

## **The Prodigal Son: A Story Jesus Told**

**By Joelee Chamberlain**

I like stories, don't you? I think everyone likes stories. Well, did you know that Jesus used to tell stories to people? Yes, He did. And some of these stories are written down in the Bible. So today I thought I'd tell you one of the stories that Jesus told. Would you like that? All right, then. So here is a story that Jesus told to some people.

Once there was a man who had two sons. These sons were grown up, and one day the younger son said to his father, "Father, I know that someday you will give me a lot of your things. But I would like to have them now."

So the father gave both of his sons what he had been going to give them someday. After a little while the younger son took everything his father had given him, and he went far away to live. And there he decided to have lots of fun. So what do you think happened? Why, this foolish younger son spent everything his father had given him on having fun -- until he had nothing left at all! Just think!

Well, after the younger son had spent everything he had, there came a famine. That means there wasn't much food. And the younger son was hungry and needed food, but he didn't have any money to buy any with. He was really in a bad way, wasn't he? So he looked for a job, and he began working for a man in that far away place. The job this man gave the younger son was to go out and feed the pigs.

Well, the younger son fed the pigs, but he was still very hungry. In fact, he was so hungry that he felt like eating the food he was feeding the pigs. And no one helped him out or gave him anything.

Well, finally one day the younger son came to his senses, and he realized how very foolish he had been. He thought, "Why, my father hires men, and those servants have more than enough food. But here I am dying of hunger!"

He said to himself, "I know what I'll do. I'll go back to my father, and I'll tell him that I've been bad. I'll tell my father that I've sinned against heaven and against him. And I'll ask him to hire me to work for him. I'll tell him that I'm not good enough anymore to be called his son, but I'll ask him if I can be one of his servants. At least that way I'll have enough to eat."

So the younger son got up and traveled all the way back to where his father lived. Now, do you think his father would be mad at him and scold him? Well, let's go on and find out!

Well, the younger son was walking along, and he was still quite a ways away from his father's house when his father saw him coming. And what do you think the father did? Why, his father was very sorry for his younger son and was so glad to see him! And the father ran to meet the younger son and hugged him and kissed him!

Then the son he said to his father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I'm not good enough to be called your son anymore."

But the father was so happy to see him! The father said to one of his servants, "Bring out the best clothes and put them on my son! And put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet! And get the fatted calf and kill it and fix it for dinner! We are going to have a feast and be very happy!"

And the father said, "This is my son. It was like he was dead but is alive again! He was lost, but now he is found!"

And they began to be very happy and have a good time.

Well, while this was happening, the older son had been out in the field working. And as he was coming back to the house, he heard music and dancing. It sounded like a party was going on! So he called to one of the servants and asked him, "What's all this mean?"

The servant said to the older son, "Oh, your brother has come home! And your father has killed the fatted calf and fixed a feast because he's gotten your brother back all safe and sound."

So what do you think the older son thought about that? Was he glad and did he go in and join the party? No, the older son was jealous and angry! And he wouldn't go in to where the party was.

Then his father came out to the older son and begged him to come in.

But the older son said to his father, "Look here! I've worked for you for all of these years. I've always done what you said. But you never gave me even a young goat so I could have a party with my friends."

The older son kept talking to his father and said, "But your other son wasted all of what you'd given him on bad friends. But as soon as he comes back, you kill the fatted calf and make a party for him!"

But the father said to his older son, "Son, you are always with me, and everything I have now belongs to you. It was the right thing to do to celebrate and be glad. After all, it was just like your brother had died and then become alive again. He was lost, but now he is found."

And that is the end of the story! Jesus doesn't go on and tell us what the older brother said then! But I like to think that the older brother realized that he was just being angry and jealous for no reason. And I like to think that the older brother then went in and was glad to see his younger brother. And I like to think that the younger brother then worked hard for his father and was a good son and brother from then on. But the Bible doesn't tell us that; it's just what I hope happened.

But actually this isn't a story about a real family, so it really doesn't make a difference what happened next. This is just a story that Jesus made up and told to some people.

But why did Jesus tell this story? Was He just trying to entertain them? No, Jesus told the story to teach the people something. (A story that is told to teach something is called a par-a-ble.) The Bible doesn't give this story/parable a name, but many people call this the story of the prodigal son. "Prodigal" usually means "wasteful". A prodigal person just wastes everything he has. We might say that he "throws his money away". And that's what the younger son did, wasn't it? He just spent his money all over the place without thinking until he had nothing left. But why did Jesus tell this story about the prodigal son? What was He trying to teach, and who was He trying to teach?

Well, Jesus was telling this story to some leaders of the Jews. These leaders were called the Phar-i-sees and scribes, and the Pharisees and scribes used to teach the Jewish people about God. Earlier, Jesus had been talking with just some ordinary Jewish people, some of whom had been living bad lives. But some scribes and Pharisees had been there, too, and they didn't like this. The Pharisees and scribes didn't like it that Jesus was paying attention to these other people, people they called "sinners". And they especially didn't like it that these other people were coming to Jesus to learn about God and that then they were being sorry for their sins and turning away from their sins and turning to Jesus.

You see, the leaders (the scribes and Pharisees) thought the people should only listen to them and only learn from them. They were jealous of Jesus, weren't they? And these scribes and Pharisees, even though they had for years been teaching the people about God, they didn't themselves believe in Jesus. You see, the Pharisees taught people about God, but they had not told the people to stop sinning and to turn to Jesus and trust Jesus to forgive their sins. Instead, these Pharisees had been teaching the people that they could make God happy and be closer to God if they followed a bunch of rules. But following a bunch of rules isn't what God wants, is it? No, God wants us to turn away from doing bad things and to trust Him to save us from our sins.

So let's look at this story again and see what Jesus was telling the scribes and Pharisees, what He wanted them to learn.

You see, this story/parable is sort of like a picture. The younger son in the story was sort of like a picture of people who are living a sinful life and who know they are sinners. The younger son had been living a sinful life, hadn't he? And he finally realized that he was sinful, didn't he? And then he went back to his father and asked forgiveness. And that is a picture of what all people should do. Now, no matter how hard we try to be good, we all still do things that are bad, don't we? Yes, we are all sinners. And we need to realize that we are sinners and to repent, that is, to turn away from our sins and turn to God.

The father in the story is a picture of God. And the father in the story loved his younger son very much and ran to meet him and forgave him right away, didn't he? And then the younger son could live as a son with his father again. And in the same way, God loves sinners so much, that if they will turn from their sins and turn to God to forgive them, He will forgive them right away, and they will then be God's children. God will be their heavenly Father then.

And the feast, the party, is a picture, too. In fact, it is two pictures. At this feast that the father was giving for the younger son, the younger son was eating lots of good food and having a good time,

wasn't he? So the first picture that the party shows us is how good it is when we turn to Jesus and trust Him to forgive our sins. It's like we're taking part in a great feast and party; it's happiness for us. People are much happier when they have turned away from their sins and trusted Jesus, aren't they?

But also when the father fixed the feast for the younger son, there would have been other people there, too, wouldn't there? After all, there was music and dancing, and you wouldn't just have a big feast and have music and dancing all by yourself, would you?! And these other people at the party were all happy that the younger son had turned from his sinful ways and was home again. So the second picture the party shows us is something that the Bible tells us about in other places, that there is great happiness in heaven when even one person repents of his sins and turns to Jesus the Son of God and trusts Jesus to forgive him.

So the party in the story is two pictures. We're happier when we've turned to Jesus, and those in heaven are happy about it, too.

But what about the jealous older brother? Was he a picture of something, too? Yes, the older brother was a picture of the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees were proud, and they were working hard trying to please God just by following rules. But they were still sinners, though, weren't they? (After all, everyone is a sinner!) However, since they were following these rules, they didn't think they were sinners. But in this little story the father loved the older brother very much, too, and went out to the older brother and begged him to come in to the feast, too. This is a picture that God the Father also loved the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus (the Son of God) was talking to. Jesus wanted them to realize that they were sinners and then to turn from their sins and turn to Him for forgiveness.

And remember, the story didn't tell us what the older brother did then, did it? You see, Jesus stopped there in order to let the scribes and Pharisees think about what He had said and to think about what they needed to do.

Now, we aren't leaders, are we? But we can think about and learn from this story of the prodigal son, too, can't we? What can we learn? What does this story teach us?

Well, of course, one thing this story can teach us is that we shouldn't waste money or food or things like that. And another thing we can learn from this story is that we shouldn't be proud or jealous. But those aren't the really big things we can learn from it, are they? No. But there are two big, important things we can learn from this little story.

The first big thing we can learn from this story is how very much God loves us. Like the father who loved his prodigal son and ran to meet him and forgave him and also like how much the father loved the older son and went out and begged him to come into where the feast was.

Yes, like the father in the story, God the heavenly Father loves us very much, too. In fact, God the Father loved the world so much that He gave His Son Jesus (who is both God and man) to die for our sins. But three days later Jesus was alive again, wasn't He? And Jesus is still alive in heaven. Now, we are all sinners just like both of the sons in the story, aren't we? And we should do something

about our sins, shouldn't we?

So the second big thing we need to learn from this story is what we should do about our sins. We can't just follow rules in order to go to heaven like the scribes and Pharisees were trying to do, can we? No. Instead, we need to realize that we are sinners and then trust in Jesus to save us from our sins, and then He will forgive our sins. Then we will be children of God, our heavenly Father. And we will be happy, and there will be happiness in heaven, too.

So, what are the two big things we can learn from this little story of the prodigal son? Yes. First, we learn how much God loves us. And second, we learn that we need to be like that younger son when he realized that he had sinned against his father. We need to realize that we are sinners and to be sorry and to trust in Jesus and turn to our heavenly Father for forgiveness. And God promises that He will forgive us if we do. And we know that God always keeps his promises, doesn't He?!

I like this story that Jesus told of the prodigal son, don't you? I'm glad He told it, and I'm glad it's in the Bible so that we can read it and learn from it, too.