

THE PRODIGAL SON

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“This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:24).

Jesus said that a man had two sons. The younger son went to his father and demanded his inheritance. The Word says he went to a far-off country, and there he wasted all that he had with riotous living. A famine arose in the land, and the young man had nothing to eat. And so he hired himself out to go into the fields to feed the swine. He was so hungry that he would have eaten the food of the pigs. But suddenly, he came to himself. He said to himself, “I will go to my father and ask him for forgiveness, and I will become as a hired servant to him.” We can picture the young man coming back after a long journey. Will his father forgive him? Will his father be angry with him?

His father is waiting for him! His father sees him at a distance, runs to him, and embraces him. The father has compassion on his son. And at the end of this story, we hear those words of the father to the older brother: “It is right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”

There is something in each of us that is touched by the power of this parable. This is because it is a story of hope. We might have a friend or relative who seems to turn from the Lord. We might have a friend who for a time seems lost, spiritually wounded, in a time of spiritual crisis. And the everlasting message of this parable is that there is a way back. The Lord gives us a path to restore our souls no matter how hopeless the situation.

The father figure in this parable is so important. It is a picture of the Lord Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ as our heavenly Father. And what we see is a picture of the Divine love. When the young man returns, we don't see the father demanding payment or retribution for the son's sins. We don't see anything that suggests the traditional dogmas of Divine atonement or punishment for sin. Those old-fashioned, traditional ideas of God are not based on Scripture. In this parable we see only forgiveness after the long journey of repentance and reformation. The father celebrates his son's return. And the Lord rejoices when we come back to our spiritual home.

The story of the prodigal son is the personal story of our rebirth and regeneration. It is the story of the Lord's healing our troubled hearts. And in this story, we find, step by step, the journey that we take as the Lord leads us on the path to heaven. Let's look at the steps of regeneration that are outlined in this story and that have been opened to us by the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church.

Step number one is permission, what the Heavenly Doctrine calls the “doctrine of permission.” In this story the father allows his son to leave and go to a distant land. It almost seems that the father willingly gives his son all of his inheritance, knowing that this will lead to grief and pain for the son. And how can this be? Why would a loving father do this?

The Heavenly Doctrine says that this permission to leave is a picture of the magnitude of the

Lord's love and wisdom in our lives. The Lord loves us so much that He will even allow us to turn from Him at times, if this is what we truly choose. He will allow us to turn from Him and even experience the consequences—the pain and suffering—of that turning away. And this is said to be of His permission, not of His will.

He grieves when we turn and suffer the consequences of evil. The pain of evil is not the Lord's punishment; no, the Lord weeps for us. Still, in His love He allows this because, in His infinite wisdom, He foresees that sometimes it is only through the process, the journey, that we can finally choose what is good, fight for what is good, and make what is good our own. So number one: the Lord permits us to leave.

And step number two: If we do choose to turn from Him, He is not passive. If we do choose to turn away from Him, the Lord continues to protect and guide us every step of the way. He is with us on the perilous journey. We have a beautiful teaching in the Heavenly Doctrine that during times of temptation and despair it seems as if the Lord has left us, whereas, in fact, He is closer than ever. The Lord is closest to us in times of temptation.

In this parable it seems that once the son left home and went to the distant land, his father was out of the picture. It seems that the father just stayed home and worried. It is important to realize that this is written from the viewpoint of the son. When we turn from God it *seems* as if He is distant from us; that's how it feels to us. But from the Lord's perspective, He never leaves us. If we could re-write this parable from the Lord's viewpoint, the father would be with that son in the distant land, actively protecting, guiding and leading him.

How does the Lord protect us when we are in the distant land? First there is the famine. The Lord allows us to hunger in the distant land. He allows us to hunger for righteousness. The Lord will never let us be completely satisfied with evil. No, something inside of us will hunger for a life that is higher. And it is this hunger that finally causes us to turn back to the Lord. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

Another thing the Lord does when we are in the distant land is to withhold us from further evils. In the parable this is represented by the son being almost at the point of eating the food of the pigs, but he doesn't eat it. A person who has been in a state of disorder will often say, "Yes, I was in terrible disorder, but somehow there was something preventing me from going all the way down to hell. Something was holding me back." The Lord's hand is there protecting us from the hells, even when we are in active evil.

The Lord does a third thing for us when we are in that distant land. He causes us to remember our home; He lets us remember our spiritual home. In the story the son remembered his father's house. We hear the words, "I will arise and go to my father." It's a memory of heavenly life. The Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church speak about good memories that stay with us always. These memories that remain with us are sometimes called "heavenly remains." No matter where we are in life, we all have a memory of heavenly loves (sometimes from our earliest childhood) stored up in the interior parts of our minds. And these memories temper and bend our life back to our spiritual home, just when we are at the height of temptation and despair.

But then we come to the climax of the story, the turning point, and it represents the turning point in our lives. The story says that the young man was in the field, far from his home, hungry. Then, when he was at his lowest moment of despair, this son came to his senses. One translation says, "He came to himself." This is the beginning of true repentance. For the first time, we find the son thinking the words, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."

The young man suddenly sees his life in a new way. It is as if his eyes are opened. It is interesting that the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church uses the word "inversion" in talking about this change. In our lives, when it seems as if things can't get any worse, suddenly we come to this turning point. We come to a moment of change, and our lives are totally inverted. Everything is changed from top to bottom. The love of self, which used to be at the top in importance, is now at the bottom. In its place is a love of the Lord and the neighbor. We hear the words, "I will go and serve my father; I will hire myself to him; I will be as servant to him," and we begin to lay down our lives. Jesus said, "He that shall lose his life for my sake shall find it."

And we find that there is a road back home. The younger son journeyed back home, retracing every step that He had taken. The Heavenly Doctrine calls this process "reformation." Notice the power of that word; the Lord literally "re-forms" us. He makes us anew.

Then there is a time of rejoicing. Here are some of the internal meanings of this part of the parable. The ring the father put on his son's finger pictures "internal conjunction." The robe pictures "truths of our faith and trust in God." The sandals picture our life, changed even to the most "down-to-earth" parts. And the fatted calf pictures our life of charity.

So this entire fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke deals with the topic of lost things and how the Lord's rejoices when what was lost is found again. Let us take these wonderful teachings and apply them to our lives, reaching out with hope and forgiveness to those who are hurting, supporting them on the Divine path of restoration. And let us receive the love of the Lord in ourselves, as He comes to restore our own lives toward heaven, realizing that in His sight we are all in need of Divine healing and forgiveness. This parable teaches us the Lord's everlasting message of hope: "It is right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 84; Luke 15; *True Christian Religion* 394-5