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For this son
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O N E

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The Prodigal

It was one of those gorgeous Indian summer evenings in western Pennsylvania—Friday, October 29, 1999, to be exact. My wife and I had just finished an exhausting day of chores in preparation for an early Saturday morning departure to western Canada. As we sat down to a late dinner, the telephone rang and the voice of my youngest son, Bruce, gave us the news we feared would come some day, but still left us in shock: Jeff, my middle son, had been admitted to a hospital in Denver with massive internal bleeding due to AIDS and had only days, if not hours, to live.

Horrified, our minds became totally disheveled as we attempted to respond. For a few moments it was as though we had a complete disconnect from all reality: “Is this really happening? Is this diagnosis from the doctors? Are you sure it’s terminal?”

No one knew he had AIDS, not even his family or closest friends.

We soon found ourselves racing to catch the last flight out of Pittsburgh for Denver. By God’s providence, ninety minutes later we were sitting in a half-filled Boeing 727, waiting to pull away from the gate for a trip like we had never taken before—and hopefully never will again!

Once airborne, my thoughts raced back to Jeff’s youth: his profession of faith in Christ Jesus; his involvement with youth activities at our local church; his intellect and tremendous potential; his position on the high school wrestling team. I also recalled later events in his life, such as his entering Baylor University and being assigned a homosexual roommate, as well as the revelation that his pastor in Waco,

Texas, was a homosexual. I relived that infamous evening of June 30, 1984, when Jeff flaunted his homosexuality in a West Hollywood restaurant and declared, "I never want to see you again." He became so enraged with my position on homosexuality that he changed his last name from Burr to his biological mother's maiden name, since she was sympathetic to his position.

Indeed, it had been a long and agonizing fifteen years since I had last seen Jeffrey, and much carnage had flowed under the bridge of life. Even though our communications had been somewhat restored in the last three years, whenever we scheduled reconciliation visits, he would never show up. Now we found ourselves on a three-and-a-half-hour flight that would eventually bring us face-to-face with this disaffected son.

Having no idea of what we were walking into, my wife Anastasia and I prayed fervently that God would grant us an extra portion of grace, wisdom and strength. We discussed the possibility of taking Jeff back to our home to care for him in his remaining days, should God graciously extend his life. Since Anastasia is a registered nurse, though not his biological mother, she would have the necessary skills for his care at home. But, most significantly, we prayed passionately that the Spirit of the living God would create within my thirty-eight-year-old son the *heart of a little boy* and a *repentant spirit*.

Upon arriving in his hospital room at 11:50 p.m. Denver time, we knew immediately that the Spirit of Christ had preceded our arrival, for Jeff greeted us with tears of joy, saying repeatedly, "Dad, I'm so sorry. . . . I love you, I love you!" We loved on each other as God proceeded to reconcile a father with his estranged son. But this was just the beginning of the most awesome display of God's presence, power and loving-kindness that we have ever witnessed!

Family Background

Perhaps a glimpse of our family background would help you to better understand the events leading up to this emotionally charged reunion.

I was privileged, along with my older brother, to be born to righteous parents who truly modeled love, respect in their marital relationship and an abiding faith in Christ. Our father was a masculine man with a loving heart and a great sense of humor. A banker with enormous integrity, he consistently modeled an impeccable work ethic. Mother was a quiet, gracious and godly woman who superintended our household and gave unsparingly to her family—a “Proverbs 31” type of lady. Never did I hear an argument or see disharmony between my parents, nor was there ever any use of profane language. It was a classic model of a middle-income Christian marriage between two people who feared God and had graciously survived the Great Depression.

In spite of this godly upbringing and my profession of faith at the age of twelve, I took a different course upon entering college. To my shame, this was my entry point into the world, the beginning of my “twenty years of darkness,” from age eighteen to thirty-eight. It was during this period that the world encroached upon my fleshly desires and I began “partying” against God. This spawned indulgences in worldly pleasures, a delight in riches and possessions and a thirst for positions, power and applause.

Following college, I entered the military and flew with Strategic Air Command (USAF), where I sunk even deeper into the cesspool of the world, playing it “fast and loose.” During the final months of my tour of duty, I became involved with a very free-spirited and attractive airline stewardess. After only a few weekends of courtship—and sadly, in the midst of folly—we came together through the mar-

riage covenant only to marginalize its lifetime commitment and accompanying family values.

From that unpropitious beginning came twins, one of whom was stillborn. The surviving twin, Timothy, was joined a few years later by his younger brothers, Jeffrey and Bruce. Regrettably, though, their father continued in his pursuit of gold and silver, believing that this would give purpose to his life and satisfy the emptiness of his soul.

But by the mercy of God, the eternal Redeemer rescued me when I reluctantly attended a Methodist laymen's retreat in central Florida. I was graciously convicted of my sin and, by God's sovereign grace, I experienced the miracle of the second birth by becoming a new creature in Christ. The new language of Canaan was planted in my soul (replacing my old vocabulary, which could turn the air blue!). All things were new! Our merciful God was faithful to His promise: "I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten" (Joel 2:25, NKJV). To this very day, I haven't recovered from that divine appointment with God on October 10, 1970!

At the time of my conversion to Christ, the boys were between the ages of nine and thirteen and I was thirty-eight years of age. They now had a new father who attempted to make up for lost ground, but, regrettably, their mother and I were not of like heart, mind and purpose. When our youngest son turned twenty-one, she sought a divorce, dissolving our twenty-six-year marriage and remarrying.

Tragically, it was in this unsettling environment that Jeffrey attempted to find his way into a compromising world that would eventually consume him with its guile.

A Family Reunion

Gathered in Jeff's hospital room that Friday night were his mother with her husband, Jeff's younger brother, Bruce,

Anastasia and I. As I said before, this was the first time in over fifteen years that Jeff and I had seen each other.

Moments after our arrival, the doctors gave us a briefing on Jeffrey's condition: He had been found unconscious in the hallway of his apartment at approximately 1:00 a.m. that Friday due to massive bleeding, and was rushed to the Swedish Medical Center in Denver, where he was given continuous blood transfusions. It was determined that he was in the last stages of Kaposi's sarcoma, a cancer that is common to AIDS patients who do not seek treatment for HIV. It affects both the internal organs and the skin. As a result, purple blotches of various shapes and sizes covered his entire body. His doctors described his small and large intestines as "an old thread-worn tire" that would surely puncture and lead to a painful death should surgery be attempted. He had also contracted pneumonia because of his weakened immune system.

Death was imminent, and the only hope was that transfusions of blood would stabilize his condition, stop the bleeding and possibly give him a few weeks of extended life. If this were to occur then he could be released to a hospice center for his final days.

It was at this point that Anastasia and I looked at each other and almost simultaneously suggested that we would love to take Jeff to our home in western Pennsylvania instead of placing him in a hospice. We'll never forget Jeff's reaction—it was as if he had been hit with a bolt of lightning! He lit up like a Christmas tree and joyously accepted our invitation. His extraordinary response was apparently because he had believed, through Satan's deception, that his father did not love him.

The next day, Saturday, more tests were performed and, to everyone's surprise and joy, about midday, his bleeding did stop. We began to make preparations for taking him home. How would we transport him to Pennsylvania? We would give

him our master bedroom on the first floor; we would make arrangements with the local hospice nurses to work alongside Anastasia; we would invite our friends to have times of fellowship with him; we must have parties for him and saturate him with our love. He continued to be stable throughout that day and our hearts were enormously encouraged and hopeful.

The Dreaded News

However, the next morning (Sunday), we were informed that Jeff had started bleeding again during the night. The prospects for his survival looked very grim, but we were assured that everything possible would be done to extend his life. More tests were to be performed that morning.

Early that Sunday afternoon of October 31, when we again met with the medical team, we received the dreaded news we didn't want to hear: "His condition has so deteriorated that he will never leave this hospital and death is imminent." Jeff was then informed of his ominous condition and given his options, none of which held any promise. He elected to terminate all blood products and to receive a sedative and a painkiller, which, without accelerating the dying process, would induce sleep and help him to pass away comfortably.

When Anastasia and I entered his room following this sorrowful news, Jeff greeted us with, "You guys know that I'll never be going back to Pennsylvania, don't you?"

"Yes," we responded, with great effort to hold back our tears. We attempted to play down this *temporal* trip to Pennsylvania by pointing him to the *eternal* trip that would bring him face-to-face with his Creator. I asked if he were ready for this ultimate encounter and he responded, "No, I'm not," but quickly added, "Will you help me, Dad?"

With a heart that was breaking, I responded, "Certainly, son; however, I can only escort you to the throne of grace and

then you're on your own. It will be your heart dealing directly with the heart of God, but Christ the Mediator will be there—the One who paid the ransom for your life.”

He seemed to understand. Then he asked me to help him through the process of getting right with his Maker.

With his family gathered around him, Jeff prayed for God's mercy and forgiveness. His prayer went something like this:

Almighty God . . . Lord Jesus, I acknowledge my wicked sins and beg for mercy. I repent of my wretched deeds and lifestyle. Even though I deserve eternal punishment, I plead that You will give me a bath . . . cleanse me with Your precious blood and make me pure within. I ask that You would extend Your grace to me by becoming my Lord and Savior and taking me as Your adopted child for all eternity. And, as an act of faith, I wish to express my gratitude by thanking You for hearing and answering the plea of this repentant sinner. I pray all of this in Your most powerful name, the name of Jesus, who is the risen and living Savior. Amen.

Victory in Jesus

Before our very eyes we saw the transformation of our son! There was an immediate change of his disposition that produced an indescribable peace, childlike faith, joy and absolute fearlessness in the face of death. His mother, who was very close to him and a witness to all these events, described it this way: “*He had become like a little boy.*” All of the effeminacy, restlessness, anxiety and vanity that had characterized much of his life was stripped away! He had experienced his *second birth* and was now a *new creature* in Christ!

Following this we read from Revelation, chapters 4 and 5, depicting what the throne room of heaven would be like. Jeff responded with such joyful expressions as, “I can't wait to see the gates of heaven,” “It's hard to believe that I'll be in heaven before you, Dad,” and “I can't wait to see Jesus.”

He then turned to his mother and asked her to notify his employer, a major airline, of his death. He instructed her about the location of his personal effects, of various people to inform and other particulars. What amazed us was his *total peace* in such horrid circumstances; it was as if he were simply preparing for another usual trip. In reality he was—only this one would take him to his Redeemer for all of eternity!

With his family gathered around him and his favorite meal before him, we held Jeff's memorial service while he was still with us. We shared some precious experiences of the past, we laughed, we prayed and we wept. Finally, he wanted to meet with each one of us privately.

When my turn came, we chatted and stared at each other with smiles and bittersweet tears. My thoughts rushed to Psalm 126:5-6, where the psalmist says, "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him." My heart was filled with wild swings of emotion. One moment I was overcome with the "what ifs" and the raging thoughts of the wasted years for both of us. The next moment I was overflowing with joy, "for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:24, NASB).

We shared some more personal thoughts and then embraced each other, at which point Jeff whispered in my ear words that every father of a prodigal hungers to hear: "You know, Dad, you really are a great man; I love you. . . . I'll see you in a bit."

At 7 p.m. that Sunday, drained of all strength due to the loss of blood, Jeff called his nurse for the injection that would induce sleep leading to his eventual demise. Twenty-six hours later, on Monday, November 1, 1999, our gracious Lord and Savior of life took Jeff home. However, a most extraordinary

incident occurred during this time. Just four hours prior to his death, he awoke briefly and greeted those in the room by name, saying, “I love you and I’m waiting for them to come and take me to heaven.” Immediately afterward, he slipped back into a coma. We received this as the Lord’s final affirmation of Jeff’s ultimate destiny.

The ferocious battle for his soul was over. Our sovereign God had won—as He always does—and Satan, that “murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44), was crushed once again in total defeat! Our great and glorious Redeemer had snatched our son from the Destroyer’s snare in the very final moments of life, saying in effect, “Satan, you can have this useless and wasted shell of a body, but I am taking the soul of Jeffrey Scott Burr to be My adopted child for all eternity and will give him a new and incorruptible body!” And our own hearts were immensely affirmed with the eternal truth that no sinner can drift so far from his Creator that the redemptive love of Jesus cannot reach him!

Jeff’s ultimate destiny has now been fulfilled as requested by Jesus in His high priestly prayer: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory” (John 17:24). He is now home in heaven, experiencing the glory promised by Jesus, to which we look forward with great expectancy. In the meantime, we who remain are called to run the race to the very end, knowing that our sovereign Lord “will respond to the prayer[s] of the destitute; he will not despise their plea” (Psalm 102:17) and will draw sinners unto Himself by His *irresistible grace!*

Hallelujah, Thine the glory; hallelujah, amen! By Thy grace, O Lord, we’ll see our son again!