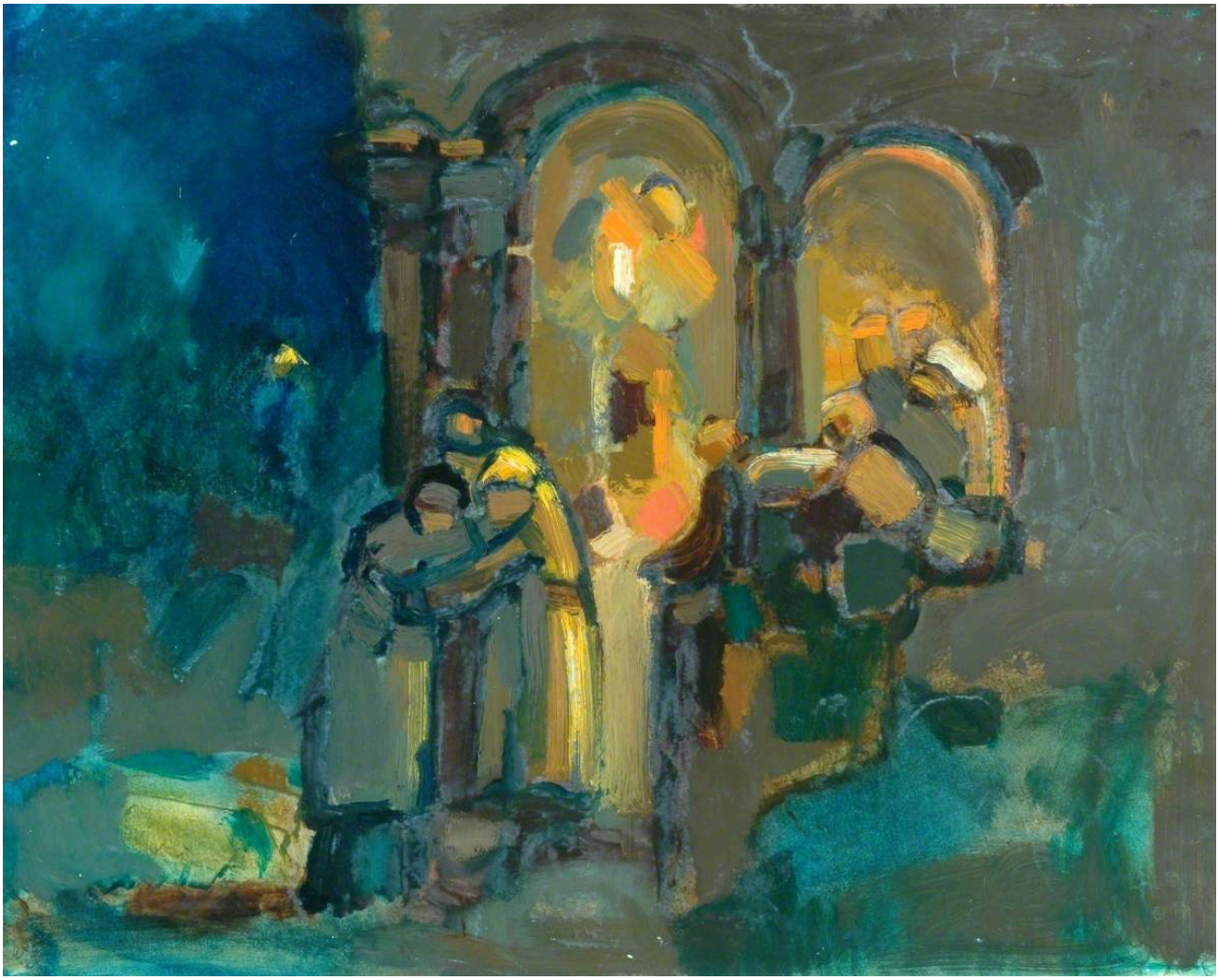
The Perfect Story of the Perfect Father

by Jeff Plude (February 2019)



The Return of the Prodigal Son, Eric Rimmington, 1962

In case you missed it, GQ magazine declared last year that the Bible is overrated. The group of self-proclaimed "un-boring" writers who performed this public service also condemned twenty other books as sexist, racist, and "just really, really boring."

Specifically, the Bible's accuser, a novelist who was about to turn forty, alleged: "It is repetitive, self-contradictory, sententious, foolish, and even at times ill-intentioned." Unlike the Bible, the other undesirables were from the recent past.

To the GQers and their fellow travelers, that the King James Bible has been, along with Shakespeare, one of the principal creators of English as the lingua franca of the modern world, seems beside the point (or part of their hatred). But for me, and for many others from two millennia ago until now, including some of the world's greatest writers who have used its images and stories throughout their works, the Bible is a fount of not only wisdom and spiritual truth, but literary brilliance.

In particular, it contains what I believe to be the perfect story perfectly told. "The Prodigal Son" is anything but prodigal in the telling—just 504 words in the Authorized Version. But what it saves in words it spends in power, a testament to its sublimity and art.

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The story seems to expand far beyond its spare but exquisitely chosen details. In this mighty miniature you seem to see the past, present, and future of this family. The story is much more than an outline for a novel, or a treatment for a feature-length film, but a full-blown drama in its own right.

It’s technically a parable, a short narrative that reveals a moral or spiritual message, a subgenre of the short story. Of course short stories today are likely to be considered bad or even juvenile if they have a didactic element. But Kafka, that sphinx of modernism and reputed master of the short story, wrote parables. Not coincidentally, I think, like the author of “The Prodigal Son,” he was Jewish.

Why did Jesus use parables? They are deceptively simple on the surface but work their magic by obscuring their deeper meaning. Only those who truly yearn and are diligent to understand, who are willing to seek, will find. It keeps dabblers and detractors away.

“The Prodigal Son” appears in Luke 15:11-32. Luke, a doctor and a Gentile, wrote his chronicle of Jesus in Greek (as did the other contributors to the New Testament), the universal language of the Mediterranean world in the first century A.D. Luke was not an eyewitness of the events he relates, but gathered his materials from people who were. Unlike the two other synoptic evangelists, Luke was the only one to record the immortal story in his gospel.

Jesus tells it by speaking, leaving the transcribing to Luke. And he uses plain, unpretentious language. This appeals especially to the common people in his audience, which we are told earlier in the chapter is made up of “publicans and sinners.” On the other hand, the scribes and Pharisees, the learned and powerful religious leaders, were there, too. But they are not receptive, as Jesus explains elsewhere, because “this people’s heart has waxed gross,” and “they seeing see

not, hearing they hear not, neither do they understand."

However, the story is far from a commentary on social justice or a political theory, as a *New York Times columnist absurdly proposed* ("Context, context, context!" the senior pastor at the church I attend is fond of saying). Rather, it's a personal message; it speaks to each person's soul.

The simple words also serve another purpose: they don't upstage the story, as can often happen, but make the images, the scenes, and the characters stand out like animated figures in a dazzling relief carving. In other words, the words of "The Prodigal Son" are inseparable but subordinate to the story.

Common words also allow its natural beauty and force to radiate pure and full. As Oliver Goldsmith, whose novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* became one of the most widely read of eighteenth century literature, says in his essay "Of Eloquence": "Eloquence is not in the words, but in the subject; and in great concerns the more simply anything is expressed, it is generally the more sublime."

The structure of "The Prodigal Son" is just as direct. It's in three acts, you might say.

From the start, Jesus throws his hearers straight into the heart of the conflict. "A certain man had two sons: / And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them

his living.” This is the kind of opening that inspired Tolstoy, after reading a simple direct opening of a fragment from Pushkin, to begin writing *Anna Karenina* with its bracing first line: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Right to the spiritual jugular.

So the younger son asks his father to give him his inheritance. In other words, so he doesn’t have to wait for his father to die, so he can enjoy it before he himself gets too old. Right away we clearly see that the younger son is rash, disrespectful, and ungrateful.

But the conflict doesn’t come from the father. Because the father gives his son what he wants: his portion of the wealth that the father has spent his life building up—quite a thing to ask for! Even more surprising, the father doesn’t say a word about his son’s bold request. No words of wisdom, no warning or lecture. He simply gives him the freedom to do with it what he wants. It’s shocking but shrewd on the father’s part: he lets his son’s free will take its course, whatever the consequences may be.

And that freedom to do with it what he wants, without regard for his father or his older brother or even himself, his own future, is where the younger son runs into trouble. His conflict is with his own selfish and self-destructive desires. He lusts for instant gratification, which two thousand years later is eerily familiar.

The next section is about as long as the first one, and develops the main conflict to its climax.

The son takes off with his father’s prematurely given legacy like a thief and travels to a “distant country”—he wants nothing to do with where he comes from, he wants nobody to judge or hinder him. He wastes his father’s money on “riotous living” (which would take up many frames or pixels these days), and he’s soon broke, not having the experience or common sense to know that money needs to be managed and replenished.

Of course the father knew this would happen. Which is why he said nothing.

If this weren’t enough, there’s a famine. Just when you think it can’t get any worse, it does. The younger son knows nobody. So he has to hire himself out to a farmer, who sends him to the sties to wallow with the quintessential “unclean” animal of Jewish law. All the younger son has to eat now are the husks that the pigs eat. “And no man gave unto him.” A sentence (in both senses of the word) that’s worth a thousand words. He is completely and utterly alone and broken. He can’t sink any lower.

It’s here that the younger son realizes the enormity of his mistake. He begins to understand all that his father had given him, and even his father’s servants, who have it better, much better than the younger son now has it.

He resolves to return to his father, admit his guilt, and beg for mercy and forgiveness. Which is what the father had hoped for all along. What if he had been wrong, you may say? Then

his son would be hopelessly and incurably self-destructive and would've found another way to do the same thing. But the father knew his son, and knew just what he needed.

The third section is the longest. It portrays the poignant reunion. But before the younger son can even get there the father sees him—he must've been looking for him, we can see him every day gazing out to the horizon to see if the mirage, the miracle of his penitent son, might appear, like a terminally ill patient praying for a cure. The father runs out to him, embraces and kisses him, rejoices. The younger son tries to tell him he's sorry—it doesn't matter to the father, he knows he's truly sorry and now realizes what he wanted him to know all along. And not by mere words, but by feeling it deep in his bones, which are protruding from hunger. In this sense, the road of excess did lead to the palace of wisdom, though it can also lead to a wasteland of eternal regret.

Why does the father forgive the younger son so easily and completely? This bothers some hearers and readers. Won't that just encourage the younger son to do the same thing some other day? But the father loves his sons unconditionally. That's why my pastor says the story should instead be called "The Perfect Father."

Here we think the story is over, or perhaps a lesser story would end here. We see the son arrayed in fine clothing and jewelry to celebrate his homecoming, both literal and spiritual. But this is a false ending, though a natural one, which throws even more of a spotlight on this final section.

The story is relentless and plows deeper and deeper into the hearts of the characters, and the heart of every man and woman.

In the final act, the older son, out working in the fields, hears the party for his younger brother and wonders what's going on. When a servant tells him, the older brother is angry. He refuses to go any farther. He can't believe his father would do this—treat him like this! Though the father has done nothing to him.

Again we see the father patiently and humbly deal with a son, this time the elder one. But unlike with his younger son, the father pleads with him. The older son, sober and dutiful to a fault, can't stand it any longer. He erupts: "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: / But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf." He's entitled, in other words.

The father simply reaffirms his great love for him and repeats the coda from the previous act when his younger son returned, which rings out as it does in the chorus of "Amazing Grace": "For this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

So it is now the elder son who has asked for his due, even though the father tells him "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine." We are left to wonder if he, like

his younger brother, will repent—not of a lust for pleasure, but of his self-righteousness and hardheartedness. This type of sinner is just as common as the hedonist but more insidious because it seems fair.

You can almost hear another line at the end, asking the audience: “What about you?”

This is much different than one of Kafka’s existential puzzles. And I believe more powerful, even apart from the belief that “The Prodigal Son” is, for true Christians, the inspired word of God. But it also is a universal story, a human story, that cuts across all time and cultures.

And because so much is left out of it, what Jesus does put in—the details, the words and phrases—shine like stars in a night sky, forming constellations of imagery and meaning. This is what prompted artists from Rembrandt to Chagall to paint scenes from it.

Jesus in fact spares no words at key moments, such as the younger son’s decision to repent. Here, instead of a terse summary, we get a masterful piece of interior dialogue. We hear the younger son say to himself how sorry he is, truly sorry, brought home by the very realistic way he rehearses to himself what he will say when he returns to what he believes will be his enraged father:

“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."

What's even more poignant is that he doesn't make it through the last part of his speech when he is reunited with his father, because his father already knows when he sees him and is overjoyed.

And there's the tense dialogue between the elder son and his father after the younger son's return. Even the way the servant tells the elder son in his own voice what's going on—"Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound"—plays up the fact that he understands what his young master does not.

There are the vivid images—the younger son wallowing in the mire of the pigsty, so hungry that the husks the pigs eat look good to him. When the son returns, the father ordering the servants in his great joy to put a robe on him, the "best robe" in fact, a ring, and shoes—to dress him like a son of nobility. The elder son coming in from his work in the fields and hearing the music and seeing the dancing. Maybe even smelling the fatted calf being roasted.

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Jesus uses particular words to create different nuances. For instance, the word "merry" is used in apparently the same but actually opposite ways. When the younger son returns home, the father and his whole household begin to celebrate and be

“merry.” But the older son complains to his father that “yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.” In other words, he now wants to act like his brother did! This contrasts the two types of “merry”—one born of selfish pleasure and appetites, which is sinful, and one born of true joy and family love.

The older son erupts, angry that his brother is not punished for his transgression, and says to his father with a gleam in his eye and sticking the knife in: “But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.” By sarcastically referring to his brother as “thy son,” the elder son rudely estranges himself from the family just as his brother did. And earlier Jesus described the younger son’s actions as simply “riotous living.” Now, as characterized by the elder sanctimonious son, the younger son was gobbling it up with whores. Of course the elder son is probably right. But he conjures up a more graphic picture, and a hateful and vengeful one at that. This is juxtaposed to the younger son’s humility and repentance, and the father’s love and forgiveness.

So, there are many layers to “The Prodigal Son,” much more than what it says on its typeface. No doubt that’s why Shakespeare, according to one commentator, alluded to it more in his plays than to any other biblical parable.

And Dostoevsky’s dying wish, his daughter Lyubov “Aimée” Dostoevskaya claimed in her memoir, was to hear the story one more time. Her mother, Anna, read it to him. Then he said to Aimée, who was only eleven at the time, and her two younger brothers, holding their hands at his bedside:

> My children, never forget what you have just heard. Have absolute faith in God and never despair of His pardon . . . You are His children; humble yourselves before Him, as before your father, implore His pardon, and He will rejoice over your repentance, as the father rejoiced over that of the prodigal son.

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