

Initial Help and Hope for Parents of Prodigals

By Shirley Elliott Johns

When most parents first learn they are expecting a child, they are utterly delighted at the thought of parenthood and all that entails. It's not long before they're dreaming about what their baby will look like and imagining what his life will be like. Expectant parents fantasize about the future and are carried away on the wings of anticipation. And for those whose desire is to teach their children about Jesus and center their homes around the precious truth of God's Word, they can envision nothing less than having a godly home with children who are eager to learn about Jesus and follow Him.

There's nothing wrong with aspiring to that kind of home. But what happens when a baby grows into adulthood and chooses to make a conscious decision to live in a totally opposite way from the godly instruction and upbringing of his mom and dad? The point at which the U-Turn is exposed is nothing less than agonizing for these parents and can hijack their hearts if the gospel is not at the forefront of their thinking.

In Genesis 3:16, the result of Eve's sin is recorded. We are told that her pain in childbirth will be multiplied, and "in pain she will bring forth children." As a result of her sin, and as a consequence of her rebellion against almighty God, all of womankind will experience multiplied pain in childbirth – in reality, a pain that will endure throughout her life as a mom. For most moms, her level of joy or fear, and her overall general demeanor is frequently an indicator of how her child is doing in life. As goes the child – so goes the mom.

Dads are not excluded. They possess a charge that has been handed down to them, to be the patriarchal leader of their homes. Most dads feel an enormous weight of responsibility for the future of the children. Yet, as children grow into adulthood, a father's grasp upon his child's future and eventual life decisions wanes.

Parents understandably want only 'good' for their children. They do everything within their influence, ability, and control to ensure that 'good' happens. Their job, as they see it, is to guard their young and impressionable babes from ravenous wolves. But there comes a time when little lambs grow into sheep and children grow into adults. And although a child may have been raised in a godly home and trained in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, there is no accompanying promise or guarantee that an adult child will share his mom and dad's love for Jesus Christ.

God Looks on the Heart

When the Bible speaks of the heart, it is describing the will, intellect, emotions, and desires of an individual. The heart is the control center of a person, and apart from Christ, it has the capacity to sinfully and selfishly dominate one's thinking, feelings, and actions no matter the age.

Jeremiah 17:9 - “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”

Mark 7:20-23 - “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Matthew 6:21 - “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Hebrews 4:12 – “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Our hearts are alive, and they have thoughts and intentions, as described in Hebrews 4:12. They have a planned and desired direction. Our hearts drive us and want to take us somewhere. If our hearts aren't yielded to Jesus Christ, they will invariably take us down roads of deceitfulness and wickedness (Jeremiah 17:9). God's Word has the capacity to pierce and breakthrough to the deepest thoughts and intentions of the heart.

What is going on in the heart of a parent when he feels pleasure and overall satisfaction because of his child's accomplishments? There is nothing inherently sinful about that. Godly parents realize that every blessing is ultimately from the hand of the Lord, and they are most grateful to Him. The problem comes when parents give more attention to their child's outward accomplishments than the inward, Christ-centered work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart of the child. To give greater accolade to a child's outward achievements lays a foundation for a pharisaical belief system and works-oriented righteousness.

When children behave well, parents are pleased and loving towards their son or daughter. But the converse is also often true. When adult children make a choice to live apart from what was taught to them in God's Word, parents are heartbroken. But some parents respond with self-pity or anger, and in situations like this, the idolatrous heart of the parent is exposed. The adult child and his good behavior have become an idol of that parent's heart. It is not uncommon for parents to allow their children to be the center of their world and make life about them, but we are told in Scripture to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37). Our love for Jesus Christ is to be first and foremost.

No Guarantee for a Godly Home

“A godly home does not guarantee godly kids, but a godly home can lay the foundation for the grace of God and the gospel of Christ that alone can produce godly kids.” Proverbs 22:6 says, “train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old, he will not depart from it.” This verse is not a promise. It is also not an indictment to be used against parents if their children are

not following the Lord. Most translations of this verse make it sound as if parents are guaranteed godly kids if they will do their part and teach their children the Bible, take them to church, and have daily family devotions. This verse, however, is a warning to parents and a more accurate translation of the verse is, "If you bring up a child in his way, when he is old, he will not depart from it." In the Hebrew, the phrase *the way he should go* is not there. It reads, *bring up a child in his way and when he is old, he will not depart from it*. What is a child's way? It is the same as *our* way. It is the way of selfishness.

The picture in Proverbs 22:6 is that of a parent deliberately getting *in the way* of the child and his natural bent toward selfishness. Christian parents who have desired to live godly lives before their children must trust God to work in the hearts of their children. Salvation is by grace and through faith (Ephesians 2:8). When children turn out godly, it is only the grace of God in their lives. When children grow up in a Christian home, choose a prodigal path to follow, but eventually turn to Christ, it is the grace of God in their lives. And when children grow up in a Christian home and reject the godly instruction of their parents, it is still the grace of God that must invade their lives and rescue them from themselves.

Parents cannot judge the heart of the prodigal adult child, but they can see the outward fruit of his decisions and lifestyle, and with time hearts are revealed. Some adult children will admit they are not believers and don't wish to be, while other adult children profess to be a believer, yet live lives completely apart from the Lord. As difficult as this time can be for parents, it is a blessing when they are able to get a glimpse into their child's sinful heart. It is the heart and not the outward behavior that matters most.

We Were Made to Worship

When parents realize their prodigal adult child may not be a genuine believer, or when faith in Christ has been clearly denounced, the parents are able to understand their son or daughter's past thinking, feelings and actions and is surely able to pray more effectively. Our hearts were designed for worship, and if we are not worshipping our Creator, we *will* worship someone or something. God alone is to be the object of our worship. He alone is holy and worthy. Exodus 20:3 is a visible command to us that there are to be no other gods before God Himself. A heart that is continually bent toward sin and self can be defined as a worship disorder. "Worship is always the problem, and worship is always the solution." When we find our joy and satisfaction in anything other than Christ, we become idolaters. "For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14).

Prodigal adult children who have grown up in godly homes and have turned from the truth are making a conscious decision to worship themselves and their desires instead of God. The war rages in their hearts continually. An adult child's decision to live independently of God is not a personal attack against his parents. Although they will naturally grieve as they watch their son or daughter reject biblical truth, the rebellion is aimed directly at God Himself. He is the one who is ultimately being rejected. The word of God is being challenged. His authority is being questioned.

As challenging as life may be for those of us who are moms and dads of prodigal adult children, the season we are in is not a time for us to shrink back or lose heart. We can be assured that God is aware of everything going on. Nothing is taking Him by surprise. He loves when we walk closely together with Him in dependence upon His strength and power. He loves when we call upon Him to intervene for us on behalf of our children (Jer. 33:3).

One of the temptations for parents of prodigal or unsaved adult children is to turn inward and become absorbed with self and with the problems of his son or daughter. It is easy for us to lose our focus and spiritual direction, especially if much of our own lives had been immersed in the lives of our children. The Lord calls us to lives of faithfulness, no matter what trial we face. In this way the glory of God is on display and the focus is on Christ rather than on us. The temptation for us as moms and dads will always be to withdraw and keep a *self-focus* instead of a *God-focus* or *other-focus*. We often feel like running and hiding.

The best thing we can do is to simply continue being faithful in our personal responsibilities. These may include the parenting of remaining children in the home, being faithful at our place of employment or faithful to fulfill commitments at our home church. It is important for us to keep serving the Lord by doing the things we were already doing. Our motivation for this kind of loving and authentic behavior can be nothing less than a deep and penetrating love for the Lord Jesus Christ. It is love for Christ that will control us as parents to do the things we know we should do. "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this; that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (II Cor. 5:14-15).

As unsaved children grow into adulthood parents are faced with challenging situations since adult children are no longer under the authority of parents. Thankfully, God's Word is the source of help and hope. Here are some biblical principles and practical help to guide parents during this difficult time:

1. Be Christ to your unbelieving adult child. Welcome them, love them, share meals together, have peaceful conversations where your hearts connect. Think of ways you can show the love of Christ to them whether they live near you, with you, or out of town. Connect through text messages, emails, phone calls and cards. For some parents it may be a one-sided relationship when their adult child does not want a relationship with them. In times like this we must remember that our motive for all we do is the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31). God will lovingly reveal our hearts to us when there is no response or when our child cancels or does not show up. We become Christ when we show love to our prodigal, expecting nothing in return (Romans 5:8).
2. Guard against speculations like, "what if", "I wonder", and "if only". As parents, it's easy to beat ourselves up, by doing a meticulous review of the previous ten to twenty years, and begin to think, "If we had only done this, and not that", "If we had only said 'this' instead of what we did say", maybe our child would be different. These kinds of thoughts

can consume the hearts of Christian parents, paralyzing them with fear and making it easy for them to experience despair and hopelessness. God's Word teaches us to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). Dwelling on the 'what if's' will get parents nowhere and can easily tempt us with fear of man which can result in making decisions based on something other than biblical truth. This was me in the beginning when I realized my young adult daughter was not a believer after all.

3. When adult children are living in the home and parents become aware they are acting deceitfully and making choices to follow Satan and self, parents should lovingly address their behavior. If they refuse to abide by house rules, parents should tell them to leave within a short timeframe. Perhaps only a couple of weeks. This helps the prodigal grasp the seriousness of his thinking and behavior. It is heartbreaking for parents to do this, but an important decision, especially when there are younger children living in the home who may be influenced by older siblings. The parent can consider making a behavior contract. Signing it does not mean they are in agreement but does mean they understand what is expected and what the results of abiding or not abiding will be.
4. For parents who have young children in the home and an adult child who is not living at home but is living a lifestyle of drug or alcohol abuse, homosexuality or transitioning their gender, it is important for parents to communicate truthfully to the younger child concerning the ideas and lifestyles of their older siblings. Even with young elementary children, when it comes to a transitioning adult child, a parent can simply explain, "God made people male and female, but many people today do not like the way God made them and so they try to live like the opposite sex." It is also unwise to allow younger children to be alone with an older sibling since you do not want them to be influenced by the lifestyle of their older sibling and see their behavior presented in a 'positive light'. These challenging days can present many teachable moments to younger children. Nonetheless, parents can and should seek to maintain a relationship with their prodigal son or daughter while refusing to compromise godly principles (Romans 12:18).
5. Allow the natural consequences of foolish decisions to run their course. Don't interfere with what God may want to accomplish in the life of your young adult. The temptation for parents is to protect and rescue, but the outcome and benefits to the prodigal can be life-changing when parents allow their children to experience the effects of the 'sowing and reaping' principle found in Galatians 6:7-8. No one helped the younger son in Luke 15 or offered to have him dine at their table. God used the natural consequence of hunger and hitting rock bottom to drive the young prodigal back to his father with humility, a heart of repentance, and a willingness to work as one of his father's hired servants. For parents whose adult children are going through church discipline, although heartbreaking to watch, we know that God ordains this process. As Jay Adams describes, "... it is God's provision for good order in His church that creates conditions for the instruction and growth of the members. Discipline has a positive function."

6. God alone has the power to save – we as parents are called to train our children in the instruction of the Lord, but salvation is a gift from God, by faith and through grace. There is nothing we can do to earn it for ourselves or for our children (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are not the Savior. It's easy for parents to believe the lie that they alone can speak truth to the heart of their adult prodigal. That is not true. God can use anyone and anything to open blind eyes and soften hard hearts to the gospel. It is the work of the Holy Spirit.
7. It is wonderful when parents and adult children can enjoy peaceful conversations and enjoy being in the lives of each other. However, there may be times when it is loving and wise for parents to distance themselves and even cease communication with their prodigal. It depends on the situation and the heart motive must be examined. A relationship with your adult child is a wonderful desire but cannot be forced. When adult children are demanding, harsh, abrasive or attacking when they are with you, then it may be necessary for a while to let them go and not pursue communication until behavior changes. We never want to have the attitude of 'washing our hands' of our children. That would be unloving. But it is also unloving and unwise to give freedom to a prodigal adult child to selfishly explode in anger towards you, the parent.
8. Parents must be discerning about advice or counsel given by well-meaning friends. This can be unbiblical at times and be rooted in emotion rather than truth. Some counsel may indicate that love and confronting sin are in opposition to each other when biblically they are not. It is unloving to watch anyone heading for a cliff and not attempt to help that person avoid the pain of the fall. Obviously, this is done with discernment and care depending on the situation and context. Both friends and family have confidently assured me that my daughter *will* turn and be saved one day. But I respond with, "I don't know that to be true and I cannot put my hope there. My hope rests in the Lord."
9. Keep praying and never lose hope! My daughter's salvation is at the top of my prayer list. In the beginning when I became aware she was not a Christian, I'd hoped it would be a sprint until the day she acknowledged Jesus as Lord in her life. But over these 14 years, it has become a marathon and I continue to find hope in God and great comfort in Isaiah 59:1 which says, "*Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear*". Holding tight to the secure belief that God is sovereign over my daughter's life has allowed me to take a step back and quiet my racing heart and noisy soul. It has allowed me to sleep at night when I might be prone to worry and believe the worst. Other hope giving passages that remind parents to rest in the Lord are Psalm 27:14 and Lamentations 3:25-26.

Praying Biblically for a Prodigal or Unbelieving Child

As time passes, parents begin to realize they may be in this for the long haul. Life isn't changing, and they have started to settle into a "new normal." How should we be praying for our sons and daughters? I had the privilege of listening to Dr. Stuart Scott speak on this topic and here

are the ways he suggested. He understands since he has been the father of a prodigal adult child himself.

1. *Heavenly Father, we love you. Thank you for the blessing of our children and for your wisdom in giving them to us.*

It is tempting at times, for us to feel just the opposite. When things are going well with our children, we're thankful. But when a child rebels, we forget that we're still called to be thankful in all things. "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:18). Our prodigal or unbelieving adult child is a gift and blessing from God's loving hand. He was wise and knew what he was doing when he entrusted our son or daughter to us. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord" (Isa. 55:8).

2. *Thank you that you have given us our children for our sanctification so that we can love you and them more, and glorify you more, and reflect your wisdom.*

God can use even unbelieving adult children in our lives for the purpose of developing Christ-like qualities. He has the power to take the most difficult and painful of situations, and use them for our good and his glory. God can use absolutely any circumstance as a means of killing pride and cultivating humility in the hearts of self-righteous parents (Rom. 8:28-29; James 4:6).

3. *Grant us wisdom and grace to train and instruct them in the Lord.*

Apart from the wisdom of God, our wisdom is foolishness. We must depend fully upon the strength and grace of the Lord and he promises wisdom when we ask in faith. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" James 1:5-8).

4. *We plead for you to save them **if** you will and **when** you will.*

Naturally, we should pray for the salvation of our son or daughter; but salvation is of God and we have no power to save them or sanctify them. The Lord is never hurried, and he is never late. His timing is perfect to save all those who are his.

5. *We ask you to have mercy on him in spite of his folly and our failures.*

Praise God for his mercies that are new every morning (Lam. 3:23). Praying for the compassion and mercy reflects humility, acknowledging the foolishness of our child and our own shortcomings as a parent.

6. *Help us to remember and repeat your promises to ourselves.*

Memorizing and meditating on God's word will help us keep a focus on Christ and the truth of his word. It will guard us against wrong or sinful thinking (Ps. 119:11), and it will keep us from falling apart or perishing in our affliction (Ps. 119:92).

7. *Help us to live holy lives as we parent, in our minds, hearts and responses.*

As time passes, we will grow to hate sin more and more, and will be driven to the cross and the holiness of Jesus Christ. And that is a good thing!

8. *Help our joy and delight to be in Christ alone, even during the times when we are sorrowful, yet rejoicing.*

This is a wonderful prayer for us to pray. Our true source of joy and delight is in Christ alone, even though we may be sad over the path our adult child is taking. It's an unusual mix of sorrow and joy and is only possible through a deep and abiding relationship with our Savior.

9. *Give us grace to do what is right, even if others, or our children do not understand or are upset with us.*

In Proverbs 29:25 we read, "The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe." Praying for grace to do what we believe to be godly is a good request for us to pray. Don't be surprised if your son or daughter becomes upset with you, since you will purposefully be attempting to frustrate their way (Prov. 22:6).

10. *Keep us from pride and help us to humbly seek help and the prayers of other Christians.*

There is always great benefit when we humble ourselves by asking for practical help, godly wisdom and prayer from others. God blesses the one whose heart is soft and humble, not hardened and full of pride (I Pet. 5:6).

11. *Lord, we trust your sovereignty, wisdom, goodness, and faithfulness.*

This prayer acknowledges our trust and dependence upon the character of who God is. It is admitting that God is everything and that apart from him we are nothing (John 15:5). It is a prayer of humility and of praise. We may have influence over our son or daughter, but we have no control or power over them.

12. *We look forward to seeing how you are going to work in our lives, our children's lives, and the opportunities you are going to give us for your glory.*

As we who go through this kind of trial usually have an opportunity, or many opportunities to “comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (II Cor. 1:4). Parents of prodigal children are often at different stages in the process. Nonetheless, God can use us to minister to the hearts of other hurting moms and dads. Trials are God-ordained opportunities for us to reflect the glory of God in the way we respond.

The Battle Rages and Prayer is the Answer

A trial such as this can be so uncomfortable. These are deep waters and it’s important for parents to remember that God desires to work in the heart of the parent as much as in the heart of the prodigal. At times it can *seem* as if nothing is happening, but we can be assured that God is still in control. This is a spiritual battle and prayer is the answer. Prodigals need prayer, but we as their parents also need prayer to endure and to respond to our children in a way that honors God.

We have an enemy who seeks to discourage us as parents. He disseminates lies through unsuspecting unbelievers, as well as untaught, uninformed, and non-discerning believers who adhere to the world’s philosophies. We read in John 8:44 that Satan is the father of lies. He has nothing to do with truth because there is no truth in his character. His number one task is to deceive us into believing all sorts of lies concerning our adult children. One lie that many parents often believe is that their son or daughter will never change. That lie brings such hopelessness to the hearts of moms and dads. Those who believe it are virtually erasing God from their thinking. How we must remember that there is no truth in any of the enemy’s words. He has been the deceiver since the beginning of time.

Satan not only deceives. He also seeks to kill and to destroy. “Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith. . .” (I Pet. 5:8). Sober-minded believers have clear thinking that results from the study and understanding of God’s pure and holy word. When we as parents make conscious choices to stand upon the truth of God’s word, we won’t be easily swept away by the world’s thinking. Consequently, we will be resisting our enemy and his lies, and will be aligning our thoughts with truth. Only then, will we be kept and protected from the onslaught of fear that can result when our thinking is unbiblical, and when the object of our trust is someone, or something other than God.

The character of Jesus Christ is contrasted from that of our enemy. Every word of Satan is a lie and is detrimental to us. But every word of God embodies truth and is beneficial for our souls. “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

Jeremiah 17:5-8 provides a vivid picture of the person who trusts in man (the world’s philosophies), and the one who trusts in God.

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land” (verses 5-6).

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream and does not fear when heat comes for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit” (verses 7-8).

As parents, we can choose to trust man (the world’s thinking), or we can make a determined and conscious choice to trust God and his Word. Trusting God is always the remedy for an anxious heart. This passage in Jeremiah tells me that I don’t have to be fearful when testing comes. And in the heat of my most difficult or heartbreaking of situations I can, by God’s grace, nonetheless live a God-honoring life, bearing fruit for his glory. That thrills me and gives me hope! That is truth that sets me free from the fear that can result if I choose to think about my situation from a worldly perspective, rather than God’s perspective, based solely upon his sufficient word.

In Philippians 4:6-7, we are told to “not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” As we humbly come before the Lord in prayer, with thankful hearts, acknowledging our trust in him and in his purposes, we will receive God’s peace. Peace that promises to watch over and protect our hearts and our minds from fear, worry, doubts and anxiety.

Although our situation may or may not change, we are not without hope. Our hope and confidence is in Christ, and *not* in our situation changing. God can do great things to make us more like Jesus as we endure difficult trials, and there’s nothing hopeless about that! Those of us who are parents of prodigal or unbelieving adult children often agree that we have *learned* and are *continuing* to learn to “pray without ceasing” (I Thess. 5:17). Prayer becomes an ongoing conversation between us and our heavenly father as we draw near to him in dependence, trusting him with our children’s spiritual future. And prayer brings peace (Phil. 4:7). The desperation and anxiousness that we felt in the beginning of the trial begins to subside, and in its place is a sweet surrender to the Lord. Trials are God-ordained opportunities for us to reflect the glory of God in the way we respond.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear. . .” (Ps. 46:1). As mentioned above, fear is a result of our thinking. If we are not thinking in accordance to truth, sinful fear will be sure to grip our hearts, and the more we think unbiblically, the more fear we will experience. Let us be careful to recall to our minds that, “greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world” (I John 4:4).

Dear parents, let us trust God and not fear the future when it comes to the lives of our prodigal or spiritually lost adult children. Instead of becoming angry as a result of our circumstances, let us choose to display a strong and quiet trust in the Lord who is perfect in his love, his wisdom and his sovereignty!

Taken from the book, From Heartbroken to Hopeful by Shirley Elliott
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