

RAY PRITCHARD



Praying  
*for your*  
Prodigal



## Praying for Your Prodigal

I received an email with a heartrending question:

*I have a daughter that I don't believe is saved. I pray for her but often times I can't. I suppose I'm angry she isn't responding and feel incapable of helping her. What can I pray for on a daily basis so she will come to Christ? At times I feel such sorrow, thinking she might go to hell.*

This parent speaks for mothers and fathers everywhere who pray for their prodigal children, often for years, with seemingly no results. I do not doubt that praying parents must at some point feel like giving up, and it must be hard not to get angry when you see your children repeatedly making bad choices or showing no interest in the gospel. What do you do then? How do you keep believing for your prodigal son or daughter?

When I use the word “prodigal,” I’m referring to anyone who has drifted away from their Christian heritage. It could refer to a college student who simply stops going to church or to a man who thinks he doesn’t need “religion” or to someone who becomes an atheist. It could refer to a son raised in the church who calmly tells his mother, “I’m no longer a Christian.” A prodigal could be a husband who one day walks out on his marriage and simply disappears. A prodigal could be someone who gets so busy in their career that they have no time for God.

In thinking about cases like this, we often wonder if the prodigal is saved or lost. *The answer is, only God knows because only he can read the heart.* We don’t need to answer the “Are they saved?” question because for the moment we don’t know the answer. It’s usually not profitable to spend time wondering, “Were they ever truly converted?” Those questions, while important, go to matters of the heart known only to the Lord.

When we look from the outside, it may be easy to conclude that the person we thought we knew so well was never saved in the first place. But our knowledge is limited. While the prodigal may appear to have totally rejected his background, and he may give all the appearances of being lost, only God knows for certain.

## THE PROBLEM WE FACE

*When thinking about hard questions, it's crucial that we start in the right place.* Nowhere is this more important than when we pray for our prodigal sons and daughters. Because we have so much invested in them, we may be tempted to give up because the pain of praying when nothing seems to be happening finally overwhelms us.

A prodigal may be a pastor who ran off with a woman in his church and now has rejected his family and his faith. It might refer to a brother who used to be an Awana leader who now refuses to go to church at all. It could refer to a Bible college graduate who now lives an openly homosexual lifestyle. You may have learned about Jesus from someone who now rejects the very faith they once taught you. Very often prodigals start out as people who, having been deeply hurt by the circumstances of life, feel abandoned or cheated or mistreated by God.

*These things happen, and they happen more often than we like to admit.* If we could go behind the scenes of the “best” Christian families we know, most of them would have stories of a prodigal son or daughter or a prodigal husband or wife. There is no way to guarantee it won't happen to someone close to you. For that matter, I know of no way to be certain that you yourself may not become a prodigal someday. That's why we have warnings in the New Testament to pay attention to how we live and to take nothing for granted (1 Corinthians 9:24-27 is a good example).

*In stating the matter this way, I don't believe I am a pessimist.* I am simply drawing conclusions based on a sober reading of the New Testament and a lifetime of dealing with hurting, confused people.

The parable Jesus told that gave us the term “prodigal son” (Luke 15:11-32) is universally regarded as one of the greatest short stories ever told because it speaks truth about the human condition.

Prodigals happen.  
This is the problem we face.

They won't come back until they are ready.  
We can't argue them back or shame them back.  
If we force them back too early, they will still be in the “far country” on the inside.

How should we pray for our prodigals? To answer that, we first need to get our theology right.

## THE THEOLOGY WE NEED

*We need to remember that an astounding miracle lies at the heart of our faith.* We believe something incredible—that a man who was dead came back to life on the third day. We believe God raised him from the dead. Now if God would do that for his Son, indeed if God has the power to raise the dead, who are we to question God’s power to change the hardest hearts? After all, if you go to the cemetery and stay there waiting for a resurrection, you’ll wait a long time. You will see plenty of funerals but no resurrections. What are the chances that a man who had been tortured and then crucified and then buried in a tomb would be raised from the dead? *The odds would seem to be against it.* You can’t start with what your eyes see or what you can figure out. You can’t trust your feelings because your emotions can play tricks on you. We must therefore start with God who can raise the dead, not with the person who is spiritually dead.

*If it is God alone who can raise the dead, then our focus must be on God alone.*

Here are three verses that will help us as we think about praying for our prodigals:

**“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it”** (Proverbs 4:23 NIV).

**“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will”** (Proverbs 21:1 ESV).

**“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened”** (Ephesians 1:18 NASB).

*The heart has eyes.* Did you know that? When Paul speaks of “your heart,” he’s not referring to the organ in your chest that pumps blood throughout your body. The term “heart” refers to what we might call “the real you,” the place inside where the decisions of life are made. The heart decides what values you will live by and what direction you will go and how you will live your life each day. *Every important decision you make starts in your heart.*

Your heart has eyes that can be open or closed. When the eyes of your heart are closed to the light of God, you stumble blindly through life, making one dumb choice after another. You fall into sinful patterns, you break God’s laws, you make the same mistakes over and over again, and you enter one dead-end relationship after another. Why? Because the eyes of your heart are shut and you lack moral vision. The light of God is shut

out of your life. *That means you can see and be blind at the same time.* There are lots of people like that in the world. Physically they can see, but spiritually they are blind.

That describes many young people raised in the church. *They know God, but their eyes are so filled with the things of the world that they are blind to the truth.* Let me illustrate. Here we have a young man who has been raised in a Christian home. He's been going to church for years—Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, children's ministry, and the youth group. Now he goes off to college where he's on his own. He meets a girl and they start dating. Soon they are sleeping together. When his parents hear about it, they are furious and worried and upset and they wonder what to do. They argue and plead and cajole and threaten and quote Scripture, all to no avail. What is the problem? It is precisely this: *The eyes of his heart are closed to the truth of God.* Until those eyes are opened, all the yelling in the world won't make much difference.

If our young people sleep around, or if they get drunk on the weekends, if they cheat and cut corners, if they are rebellious and unmotivated, those things are only symptoms of a deeper, more fundamental issue. *They've never made a personal commitment to get serious about Jesus Christ.* Once Christ becomes the center of your life, no one will have to tell you not to sleep around, and no one will have to tell you, "Don't get drunk on the weekends." You just won't do it. Once the eyes of your heart are opened, the light of God's truth will come flooding in, and you'll never look at anything the same way again.

## THE PRAYER WE MUST PRAY

The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

*Sometimes we worry too much about the symptoms without dealing with the root issues of life.* We should pray, "**Open the eyes of their heart, Lord,**" because when that happens, life will radically change. They will grab their helmet and get in the ballgame for the Lord. They'll go to the huddle and say, "You call the play, Lord. I'm ready to do whatever you say."

One translation of Ephesians 1:18 (The Voice) says it this way:

**"Open the eyes of their hearts, and let the light of Your truth flood in."**

That's what prodigals need.  
That's what we all need.

*It's a beautiful picture of a person whose eyes have been closed for a long time.* When their eyes are opened, light from heaven comes flooding in.

Suddenly everything looks different.  
What seemed right, they now see as wrong.  
The truth they once mocked, they now gladly obey.  
The Jesus they spurned, they now worship.  
The path they followed into sin, they follow no more.

All things have become new to them.  
What a thousand sermons could not do, the light of God does for them.

Once they enjoyed the far country.  
Now they long to dwell in the Father's house.

Once they lived for worldly pleasure.  
Now they seek to please the Lord.

Once sin held them captive.  
Now their heart is captive to Jesus alone.

Some people wonder, "Is this possible?" Could a life so far gone in sin ever be deeply changed? My answer is quite simple. *We do not need to understand how it could happen.* We only need to know that with God all things are possible.

*Opening blind eyes is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.* He alone can do it, but he can do it, and this is the source of our hope.

This is why we pray for our children and grandchildren and our family members and for friends and loved ones who today are far from God. As we think about our prodigals, we should cry out to God and say, "**O Lord, open the eyes of their heart. Help them to see the light of truth.**" That prayer is so simple and yet so profound. *Only God can open the eyes of the heart.* When that happens, they will see the truth and light from heaven will come flooding in.

## A MOTHER'S TEARS

My favorite story about the power of prayer to reclaim a prodigal is over 1600 years old. It begins with a woman named Monica, who was raised by Christian parents in North Africa. When she was old enough, her parents arranged a marriage to a pagan man. Evidently the marriage was very difficult because of divided spiritual loyalties. Monica and her husband had three children who survived. *Two of them followed Christ, but one son left the faith of his childhood.* By his own admission, he chose the path of worldly pleasure. For many years he lived with a mistress and together they gave birth to a son out of wedlock. He broke his mother's heart by

joining a religious cult. Monica prayed for seventeen years that her son would return to Christ.

Looking back, her son said she watered the earth with her tears for him, praying more for his spiritual death than most mothers pray over the physical death of a child. She fasted and prayed and asked God to save her son. One day she went to see the bishop and with tears asked why her son was still living in sin. The bishop replied with words that have become famous across the centuries: "It is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish. Your son will be saved." He was right. *It took several more years of fervent praying, but eventually Monica's son came to Christ.* His name is Augustine. We know him today as St. Augustine. He is universally regarded as one of the greatest thinkers in Christian history. He makes it clear that his mother prayed him to Jesus. She would not give up, and eventually God answered her prayers.

I think the bishop was right when he said, "It is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish." How precious are a mother's tears! There are mothers and grandmothers who have prayed their children and their grandchildren to Christ. They have seen their children and grandchildren in the "far country" of sin and have prayed them step by step back to the Father's House. When everyone else gave up, godly women laid hold of heaven and claimed their offspring in Jesus' name.

Please do not misunderstand. I do not believe our prayers contain merit in and of themselves. *But God has ordained both the means and the ends of salvation.* We pray because everything depends on God, and we preach because the gospel is the power of God for salvation. *Your prayers are part of heaven's plan to reach out to the prodigals in your life and bring them back to God.* If you are heavily burdened for a loved one, you may be sure that burden does not come simply from yourself. The burden is a gift from God, a token of his mercy toward the prodigal who at this moment cares nothing for the Lord. Your prayers are an indispensable link in the chain of God's purposes.

## FIRST, WE MUST CHANGE

I received an email with a perspective we need to consider:

*Our third son is a prodigal, (although I suppose we are ALL prodigals in some fashion!). I have experienced a depth of relationship with God that I didn't know before mothering a prodigal. God has continued to walk this road of parenting with us, revealing his character to us, and growing us through the trials. I thank God for our son because he has been the iron that sharpens me. I trust God is working deep in his heart, even though the outside doesn't often look that way. I believe*

*someday his eyes will be opened, and God will remove his heart of stone and will give him a heart of flesh! And the renewing of his heart and his mind will be a great testimony to God and who he is.*

*Everything I have been trying to say is in that email.* Here is a mother who has grown spiritually as she has prayed for her son. Instead of becoming bitter, she has been changed on the inside and brought closer to the Lord. *God often uses the prodigals in our lives to bring us closer to him.* As long as we try to control our loved ones, either through anger or through our tears or by arguing with them or complaining about them to others, as long as we focus on them, they will not change, and neither will we. Sometimes in our despair, we become prodigals ourselves because our anger at them has ruined our own walk with the Lord.

*As we pray for our prodigals, remember that the change we seek must start with us.* Until we are changed, and our anger is turned to love, we will become bitter and hardened ourselves. That can happen even though we go to church every Sunday, pray the prayers, sing the songs, serve the Lord, and do all the outward things the church asks us to do. At that point we have become prodigals on the inside even though we look just fine on the outside.

We must relinquish our loved ones into God's hands and say, "Lord, they belong to you. Always have, always will." *They never were ours to start with.* It is so hard to yield them to the Lord, but we can do it if we remember that his love never fails, that he knows what he is doing, and that he is a better parent than we are.

We sometimes look at the prodigals around us and wonder where God is in the midst of our pain.

He is not unknowing or uncaring.  
He is not surprised or stumped.

*Though our prodigals may have left the Lord, he has not left them, not even for a second.* They may be "lost" to you, but they are not "lost" to him. He knows exactly where they are and what they are doing at this very moment. He loves them more than you do. He leads them even when they don't know they are being led.

Do you have a loved one who is far from the Lord?  
Does it seem impossible that he or she will ever change?  
Do you get angry thinking about their foolish choices?  
Do your prayers seem useless to you?

*Pay no attention to your feelings.* There is more going on in the heart of your loved one than you can know.

Don't give up.  
Keep on praying.  
Keep believing.  
You never know what God will do.

When you pray for a loved one who seems hardened against the Lord, pray that the eyes of their heart might be opened so the light of God can come flooding in. *If that seems hopeless, at least it puts the hopeless case at God's doorstep, which is where it belongs.* On Saturday night there was a “hopeless case” in the Garden Tomb. On Sunday morning the whole world changed when Jesus rose from the dead. You never know what God will do, so keep on believing and keep on praying. God specializes in impossible situations, and he loves to prove that hopeless cases aren't hopeless after all.

Never give up. Pray, pray, and keep on praying. Your prayers accomplish more than you have ever dreamed.

# GOING DEEPER

1. Who are the prodigals in your life? List them by name and then take a moment to thank God for each one.
2. How has God used the prodigals in your life to draw you closer to the Lord?
3. How does Psalm 139:7-12 encourage us to keep on praying for those who are far from the Lord?
4. “Lord, give me gritty faith that will never give up until the answer comes.” Memorize that simple prayer and say it to the Lord every day. Someday your prodigal will be glad you never gave up.

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