

# Back Home

## The Gospel in the parable of the Prodigal Son

by David Shutes

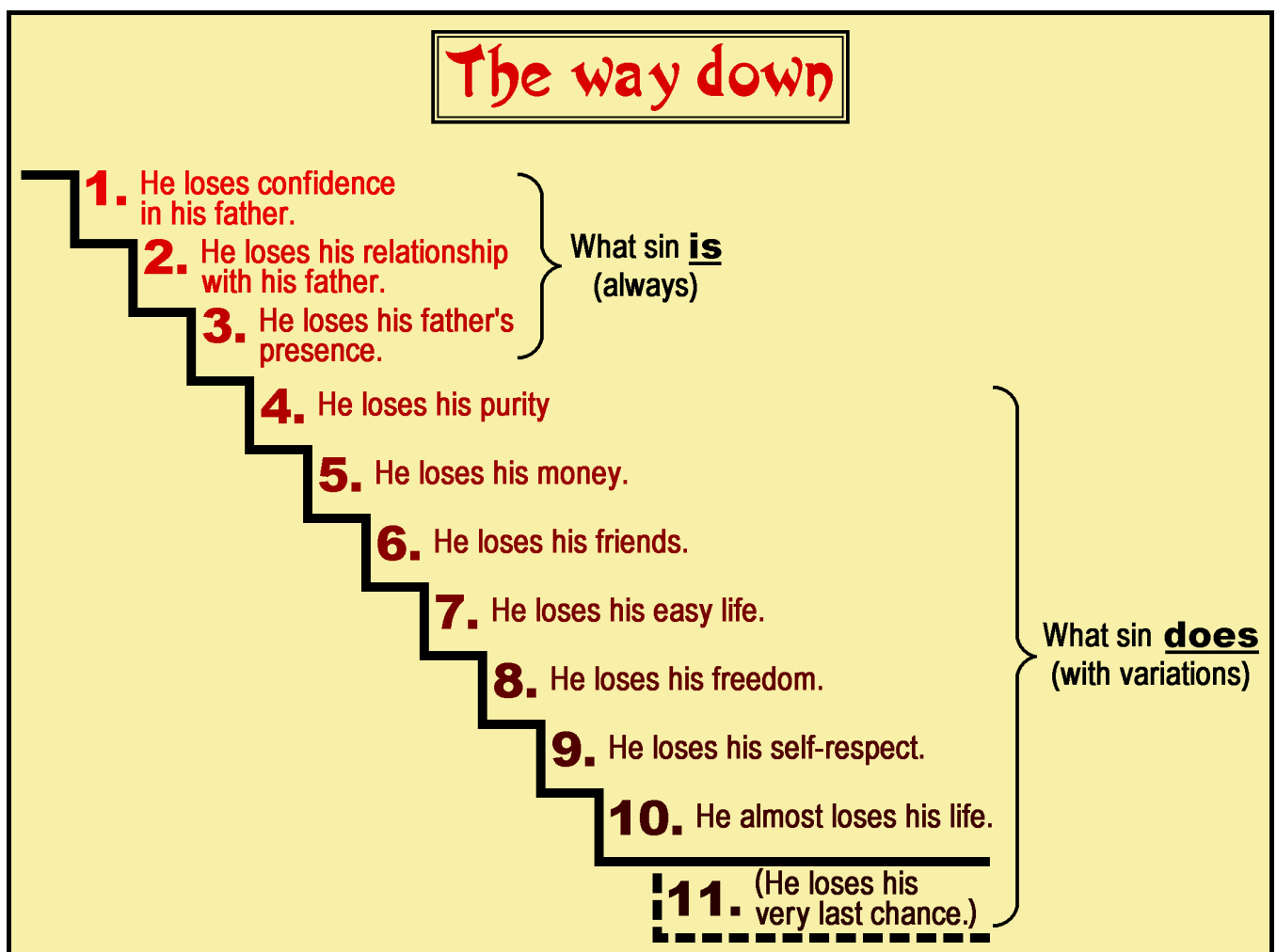
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[update : October 2013]

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**Note** → This story is written in basic English so it can be understood by everyone. I hope those whose reading level is beyond that won't mind.

**Note** → Every time I quote from the Bible, I translated it myself from the Greek text of the New Testament. The translations are as faithful as possible to the meaning of the original, but are also in "basic English."



Sometimes Jesus wanted to explain things that were kind of hard to understand. He often used stories to do that. We call those stories “parables.” Parables are illustrations. That means that they are kind of like pictures, made with words. They give you a picture of something that is much more important than the actual story.

One of Jesus’ stories was about a man and his two sons. The boys were already grown up, but were still young men. They both had their problems. Jesus’ story tells about their problems, and what their father did to help them. It also shows what God can do to help us. He wants to be a Father to each one of us.

Let’s look at the story. It comes from the gospel of Luke, in the Bible. It is found in chapter 15, and goes from verse 11 to the end of the chapter. This is the story Jesus told:

“There was a man who had two sons. One day, the youngest of the sons said to his father, ‘Dad, give me the part of the family wealth that I have coming to me. I want it now.’ So the father split up his goods between the sons.

“It wasn’t long until the youngest son gathered up all his things and left. He went far away, right out of the country. There, he was wild and disorderly. He wasted all his money doing whatever he felt like, no matter how bad it was.

“When his money was all gone, very bad times came to that country. People didn’t even have enough to eat. And of course he became needy himself. He had to get a job. He ended up serving someone who lived in that country. His boss put him out in the fields, feeding pigs. It made him jealous to see the pigs eat when he was so hungry. He wished he could eat their food. But nobody gave him anything to eat.

“He finally came to his senses again. He thought, ‘Even my father’s hired workers have all they want to eat. More than they even need. And I’m dying of hunger here! I will leave. I will go back to my father. I’ll tell him that I was wrong. I sinned. I was unfair to my father. He knows that. I’m no good, and I don’t deserve to be his son. But I’ll ask him if he’ll at least let me work for him. He can hire me like he would anyone else.’

“So he got up and went back to his father. He still had a fair ways to go when his father saw him. His father still cared about him. He got up and came running to meet him. He was so happy, he hugged his son and kissed him.

“The young man said to his father, ‘Dad, I was wrong. I sinned. I was unfair to you. You know that. I’m no good, and I don’t deserve to be your son.’

“But the father said to his slaves, ‘Hurry up and bring out nice clothes for him. Dress him in a fine robe. Give him a ring for his finger. Put sandals on his feet. Then prepare a feast. Cook the very best meat. Let’s celebrate and give thanks! My son was as good as dead, but now he’s really alive again! His life was ruined. We had lost him. But now he’s back with us!’ And they all started rejoicing.

“The older brother was working in the fields when all that happened. When he came back near the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants to him. He asked him what was going on. The servant told him, ‘Your brother has come back. He’s all right. Your father is very happy. He threw a big party to celebrate.’

“The older brother was very mad. He refused to go into the house. His father came out to him. He encouraged him to come in.

“But the older son answered him, ‘Look. For many years I have been working for you like a slave. I always paid attention to what you told me to do. I did just what you wanted. But you never once threw even a little party for *me* so I could have fun with *my* friends. But now here comes this son of yours. All he did was waste all your money on prostitutes! And for *him* you celebrate with a huge feast!’

“His father answered him gently, ‘My boy! *You* are always here with me. Everything I have is yours. But this is a special occasion. We should celebrate and be joyful. This is your brother, after all. He was as good as dead, but now he’s alive. His life was ruined. We had lost him. But now he’s back with us.’”

It is interesting to see what happened to this young man. He started out very well. He came from a wealthy family. He was comfortable. He had a nice home. But he lost all that. He found himself in a very bad situation. Let’s see how that happened.

He didn’t lose everything all at once. He made one wrong choice after another. His path is like a stairway, leading downward. Each step takes him further down. It is like going down into a dark and lonely dungeon.

We don’t usually count the steps when we go down stairs. We don’t look at them very closely. But we will do that

here. We will look at each step downward. That will help us to understand the story. We will see just how bad off this young man was. And we will see how it all happened.

## THE 1<sup>st</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

The first thing Jesus tells us about this young man was that he asked his father for his part of the money. But that isn't where the problems started. There was something wrong before that. Otherwise, he wouldn't have acted the way he did.

Think about his home life. His father was rich. His father was kind. We see that all through the story. Yet the boy was unhappy at home. He wasn't satisfied with the way things were going. He must have thought he wasn't having much fun.

His father was in charge. His father directed how they worked and how they lived. But still the boy was unhappy. He didn't like the way his father ran things.

The first step downward happened there. If he wasn't happy with the way his father ran things, that means something. It shows us what he thought of his father. "Dad doesn't want to have fun," he may have thought. "Dad is old-fashioned. Dad doesn't understand what I want to do. If I was in charge, I would do things differently. I could run things better than Dad does."

In other words, he had lost confidence in his father. This is the first step downward. He wouldn't think he could run things better if he already thought his father was doing a fine job. If something was wrong, then it was his father's fault. His father was in charge, after all. Which means his father didn't know what he was doing.

When you don't trust someone any more, you don't want him in charge. That makes sense. So he is going to change that. He isn't going to let his father run his life any more. He will run things himself. But that isn't where the problems started. They started even before that, when he didn't trust his father any more.

This says a lot about our own hearts. Jesus' story isn't just a story, after all. It is meant to tell us about ourselves, and about God. The father in the story is an illustration of God. The boys are like us. The youngest son doesn't trust his father. That's when things started going wrong. Jesus is telling us that we don't trust God, either.

Why did the boy want to run his own life? Because he didn't like the way his father was doing it. He didn't approve. He didn't think his father knew what he was doing. So he ran things himself, and ended up making a mess of everything. But that didn't matter to him. He would rather live his own way than let his father be in charge. Because he didn't trust his father.

Why do we want to run our own lives? For the same reasons. We don't think God knows what He is doing. We don't think He wants us to have fun. We don't like the way He runs things. What all that means is that ***we don't trust Him***.

We don't know everything. We know we don't know everything. But we still think we know better than God does. Which shows that we have a very low opinion of God. "I don't know everything, but God knows even less. If I run my own life, I'll make mistakes. But I'll still do a better job than God would." That's what we think. We never put it that way, but we think it anyway.

The young man in Jesus' story thought that, too. All the rest of his troubles will come from that. We will look at the rest of the steps he took downward. The steps down into the lonely dungeon that he built for himself. But we must remember that the first step downward was what started it all. He would never have ended up in such a mess if he had trusted his father. When he lost confidence in his father, he began to lose everything else, too.

## THE 2<sup>nd</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

The problem got worse quickly. The boy had lost his confidence in his father, so he doesn't want his father running things. He asks his father for the part of the family wealth that "he has coming to him." He thinks, "I'm a part of this family, so some of what we have belongs to me."

This is true, in a sense. But in another sense, it all belongs to the father. As long as the father is alive, he runs things. The boys can enjoy the family wealth. It is theirs, too. But not theirs alone. Not theirs to take and run off with, so no one else can use it.

He didn't understand that. Or else he didn't care. He just wanted to be able to run things himself. So he tells his father to give him his part. Right then.

He lost something else here. He had already lost his confidence in his father. Now, he loses his relationship with his father. He doesn't want his father to be "his father" any more. The father runs things. That's his role. But the young man doesn't want his father to run things. Which means he doesn't want him to be a father.

The relationship was lost anyway, though. This was bound to happen. You can't have a good relationship with someone when you have lost confidence in them. When the young man demands "his part of the money," he isn't really changing much. His actions just show what the situation already is. He no longer has a father. Not really. Because he won't let him be a father any more.

We have all done this, too. We don't trust God, so we don't want Him running things. He isn't a "Father" any more.

He is just God. Far away. He doesn't have much to do with us any more. We don't have a relationship with Him. We maybe know a bit about Him. But we don't know *Him*.

That is because we don't want Him to be a Father to us. We don't want Him to run our lives. We don't think He would do a good job of it. He wouldn't let us have much fun. We can run things better ourselves.

Oh, we still need Him to give us things. When we have problems, we want God to straighten them out. We like to have a "man upstairs." Someone who is able to fix things. The young man didn't want his father to run his life, but he still wanted his father's money. We still want God's riches, too. Even though we don't want Him running our lives. We don't mind Him helping us out, but we don't want a relationship with Him. Because He would want to run things. And we don't trust Him to run things.

The young man lost confidence in his father. Then, he lost his relationship with his father. But still his problems are only just beginning.

## THE 3<sup>rd</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

Just a few days later, the young man left home. He went far away. To some other country. When he did that, he lost something else. He had already lost his confidence in his father and his relationship with his father. Now, he loses his father's presence.

He probably didn't care. He was probably very glad not to have his father around any more. After all, he didn't want him running things. If he was near by, he might still have some things to say. So it is better not to even have him around.

That's what he thinks. But he is wrong. When he loses his father's presence, he loses any chance of his father helping him. Bad times are going to come. He doesn't know that, but they will. And his father won't be able to do anything for him. Because he doesn't want his father around. He has run as far away from his father as possible.

We have all done that, too. We no longer have God's presence in our lives. We are busy running away from Him. Avoiding Him. Then we wonder why He doesn't fix things when we have problems.

Of course, God is everywhere. Jesus' story is only a story. In the story, the father can't be everywhere at once. But God is everywhere. So you might think we haven't run from God.

But we have. We haven't done it physically, because God is everywhere. But in another sense we have run from Him. We have chosen to live our lives without Him. We don't let Him have control.

When things go wrong, we suddenly would like Him to have control. Of the problems, that is. Only of the problems, not of our whole lives. But God won't do that. He doesn't want to make our choices for us. If He fixes our problems, that will make us think we can get along just fine without Him. We will think it works out all right to run our own lives. He knows it doesn't. So He won't fool us into thinking it does. He wants us to face our problems ourselves. We need those problems, to see that we don't know how to run our lives ourselves.

He doesn't even have to make problems for us. Some problems come from our own choices. Others come from the choices of those around us. Still others come from the fact that the world is a rough and dangerous place. But we think we can get along fine on our own. We think we can make good choices. We think we can take care of ourselves in this world.

If God protects us while we're busy running our own lives, He will be fooling us. He will encourage us to think we are doing all right. We will think we were right to do what we want. If nothing bad happens to us, that will convince us that life is just fine without God running things.

God won't do that. He cares too much about us to fool us that way. He wants us to come back to Him. He knows that's what we *really* need. So He won't take care of us while we're still running away from Him.

So it is true that we have run away from God. The young man in Jesus' story ran away from his father. His father couldn't help him. In another sense, we have run away from God. And God can't help us when we're running away from Him. Otherwise, He will just encourage us to keep running.

## WHAT IS SIN?

The Bible talks a lot about sin. Christians talk a lot about sin. We have all heard the word. But we usually don't know just what it means. We probably think it means doing bad things. But we don't always know just what is bad. And we don't know *how* bad something has to be before it is "sin."

Sin isn't just doing bad things, though. It is true that we do bad things. We all do bad things. Some of us do worse things than others. Some of us don't do *really* bad things. Some of us don't do very *many* really bad things. Some do lots of really bad things.

The Bible says we are all sinners. All alike. Doesn't it seem unfair to say we're all alike when we don't all do the same bad things? God should realize that some people are more sinful than others. Shouldn't He?

No. Because that's not what sin is. If sin was doing bad things, that would all be true. Some would be worse sinners

than others. Because some people do worse things than others. But the bad things are what we do because we *are* sinners. They're not what *makes* us sinners.

These first three steps downward show us what sin really is. The other steps will show what sinners sometimes do. Everyone won't do the same things. But the first three steps are the same for everyone.

Sin means you don't want God running things. That's because you don't think you would like the way He runs things. You don't think it would be much fun. You don't think He really knows what He's doing. Or else He doesn't care. Or else He wants to keep you from doing what you like doing. What it amounts to is that you don't really trust Him. That was the first step downward. That's where sin starts.

Sin also means you don't have a relationship with God. Not a *real* relationship. Not a relationship with a *Father*. You might want His help when things go wrong, but you don't want Him in charge. That was the second step downward, and that's part of sin, too.

And because you don't *want* God in your life, you don't *have* God in your life. You don't have His presence, which is the third step downward. Sin means being separated from God.

These are the first three steps downward in Jesus' story. And they describe what sin really is. The rest of the downward steps will show us what sin *does*. And it doesn't even always do the same things. But the first three steps show us what it *is*. If you really understand these first three steps, then you can understand sin. Sin is not just doing bad things. Sin is wanting to run your own life, because you don't trust God to run it.

## THE 4<sup>th</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

The young man is already doing lots of bad things. He hurt his father by his attitude. He hurt himself by making stupid choices. All the *real* harm has been done.

But people can't see it yet. He probably can't see it himself. He would say, "I haven't hurt anyone. I just want to be free."

The things he will do in the country where he went to live are no worse than that. But they are more *visible*. Jesus says that he was wild and disorderly. "He wasted all his money doing whatever he felt like, no matter how bad it was."

He doesn't say just what the young man did. But we can imagine. We know he spent a lot of money on prostitutes. His brother says so. There was probably plenty of other things. Sex, alcohol, parties. Today, it would be drugs as well.

You might think that doesn't hurt anyone either. But it isn't true. All those things hurt people more than we realize. There's nothing wrong with sex, in the right circumstances. When people are married, they love each other. They are committed to each other. That means they can count on each other. Under those circumstances, sex is a very good way to enjoy each other.

But sex just for the fun of it hurts people. When you can't really count on each other, it's not the same. In the end, it makes you more lonely than you were before.

Alcohol and drugs are the same. They seem fun at first. But they mess up our lives. They hurt us. And they cause us to hurt others.

We don't know all of what the young man did where he lived. He probably wasn't trying to hurt anyone. He just wanted to have fun. But he hurt more people than he realized.

And he lost something by doing all that. He had already lost his father. Now, he lost his purity. He is no longer someone people can approve of. He thinks he is having a lot of fun. He thinks things are better than they have ever been in his life. But he has taken another step downward. He has become part of those who don't really care. He only wants to have fun.

We haven't all done this. Some of us have always been "good." What some people call "respectable." Some people might think they're better than this young man.

Others might think they are much worse. This guy didn't really try to hurt anyone, after all. He was just having fun.

It's true that we didn't all do the same bad things. Some are worse than others. But there is something here that we have all done, even so.

The young man doesn't care about the future. His motto is probably, "Live for today." That means he does what he wants. He doesn't worry about the consequences. He probably doesn't even know that there will be consequences.

But there always are. "Consequences" means what will happen because of what we do. If you throw a stone in water, it makes ripples that spread out. Little waves in circles. The stone only hit a little part of the water. But it makes waves that affect a lot more of the water.

What we do will have an effect. Like the ripples that spread out from the stone. If we don't think about those consequences, then we will get in big trouble a little later on.

The young man in Jesus' story isn't worrying about that. He is doing what he wants. He doesn't care what will happen later. I think we have all done that, at one time or another. I know I have. Maybe we're more like him than we think.

## THE 5<sup>th</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

The next step was bound to happen. The young man didn't see it coming, but anyone could have told him. He ran out of money. He had lost his father and his purity. Now he lost his wealth, too. He thought he had enough money to last forever. But he ran out.

This is probably the first step downward that he noticed. Up until then, he probably thought things were getting *better*. He had money all for himself! He didn't have his father bugging him! He didn't have to work! He could have parties all the time! This isn't bad. This is *good!*

But when he runs out of money, he knows something isn't good. You can't have as much fun when you run out of money. You don't have to be too smart to figure that out.

This is the first step downward that he didn't actually choose himself. He is the one who decided he didn't trust the way his father ran things. He decided he didn't want his father to run his life. He decided he didn't even want to be near his father. And he decided to spend his money having fun instead of investing it wisely. But he didn't *choose* to run out of money.

This is important. The first step that he didn't choose for himself is the first one that really bothers him.

You see, none of us *choose* to do things that we don't like. We choose to do what we think is best. We want to have fun. We want to make money. We want to enjoy life. So we choose to do the things that will help us enjoy life. (Or so we think.) We never *choose* to have problems.

But in a sense, the young man did choose to run out of money. He never realized it, of course. But he chose how to spend his money. And that meant he was bound to run out. His father gave him lots of money. But it wasn't unlimited. He didn't use it wisely, so he ran out.

All of our problems don't come from the things we decide. Some things really aren't our fault. But a lot of them are. More than we realize. We don't choose to have problems. But we *make* a lot of problems by what we *do* choose.

If we don't realize that, we will think that everything that happens to us is someone else's fault. Maybe the young man thought that. Jesus didn't say. Maybe he thought it was his friends' fault. They might have taken advantage of him. Maybe he had someone else to blame. We don't know all the excuses he had.

But really, it happened because of his own choices. He could have spent his money differently. It was his own fault that he got in trouble. He didn't actually choose this fifth step downward. But he made it happen by his choices. So he is responsible.

## THE 6<sup>th</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

The next step downward must have happened pretty soon after the last one. He had lost his father, and his purity, and his money. Now, he loses his friends. Jesus doesn't actually say that, but it's obvious. When hard times come, no one will be there to help him. He will be all alone. That shows that he had lost his friends.

That is to be expected. The friends he had were just looking for fun, like he was. When there is no more money, they go away. True friends can't be bought with money.

It hurts to be alone. You feel very helpless when you don't have any friends. But maybe this isn't so bad after all. The kind of friends he must have had when he was just interested in parties aren't very useful. It will hurt to be all alone. But maybe he's better off without them.

It must have hurt to be alone, though. He knows things are wrong, now. Once again, he knows he has lost something. His downward journey started long before, but now he is beginning to realize it.

This step downward is kind of like the last one. It wasn't actually something he chose either. In fact, he won't have too many more choices to make. There will be other steps downward. He will lose a lot more. But these will be things that happen to him instead of things he decides for himself.

That doesn't mean it isn't his fault, though. He is in a situation where he can't control things. That's why troubles come and he can't stop them. But he got into that situation by his own choices. His own stupid choices.

That's what happens when you make the wrong choices. You can end up in situations where there's nothing you can do about it any more. When the mortgage payment comes due, and you don't have any money. When the judge pronounces the sentence and they take you away. When the doctor tells you, "I'm sorry. It's lung cancer. You smoked for too long, and now it's too late."

It hurts terribly to be helpless. You feel like a trapped animal. You feel like everything that happens to you is someone else's fault. But very often, it is the result of choices we made. The young man could have done things differently. Then, a lot of this would never have happened to him.

## The 7<sup>th</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

Things got worse fast. After he ran out of money, hard times came to the country where he was. If he still had money, he could do something about it. But you don't have a lot of choices when you don't have money.

People didn't even have enough to eat. Maybe some people died of hunger. That's called a famine. There were a lot of needy people all over everywhere.

Soon, he was hungry himself. This was another step downward, toward the dark and lonely dungeon. He has lost his easy life. He used to have all he wanted of everything. Now he doesn't even have enough to eat.

This isn't his fault either. He didn't choose for there to be a famine. He didn't even cause it by what he *did* choose. This is the first step on his downward slide that isn't his fault in any way.

But his helplessness is still the result of his earlier choices. He let himself get into a situation where no one can help him. He had a father who loved him and took care of him. He left his father far behind. He had money. He wasted it. His only friends were "drinking buddies." When the parties were over, the friends were long gone.

When you make enough bad choices, you get burned. Bad things happen to everyone in this world. If you aren't prepared, then you can't do anything about them when they come. He had turned away from everyone who cared. Now, there's no one left who cares. No one to turn to.

But the situation still isn't as bad as it could be. It's going to get even worse.

## THE 8<sup>th</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

Jesus said the young man had to get a job. He ended up serving one of the men in that country. Jesus put it in a way that shows this is not an ordinary job. It means that he pretty much sold himself as a slave. This is another serious step downward. He lost his freedom.

He isn't *actually* a slave. He can still leave if he wants to. But he doesn't have a very good boss, either. He doesn't know if he will be paid. He has to work. He will just have to wait and see if he gets anything for it. His new boss can do pretty much whatever he wants with him.

He must be getting pretty desperate. Otherwise, he would never have taken a job like that. But his options are limited. He doesn't have much choice.

We have seen that already. He wanted to run his own life. He didn't trust his father to do it. And he ran it very poorly. He thought he was having fun for a while. But everything went wrong. He ended up in situations where he didn't have any more choices. Now, others are running his life for him. And he isn't enjoying it very much. But there isn't much he can do about it. The situation has gotten completely out of his control.

## THE 9<sup>th</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

Jesus said his boss sent him out into the fields to feed pigs. That might not mean much to you. Maybe you've never even seen any pigs. Or maybe you have, on a farm. You might think they're just animals. Like any other animals.

To you, maybe they are. But not to Jews. This is a Jewish boy. He was raised in a good Jewish family. Of course, he has turned away from what he was taught. We know that. But feeding *pigs*?

To Jews, there is nothing more unclean than pigs. They are dirty enough animals anyway. They smell bad and their manure stinks *much* worse than cow manure or horse manure. But to Jews, they are also animals that God Himself said were unclean. Jews won't eat pork. They won't raise pigs. They don't even want to be around pigs.

It is hard to imagine a worse job for a Jewish boy. Feeding pigs. But he has to do it, because he has no more choices. And this is another step downward. A terrible step downward. He has lost his self-respect. He can no longer be proud of himself.

He has done plenty of other bad things. But he probably didn't think they were all that bad. Now, he knows he is filthy. He is unclean, because he raises unclean animals. And he doesn't even get anything for it!

He can no longer pretend he is as good as everyone else. He can no longer be proud of himself. He has had to take a degrading job. It hurts terribly when you can no longer think you're very good.

He probably isn't thinking about much of anything, though. It hurts too much. He is just doing what he has to do. He doesn't want to think about how far he has fallen.

## THE 10<sup>th</sup> STEP DOWNWARD

He probably thought he had sunk as far as he could. Nothing could be worse than having to feed pigs. But he discovered in a hurry that something could be worse.

He found out that even the *pigs* had a better life than he did! They had food to eat, and he didn't. He had taken this filthy job so he could eat. But he isn't even getting that.

This is misery. This is another step downward. He has come so low that he almost lost his life. He doesn't have anything to eat. If something doesn't happen quickly, he will die of hunger.

How ironic. The rich kid, dying of hunger. How sad. How stupid, even. He had so much, and now he has nothing. Nothing! He lost his father. He lost his purity. He lost his money. He lost his friends. He lost his freedom. He lost his self-respect. And now, he is about to lose even his life.

He has wasted everything. He thought he could run his life better than his father could. But what a mess he made of it!

He actually became jealous of the pigs. If he could, he would get right in there with them and eat their food. Can you imagine that? A Jewish boy, eating pig food along with the pigs.

Jesus wants to show us how terrible of a mess we can make when we run our own lives. This young man never *chose* to be miserable. He never *chose* to be hungry. He never *chose* to end up with nothing. How silly he had been to think he could run his life better than his father would have. His father would never have made him feed pigs. His father would have given him food to eat. But he never thought of all that, when he was at home. All he knew was that he didn't trust his father to take care of him.

## IS THERE AN 11<sup>th</sup> STEP DOWNWARD?

Can things get worse? Is there anywhere further down that where he is now? Can anything more happen to him?

Yes. He can die, lonely and helpless. And the people around him won't even care. Too many of them are dying also. There isn't enough food to eat. What difference does it make if this foreigner dies too? Who cares?

And if he dies, he loses his very last chance. Nothing will be able to help him anymore. It will be *too late*. Forever.

That is what is going to happen to him. There's nothing more he can do. He has made one last attempt to take care of himself. He has gotten a job. He has even accepted a filthy job, just to be able to eat.

But it hasn't worked out. Maybe his boss doesn't have anything to eat either. Maybe he doesn't care. It doesn't matter. This young man has run out of possibilities. He has sunk down into the dark and lonely dungeon. He can't help himself any more. His very last chance is about to slip away forever.

But wait. He can't help himself. That is true. Everything he has tried has failed. He knows it is useless to keep on trying.

But there is someone who could help him. Maybe. His father.

He must have thought back on what he had had. How well off he had been when he was younger. He must have thought bitterly about how much he had lost. He had had so much. His father still had so much.

Could he get back to where he had been? Could he "go back to square one"? Could he start over?

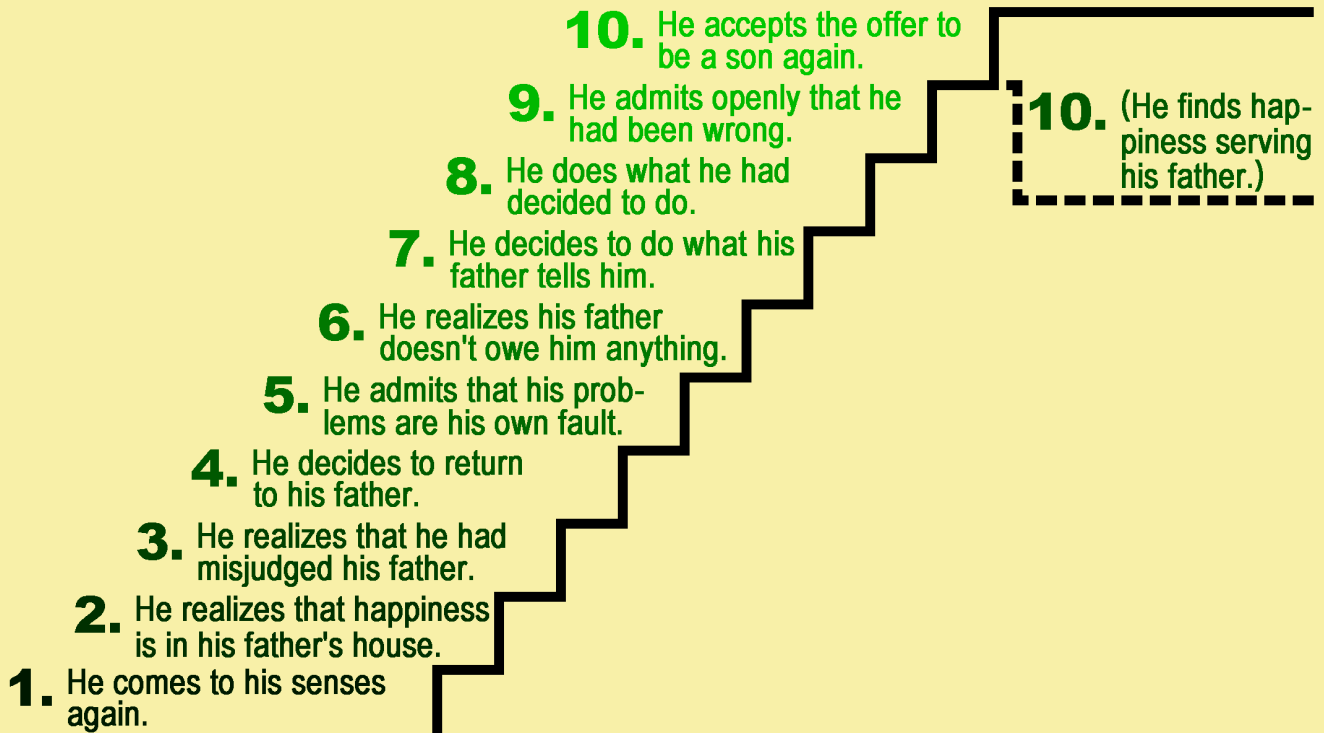
Probably not. A lot of what he lost is lost for good. He can't get it back. He can't just "undo" all of what he did. That means he can't climb back up the stairs he has come down. That was a one-way trip. Downward. But he just might be able to work out something else.

He will have to go back up a different way. We will look at those steps, too. They will teach us as much as the steps downward. Maybe more. We have seen how someone can make a mess of their lives. Now we will see how they can get out of that mess.



## The way back up

SALVATION



## THE 1<sup>st</sup> STEP UPWARD

Jesus said, "he came to his senses again." This is already something good. Of course, it doesn't actually fix anything. But it does allow him to face up to reality. He has been playing games with himself for too long. He thought he could handle things himself. He thought he could run his own life. He thought he could do a better job than his father. He didn't have much confidence in his father anyway.

So he ran his own life. And he made a mess of it. Things got worse and worse. But still he pretended he could handle things. He was not facing reality. He was still convinced he could take care of himself. But he couldn't. He could only make a mess of things.

It hurts to admit we are making a mess of our lives. It hurts our pride especially. The young man in Jesus' story preferred to face **very** bad problems. He preferred to take a degrading job. He preferred to lose his liberty. It was better than admitting he didn't know what he was doing.

But reality is real. It is what it is. The reality of the situation was simple: He couldn't run his own life. He wasn't smart enough. He wasn't wise enough. He needed to realize that.

He came back to his senses. Maybe he didn't yet understand everything. He probably didn't. But he is willing to face reality. Hard, bitter reality. He has been proud. He has been stupid.

He has to start here. He can't get out of the mess without coming to his senses. He must face up to reality. But this isn't enough. He must not think he has done all he needs to do.

He still can't handle things alone. It is not enough to "get a grip on himself." It won't work to just "try to be more reasonable." It is important to come to your senses. But it can be a trap, too. It can make you think that you have done what needs to be done. In fact, it only means you have started doing something right. You have to start here. But you must not stop here.

## THE 2<sup>nd</sup> STEP UPWARD

For a long time, he wouldn't face facts. He didn't think his father knew what he was doing. He didn't think life was good with his father. That was why he left. In his own mind, he probably made his father out to be someone pretty bad. He

probably imagined that no one could be happy with his father. He probably imagined that he was a tyrant.

That's what we do, you know. When we want to believe something, we make up the facts to go with it. But now he has come back to his senses. He is willing to face facts. Even if they don't make him look good.

He admits that everyone in his father's house is doing fine. They are comfortable. They have plenty to eat. Even the hired servants. They don't have to feed pigs in order to eat. They have honorable jobs.

He has been looking for happiness. He has been looking for an easy life. He has been looking for wealth. Now, he realizes that true happiness can only be found in his father's house. He has tried to be happy on his own. He just made a mess of it. Now he admits that what he is looking for isn't here. It is in his father's house. That's where it has been all along.

This still isn't the end of the road. He still hasn't climbed back up out of his dungeon. He still has a long way to go. But it is important to realize that his father has a lot of good things to offer. He won't go back to him unless he thinks he has something to offer.

This is what we need to do with God. We will see that it isn't enough to realize that God can do a lot of good for us. It isn't enough to realize that He has plenty of riches. But we still need to understand that. Otherwise, we will never come back to Him.

## THE 3<sup>rd</sup> STEP UPWARD

He admits his father has riches to offer. He also realizes something else important: He is dying of hunger. He finally faces up to his situation. This is not just "a difficult moment" that he is going through. This is not something that will go away all by itself. He is going to die if he stays here.

This means he has realized something important about himself. He has also realized something about his father. He thought he could run his life better than his father did. He didn't have much confidence in his father. Now, he realizes that he is doing a very bad job of things. He realizes also that his father does a pretty good job. The results are there to show the difference. Those who work for his father are prosperous. They have more than they can eat, even. And he is dying of hunger. He hasn't done *at all* as good a job of things as his father did.

This requires him to admit something that will hurt. But it is terribly important. He has to realize that he has misjudged his father. He didn't have a lot of confidence in his father. Now, he has to admit that was wrong. He should have trusted him. His father knew what he was doing. His father knew you can't spend all your money having fun. You have to plan for bad times, too. That didn't seem too smart a few years before. Now, he knows it was exactly the right thing to do. He should have trusted his father.

That doesn't mean he has learned all he needs to learn. He doesn't yet know how to trust his father completely. But he is beginning to learn. That's what counts.

When we come back to God, we have to trust Him. We have to realize that we haven't been trusting Him. If we had trusted Him, we would have done what He tells us. But we thought we knew better. We thought we knew how to have more fun. So we went ahead and made a mess of things.

Now, we have to learn to trust God. We will have to learn a lot more about trusting God as the years go by. But from the very start, we have to trust Him. We have to admit that He knows what He is doing. Even when it doesn't seem like it. Even when it seems like we aren't having much fun. Maybe He knows that having fun isn't the most important. Or maybe He knows what will make it possible for us to *really* have fun. It doesn't really matter. We don't have to understand. We have to believe that God knows what He is doing. Even when we *don't* understand.

But this isn't the end of the path either. This is an important step upward. But he isn't out of the dungeon yet. If he stops now, he won't be any better off than he was. He is still feeding pigs. He still doesn't have anything to eat. It is good to admit that he should have trusted his father. It is good to realize that his father knows what he is doing. But that still doesn't change his situation. He has more to do.

## THE 4<sup>th</sup> STEP UPWARD

He had realized that he didn't know how to handle things. He had admitted that his father did. That means that his father knew what he was doing. He could trust him. All of that is good. Now, he decides to act on that. He doesn't just say, "I will trust my father." He says also, "I will go back to my father."

That is the next step upward. He will return to his father. The things that need to change aren't just in his own mind. He had to change his mind. He had to realize he had been wrong. Without that, he would never do anything differently. But he has to act on that, too. He decides he will. He will return to his father.

There is something very important here. He remembers that there is plenty to eat in his father's house. His father has great riches. That is what made him realize he didn't know what he was doing. That is what made him realize his father did.

But he didn't say, "I will return to my father's riches." He said, "I will return to *my father*."

Many people today know that God has great riches. They know He can do a lot for us. They realize He has better things for us than what we can provide for ourselves. So they think they will go looking for God's riches.

It doesn't work that way. The young man didn't need to return to his father's riches. He needed to return to his father. And we cannot just go to God for his blessings. We must not just look for the good things He can do for us. We need God Himself. If all we want is what He can do for us, then we want a servant. Someone who helps us. But God is not a servant. He will help us, because He loves us. But He will not serve us. He is God. He is Lord. He is in charge. We need to seek *Him* and not just His blessings.

That is why it is not enough to realize that God has great riches to offer us. Sure, He can do a lot of good for us. More than we know. But that can be a trap, too. It can make us think that God's blessings are the most important. That all we need is for Him to give us good things.

The young man in Jesus' story knew that wouldn't work. You see, he had already tried that. When he left home, his father gave him plenty of money. He had his father's riches. And even with that, he made a mess of his life. He knows that it isn't enough just to ask his father for more money. He will just waste it again.

He needs his father. His father's money isn't enough. Only his father knows how to run things right. His father's riches won't last, if his father isn't there to direct things.

So he won't just return to his father's wealth. He will return to his father. And that is what we all must do. We must avoid the trap of seeking only God's blessings. We must not think that what He can do for us is the most important. We need God Himself.

The young man has taken another important step here. But it still isn't enough. He still has a long ways to go.

## THE 5<sup>th</sup> STEP UPWARD

He knows it is going to be hard to go back to his father, though. He has not been fair to his father. He has not done what he should have done. That all needs to be settled with his father.

This is where we will see if he is sincere or not. If he still thinks he knows how to run things, he will pretend that what has happened to him isn't really his fault. He will say he was a victim of circumstances. He will say others took advantage of him. He will say he couldn't have known there would be a famine. He will find some way to show that he wasn't so bad.

He could have done that. That would mean he still didn't think his father really knew better than he did. That would mean he still wasn't really facing facts. That would mean he is still proud.

But he doesn't say that. He took another important step upward. He admitted that his problems were his own fault. When he decided to go back to his father, he decided he wouldn't go back with excuses. He said, "I'll tell him that I was wrong. I sinned. I was unfair to him." He knows that his father knows that anyway. There's no sense in playing games with him.

This is something that is hard to do. It is harder and harder to do, today. Our whole society wants to tell us we are victims. No matter how bad are the things we do, it isn't our fault. Or not entirely our fault. It's our parent's fault. It's the school's fault. It's the government's fault. It's the fault of what we see on TV. It's the fault of everyone else. But it's not our fault. Or, if it is our fault, it's only a little bit our fault. We were maybe a little bit wrong, but everyone else was wrong, too. That way, it doesn't hurt so much to admit you were wrong.

This is what people want to think today. But it isn't true. And it will never help us get out of the mess we're in. It feels good at first. It is nice to think that your troubles aren't your fault. Not *really* your fault. But it only helps for a while.

Here's why: If something is not my fault, I can't do anything about it. If I could do something about it, then it is my fault. Because I could have done differently. So if I let myself believe I am a victim of other people, then my problems aren't my fault. And if they aren't my fault, I can't do anything about them. And if I can't do anything about them, I'm stuck with them. So blaming others doesn't help anything. It feels good at first, but that's all. In the end, it locks me up in my dungeon. I am at the mercy of others.

But often I *can* do something about my problems. Maybe others influenced me. But I chose to do what they wanted me to do. Maybe others took advantage of me. But I let them. Maybe they did wrong to me. But I chose how I would react to what they did. It is too simple to say that everything is someone else's fault.

If I admit my responsibility, then I will do something. Maybe others were wrong, too. That's their problem. I don't have to worry about it. But I can recognize *my* part in it. And often, *my* part can change more than I think. In others words, I am more responsible that I like to admit.

This is what the young man did. He admitted his responsibility. He didn't blame it on anyone. He didn't say his father didn't bring him up right. He didn't say his friends led him wrong. He made the decisions himself. He is willing to face up to them.

He isn't just saying he made mistakes, either. That is another way of saying it isn't really our fault. "I did it, but I couldn't help myself. I didn't know any better." It is true he didn't know any better. But he *could* have trusted his father, who

*did* know better. So his ignorance does not excuse him. He didn't just "make wrong decisions." He *sinned*. He was wrong.

He is willing to accept all that. He is willing to admit it. He is even willing to admit it to his father. He is done pretending that everything is someone else's fault.

This is very hard to do. Usually, when we admit we were wrong, we still find excuses for it. "Okay, I was wrong. But it was because..." That is just a way of saying I wasn't *really* wrong. The young man isn't going to play those games. It hurts to admit he was wrong, but he will do it.

This is a very important step. He couldn't really go any further without doing this. Anyone who won't recognize his sin is just being proud. And that is another sin. When we pretend the mess we're in is someone else's fault, we aren't getting out of the mess. We're getting in deeper. We're still doing the same things, really. Trying to run things ourselves. Trying to pretend we know better than others. To get out of the dungeon he made for himself, he had to admit his sin. Really admit it, without any excuses. And he did it.

But this still isn't the end. Sometimes, people think that everything is all right once they admit their sin. They think all they have to do is humble themselves. All they have to do is realize how bad they are. If they do that, they think everything is all right.

But nothing has changed in the young man's situation. As he looks around him, he still sees the same old fields. He still sees the same filthy pigs. He still doesn't have anything to eat. He still doesn't have his father to take care of him.

It is very, very important to admit our sin. We must do it as honestly as possible. But we must not stop there. The goal is not to admit sin. The goal is further on. Fortunately, the young man in Jesus' story went on further.

## THE 6<sup>th</sup> STEP UPWARD

He made another important step just after that. He admitted his sin. That is important. Then, he recognized the consequences of his sin. He realized he didn't deserve to be his father's son any more. He wouldn't just go back and try to start over where he had been. He knew he didn't have the right to do that.

This is another important step. He realized his father didn't owe him anything. His father didn't *have* to fix up what he had ruined. He was willing to "face the music." He had ruined things that he couldn't fix. And he couldn't expect others to fix them for him.

This is hard to do. It is hard to admit we have sinned. It is hard to admit we need God. It is hard to admit we can't get along on our own. But when we *do* get that far, it is easy to think that God *owes* us something. That he *has* to straighten out everything for us.

There is a word Christians use that isn't easy to understand. The word is "grace." We talk a lot about grace. But we don't always know what it is.

Grace is what God gives us that we don't deserve. Grace is what He gives us just because He is good. And even though we aren't. Grace is what we have no right to expect.

Grace shows us how much God loves us. He helps us a lot, even though we don't deserve it. We can never know how good God is. No matter how good we think He is, He is even better than that. His grace shows us that.

But if we think God *owes* us something, then we forget about grace. We come to Him with our demands. "The Bible says that if I do this, then You have to do that. So give it to me. I want it. I deserve it."

And God says, "No." God loves to give us good things. Because He loves us. But He won't listen to our demands. If we think He owes us *anything at all*, then we will try to demand it. We need to understand He doesn't owe anything to us.

The young man understood this. He wouldn't demand his "rightful place." He wouldn't even ask for it. He knew he didn't deserve that. He wouldn't demand a job, either. He would ask for one, politely and humbly. But he wouldn't demand one. He knew his father could refuse that, too. His father didn't even owe him a job.

We know how the story ends. We know the father is going to give him more than he ever dared hope. That is beautiful. But we must not think that the father *owes* it to him. The young man didn't think that. He knew it wasn't true. If his father even gives him a job, that is already good. That is already grace. And if his father takes him back as a son, that is even better. That is even more grace.

But he must never forget that it is grace. *He* doesn't deserve anything. His father doesn't owe him anything. He is not bargaining with his father. He could say, "I'll admit it was my fault, if you take me back." But that wouldn't work. That would be a way of trying to make his father do what he wanted. That would mean *he* was still trying to run things.

He is going to admit his guilt to his father without any strings attached. Even if his father doesn't take him back, he will admit his sin. Even if his father doesn't give him a job, he will admit his sin. Because he has realized that no one owes him anything. Especially not his father.

This is a very, very important step upward. When you realize that God doesn't owe you anything, then you can start to understand grace. And grace is wonderful. It means you don't have to deserve to be loved. You don't have to be "good enough" for God to help you. You can be a filthy, rotten sinner like this young man, and God can still help you.

We must not dictate to God what He has to give us. He doesn't owe us anything. Anything He gives us is already

more than we deserve. It is already grace. We will gladly take it, and be thankful. We won't think we deserve something better. We know we already don't deserve that much.

## The 7<sup>th</sup> STEP UPWARD

There is another important step upward here. He says he is going to ask his father to hire him. Just like anyone else. He is not going to come back thinking he owns the place. He *used* to own it. Or part of it, anyway. He was one of the owner's sons, so a part of it would come to him. But that's all behind now. And it's his fault. He won't claim his "rights," because he knows he doesn't have any. He'll just ask for a job.

What does it mean to have a job? Maybe he didn't know before. But he does now. He has a job. He has to do what his boss tells him. Even if he doesn't like it. Even if it's filthy. Even if it means raising pigs. But if that's what the boss says, that's what you do. Or else you change bosses.

He is going to ask his father for a job. That means his father will be his new boss. That means his father will give him orders. And he will obey them. He will let his father be in charge.

This is another important step upward. He has decided that he will do what his father tells him. He will obey his father.

We don't like to obey today. Obedience isn't a word we like. We like to hear about how good God is. We like to hear about how much He loves us. We like to hear about how He saves us. But we don't like to hear about obedience. Some people even pretend we don't have to obey God. He will save us anyway.

That's not what the Bible says. I don't know where those who say that learned it. But they didn't learn it in the Bible. The Bible tells us we must obey God. Many parts of the Bible tell us that. Many people in the Bible tell us so.

One of those who says so was a man named John. He was one of Jesus' closest friends. He was one of the twelve friends Jesus sent out to preach. He is called an "apostle." That means "someone sent to preach."

When John was an old man, he wrote some papers for Christians. They are short letters. In one of them, he talked about people who think you can be a Christian without obeying God. In it, he wrote, "Anyone who says he knows God, but doesn't do what God says, is a liar. He doesn't have any idea what the truth is." (That's in the first letter John wrote. It's the 4th verse of the 2nd chapter.)

You can't come back to God without obeying Him. Jesus' story should show us why. The young man got into trouble by doing things his own way. He needs to have help. He doesn't just need his father's riches. He *had* that, and he still got into trouble. He needs his father to direct him.

We have all gotten in trouble the same way. We didn't do what God wants us to do. Maybe we never even bothered to find out what God wants us to do. And we probably didn't care anyway.

But God really can help us. What He wants us to do really is good for us. That's part of trusting Him. If you trust someone, then you think he knows what he's talking about. And if you think he knows what he's talking about, then you will listen to him. And do what he says. Because he is a trustworthy person.

God knows what He is talking about. He really does. If we believe that, then we will do what He says. But if we don't want to do what He says, then we still don't think He knows what He is talking about. We still think we know better than He does. We still don't really trust Him.

And if we don't trust Him, then we haven't gotten far at all in getting out of our mess. We are still playing our little games. We are still believing our little lies.

The young man had to come to the point of obeying his father. He had to come to understand that his father knew what he was doing. This is a very, very important step on the way up. Without it, he will never get things straightened out. He will still try to run his own life.

But this step can be a trap, too. He *must* learn to obey his father. Without that, he can't go any further. But this isn't the end of the path yet. There are still more steps to take.

We must learn to obey, but it isn't enough to obey. A lot of people think that when we do what God wants us to do, everything is all right. But this isn't the end. There are still some important things missing. If we think it is enough to obey God, then we haven't yet discovered all He has for us. Fortunately, the young man in Jesus' story didn't stop there.

## THE 8<sup>th</sup> STEP UPWARD

It was good that he came back to his senses. It was good that he thought about all these things. He was honest with himself. He faced facts. He didn't make excuses. He decided some important things. That all counts for a lot.

But he is still in the fields. He is still feeding pigs. Many things have changed, but they are all in his own heart. That is important. That is where changes have to start. But that isn't enough. Many people make good resolutions. But making good resolutions doesn't change your life. You have to do something about them.

That is why the next step he made is so important. Jesus said the young man thought about all these things. Then He said that he “got up and went back to his father.” This is the next step upward. He did what he had decided to do. He didn’t just sit there with the pigs, imagining how things would be different. He knew they would never be different if he didn’t do something. No one else was going to help him. His friends were gone. His boss didn’t seem to care. His father cared, but he had told him very clearly he didn’t want his help. No one is going to help him until he actually makes some changes.

It was important to think about things first. It was important to really face facts. It doesn’t help much to act without thinking. He thought about it, so he would know what he had to do. But it doesn’t help much to think without acting, either. He decided a lot of good things. Then he acted on what he had decided.

That took time. He was a long way from home. He was hungry. He was dirty. The trip wasn’t easy. But he did what he had to do anyway. This time, things are beginning to change. They have already changed in his heart. Now, they are going to change in his life, too. He is going to walk all those weary miles back home. People will see him. They will wonder. They will talk. They will shake their heads. They might even laugh. “This is the rich boy. He thought he knew so much. Look at what a mess he made! Doesn’t he smell bad?”

He doesn’t care. This is too important. People can think what they want. He can’t afford to turn around because people will talk. He can’t afford to stop because the trip is long. He will go through with it, because he must go through with it.

This is what it means to **choose**. Choosing is not just thinking things over in your head. It is more than just figuring out what ought to be done. Even if you figure it out right. Choosing means acting. God tells us that we must choose. That means changing some of our ideas. It means changing the attitudes in our hearts. But it also means acting. The young man acted on what he had decided. That is another step upward. He isn’t out of the trap yet, but he is getting closer. Much closer.

## THE FATHER’S REACTION

Before there could be a 9th step, the young man’s plans were interrupted. He probably had it all figured out in his mind. He would come back. He would ask to see his father. His father would be mad. He would be hurt. He wouldn’t want to see him. When he did see him, it wouldn’t be easy. He would tell his father he had been wrong. But would his father believe him? He would have to try to prove himself.

That’s the way it should have gone. He had offended his father. He had hurt his father. He had shamed his family. He had shamed his family honor. The neighbors probably knew all about that. They probably sympathized with the father. “Yes, that son of yours was bad. He was mean. He was unfair to you. If you ever see him again, you need to get back at him. Show him that isn’t done. Make him realize he’s no good. Defend your honor.”

But the father didn’t care what the neighbors thought, either. He only cared about one thing. He had a son he cared about. A son he hadn’t seen in many years.

How many times had he looked down the road, where it curved through the hills? Wishing he would see his son coming back. Thinking about when he left. Thinking how much he loved him. Wishing he knew how to tell him he still cared. Wishing he could tell him he could come home.

He had been disappointed many times. He would see someone off in the distance. Could it be his son? He would begin to hope! The person would come closer ... Was it his boy?

It never was. The months went by. But he never stopped caring. He never stopped hoping. He never stopped looking off down that road. Wishing his son would come back.

Then one day it happened! Someone was walking down the road. The way he walked looked familiar. Could it be him? It probably wasn’t, but he could always hope.

The person got nearer. Maybe it wasn’t his son after all. This was a beggar. Filthy dirty. Dressed in rags. His hair and his beard were a mess. He didn’t even have any shoes. The father’s heart would be disappointed once again.

And yet, still there was something familiar about him. Could it be? ***It was!*** It was! It was his son! The son he had lost!

Sure, he looked terrible. Sure, he smelled bad. But it was his son. He went running off out of the house. He didn’t care what anyone thought.

He ran to his son, instead of waiting for his son to come to him. He hugged him tight. He certainly cried. It was too good to be true! The boy was still alive! He was skinny. He looked awful. He smelled like ***pigs***. But he was alive. He kissed him in his joy.

The young man probably didn’t know what to make of this. This wasn’t what he had expected. In his mind, his father was a boss. Severe. Powerful. Distant. He would surely have some pretty harsh words for him.

But it didn’t work out that way at all. No harsh words. No anger. No getting even for all he had done. Just love, and joy at seeing him again.

It is important to know this. This is how God feels about us. God does not like sin. He doesn’t approve of all the wrong things we do. He does not want us to go on acting like that. But he cares, even so. He cares more than we can know. He doesn’t want to crush us for our sin. He doesn’t want to “get even” with us. He just wants us to come back to the right

path. Back where we belong.

One of the early Christians (probably one of Jesus' brothers) wrote a short letter that is near the end of the Bible. It is called the letter from Jude. (In many Bibles it is called an "epistle." "Epistle" is just a fancy word for a letter someone writes to someone else.) It is just before the last book of the Bible, the Revelation.

At the end of his letter, Jude wrote some important things about what God has in store for us. He wrote, "God is able to keep you from falling. He can do it, and He will. He can bring you to Himself. You will stand right before Him, in all His glory. There will be nothing wrong with you on that day. He won't have anything to criticize you for. You won't have anything to be ashamed of. You will just be overflowing with joy." (That's the 24th verse of the first and only chapter in Jude's short letter.)

God isn't out to criticize us. The devil criticizes us. He criticizes us all the time. He points out everything that is wrong with us. But God just loves us. He knows what is wrong with us even more than the devil does. But He loves us anyway.

That means we don't have anything to worry about. God will not help us if we keep on running from Him. He won't interfere if we want to keep running our own lives. But He doesn't have harsh words for us when we come back to Him. He wants to help, not criticize.

It helps a lot to know this. It encourages us. It surprises us, too. We are so used to being criticized. Whenever we're wrong, someone will criticize us. Even when we're not wrong, some people will criticize us. It is a lot easier to come back to God when we know He just wants to help. He cares.

But that shouldn't stop us from doing what we have to do. The young man had made some important decisions. He has acted on part of them. He discovered that his father cared more than he had imagined. But that doesn't mean he doesn't have to do the rest of what he has decided to do. God's love *encourages* us to do what we should do. It should never be *in place of* doing what we should do. There are still a couple more steps that need to be made. The father's attitude helps a lot. But those steps *must* be made, even so.

## THE 9<sup>th</sup> STEP UPWARD

He had already admitted to himself that he was wrong. He knew he had been unfair to his father. He knew he had sinned. He had decided he would admit all that to his father. But he hadn't done it yet.

Now the time has come. His father's attitude helps. But it could also be a problem. It could tempt him to think that he doesn't need to change after all. His father will love him anyway. Even if he doesn't straighten up.

Which is true, by the way. His father is a picture of God, after all. And God loves us, no matter what we do. Even if we choose to continue sinning. Even if we don't come back to Him. He loves us.

So his father will love him even if he doesn't change his ways. His father cares. Not because his son is good, but because he is good himself. This might make the young man think he can take advantage of the situation. Maybe he should just ask for more money. This time he could be more careful. This time maybe there won't be a famine. This time he might know how to work things out better.

His father will still love him if he does that. But he won't get anything from that love. It won't help him. Because he will still make a mess of things. That's what we always do when we don't let God run our lives. Some people make a big mess of their lives. Others only make a little mess. Sometimes the big mess is actually better. It helps us to realize things are wrong. As long as things aren't too bad, we can keep on fooling ourselves.

No, he doesn't dare keep running. Even though his father loves him, he must change. He must do what he had decided.

It would seem from the story that these ideas never even crossed his mind. He had decided he had to change his life. He had realized he was wrong. The warm welcome from his father didn't change that at all. It only made him surer than ever that he had misjudged his father.

He took the next step upward without hesitating. He admitted openly that he had been wrong. That means he also admitted that he had to change, even though he didn't say it.

There were probably others around. People noticed it when the father suddenly went running out of the house. He was the boss, after all. There were servants around. Everyone was going to hear that he had been wrong. Those who weren't there would hear it from those who would.

He didn't care. He went through with what he had decided. He had decided to return to his father. He did. He had decided he would admit his sin to his father. He did.

What he did here is very important. Too many people fall into the trap he avoided. They make a lot of good decisions. They start getting things straightened out. Then they discover that God loves them. And they decide they don't need to change their lives after all.

This is tragic. Sure, God will love them. But it won't do them any good. The young man could have gotten more money and left again. He could have gone somewhere else. (He didn't need to go back where the famine was.) He could

have made better decisions. But he still wouldn't have a father. He still wouldn't trust him. He would still be on his own.

That's what we do if we continue running our own lives. We might think it doesn't matter. "God will love me anyway. God will forgive. Because God is good."

Yes, God is good. But His goodness won't help us if we don't come to Him. Since when should we turn away from God because He is good? If we are really convinced He is good, we will come *to* Him. We won't run *away* from Him. The surest sign that someone really believes God is good is that he comes to God. He trusts God enough to let Him have control. If someone pretends to believe God is good but still won't let Him run their life, then he is just fooling himself. He doesn't know God.

Remember what John wrote. "Anyone who says he knows God, but doesn't do what God says, is a liar. He doesn't have any idea what the truth is."

The young man *had* to take this step upward. Otherwise, none of the rest would have counted. It is the worst kind of foolishness to think we can continue to sin just because God loves us. If we really understand that God loves us, then we will love Him. And if we love Him, we want to be with Him. Not far away from Him, doing what we want. Running our own lives.

This step is important, but it still isn't quite enough. The young man took ten steps downward. He has taken nine steps upward. He has realized some very important things. But he is still hungry. He is still dirty. He still doesn't have a home. That last step still needs to be made. The story doesn't end here.

## THE MISSING STEP

He had decided to return to his father. He did that. He had decided to admit to his father that he was wrong. He had done that, too. He had decided to ask his father for a job. He is going to do that, too. "I don't deserve to be your son," he was going to tell him. "But will you at least let me work for you? Will you hire me like you would hire anyone else?"

That was what he had planned. That would be the last step upward. It wouldn't be the same as what he had lost. But it would be all right. He would be happy. He could eat. His father would be there to take care of him. He wouldn't really be a father any more. But even as a boss, he would be a very good boss. Much better than the one he had had before. The one who sent him into the fields to feed pigs. The one who didn't even give him anything to eat. He wouldn't have anything to complain about. The next step was all worked out. He would find security and happiness in serving his father.

But he never got a chance to do that. His father let him admit he was wrong. His father let him admit that things needed to change. All that had to be said. But when the father had heard that much, he had heard enough. He didn't let him finish what he had planned. He interrupted him before he could go any further.

Why? Why won't his father let him ask for a job, as he had planned? Why can't he make that last, important step? There are two reasons for this. They are both very important.

The first reason is that it wouldn't have worked. He was a son, not a servant. He was not meant to be a hired worker. He was meant to be part of the family.

What does it mean to have a job? It means you have a boss. He tells you what to do. You have to do it. In return, he pays you. You get something for what you do. Everybody is happy. You have a nice contract that says what you have to do. Your boss is in charge of your work. But your private life is still your own. As long as you do your work right, your boss doesn't have anything to say about that.

That wouldn't be any solution. That was what the problem was! This would not be the last step upward. This would be a step *downward*. He had gotten in trouble from running his own life. If he only had a boss, he would still run a lot of his own life. And he would still make a mess of it. He just didn't know enough to make the right decisions. His father was much wiser than he was. He needed that wisdom in every area of his life. Not just in his work.

What it comes down to is that he needed a father. Getting a job was just another way of getting money from his father. But we already saw that he needed his father, not just his father's riches.

And if he works for his father, then his father has to pay him. He *owes* it to him. That's normal enough. Your boss isn't just being nice when he gives you a paycheck. If you have done your job, he has to give it to you.

Remember grace? Remember what it means? God doesn't *owe* us anything. He gives us much, much more than we deserve, just because He loves us. That is what grace means. We haven't *earned* His help. He helps us because He is good. Not because we are good.

If he gets a job, there is no grace. He will just get what he deserves. And he doesn't deserve much. He has never learned to be a good worker, after all.

This is what religion is all about. Many people "get religion." But religion means doing what God wants you to do, so that He will do things for you, too. It is a kind of contract. "If I do this, then God has to do that." We like to work it all out in detail. We like to make long lists of what we must do. (And even longer lists of what we must not do.) And if we do all that, then God has to bless us. He has to save us from hell. He has to take care of us. He will owe us that much.

We don't need religion. We need God. There is a very great difference between the two. Religion isn't enough. We don't just need a boss. We need a father.



When we “get religion,” we think we are serving God. We think we are doing something useful for Him. But we aren’t. One part of the Bible tells about what the early Christians did. It is called “The Acts,” and is found in the New Testament. In the Acts, we meet a man named Paul. He was very active in his religion. Then he found out that religion wasn’t enough. He got to know God. From then on, he told people that *grace* was important, not religion.

At one point, he said something very important. He was talking to people who had a religion. They thought they were serving God. But he told them, “The true God made the whole world. He made everything that is in the world, too. He reigns over heaven and earth. He doesn’t live in temples. People can’t build something big enough for Him. People don’t serve Him. He doesn’t need anyone to help Him or take care of Him. He takes care of everything He needs by Himself. *He’s* the one who provides for *us*. He gives us life. He gives us breath. He gives us everything we have.” (That’s in chapter 17 of “The Acts,” in verses 24 and 25.)

That means that God doesn’t need religion any more than we do. He doesn’t need our help. He doesn’t need us to serve Him. He wants to love us, and He want us to love Him. That is something completely different from religion.

In other words, we can’t “serve God.” Not really. We *try* to serve God, in order to get blessings from Him. We think if we do the right things, He will reward us. But we are working for our own good, not God’s. This means that religion is not a way of serving God. It is just a way of serving yourself. It doesn’t do God any good. For that matter, it doesn’t do us any good either. Because we are just fooling ourselves with it. We think we are earning something from God by serving Him. But since we aren’t serving Him, we aren’t earning anything either.

This is the first reason why the father wouldn’t let his son take that last step. It just wouldn’t work. This was still something the son had worked out on himself. He thought he had decided to trust his father. But he wasn’t trusting him all that much yet. He still thought it was up to him to figure out what to do about his problem. He was going to include his father in his plans, but they were still *his* plans. Maybe he wasn’t facing reality as much as he thought he was. He wasn’t completely willing to admit that he didn’t have anything to offer. He still thought he needed to find solutions himself.

So that is what he had done. He had figured something out. He would ask his father for a job. But it was a bad idea. Like all the rest of his ideas, when he wanted to run his own life. I’m sure he didn’t see what was bad about it. He thought he was being honest. He would admit he was wrong. He would obey his father, who would become his boss. He didn’t see anything wrong with that.

But his father was much wiser than he was. His father could see that it wouldn’t work. It didn’t make a big enough change. It still left the boy in charge of his own life in a way. Even though he would have a boss. But he would still be earning everything he got. He would still be “his own man.” He wouldn’t have a father. He wouldn’t have grace.

There is another reason why the father wouldn’t let him make that last step that he had planned. That is because he had something much better for him. That is the *real* last step upward.

## THE 10<sup>th</sup> STEP UPWARD

The father didn’t need more servants. He didn’t need more hired hands. He wanted a son. His son. He told his slaves, “Hurry up and bring out nice clothes for him. Dress him in a fine robe. Give him a ring for his finger. Put sandals on his feet. Then prepare a feast. Cook the very best meat. Let’s celebrate and give thanks! My son was as good as dead, but now he’s really alive again! His life was ruined. We had lost him. But now he’s back with us!”

He dresses him like a *son*. He receives him as a *son*. He is not just interested in having him work. He doesn’t just want him to obey. That’s important, but it’s not the most important. It’s not enough. The father wants his son to be part of the family. He wants to have a relationship with him. That is very different from a contract.

This is what the son needs, too. He didn’t ask for it. He probably never even thought it could be possible. But it is what he needs. Being an employee isn’t enough. It is so much better to be part of the family.

This is why the father wouldn’t even let him suggest working for him. He had something so much better to offer him. He doesn’t just have a job for his son. He cares much more than that. He wants him as part of the family again.

The son didn’t ask for this. He had no right to ask for it. It was true that he didn’t deserve to be a son any more. It would not have been right for him to come claim his place as a son. His father didn’t owe him that. After all he had done, his father didn’t owe him anything.

The son can’t demand it. He can’t even expect it. But the father can offer it if he wants to. And he wanted to. This is grace. This is what God wants to do. He knows we don’t deserve to be part of His family. If we understand how bad we are, we know that, too.

But we don’t have to deserve it. He offers it to us because He loves us so much. He knows it is what we really need. It is not enough to have His riches. The young man had that, and made a mess of his life anyway. He wants us to be part of the family.

There is something missing in the story here. Jesus is telling the people what God has for us. He tells that very well. But He doesn’t try to tell them *how* God can do this. Not now. He will tell that another time. He doesn’t put it in the story here.

But we know what that is. In the story, the father takes the boy back just because he loves him. Nothing is said

about all the bad things the son did. What had to be done about that?

In the story, maybe nothing had to be done. That's the way stories are. You can make them simple sometimes, so they are easy to understand. But in real life, something has to be done about our sin. God can't just pretend we are nice.

The Bible tells us what He did about our sin. He paid the price Himself. He came to Earth as a man. Jesus Christ was a man. He was also God. God became a man. And He did that so He could die for us. He paid the price for our sins Himself. That's why He can welcome us back into the family. The price has been paid.

Jesus' story doesn't tell about that. That doesn't mean it is not important. It just means it isn't what He wants to teach here. He will tell people about it other times. But this story just skips over it. It is true that a calf will be killed for the feast. But that is after the son has returned. That is to celebrate their joy. It says nothing about paying the price for all the bad things he did.

The story doesn't need to tell about it. The point of the story is to tell us what God wants to give us. We can learn another time about how He can give it to us. It is enough for us to know the price has been paid.

You might think you are too bad for God to take you into his family. You might think you have done a lot worse things than the young man in Jesus' story. Maybe you have. And it is true that you don't deserve to be one of God's children. I don't either. None of us do. We aren't good enough.

But God can accept us anyway. Not because we are good, but because He has done what has to be done. No matter how bad your sin is, the price has been paid. It was a very high price. More than we can imagine. It is surely enough for anything I have done. If you understand that Jesus died for you, you will realize that. You can come to God and be a part of His family. You don't have to be "good enough." You just have to know that the price has been paid.

When the father proposes this, the son must react. His father has offered him something wonderful. Something better than he dared hope. He fell farther than he would have thought, when he ended up feeding pigs and starving to death. Now, he has come back up farther than he would have thought. He can actually start over where he was. He has his father's wealth. He also has his father. A job would just give him some of his father's money again. But now he can have his father, too. As a real father. Not just a boss.

He could refuse that. He could tell his father, "No. That won't work. Please don't suggest it. We've tried that. You know it doesn't work. You and I just can't get along. I will work for you. I will do what you say. I will be willing to have you as a boss. But I don't want you any closer than that. I'm sorry. But that's not what I want."

He could have said that. He could have told his father to stop. No celebrations for a son. All he wanted was a contract for an employee. There was no sense in trying something that hadn't worked before.

But he didn't say that. When his father received him back as a son, his heart leaped for joy. He didn't dare ask for that. He didn't even dare suggest it. He knew he was too bad. But it was what he really wanted. It was his heart's desire.

This is when he made the final step upward. Not some silly contract where he tries to earn his father's approval. Not his own efforts. Not anything he deserves. Something much better than any of that. The last step upward was made when he accepted his father's offer. When he accepted to be a son again. When he accepted, really, to be more of a son than he had ever been. He hadn't really trusted his father before. He hadn't let him be what a father should be. Now he has learned how foolish that is. For the first time he is going to have a real father. Not because his father has changed, but because he has changed. Because he trusts his father enough to let him have control. He trusts him enough to want to be as close to him as possible. He doesn't need a contract that keeps his father at a distance. He needs a father, who loves him just as much as anyone can.

Anything he could have worked out on his own wouldn't have been enough. He thought he had a system for that final step. It couldn't have worked. He was still trying to take care of himself. He still wouldn't have had what had been lost. But now he is really part of the family. More than ever. What "should have been" has been restored. Now they can rejoice. Life has started over again.

## WHAT IS SALVATION?

The Bible talks a lot about sin. We have seen what sin is. It is those first three steps downward. When you don't trust God. When you don't have a relationship with Him anymore. When you run off on your own, to run your own life.

The Bible talks about grace. We have also seen what that is. It is when God gives us so much, even though we don't deserve it. It means we don't ever have to worry about deserving God's love. We don't have to worry about "earning" anything at all. God gives it to us just because He cares about us. That is grace.

The Bible also talks about salvation. That is another one of those words we don't always understand. But this story helps us understand what it means.

When the young man was far away and unhappy, that was sin. He had turned away from his father. He didn't have enough confidence in him to let him run his life.

What did he need? What did he need *the most*? Maybe you think, "He needed to stop doing bad things." That's true. That was part of what he needed. That was part of the return. He had to learn to obey his father. But that wasn't the

whole thing. That didn't yet give him back what he had lost.

Maybe you think, "He needed money, so he could buy what he needed." That is true, too. You can't live without money. When he ran out of money, he almost died. Because he didn't have enough to eat. But we also saw that he needed more than that. Money wasn't enough. He had lost more than that.

What he needed the most was a father. A relationship. He didn't just need *something*. He needed *someone*.

This is salvation. Nothing else is salvation. Salvation means restoring what is lost. And what is lost by sin? Our relationship with God. We don't trust Him enough to want Him running our lives. So we turn away from Him.

*That* is what needs to be restored. That is what we need to get back. God gives us many good things. That shows us how much He cares. But that can also be a trap. We can think that the good things God gives us are more important than he is himself. But that is not salvation.

When a man and a woman get married, they can do a lot of things for each other. The wife can fix meals for her husband. She can earn money to help support the home. The husband can fix the car. He can earn money, too. They can be very useful to each other. They should appreciate each other.

But is that all there is to being married? What kind of a marriage is it where all you care about is what the other one can do for you? Shouldn't you be more interested in a *relationship*? Shouldn't you be more interested in a *person* than in what he or she can do for you? Of course you should. That is what a marriage is. It is love, not just helping each other.

The Bible says that belonging to God is like being married. We have a relationship with Him. That doesn't mean He doesn't do good things for us. He does *lots* of good things for us. More than we can ever realize. But we love Him for Himself. That is what salvation is. A restored relationship.

The Bible talks about knowing God. Many, many times the Bible says that. Lots of people don't know God. They might know some things *about* God. They might know some of what He does. But they don't know Him.

We don't have salvation until we know God. The young man in Jesus' story didn't finish his path until he had a father again. If he had stopped before that, he never would have had what he needed the most. He had lost a lot by turning away on his own. He never would have gotten it back if he hadn't been able to really have a father again. He needed to live with him. He needed to trust him. He needed to enjoy the relationship with him.

Jesus told this story so we would know what salvation is. He wanted us to know what God wants to give us. And now we know. He gives us Himself. What could be greater than that?

## THE OLDER BROTHER

Jesus' story didn't end there. It could have. It would have been a nice story that way. It would have had a happy ending. The son was lost, but he came back. Everything is going to be nice.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He had to tell more. People wouldn't have understood what He was saying if He stopped there. They would think the story was only about "bad" people. It was only about "someone else."

So He added more to the story. The father had *two* sons. Why two? Why did Jesus add this detail? It was so He could tell us about the second son, too. He was lost also, in his own way.

That young man was a hard worker. He was out in the fields where he belonged. He didn't even hear about it when his brother returned. He was working. That is good.

When the work was done, he headed for home. He was tired. He was hot. He had worked hard. He was proud of the fact that he always worked hard.

He heard music and dancing from the house. That was strange. What were they doing? Why were they having a party when there was work to be done? Didn't they know what was important?

He asked someone about it, and found out the news. His brother was back. It was time to rejoice.

He should have gone running into the house. He should have gone looking for his brother, the way his father had. "Is it true? Is it possible? You have come back? Oh, I'm so glad to see you again!"

But he didn't. He was too proud for that. He just got mad instead. After all, *he* had worked so hard. His brother hadn't. He had stayed with their father. His brother hadn't. He had behaved himself. His brother hadn't. He was much better than his brother was!

His father heard about that. And his father had to do the same thing for him as he had done for the younger brother. He had to take the first step. He had to go out to him.

He tried to encourage him. He invited him to come in. Just as he had invited the younger son in. Both of them had a right to be in the house. Both of them were part of the family. Or at least they could be if they wanted to be.

The older brother was mad at his father. He told him off right. He reminded him about all the bad things his brother had done.

He also told his father it was unfair. *He* had worked so hard! He had worked like a slave, he said. For years now. And what thanks had he gotten for it? Nothing. Not one little party. It isn't fair!

His father reminds him that he could have all he wanted. His father didn't *need* to throw a party for him. He could

throw all the parties he wanted. It was his own pride that made him work like a slave all the time. It wasn't his father.

He didn't even want to admit that the young man who had come back was his brother. He called him, "this son of yours." His father had to remind him, "This is your brother, after all." He just wanted to hate. He was too proud to rejoice. He certainly didn't know anything at all about grace. He knew he had a right to a lot more than his brother did. It wasn't fair for his father to throw a big party for his brother.

What is wrong with this young man? It is important to understand this. It is not enough just to say, "He's mad." Sure, he's mad. He's throwing a temper tantrum. He's acting like a little brat. Anyone can see that. But we need to know *why* he's doing that.

Think about this. He is mad at his father. He doesn't think his father should have done what he did. He doesn't think his father is fair. He doesn't like the way his father does things.

Does that sound familiar? That's how his brother's problems started out. He is just like his brother in this. He has lost confidence in his father, too. He thinks he knows much better what should be done.

Then, look at what he wants. Does he say, "*I* want you to be my father, too"? No. If he did, his father could just say, "But of course I'm your father, too. A father can have more than one son."

He isn't interested in his father as a father. He is only interested in what his father can give him. Or rather, what his father *should have* given him. "*I* want to have parties, too. I want you to give me things so I can have fun, too."

That sounds familiar, too. That's how his brother acted when he didn't have confidence in his father any more. He was no longer interested in him as a father. He was only interested in what he had to give. The relationship didn't interest him any more.

That means he has taken the second step downward on the same path his brother took. He doesn't have a relationship with his father any more, either. Not as a *father*, in any case. All he wants is a boss, who tells him what to do. He is willing to obey. He is willing to work hard. Harder than anyone else. But he wants what he earns.

His father won't do things the way he wants. He wants his father to send the other brother away. Or at least make him crawl. Make him see how bad he is. Make him pay. Make him prove himself first. His father simply won't do that.

So, he refuses to come into the house. It's as simple as that.

This is very familiar as well. When the younger son didn't want a father any more, he went away. That's what the older brother is doing. He didn't go as far away as his brother did. But he doesn't want to be in his father's house if his father isn't going to do things the way he wants them done. His brother ran away to another country. He just runs away to the fields. But he is still gone.

This is the third step his brother took. He doesn't want to be with his father any more, either. Not under those circumstances, at least.

He has lost exactly what his brother lost. He has lost confidence in his father. He has lost his relationship with his father. He has lost his father's presence. In his own way, he is following the exact same path as his brother.

Remember what we said about those first three steps downward? We said they show us what sin is. We said that people don't all act alike, but they all take the same first three steps. The problem is in the first three steps.

He has taken those same steps. He probably took them long before, in fact. Maybe they didn't show up until now. But if he gets so mad at his father, that shows he stopped trusting him a long time before. It is obvious that he hasn't had a real relationship with his father for a long time, either. And he probably hasn't even spent much time with him for years. His father's attitudes certainly haven't had time to rub off on him. His father never stopped caring. The older brother never learned to care. His father wants to help even those who don't deserve it. The son only wants his father to give them what they deserve.

He is so proud of serving his father. But he has nothing to be proud of. He isn't really serving his father. He is not doing what his father *really* wants done. He is just being proud. He is serving himself. He just *thinks* he is working for his father. He's fooling himself as much as his brother ever did.

From the outside, he looks so much better. The younger son wastes his money on prostitutes. He ends up feeding pigs. He lives a bad life. The older son is a hard worker. His father can count on him. The neighbors probably never had anything bad to say about the older son. They probably told the father, "I bet you wish both of your sons were like that."

And the father probably thought to himself, "If you only knew. Both of my sons *are* like that. Proud. Foolish. Uncaring. Lost." The father was no fool. He is God, after all. And God knows what is in our hearts. Better than we do ourselves. He knew the older son was lost, too, just like the younger one. He worked harder. He did what his father told him. He was "nicer." But he was lost, because his heart wasn't with his father.

## IS THERE A HAPPY ENDING?

What is sad is that we don't know how the story ends. We don't know if he let his father convince him. We don't know if he admitted he was wrong, the way his younger brother had. Or whether his anger and pride kept him from learning to love and trust his father. Jesus didn't say what became of him.

Maybe that's a good way for the story to end. It means there are still questions that have to be answered. It means there are still things that have to be worked out. It means there are people who are still lost.

All those who don't walk with God are lost. A lot of them don't know they are lost. That is because they don't know what it means to be found. They think everything is all right, as long as they go to church. Or even if they don't go to church, as long as they are "good." Many people are lost the way the younger brother in Jesus' story was lost. Many others are lost the way the older brother was lost.

The only real difference between the two was that the younger brother knew he was lost. It maybe took him a while to realize it, but in the end it was obvious. When he was alone and hungry and feeding pigs, he couldn't play games with himself any more. He had to admit that he needed his father. The older brother needed his father, too. But he didn't realize that. He thought he *had* his father, for one thing. He thought it was enough to work hard and "serve his father." He didn't know about loving his father, or trusting him, or just enjoying being with him. He didn't care, either.

They say, "Home is where the heart is." That's probably true. We could also say, "Home is where the heart belongs." The youngest son didn't just decide he would try to do better. He came back home. That's what we all need to do. God gives us many wonderful things. But the best of all is the chance to come home. To come back to our Father. That is where we all belong, really. We just need to admit it.

Jesus' story doesn't really end. It continues on, for each one of us. Whether or not it has a happy ending depends on you. If you are running from God, that's sad. If you are busy making a mess of your life, that's sad. But if you are settling for trying to do what God wants, instead of really knowing Him, that's even sadder. Because you might not know you are lost. Many people think religion is enough. But it isn't. Only God is enough. What could ever replace Him? If you stop short of that final step, you have missed it all. You might have found religion, but you haven't found a Father. You haven't found a relationship with God.

I'm so glad He gave me the chance to come home. To come back to Him. You can do it too, if you haven't already. Jesus has shown us the way. The way home. The way back to a God worth knowing. Are you ready to come back home?