

I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son.

This confession of the prodigal really gives me pause to ponder Christ's message entirely here, and therefore to really give a look at myself. And I began to pray:

How many times, O God, have I begged Thy gifts, and Thou hast given me? How many times to then set about my own self-assured course of greatness? How many times, O God have I taken from thy bounty ungratefully, or unjustly for mine own use and no other's? I needed no other man, except for amusement. I needed no other God because I had one. And when, through the patterns of my own deceit and wretchedness, I have built up monuments, not to Thee, and for all Thou hast given, but to me and all my achievements; I begin to shiver. I have blocked out the Light and warmth of Thy loving-kindness and mercy, which has been From Everlasting, with this horrible construction of ruin; a dark, lonely coldness sets in from the shadow of my sin.

And so, do I turn to Thee again, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. AMEN.

These two prayers begging forgiveness of a loving and caring Father are very different.

Our Lord's Prayer, after all, is an hourly, or more often occurrence in most of our lives; set forth by our Lord on his earthly ministry, to men hungry and thirsty for his words at the Mount; fresh in from a desert of religious fanaticism and a complete spiritual vacuum, and then to us, men of all time, in much the same state. It is the prayer of consummate love and unfailing care, for forgiveness; it implores our constancy, our faithfulness all the while giving succour to our souls. In short, it is an oasis, a spiritual Eden in a too often desert of pilgrimage that we face; either by circumstance or far more often, our own making. And it is a pledge that we do indeed need forgiveness, and so we may receive it.

Our Lord, for men's spiritual nurture and edification presents the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and his prayer, to us. It is certainly a prayer for forgiveness, if not the *sui generis*, and does by its author's design bespeak a far graver circumstance than the day to day, or hour to hour struggle we face to beg God's love to stop ourselves from hurting Him, our fellow man, and our very souls. It is, in fact the ultimate harvest of a lifetime's sin and pain. So much so, that it really is the most perfect Opening Sentence of Scripture for a Lenten morning.

In order to fully understand the prayer, of course, one must truly hear the message, and the full import of Our Saviour's parable. All of Scripture speaks of a thorough repentance, but what our Lord is speaking of here is a

thorough conversion and nothing less. Unlike the Lord's Prayer, it holds very little encouragement for serial relapse. This is not to say that The Almighty has not made ample provision for us backsliders, and while we constantly provoke His wrath, He is ready to speed our recovery even in the most serious of cases. For wherever God's grace to fight is present, there is hope, and Christ begins this parable with a lot of it.

Our Prodigal is presented to us, by our Lord, before his Father: full of the assurance of youth and with an unspeakably brazen and down-right insulting demand, "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." This unimaginable utterance would have shocked and scandalized the average first century man, woman, and child old enough to understand it, just as it does and should do us today.

Middle Eastern literature from antiquity to today presents no case of a son, be he the eldest or youngest, forcing the issue of inheritance while a father lived and breathed: except in this parable. Let us truly name his request as the statement it is, "Give me what I've got coming, Old Man; I really don't have the time to wait for you to drop off the twig." And, "I'll be free of your simpering advice and control, and can make something of myself." As I said there is a great deal of hope at the outset, it happens to be absolutely prideful, incredibly cruel, and completely egocentric; but the vain, ugly hope of man alone, nonetheless.

Now a Judean man of the time would have been just as horrified by the father's reaction. He actually agrees and

apportions to this upstart the said property. Most men and fathers of that time, or this, (I'd like to think, anyway) would call into action either the winepress or the wood shed respectively. Instead, Jesus' listeners received of Him a father whose love for his son was so boundless that he was prepared not only to lose his fortune but his son as well, to a rejection already grossly apparent. And he does all this in the hope that his son will find himself and come to his senses.

Of course, our Prodigal has only started to set out on what he sees as the proper course for one as lofty as himself, and while he may now own a good bit of a fortune, he faces a tiny problem. It is rather hard to find one's way around the world with a flock of sheep under one arm and a statue on one's back. Now in this Roman economy, his father like everyone else of means would have had cash, but some of what our Prodigal snatched from him would surely have been physical property. This realization must have set our young man in search of someone to convert this property into a readily transportable wealth. More cash.

Now first century Judea is just a tad different than our environs. The economy was an agrarian one and communities were by virtue of topography, available resources and, local politics and sentiments; small and somewhat cloistered. This would have presented the first challenge to our Prodigal, as every one must have known each other and no one would have wanted to do business with him. Religious commandment, social mores, values, and standing in the community would be placed at risk.

Only those whose scruples were somewhat less than socially acceptable would venture into such a thing. And it is important to note, that the son here must magnify the father's horror at these events. As he has only settled part of his fortune on his youngest, the remaining part; for however long would be tied to people the father probably knew. This makes a fine parting gift, indeed.

Our Saviour is at this point in His narrative is a little vague as the particular arena of, "riotous living" to which this Prodigal travels to "waste his substance", and the first century Roman Empire had no shortage of fleshpots or the appetites for them. One really wouldn't have needed to go far abroad, Samaria would certainly have offered some "unclean" pursuits to such a young Judean man. However, Jesus is specific enough to say "far abroad". This certainly provides the reader with a list of options just as it would the hearer of our Saviour's story the first day he told it.

Corinth would have to be the even money favourite for any one listening to this parable with Ephesus finishing a close second. Julius Caesar came to Corinth in the 40's B.C. to create a colonized seaport, and in the ensuing years it had become the Roman Capitol of Achaia. All the old temples had been carefully restored and enlarged, a 14,000-person capacity Amphitheatre completed, and the agora, forum was on its way to superseding any to be found in 1st century Rome. Temples to the Gods of Egypt, Rome, and Greece were all represented. Add to this bustling hub of idolatry and commerce a mix of the requisite passersby, in the form of sailors and salesmen and Corinth became a

synonym for immorality. Paul, in 1st Corinthians 6:9-20, runs down a laundry list of the inhabitants: fornicators, idolators, adulterers “ and he was just getting warmed up. He concludes this panoply with, “thieves, drunkards and idolators.” And as 2nd Corinthians points out, thusly it did continue. In fact, long before the Crucifixion the name Corinth was a byword for evil living. The very word *korinthiazesthai* (to live like a Corinthian) had become a part of the Greek and Latin languages, and by the end of the first century a Corinthian portrayed on stage was shown as a drunk, *pro forma*. And I would be remiss in not giving, at least dishonourable mention, to the temple of Aphrodite and its one thousand sacred prostitutes come down from the Acropolis at Corinth to ply their trade nocturnally. This sacred lot also gave rise to a Greek proverb, “It is not every man that can afford a journey to Corinth.”

This history of Corinth to us, would have been well known fact to any adult Judean of the time, and although the synagogue where Crispus was to be baptized by Paul resided there, Corinth would have been known immediately as one of the most probable, “sinks of filth” (*William Barclay, Letters to the Corinthians*) to which our Lord was referring.

It is here that Our Lord’s story of the Prodigal takes a very swift and almost unheralded turn with, “and when he had spent all there arose a mighty famine in that land”. Christ’s words here would almost certainly, in the imagination of some listeners, have cemented the idea of venue. After all Corinth, in the first century, experienced

several crushing famines, both before the Resurrection, and after. Our Saviour speaks of famines and pestilence to come. Luke in Acts of the Apostles speaks of a Judean famine. Josephus records “many” famines in the Empire all through the early 1st century leading up to the first Jewish War, and some of the narratives are bone chilling.

Now, undeterred by this most horrible of circumstance, and bent to carry on; the Prodigal puts himself into the indenture of “a citizen”, our Lord relates. At the time of Christ a full third of the Roman population fell into the category of *doulos* (Gr.) or bondservant/slave, and another third had been slaves and now were free. It was, in fact, not uncommon for freeborn, found in hard times, to indenture, and work side-by-side with slaves as street cleaners, dock workers, household, or agricultural bondservants.

And so Christ tells us of our hapless Prodigal being sent to feed swine. For a Judean to muddle around with swine in any way would be preposterous, and it would have horrified most 1st century listeners. Since the time of Moses handing down the restored tablets, and the exhortations to obedience in Deuteronomy the thought of associating with pigs was disgusting. And now, our Lord tells his audience that this young man’s lot has fallen so low that he must eat with them. These husks would have been carob pods and the chaff of any grain readily at hand, and this diet would not have seemed strange to the poorest men or the pigs they were most probably servile enough to feed. Not only, according to Christ does his Prodigal eat these husks, he must, because no man would give unto him,

pretty much eat them with the filthy swine themselves. The Prodigal has come into the worst and lowest of society, in a foreign land filled with vile things and repudiated even by those who share his lot.

“And when He had come to himself” This is where I feel I’ve run the danger of being like the cleric in a comedy, were you all say, “we know this Father, we’ve heard it all before!” But the whole topic of the Prodigal’s confession cannot be addressed or even given breath, until we understand every total, horrible, breakneck, thoughtless and deliberate step in the path he has taken. And it is here we find the Prodigal. And it is here, our Lord tells us, He finds himself.

With these words our Lord brings us in his story out of the purely physical world to which our Prodigal has flown, reveled and wallowed; into the eternal world of our God given souls and his love for us.

The Prodigal here has reached a turning point that is inescapable to repentance and to the making of a truly great confession. That’s not to say that this event is a wholly beautiful thing. It is not true repentance but merely a step toward it. He has really only acknowledged the mire in which he stands. His thoughts are not really of his father or home or even the brother he has so carelessly left behind. His thoughts, his cares, his tears, his trembling are completely, utterly and unadulteratedly for Himself.

At first glance, this may well seem business as usual for our young man. But our Saviour is telling us he has started his act of contrition by coming to himself, because what he has come to is his sin. The Prodigal has made an

internal turn, by the grace of Almighty God and acknowledged that he has a soul. In and of itself *IT IS* a moment of God given revelation, however he may not realize it.

The true seeds of repentance, must be, like the seeds of our faith, planted in deep rich soil. And like any seeds of worth they need rain. Our prodigal has just realized that his own headlong pursuit of pleasure has left him surrounded with an abundance of the elements of good soil, and he has by God's grace at that time been given the seeds.

And so it is, that these seeds of repentance receive their first rain. The storm clouds that must open first on this barren field of promise provide the tears of self-interest. No journey to repentance, no matter how deep or shallow can start any other way.

While the world smiled on the prodigal, and its lures were still abundant, he was immune from his spiritual condition, as are we. Repentance is difficult at all times, but especially so, when his vanity, or ours, is so protected by the gaudy armour this world has to offer. While the prodigal had the benefit health, and friends, and money, repentance was unnecessary. *Christ has told us that he headed out pretty well set for cash, so we know the world supplied him with "friends"!*

Unfortunately, all the unpleasantness that comes with losing the comforts, and pleasures of the world, and the attending sense of loss does not repentance make; but it is very often God's mercy that assists it.

The Old Testament is alive with stories of great repentance and the terrible circumstances of loss that attended them. David's loss of his son, Hezekiah's illness, and Daniel's captivity all speak of repentance brought about by great loss, and attended by God's love. When the columns of this life fall, when all the revelries are over, when we feel truly alone and naked, and hungry, it is God only, that can give us what we truly need. It is a state our Lord relates to us now, in our Prodigals consideration of father and home.

He has found himself with nothing, he has been relieved of his inheritance, is forced to eat swill with pigs. He has looked around for aid from his fellow man, and he has been reviled by even by his lowly peers. And he came to himself.

And thus our prodigal's repentance begins in his own debasement of self. Now all his aspirations and dreams lie in the humiliation of returning to his father, penitent and with the slim hope of being a servant and receiving the slightest of mercies. And he begins his confession, "*I will arise, and go unto my father.*"

All of Holy Scripture, from, "In the beginning..." to the Last Amen of St. John's Revelation, speaks of covenant. From before Abraham was, the Lord God says, "Go, and I will meet you there." Our prodigal may not even realize the importance of this element in his confession, but it is a crucial element to him in our Lord's story, and therefore to us.

Now, in this very far land, full of vile, and horrid pleasures and practices, this young son turns on his heels,

and makes that first step towards his father and home and ponders his next words: *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee...”*; how he must have had a heavy heart. We know his Judaic upbringing has reasserted itself. He has acknowledged that a higher power than himself exists and is at work, and he has accepted its Providence whatever it may be. And so he heads on his way; and he must, whether with every dusty sandal step, or in the stinging spray of the Mediterranean, be repeating this mantra.

No great expectation of a gracious reception must have lingered in his mind. If he had a different frame of mind, if his approach had been, “well, they’ll be glad when I’m back...” our Saviour would have painted him in a very different mood. And he goes on, *“and am no more worthy to be called thy son,”*

So thus, the Prodigal’s confession seems complete. And certainly the physical elocution of it is, however its spiritual execution is far from arrived. It cannot, because the elements are not yet come together.

So like the publican in the temple our Prodigal approaches home, not risking to even lift his eyes, and when still far off, his father runs out to greet him. It is a good thing he rehearsed. His Father’s joy, his fathers loving hugs and kisses, would have distracted far stronger men than our Prodigal must have been, but he manages to get the entire statement out according to our Lord.

Confession.

Now the father in our tale never grants an explicit or verbal absolution, but our Saviour's meaning is clear. The father NEVER says, "WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING?"/ "HOW DID YOU SURVIVE?"/ "WHERE IS MY MONEY?" No, the father calls for his best robe, ring, and shoes and adorns his son with them, and with these outward signs Reconciliation is begun! Remember, the father never rebukes his son; he never questions him, and never upbraids him. There is no expectation of return for his son to his lascivious ways.

Any first century Judean would not have missed the importance of this investiture and the symbolism of it. Certainly Joseph and his robe would have sprung to their minds, so to would the sacred vestments and robes of the priesthood commanded of God in Exodus, not to mention Isaiah's robe of righteousness. Add to that the sacrifice and feast of the fatted calf, and Reconciliation is proclaimed!

Whatever else the father and his actions may represent to us, that robing was certainly not to honour the young son's previous exploits. Rather, the father is proclaiming to his son and everyone else, that something momentous has happened. He is still the same son, but he is a NEW MAN. And that robe and its acceptance also proclaim a covenant between a repentant son and his loving father. There is no going back to the old ways; the robe is a symbol to everybody of the responsibilities the son now embraces.

Now I expect that you may be tempted to stop me and ask, "Father, what about the older son?" and "How on earth can you leave him out of this parable?" That is a very

fair question. It can truly be said that the commentaries on the Prodigal Son are, well, Prodigal. I've seen at least a dozen and those are just the ones I dared to read. Not one of those cast the older boy aside, and I won't either. True the individual treatments of our Lord's characters are myriad too; including one that chastises the father for the "recklessness" of his love in producing a child that would behave in such a fashion. I must hold my hand up to seeing some value in that avenue as well, but that is for another time.

The oldest son here is belied by the very reaction and words our Lord gives him, at the news of his brother's safe return. After refusing his own home, he begins, "Lo, these many years..." Now one look at verse 29 and a very clear point is made about this stay-at-home son. There are four personal pronouns in that verse alone, and no one else need be concerned. He says "I" three times and "me" once.

First off, to say his concern is probably not for his father seems obvious, but more importantly it shows something about his anger. And his anger is what resolves his place in The Prodigal Son's Confession This anger may well have erupted on this day of home coming, however this back-blast is only the visible sign of a very long period of festering bile. This anger is not of today, this anger was born the day his brother left, and then; like carefully tendered coals, when raked, erupted into fresh fire.

And here our Lord brings us to the last piece of the Prodigal's confession. SATISFACTION.

Our Lord's closing of this Parable, makes the point about the necessary satisfaction required of any sound confession, in its silence itself. Truly, the Father iterates to the older son, his joy at having had a son returned from the dead and just as truly, our Lord speaks of eternal life with that idiom. But around that is the glow of a fulfillment unspoken.

Our lord gives no sequel to this parable, there is no, "and Then..." No, Our Lord indicates through silence alone that the unhappy situation of this small family has changed, just as the Prodigal was made new. It must be supposed that in Christ's story, tangible healing has occurred on all fronts; for we can only be left with the conclusion that the Prodigal and his brother continued on from thence with their father. And so shall we continue on with our heavenly family and our Father, when at last we make this confession, as ultimately we all must.

You see our Prodigals confession is very different from The Lord's Prayer in that it also implies or actually implores a finality that is not fully attainable to us in our journey home. The transgression of our first parents hangs about our necks. Our journey home is too often littered with detours of our own making or worse yet site-seeing trips to the macabre venues of this world.

Surely like the Prodigal we wake up, we dress to go about our work, and events bring us to a point where we think we can handle a situation for ourselves, that God's help isn't really needed. Sometimes situations arise in men's lives when they don't want God's help. Sometimes, men just hope God isn't noticing. When we do this we

become like our Prodigal awaking and saying, “ I’ve got what I need now, I’ve got it from here.” We, like him, take our Father’s inheritance we stuff it in our pockets and we wander off in our own prideful, vain, and ugly way.

Then in the course of our daily sojourn to foreign places, we find we are lost, we cannot speak the language, and then we become abused of its inhabitants. We reach in the pocket of our souls and we find we are destitute, and our thoughts turn to our Father.

Fortunately for us, he is not far, we have not gotten away or wandered too far, The Great I AM has certainly gone nowhere. So we turn, with thoughts of home, repenting, and we say:

Our Father...

We are then, through our Saviour Jesus Christ, and his blood, brought back to our Father, and given the comfort of His Holy Spirit. We are refreshed, and our much longer journey homeward bound may, by God’s grace only, be sustained.

The Prodigal and his confession, as I have said, speak of a far longer journey, into far different climes; and a long unwatched or cared for soul. Sometimes, it bespeaks of a soul on the run from its Father, a soul whose very employment is, by the din and distractions of this world, to close its ears; and vainly attempt to silence its own screams. A soul that has endeavoured to forget, to lose, deceive itself and hide its face. It is a soul whose entire work is to hide from itself, and therefore from God. Is it any surprise that

those who do not know God, work so very hard not to know themselves?

The true sight of oneself, one's soul, after such lurid travels is often the hardest thing at which to look. That is because it is the undoing of God's wonderful work. It is the revelation that one has squandered the inheritance of eternity.

That is why the Prodigal's confession offers so little to those who have spent a day or a night in worldly pursuits pleasures, or the like and again and again are daily or weekly sorry for it. This parable really holds very little encouragement or comfort for them. They have not had that long journey home to consider their confession.

This confession is crafted from a lifetime's worth of squandered gifts given by God. It is the confession of one who has journeyed very, very, far from home to places strange, trying desperately to escape his father's love. It is a confession crafted from a long considered repentance and a lifetime of sin.

We will all make the confession of the prodigal. We are all on our long journey back to our Father and to home.

The good news is that our Passport for convey was purchased by our Saviour at Calvary, and paid for by his most precious body and blood. And while on our journey home, we choke on the dust from our sandals or stung by the waves of life; when we find ourselves naked and hungry; let us remember the robe with which we have clothed like new and the most blessed feast with which he

has refreshed us. And the glorious home that awaits us in heaven. If we listen closely we can hear Him call:

 Come unto me all ye that travail, and I will refresh you.