

Can You Lose Part of Your Reward?

An analysis of the parable of the “Prodigal Son”
as it relates to the power of a Father’s love

By Dennis Fischer

© 2012 Dennis Fischer ®
All rights reserved

Dedication



This book is dedicated to Diane Chasse—
My sweet twin sister and next to my wife my very best friend.

Dear Friends,

The story that follows is true. It is offered to illustrate how destructive words can be and how a pre-conceived belief can shatter the spirit of those who genuinely seek God's mercy. It is only one story, but I suspect it has played out in countless episodes.

“A Girl Named Ginny”

Once upon a time there was a girl named Ginny. She was an extraordinary young lady with a great desire to please her parents and her God. Ginny was very meek and was always willing to serve the needs of others. With her, one only had to ask and it was done.

As a young girl growing up Ginny was often described by others as very sweet, very pretty and very shy. She was also very conscious of her character and did her best to do things with grace and dignity. Her speech was never coarse but rather proper and refined—and it is more than fair to say that her words were almost always filled with the law of kindness (Pro. 31:26). She never spoke ill of others

As a teenager she discovered God's truth and was very committed to living a life that honored her new found faith. After graduating from high school she even attended Ambassador College for one year. However, for whatever reason, it just wasn't the right fit leading her to continue her education at another institution where she earned a Bachelor's degree. Later she would earn her Masters at a very prominent graduate school in California.

While in college Ginny met a young man that really captured her interest. He was extraordinarily disciplined and driven. In many respects he was mature beyond his years. He was very goal oriented and always achieved what he set his mind to do—Always. Although he was not interested in Ginny's faith, he wasn't antagonistic toward it either. As a result, their relationship would eventually grow into a courtship and ultimately a marriage.

After her wedding Ginny continued to attend weekly services every Sabbath, however, she was very secretive about her personal world outside the small community of faith she was a part of for so many years. It was almost as if she was leading a double life. In truth, she simply didn't want people in her spiritual family to judge her decisions. Sadly, the stress of walking this tightrope eventually became too great and she “left the church.”

In the years that followed Ginny was an ideal wife and mother. Her husband, who had become highly successful in the corporate world, provided her with a life that many could only dream of. They lived in beautiful homes, drove expensive automobiles and resided in one of the most prestigious communities in the United States. However, something was missing.

Although it had been almost twenty years since Ginny had attended a Sabbath or holy day service, the faith she once embraced was still very much a part of her. Throughout that time she continued to honor God's dietary laws and although her family celebrated the festivals of normative Christianity, she quietly withdrew from them as much as possible. Additionally, she was remarkably honorable in her dealings with others and her kindness toward those of a lower estate was nothing short of heroic. She could host an elegant dinner for some of the real power players in corporate America one evening and quietly serve meals at a homeless shelter the next. What was really remarkable about this is that she never made a distinction between the two. In truth, despite her remarkable

talents, there wasn't a judgmental bone in her body. On the contrary, her life was a living portrait of Proverbs 31.

However, despite her successes, her departure from God's Church eventually gave rise to a great sense of guilt and even shame. As a result her meditations were often accompanied with copious tears and her prayers were filled with words of genuine despair.

After several months of sheer agony Ginny sought out the church she had abandoned so many years before. An administrator from the church's headquarters informed her that they would have a pastor contact her to set up a time for them to meet. Although she was somewhat nervous, Ginny was very much looking forward to renewing her relationship with God's Church and His people. She even pondered how positive the meeting would go. She anticipated the pastor offering words of great encouragement. Perhaps he would remind her that there was joy in heaven over her return (Lk. 15:7).

Unfortunately, the minister she counseled with presented a far darker view of how God looked at her departure from His spiritual family. He explained that her trespass (leaving the church) was so serious that she would have to pay for it for all eternity. In his words, she had lost part of her reward. He cited as his proof the parable of the "Prodigal Son" (Lk. 15: 11-32) emphasizing that while the younger son squandered his inheritance, thus leaving him with nothing, the older son wisely safeguarded his portion of the estate. This minister even extolled the character displayed by the older brother and how God's people should look to his example when making their choices.

As Ginny attentively listened to every word she fought back tears as this longstanding minister informed her that she alone would ultimately have to bear the guilt she had been carrying for years. After all, she brought it upon herself. Suffice it to say Ginny was devastated.

Although disgraced, she resumed attending services. Unfortunately, the shame she was told would be her burden was simply too great to bear. As a result, this exquisite woman who had done so much good in her life walked away again believing that although God might allow her entrance into His Kingdom, He would never provide the love and forgiveness she so desperately craved.

This now brings us to a very important question. Is it possible for those who enter into God's eternal kingdom as born again spirit beings, to commit a sin in this life that is actually beyond the power of Christ's sacrifice to COMPLETELY blot out? In other words, can you commit a sin that God will only partially forgive thus requiring you to pay the balance for all eternity?

The booklet you are about to read examines this question as well as the parable at the center of the controversy. Its purpose is to present God's wisdom concerning how He judges and the role mercy plays in His pronouncements. Its message is broken into two parts: Part I addresses the parable of the "Prodigal Son" and explains how God's compassion is expressed toward those who have departed from Him and later return. Part II illustrates with real examples, God's commitment to the TOTAL redemption of those who genuinely repent.

Finally, if you have ever personally thought that the Almighty could never COMPLETELY erase your sins and their eternal consequences get ready for a WONDERFUL surprise.

Your Brother in Christ

Dennis Fischer

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins,
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

1 John 1:9

Part I

The Prodigal Son

The parable of the “Prodigal Son” (Luke 15) proclaims a message of great hope to all who have sinned and fallen short of the mark. It declares that the Father of all mankind has a deep and abiding love for His children and desires with all His heart to receive them unto Himself. Regrettably, it is one of the most misunderstood lessons among God’s people today. As was mentioned earlier, even ministers have employed it to prove a point that Christ never intended.

The story centers around a prosperous family consisting of a father and his two sons. There is no mention of any women in it. By all appearances the younger son seems to be somewhat impetuous and undisciplined while his older brother is highly driven and focused. As the story begins the younger son appeals to his father to bequeath his inheritance early while he is still young enough to enjoy it and build an estate of his own. The father eventually consents and divides his estate between both of his sons. Here is how Jesus describes it.

And [Jesus] said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me. And [his father] divided unto them his living. (Lk. 15: 11-12)

Shortly after receiving his portion of the inheritance, the younger brother leaves his family and travels a great distance—eventually arriving at a place where he plans to build his own life. However, although he was optimistic about his future, it is clear that he lacked the maturity and wisdom to navigate his life in a world fraught with temptation. As a result, he squanders all that he was given by indulging himself in sin.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. (Lk. 15:13)

Eventually the money ran out, and this young man, from a very prominent and honorable family, became destitute. Add to that there was a great famine in the land leaving him with few options. His condition became so dire that in an attempt to sustain himself, he sought employment slopping pigs and actually eating their food.

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and [the citizen] sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. (Lk. 15: 14-16)

The son is now humiliated beyond imagination and thoroughly disgraced, not to mention starving. At this point, all hope appears to be lost. This condition leads him to conclude that it would be better to return home in shame than to try to survive in a place with virtually no prospects, not to mention one that has literally destroyed his life. As a result, he decides that upon his return, he will beg his father for mercy and seek his permission to work as a slave on the family estate.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. (Lk. 15:17-19)

A wonderful reunion

The younger son now makes the long journey home. However, as he approaches the family he deserted, his father sees him from a distance and rushes out to meet him. Then, as the prodigal stands in shame, barely able to look at the man he feels he disappointed so greatly, his father could hardly contain his joy—repeatedly kissing him and undoubtedly shedding tears of his own. Even when the prodigal was confessing his failings his father would hear nothing of it. At this point it is clear that this wise and understanding man was very much aware of the ordeal his son had gone through and the courage it took to face his own weakness. As a result, he lavished his child with very precious gifts as if he was royalty.

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. (Lk. 15:20-24)

When the older brother heard the commotion coming from the festivities, he decided to investigate the matter. However, when he discovered what was taking place his reaction was vastly different from that of his father. Instead of rejoicing he was furious and began chastising his father for celebrating the return of someone who had brought such shame on the family. So intense was his anger that he refused to join the celebration, even after his father entreated him to do so.

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And [the servant] said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

And [the older brother] was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this your son was come, which has devoured your living with harlots, you have killed for him the fatted calf. (Lk. 15: 25-30)

The parable concludes with the father explaining why his actions were appropriate and why the older son should not be resentful of what was done.

And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is yours. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. (Lk. 15: 31-32)

The Point

We now come to the point Jesus was making in this timeless lesson. However, in order to understand it, some background is necessary. This will provide context to His words and why He expressed them the way He did. What follows is a series of questions that should prove useful in providing that context.

General Questions Regarding Parables

1) What is a “parable”?

The word “parable” comes from the Greek word *parabole* and means “likeness.” It is derived from the Greek verb *paraballo* (“para,” “beside,” and “ballo,” “to cast”). A parable is a comparison of two objects for the purpose of teaching. Although Jesus did not invent speaking in parables, it is significant that He is the only one who used them in the New Testament. At one time in His ministry, it was the only method He employed when speaking to the masses. (Mt. 13:34; Mk. 4:33-34; see also: Ps 78:2)

2) Why did Jesus speak in “parables”?

Although many in the professing Christian world believe He did so in order to make His point more clear, the opposite is actually true. Jesus Himself said as much. The scriptures reveal that the Messiah was once asked by His disciples why He spoke in parables (Mt. 13:10). He answered them by revealing that He did so to hide the meaning of His words from some who would hear them.

“Because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given.” (Mt. 13:11-15).

The gospel of Mark records Jesus’ words this way.

“Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.” (Mk. 4:11-12 See also: Isa 6:9-10; Acts 28: 27)

Questions Regarding the Parable of the Prodigal Son

3) To whom was Jesus speaking when He gave this parable?

The Biblical record indicates that Jesus was addressing the scribes and the Pharisees (Lk. 15:1-3) when He told the story of “The Lost Son”. However, it is reasonable to conclude that the sinners who had come to see the Messiah also heard His words—for it was about them that He spoke.

4) What prompted Jesus to speak this particular parable?

To better appreciate the answer to this question we need to understand the religious leaders He was addressing. The scribes and the Pharisees were constant antagonists of the Messiah. They sought to discredit Him at every turn. During what is commonly referred to as His “Latter Perea Ministry,” which took place just months before His crucifixion, Jesus was eating with what these religious leaders regarded as “undesirables.” Simply put, His dining companions were horrible sinners—the very dregs of society. Based on this assessment, these spiritual leaders were highly offended that the Messiah would associate with such people. As a result they began murmuring among themselves and expressing their disgust at Him for doing so.

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receives sinners, and eats with them. (Lk. 15:1-2)

At this point it is important to understand that these religious leaders were brazenly arrogant. So much so that they would often tout their own righteousness while at the same time condemn others. The parable of the “Pharisee and the Publican” (Lk. 18:10-14) illustrates this point. According to this parable, a

Pharisee actually belittles a tax collector in a prayer. He even had the audacity to thank God that he (the Pharisee) was not like all the wretched people around him especially a pathetic tax collector.

Now, once again, as these religious leaders witness Jesus showing compassion to those whose lives were scared by bad decisions and hard living, they declare their disdain for them. They see no redeeming qualities in these people. Furthermore, they see Jesus' kindness toward them as a lack of discernment and further evidence that He is not a true man of God.

This is clearly what was taking place at this moment. In essence these spiritual pillars of Judaism were doing three things: 1) they were asserting their own righteousness. 2) they were condemning others who clearly had some serious flaws in their lives and, 3) they were questioning the wisdom of Jesus for showing compassion to such people while at the same time failing to show honor to them.

Jesus responded by presenting a trilogy of parables in which the first two ("The Lost Sheep" and "The Lost Coin") expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees grumbings. The third parable presents them with a chilling reality of how distant their judgment was from that of God's. In the parable of "The Prodigal Son" Jesus tells a story about a sinner who repents, a father who forgives, and a brother who 1) asserts his own righteousness, 2) condemns his sibling for past mistakes and 3) questions the wisdom of his father for showing mercy to a sinner while at the same time failing to show honor to him. While some in God's Church hold up the older brother as a model of honor to a father, he is in fact, nothing but a resentful child that cared little about anything but himself much the same as the Pharisees the Messiah was talking to.

5) What evidence in this parable suggests that the father knew his lost son would ultimately return home?

Three Reasons

There are certain things that occur in this story that suggest the father anticipated the return of his son. First, the father saw him "when he was still a great way off" (Lk. 15:20). This being the case, how could he even recognize his son at such a great distance? How could he know that the small figure on the horizon was actually his child? Furthermore, why was the father looking out on the horizon in the first place? There can be only one answer. He did so because he anticipated his son's return. In essence, the father was looking out in the hope of seeing the child he loved so dearly—and there was something in him that just knew he would come home. But there is more.

A Second Reason

The powerful story Jesus tells indicates that the father was "moved with compassion" and ran out to meet his son (Lk. 15:20). The word compassion in this verse implies pity. The question we need to ask ourselves is why would the father pity a son he had only seen from a great distance? What would make him think his son would even need his pity?

The implication in the parable, although not stated directly, is that the father knew that the world into which his son had gone would be treacherous and evil. As such it had the potential to cause great harm. Because he had a keen awareness of both his son and the world into which he was going, the father rightly anticipated the result. Many parents today can identify with this. They see their children boldly pursue things that they (the parents) know will only bring pain and heartache.

It is clear that the father allowed his son to go into that world in order to learn a lesson that could not be fully appreciated by staying at home. And although the son left the father's estate of his own volition, he did so with his father's consent. This is not unlike God's children today. Many have left the faith only to return again and seek out God's forgiveness and mercy. This great parable illustrates that God is not surprised when His children return. On the contrary, He is filled with joy.

A Third Reason

Another indication that the father knew his son would return is that he had a fattened calf ready to be slaughtered for a great feast (Lk. 15:23). This being the case it is reasonable to think that the father must have anticipated a celebration would be held—thus he had prepared for it. The lesson for God's people today is that the Father knows His children so well that He can plan for their return even when it doesn't look like there will be such an event. With this said, imagine what He has in store for us.

6) Was the older son justified in feeling cheated by his father?

According to the parable, the older brother was angry with his father for honoring a son that he (the older brother) believed deserved no honor. This resentment was driven by nothing other than selfishness, which is never justified. If one thinks about it, the older sibling was reflecting the same attitude as the religious leaders Jesus was speaking to. They too were offended that Jesus would dine with highly flawed people. Obviously, Jesus wasn't.

One of the great mistakes made by many of God's people today is to sympathize with the older brother. Some believe that this parable actually vindicates him because the balance of the estate would go to him. However, another question begs to be answered: What ultimately happens to the prodigal? Is he left with nothing? The answer to this question is revealed in the gifts his father bestowed on him.

7) What is the significance of the gifts (sandals, a coat, and a ring) the father bestowed on his son after his return home?

According to the parable, the father ran out to embrace his son the moment he saw him. The lesson we can learn from this is that as soon as a sinner's face is turned homeward, even though he may still be far away, our Father in heaven recognizes this change of heart, and bounds out to meet the child He so dearly loves. God doesn't say, "Let this sinner come to Me and beg for my mercy." On the contrary God moves quickly with delight when He sees a child return to Him.

Additionally, the father fell on his son's neck and kissed him (v 20). Consider what must be taking place here. The son was unquestionably filthy. The smell of garbage and pig slop must have been intense. But did the father care? Of course not! His son was a WONDERFUL sight to Him and nothing could diminish that. We now come to the gifts the father bestowed on the child he so dearly loved.

Four exquisite Gifts

When the prodigal returns in tears, he begs his father to allow him to work as a servant on the family estate. But the father wouldn't hear of it. His reaction speaks volumes about how God views genuine contrition and repentance. This wonderful patriarch provides his son with exquisite gifts—each of which tells an extraordinary story of distinction and honor and a son's return to a position of prominence in his father's eyes.

"Put sandals on his feet"

The sandals picture freedom. Slaves at that time were barefoot. And although the prodigal wanted to be a servant, the father saw him as much more. He was a son and his father cherished him greatly. It is interesting that although God's people are referred to as servants (Rev. 7:3), they too are much more. At the end of His life Jesus called His disciples "friends" (Jn. 15:15). Ultimately they will be His bride (Rev. 19:6-8, See also: Psa. 45).

“Put a ring on his finger”

The Bible also indicates that God's people are to hold positions of great distinction in His kingdom (Rev. 5:10, Dan. 7:18,22). They will actually sit on thrones and govern the entire world (Rev. 20:4). This wonderful truth is also captured in the story of “The Prodigal Son.” When his repentant son returns, his father gives him a ring. A ring is a symbol of power and authority (Esther 8:10). It actually carries the weight of the one who gives it. Pharaoh bestowed such an honor on Joseph (Gen. 41:41-42). And God Almighty will do the same to His bride.

“Bring him the best robe”

In addition to giving his son sandals and a ring, this loving father directed his servants to bring him a coat. But not just any coat. It had to be the very finest for his dear son (Lk.15: 22). The scriptures speak prolifically concerning the significance of garments. Bestowing such a gift was not only a sign of distinction and honor (Psa. 45:13, Rev. 19:8), but also a reflection of intimacy and affection. Jacob set his son Joseph apart from his other children with an exquisite garment (Gen. 37: 3). Hannah, the mother of Samuel also brought her son a coat every year when he served in the temple under Eli (1Sam. 2: 19). Mordecai was also given this distinction (Esther 8:15).

But why would the father give such an important gift to a son who had brought such shame on the family? This is a question that must have been on the lips of older brother. The reason can only be that the father saw a state of heart in his son that was worthy of honor. The book of Zechariah records that God does this very thing to the priest Joshua (Zech. 3:4-5). Furthermore, although we may not fully grasp God's desire to raise up the fallen, the Bible tells us it is a part of His nature never the less.

He raises up the poor out of the dust, and lifts up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and he hath set the world upon them. (1 Sam. 2: 8)

Prepare a Great Feast

The last gift the father bestows on his son is a great celebration. The joy of his return just had to be shared with others. Now consider the significance of this act as it pertains to those who repent and appeal to God for mercy. The book of Revelation provides a brief glimpse into a wonderful celebration given in honor of Christ and His bride. Notice how the apostle John describes this event.

And a voice came out of the throne, saying, Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great. And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigns. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he said unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. (Rev. 19: 6-9)

In truth, this great wedding is a celebration of redemption's victory over sin. It is arguably the happiest moment in history—and although the scribes and Pharisees could not grasp how the bride makes herself ready, Jesus could. Those sinners who sought out the Messiah took a monumental step in that direction. Jesus knew precisely what was taking place when He received the prodigals that sought Him. He also knew that His Father in Heaven was preparing a wonderful array of gifts for them.

8) Based on this parable, can a person lose (squander) part of his reward?

There are many sincere members in God's Church that argue this very point. They do so based on the fact that in the parable, the younger brother squandered his inheritance, while the older brother had not.

Additionally, the words of the father declared that the balance of the estate would go to the oldest son: "Son, you art ever with me, and all that I have is yours" (Lk. 15:31).

With this said, it is important to understand that what is mentioned here is an "inheritance" not a reward. Ostensibly what the father was telling the older son was "Why are you so angry? You have lost nothing." Furthermore, there is nothing in the scriptures that even remotely hints that our inheritance can be received (and later squandered) in this life. In truth, the inheritance God has provided for His children is His Kingdom and entrance into His eternal family (Mt. 19:29). That inheritance has been prepared since the foundation of the world and will only be given at man's final judgment (Mt. 24:34). It is true that God will disburse His rewards, but that only takes place after the recipients have received their inheritance. Furthermore, to think that God's system of rewards fluctuates up and down based on our behavior is speculation found nowhere in scripture. At this point it is interesting to note that the father in this parable identified the result of the prodigals behavior (prior to his repentance) as death, not loss of wealth "for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again" (Lk. 15:24,32).

For those who believe this parable stands as proof that one can lose his reward by walking away from the faith and later genuinely repenting and coming back, consider the following question. How can someone actually receive his eternal reward during this life in order to squander it, because that is precisely what would have to take place according to the parable?

Additionally, what specific sin results in losing part of one's reward? And if all sin possesses such a threat, who besides Jesus Christ hasn't lost something? After all, sin has touched the entire human family. This being the case, has Abraham lost part of his reward? What about Moses or Joshua? What about David, Samuel, Elijah or Daniel? What about the great prophets of the Old Testament or the martyrs of the New Testament. Every one of them has had moments of weakness when sin got the better of them. Now ask yourself, has everyone in human history lost part of his reward?

The bottom line is this—WE ARE ALL PRODIGALS—including the pastor who assigned that label to a young lady named Ginny who sincerely desired to resume a life with God's people.

A Work not Honored

When giving the Sermon on the Mount, the Messiah indicated that if a good work was done for the purpose of gaining the praises and admiration of men, God would not honor it. However, this is not a reward lost but rather a work not rewarded at all because it had been contaminated by the motive behind it—and thus not worthy of being considered a "good work." Here is how Jesus conveyed this point.

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou do your alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have the glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when you do alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing: That your alms may be in secret: and your Father which sees in secret himself shall reward you openly. And when thou pray, you shall not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But you, when you pray, enter into your closet, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father which is in secret; and your Father which sees in secret shall reward you openly.

I Corinthians 3:11-15

The scriptures firmly declare that every work, whether good or evil, will come into judgment (Eccl. 12:14). It also affirms that there is a direct link between the rewards God bestows on his children and the works they perform (Rev. 22:12). However, the point that needs to be understood is how God judges our works and how he determines our rewards? The apostle Paul answered this question in his first epistle to the church at Corinth. In it he writes:

"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

This passage is often cited by many who believe that God will strip those who have sinned of rewards they would have otherwise received had they not sinned, even though they later repented. However, this is not what Paul is saying at all. In truth, he is revealing that all works will be tested based on their own merit. If the work is acceptable it will survive God's scrutiny, if it isn't, it will be consumed leaving no reward. However, at no point is Paul suggesting that the reward for a good work will be quenched by fire to offset a past sin. Nor is he saying that part of a work's reward will have to be forfeited as a consequence for past transgressions. In essence, here is his point.

The work of one will become [plainly, openly] known (shown for what it really is); for the day [of Christ] will declare it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test and critically appraise the character and worth of the work each person has done. If the work any person has built on this Foundation [any product of his efforts whatsoever] survives [the test], he will receive his full reward. But if any person's work is burned [under the test] he will suffer the loss [of all of it], though he himself will be saved, but only as [one who has passed] through fire.

The point is that the good works one has done in Christ prior to leaving the faith will not have to be surrendered (even in part) once they return. It is only sinful works that will be consumed by fire [burned up] while all good works will be preserved and rewarded. Therefore, dedicate your life to good.

"To be Made Whole"

The mistake being made by many in God's Church today is that they read something into the story of "The Lost Son" that has nothing to do with the point Jesus was making when giving it in the first place. The Messiah's intent was to illustrate that God is a loving Father who desires with all His heart to FORGIVE His children. When He does, they are COMPLETELY restored and made WHOLE—with all the privileges of a member of the family. With that said, consider what God's forgiveness involves. First there is a TOTAL cleansing from the sin—no part of the transgression remains. Notice how the Almighty expresses this truth when speaking of Israel and Judah in the millennium.

And I will cause the captivity of Judah and the captivity of Israel to return, and will build them, **AS AT THE FIRST**. And I will cleanse them from **ALL** their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against me; and I will pardon **ALL** their iniquities, whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against me. Jer. 33:7-8)

Here, God explains that His forgiveness is so complete that it will restore the one receiving it back to a state prior to the trespass—"as at the first." In other words, the sin is totally erased and no longer exists. King David referred to it as the "blotting out" of sin (Psa. 51:9). The term "blot out" comes from the Hebrew word *makhah* and means to "obliterate," or, "exterminate." Furthermore, God's forgiveness is so complete that the sin is actually expunged from His memory..."for I will FORGIVE their iniquity, and I will REMEMBER THEIR SIN NO MORE" (Jer. 31:34). It is interesting that the term *makhah* cited from David's Psalm above, can also be rendered "to erase from memory."

Separating the sinner from the sin

In the Psalms, God's mercy is described as so powerful that when it is extended to the repentant, the distance between the past sin and the sinner He forgives is infinite.

For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he **REMOVED OUR TRANSGRESSIONS** from us. (Psa. 103: 11-12)

The promise in this verse is truly remarkable. Consider what is being said. If two people were to walk on a straight plane, one to the east and one to the west they would never meet. The point here is that the distance between the one forgiven and his past sins is literally immeasurable. Even the memory of that sin no longer exists in God's mind. If it was possible for you to lose part of a reward reserved for you, because of a trespass you committed at some point in your life, that sin would be attached to you for eternity—so much for "as far as the east is from the west."

Diminishing the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ

The idea that God would require any member of His eternal family to bear part of the burden of their sin for all eternity goes totally contrary to everything embodied in Christ's sacrifice. In truth such a belief diminishes its very purpose as expressed by the apostle Paul in his epistle to God's Church at Colosse.

Col. 1:21-22

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and **unblameable** and **unreproveable** in his sight:

The term *unblameable* in this verse comes from the Greek word "*amōmos*" (Strong's G299). It means "without blemish, faultless." It is a state in which no accusation can be leveled. It has also been rendered "without rebuke."

The term *unreproveable* is equally compelling. It comes from the Greek word "*anegklētos*" (Strong's G410). It is a state in which the recipient "cannot be called into account." In other words he is "unaccusable and blameless" bearing no responsibility for past sins. *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* renders it as follows:

"...that which cannot be called into account—blameless... The word implies not merely acquittal, but the total absence of even a charge or accusation being leveled against a person."

The point that needs to be drawn from this is that despite views to the contrary absolutely no benefit from the atoning sacrifice of your Savior can be withheld from those who claim it.

The apostle Peter expressed it this way:

Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. (II Pe. 3:14)

Pounds & Talents

There are some who have argued that Jesus' parables indicate that people can have their rewards taken from them and given to another (see the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30) and the parable of the pounds (Lk. 19:12-27)). However, the point missed in this argument is that in both of these parables the unprofitable servant not only lost all of his reward (as opposed to part of it), he lost ALL of God's mercy as well, which is a far different fate. In the parable of the "talents" the unprofitable servant was cast into outer darkness where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 25:30). In the parable of the "pounds", a nobleman (Jesus Christ) referred to him as wicked (Lk. 19:22) and ordered him to be executed (verse 27).

The point here is that with God it is all or nothing. Those who repent and are forgiven are TOTALLY restored. Those who don't, get nothing—including salvation.

Returning to the Prodigal Son

Now consider what truly lies ahead for both sons if nothing changes from this point. In reality the ultimate fate of the prodigal will be far greater than that of his older brother, and for good reason. The prodigal will occupy a position of great authority in the Kingdom because he can fully appreciate the value of mercy. That is the POINT! The prodigal is the one who will sit on a throne for all eternity—because he will judge like his Father does.

With that said, it is interesting that the father in this parable actually went out to meet both of his sons. The reaction of the younger was to beg for his father's forgiveness and to tell him that from this day on he would comply with all his desires and honor him for the rest of his life. He would even be his slave.

However, the reaction of the older brother was much different. When his father came out and implored him to come into the house, he would not. In essence, he refused to honor his father's desire to rejoice with him. The irony of this is too powerful to ignore. As the story ends the older brother has now become a prodigal himself while the younger is once again a son.

Manipulating God

There are some who believe that if it was impossible for a spirit born member of God's family to lose part of his reward, it would be a mockery to God Himself, because His people could just sin wantonly and then repent at the last minute. Ministers have actually made this argument in sermons. What this theory fails to take into consideration is that such a scenario can NEVER take place. In truth, God's word declares that it is virtually impossible to be forgiven of any sin that is the product of willful and direct calculus—which is exactly what this would be.

For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains
NO MORE SACRIFICE for sins, (Heb. 10:26)

To “sin willfully” means to sin with purpose and dedication. The point here is that God's mercy, as reflected in Christ's sacrifice, does not extend to those who consciously set their will in a concerted attempt to exploit Him—and there is nothing in the scriptures that suggests otherwise. Furthermore, there is nothing in the scriptures suggesting that this is what the prodigal was attempting.

Question Box

Question:

Didn't John write that it was possible to receive only a portion of one's reward?

Answer:

There are some who believe that II John 1:8 is making that very point. But this is not the case at all. Notice what God's apostle writes.

"Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have worked for, but that we receive a full reward" (II John 1:8 KJV). Some translations render it "Watch out that YOU do not lose what YOU have worked for, but that YOU may be rewarded fully" (NIV 1984).

This verse has been at the center of considerable debate within the churches of God. However, its meaning is actually revealed by John himself throughout his letter. In truth, John is exhorting the church to be on guard against those who would subvert the gospel—the very gospel that God's real servants preach. His point is that if Christians embrace false teachings, the kingdom—(and by extension, salvation) they seek could be lost. As a result, the joy God's true servants would experience over their entrance into eternity would be lost as well. This is because in a very real sense, God's people constitute their work. Adam Clark's Commentary put it this way.

"We find that if these persons did not keep on their guard they might lose their salvation and the apostles their rejoicing in the day of the Lord Jesus."

This being the case, the issue addressed by John is not works being rewarded but rather what happens to those who fall prey to deception. The "full reward" referred to by him is the reward Salvation brings to ALL who receive it. When speaking of this particular reward John Gill's Commentary emphasizes that its fullness is equally shared by all the saints.

"...the meaning is not as if it was different to different persons, for there is but one recompense of reward, or reward of the inheritance common to all the saints."

A Final Thought

The great hope expressed by the Messiah in the parable of the "Prodigal Son" speaks volumes about a father's desire to draw those who have gone astray back to Himself. In essence, the message is this:

- To those who are broken hearted because they abandoned their faith, your Father in heaven calls out, "Come home."
- To those who are riddled with guilt and shame because they succumbed to the temptations of this world, your Father in heaven calls out, "Come home."
- To those who have shed tears over personal weaknesses that lead to a life of poor choices and bad decisions, your Father in heaven calls out, "Come home."
- To those who feel that all hope is lost because they can't possibly bear the weight of their own transgressions, your Father in heaven calls out, "Come home."

And when you do He promises He will be there to embrace and comfort you and share His JOY at your return. It is then that He will present you with very special gifts that have been preserved just for you—sandals for your feet, a ring for your finger, a beautiful garment, and a wonderful feast

In closing, the great prophet Isaiah provides words that capture the theme of the parable Jesus uttered so very long ago. It is an appeal for God's people in all generations to come home.

Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; **AND LET THEM RETURN TO THE LORD**, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon". (Isa. 55:7)

This is our heavenly Father's appeal to His children. However, if, for some reason you believe your sins are greater than God's capacity to forgive read on.

Part II

The Power of a Father's Love

Introduction:

Have you ever felt so beset by sin that you believed you were beyond God's forgiveness? Have your own personal flaws and weaknesses loomed so great in your life that it just seemed inconceivable that you could ever be a part of His eternal Family? I suspect that almost all of God's people have experienced the weight of their own shortcomings caving in on them. I know I have. There have been times in my life when I have felt so unworthy of God's love that I was convinced that a Great Moral Being such as He, couldn't possibly want to have anything to do with me. Add to that, I had the knowledge that a real devil is constantly reminding Him of every sin I commit and every blemish I have, and that it was pointless for God to carry a defect like me through life, let alone into His Kingdom. According to Satan, the only thing God's people are good for is to be discarded like garbage. Sound familiar? Have you ever gone through the ordeal of assessing your own qualifications as a child of the True God and found yourself totally without value? If you have, then you, like me, have been looking at it all wrong.

Putting things in Perspective

If the scriptures tell us anything at all, it is that God's love, not our virtue, is what carries the day when it comes to those who will celebrate eternity with Him in His Kingdom. To be sure we must claim that destiny and strive diligently to be like Him—we must obey His law and do His will. But in the end it is His righteousness and His walk in us that will bring about our magnificent future.

This now brings us to the question of the day. How committed is God to our ultimate success? How driven is He to convert the weak into the powerful, the plain into the exquisite, and the mortal into the infinite (I Cor. 15: 42-43). Is it possible for God's people today to grasp, at least in part, the measure of God's love toward us? If we honestly look into the scriptures the answer is a resounding YES. Furthermore, they provide tangible examples of those who sinned greatly and were completely cleansed of their trespass by none other than God Almighty. Consider the following examples.

Moments of Compromise and Doubt

Throughout the scriptures great men of God have had some very low moments. Moments that must have caused them to question their own worth in God's eyes. King David was such a man. His story is one filled with times of great courage and triumph. Sadly, it had its low points as well. In truth, David, a man after God's own heart (I Sam. 13:14, Acts 13: 22), actually provoked the Almighty to great anger on more than one occasion. At one particular time, he actually committed two separate capital crimes.

Example I David takes Bathsheba

The story of David and his sin with Bathsheba is famous in scripture. According to the narrative recorded in second Samuel, while walking on the terrace of his home in Jerusalem David noticed a woman bathing. He was obviously attracted to her, and as the king, he ordered her to be brought to him. That same night he seduced her—resulting in her becoming pregnant (II Sam. 11:2-5).

In an attempt to hide his sin, David sent for her husband, Uriah who was fighting in the Israelite army against the Ammonites. His plan was simple. Using the pretext of wanting an update on the war, he sent word to his field commander, Joab to provide him with a status report and send it at the hand of Uriah. Of course, Joab complied and dispatched Uriah with the information the king requested. After their meeting, David attempted to persuade Uriah to spend the evening at home with Bathsheba before returning to the battle. However, despite all attempts to get Uriah to sleep with his wife, he declined—and did so for the noblest of reasons.

And Uriah said unto David, The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in tents; and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? as thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing. (II Sam. 11:11)

Uriah's words were not an expression of defiance. On the contrary, they were a declaration of great devotion to Israel and its king. Here is how David rewarded that devotion. He wrote a letter to Joab and instructed Uriah to personally deliver it. Here is what the letter said.

And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die. (II Samuel 11:14-15)

And it came to pass, when Joab observed the city, that he assigned Uriah unto a place where he knew that valiant men were. And the men of the city went out, and fought with Joab: and there fell some of the people of the servants of David; and Uriah the Hittite died also. (II Sam. 11:16)

David is now not only guilty of adultery—a CAPITAL crime, but also murder—another CAPITAL crime. This act is so despicable to God that He has to address it. So He dispatches Nathan the prophet to expose it to David. He does so in a parable. Here are his exact words to the King.

And the LORD sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveler unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him. (II Sam.12:1-4)

Believing the story to be real, David became furious and imposed a death sentence on the lead character in the parable. However, Nathan would then deliver horrible news.

And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the LORD lives, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die: And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man... (II Sam. 12:5-7)

Nathan is now going to present more bad news. He introduces the aggregating circumstances of David's sin. In a criminal trial a prosecutor may introduce evidence to prove that certain facts pertaining to the case make the crime even more egregious and add greater weight to its severity. In this case the aggravating circumstance is fact that David was a king who had God's favor. He was not only hand – picked by the Lord of Israel, he was also repeatedly blessed by Him—and despite this fact he engaged in acts that were an affront to his benefactor. Nathan makes that point very clear with a message from God Himself.

...Thus says the LORD God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul; And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.

Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon. (II Sam. 12:7-9)

God concludes His indictment of David by pronouncing His sentence. And although He spared the king's life, his future would be filled with tragedy beginning with the loss of the child he conceived in Bathsheba.

Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife. Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbor, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun. For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun. And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die. (II Sam. 12:10-14)

When David heard these words he was devastated. The weight of his guilt was unbearable leading him to personally approach his God and cry out to him. Notice how David describes his condition. There is almost a sense of desperation in him.

Psalm 51

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou might be justified when thou speak, and be clear when thou judge. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, thou desire truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.

For thou desire not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delight not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.

Consider for a moment the weight of David's sin. This king had not only stolen the wife of a loyal soldier in his service, but then in a cynical attempt to hide his sin, orchestrates the murder of this soldier. When Nathan spoke God's words he was addressing someone who had completely forsaken the commandment of his Lord. In the words of God Almighty, David "DESPISED" His commandment (II Sam. 12:9).

Example II Forsaking the Messiah

Now let's look at a New Testament example—one that stands as perhaps the greatest act of disloyalty ever perpetrated. It was committed by Peter as Jesus was being tried before the Jewish leadership just hours before His execution. Furthermore, it was done despite the fact that just a few hours earlier Jesus had predicted that despite all his protests to the contrary (Lk. 22:33), Peter would deny his Lord three times before the cock crows the following morning (verse 34). Tragically, Peter succumbed to his own fear. Here is how Matthew describes it.

Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, Thou also were with Jesus of Galilee. But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou say. And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, "This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man. And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech betrays you. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man... (Mt.26:69-74)

The words "curse and swear" do not refer to obscene or profane language as it is thought of today. What Peter was doing was invoking a solemn oath in which he places a curse on himself if he is lying. He may also have appealed to something sacred in an attempt to persuade his accuser that he was telling the truth, which he wasn't.

Then, at this precise moment, Jesus expresses what is arguably the most penetrating indictment ever leveled at one of His disciples. Furthermore, He did so without uttering a word. At that point Jesus looked out and His eyes met Peter's.

And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly. (Lk. 22:61)

In this moment of great weakness, Peter abandoned his Lord just as Jesus said he would (Mt. 26:75). Now, consumed with fear and guilt, he would depart in grief, leaving his Savior alone. Try to imagine the devastation Peter must have felt for this sin? This was the last contact he would have with Jesus during His physical life. There was no way to correct it.

Imagine doing what Peter did to your best friend, or, a brother, or, a parent you loved with all your heart. Now imagine doing it to your God. When the scripture says Peter "wept bitterly" the implication is that he was distraught and inconsolable. In the hours that followed, he undoubtedly questioned his own standing with God and could have easily thought all hope was lost.

Example III The Apostle Paul

The apostle Paul is celebrated as one of the great heroes of faith in all the Bible. But there are moments when he too may have questioned his life and how unworthy he was in God's eyes. His reputation as an enemy of God's people is well documented in the scriptures. The book of Acts tells us he was even complicit in the death of Stephen. Additionally, he launched one of the most aggressive assaults on the church in history. One might even conclude that He was obsessed with exterminating the early New Testament church.

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. (Acts 8: 3)

Unlike the other apostles Paul was an avowed enemy of the church prior to becoming a Christian. It is doubtful that he completely put this behind him. On the contrary, it is because of this fact that he referred to himself as "least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9). This confession stood as a constant reminder of what he had done to God's people. Many of God's people today carry the memory of horrible episodes in their past as well. The point here is that you are not alone.

Mitigating Paul's sin

There are some who contend that any atrocities Paul may have committed took place prior to his conversion. Therefore, they were done in ignorance and don't carry the same moral weight. That's true, but his personal struggle with sin didn't end on a road to Damascus. His entire life was spent in a great struggle against his nature, and according to his own words, that struggle was not going well. When writing to the church at Rome Paul put it this way.

Romans 7: 14-24

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwells no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

There are some, even within the leadership of God's Church who dismiss the severity of the issue Paul is addressing. They base this belief on the fact that his personal and rabbinical credentials strongly suggest that he was a man of remarkable self-control and discipline. However, it is very unlikely that Paul was simply using hyperbole in an attempt to accommodate the weakness of others. His words were real and reveal that he was acutely aware of our struggle with sin because they were his struggle as well. His words also reveal that his battle was a protracted one which he agonized over. And it is certain that his prayers were accompanied with tears.

We now come to our last example. And although it does not come from the scriptures, it graphically illustrates the lengths to which a father will go for a son he truly loves.

Example IV Team Hoyt

A few years ago Sports Illustrated magazine published a remarkable story about a man named Dick Hoyt and his son Rick. These two extraordinary men are among the most inspiring athletes in the world today. What makes them so remarkable is that Rick has cerebral palsy and has no control over his limbs. Despite this huge limitation, the two of them have accomplished the impossible.

Their story began in 1962 when a tragic accident marked the beginning of Rick's life. During his birth his umbilical cord got tangled around his neck cutting off oxygen to the brain. The damage was so severe that doctors told Dick and his wife, Judy, that there was no hope for their son's development. Later, the news got worse. When Rick was eight months old, doctors told the Hoyts that they should consider placing him in an institution because "he would be a vegetable the rest of his life."

Fortunately, the Hoyts saw things differently. They were convinced that there was life in their little boy and they weren't going to be denied the joy of participating in it. Although others saw nothing but a blank stare in Rick, the Hoyts saw a child craving to explore his world. They noticed the way his eyes followed them around a room. This was no vegetable. This was a cognitive life. And more than that, he was their son. From this time on little Rick and the development of his full potential became Dick and Judy's cause. They were driven to give their precious son a life with meaning and hope.

When Rick was 11 they took him to the Engineering department at Tufts University and asked if there was anything they could do to help their boy communicate. "No way," they were told. "There's nothing going on in his brain." But once again, Dick wasn't buying it. "Tell him a joke," he countered. They did, and Rick laughed. As it turned out, there was a lot going on in his brain. Then, rigged up with a computer that allowed him to control the cursor by touching a switch with the side of his head, Rick was finally able to communicate. His first words? "Go Bruins!" As it turned out Rick was a huge hockey fan. Now armed with the technology that would connect him to the outside world, Rick's life was about to change. This remarkable moment was just the beginning of a wonderful journey he and his family would share.

A Defining Moment

When Rick was in high school his life was about to be transformed. At that time one of his classmates had been paralyzed in an accident and the school decided to organize a charity "five K" run for him. When Rick heard about the fundraiser he pecked out a message to his father, "Dad, I want to do that."

The problem was that Dick was in terrible shape. So the question he had to ask himself was "How can a guy who never ran more than a mile at a time, push his son five miles? Still, he tried. "Then it was me who was handicapped," Dick says. "I was sore for two weeks."

That experience changed Rick's life. "Dad," he typed, "when we were running, it felt like I wasn't disabled anymore!" That single sentence exploded into Dick's life. He now became obsessed with giving his son that feeling as often as he could. To do so he trained, and trained, and trained. He got into such hard-belly shape that he and Rick were ready to try the 1979 Boston Marathon.

However, they were prohibited from competing because there was no provision in the rules for it. This is because the Hoyts weren't quite a "single runner", and they weren't quite a wheelchair competitor. So for next few years Dick and Rick just joined the massive field and ran anyway. Then they found a way to get into the race officially: In 1983 they ran another marathon so fast they made the qualifying time for Boston the following year.

Since then Team Hoyt has completed over 200 marathons with Dick pushing his son 26.2 miles in a wheelchair. Eight times he has not only pushed him 26.2 grueling miles, but prior to that has towed him 2.4 miles in a dinghy strapped to his back while swimming, after which he peddled him 112 miles in a seat on the handlebars of a bicycle. This challenge, which attracts the premier athletes in the world today, is appropriately called the "Iron Man Triathlon." But it doesn't end there. Dick has also pulled his son cross-country skiing, taken him on his back mountain climbing and once hauled him over 3,700 miles across the U.S. — on a bike!

A Final Thought

We have witnessed through the pages of God's word low points in the lives of some of the most celebrated figures in scripture. But how did their stories end? Did God give up on them? Were they simply too morally disfigured to be embraced by their Creator? For the record, here is the rest of their story.

- For King David, who disgraced himself and Israel, the Bible tells us that his trespasses and their eternal consequences have been TOTALLY erased—and he has been completely restored as at the first. In other words, as a result of the perfect sacrifice of his Savior he has lost nothing. On the contrary, David's destiny is to preside as a "shepherd" and "prince" over the nation of Israel in God's Kingdom (Ezk. 34:23-24, 37:24).

- For the Apostle Peter, who brought humiliation on himself, God's word proclaims a great hope as well. Jesus called Peter His "friend" and promised that he would sit on a throne judging one of the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt. 19:28, Lk. 22:30).
- For Paul, who bore the shame of knowing the great destruction he brought on God's people prior to his conversion, God declared a wonderful future in His Kingdom. Paul himself revealed it in a letter to the evangelist Timothy. In it he acknowledged that he will receive a crown of righteousness (II Tim. 4:8).

Although each of these heroes succumbed to great sins in their lives, none of them lost part of their eternal reward in God's Kingdom. The price for every transgression they every committed was paid by their redeemer--and the same is true of every one that enters into His Kingdom today.

And then there is Team Hoyt

Had Dick Hoyt listened to the many voices appealing to him to walk away from his child, a wonderful story would never have been written. His son, who doctors referred to as a "vegetable" now has a college degree and works in a major university's computer laboratory helping to develop a system, code named "Eagle Eyes," through which mechanical aids (like a powered wheelchair) can be controlled by a paralyzed person's eye-movements, when linked-up to a computer.

This "vegetable" also has his own apartment, gives speeches all over the country, and still competes in marathons almost every week. And through it all not once has he doubted his father's commitment to him and his success—a man He once referred to as "the father of the century."

A Lesson for Us

The lesson from this story for God's people today should be obvious. God's people have a father as well. But He is not the father of the century—He is the Father of all centuries. And regardless of how ugly and disfigured we see ourselves, He sees us as His child. To Him we are exquisite—priceless.

Furthermore, although Satan wants Him to give up on us, this just isn't going to happen. God's love for His children and His commitment to their ultimate victory over sin is unwavering. And he is prepared to carry us, peddle us, pull and/or push us every step of the way into His glorious Kingdom. His love just won't let Him give up. That LOVE is steadfast and resolute, and nothing can separate us from it. Perhaps the apostle Paul said it best.

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Rom. 8:38-39)

Think about that the next time you feel God has given up on you.