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The Prodigal Brothers

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Review

FEBRUARY 20, 1975

ADVENT REVIEW AND SABBATH HERALD ♦ GENERAL CHURCH PAPER OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

IN THE WELL-KNOWN STORY of Jesus about the wayward boy and the boy's yearning father, who was the prodigal? Why, we immediately respond, it was the younger son, of course. It was he who turned in ungrateful restlessness from home and father, he who wasted his wealth and his youth in the far country, he who "came to himself" among the pigs and at last returned home.

But wait—in recounting this universally appealing tale, we usually stop right there: the prodigal son comes home and the father and servants rejoice. But Jesus didn't stop there. There is an epilogue. At the end of the story the prodigal son is safe inside the fold, but his brother is outside, obdurate in his refusal to receive the wanderer and join the feast.

When the story ends who is the wayward son? And, we might further ask, is not this actually the story of two wayward sons?

I'm not trying to excuse the younger son in any way. He was guilty of that sharpest of sins that plague the family—ingratitude, sharper, as Shakespeare put it, than a serpent's tooth. He was a disgrace to his good name, a black sheep who broke his father's heart.

However, an important point in his part of the story is that he didn't stay among the pigs. It is one thing to get into a predicament; it is another thing to stay in it. What is more important than where we are now is the direction in which we are moving, or whether, in fact, we are moving!

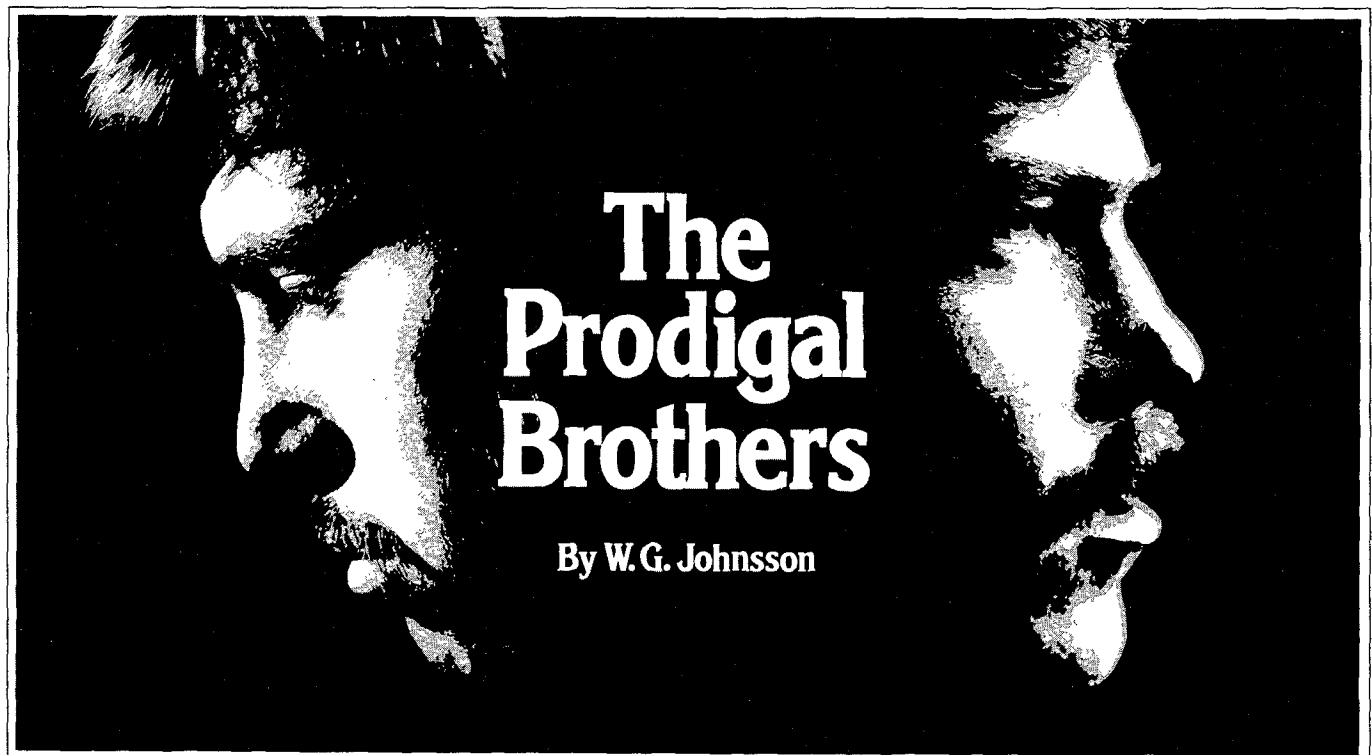
So it is that this most famous of the Master Teacher's illustrations speaks to us today. It gives hope to the fallen, encouragement to the heartbroken; it points to a heavenly Father's love for the darkest soul.

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We make much use of this aspect of the story, and rightly so. But there is more for us, if we will but go further and complete the tale. And, if we examine the record carefully, we may find that it is the second son—the older brother—who may be the chief character in this story. That is, the story of the younger son may be told chiefly to bring the character and desperate need of his brother into bold relief.

This is borne out by a study of the circumstances of the parable. The story of the brothers is the third in the series of "lost-and-found" incidents that occupy the fifteenth chapter of Luke. The narrative is preceded by the story of the lost sheep (verses 3-7) and that of the lost coin (verses 8-10). What prompted Jesus to tell these stories? The answer seems apparent from verse 2—the scribes and the Pharisees were grumbling against Jesus because of His friendliness toward the social outcasts. Indeed, it seems likely that the chapter break after Luke 14:35 is singularly misplaced. A careful reading of the Gospel beginning at 14:1 indicates a continuous story. That is, Jesus has been dining at the residence of one of the leading Pharisees (verse 1). During the course of the banquet and thereafter He gave valuable instruction, recorded in the remainder of chapter 14. But His words were not welcome to the religious leaders, hence His challenging remark of verse 35—"He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (R.S.V.). Immediately there follows chapter 15:1—"Now the

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tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him" (R.S.V.). Though the scribes and Pharisees resented His words, those beyond the pale of religious respectability were eager to hear more.

It therefore seems apparent that Jesus has two principal objects in His teaching of Luke 15. First, He defends His work for the social outcasts against the criticisms of the religious hierarchy. Each of the three "lost-and-found" stories points out the inestimable worth of a soul, and the rejoicing in heaven when a sinner is saved. Jesus is in effect saying: You Pharisees have no regard for these cursed of God (John 7:49). But I am interested in them because Heaven puts supreme value upon them. When one of these little ones is saved, there is more joy than over 99 who need no repentance.

"Need no repentance"! The words strike with ringing irony, even as did His earlier words of defense: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Luke 5:31, R.S.V.). For the second great objective of Jesus is to convict the Pharisees of their own fearful need before God. To point out their sin directly would but further alienate them; so He will tell a story, get their interest, and the conclusion will perhaps strike home with peculiar force in conviction. For Jesus was not interested only in the blind, the halt, the maimed, and the lame, He loved the Pharisees, too, and tried by every skill to win them to Himself. If they could but be led to acknowledge that they were the elder brother their desperate need of a genuine repentance would ring the bells of their souls.

After all our effort for God, is it possible that we might be outside the kingdom?

Something was very wrong with the older brother. Something was very wrong with the Pharisees. The feast is prepared, supper is served, and the Father comes in person to extend the invitation. But they are outside; outside, and arguing with God. How far indeed they were from the kingdom of God!

Yet, they had religion aplenty. They had given their lives to the study and exposition of the Law. They were wedded to religion. Looking at these men, whose every word and deed were governed by the Law, the common people must have thought: If any people are to be saved, it will surely be they. So when Jesus pointed out their unworthiness before God, the disciples must have been amazed.

Herein lies a vital message for God's people today. We must study carefully this parable of the two brothers—all of it, and especially the latter part. For we who know so much, and who are often so careful in our religion, must search our souls as the spotlight of the Spirit beams upon us. Are we in danger of becoming the older brother? After all our effort for God, is it possible that we might be outside the kingdom, indeed, even angry with God because the final disposition of humanity is not according to our liking?

If we will but listen, the parable of the older brother speaks with special force to us today.

It tells us, first of all, that religion alone is not enough, that is, mere trust in organized religion, or being wedded to a religious bureaucracy. Our allegiance must first be to Christ. We

must believe in the Advent Movement and its triumph; but primarily we must be wedded to Christ. If the order of loyalties is correct, so much the greater will be our contribution to God's great cause; if it is inverted, we are in peril of becoming hypocrites or religious bigots.

The parable warns against the fearful hazard of self-righteousness. This is most hateful to God, most nearly beyond His help. Said Jesus—"Every one who exalts himself will be humbled" (Luke 14:11, R.S.V.). Continually we need grace. Day by day, as we see the unfortunate and the fallen, we must say from the heart, "There go I, but for the grace of God." Any interpretation of the faith that makes us feel better than someone else is a sure station on the road to hell!

The parable counsels us against a critical attitude. Like the older brother, we love to compile statistics of evil. How often we cut down a fellow member, a fellow worker, by dragging out some dusty skeleton that the good Lord long since put to rest!

The parable shows us that a loveless religion is a false religion. The older brother could say only—"Your son," refusing even to call him his brother. But can we not fall into the same loveless attitude? When we see those of other races, other cultures, other social status, how often we sanctimoniously classify them as "God's children"; let us rather, from the heart, name them "My brother"! Where love is, God is. The apostle tells us that if we love in truth, we *know* that we have passed from death unto life (1 John 3:14).

The parable points to the true spirit of service. The older brother, like the Pharisees, was a timeserver. He was greedy for the reward, angry that the wastrel should be given a free feast. (Here was a false sense of economy!) He had labored hard for many years. But, laboring in the name of the father, he had actually labored for himself. And so may we: unless all our toil, our endurance, our patient continuance in well-doing, is done as unto Him, in the spirit of Mary, who shattered the alabaster box of precious ointment for the Lord, we too may find ourselves outside the feast.

In a word, the parable defines a form of religion that has always been inviting to the human heart, but one that is as filthy rags before God. Cold, heartless, hypercritical of others, jealous of its own feelings, position, and rewards, cocksure of itself, the legalistic heart will be astounded at the balancing of God's scales. Fain would it rise in its own defense to rebuke the Lord Himself: such is the wickedness of the self-nature.

But the story of the wayward brother has no conclusion. Did he at last relent? or was he obdurate to the end? We would like to know; but we may be sure that Jesus deliberately left the conclusion open. For the last paragraph was yet to be written—written by the Pharisees themselves. If they, pricked by the Spirit, might see themselves as the Lord saw them and turn to Him in faith, they might gladly enter the feast.

The tragic end of the story is a matter of history. By and large, the offer was rejected: it was these very men of religion who whipped up the hate-cry of the mob six months later: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

But to every one of God's people today who reads the story and sees himself in the sad figure of the older brother, the end is yet to be written. And the Father still pleads; the feast still waits. The music is playing, the guests are set. There sits the younger son—he who has come home from heathen lands, come home from debasing habits, come home from various forms of vice. Once he was far away, but he has come home. Now he sits, clad in the best robe, shod with the father's sandals, the father's ring on his finger. And all heaven waits to break into rapturous joy at the entry of the "just one, who needs no repentance"! □