

Part 2

Faith Alive Through--

BEGINNING AGAIN

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-THE NEED TO BEGIN AGAINI-

I was a Prodigal living right at home in the Father's House. The "house" was a typical American Church and I was the Preacher!

Jesus told a story about a "prodigal church member." It is often dubbed "*Parable of the Prodigal*." It reads like this:

"A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' And he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. But when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. And when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!' I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fattened calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry." (1)

Now, please know, that this is NOT a story about a young man who lived in a shack on Shady Street frequenting the back alleys of the world. This IS a story about a "church member" for he was a "SON in the FATHER'S HOUSE." Look again and note to WHOM Jesus was speaking in Luke 15:1-3. It was to the Pharisees and Scribes! The religious people of the day! Thus to give this parable relevant application, Prodigal is a "church member." The Father is God while the

Father's House is the "church." Yes, I know the church didn't come into existence until after Christ's death; but, prodigality begins in the "church house" even as Vs. 13 says of the Prodigal: "...*the younger son gathered all together, and JOURNEYED INTO A FAR COUNTRY.*"

H-O-W do I know so much about the HOW and WHERE of prodigals you ask? Because, you see, I was a prodigal, who journeyed a long way from home, yet, was a church member and called God my "Father."

One day Bro. George Reynolds, Elder in the West Lebanon (Indiana) Church where I preached, came saying--"*Too bad about John Doe! He has quit the church and backslid!*" I said--"*Now, George, it is too bad, but John didn't quit and backslide. He BACKSLID and t-h-e-n QUIT!*" This is always the order of events in a prodigal's life. **THIS** was the road I followed.

Slipping away from the Lord begins in *places* no one can SEE!

*****WHO** could see that the weekly Communion was mere bread and grape juice to me?

*****WHO** could *know* that I had most of the hymns memorized and could and did sing them by rote without meaning a word?

*****NO MAN** *knew* that my sermons were NOT messages from God, but right out of the latest "Sermon Book." And, these sermons were legalistic down to the last "jot" and "tittle" and VERY JUDGEMENTAL---Always *judging someone else*.

*****WHO** could *see* the lack of love as I put my offering in the plate?

*****WHO** could know that God quit answering most of my prayers, but I manipulated matters with Programs, Projects, Gimmicks and Gadgets, so *it looked like* real power. It was as Bro. Carl Ketcherside said in his "Mission Messenger", "Straight as a gun barrel and just as empty."

Sad, sad was this prodigal a long way from home.

Discerning readers will ask--“How did you do this? How could you be the preacher and be backsliding?” The simple but sad answer--By staying one step ahead of most of the Church members, while still being lukewarm in my own life.

Across some twenty-five years there was the exhausting SELF effort to do better. My constant trying to rededicate a carnal self to God. Trying to serve two masters even though Jesus said “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” Matthew 6:24.

-THE V-O-I-C-E That Calls-

The *famine* came for the Prodigal in Luke 15 and it came for me, too! Words in this Parable of Life that speak of a lonely heart a long way from home are: “*he began to be in want*”... “*he would fain have filled his belly with husks*” (he had already filled his heart with ‘husks’). And, so IT IS --*thank God!*-- that forever HE SEEKS the LOST SHEEP...the LOST COIN...A LOST SON!!! Always and always there is the VOICE of the seeking Shepherd, the willing Father that cannot be stilled, calling to remind us of--What used to be! What could be, IF...! and to simply say--I LOVE YOU!!

It was this voice of love that called loudly as I attended a Workshop on Conversational Prayer. The lady was dressed in what appeared to be sackcloth. She came onto the platform from a back door that I concluded led to the kitchen where a banquet was being prepared. No doubt she was in charge of the meal and had a special announcement relating to it. Her words were strange for a cook. She said, “*Before we eat, I must tell you that GOD LOVES YOU! And, JESUS LOVES YOU; but, YOU DON’T KNOW IT and you may not even LOVE YOURSELF!*” Her eyes of love reached my heart as she looked directly at me. I was uncomfortable as I made the mistake(?) of sitting in the front in this large Methodist church building in Emporia, Kansas. At this point, I turned halfway around to see who else she might be looking at.

There was no one within another four pews and now she said. "You don't need to turn around Mister, I'm talking to YOU! JESUS LOVES Y-O-U! and before we leave this workshop, I want YOU and everyone else to K-N-O-W Jesus' love in a personal way!"

We ate the banquet meal but the words of Rosalind Rinker (the "cook" in sackcloth) ate on my heart. I had been studying and teaching the LOVE OF GOD for 25 years and surely didn't need ANYONE to tell me about something so simple and basic as l-o-v-e. After the meal, which was as simple as the sackcloth dressed lady, we returned to the giant auditorium. So BIG was it that one could get lost in the crowd. I did just that, hiding myself halfway back. It was a painful experience in that she didn't preach, just talked. She made everyone see themselves as the *little lost lamb*, the *coin*, the *prodigal* a long way from home, and maybe, perish the thought, the *Elder brother* in Jesus' Parables of Luke 15.

It was invitation time, which signaled the end, and I was more than ready to get out and go home. The traditional song gave me some comfort. I did not feel threatened by an age-old custom for I knew what was going to take place and how to control the situation. What followed, not only threatened, but wrecked me. As soon as the song was finished, this strange lady said--

"The Closing will be a little different tonight. Since this is a workshop on Conversational Prayer, quickly form a circle with four or five other people around you, put your arm on the shoulder of the person next to you and pray for each other."

I quickly looked for those who had accompanied me, Lyle & Eileen Marshall and Sharon Kennedy, but couldn't find them. Someone was already putting a hand on my shoulder. One man said, "Let's introduce ourselves by name, tell what church we are from and any special prayer need." GREAT! I could handle that! Around the circle we went--one was a Baptist, another a Friend, a Lutheran and a Methodist. I tensed up for these men were not *my kind*! Now, please understand that as the years had gone by I had become a 'Pharisee' in attitude, dealing with the kind of people facing me in the circle in a

JUDGMENTAL way! N-o-w, *t h e y* were going to PRAY FOR ME! Beyond this, I was being asked to PRAY FOR THEM! My request was: Please pray for my wife, Imalee and I. We have a little 12 year old daughter, Lisa, at home who is emotionally handicapped. PLEASE PRAY FOR HER! They did, but also saw beyond my words and prayed for my real needs. One man prayed that Jesus' love would come alive in me and another made bold asking God to fill me with the Holy Spirit.

At last, the evening session was over, and I hastened to my hosts' home for the night. They were a lovely couple. He taught Math in a local school and was a leader in the Church where the Workshop was being hosted. I was tired, so I asked to be excused. It was about 11 o'clock as they showed me to my room. However, it was 4 a.m. before sleep came for I had a battle to wage with God and He had a few words for me, too. I experienced something like Jacob who wrestled until the breaking of day.(2)

The battle started with me on my feet telling God that I CERTAINLY DID LOVE HIM for I had preached LOVE for twenty plus years! He responded--"*Feed my Sheep(!) if you love me.*" I responded that I had been doing just that for many years! HE replied in my spirit with--"*Why are they hungry and hurting and why did a lady at the church door just last Sunday say--'Your judgmental sermons make me feel dirty inside.'*" The battle raged on. I had lots of questions--How do you love anyway? What is love? Would love make any difference? He had a-l-l the answers. Each question of mine was answered with an immediate verse of Scripture. The battle ended just before Sunrise with me on my knees praying--"I LOVE YOU, GOD! YOUR WILL BE DONE! LET YOUR LOVE SHINE THROUGH ME! A new day was dawning in ways I could never imagine. This prodigal was being called home and the road was paved with LOVE.

-THE CRISIS APPROACHES-

The Prodigal would have eaten the "husks", the Bible says. **I DIDI**

Early on in my life, I had made "friends" with a couple of sins. One sin came at the early age of five and the other appeared a few years later. I tried to give them up time and time again, but the "*pleasure of sin for a season*" was stronger. So, I became the proverbial "Dr. Jekyll" on Sundays and "Mr. Hyde," Monday through Saturday. Yes, I knew what Jesus said: "*No man can serve two masters.*" But, surely I could be an exception to the rule.

Of the Bible Prodigal it is stated: "and NO MAN GAVE unto him." A new day was dawning, now that men were no longer going to give, give, give to him! When the world quits meeting our every need and we are forced to f-a-c-e our spiritual bankruptcy, there is the potential for a NEW BEGINNING! With the Bible Prodigal it had been: Give me my rights--my share of the inheritance; Give me my freedom, even in a far country; Give me a good time and finally, Give me some pig feed.

I had made special arrangements to feed my bankrupt soul with the "fodder" of the world. For 39 years I had been able to manipulate THINGS with money. I never believed God could produce funds outside the church program. Thus, I said to the WORLD--"Give me!" And the world was delighted to do so. So much so that at one time I owed five small loan companies. God allowed me to get myself in a "corner" on many occasions in hopes of getting my ATTENTION! But, MAN always bailed me out with one more loan to pay off all the others. And, I breathed a sigh of relief!

Both of my "pet sins" produced a deep sense of guilt within. And true to the psychosomatic process--the unresolved guilt brought on a bad case of NERVES. In early years I confessed my sin to God and He forgave me just as His Word says--"*If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us.*" (I John 1:9) As the years wore on I grew weary and the devil deluded me into believing that these "SINS" were only "BAD HABITS." I ceased to confess! God stopped forgiving! The nerves got worse!

ONE MORE TIME--MEN GAVE TO ME. Dr. Charles

Stephens of the Minneola Clinic made an outside observation and said: "Preacher, you have a very bad case of nerves and unless you do something about them, a nervous breakdown may ensue. I'll give you a prescription for some nerve pills." I breathed a sigh of inward relief. One more time I had avoided a mounting crisis of having to deal with the real cause.

-THE CRISIS-

"NO MAN GAVE UNTO HIM" surely was an action that caused the Prodigal to t-h-i-n-k! For, the n-e-x-t words are--"*And when he came to himself.*"

Isn't it amazing how God uses little and powerless things to CONVICT US? It was not the wind, earthquake or fire that got Elijah's attention, but, the "*still small voice*" of the Lord and the question: "*What are you doing here?*"(3)

Three of the twelve Apostles of Jesus were warming themselves at a pre-dawn fire while Caiaphas and the Council sought to find fault with Jesus. Consider the sounds all around--milling Passover crowd, Sanhedrin arriving for the trial, horses of the Roman Centurions-- and, in the midst of all that, a rooster crows! Now, roosters have been crowing since the dawn of time. Is this rooster any different? No, but the timing is. ONE MAN h-e-a-r-s that sound and goes out and cries like a baby. God was speaking and Peter heard!(4)

God used a Pharmacist to awaken me. After about three years of taking the prescribed "Nerve Pills," I went one more time to get the bottle filled. Lyle Gifford of Minneola (Kansas) Pharmacy said: "Preacher, I'm very busy and not playing favorites today. Your tranquilizers will not be ready until late afternoon." "Fine," I said, "but, DON'T put any tranquilizers in that bottle! I don't take them!" I'll never forget his going to the file and digging out the original prescription, checking it against the big Pharmaceutical Book on the shelf and saying, "Call them nerve pills if you want, but they are TRANQUILIZERS!" I replied: "DON'T FILL IT for I DO NOT TAKE THAT KIND OF STUFF!" And the bottle still sits on my shelf

with one last Librium capsule in it.

Now, I was on a collision course with God! I could REPENT o-r CONTINUE ON without my medical "crutch" and end up with a nervous breakdown.

-THE MOMENT OF TRUTH-

And when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" I will arise and go to my Father, and I will say to him: "Father I have sinned...MAKE ME like one of our hired servants."(5)

Just like you are unaware of snow falling silently in the night, so I was not aware that Sunday, February 14, 1971 would be any different from a hundred others.

As the Sunday Morning Service came to a close, I did something I had not planned or ever done before. I ANSWERED MY OWN INVITATION by asking the people to be seated. I said to the audience of the Minneola (Kansas) Christian Church: "This will seem strange to you for it IS strange to me! I just want to tell you that from this day on- I MUST DECREASE. HE WILL INCREASE!"

As the song says--"Church was finally over one more time." I walked home. Nothing seemed different. Imalee had a good meal prepared. It was a warm happy time as we ate Sunday dinner with our four children.

One-thirty signaled the time for my usual custom of a quick nap before preparations started for the Youth Meetings and Evening Family Hour. But, the Moment of Truth was finally upon me as I closed my tired eyes and prayed this simple and honest prayer:

"Dear God, I'm sick of myself and the church and the ministry and I'm terribly tired of spinning my wheels. Here I am, a crooked stick. Break me if you must! Melt me and mold me! Fill me with Yourself and Your Spirit! I no longer ask to be a stone in your Temple Grand. Not even a grain of sand, just a drop of water in the mortar that holds the stones in place will do. I only ask that You will use me! Please don't refuse me!"

I awoke from my nap. Everything *seemed* the same and yet time would decree that **NOTHING** would ever be the same again from that day on!

-“WELCOME HOME!”-

The Prodigal of Luke 15 walked into the o-p-e-n arms of unending love! He discovered upon his arriving home that his Father had gone “deaf”. The lad had his return speech all prepared. He said: “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.*”(6) It is at this point that the Father goes “deaf” and i-n-t-e-r-r-u-p-t-s his son with: “Bring forth the best robe,(7) and a ring, and shoes, and a calf, for a WELCOME HOME PARTY....for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”(8) Now, God is always like that! He says “*Come let us reason together, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.*”(Isaiah 1:18)

Time would decree that this day was the place of beginning again. It is from this point on that all the blessings that come from being filled with His Spirit can be numbered in my life. Yes, the works, fruits and gifts of the blessed Holy Spirit started to bloom out of the desert lands of my life and the remaining chapters are that STORY for H-I-S GLORY!

In summarizing my journey up to this point, I am reminded of the beautiful words of the poet Myra Brooks Welch in “The Touch of the Master’s Hand.”

’Twas battered and scarred and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile:
“What am I bid, good folks,” he cried,
“Who’ll start the bidding for me?”
“A dollar, a dollar;” then, “two! Only two?
Two dollars, and who’ll make it three?
Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three---” But no,

From the room, far back, a gray-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then, wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loose strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet
As sweet as a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow.
"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
Three thousand, once, three thousand, twice,
And going, and gone," said he.
The people cheered, but some of them cried,
"We do not quite understand
What changed its worth?" Swift came the reply:
"The touch of the master's hand!"

And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.
A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine;
A game--and he travels on.
He is "going" once, and "going" twice,
He's "going" and almost "gone."
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that's wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand!(9)

I was much like the old violin, the man with life out of tune.
But the Master came! He touched me and now my life is no longer the same!

I chose a road of beginning again. Some will ask: "Is it necessary for everyone to follow this road? To experience evil? To backslide?" The answer is clearly "NO!" However, it is **absolutely essential** that everyone of us come to the place of the Prodigal in saying: **"THY WILL BE DONE! MAKE ME! MOLD ME! USE ME!"**

Even as Jesus said: *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me."*
Matthew 16:24.

Like the last verse of Robert Frost's poem:

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."(10)



Our Family in 1957
West Lebanon, Indiana
Wilbur, Galen, Teresa, Lynn,
Imalee and Rebecca

FAITH ALIVE IN HEART, HOME and CHURCH
NOTES - Chapter 2

1. Luke 15:11-24
2. Genesis 32:24
3. I Kings 19:11-18
4. Matthew 26:75
5. Luke 15:17-19
6. Luke 15:18,19
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Poem, "The Touch of the Master's Hand" by
Myra Brooks Welch.
10. Poem, "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost.
Written November, 1974.