

Every House Has Its Trials!

There's no such thing as a perfect family, which is why we have the saying that "every house has its trials." In the following parable of the prodigal (lost) son told in Luke 15 (which is generally regarded as the best short story ever written), tension existed between the father and his two sons. This short story can be divided into four sections, so we will pause here over the next few days. Enjoy!

Luke 15 (parable—episode 1)

¹¹Jesus continued, 'There was a man who had two sons.

Tension: Tension between father and son.

¹²The younger son spoke to his father. He said, 'Father, give me my share of the family property.' So the father divided his property between his two sons.

Relief of Tension: Looking for 'greener' pastures.

¹³Not long after that, the younger son packed up all he had. Then he left for a country far away. *There he wasted his money on wild living.*

Result: Misfortune and disillusionment

¹⁴He spent everything he had.

'Then the whole country ran low on food. So the son didn't have what he needed. (NIRV)

The opening sentence of this wonderful short story is short and sweet: "There was a man who had two sons." The youngest of these sons yearned for excitement in his life. He wanted to have a bit of fun. He was a real party animal. However, to do this, he needed money, so he approached his dad with a strange and surprising request: "Father, give me my share of the family property" (v. 12). By making this request, the young man revealed that he wished his father were dead. The father's reaction was just as strange and surprising: "So the father divided his property between his two sons" (v. 12).

In other words, the father allowed his young son to go. He knew that there was only one way that he would learn his lesson—the hard way! Sadly enough, the younger son went looking for things that were already present in his father's house. He went looking for joy, security, love and his place in life. To put it bluntly, he went looking for a home away from home! Nor did he keep the backdoor open so that he could return.

Misfortune and disillusionment awaited the young man in the foreign places he visited. Two disasters hit him simultaneously: first he ran out of money (which, of course, was his own fault), and then famine hit the land (which was beyond his control but nevertheless aggravated his situation). This young man lacked wisdom. Wisdom will help us to not become totally disillusioned.



Lord, help me to live every day with wisdom and insight.

The function of wisdom is to discriminate between good and evil.

—Cicero (106 B.C.–43 B.C.), *Ancient Roman lawyer, writer, scholar, orator and statesman*

The Big Question Concerning Our Problems

Sooner or later, we all make mistakes. Unfortunately, our mistakes often have dire consequences. Some people's problems are just so much greater than others. However, the big question concerning our problems is not how we got into them in the first place but how we will get out of them. Let us see how this young man got out of his dilemma.

Luke 15 (parable—episode 2)

Tension: A Jew looks after pigs!

¹⁵He went to work for someone who lived in that country, who sent him to the fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶The son wanted to fill his stomach with the food the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.

Relief of Tension: The prodigal son sees the light!

¹⁷Then he began to think clearly again. He said, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food! But here I am dying from hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go back to my father. I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven. And I have sinned against you. ¹⁹I am no longer fit to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers.'

Result: He returns to his father!

²⁰So he got up and went to his father. (NIRV)

As we mentioned yesterday, the youngest son was hit hard in the foreign country. He lost all his money (because he squandered it,) all his values (because he practiced free sex) and all his dignity (because a Jew who looked after pigs was condemned by his fellow countrymen). His urge to eat the food of pigs was lowest point to which a Jew could stoop. Furthermore, he also lost his right and claim to be acknowledged as a son.

The young man had bumped his head very hard. But there was one thing he could not lose—his father's love. This time, the young man did not long for what was in his father's hand but what was in his father's heart. The story's turning point is in verse 17, when he came to his senses. His need made him realize how stupid he had been, and his misery made him long for the abundance in his father's house. He decided to confess his sins to his father and to God.

The young man's sinful lifestyle and wrong attitude toward life landed him in big trouble. However, the most important thing to remember is not how he got into his situation but how he got out of it. Where does one start? Exactly where this young man started out. He realized that he had sinned. He did not make all kinds of excuses to justify himself or plead for leniency—just for mercy.



Lord Jesus, help me to be honest in confessing my sins to You and to others.

The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.

—Saint Augustine (354–386), *Christian theologian, rhetor, North African bishop and doctor of the Roman Catholic Church*

This Is Too Good to Be True!

We often use phrases such as “this is too good to be true” when we react to something wonderful that happens in our lives. In the following passage in Luke, we have an episode that is also too good to be true. Let’s have a look!

Luke 15 (parable—episode 3)

Tension: A waiting father.

²⁰While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him. He was filled with tender love for his son. He ran to him. He threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Relief of Tension: The prodigal (lost) son shows remorse.

²¹The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.’

Result: His father forgives him.

²²But 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. ²³Bring the fattest calf and kill it. Let’s have a big dinner and celebrate.

²⁴This son of mine was dead. And now he is alive again. He was lost. And now he is found.’

’So they began to celebrate. (NIRV)

The youngest son must have returned home with a fearful heart, wondering: *What will my father say?* Yet it is interesting to note that the father did five things before he even said *anything* to him. According to verse 20, these five reactions were:

1. He saw his son while he was still a long way off—which means that he had waited for him all the time!
2. He pitied him deeply—his eyes were not filled with anger but with tears.
3. He ran to meet him—he took the initiative.
4. He embraced him—the prodigal son experienced unconditional love.
5. He kissed him—this was considered undignified conduct for an Oriental father, but it did not bother him to act in this way because the news about his son’s return was overwhelming.

In this manner, the father eased his son’s final steps on his return. When his son expressed remorse (v. 21), the father did not answer directly but arranged a feast for him. The father’s actions indicated that he had forgiven his son. In this parable, the prodigal son represents the sinners and tax collectors. The father is God. God is the father who always rejoices when someone who went astray returns home, shows remorse and confesses. The prodigal son’s fear was unnecessary, because he was greeted with a feast instead of rejection. This seems too good to be true. But fortunately this is true, because God always shows mercy toward repentant sinners. Hallelujah!



Lord, I want to praise and glorify You for showing me so much mercy. Thank You that I can know that You always wait to receive me with open arms.

Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.
—Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), *Irish poet and dramatist*

Obstacles to Joy

The fourth and final episode of the parable of the prodigal son tells us about obstacles to joy. We should guard against this!

Luke 15 (parable—episode 4)

²⁵The older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants. He asked him what was going on.

²⁷“Your brother has come home,” the servant replied. “Your father has killed the fattest calf. He has done this because your brother is back safe and sound.”

Tension: The eldest son is bitter.

²⁸The older brother became angry. He refused to go in.

Relief of Tension: His father pleads with him!

So his father went out and begged him.

²⁹But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve worked like a slave for you. I have always obeyed your orders. You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But this son of yours wasted your money with some prostitutes. Now he comes home. And for him you kill the fattest calf!”

³¹“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me. Everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad. This brother of yours was dead. And now he is alive again. He was lost. And now he is found.” (NIRV)

Result: Open-ended!

The eldest son’s bitter reaction stood in stark contrast to his father’s joy. The eldest son felt that his younger brother did not deserve the festivities, because he had squandered all his money on prostitutes. He was bitter because he had been a loyal son all those years and yet did not receive festive recognition for it. The eldest son’s reasoning was wrong. He thought in terms of reward, not in terms of his father’s goodwill. In fact, he was the one who was lost. He was lost because he was Mr. Clean and Correct. He did not work for his dad out of love but in order to earn things, which is why he became bitter when his undeserving brother was welcomed in a festive manner.

Yet despite all this, the father showed great love to both his lost sons. He also tried to show his eldest son that his sense of duty and zeal had robbed him of his joy. He was the complacent eldest son who had stayed at home, but he still did not experience the joy of being home and feeling at home. We are not told whether the eldest son actually went inside and joined in the festivities. This open-ended parable is an invitation to each one of us to use our own lives to complete the story.



Lord, I want to show by my way of living that I am part of the festivities.

Hurt leads to bitterness, bitterness to anger, travel too far that road and the way is lost.

—Terry Brooks (b. 1944), *Writer of fantasy fiction*