

The Returning Prodigal

by J. K. POPHAM

"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." (Luke 15:32)

THIS parable, like all parables, has one particular end, or lesson, to set before us. You will never be able to make parables equal in every point, but you will find, as led by the Spirit, that each parable has one special lesson, an instruction which, when opened and set on the heart with power, discovers some particular part of the gospel, some particular perfection of God, some particular end that God has in view. In this parable, as I understand it, the end, the point, the lesson of it is, the kindness and love of God to His poor, repenting, returning sons.

There have been a good many disputes as to who the elder brother is and represents, and I do not intend to enter into that matter, beyond this general remark; that the elder brother, as set before us in this parable, has, in my judgment, more marks of a sinner dead in trespasses and sins, than anything else. He quarrels with his Father's love, he rebels against the heavenly music, he dares to say to his Father that he has never broken one of His commandments. He is angry and bitter at the kind, paternal reception of the wicked younger son, who went out rich, and came back poor; clean, and came back polluted; well clothed, came back in rags; well-nourished, came back half starved; but came back with one thing in his heart and on his lips - repentance. May God save us from being like the elder brother.

The younger son asked and got that part of his Father's portion which he thought to be due to him; and having obtained it, he, not many days after, gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, where there would be no restraint, conscience easy and dead for the time being; and there wasted his substance in riotous living, where pride and voluptuousness reigned and was soon a beggar. This is our nature; this is our practice; this becomes our condition, and very solemn it is.

There came unto that land a mighty famine. God has means of working, means of pulling His sons back, means of bringing them to their senses; and the means He used in this instance was a famine, a mighty famine. People were dying. And this poor, haggard prodigal, reduced to penury, want, and shame, hires himself out to a citizen of that country, who sends him into his field to feed swine. Their conscience is made alive, active, powerful, honest. If you have a conscience moving, if it speaks to you, listen to God forbid you should be left to browbeat your conscience, and trample upon anything it may say. If it tells you you are wrong, listen to it; if it protests against your conduct, listen to it; if it points out to you your rags, look at them; if it speaks to you of your hunger-bitten strength, listen to it; if it begins to reflect on God's goodness and your wickedness, oh, listen to it. Conscience wrought upon by the Spirit of God is made God's friend in sinners, and made the friend of sinners in whom it is speaking. Conscience will always tell the truth, when moved and instructed by the Holy Ghost. And his memory was made active. It set before him his Father's house, the home he had left, the affluence he had enjoyed; and this moved him greatly. What a contrast! He now with swine,

having to feed them, and so hungry himself that he, if he might have done so, would gladly have eaten the husks that were given to him to give to the swine. He who had been in affluence was reduced by sin to this condition.

And now with the picture of his Father's house before him, with his present distress and poverty and shame, and rags and ingratitude and evil, his heart goes back to the house he had left, and the Father he had so maltreated, and he says, "I will arise." Do you feel a rising at any time? "I will arise, and go to my Father"? And he frames to himself an address, a confession, and a petition, which he would present to his injured Father: I have sinned against heaven and in Thy sight" - how true - "and am no more worthy to be called Thy son" - how true! The petition is, "Make me as one of Thy hired servants." This his Father chokes down, will not listen to.

In the first place, I would make a few remarks upon the condition to which we have all reduced ourselves. We were made upright and in the image of God. We were rich, being well favoured, blessed with power to do what was our duty to do to our Creator and Lawgiver. But we soon became discontented, that is to say, we fell; and the consequence of the Fall was just the condition we are in, and a further consequence, if Christ prevent not, the condition we shall be in through eternity. A woeful condition that. Oh it is good to have eyes to see what we are; good to have a heart to feel what we are; good to have an honest conscience to confess what we have done, and good to have grace in our lame and miserable, wretched and forlorn, ragged and shamed condition to come back. This younger son had no excuses. This is a mark. Before God kindly dealt with Adam, Adam had an excuse for his sin. "The woman Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me, and I did eat." Oh what a miserable excuse for sin! Who has it now? Who does not excuse himself? Who does not justify himself? "Are we blind also? We never were in bondage." There were always excuses found by us. Excuses are most prolific in a carnal heart at enmity with God. The prodigal had not one, as far as this parable shows us. All he had to say, all that was in his mouth, was a confession, with one petition added. He comes in this state.

How does he get back? How does a poor sinner come to God? By the Spirit of grace and of supplication. (Zech. 12:10) How do you guide your horse? With bit and bridle, and by that you turn him whithersoever you will. That is how God deals with people who are coming to Him; how else should they find the way? Who knows his way to God untaught, unled? So the Spirit of grace and of supplication being promised is given; and poor sinners thus blessed come, prodigal-like they come. They are not unobserved, "I have observed him." There is an Eye upon them, even when they are afar off; when they may be finding it difficult to come, feeling shame and pain; when they may be wondering whether God will kindly look on them, or whether rather He will not cut them off the moment He sees them. He looks, this good Father looks upon this returning son, and sees him in his condition of woe; and love will not wait for his weary steps to reach the door, it goes out to meet him. That is just what God does. His love never waits for a sinner to walk all the weary way before it takes a step to him. Love will always be first. Love drew him, pulled him; love moved his conscience and guided his steps; it guided him, and now it goes out to meet him. And you who are returning will find it so one day, whether it be for the first time or as a backslider, you will find it so.

The text is part of the Father's answer to the ungrateful and ungracious elder son: "It was meet that we should make merry and be glad." - "There is good reason for it, it is suitable, proper to the occasion." What is this meetness? Well, I understand it spiritually thus:

i. It was meet for eternal love, proper for eternal love to go out to an object of it. How meet it is for God to show love! It is a part of God's goodness to communicate of Himself; and there is no more proper object in the world than a prodigal, no other object so proper, since all men are sinners. It is meet for God's goodness to communicate of Himself to a poor, returning, miserable, ragged, shamed prodigal. God will communicate of Himself; there is much in Him that is communicable, and which therefore He communicates. He can and does communicate of His love. "I have loved thee," He says to some, "*with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.*" (Jer. 31:3) And "the love of God is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Ghost." It is not more natural for our sun to communicate of its light and heat than it is for God to communicate of His love. It is not more natural for all rivers to run into the sea than it is for the river of God's love to run to His elect people. Oh, God is good. God is love. He cannot, I would say it properly and with reverence, He cannot keep all this to Himself. He will not, because it is for men, poor, yet elected men. Oh, it is meet that God should be glad when one born of Him, bought by Him, quickened by Him, comes in his misery and emptiness and hunger and guilt; it is meet that a God of love, should be glad. If angels, pure creatures, rejoice in heaven over repenting sinners, how much more will a God of love, who has made them repenting sinners, rejoice over them in their repenting condition! This is one great mystery of God, that He receives sinners, and eats with them; does not disdain them. It would be a great test of human love in any father, to have coming back to his home a son who had wasted all that parental love had given to him to have that son come back disgraced, degraded, and ragged, - to receive him kindly. But the love of God glories in this. This He esteems an honour to Himself, even to forgive sin. He does justify the ungodly.

"Sinners are high in His esteem,
And sinners highly value Him."

"Come then, repenting sinner, come;
Approach with humble faith;
Owe what thou wilt, the total sum
Is cancelled by His death."

It is meet that God should rejoice over, and with, a poor son of His who comes in this condition.

And this is a rebuke - may God make it so to us where it is needed - this is a rebuke to the legal pride, and the preparing disposition, the self-cleansing disposition that we all have, a disposition to fit our selves; all have something of that sort. This parable rebukes it; and it says,

"Come needy, come naked, come loathsome, come bare,
You can not come too filthy, come just as you are."

There is never a harder thing for a poor sinner to do than that, and especially if he has wasted a good deal of God's money, - I mean a child of God who has wasted the good things, as we

have it in the prophecy of Ezekiel, poured out the wine that God gave him as a libation to some idol, and spent the gold and the silver that God gave him on some vanity, and given the fine linen and the flax and all that God had given to him, to adorn some vanities. Oh, for such a person, for such a person to come boldly, is no easy matter! Some of us have been fools, and spent up all the oil and treasure that was ever in our hearts; then to come boldly is one of the greatest acts of faith that ever God will enable us to perform. "It was meet." Sinner, think of it, if you can. It is meet that God should rejoice with a bad son, and over him; meet that He should rejoice with a bankrupt son; meet that He should rejoice with a poverty-stricken and hunger-bitten son, and meet that He should fall on the neck of a ragged, polluted son, and kiss him; because he is His son, and because He loves His son.

This, as opened, will be an encouragement to us who resemble, to our pain and shame, the prodigal son. Love will bridge over every gulf between God and His coming sons. Love will do everything that a returning son requires to have done for him. Love thinks, if I may so put it, thinks nothing of the disgrace and the rags of this coming creature, but says, "Oh, welcome, My son! Thou hast been dead, but art now alive; hast been far off, now I welcome thee to My house again. Come in, come in." Here is love's feast, here is Wisdom's house, here are "her seven pillars," indicating no possible change in God. "Come into this house of wine, this banqueting house." It is meet for love. Love ought to be exalted, love ought to be extolled and made very high in this chapel, because some of us are amongst the worst of all the prodigals God has ever had to receive, and has received. "It was meet that we should make merry and be glad." Angels making merry, saints, brethren making merry, the Father making merry, the Son making merry, and the Holy Ghost making merry, oh, what a rejoicing company! Joy in heaven, joy in the conscience, joy in the spirit, joy in the church of the living God, all because of a poor creature who has disgraced himself, and now despises himself, and is sorry for every wrong step he took, every wrong thought he thought, every wrong word he uttered, and every wrong act he committed, - sorry and ashamed of all and for all; and now that this creature is come back, there is all this joy; great joy, heavenly merrymaking, as if the Father's heart is so glad, and the Son's heart is so glad, and the Spirit's heart is so glad that this sinner has come back, that there cannot be too much made of him. It is difficult to believe it, but it is true. It will bend your soul in deepest admiration and adoration, and melt you into the sweetest grief, and lay you in the deepest depths of a pleasant humility. It will do all this for you, when you get the reception. Oh may the Lord give us to believe it! We are not good when we come back, as the elder son had always remained, in his own judgment; we are to come back poor and wicked, not now doing wickedly, but having done so. It was meet to make merry on account of God's love.

ii. And further, it was meet on account of the atonement of Christ. The church that was purchased by His blood must be freed from death, and must live. The Lamb of God must be given to a poor hunger-bitten sinner who says, "I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not." Oh, there is a feast for you, you who are prodigals, you who are returning, you who are coming back with shame and fear and pain as you view yourselves; there is a feast, a feast of eternal mercy in the blessed Lamb of God. And Christ gives this evidence of life being really possessed or not: "*Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you.*" (John 6:53) But when a poor creature, finding himself hungry, and no man to give him even husks to eat, gets a drawing in his conscience and heart and spirit unto the Father's house, though he perhaps dares not think of God as his Father, he will find there

is a feast awaiting him. The atonement makes a kindly reception necessary. Shall a blood bought sinner be rejected and repelled and turned back, while by the Holy Spirit's power he is coming in prayer and supplications? Never, never. May God give thee courage, poor sinner. If thou art old, and hast many and many a time been received, thou wilt need encouragement to-day. Every sight and sense of sin done against the goodness and love of God is more weighty, more discouraging than the very first sight; always it will be found to be so. But it is meet, it is proper, that the atonement should take effect in the conscience. It is meet that the purchase of Christ's blood should be in Christ's house. It is meet that one for whom that blood was shed should be cleansed by it; and no arguments against it will ever avail in the court of God, nor eventually in the court of conscience. No reasons you can produce will be strong enough to induce the Lord to repel and rebuke you. No. "This is My son, My beloved son, for whom I shed My blood; and that is the reason why, I will receive him. - Come in, thou blessed of the Lord; come in, maimed and lame and blind and halt; come in, poor and miserable; come in, fraudulent bankrupt." What a gospel God has discovered! It was meet on the ground of the atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. And if sin were a thousand times blacker and guiltier, than it is, it would still be meet to receive the deepest-dyed sinner who, blessed with repentance by the Holy Ghost, comes to God by prayer and supplications.

iii. It was meet because he was a son. In the parable he is a son. "Oh, but I am not," one may say, "at least I think, I fear, I am not." But every one born again is a son; he is begotten of an incorruptible seed, even "*by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.*" (1 Pet. 1:23) What does God see in a son? His own nature: sons being made "partakers of the divine nature." Whatever is communicable in God He sees for substance in the son: "Predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son." (Rom. 8:29) And God sees this.

There are several things, which I would just name to you on this point. First, there is the spirit of repentance. "I will arise, I will go; I am sorry for my sin." Is not this an experience that frequently is made yours? Some of you must say it is.

"Repenting saints the Saviour own."

The Father owned this son; and you will own the Saviour when repentance works in you, that kindly spirit, that soft spirit, that tender spirit. God looks upon it. It is meet to rejoice over this, suitable. Why? Ought not the sinner to repent? Yes, but the law, except for the gospel, would not allow him to repent. Further, when he repents, it is by the gospel; and it is meet for God to own that which He Himself has given; meet to rejoice in that which He Himself has wrought. He has wrought the repentance; it is the Spirit's doing; it is the direct mission and work of the Holy Spirit in a sinner, to produce "repentance toward God." It is acknowledged in the Scriptures to be the work of God, and this is to be preached: "Repentance toward God." The gospel teaches it, the gospel allows it, and the gospel works it in the Spirit's hand. Repentance! gloomy, some people think; sweet, say all who experience it. O the relief of repentance! the sweetness of dropping a tear before God! the sweetness of being enabled to say, "I will be sorry for my sin" I And the Lord looks on it. O, come in," as if He should say to this poor sinner, "how welcome you are!" May the Lord say it to those of us who are in a case to need it Look at yourself, and what do you see? "Only sin." Nothing else? "Well, yes," one may say, "I do feel grieved that it is so with me. I wish it were otherwise. Oh, I wish I were at the Lord's feet." Well, the Holy

Ghost sees that, because He has wrought it; He has given that very repentance that you so much desire to have, and which really you have.

There is this also: faith, true faith; "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Now faith has a peculiar perception. It goes where reason cannot go; it goes where a legal mind cannot go; it goes out to the blessed work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and it sees in His blood such infinite value as that it begins to plead it. And mark, you who are blessed with faith will perceive it in your own souls at times; that when faith is drawn out into exercise, it will perceive an infinite value in the death of Christ. Faith will work here. This is her work, to fix in the atonement, to plead it before God, to make mention of it, and of it only, before God. The blood of Christ is a precious blood, a sin-cleansing blood, a sin-subduing blood, a sinner-uniting blood, uniting a sinner to God.

"The blood of Christ, a precious blood,
Cleanses from all sin. Doubt it not."

"All sin" is a big word, but the blood of Christ will bring it into your very heart. You will believe it. There was one word that this young man said, - "Father;" he had been at his Father's house. Now with respect to ourselves, we may stick at that a long time; but if we cannot say, "Father," yet if we can by faith speak of the precious blood of Jesus Christ, we shall speak that which is heaven's sweetest music, which gives the Father infinite pleasure, and which will, when applied, give to our consciences the sweetest peace; "It was meet." Oh, it is meet for God, it is meet for Christ, it is meet for the Holy Ghost, to rejoice; and it is meet for angels in heaven and spirits of just men made perfect in heaven, and saints in the church of the living God on earth, - it is meet for all of them: to unite in this merrymaking, this gladness, because one purchased by the blood of Christ is brought into the house of Christ, the banqueting house.

iv. It is meet, because the blessed invitations and promises of the gospel here begin to be fulfilled, and the Word of God can never be broken. Why, my friends, God says, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He means it, He really means it. And it is meet when the dear Saviour sees at His heavenly footstool a mourning sinner. Christ sees more in a repenting sinner at His footstool, of beauty and of glory than He can see in all His works of creation and of providence. I am not going too far when I say that; for "*He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied.*" (Isa. 53:11) Creation was the effect of His power; this, of His sore, soul travail. "Satisfied with such a wretch?" Oh, yes. It is an honour to Him to receive a sinner; He counts it as an honour to Himself to forgive a sinner, to kiss a sinner, to clothe a sinner, to bless a sinner.

v. And lastly, it is meet because of the great change that has taken place in this prodigal. He was dead: yes, dead to all with whom he had lived; and now he is found alive, a living child. What a change! And what a change takes place in us from time to time! from hardness to melting, from rebellion to submission, from rags to the best robe, from doubt to assurance? and from being very weary and footsore with much travelling, to having on us "the shoes of the preparation of the gospel of peace!" (Eph. 6:15) It is a new creation God sees. Will God call on His children to rejoice in that which He has done and not rejoice in it Himself? "Rejoice for ever in that which I create. For behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing and her people a joy." (Isa. 65:18) And when

the worst of sinners is brought again, it is indeed fulfilled. This great change is a divine change, divinely wrought, and is for the glory of Him who has done it. "*He that hath wrought us,*" says Paul, "*for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit.*" (2 Cor. 5:5) It is hard to believe that God can ever take any pleasure in us, as we view ourselves, as we feel our sins, as we look at what we have been, and what we have made ourselves, and with what guilt and shame we have covered ourselves; it is hard, I say, to believe that God can take any pleasure in us; and here I shall be the companion of anyone and everyone who may say the same thing. It is most difficult sometimes to think that the Lord can ever look with the eye of approbation, and pleasure on one who has behaved so basely, so dreadfully, so wickedly. But it is even so. God does look on His people with pleasure, He "taketh in them that fear Him." And He sees His fear when He sees a poor sinner coming; He sees His holy fear in his heart, that clean fear that makes a sinner say, "I have sinned, I have sinned."

The prodigal would call his Father's attention to his condition, when he said to himself, "I will say, Make me as one of Thy hired servants." It was as if he should say to himself, "I will show my rags, and I will prove to a demonstration that I am not fit for the house, that I am not fit for the society of my Father; I will demonstrate it by my rags." But the Father, as I said, chokes down this. "Oh," says He, "he is My son: bring forth the best robe, I will justify him." I like the word that Hart has on the prodigal:

"What treatment since he came?
Love tenderly expressed.
What robe is brought to hide his shame?
The best, the very best."

Heaven's best. Better, wisdom cannot devise. Better, omnipotence and love cannot weave; better, infinite abundance cannot bring forth. "And put a ring on his hand." The hand of faith may be ringless for a long time, but one day it shall have the ring of assurance. "And shoes on his feet" - spoken of in the Scriptures as "the shoes of the preparation of the gospel of peace," shoes prepared by God. The peace of God in the conscience will be shoes to tender feet on a rough road. Any trouble is bearable, all difficulties you can face, if the peace of God is in your conscience. And they are spoken of as "*shoes of iron and brass;*" (Deut. 33:25) because the way is rough, very rough, and will wear out all ordinary shoes, but not these. "Bring forth the best robe; bring forth the ring; put shoes on his feet; I have received him safe and sound. He has spent My money, but I have more, - plenteous redemption, free justification, and I will give it to him. He sinned basely against My love, but My love is unchangeable and un-removable; let him know it, let him feel it; let us make merry." And they would sit down to the feast. The Father would be there, and the Son and the Spirit would be there, and this shamed son would be at His right hand; and lest shame and fear should prevail, the Father would say, "*Eat, O friends, and drink abundantly, O beloved.*" (Songs 5:1) So God works in His dear children, and brings them to this blessed state. I do hope that this parable may be made useful to us. It is a very suitable one for sinners, and the instruction of it, if it be written upon the fleshy tables of our hearts, we shall find to be very good, profitable, strengthening, and comforting; and though it may not come with a sudden flash into your soul, like a flood; yet should it distil like the dew, and fall like the small rain upon the tender herb, may God give you power to regard it as so coming, and to thank Him for it. Amen.

