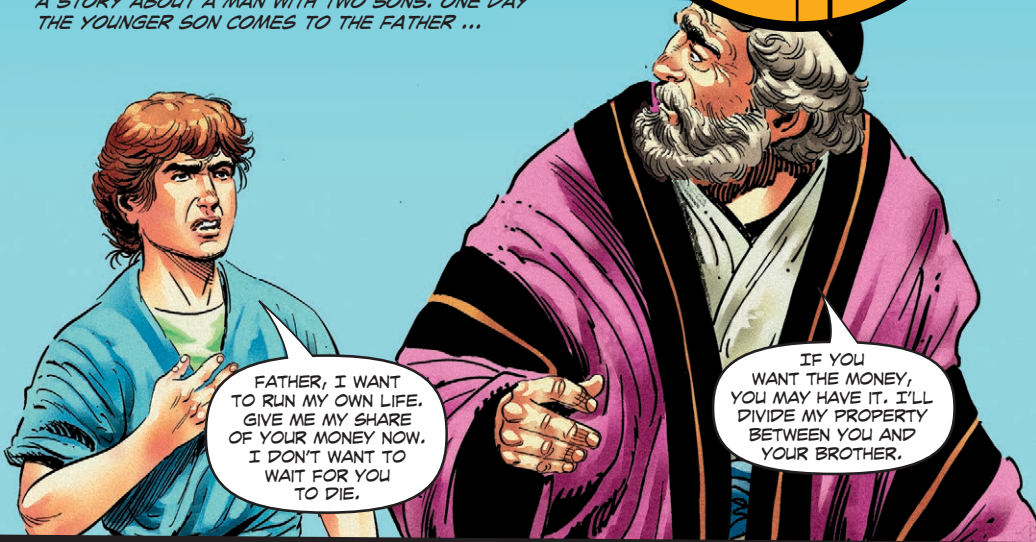


A Loving Father

BASED ON LUKE 15:11-32



JESUS LEAVES JERUSALEM AND CONTINUES TO PREACH. THE PHARISEES COMPLAIN BECAUSE HE SPENDS TIME WITH SINNERS. SO JESUS TELLS THEM A STORY ABOUT A MAN WITH TWO SONS. ONE DAY THE YOUNGER SON COMES TO THE FATHER ...

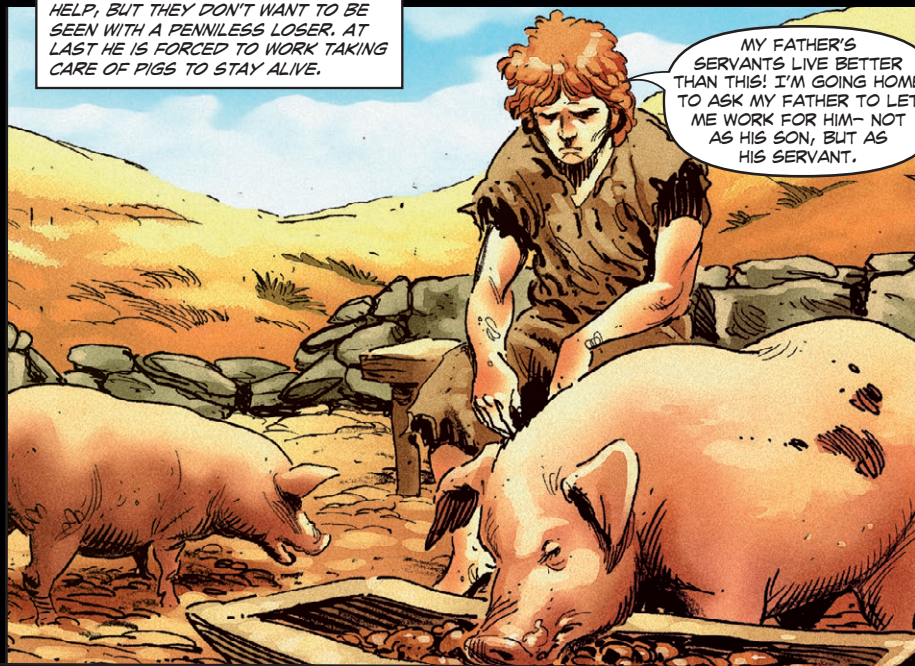


THE YOUNGER SON MOVES AWAY TO ANOTHER COUNTRY ...





BUT EVENTUALLY, THE MONEY RUNS OUT. HIS CREDITORS TAKE HIS HOUSE. THE BOY TURNS TO HIS FRIENDS FOR HELP, BUT THEY DON'T WANT TO BE SEEN WITH A PENNILESS LOSER. AT LAST HE IS FORCED TO WORK TAKING CARE OF PIGS TO STAY ALIVE.



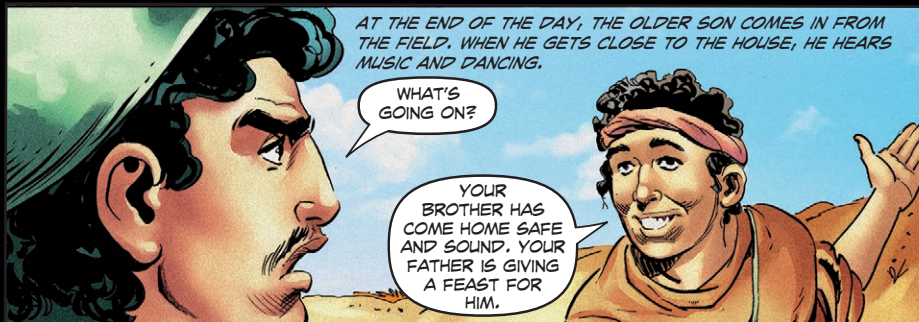
BUT WHEN THE SON REACHES HOME, HIS FATHER RUSHES OUT TO MEET HIM.

FATHER!
I HAVE SINNED
AGAINST HEAVEN AND
AGAINST YOU. I'M NOT
WORTHY TO BE
YOUR SON.

BRING MY SON
THE BEST ROBE IN
THE HOUSE! PREPARE
A FEAST! MY SON
WAS LOST AND NOW
HE'S FOUND.

OUT IN THE FIELD, THE OLDER SON WORKS HARD.

IF MY
BROTHER WERE
HERE, I WOULDN'T
HAVE TO WORK
SO MUCH.



AT THE END OF THE DAY, THE OLDER SON COMES IN FROM THE FIELD. WHEN HE GETS CLOSE TO THE HOUSE, HE HEARS MUSIC AND DANCING.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

YOUR BROTHER HAS COME HOME SAFE AND SOUND. YOUR FATHER IS GIVING A FEAST FOR HIM.

IN ANGER, THE OLDER SON REFUSES TO GO INTO THE HOUSE AND JOIN THE PARTY. SO HIS FATHER COMES OUT TO TALK TO HIM.



I HAVE ALWAYS OBEYED EVERYTHING YOU WANTED ME TO DO, AND YOU'VE NEVER LET ME HAVE A PARTY WITH MY FRIENDS. BUT FOR HIM, YOU THROW THE BEST PARTY EVER.

EVERYTHING I HAVE IS YOURS. BUT WE HAVE TO CELEBRATE. YOUR BROTHER WAS THE SAME AS DEAD, AND NOW HE'S ALIVE AND SAFE.



WHEN JESUS FINISHES TELLING THIS STORY, THE PEOPLE TURN TO EACH OTHER IN WONDER.

WAIT! IS GOD LIKE THE FATHER IN THE STORY?

YES! I SEE IT. YOU'RE SAYING THAT GOD IS WILLING TO FORGIVE US SINNERS IF WE WILL JUST COME BACK TO HIM.



Jill wanted no part of Cedar House or all the prayers or the smiling director.

Welcome Home

"This is it, Jill," Miss Denton, the social worker, said. She turned into a long drive lined with trees. At the end of the drive stood a gray and white mansion. It looked more like a movie set than a group home.

"Hello!" A tall man with a beard hurried down the front steps. "You must be Jill," he said cheerfully. He smiled at Jill and shook Amy's hand. "I'm Brian Dunn, director of Cedar House."

Jill looked away.

Amy put a cool hand on Jill's arm. "I hope you will be happy here, Jill." Her voice was stern.

As if I have any choice! Jill thought. She knew Amy meant not to make trouble or run off like before. *There's no place to run now,* Jill thought. *Gram's in a nursing home. Her house is sold.*

As soon as Miss Denton left, Mr. Dunn led Jill inside. "Your room is on the third floor," he said. "You'll room with two other girls." She followed Mr. Dunn up the stairs.

"Here we are," Mr. Dunn said. The room had three beds, three dressers, and two large windows. On one bed, a girl with dark hair

sat reading a book.

"Beth, this is Jill," Mr. Dunn said. "I hope you'll make her feel at home."

The girl jumped up. "Hi, Jill," she said cheerfully.

"You'll meet Ann at dinner," Mr. Dunn said. "Don't be late. It's fried chicken."

Mr. Dunn left, and Beth went back to her book. "Our cook makes great fried chicken," she said.

"Sure," Jill sneered, kicking her suitcase across the floor. "Which bed is mine?"

Beth pointed to the bed by the wall. Jill flopped down on it, closed her eyes, and stayed there until dinner.

At 5:30, she followed Beth to the dining room and sat next to her. Then, Beth introduced Jill to Ann, who was sitting across the table.

Mr. Dunn sat down and everyone bowed their heads in prayer.

Jill knew about mealtime prayers. Gram never let her eat a bite until she'd prayed. But Jill didn't listen now. *Give thanks for what? Gram's heart attack? Three rotten foster homes? Being sent to here?*

When Mr. Dunn finished, everyone passed platters of chicken and bowls of steaming vegetables. Jill ate hungrily. When she was full, she started to stand up.



Everyone was working—even Mr. Dunn.

"Wait," Beth said, and Jill sat down.

Mr. Dunn stood up. "Let's all welcome our new family member, Jill." Everyone yelled a welcome.

Jill stared at her empty plate.

"Jill can help with our spring planting tomorrow," Mr. Dunn continued.

Jill snorted.

Mr. Dunn talked briefly about the plans for their garden. "Check the schedule. Some of you will be getting up at sunrise," he said.

"That's us," Beth said cheerfully.

Jill shook her head. "Not me! I'm no farmer."

"You sure liked the food," Ann said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jill growled.

"The vegetables you ate were from last year's garden," Beth explained.

Jill got up and headed for her room. *I don't care where the food came from. I don't even want to be here.*

At 9:30, Beth and Ann came to bed. Jill faked sleep. For a while the two girls joked together before turning out the lights. Then Jill heard Beth talking quietly: "Dear Lord, bless us all: Mr. Dunn and our new roommate . . ."

Jill scrunched down in the covers. Beth was praying—for her. Jill covered her ears.

The next morning Jill woke to the alarm clock. Ann and Beth dressed quickly.

"Come on, Jill," Ann said.

Jill groaned. "I'm not getting up to plant a stupid garden. You people are nuts!" Jill rolled toward the wall, and Ann and Beth left the room.

Jill slept until voices outside woke her. From the window she looked down on the large garden. Everyone was working—even Mr. Dunn.

Her stomach rumbled and she went down to find some breakfast.

In the kitchen, lunch had been started. It was past 10:30. The cook handed Jill a biscuit.

Mr. Dunn was raking in the middle of the garden. Jill leaned against a tree, watching. One girl near Jill started singing praise songs. Soon everyone joined in. They were actually enjoying the work.

Jill finished the biscuit. *They're all nuts singing and praying about everything day and night!*

At last Mr. Dunn saw Jill standing by the tree. *Oh, no! Here it comes!* Jill thought.

"Just in time, Jill!" Mr. Dunn called as he crossed the garden. He pointed toward the far corner: "Ann and Beth are about ready to start planting corn. They'll show you what to do."

Jill glanced at Mr. Dunn. His face was flecked with dirt and his brown eyes sparkled. He wasn't angry. He was having as much fun as the kids.

"We'll be eating it by summer's end," Mr. Dunn said.

Jill nodded, staring at Mr. Dunn. *Not a word about me being late. No lecture about me doing my part. The guy's always smiling . . .*

"Something wrong, Jill?" Mr. Dunn asked with concern.

Suddenly Jill realized she'd been staring. "No," she snapped, "nothing's wrong." She scowled as she felt her cheeks burning.

For a moment, Mr. Dunn seemed puzzled. Then his smile returned. "Well," he sighed, "I'd better get back to the rake."

Jill watched him return to the garden and then glanced over to Beth and Ann. A sudden breeze carried the rich scent of freshly turned earth. Jill breathed in deeply and looked around once more. *Maybe it wouldn't hurt to try—just this once,* she decided. So she picked up a hoe and headed for the corn patch.



Pause a minute

1. Let's see if you can roll your eyes. Good. Now fold your arms. Now pretend a parent or a teacher is asking you to do something you don't really want to do. Right. See where eye-rolling and crossing your arms comes into this picture? God knows all about the ways we sometimes ignore and resist the rules. **Read Numbers 14:18.**



Take a look back

3. Next time you're asked to do something, how can you respond with a willing heart? What is one thing (Bible verse, saying, etc.) that can help remind you that God always loves you?

key verse

**"The LORD is slow to anger,
abounding in love and
forgiving sin and rebellion."**

Numbers 14:18



Record your thoughts

4. Using a pencil, write down the last time you disobeyed a parent. Now ask God to forgive you. Erase what you wrote. See how forgiveness frees you from the past?

Read more about God's never-failing love for you this week:

☐ Jeremiah 31:3 ☐ Luke 15:11–24 ☐ Numbers 14:18

**faith
forward**
in touch with God



Play it out

2. Your mom asks you to clean your room. But you stay in front of the TV. Sometimes it seems more fun to bend the rules and ignore what you're told. But how do you feel when you choose to have your own way? What happens to others? Whenever you brush aside the directions of adults, God knows your actions and thoughts, yet He loves you and forgives your not-so-great attitudes and actions. And, as in our Bible story of the rebellious son, God is always waiting for you to ask for forgiveness and come home. He welcomes you with open arms.

