

I Am the Prodigal
by: Laura I. Stevens

As many of you know, I've been a preacher's kid all of my life. I not only grew up in the church, but I also grew up at the church. My brothers and I grew up learning Bible stories, attending Sunday school, and participating in youth group. It was what we did, no questions about it. When I was a kid, I loved going to church. It was truly something I looked forward to every week. The Bible stories that we were taught seemed so magical and wonderful, to me. I could sit and listen to those stories forever. In fact, one of my favorite books mom and dad read to us as kids, was a Children's Bible.

When we weren't at church, God was still very much a part of our lives at home. We said our prayers before meals and at bedtime. Mom and Dad read us books and stories about God. I even attempted to baptize my cat once or twice, but without much success. Mom and Dad modeled God's love everyday by the way they took care of us and loved us, no matter what.

As I got older, I started looking at Mom's and Dad's beliefs, and started to make my own decisions as I began on my own faith journey and trying to figure out what beliefs and values mattered to me. How did I understand Jesus? How did I understand God? Mom and Dad never gave me the answers nor did they tell me what I had to think or believe. They shared their faith with me, and then let me discover my own faith journey. My parents helped me navigate along the way, but never once told me that I had to believe what they believed in.

My faith in God meant a lot to me because it was personal. I didn't necessarily share everyone's viewpoints, and I was ok with that. I never wanted to be spoon-fed my religion. I didn't want to accept something just because of what someone else said. I wanted to ask questions. I wanted to struggle with certain things, so that I could learn and understand them better. I was sure of my faith and that comforted me.

However, that all changed when I was just 16 years old. Even though I won't go into details, it was something that completely shattered my world and my faith. Depression and darkness consumed me. I began to hate everything and everyone, in the world around me. I really didn't care. I stopped taking care of myself and especially my Diabetes. I was in and out of the hospital quite frequently. I started to distance myself from those who loved and cared for me, my friends, my family and especially God. I felt like a robot. I went on with my daily routines of school and work, but other than that, I wanted to be left alone. My parents did all that they could to try and help me, but I wasn't interested. I believed they couldn't possibly understand what I was thinking, feeling, or going through. In my darkness, I convinced myself that everyone hated me. I just knew that I would never live to see my 18th birthday.

Desperate for answers, my dad took me to see the doctor. I went unwillingly, but it became the day I began to realize that I needed help. I remember sitting on the examination table, with my doctor sitting in front of me, and Dad sitting in the corner. I couldn't make eye contact with either of them. I just stared blankly ahead. My doctor asked if he hated me, "yes." Does your father hate you? "Yes, everyone

hates me. I can feel it. It's all directed at me." "Why, my doctor asked. "Why does everyone hate you? Don't you know that your parents love you very much and want to help you?" "No, they don't love me. They hate me just like everyone else." I couldn't answer his question though as to why everyone hated me. When I said that my parents especially hated me, my dad began to cry. I saw him, but I felt nothing. I was void of any emotion whatsoever. I felt as though I should have put my arms around him and console him, but I couldn't.

I thought about what had happened in the doctor's office. The memory of my words making Dad cry haunted me. I finally realized that I was out of control and on a very slippery slope. With this newfound insight, I went to my parents, begging for help and forgiveness. I had returned to my family, but I was still unwilling to return to God.

I had worked so hard to keep God at a distance. Little did I realize that God was still actively working to find a way back into my life. I was driving home, from Charlottesville, around 6:30am, on New Year's Day 2000. A New Year's Eve event I had attended had been dreadful, and I just wanted to go home. As I was driving, the darkness started to lift, as the sun came up. The sky turned hot pink, and it was magnificent! I have never seen another sky like it! I felt as if the sun had come up just for me. Somehow I knew, God meant for me to see that. I started having it out with God, praying and crying. Weary from my hatred, I placed it all in God's hands. Suddenly, I no longer felt weighed down with the heaviness and darkness that I had held onto for so long. I knew that things were going to be ok, and that they were going to get better. I actually smiled the rest of the way home, and could not wait to

get home and tell Mom and Dad that I had finally made peace with God. My faith in God had been restored. I was no longer the prodigal daughter.

Over the next several months and years, my faith kept growing. I went back to church, and even became actively involved. When Dad, and eventually Mom moved to Martinsville, I still stayed involved with the church, even though it wasn't the same. People started recognizing me as Laura Stevens, and not just Randy's daughter.

When I moved to Martinsville, I was greeted with open arms, and for the first time since Texas, I felt like I had a church home. Things were looking up for me. My faith in God was rock solid, and I no longer doubted him. Then a single phone call changed everything. In May 2005, my older brother, Andrew, was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer. My whole family was reeling from this, especially when the doctors only gave him 3 months to live. My faith was strong, and I prayed every single day and night for Drew to get well. I thought my prayers had been answered because Drew started looking and feeling really well. He became the manager at work, married his beautiful wife, Sarah, and was still very active with hiking. This all came to a screeching halt though. In January of 2009, Drew passed away. My faith that I had been holding on to with dear life was rocked to its very core. Again, I found myself turning away from God.

How could this have happened!? How could God have let this happen!? I was angry, to say the least. I couldn't handle the loss of my big brother. I had trusted God to take care of Andrew, and he let me down. God let my family down. Loving and merciful? I wasn't buying it any more! If this was how God chose to answer

prayers, then I didn't need him. I was better off without him. Once again, I became the prodigal daughter, running with all my might, away from God.

This time was different though. I actually tried to make an effort, to reach out and understand. Instead of finding understanding, I became more and more angry, and it wasn't just towards God. I was mad at the world. I was actually mad at those who had survived cancer, even though I knew that wasn't right. I was mad because mean, wicked, and horrible people were still living, but my brother wasn't. It didn't make any sense to me. I didn't really want to be consoled. I wanted to be mad. I wanted to yell and scream and curse the very name of God. I let anger consume me once again.

Since God didn't seem to care, I took matters into my own hands and made a life altering decision. I had had enough with the Diabetes, and decided it was time to try for a pancreas transplant. After watching everything Drew had been through, I was not going down without a fight.

The transplant process was not as smooth as I thought it would be. During the numerous tests that I had to undergo, it was discovered that I was in renal and congestive heart failure. That meant even more tests and procedures for me before I could even be considered a candidate for a transplant.

On June 17, 2010, I was given a gift of grace. I received a kidney from my cousin James. I am still at a loss to express my sincerest gratitude. James' unselfish act saved my life. Immediately following my transplant, the kidney started working, and I immediately felt much better. Six months later, almost to the day, I received a

pancreas. My life long dream of not being Diabetic had become a reality for me. I was quite literally given a second chance at life. I was grateful, but still angry at God.

Then came another devastating blow. Not even three years after Andrew's death, my dad suffered a fatal heart attack. I was numb. It couldn't possibly real. I was still grieving over Andrew. How could I lose my dad, too? I couldn't handle it. I was not that strong. When Mom and I left the hospital to go home, I got in my car, and just sat. I had some pretty strong words for God at that moment. I told him to go away, and to leave my family alone. Find some other family to pick on because we had had our share. If this is what his mercy was like, I surely didn't need it or want it.

However, God moves in mysterious and wonderful ways. I remembered Dad telling me that he received his calling into ministry when he was 15. His grandfather had just passed away, and as he and his family were walking to the cemetery, Dad said he felt sad, but that he also felt very thankful for having his grandfather in his life and for getting to know him. I never fully understood that story, but when Dad passed away, I kept thinking about it. I was grateful for my dad and for his life, and the impact he had and still has on mine.

I was still sad, but it was a different kind of sad. I knew where dad was, and that he was getting to witness what he devoted his entire life to. He was reunited with Andrew, and that gave me a great sense of peace. Honestly, I was just a wee bit jealous.

It still doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me, but I came back to God after that. As I think about it, I realize that all along the way God did answer my prayers,

maybe not in the way I was hoping for, but they were answered. God gave me parents who didn't give up on me when I thought the world hated me. God gave Andrew three years of relatively good health and a quiet, peaceful transition from this world to the next surrounded by those he loved instead of three months of painfully wasting away. His pain and suffering are over, and he has been freed from his cancer-ridden body.

God answered prayers on my behalf by allowing my anger toward him to push me into seeking a transplant. If that had not happened, I doubt I would be among you today. There were some close calls during the whole transplant experience, but each time, God showered his grace on me and brought me through it.

Even in Dad's death I was able to discern the grace of God. Dad didn't suffer. He was out doing what he loved, having a good time when he died. And I am certain that my dad is face to face with God. I have been given the grace to understand the many times and many ways God has answered my prayers—even the ones that I didn't know how to pray.

To say that my family and I have been through quite a bit would be an understatement. Through everything, I have come realize something. It wasn't my faith in God that helped me persevere. It was God's faith in me! God knew me and was with me every step of the way. When I was born, God was there through my parents to welcome me into the world and nurture me. When I was lost in darkness, God was there to gently light my way home. When I was lost in my grief and anger,

God was there waiting patiently for this prodigal child to return to Him. Even in what should have been a crushing blow, God was there to show me his goodness and mercy. I have learned there is no place, no circumstance, no amount of anger or despair that can drive God away. His works are wonderful and beyond my control or comprehension. He has known me, loved me, endured my wrath, sustained me, and waited eagerly and patiently for me to return to Him. All glory be to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! Amen.

Statement of Faith

Please stand and let us affirm what we believe, using an excerpt from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, which is printed in your bulletin.

We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

Charge and Benediction

God knows each and every one of us. He is with us in the light and the darkness. God is big enough to handle our fears, our doubt, and even our anger. Our faith in God is important, but God's love, faithfulness, and mercy are given to us freely, abundantly, and is without end.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you and abide with you always. Amen.