



“WHAT DID I DO WRONG?”

Wherever I go, I meet men and women who have lost someone they love. No, the person isn't dead, but the pain of the loss is just as intense. They have lost a prodigal: a son or daughter, a grandchild, or a sister or a brother who has walked away from God and the family. After I spoke on this topic at a church a short time ago, a lady wrote me this letter.

Dear Phil,

I am writing you this letter this morning because my heart is very heavy. I've been carrying a burden for a long time, and I don't know where to turn for help. I've wanted to talk to people in my church about it, but if I do, I'm afraid it will become the subject of gossip. I'm not sure I can stand that, so I'm sharing my heart with you, hoping you can give me some advice. You spoke in our church a few months ago, and we enjoyed listening to you very much. After church, you came to our house for lunch. You saw a photograph of my husband and me with our five grown sons, and you asked

about them. For the next few minutes, I told you about them—well, about four of them, anyway. The three oldest live with their wives and children in Birmingham, where they were born and grew up before my husband was transferred. They are all fine young men, very much involved in their churches. Our youngest son married a pretty girl, a Methodist, and they now attend a Methodist church in Jackson. (I tease him that now he's a missionary to the Methodists.)

But Phil, I didn't tell you anything about our fourth son, Morris. Either you didn't notice, or you were gracious enough not to ask. Like the other boys, he grew up in church. Every time the doors were open, we were there. He heard the message of Christ loudly, clearly, and often. Morris was a

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loveable boy, and he sang in the choir. He volunteered to speak at every year's Youth Sunday. In fact, when the boys were young, I told my friends that he would be the one who would become a preacher or a missionary. He had such a sweet spirit.

After Morris graduated from high school, he went to college. For the first couple of years, he remained faithful to God, but then, something happened. I'm not sure what it was, but something turned his heart cold. When he came home on some weekends, we noticed that he didn't

sing the hymns, and he backed away from my friends he had hugged only a few months before. I thought this was just one of those "phases" we hear about.

A few weeks later, a friend called us. His daughter went to the same university, and she had told her parents that Morris had been drinking and partying a lot. We were shocked, but when we tried to talk to him about it, he shook his head. He didn't want to talk about his drinking. Instead, he dropped a bomb on us. He told us that he was getting married—in two weeks. You guessed it. She was pregnant.

Morris quit college just before his senior year. His wife had the baby and they seemed to be doing well, considering the circumstances. After about two years, though, he told his wife he didn't love her any more, and he moved out. We found out later that he was having an affair with a woman he worked with.

He moved to get farther away from us and from his wife and child. We see him about every three months, and we talk to him on the phone almost every week, but he has made it clear that he doesn't want to talk to us about the Lord, church, or his decisions that have caused us and him so much pain. We recently learned that he is living with a woman, and they aren't married.

Phil, I'm struggling. How can a child grow up hearing the message of the gospel, have four

brothers who love God and parents who would die for him, and end up so far away from God? Isn't there a verse in the Bible that says if we had

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raised him right he'd be serving the Lord today? I'm sure I've heard people quote that verse many times over the years, and it cuts my heart like a knife. What I really want to know is, what did I do wrong, and what can we do now to help our son return to God? Even if you don't have any advice, would you please pray for us?

Thank you for reading my letter and sharing our pain.

Sincerely yours,
Dorothy

This letter, with slight variations, could be written by countless parents who have the same anguished hearts. Some would change "sons" to "daughters," or have two children instead of five, or be facing a problem with drugs or jail instead of an unwanted pregnancy. But many people have a son, a daughter, a grandchild, or a sibling who has walked away from God. They have many wonderful things in their lives and are grateful for those blessings, but one person's spiritual drifting has brought tremendous heartache to the family.

You may have asked the same questions this dear lady asked in her letter: How can it happen to us? What did I do wrong? And what can I do now to bring my beloved prodigal back to God? We receive many letters at our office, but by far, the most common request is for us to pray for a wayward son or daughter, son-in-law or daughter-in-law.

THE SEARCH FOR INSIGHT

After reading the letter, I wanted to address this issue of parenting prodigals, so I researched books and sermons to find principles to share with dear parents. I found scores of books and talks on how to help rebellious children and adolescents, but I couldn't find anything on how to parent adult prodigals. That posed a problem for me. I couldn't find good, biblical research, and I felt the Lord was calling me to address this crucial need. Yet I'm a relatively young man with two daughters still in elementary and high schools. When I was a young, unmarried preacher, I often told people confidently and boldly how to raise their kids. Then Debbie and I married, and God gave us two wonderful children, Maegan and Melodi. With experience came wisdom, and I learned a thing or two—including the need to be careful about speaking authoritatively on subjects I hadn't personally encountered.

Since I couldn't share life experiences with prodigals of my own, I concluded that I needed to back away from this issue. God's Spirit, however, reminded me that He had called me to this ministry and would guide me. The Lord led me to talk to a group of men and women to hear