

Open Arms, Forgiving Heart

Sandwiched between the God of pristine holiness in the account of Moses and the burning bush, and the high and mighty recipient of worship in John’s revelation, is the loving Father of Christ’s parable about the prodigal son. All three describe the same God—not an obsolete god of the Exodus, a mysterious and judgmental god of the future, or the human-like god of a fanciful story, but three aspects of the same eternal “I AM”: The God of grace through Jesus Christ.

There are two ways to think about the grace of God: One is to look at yourself and see how sinful you were and say, “God’s grace must be vast—it must be huge as space to forgive such a sinner as I am.” That’s one way and that’s a good way—and probably that’s the most popular way. But there’s another way to think of the grace of God. Think of it as the way God is: God being like God. And when God shows grace to a sinner He isn’t being dramatic; He’s acting like God. He’ll never act any other way but like God. On the other hand, when that man whom justice has condemned turns his back on the grace of God in Christ and refuses to allow himself to be rescued, then the time comes when God must judge the man. And when God judges the man He acts like Himself in judging the man. When God shows love to the human race He acts like Himself. When God shows judgment to “the angels which kept not their first estate” (Jude 6), He acts like Himself.

Always God acts in conformity with the fullness of His own wholly perfect, symmetrical nature. God always feels this overwhelming plenitude of goodness and He feels it in harmony with all His other attributes. There’s no frustration in God. Everything that God is He is in complete harmony, and there is never any frustration in Him. But all this He bestows in His eternal Son.
 A.W. Tozer

Sidetracked

“A certain man had two sons...”

The grade school I attended, Franklin School, was located on Main Street, just through the block on which I lived. The normal way for me to get to school each day was to go out the back door, cross our back yard, “cut through” the Wigand’s back yard, down their drive, and cross Main Street to the school yard. The return trip was the same, but reversed, and never took more than two minutes for the entire journey. Mom could always expect me home just a few minutes after the school bell rang.

“The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.”

One day after school a classmate, one of the Nelson boys, invited me to join him catching crawdads down at Linn Creek, instead of going right home. The creek (or "crick," as we called them in those days) ran east and west along the backside of the football field and track that was behind Franklin School, then angled north to define the boundaries of the park that was our summer playground. The creek was a tiny tributary, shallow, muddy, and smelled not unlike the sewer that crossed its path—but the Mississippi never held more fascination for Tom Sawyer than did Linn Creek for us.

"Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him."

I knew it was wrong. I knew I'd get into trouble for it. And I did it anyway. Instead of going right home after school that day, I went down to the creek with the Nelson boy. We caught crawdads, looked for garter snakes and frogs, and generally got wet and muddy and had a wonderful time.

"But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' So he got up and came to his father."

The Nelson boys had parents who didn't really care where they were or when they got home from school. So, when we eventually decided to leave the creek, they probably headed off to some other adventure.

I went home to my sure execution.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly 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, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate."

Luke 15:11-24


On that day so long ago, I was one half-hour—all of thirty minutes—late getting home from school, and my mom was beside herself. *Where have you been? What happened to you? Are you hurt?* Boy, did I get a lickin' that day. And I learned the rather painful lesson that no matter how much the creek beckoned, I was always to come right home after school.

As young as I was, however, I learned another, even more valuable lesson that day. Even though I experienced a burning sensation in my posterior for the next few hours, I learned that of the two sets of parents—the Nelsons and the Lampels—mine loved me more. Even then I understood that though it was sometimes expressed with worry, fear, anger and eventual punishment, my parents loved me enough to care. Beneath my mom's anger that day was a more powerful relief that I was finally home safe and sound.

Safe Return

That is the picture of our heavenly Father. Though we may be a "long way off," He stands watching and waiting, hoping for our safe return. How sad it must be for those who think God to be more like the Nelsons: distant and disinterested, leaving us on our own to stumble unaided through life, not caring whether—or even if—we ever come home.

And how lonely it must be to live thinking of the Father as only an angry, short-

tempered God who loves nothing better than to box a sinner about the ears. The truth is much more reassuring. 

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
Just as a father has compassion on his children,
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.
For He Himself knows our frame;
He is mindful that we are but dust.

Psalms 103:11-14

