earnest desire in everything to serve and please God. The latter was an address to his flock, saying how gracious God has been to him all his life through, and exhorting them to walk in God's ways.

This latter paper showed how faithfully he had kept the purpose named in the former one.

Why should not you, as you read these words make something of a similar resolve?

"O God, I am weak and unable to do anything — but by Your grace I desire from henceforth to be Yours alone. I will strive in everything to please You. I will never pass a day without coming to You on my knees for pardon and strength, and without reading Your Word. I will never pass a Sunday, if I can help it, without going to Your house. Oh, grant me to be filled with Your Holy Spirit, that I may ever fulfill this my purpose."

But notice the spirit of deep self-abasement in the resolution which the prodigal made.

He felt it was his own sin. True repentance is intensely personal. Men generally try to lose themselves in the crowd — we are all sinners. But with the true penitent it is quite otherwise — it is I, I, I. He can scarcely see any sin but his own. At least he sees his own sin in the very worst colors. Study the fifty-first Psalm. See how David again and again speaks. It is my transgression, my iniquity, my sin ever before me.

The prodigal felt it was sin against Heaven. True repentance beholds the wrong done to God by sin. It is a breach of His holy law. It is opposition to His holiness. It is sin against His goodness, against redeeming love, against the strivings of His Spirit. So David cries in his bitter sorrow, forgetting for the moment the wrong he had done to Uriah — in the far greater wrong which his sin had done to God: "Against You, You only have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight!"

True repentance is intensely personal. The prodigal felt it was his own sin. "I have sinned!" He can scarcely see any sin but his own. At least he sees his own sin in the very worst colors. Study the fifty-first Psalm. See how David again and again speaks. It is my transgression, my iniquity, my sin ever before me.

True repentance beholds the wrong done to God by sin. The prodigal felt that his sin was primarily against God. It was a breach of His holy law. It was opposition to His holiness. It was sin against His goodness, against redeeming love, against the strivings of His Spirit. So David cries in his bitter sorrow, forgetting for the moment the wrong he had done to Uriah — in the far greater wrong which his sin had done to God: "Against You, You only have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight!"

True repentance makes no excuses. The prodigal seeks for no palliation, no covering, no cloak. He says nothing of the circumstances which led him to do evil, or of companions who had drawn him aside. He does not attempt to shift the burden from his own shoulders to that of others. He makes no self-justifying pleas — he has too much sorrow, too much true brokenness of spirit, to desire or attempt it. One thing, and one thing only, he sees — his own terrible fall, and his own exceeding guilt.

True repentance takes the very lowest place. Once to be a son was not enough — but now he will be content even to be a slave or a hired servant! He feels utterly unworthy. As Jacob felt: "I am not worthy of all the mercies and of all the truth You have showed me." As the centurion felt when he sent to Jesus: "I am not worthy that You should come under my roof — nor do I think myself worthy to come unto You." So did the young prodigal esteem himself: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

Be sure God delights in the humble and contrite soul.

Lift yourself up in pride and self-satisfaction — and God will assuredly cast you down.

Cast yourself down in humble confession of your sin — and God will assuredly lift you up.

"God resists the proud — but gives grace unto the humble."

In this story was fulfilled the word, "I will confess my transgression unto the Lord, and You forgive the iniquity of my sin."

But we see here the purpose of the heart accomplished. The young man not only made the resolution, but he kept it. He said "I will arise;" and he arose and went to his father.

He turned his back forever on that far country and his old companions — and turned his face homeward. Doubtless it was with many a tear, with many a bitter feeling of regret for all that had passed, since in so different a spirit he had trodden that path before. Yet onward he trudges with weary heart and weary footstep, in the hope that a place may still be found for him in his father's house.

Do you ask, What is repentance? I can scarcely better describe it than from the path of this wanderer. It is turning the back . . .  
on sin,  
on the ways of the world,  
on the lusts of the flesh,  
on the service of the devil.

And it is turning the face God-ward, Heaven-ward, confessing all that is past, looking upward for grace to live holier, with one single desire — for years to come, to abide in the fear and love of God.

In a poor house in London, a few years ago, a Christian man spoke a few words for his Master. A crowd of shivering, starving, men and women were there, many reaping the fruit of their own wicked and profligate lives. The visitor read to them God's Word, and dwelt particularly on one verse: "Behold God is mighty, and despises not any." [Job 36:5](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Job 36.5)

Among that crowd was a drunkard. To use his own expression afterwards — he was "homeless, shoeless, Christless." By the Spirit's grace the Word that was spoken reached his heart. "God despises not any," he said: "then He will not despise me." Then, amidst the jeers and mockings of those present, he burst forth in prayer, "O God, You are mighty, and despise not any — oh, despise not me! Save me — even me!"

And so he prayed, confessing the evils of his wasted life, and asking for God's grace and help to amend. His prayer was heard. Two years after, in his own house, with God's Word open on the table, he loved to tell to his old companions the story of God's goodness and grace.

Reader, if still a stranger to the power of true religion, the same merciful God is waiting for you. Repentance may sound a gloomy word, but it is next door neighbor to the sweetest joy man can have on earth — namely, to be at rest in a Father's love, and to look forward in blessed hope to a place in His heavenly kingdom.

Poor child of sin and woe,  
Now listen to your Father's pleading voice;  
No longer need'st you go  
Without a Friend to bid your heart rejoice.

Your life of sin has been  
A toilsome path without one cheering ray;  
Now on your Father lean,  
And He will guide you in a better way.

Come, leave the desert land,  
And all the husks on which your soul has fed,  
And trust the faithful Hand  
That offers you a feast of living bread.

Oh, sinner! 'tis the voice  
Of One who long has loved and pitied thee:  
He would your heart rejoice,  
And set you from all sin and suffering free.

Oh, can you turn away?  
It is your Father that invites you near!  
Nay, sinner — weep and pray;  
And Heaven shall hail the penitential tear.

4. Welcome Home!

We follow the wanderer on his homeward path. It is a sorrowful journey. We can picture to ourselves the bare feet, the famine-stricken form, the destitute condition. But, above all, what anxious thoughts fill his breast! He is tossed hither and thither by conflicting hopes and fears. He is like a sailor on the stormy main — now lifted up to Heaven by a wave, then going down again into the trough of the sea. Even so with the prodigal. At one moment he is borne up with cheerful hope, at another cast down in gloom and despondency.

 "How will my father receive me?" Here is the one concern.

Fear says: "Ah, he will surely spurn you from his door! He will never speak to you! He will never permit you to tarry beneath his roof. He will bid his servants to turn you hastily away, lest you should bring shame and disgrace upon his household."

Then hope chimes in: "Nay, not so sadly! Why thus wrong your father's love? Has he ever thus dealt with you in days past? Will he not show you some pity? Did he not lovingly forgive you the lesser faults of earlier days? and will he not receive you now? Will he refuse you forgiveness for the past?"

Thus would he speak to himself along that painful way; sometimes sore dismayed — and sometimes anticipating a happy outcome.

But did he once along that journey rise in imagination and thought, to the full truth? Did he ever catch a glimpse of that superabundance, that overflowing tide of kindness, tenderness, and love which soon after he experienced? Nay, methinks not. At least, this I know — none, until they taste it, ever rise to a full view of the wondrous pity, goodness, and grace of the great redeeming God! "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has entered into the heart" of the lost sinner — how rich and plenteous is the mercy in store for him as soon as ever he throws himself upon that Father's love.

Anxious sinner! will you not try it? Venture upon this bridge — it will surely bear you. None in vain have ever sought Him whose "tender mercies are over all His works." You shall never be disappointed! Is it not written, "You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy unto all those who call upon You"?

But let us leave the son for a while, and go in thought to the Father's house.

How does it happen that he sees him while as yet at so great a distance? Has he, like a pious Jew, gone upon the housetop for prayer and meditation? Is it too much to suppose that in his solitary prayer-hour he thinks, as he is accustomed, of his long-lost son — that he offers again the usual petition "Lord have mercy upon my son!"

And now from his watch-tower he espies a form yet far distant. As Elijah on Mount Carmel prays, and then sends his servant to look and see if there were the sign of coming rain, and at last the little cloud appears; in the same manner may we imagine it to have been with the father in the story. He now sees a form, and eagerly looks. "Can this be my son, my rebellious one, my Absalom? Has God heard my oft repeated cry? Surely it is none other than he! But lo, how changed!"

Then with quick and eager steps he descends — he leaves the house — he runs hastily, and before long has met his returning child!

No mention of the past, no word of chiding, no harsh reproof — shall wound the heart already smitten by the sorrow of self-reproach. Nay, a father's embrace, a father's love, a father's kiss shall be his!

Marvelous picture of the Divine compassion! No hand could have traced it, but that of the Only Begotten — the One who was Himself the very image of the Father! Divine love outstrips all our thoughts! Each syllable, each word here demands our deepest attention.

"When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."

"Yet a great way." No distance is so great, but Divine love can bridge it over. Though you may, in your own thought, be as far from God as the north from the south — yet God may be close at hand. The publican stood afar off — yet God was near to hear and forgive. Manasseh was far away from Jerusalem and the temple, in a dungeon and in a heathen city — but God was near to hearken to his supplication. The message is sent, "Peace to him who is far off and to him who is near, says the Lord, and I will heal him." "The Lord is near to those who are of a broken heart, and saves such as are of a contrite spirit."

But in how many ways have we God's tender love set before us in this verse? Matthew Henry beautifully puts it:  
"God has eyes of mercy — for the father saw the son;  
 He has a heart of mercy — for he had compassion;  
 He has feet of mercy — for he ran;  
 He has arms of mercy — for he embraced him;  
 He has lips of mercy — for he kissed him."

What a consolation it is, that God sees the desolate, broken-hearted sinner. He beholds with a most pitiful eye the outcast, the wretched, the fallen, the lost.

Pharaoh's Hebrew slaves were in a miserable case — yet "the Lord looked upon them and had respect unto them."

The Monarch of Israel was in sorrow and fear upon his bed of sickness, but the Lord said, "I have seen your tears."

The Nathanael was beneath the tree, no doubt in prayer or meditation, and Jesus said, "I saw you."

When the widow was carrying to the grave her only son, we are told that "the Lord saw her and had compassion on her."

Neither are you, sorrowing one, forgotten in your grief!

You may carry a burden of secret sorrow;  
you may be feeling a desire after a new life;  
you may be troubled and sad in the remembrance of a misspent life;  
and you have no friend to whom you can go and ask counsel!

But believe it, your Father sees you. He saw you in the far country, in the hour of your darkest sin, and does He not see you now that you desire to arise and live to Him? Surely, He does! "Behold! the eye of the Lord is upon those who fear Him, upon those who hope in His mercy."

But God has also a heart of mercy. He has compassion. In spite of all your provocations, in spite of all your rebellion, your ingratitude, your hardness and impenitency — He is gracious still.

Has your sin caused Him forever to shut up His loving kindness in displeasure? Not so! Is the glorious sun yet exhausted of its cheering light? Is the wide ocean yet exhausted of its health-giving waters? Still less is the compassion of God sealed up. As ever, He is still full of compassion — abundant in goodness and truth.

And then, too, God has feet of mercy. It is not written that the father sat still in the house, and gave directions to the servants whether to receive the son or shut the door against him. Neither is it written that with quiet, measured step he went to meet him. Nay, he ran. He put forth speed. He trod quickly the long distance that intervened. What love is here!

God never runs to punish, for He is long suffering and slow to anger. He gave . . .  
forty days to Nineveh;  
one hundred and twenty years to the old world;  
four hundred years to Canaan; and  
three years plus one year over to the barren fig-tree.

And so with eager haste He runs to welcome the lost one. The Word is true: "Draw near to God — and He will draw near to you." For one step that you take Godward, and this too by His grace — He takes twenty steps towards you. The faintest desire, the feeblest effort, the trembling cry, "Lord, save me!" — how soon does He reward!

Oh, that men were as eager to seek after God — as He is to receive them when they come to Him! Oh, that there were more running in the ways of godliness, and in seeking after those that are perishing! Oh, what leaden feet have we in the ways of God's commandments — and what winged feet in the ways of sin!

What winged feet has God in the ways of mercy — and what leaden feet in His just retributions on the ungodly!

But, again, God has arms of mercy. The father embraced the son! Jesus gathers the lambs with His arms. He took the young children up in His arms and blessed them. O perishing one, your Father, your Savior, stretches out their arms of mercy to catch you from falling into the yawning precipice of eternal doom! Yes, and when you are safely welcomed there, those everlasting arms are your support forever! Let this be your trustful plea:

"A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,  
 On Your kind arms I fall!"

And once more, God has lips of mercy. When Joseph's brethren came into Egypt, they were troubled at his presence, and thought he would surely repay them the wrong they had done him. But we are told that he kissed them; and thus, one by one, their hearts were re-assured, and they could talk with him in peace. The kiss told them of the complete forgiveness of all that was past, and was better than a thousand words or promises. Thus does our Father welcome us.

When we accuse ourselves of sins past — He casts them all behind His back. He puts them as far away as the east is from the west. He remembers them no more. All our trespasses and iniquities are not so much as mentioned against us. Yes, thank God, He forgives all our countless iniquities freely, on account of Jesus' death. He blots them out of His book forever. He reckons them as fully put away, as if never committed.

Reader, sound if you can all the depths of love in this verse. Read it again and again. Bear in mind that it is to teach us of God's free love as a great reality.

I sent it once as a message to an elderly man who was fearful that his salvation was impossible. But this word gave him hope. He felt he was "a great way off," but he saw our merciful Father was near to save. He placed his trembling foot upon the Rock of Ages, and in utter rejection of all other hope than in God's mercy through a Savior's death — he passed from earth, I fully believe, into the Savior's presence.

How plainly does this word of Holy Scripture chide us for our unbelief, and reprove our hard thoughts of Him whose name is Love. He calls to the weary, wandering children of sin and sorrow. He invites them back to His shelter and His Fatherly protection. He bids them Welcome Home! Welcome Home!

You are yet tarrying in that far-off land. What can you find there but disappointment? What is there to be found in all your wanderings that can speak to your heart words of peace and hope? What can your sin give you, but its wages — shame and death and damnation? What can your companions give you that shall repay you for the loss of all that is high and holy and good? What can your days of self-indulgence yield you — but useless regrets and empty sighs when all are passed?

But God says to you,

 Welcome home! He sends you a message in that distant land. He sends me by this little book, to tell you to return and tarry not. Wait not until your substance is all wasted, until your companions have all forsaken you, until you have tasted more of the bitterness that evil will bring you — but come back now! You have already grieved Him too long. You have already wrought yourself much harm. But come home! An open door invites you. A joyful welcome shall be yours!

Welcome Home backslider, who has known in days past, the rest and comfort of your Father's house. Now you are forlorn and hopeless. Prayer has been neglected, temptation to some besetting sin has proved too strong for you, an old friend has beguiled you to turn away from your Heavenly Friend — and now a moment's reflection awakens thoughts that you would flee from if you could. Nay, but listen to them; and as you listen and think — see that Father so lovingly waiting to restore you, beckoning to you to return, promising you all possible grace and love and help.

See your Savior too, standing by and repeating the call. "Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." "O Israel, return unto the Lord your God, for you have fallen by your iniquity. I will heal your backslidings, I will love you freely." Surely such mercy as this should win your heart for God.

Welcome Home! You trembling, fearful one, who are afraid to venture or to test your Father's compassion. Stay not by the cliffs of Sinai, stay not along the road from the city of destruction — but make haste and delay not. Nothing stands in your way but unbelief.

Your heart may be hard — but there is One who can soften it.

Your burden may be heavy — but there is One who can remove it.

Your wounds may be deadly — but there is One who can pour in the oil and wine of His grace.

Your spirit may be fainting — but there is One who can revive it.

Your soul may be guilty and polluted — but there is One who can cleanse it from all its defilement!

Welcome home!

Welcome to your Father's house!

Welcome to the open fountain which can wash away your guilt!

Welcome to the mercy-seat where every prayer shall be heard!

Welcome to the feast of heavenly love!

Welcome now to joy and rest and hope!

Welcome hereafter to the mansions prepared for God's people!

Welcome home!

Sinner will you not accept the call? Surely you will!

Unbelief says: "O Lord, I dare not approach You, for You are just and holy, and I am too sinful, too guilty to hope for Your forgiveness."

A blind superstition says: "O Lord, I dare not approach You in Your solemn greatness. I will come to You under the shield of a priest, or of Mary; I will first in the Confessional hear the absolving word — and then perchance I may find mercy and acceptance at Your hands."

But faith accepts God's words and says: "O Lord, I thank You that I may come straight to You in my Savior's name. Through Him, you have opened wide Your mercy-gate to each sinful and erring one. Sinner though I am — yet am I welcome to Your love. You will receive me. You will bless me. You will heal all my backslidings. You will embrace me with the arms of Your mercy — and Your favor shall be my everlasting inheritance."

Return! return,  
Poor long-lost wanderer, home!  
With all your bitter tears,  
Your heavy burdens, come!

As you are, all sin and pain,  
Fear not to implore in vain:  
See, the Father comes to meet you,  
Points to mercy's open door,  
Words of life and promise greet you,  
Oh, return! delay no more!

Return! return  
From strife and tumult vain  
To quiet solitude —  
To silent thought again.  
There the storms shall sink to rest,  
Which now desolate your breast;  
There the Spirit, long neglected,  
Waits with bliss before unknown,  
And the Savior, long rejected,  
Claims and seals you for His own.

Return! return  
From all your crooked ways:  
Jesus will save the lost —  
The fallen He can raise.  
Look to Him, who beckons thee  
From the cross so lovingly.  
See His gracious arms extended;  
Fear not to seek shelter there  
Where no grief is unbefriended,  
Where no sinner need despair.

Return! return  
To your long-suffering Lord;  
Fear not to seek His grace,  
To trust His faithful Word;  
Yield to Him your weary heart,  
He can heal its keenest smart,  
He can soothe the deepest sorrow,  
Wash the blackest guilt away;  
Then delay not until tomorrow:  
Seek His offered gifts today.

Return! return  
From all your wanderings, home!  
From vanity and toil,  
To rest and substance, come!  
Come to truth, from error's night,  
Come from darkness, unto light,  
Come from death, to life undying,  
From a fallen earth, to Heaven:  
Now the accepted time is flying,  
Haste to take what God has given!

5. Enriched and Exalted

"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 fattened 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!" [Luke 15:22-24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke 15.22-24)

Wonderful are the resources of Heavenly Love! God . . .  
enriches the poor and needy,  
exalts the humble,  
lifts up the perishing one from guilt and condemnation,  
and crowns him with favor, glory, and immortality!

Never are we weary of pondering this story of Divine grace and mercy!

The younger son is again at home. He is welcomed, forgiven, loved. He has felt the embrace of the fatherly arms, and the kiss of reconciling love. Yet is he the more humbled. He is ashamed and confounded for the offences of his youth. He opens his lips in contrite sorrow for days past. He utters the confession which he had purposed to make. "Father," he cries, "I have sinned against Heaven and before You, and am no more worthy to be called Your son."

Ah, reader, be sure that the forgiven sinner will evermore humble himself before his God. Mercifully received, freely accepted in the Beloved — he will the more reproach himself for the ingratitude and evil he has wrought against One so loving and so kind. Nor will the Christian ever cease to need, while in the flesh, a confession such as this. Whatever progress he may make, he will ever feel that sin is all he can call his own. Whensoever he comes to the mercy-seat, he will come as a sinner — as a sinner only — putting aside all thought of human merit, and leaning only upon the hope which is in Christ Jesus.

Yes, more than this: the more real advance there is in the knowledge of God, the deeper will be the sense of sin. The more the light comes in — the plainer manifestation of the corruption of the heart.

It is often noticed that each Christian feels himself to be the most unworthy, and the most unfaithful of God's children. How is this? Is it not because each man sees the outer life of another — but the Christian, taught of the Spirit, discerns the plague of his own heart. He sees aggravations of sin in his own case from God's tender love toward him, that he cannot see in the case of another. So much of evil, so much of depravity does he recognize as still remaining in him.

But the confession is cut short. It is not finished as the son had purposed. When he has owned his sin and unworthiness, he says no more. He says nothing now of being "a hired servant."

Why is this? Is it perchance that now he feels himself the son again? Is it because he is assured that as a son, he shall ever be loved and cared for? Or is it that the eagerness of the Father's love will hear no more? Is it that the Father stops him: "No more, my child, of this! You are too weary, too hungry — enough of your sin, your evil. Now shall you see how it shall be buried out of sight beneath the excess of my bounty and loving-kindness."

"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 fattened 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!" [Luke 15:22-24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke 15.22-24)

What variety, what ample sufficiency, what rich abundance, in the provision made to supply the needs of the needy one!

Clothing is there, and the very best.

Food is there, not only the bread which he craved, but the fatted calf.

Shoes are there for the bare feet.

Not only so, but also a ring for the hand.

Divine love gives with no grudging hand or stinted measure, but according to its own fullness, "Exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

Oh, sinner, now returning to a Father long forgotten, raise high your expectation of His mercy and grace. Far beyond all that you look for shall He grant unto you. Think not that you shall be regarded as a criminal who barely escapes a just condemnation. Nay, you shall be blessed and honored exceedingly. You shall be lifted up to an inheritance of grace and favor, great beyond all expression. The Lord delights to pour upon the heads of His pardoned ones, blessings without limit or end. "My God shall supply all your needs." "The Lord will give grace and glory — no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly." "He who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" "The Spirit also bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God — and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs of Christ."

I pity a poor blind world. It can see in the blessed Gospel, nothing but a sort of painful necessity. In the eyes of most men it is something needful when men are dying — but far be it from them to care for it while they may have this world's goods. Men think of the Gospel as a sort of bridge to escape Hell — but it is a bridge of thorns, and men would avoid it if they dared.

Is this the thought of any of my readers? If it is, the god of this world has blinded your eyes. You know nothing of the joy and blessedness which Christ's Gospel brings. You know not that there is that in it, which alone can fill every desire of your heart. It is not a mere expedient to escape a terrible woe, but it is "milk and wine," "living water," and "bread from Heaven," "gold and silver," yes, more to be valued than the gold of Ophir or the precious onyx! The forgiven sinner is a beloved child, a citizen of Zion, an inheritor of vast privileges, looking forward to the sure possession of an eternal kingdom and a crown.

But let us dwell more particularly on each feature of the honor paid to the younger son in the parable.

The father's servants came to minister to the needs of the long lost child.

Even so it is that all God's servants become the servants of His penitent ones. The elements — wind and water, and fire and air — the various events that daily occur — afflictions and tribulations, famines and wars, and pestilences — all are doing the bidding of the Great King, and shall work good to those who love Him. More than this, both the righteous and the wicked, consciously or unconsciously, are fulfilling His purposes, and shall in some way forward the interests of His redeemed people. Still more, the angels of God compass His children. They minister to them that shall be heirs of salvation. Had we but eyes to see it, many a time we should behold the young Christian striving for Christ's sake to do his work faithfully; perhaps everything apparently against him — hard words and hard work and but small means — and yet bright angels near, assisting him, though he knows it not, and rejoicing in his endeavors to please God.

But turn again to the story. Think of the abundant provision made to meet each need. The clothing, and the feast, and the fatted calf — and all else which the servants were bidden to prepare for the son.

We see here the grace which is laid up in Christ for sinners. "It has pleased the Father, that in Him shall all fullness dwell." He is "made of God unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." And all this grace, this fullness, this all-sufficiency in all things — is attainable in the very simplest way. It is not kept in an Ecclesiastical reservoir, to be doled out in the Confessional at the will of a fellow-sinner — but it is free to you the very moment that in Christ's Name you confess your sin to your Father in Heaven. It is to be enjoyed in all its blessedness by reliance only on Christ, by bringing to Him your empty vessel that He may fill it to overflowing.

"I lay my needs on Jesus:  
All fullness dwells in Him;  
He heals all my diseases,  
He does my soul redeem.

I lay my griefs on Jesus,  
My burdens and my cares;  
He from them all releases,  
He all my sorrow shares."

But we must pass on to notice the rich treasury of blessing which is opened to the penitent. We must examine more closely the provision which the father made for his long-lost son.

First, we learn that God's penitents are clothed with clothing of His own providing.

The tattered rags that the prodigal had worn in the far country are removed. The father's wardrobe is searched — that rich embroidered garment, that robe of finest linen is brought, and now the young man is well clad, and again fit to sit down in the father's house.

It is the same lesson as that taught by the prophet Zechariah. Joshua, as representative of the Church, stands before the Lord clothed in filthy clothing. Satan is there to resist him — but the angel of the Lord is there also. Then the command is given: Take away the filthy garment from him. And now he stands clothed in the changed clothing, with a fair mitre upon his head, and he is assured that his iniquity has passed from him.

Ah, think of this! While men wear their own polluted raiment — the garment of iniquity, the works of pride, of selfishness, the clothing of conscious guilt, of fear, of restlessness — how can they be at peace? If a man were to wear a garment possessing some terrible power of irritation, eating the flesh as fire, could there be anything of rest? But truly it is even thus in the inner man while sin is cherished and guilt is unforgiven. There is no rest — there is no true peace.

Blessed forever be the hand of Divine love that removes this filthy clothing! Blessed be the hand that at the same time washes in the fount of healing mercy, the soul that has been thus afflicted! Blessed be the hand that gives in place of it the pure and healthful robe of a perfect justification!

This robe possesses a luster, a glory beyond that of the brightest angel before the throne. It is the bridal vesture of the spouse of Heaven's King. And shall not our King take care that His bride on her bridal day has a glory far exceeding that of all others? In this robe, wrapped round and round with the merit and obedience of our Surety — may we stand blameless before the eternal Majesty of Heaven.

"I know that some beautiful clothing is wrought,  
A beautiful dress for poor sinners is bought;  
And when they have nothing at all of their own,  
They come to the Savior, and He puts it on.

'Tis white as the snow, and bright as the day,  
Not even the angels are fairer than they;  
In this they may stand by the heavenly throne,  
So welcome to God, through the well-beloved Son."

We read also of a RING being put on his hand. "Make me as one of your hired servants," had been the utmost hope of the son. See here how far God's thoughts are above our thoughts, and His ways above our ways. Not only food and clothing — but a ring for honor. Remember Pharaoh's conduct toward Joseph. When he wished to place him in the highest position next to himself in Egypt, He bade them put a ring on Joseph's finger. Ah, believe it, God puts honor on those who can see their own utter unworthiness — whose prayer is that of the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" He adopts them as His own. He calls them His dear children. They become brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus. They are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.

"He lifts up the poor out of the dust," even you, my brother or my sister in the very humblest position — if only you have forsaken your sin and entrusted your soul to the Savior, "and the beggar out of the dunghill, that He may set him with the princes, even the princes of His people."

And there were SHOES for his feet. Of course it is possible that some of these lesser features of the parable may be only the drapery — the filling up of the picture. But I rather think that another precious truth is intended here: God gives to those who come back to Him, grace and power to walk with Him. "Your shoes shall be iron and brass; and as your days so shall your strength be." "I will strengthen him in the Lord; and they shall walk up and down in His Name, says the Lord." "Your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace."

Let this teach us to trust in the strength and grace of the Lord. Take all the blessed hopes and promises of the Gospel, as the sandals which will enable you to tread safely the rough and stony places of your pilgrimage; and wherever your feet carry you, always wear these sandals. Never leave your religion behind. Let it always be seen in your life; let it be heard from time to time as you speak a word for Christ to others.

Last of all came the FEAST. Hungry and famished with long need and distress, and now weary after his long journey, how thankfully would the prodigal partake of the bounty provided!

So, dear reader, all sufficient nourishment for your soul shall you find in Jesus. He will be your "living bread." He will satisfy you "as with marrow and fatness." He will fill your poor longing heart with comfort and hope. "A merry heart," it is said, "is a continual feast." And you shall have a heart filled with a holy mirth and gladness.

Sin forgiven,  
grace overflowing,  
tender mercy and loving-kindnesses showered down upon you in rich measure,  
a peaceful conscience,  
a filial spirit,  
an open Heaven —  
these shall be a theme for praise and gratitude, both in this world and in the world to come!

6. Joy in Heaven

"Bring the fattened 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!" [Luke 15:23-24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke 15.23-24)

Step by step we have traced the course of the sinner.

He has fallen deeply, but he has arisen.

He has gone back to his father's house.

He has been heartily welcomed.

He has tasted the sweetness of forgiving love.

And now there is gladness — exceeding gladness, "So they began to celebrate!"

There is a mirth that begins — and soon comes to an end. It is like the fire of thorns that sparkles up so brightly for a season — and then as quickly dies out. Such is the mirth of those who live without God. Such was the mirth of the prodigal in his wild career, leading on to bitterness and sorrow. But there is a holy mirth that never ends. Such is the joy of God's people. Such is the joy in Heaven over repenting sinners.

But a strange picture is presented to us in the last verses of this parable. Whatever joy there is — one is set before us in whose heart there is no joy; but envy, jealousy, sullen displeasure. The elder son is in the field. He hears the sounds of rejoicing. He hears that the wanderer has come back. How does he feel? Does he sympathize with the gladness of the household? Does he, too, run in to welcome his brother? Does he give him another kiss of welcome, that nothing might be lacking in the family joy?

Nay, nay! Behold the knitted brow! Mark that look of anger! Hearken to these unkind speeches! Much has he to say of his own goodness — and much of his brother's faults. Nay, he casts off his relationship to him altogether. The father receives him as a son — yet will not he as a brother. It is, "This your son," not "This my brother," as his father had put it to him. Besides this, he will neither go in nor join the feast. Even his father's entreaties are all unavailing. He holds out still, and justifies his unbrotherly conduct.

What is all this about? What does Christ intend to teach us? Whom does He represent by the elder son?

Go back to the beginning of the chapter. Consider how the parable arose, and you will see that Christ is setting forth the envy and pride of the Scribes and Pharisees. They murmur because Christ deals so tenderly with rebels and outcasts. So He displays to them, as in a picture, their own character. He accepts for the moment their own estimate of themselves. He supposes that they are, as they think, sinners who need no repentance — sheep that have never been lost — the son ever faithful in his father's house. And taking this for granted, He shows them up as most miserably failing in charity and love. He shows, too, that even were they as good as they professed to be, there would be more joy over one who came with broken and contrite heart than over themselves.

But to tell them the full truth, as Christ often did — they were very far from the kingdom of God. Those who are built up in the pride of their own goodness and imagined merit can have no part in Christ; for He came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. He came to seek and to save those who are lost. And if a man has no part in Christ, he has no part in His kingdom and glory. "The first shall be last — and the last first." The humbled penitent shall go down to his house justified, while the self-glorying Pharisee shall abide under God's wrath. "Except you repent, you shall all likewise perish." "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees — you shall never enter into the kingdom of Heaven."

Reader, be not led astray by the dangerous mistake which Christ thus reproved. If you never know the humiliation of repentance — you can never know the joy of pardon. If you never stoop low — you can never rise high. If you enter not Heaven as a saved sinner — you can never enter it at all. Then go to the foot of the ladder. Down, proud eyes! Down, proud thoughts! Down, all you self-righteous excuses! Down, all you lofty self-gloryings! Come, deserving to to be damned — and you shall live and be saved forever.

Then let there ever be a real joy in your heart when you hear of rebels, wanderers, prodigals being brought back to God. Have sympathy with the joy of Heaven. Consider what joy there is over the salvation of one who had been lost.

It seems to me, that there is A SIX-FOLD JOY:

There is joy in the bosom of the Eternal Father, welcoming back alive one who had been as dead.

There is joy in the bosom of the Eternal Son, who rejoices as a shepherd over the sheep restored to the fold.

There is joy in the Eternal Spirit over one whom His grace has quickened and changed.

There is joy amidst the throng of angels who welcomed the Savior when born in Bethlehem, and who delight in each soul new-born in Him.

There is joy in the Church on earth, and in each true hearted member of it, as the living temple rises higher and higher by each fresh stone being laid upon the sure Foundation.

And, not least, joy in the heart of the penitent, who tastes the blessedness of reconciling mercy and sings the new song of redeeming love.

Oh, what joy there is, and what abundant reason for it! Is there joy when a great victory has been won, and a successful war concluded? Lo, what a victory is this over all the powers of Hell, over all the craft and might of the devil! What a glorious peace is here when the soul enters into a treaty of everlasting friendship with the great King!

Is there joy when a heir is born to a great estate, or to the throne of a kingdom? Lo, here is one born heir to an incorruptible inheritance and to an everlasting kingdom!

There is joy, too, because of the previous danger. Never shall I forget the anxiety of a mother in a village in Suffolk who had lost her little child at a school function, where some two thousand children were gathered together. Neither shall I forget her joy when, a few hours afterward, her child was restored to her.

Ah, think of souls going astray and perishing! Lost, lost, lost!

Lost to all holiness,  
lost to happiness,  
lost to God,  
lost to Heaven,  
lost to themselves!

How dark the prospect for each wandering one! How blessed the change when that soul is restored, forgiven, saved! Safe in the guardian care of the Good Shepherd! Safe in the faithful keeping of the Almighty Father! Yes, well may there be joy!

One more added to the hosts of the saved!

One more trophy of Christ's power over the enemy!

One more vessel molded for glory by the Divine Spirit!

One more voice in Heaven's choir!

One more citizen of the New Jerusalem!

Are you that one? Are you, indeed? Do you know it by the witness of the Spirit? Has there ever been a time when sin has been revealed to you as never before; when there has been a complete turning round — a turning away from sin and all earthly idolatries, and a yielding yourself unreservedly to love and serve and worship the true and living God? And is the fruit of this abiding? Is there . . .  
a daily repenting,  
a daily fleeing for refuge to Christ,  
a daily desire and effort to walk more and more in God's ways?

Make sure about it. Be content with nothing short of certainty. "It is appointed unto men once to die — and after that the judgment!" There is no uncertainty about this. It is fixed, determined, appointed of God. Therefore leave no doubt unsolved as to your readiness to meet God. What! if at last it is said to you, in spite of all your knowledge, in spite of all your church going and Bible reading and profession, "Friend, how did you get in here, not having on a wedding garment?"

But if you are one of the Lord's people, make it your daily aim to multiply the joys of Heaven by bringing souls to the Savior. Why should yours be "a starless crown," as the young lady expressed it, who feared she had never brought a soul to Christ? Why not strive to win for Him the souls of parents, children, brothers, sisters, friends?

And be not discouraged by the difficulties that lie in your path. Many a precious sheaf of good grain has been reaped from most unpromising soil.

A faithful servant of Christ visited a Hindu in a prison, who was under sentence of death for murder. Never was there a case of more decided conversion to God. He grew amazingly in knowledge and in spiritual experience within a few weeks. Having a wonderful memory, he learned passage after passage of God's Word. When he came to the scaffold, he said he feared not to die, for "the messengers were waiting to carry him to Jesus Christ." He then fell on his knees and thus prayed: "O Jesus Christ, I am a great sinner. I have sinned so many times that I can't count my sins. My sins are greater than these mountains here. The stars of Heaven may be counted — but my sins cannot. The sands of the sea may be numbered — but my wickednesses are innumerable. My sin my soul is black as coal. As coal is made white into ashes by fire — so, O Christ, wash my soul by Your precious and holy blood which You have shed on the cross. Amen." And so he died.

I will mention another case. A prisoner in Winchester jail was brought to repentance and faith in Christ. His heart was full of compassion for the souls of his fellow-prisoners. One day the chaplain grieved to find him in the cell allotted to those who had broken prison rules. What had been his offence? Not often do we hear of prisoners deserving commendation for transgressing such regulations; but I think it was so here. It was contrary to rule to speak to a prisoner in another cell; but so desirous was this man to do good to another, that he read to him this parable of the Prodigal, and spoke to him of God's great love to sinners.

Oh, that every one of us were equally alive in this blessed work! Shame on us, every one, that we are so sluggish and indifferent to the claims of souls that are perishing! The time has come that every Christian man — aye — and every Christian woman, ought to be a bold and faithful witness for Christ.

Work for Christ.

Live for Christ.

Speak for Christ.

Be always on the look-out for open doors. Give away Christian books. Give away a suitable tract in the railway carriage, by the wayside, in the churchyard or cemetery. Give of your means freely and liberally to support Christian institutions. Above all, offer the frequent prayer: "O God, send upon Your Church Your life-giving Spirit. Raise up many faithful ministers of Your Word. May Your kingdom come — may Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

Thus living, you will not live in vain. Your life will not be a lost one, if by faith you have laid hold of Christ for yourself, and have witnessed for Christ. There may be those who strive hard to win some earthly distinction, others to reach the goal of great wealth — but the noblest ambition is to be a worker with Christ for the salvation of souls. "He who wins souls is wise." And what you do, do quickly. The time is short. Today is all we can call our own.

"I must work hard," said a young seamstress, "for I have much to do, and my candle is nearly burnt out, and I have not another."

How true is this in a deeper sense! Life is passing away; our light will soon go out. Now is the only time in which we can win sinners for the Savior.

O Lord Jesus, teach us to follow in Your blessed footsteps. Every day, every hour, may we work for You, and strive to bring sinners to the knowledge of Your love! Amen.