

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

"And he arose and came to his father. But 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."

(Luke 15:20)

All persons engaged in education will tell you that they find it far more difficult to make the mind unlearn its errors than to make it receive truth. To get rid of old prejudices and preconceived notions is a very hard struggle indeed. Better for us not to have known at all than to have known the wrong thing.

Now I am sure that this truth is never more true than when it applies to God. If I had been left alone to form my ideas of God entirely from Holy Scripture, I feel that with the assistance of His Holy Spirit it would have been far more easy for me to understand what he is and how he governs the world than to learn even the truths of his own Word after the mind had become perverted by the opinions of others.

The Arminian slanders God by accusing him (not in his own intention, but really so) of unfaithfulness, for he teaches that God may promise what he never performs; that he may give eternal life and promise that those who have it shall never perish, and yet they may perish after all. The influence of such an error as that is very harmful. Many children of God who have imbibed these errors in early youth have had to drag along their poor wearied and broken frames for many a day, whereas they might have walked joyfully to heaven if they had known the truth from the beginning.

On the other hand, those who hear the Calvinistic preacher are very apt to misinterpret God. Although we trust we would never speak of God in any other sense than that in which we find him represented in sacred Scripture, yet are we well aware that many of our hearers are apt to get a caricature of God rather than a true picture of him. They imagine that God is a severe being, angry and fierce, very easily moved to wrath but not so easily induced to love. They are apt to think of him as one who sits in supreme and lofty state, either totally indifferent to the wishes of his creatures or else determined to have his own way with them as an arbitrary Sovereign, never listening to their desires or being compassionate to their woes.

Oh that we could unlearn all these fallacies and believe God to be what he is! Oh that we could come to Scripture and there look into that glass which reflects his sacred image, and then receive him as he is--the all-wise, the all-just, and yet the all-gracious and all-loving Jehovah!

I shall endeavor this morning, by the help of God's Holy Spirit, to represent the lovely character of Christ. And if I shall be happy enough to have some in my audience who are in the position of the prodigal son in the parable--coming to Christ and yet a great way off from him--I shall trust that they will be led by the same Divine Spirit to believe in the

lovingkindness of Jehovah, and so may find peace with God now.

"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." First I shall notice the *position* intended in the words "a great way off." Second, I shall notice the *peculiar troubles* which agitate the minds of those who are in this condition. Third, I shall endeavor to teach *the great lovingkindness of our own adorable God*, inasmuch as when we are "a great way off" he runs to us and embraces us in the arms of his love.

I. First, then, what is the POSITION signified by being "a great way off"? It is not the position of the man who is careless and entirely regardless of God, for you notice that the prodigal is represented now as having come to himself and as returning to his father's house. It is the character of one who has been aroused by conviction, who has been led to abhor his former life, and who sincerely desires to return to God.

Once again, there is another person who is not intended by this description--the very great man, the Pharisee who thinks himself extremely righteous and has never learned to confess his sin. You are able to feed upon the husks that swine do eat, while by a miserable economy of good works you are hoping to save enough of your fortune to support yourself here and in eternity. You are not addressed in the words of the text. It is the man who knows himself lost but desires to be saved who is here declared to be met by God and received with affectionate embraces.

And now we come to the question, Who is the man, and why is he said to be a great way off? For he seems to be very near the kingdom, now that he knows his need and is seeking the Savior.

I reply, in the first place, he is a great way off in his own apprehensions. You are here this morning and you have an idea that never was man so far from God as you are. You look back upon your past life and recollect how you have slighted God, despised his Sabbath, neglected his Book, and rejected all the invitations of his mercy. You remember the sins of your youth, the crimes of your manhood, and the riper sins of your older years. Like black waves dashing upon a dark shore, they roll in wave upon wave upon your poor troubled memory. You stand astonished and amazed. "O Lord my God, how deep is the gulf which divides me from you, and where is the power that can bridge it?"

When the light of God's grace comes into your heart, it is something like the opening of the windows of an old cellar that has been shut up for many days. Down in that cellar are all kinds of loathsome creatures and a few sickly plants blanched by the darkness. The walls are dark and damp with the trails of reptiles. It is a horrid filthy place in which no one would willingly enter. You may walk there in the dark very securely, and except now and then for the touch of some slimy creature, you would not believe the place was so bad and filthy. But open those shutters, clean a pane of glass, let a little light in, and now see how a thousand noxious things have made this place their habitation. It was not the light that made this place so horrible, but it was the light that showed how horrible it was

before. So let God's grace just open a window and let the light into a man's soul, and he will stand astonished to see at what a distance he is from God.

There is a second sense in which some now present feel themselves to be far off from God. Conscience tells every man that if he would be saved he must get rid of his sin. The Antinomian may possibly pretend to believe that men can be saved while they live in sin, but conscience will will never allow anyone to swallow so egregious a lie as that. No, the most darling sins must be renounced if you would enter into the kingdom of God. You are struggling to accomplish this, and you often fall on your knees and cry, "O Lord, how far I am from you! What high steps these are which I have to climb! How can I ever be saved?"

Let me present you with one more aspect of your distance from God. You have read your Bible. You believe that faith alone can unite the soul to Christ. You feel that unless you can believe in him who died upon the cross for your sins, you can never see the kingdom of God. But you say this morning, "Sir, I have tried to believe. I have searched the Scriptures to find a promise upon which my weary foot might rest. I have been upon my knees; but though I have pleaded, it has been all in vain, for until now no whisper have I had of grace, no token for good, no sign of mercy.

Well, poor soul, you are indeed far from God. But I will repeat the words of the text to you. May the Holy Spirit repeat them in your ear! "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." So shall it be with you if you have come thus far. Though great may be the distance, your feet shall not have to travel it, but God the Eternal One shall from his throne look down and visit your poor heart, though now you tarry by the way afraid to approach him.

II. Our second point is the PECULIAR TROUBLES that agitate the hearts of those who are in this position. Let me introduce to you the poor ragged prodigal. After a life of ease, he is by his own vice plunged into penury and labor. After feeding swine for a time and being almost starved, he sets about returning to his father's house. It is a long and weary journey. He walks many a mile until his feet are sore, and at last from the summit of a mountain he views his father's house far away in the plain. There are yet many miles between him and his father whom he has neglected. Can you conceive his emotions when for the first time after so long an absence he sees the old house at home? Though it has been a long time, he has never ceased to recollect it. The remembrance of his father's kindness and of his own prosperity when he was with him has never been erased from his consciousness.

You would imagine that for one moment he feels a flash of joy, like some flash of lightning in the midst of the tempest. But alas, a black darkness comes over his spirit. "Suppose I could reach my home, will my father receive me? Will he not shut the door in my face and tell me to be gone? Or perhaps I may even die upon this road, and so before I have received my father's blessing my soul may stand before its God."

I doubt not that each of these thoughts has crossed your mind if you are now in the position of one who is seeking Christ but feels himself far away from him. You have been for months seeking the Savior without finding him, and now the black thought comes, "And what if I should die with all these prayers unanswered?" This is no needless alarm. The mass of mankind needs perpetually to be startled with the thought of death. How few ever indulge it! Because you live and are in health, and eat, drink, and sleep, you think you shall not die. When you awake in the morning, do you ever think that the trump of the archangel shall call you to appear before God in the last day of the great assize, wherein a universe shall stand before the Judge? No. "All men think all men mortal but themselves."

Your second fear is, "I have had convictions before, and they have often passed away. My greatest fear today is that these will be the same!" Now, when men come to Christ they feel that they had rather suffer anything than lose their convictions. Scores of times have you and I been drawn to Christ under the preaching of the Word. We can look back upon dozens of occasions in which it seemed just the turning point with us. Something said in our hearts, "Now believe in Christ; now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation." But we said, "Tomorrow, tomorrow." And when tomorrow came our convictions were gone. We thought what we said yesterday would be the deed of today. But instead the procrastination of yesterday became the hardened wickedness of today. Now you are crying to him for fear lest he should give you up again.

You have this morning prayed, "Let not my worldly business so engross my thoughts as to prevent my due attention to the matters of another world. Oh, let not the trifles of today so absorb my thoughts that I may not be preparing myself to meet my God." Is that your earnest prayer? O poor prodigal, it shall be heard! It shall be answered! Today your Father sees you from his throne in heaven. Today he runs to you in the message of his gospel. Today he falls upon your neck and weeps for you. Today he says, "Your sins, which are many, are all forgiven." Today he bids you come and reason with him, "for though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as wool; though they be red like crimson, they shall be whiter than snow."

III. Now, in conclusion, I may notice HOW THESE FEARS WERE MET IN THE PRODIGAL'S CASE, and how they shall be met in ours if we are in the same condition. The text says, "The Father saw him." Yes, and God saw you just now. That tear which was wiped away so hastily, as if you were ashamed of it--God saw it. That prayer which you did breathe just a few moments ago, so faintly and with such little faith--God heard it. The other day you were in your bedroom where no ear heard you--but God was there.

Sinner, let this be your comfort: That God sees you when you begin to repent. He sees you with an eye of intense interest. He has been looking on you in all your sin and in all your sorrow, hoping you would repent. And now he sees the first gleam of grace and beholds it with joy. Never did a lookout on the lonely castle top see the first grey light of morning with more joy than that with which God beholds the first desire in your heart. Never a physician rejoiced more when he saw the first heaving of the lungs in one supposed dead than God rejoices over you now. Think not that you are despised, unknown, and forgotten. He is marking you from his

high throne in glory and rejoicing in what he sees. He saw you pray, heard you groan, marked your tear, looked upon you and rejoiced to see the first seeds of grace in your heart.

Then the text says, "he had compassion on him." He did not merely see him, but he wept within himself to think his son should be in such a condition. The old father had a very long range of eyesight, and though the prodigal could not see him in the distance, the father could see the prodigal. And the father's first thought when he saw him was this: "O my poor son, O my poor boy! That ever he should have brought himself into such a state as this!" He looked through his telescope of love and said, "Ah! he did not go out of my house in such a condition as that. Poor creature, his feet are bleeding; he has come a long way, I'll be bound. Look at his face. He doesn't look like the same boy that he was when he left me. His eyes that were so bright are now sunken in their sockets. His cheeks that once stood out with fatness have now become hollow with famine." Instead of feeling any anger in his heart, he felt just the contrary--such pity for his poor son.

And that is how the Lord feels for you, you who are groaning and moaning on account of sin. He forgets your sins. He only weeps to think you should have brought yourself to be what you are. It was just like that day when Adam sinned. God walked in the garden, and he missed Adam. He did not cry out, "Adam, come here and be judged!" No. With a soft, sorrowful and plaintive voice he said, "Adam, where are you? Oh Adam, what woes have you brought on yourself and your offspring?"

Jehovah mourns today over you. He is not angry; his anger is passed away and his hands are stretched out still. Inasmuch as he has brought you to feel that you have sinned against him and desire reconciliation with him, there is now no wrath in his heart. The only sorrow that he feels is sorrow that you should have brought yourself into a state so mournful as that in which you now are found.

But the Father did not stop with mere compassion. Having had compassion, "he ran and fell on his neck and kissed him." This you do not understand yet, but you shall. As sure as God is God, if you this day are seeking him aright through Christ, the day shall come when the kiss of full assurance shall be on your lip, when the arms of sovereign love shall embrace you, and you shall know it to be so. You shall one day stand before his throne white as the angels, and that tongue that once cursed him shall yet sing his praise.

Does it seem strange that God should do so much for sinners? But strange though it seems, it is true. Look at the staggering drunkard in the ale house. Is there a possibility that one day he shall stand among the fairest sons of light? Possibility? No, certainty! if he repents and turns from the error of his ways. See that man who calls himself a servant of hell and is not ashamed to do so? Is it possible that he shall one day share the bliss of the redeemed? Possible? No, more, it is sure! if he turns from his evil ways.

One word or so and I am done. If any of you today are under conviction of

sin, let me solemnly warn you not to frequent places where those convictions are likely to be destroyed. Trifle not with your convictions, for eternity shall be too short for you to utter your lamentations.

Condensed from Spurgeon's 12 Sermons on the Prodigal Son and other texts in Luke 15. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan.