

The Wall of Weariness: Loving the Wayward



by DAVE HARVEY AND PAUL GILBERT

It's the spouse living in rebellion. A child revolting against his parents. A sibling spinning out of control. It can be a friend trapped in a hidden addiction. Do you love a person going rogue? Someone who is renouncing his or her roles and rejecting the ways of the Lord?

The situations that our wayward loved ones put themselves in can be remarkably complicated and play out with variations that would boggle the good sense of Solomon. For those of us who love them, there's one thing that we share in common.

Fatigue.

Fatigue is the collateral damage when a friend or family member strays. Prodigals possess a strange power. They suck life out of those who love them. Yes it's weariness, but it's also something more. It's weariness filled with fear. It's weariness that makes your mind feeble, saps your passion, and wrecks

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your confidence. Then, there is the despair and exhaustion, bone-tired exhaustion. And it's not hard to see why. If you love a prodigal you're always on-call emotionally. If they're at home, the floors are tiled with eggshells—you either dodge them or crush them in your quest to protect and motivate them. If they're gone, then you wait, wonder, and worry about what might happen today. What foolish decisions will they make? What influences will they follow? Will they be safe?

Then there's the carrot and stick thing. Any positive comment or civil tone, any small sign of life, the smallest flash of courtesy or positive report will inflate your heart with a desperate hope that you stand on the threshold of a breakthrough. *The last conversation must have worked. God is finally answering our prayers. Repentance must be just around the corner!*

Then they get worse. Your soaring hopes, which skipped upon the clouds only an hour before, lose altitude and come crashing to earth.

Living with a prodigal can inspire a lot of wishful thinking.

So you talk to them. Oh boy, do you talk! You are convinced that if they can just see this one thing, hear this one idea, discuss this one resource... THEN my prodigal will fall to earth, dust themselves off and set a course for home. And because talk creates the illusion of progress, it becomes a form of self-medication. As others have noted, "The temptation to create conversations that are designed to get the fool 'to see' is stronger than the most addictive drug known to mankind."¹ And yet prodigals continue to make withdrawals from the relational bank—rarely deposits. So the deficit grows daily, inducing a physical and spiritual malaise that erases joy and darkens the world with gloomy shades of grey.

It's an exhausting way to live.

Prodigals and the Heart

Ralph and Susan understand. Their teenage daughter Jan decided to drop out of high school—not to work, but to have more time for her growing "leisure pursuits." Discussing it yields little progress since Jan went incommunicado months ago. She now inhabits a sullen world where her family might as well be aliens—people from another planet who invade her space speaking gibberish.

¹ Dan Allender and Tremper Longman, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), 281.

Their hearts break for Jan, but Ralph and Susan are learning a hard lesson about themselves: prodigals reveal every spiritual weakness in the home. Jan's conversational passivity provokes anger in Ralph and fear in Susan. Exasperated by their inability to break through, they turn on each other and are locked in a cycle of accusation and apology. Sleep eludes them, worry consumes them, and energy escapes them. Ralph and Susan are exhausted. Wayward people exact a toll. Bound up in waywardness is betrayal, foolishness, lawlessness, selfishness, and thoughtlessness. This means you're always bracing against the next blow and steeling yourself in preparation for the next crash.

Jesus understands *exactly* how you feel.

In Jack Miller's book about his daughter's waywardness, his wife captured well the emotional pile-up when a prodigal starts to spiral:

When Barb announced she “was not a Christian and didn't want to be one,” my world came crashing in on me. I reacted with anger and fear. I simply couldn't handle it....

I felt humiliated and betrayed.²

Anger, fear, betrayal, humiliation—these are heavy feelings that don't lift quickly.

If that's you, prepare yourself for hope. Jesus understands *exactly* how you feel. Not simply because he sympathizes (Heb 4:15), but because Jesus experienced it. And he wants to help ease our weariness so that we can fight courageously for the future of our prodigal.

Good News for the Weary

The author of the book of Hebrews wrote to people who were tired of being sinned against. These were people who had endured persecution, degradation, and unjust suffering. They were publicly exposed to reproach, they had their property seized, and they courageously identified with scorned

² C. John Miller and Barbara Miller Juliani, *Come Back, Barbara* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing, second edition, 1997), 26.

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