

Prodigal Children

Hope and Help for Parents



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Resources for Changing Lives

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“Horrorified. Betrayed. Ashamed. Angry. Dishonored. Worthless. Sad. Hopeless.” Those were the words my friend Jill used when she first learned that her dear twenty-year-old daughter was in a committed lesbian relationship.

I believe those descriptors capture not only the experience of this Christian mother but also the varied experiences of many Christian dads and moms whose sons or daughters have chosen a homosexual lifestyle or have taken some transgender steps. If your child has chosen this path, I imagine that Jill’s words capture your own experience and the experience of your family members.

But there are other ways that an adult son or daughter might walk away from a Christian upbringing. Perhaps your son has pursued a reckless path of autonomy that has resulted in alcohol or drug addiction. He has left home, followed his own desires, and landed in a place of self-destructive behavior. Debt, joblessness, and violence follow him now, while homelessness, criminal charges, and imprisonment loom on the horizon.

Or maybe you have a daughter whose

outward lifestyle appears much more sane and stable. She seems emotionally well adjusted. She enjoys healthy female friendships, dates a respectable man, and functions productively in her legal career. But she does all this, and so much more, without the Jesus you consistently taught her about. She is lost, “separate from Christ, . . . without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

Or perhaps your son or daughter has committed a crime, has joined a cult, or has become pregnant or fathered a child outside of marriage, with no remorse.

We can multiply scenarios of adult children turning away from the Lord. Outwardly they differ, but inwardly they contain the same root dynamic. The bottom line is simple, albeit heart-wrenching: two people whom we deeply love—our child and our Savior—are separated from each other. We long for these two persons whom we cherish to walk together in a relationship of saving oneness. Our anguish comes when our beloved son or daughter walks away from the Christian faith, the faith we embraced ourselves and taught and modeled for them. We crave God’s best for our kids, and we long for them to follow Christ, but we and our other family members grieve over their choices.

The good news for you is that God promises to draw near to you in order to help you handle these hardships and navigate these

rough waters. He understands your challenges, and his Word gives you hope. Let's begin by identifying the struggles—struggles that God fully grasps and helps us to face.

What Does Your Parental Distress Feel Like?

While no single, specific emotion marks everyone in your situation, we can consider seven common responses that parents might feel when a son or daughter turns away from the Lord, whether or not they go so far as to embrace an explicitly ungodly lifestyle.

Shock

Many parents feel like their situation is a nightmare. It seems all too surreal. Debbie put it this way: “When we learned that our high-school-aged son was gay, we were in shock, in disbelief, numb.” They were speechless. “My husband and I really didn’t talk for two or three days.” When Connie and Brad discovered their daughter had converted to a cult, they were stunned. “This can’t be. We raised her to know and follow Jesus. No way can this be true!”

This kind of suffering is often unimaginable. Most parents wonder at some point if they or their spouse might get cancer or have a heart attack or if their kids might wreck the

car. But most Christian couples don't fathom even the possibility of their kids embracing a gay lifestyle, becoming drug addicts, or just turning their backs on the Lord.

What often makes this even more shocking for you is the suddenness of your discovery. You likely never expected it. Your son or daughter, on the other hand, has likely struggled for some time—in some cases, for years—with certain questions or temptations about his faith or her sexuality. But for you, the sudden disclosure of addiction, cohabitation, homosexuality, or apostasy leaves you dazed.

Confusion

The questions flood your mind endlessly. *When did this behavior start? Why did this happen? What signs did I miss? What indicators did I ignore? What can I do now? What will happen to my son or daughter? What will others think about my child? What will they think about me?* Bewildered parents scramble for answers—maybe first to website articles and then perhaps to trusted friends.

The reality remains, however, that many of these questions are unanswerable. Even your son or daughter might not understand all that is going on inside. And there is no single, circumstantial factor or familial influence that causes homosexual behavior, self-destructive patterns, or apostasy from the Christian faith.

Despair

Disappointment. Loss. Grief. Crushed hopes. For the parents of the gay son, the dream that he will grow up, find a godly woman, marry her, and have children has been dashed. As one writer put it, “When listening to people describe their feelings about a homosexual loved one, *death* is the word I hear most often. . . . The phrase ‘it feels like he died’ comes up more than any other.”¹ Upon discovering your child’s choices, you might feel that something you value highly has died. Grief is a common and understandable reaction. One of your cherished dreams did die and might never be revived.

Anger

You may feel angry. Against whom? The choices vary. Maybe you are angry with your unbelieving son or daughter. You feel betrayed: “What have you done to me? Why didn’t you tell me when you first had struggles?” As the same writer summarizes,

Suddenly, we find we *don’t* know our loved one as well as we thought. We realize he or she has had a secret problem—a secret *life*, perhaps—that we’ve known nothing about. We may have been lied to, directly or indirectly, shattering the assumption that our relationship was founded on honesty.²

Maybe you feel anger against your son or daughter's partner, the addict or drug dealer who turned him on to cocaine, or the friend who influenced her wrong religious choices.

Maybe it's anger against your spouse. You blame and criticize each other. As with any trial involving our children, it can rock our marriages and either draw a couple closer together or drive them apart. Or maybe it's anger against God: "God, we have tried to raise our son in the faith, but now you have let him go down this path."

Guilt

If anger looks at your son or daughter or at others and asks, "What have *you* done to me?" then guilt looks at yourself and asks, "What have *I* done to you?" The guilt can be overwhelming. "I have failed to be more involved in her early childhood." "I have failed to guide him to think properly about masculinity and femininity." "I have had conflicts and relational strains with her during her teenage years." "I have not screened his friends—I wrongly allowed bad influences into his world." And if any kind of sexual abuse happened to your child, you will feel doubly guilty. None of these failures, however, have caused your child to choose a sinful path. Circumstantial factors are influential but not causative; they are important but not determinative.

Of course, if you have actually sinned in some way, then you need to go to God, confess your sins to him (and, in some cases, to your son or daughter), and receive God's forgiveness (see 1 John 1:8–2:2). But if you're feeling distorted guilt—guilt feelings that are not because of actual sin based on God's law—then realize that you have wrongly placed yourself under some false law you have erected (e.g., the “law” that says you are responsible for the outcome of your children).³

Shame

Embarrassment. Feeling disgraced. Perhaps you feel a stigma, especially within your church. *What will people think of me and of my son or daughter? Will they judge me? What will my parents say? My friends? My small group? My sister—especially the one who has been critical of my parenting?* Pride can quickly capture your heart and keep you from sharing this trial with some key people whom God has placed in your world.

Loneliness

You probably feel quite isolated. You discovered your son or daughter's choices, but now you don't want to let others know (unless you have to) and you don't seek help. Even if you decide to talk to someone, who will it be? *Who will understand? Who can relate to us? Our friends don't know what to say.* And so you keep

the whole matter hidden. You suffer alone. You shrivel inside.

There are more emotions and responses we could mention. All sorts of fears, for example. But many of these seven categories likely describe you. You certainly are not alone. Others before you and others around you have faced and handled these hardships, too.

What Does God Say to You in His Word?

What does God say to you? How does he come to you? What help does his Word bring you? Consider eight pieces of biblical counsel for a parent whose adult child has turned away from the Lord and pursued a life apart from Christ.

God understands your distress; talk to him.

Beginning with the first children, Adam and Eve, Israel's history records a long, recurring narrative of God's children walking away from him. In Nehemiah 9, the Levites recalled centuries of God's grace toward his sons and daughters. Their response? "But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a