

Are You Blaming Yourself for Your Prodigal?

Name Withheld

The author is writing anonymously to protect her daughter's privacy.

My husband and I have experienced the reality of knowing that “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (John 3: 4). Our two daughters professed Christ at an early age, witnessed in their schools, traveled on mission trips, and embarked into adult life with a passion for Christ. Our family life has been built around joy and laughter, and even through our girls' teen years, we enjoyed close family times backpacking and ministering together here and abroad. The girls have been characterized as leaders, constantly encouraging and challenging those around them to live their Christian beliefs.

It always brought us great joy, knowing that our children were walking in the truth. Then one bought into a lie. Now we see the flip side to the above verse; there is no greater sorrow than seeing your children walk in a lie. Since our daughter's ungodly choice, we have grieved for the loss of our close family relationships, for our witness in our community and family, over the eventual consequences of her decisions, and even grieved that God would allow this to happen. Our joy, peace, energy, and focus have been drained and replaced with despair, anger, fatigue, and distractedness. We have been plagued by questions. How could this happen? What should we do? What would influence her? How should we respond? Our close family was thrown into crisis: joy turned to sorrow, and lies were twisted truth. The parable of the prodigal son has become a real and personal journey with a precious, yet prodigal, daughter.

At one point in this heavy journey, I had a mental picture of us facing our prodigal daughter, she standing with her back to us. We were pleading and begging for her to turn around, to listen to God's Word, and to recognize the lies. The then focus shifted. God was standing behind me, my back turned to Him, and He was calling me to turn around and recognize the lies. God was trying to get *my* attention while I was trying to get my daughter's attention. Her lies were different from mine. But nonetheless I had also been ensnared by lies. God was pleading with me to recognize and accept His truth in my own life.

God's truth needs to be sorted from the enemy's lies. I cannot allow my daughter's actions to *define* me, but I can, through God's help, allow them to *refine* me. Through godly counsel and His Word, the truth is being sifted from the enemy's subtle and pervasive lies. The refinement process is not complete, but I have identified, examined, and discarded the following lies:

What if?

The enemy loves to get us into the “what if” blame game. What if I had been more persuasive? What if I had counseled her with more studied words? What if I had been more discerning? What if I had just been a better mom? I was consumed with analyzing every nuance over the past years, reviewing my interactions and questioning my role as both mother and wife. My analytical thoughts became paralyzing, and I spiraled downward into a pit of remorse and inadequacy. Slowly, I began to see that it was not all about me. My

eloquence or lack of it, my parenting skills or lack of them, will not ultimately change a heart. That is the Holy Spirit's job. I can be obedient to God's direction. I can do the best I can in parenting and counseling. But the ultimate work is God's. My pleas will not bring a prodigal into right thinking, right living, or right decisions. Our daughter made this choice in spite of Scripture, godly models, and counsel, and she will also reap the consequences of her choice. Ezekiel 18:20 reminds us that "the son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him." I can neither accept the blame nor take the credit. The "what ifs" must cease because they are not from God.

Parent well and your child will not make ungodly choices

When my daughter turned away from her firm foundation, I questioned how this could happen to *my* family. Subconsciously and incorrectly, I presumed that Proverbs 22:6 — "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" — guaranteed a child's godly choices. Through my own heartache, the Lord showed me that I have wrongly judged others and their parenting abilities. I thought if someone had a child not walking with the Lord, it was always a direct reflection on their parenting skills. Now on the other side with a wayward daughter, I realize the lie and repent of my judgment of others. Godly parenting does not guarantee a godly child.

My prodigal adult child disqualifies me for ministry

One of the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:4 for an overseer is to "manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect." This does not refer to adult children. But Satan wants to fuel our insecurities, point out our inadequacies,

and cripple our ministries. Instead of stepping out of ministry, we should step up to be used by God. The more open and transparent we are in our parenting journey, the more dependent we are on Him for strength, and the more opportunities there will be for us to minister. Answering concerned inquiries about our daughter has allowed us to be open to those sharing similar burdens. One embarrassing instance of addressing pointed questions at a neighborhood party resulted in a phenomenal opportunity to share God's truth. Leadership is not about being perfect — it is about being humbly obedient and available. Transparency and vulnerability can make us better servant ministers.

God is powerless to intervene

Somewhere in this extended battle, I crossed the line from believing God *would not* act to believing God *could not* act. I fell prey to the lie that God could not change our daughter's mind or way. My personal systematic theology had me spinning in circles around God's sovereignty and the free will of man. The Lord has chosen to not answer my fervent prayers to radically intervene in our daughter's life. Since faith and hope are intricately entwined, I used to feel hopeless. My view of God was too small. I still do not understand how God's sovereignty and free will work, but I have become convinced that God is so much bigger than we can ever imagine. He can and will intervene if He so chooses. This mom needs to trust more, worry less, and stop trying to figure everything out. He is God and I am not! My God, our God, is a God of hope that fills us with all joy and peace as we trust in Him (Romans 15:13), and He is more than able to do great things.

This mother's journey in parenting a prodigal is far from over. The hurt and sadness are still very real. But as the Lord has revealed the insidiousness of the enemy's lies, the burden has become more manageable. Now I can focus on what I am learning instead of on what

my daughter should be learning. This was reiterated during a recent visit. We were scheduled to rendezvous with our precious prodigal after church. The sermon was unexpectedly relevant: “Grace Demands a Death.” The pastor pointed out that if we are to extend grace as Christ did, we must also experience death. As parents, we need to die to our dreams, our desires, and our expectations for our children. We need to love them unconditionally, expecting nothing in return. Still stirred from this poignant message, we exited the church building and saw our daughter standing on the far side of

the parking lot. My husband *ran* to our cold, stiff daughter, standing sullenly by the car, and wrapped her in a warm, loving hug. That was our best visit to date! My hope has been renewed; He is restoring my soul. Like Habakkuk, I will wait and keep watch from the ramparts to see what the Lord will do. God is in control, and He loves us and our prodigals dearly.

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