



Judy Douglass

FOREWORD BY DAN WOLGEMUTH  
PRESIDENT OF YOUTH FOR CHRIST

# WHEN YOU LOVE A PRODIGAL

90 DAYS OF GRACE FOR THE WILDERNESS



WHEN YOU  
LOVE  
A PRODIGAL

90 DAYS OF GRACE FOR THE WILDERNESS

Judy Douglass



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To Josh

Who God

Rescued from abandonment and loss

Relentlessly pursued as His child

Gave to us as a treasured gift

Made a teacher for us to learn the reality of grace

To the Prayer for Prodigals Community

Who walked and wept and prayed with us

on a long wilderness journey



**Prodigal**

**Original meaning (adj.):** Extravagant, lavish, abundant, and bountiful.

**Recent additional meaning (n.):** A person who is extravagantly wasteful, lavishly reckless, abundantly profligate.

**Lover of Prodigals**

**(n.):** One who extravagantly and lavishly, with perseverance, loves a prodigal.

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# Foreword

And he arose and came to his father. But *while he was still a long way off*, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Luke 15:20 ESV, emphasis added

A long way off. A chasm of shame and guilt and regret and anger and bitterness and despair . . . a chasm that only love and grace can navigate.

Jesus, the teacher of all teachers, teaches us. To love prodigals. To love in a way that crosses the chasm. While the prodigal is still a very, very long way off.

Jesus doesn't minimize the distance, He resources it. Fuel for the journey, fire for the soul.

Traversing the pain-filled, doubt-littered, fear-exploding route of redemption.

A son . . . two sons—one consumed with pleasure, the other consumed by the pursuit of power and control. Both prodigals. Both lost and demanding. Both a burden.

Enter the love of a father. The Father.

Yes, God loves first. And His love isn't restricted to saints—no, it focuses precisely on sinners. With sacrifice, humility, and passion.

God's love for sinners is why He loves me. A prodigal. Sure, more politely prodigal than some, but a prodigal nonetheless. The "prodigal journey" is all of our journeys.

The message of hope and life comes from the love of Jesus. God's messenger and message to prodigals.

Our reaction to the message: We dismissed and despised Him. We mocked and rejected Him. This is often what happens to those who love a prodigal.

Yet, our pain has a companion in Jesus. We're never alone in the journey across the chasm. Through the vast and tiring odyssey. In the middle of hopelessness and pain. Jesus is our guide and our friend. He is our breath and our advocate.

And in the journey, tears water the dust of discouragement. When our resolve is extinguished, and our courage depleted . . . God, through Jesus, shows us the way. "While he was still a long way off."

Jesus doesn't simply join us in the journey. No, this is His journey that He invites us to be a part of. This is His burden to carry, His wound to salve, His tear to wipe. Indeed, He knows the wilderness well.

And that is why Judy Douglass wrote this devotional. As a cup of cold water in the wilderness . . . from here to there, across the lonely and difficult chasm.

Her story is raw and personal. It's authentic and tender. Her wilderness journey has a name, a face, an aching heart. And as Judy penned the words that follow, she attacked the lie that those who cross the chasm go alone. No, you are never alone . . . because Jesus, our King and Redeemer, saw, felt compassion, ran, embraced, and kissed a desperately lost son. Our son. Our daughter. Us.

*When You Love a Prodigal* is a book that Jesus wrote long ago. And I'm so grateful that Judy Douglass has powerfully and compassionately highlighted the immensity and persistence of God's amazing love and grace.

—Dan Wolgemuth, president, Youth for Christ

# Introduction

## *Wilderness*

The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you . . . in the wilderness. There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.

Deuteronomy 1:30–31

There were four of them, clad in orange jumpsuits, hands and feet manacled, shuffling into the courtroom. All in their late teens, they looked down, avoiding eyes, exuding pain and shame more than anger or defiance.

Ours was third in line. He looked for us, then turned away. My tears came—I couldn't stop them. That was my son, chained and imprisoned.

He had just spent two nights in the Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) because of a poor choice—a choice that led to a dangerous situation for him and my husband.

The police came and he ran; they caught him and took him to lockup. Hours later, in the middle of the night, he called, begging

us to come rescue him. But we couldn't even if we wanted to. He had to stay until his hearing, two days later.

At the hearing a trial date was set, and Joshua was released to us.

### **Would You Take This Boy?**

Seven years earlier, we had just moved to Florida. A new friend said one day, "Do you know someone who would take an eight-year-old boy?"

Those words changed my life.

My friend Carol was asking on behalf of her best friends, whose grandson had been taken from his mother because of neglect.

Joshua had a difficult start in life.

This boy had spent most of his eight years with his mom in their little trailer, surrounded by alcohol, drugs, neglect, abuse, danger. The only consistency in his life had been his grandparents, but they didn't see how they could keep him, as they were already raising his fourteen-year-old half sister.

So social services was looking for a foster home. Carol and the grandparents wanted it to be a safe, Christian home. Would it be our home? The word for us, from God, was yes.

It took almost a year before we were approved and nine-year-old Josh, almost ten, joined our two girls, ten and twelve, to complete our family.

I'm not sure who experienced the greatest shock.

For Josh: Regular bedtime. Restrictions on TV content. School every day. Church every week. Regular real meals at a table. Discipline.

For us: Noise and chaos. Mess. A boy who was barely able to read and write. Center-of-attention need. Hoarding. Fetal alcohol syndrome residuals: attention deficit disorder, learning disability, lack of cause-and-effect reasoning.

As his parents, we were far from perfect, but we made great efforts to love and care for Josh and integrate him into our family—sports, new friends, birthday parties, family activities, vacation with extended family, spiritual input, tutoring, appropriate limits.

But nothing would overcome his belief that we didn't really love him. He was sure we would eventually reject him, and he gave us plenty of reasons to do just that. He did not attach to us, and we developed only minimal emotional attachment to him.

After three years, when the county terminated his mother's rights and placed him for adoption, my husband, daughters, and I had a decision to make: Would we adopt Josh?

He didn't seem to care, but he didn't see a better option, so he was willing.

But were we?

Emotionally, it was difficult—did we want to sign up for a lifetime of the challenges Josh presented? Again, the clear answer for us was yes. And surely, we hoped, the certainty that we would not abandon him, that we were committed to love and care for him, would bring some peace and security to him.

So we all said "I do," and Josh became our son.

The next week he entered middle school. Almost thirteen and a big boy, he towered over most of the sixth-graders . . . and discovered there was power in size. Read: bully.

School was a challenge. Sitting still all day in a classroom was not possible. Teachers couldn't teach with him in the room, so he spent most days in an alternative classroom. His grades suffered. I became friends with his counselor, the vice principal, and even the principal. Seventh grade was worse. He was banned from the bus and he joined a gang.

My husband and I tried so many ways to help Josh: with school work, creative parenting approaches, counseling, youth group, sports, camp. Nothing seemed to work—he wouldn't let us help him. When the school threatened to expel him, we took a desperate step.

We placed Josh in a nearby residential program for troubled teens. It was a lifesaver, though very difficult for him and for us.

Josh was safe, living with strict rules and consequences. He studied at his own pace, filled his head with Scriptures, did many chores,

received counseling—even had fun. And he was forced to relate to us—to the whole family.

The high point of his year and a half there—June 2, 1997—was the night he committed his life to Christ.

It was also the night Josh was truly born in my heart as my son.

I had loved Josh over the years. I had given him abundant time and attention. But that night, as I thanked God for Josh's decision, I had a dramatic experience. I sensed that God was giving to me *His* very own love for Josh.

Oh, how I would need that love in the years ahead!

Josh came home from the program and did well for six months. We continued at home the school curriculum he had been doing and caught him up to grade level. He begged to return to school. With trepidation and many requirements, we said yes. It was only a few weeks before he was back with his old friends. And now he had a driver's license and the freedom it provided.

We returned to homeschooling, which meant he eventually graduated. But the next six years were nightmarish. Summarizing: cars, girls, inappropriate Internet sites, drugs, alcohol, traffic tickets, juvenile detention, criminal mischief, job-hopping, stealing, serious accidents, gang fights.

I lived in dread of late-night phone calls: Would it be the hospital or the jail? We got calls from both.

Three times after he turned eighteen his actions at home meant he had made a choice to move out. Each time he came back repentant and reformed. For a while. God repeatedly brought special men into his life. Their influence continues today. But changes then were short-lived, and the old lifestyle beckoned.

Be assured, we were not always the best parents during this time. We made many mistakes.

The amazing thing is that he continued a relationship with us. But the question remained: Would he survive, or would death or jail be his likely future?

## Desperate for Help

In the depths of our struggle, and recognizing we needed a lot of help, we called on friends around the world for a June 2 Worldwide Day of Prayer for Josh. We invited those we knew who were prayer warriors or experienced in such a wilderness journey to join us in focused prayer for our son. God gave us some specific answers in response to those prayers.

I would like to say we saw immediate true and total turnaround, but we didn't. We did see evidence of God's hand in Joshua's life, and so did he. So the Worldwide Day of Prayer became an annual event every June 2, and each year more people joined with us. And each year we saw new steps in a better direction for our son, though often they didn't last.

We began to feel pretty selfish keeping all this prayer for our son, so we began to broaden it—and now it is a Worldwide Prodigal Prayer Day, with a growing list of several thousand people (first names only) we pray for every June 2.

It has also grown into a global virtual prayer community, called Prayer for Prodigals. In addition to our focused day of prayer on June 2, throughout the year we have active, ongoing care and prayer online. Members must be invited in to ensure safety and privacy for sharing vulnerable personal requests. Many pray for the requests, and quite a few bless all the others by writing out their prayers.

Each year we have a theme for the prayer day. The Lord enabled me to write eight to ten mini-devotionals for each theme to prepare our hearts to pray effectively. Those devotionals, plus the dozens of other letters I have written to the community, provide much of the content for this book. Because they were originally written as letters, you will sense the personal touch, the vulnerability of chatting with friends, a mixture of stories and Scripture.

This is not a how-to book. It is a journey-together book.

There are ninety essays—ninety days of perspective on what God offers to us as we love our prodigals. At the end of each brief

essay, response questions will help you process what God is saying to you. You can work through it day by day or you can read it straight through.

Loving a prodigal isn't easy, whether it's your own child, a sibling, a grandchild, a niece or nephew, a friend, a spouse, or even a parent. When someone you love veers off a safe path and makes destructive life decisions, you grow concerned. You seek to encourage better choices, point out the risks and dangers, and coax them back from harm's way.

And when those prodigal choices continue over years, you—the one who loves this prodigal—can grow desperate, thinking that nothing makes a difference. Fear escalates. Faith dwindles. Hope wanes. What can you do?

Many do what I did—pray! And ask others to pray. For we believe that God can change things, bring that prodigal home, restore sanity. And He can. But He is committed to honoring free will and wooing the prodigal back with love and grace, not force. He is patient—and He knows what it will take to win the heart and mind of your loved one.

You will ask for help, for wisdom, for advice. You will be told to set boundaries, to practice tough love, and to make sure you don't enable that prodigal.

These are good things, but I think God has given us a higher priority in His model. He has focused most often on love, mercy, and grace—in His dealings with Israel, His restoration of individuals, in the life and death of His Son, and in the story of the prodigal son.

In my own life I have not experienced judgment and punishment from God, but rather love, mercy, and grace—over and over. In these pages you will see that boundaries and consequences are helpful and needed. But we will focus more on living out this verse from Romans: “Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

So come, walk with me through this difficult but rewarding wilderness journey of loving a prodigal.



# 1

# LOVE

We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4:19

I love my prodigal. You love your prodigal.

But often it's not easy to love a prodigal. Our love is tested and stretched. Unappreciated and questioned. Not returned—even thrown back in our face. We grow weary and discouraged.

How do we keep loving as the years unfold? What does love look like when our prodigals keep making bad choices?

We know that God's love is unconditional, unfailing, radical, sacrificial. That is the love God has always had for Josh. I knew this love was mine to love Josh with, but I couldn't consistently access it.

This I know: I am not capable of that kind of love in my own strength. Jesus set an impossibly high standard. So how do we love and keep on loving our often hard-to-love prodigals?

## DAY 1: He Loved Us First

We must learn to love our prodigals as Jesus loves. The key to comprehending this concept is this:

“We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. *He loved us first*” (1 John 4:19 THE MESSAGE, emphasis added).

If we are going to consider how we can radically love our prodigals, we ourselves must be certain of, confident in, and comfortable with God’s love for *us*.

All of Scripture is a love letter to us. Many verses and passages declare and affirm His unfailing, everlasting love for us. Below are just a few of those scriptural affirmations, and they are for us.

“The LORD your God in your midst . . . He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing” (Zephaniah 3:17 NKJV).

This verse paints a rich picture for me of God singing a love song to me, calming me, encouraging me with words of love. And oh, how often I need to hear that love song!

“The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness’” (Jeremiah 31:3).

I love this promise. He speaks tenderly to His people—to us. His love is everlasting—never ending, always there, forever. His love is unfailing—it will never let us down or abandon us or make a mistake. And with this everlasting, unfailing love, He draws us, calls us, woos us to himself.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be

able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

Sometimes I am sure I have sinned or failed so badly that I have lost, destroyed, or canceled out God’s love. How can He still love me? Yet these verses drill into our hearts and remind us of this truth: *We can’t make God quit loving us.* No one else, nothing else, can separate us from that everlasting, unfailing love. Such comfort, such hope!

“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but one of power, love, and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7 1sv). There is a lot in this verse, but let’s just camp on this truth: God gives us a spirit of love. Specifically, His Spirit living in us will love through us. All that amazing love we just considered is not only given *to* us, but also given *through* us.

Remember that core verse, 1 John 4:19, at the beginning of this chapter: He loved us first. Because God first lavished His love on us and sent His Spirit to live in us, He makes it possible for us to love with His love, which we surely need for our prodigals.

#### RESPONSE:

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1. When have you been uncertain of God’s love for you?
2. How do the biblical promises in this chapter build your confidence in God’s love?

## DAY 2: As High as the Heavens

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him.

Psalm 103:11

I often read and pray Psalm 103. One morning as I read the verse above, I heard the Lord say, “This is what my love for you and for your prodigal looks like.”

This psalm is too rich for a one-time visit, so I'm just going to get you started with some portions of it. I encourage you to go further into it with the Lord, asking what more He wants to say to you personally through it.

As you read this passage, be reminded of what God's love has done for you. Pause to remember that He says the same thing to your prodigal. When God told me this passage shows what His love for my prodigal and me looks like, I prayed that morning out of those verses that my loved one would grasp the reality and depth of God's love expressed in this psalm. I urge you to do the same.

But don't stop there. Ask God how you might demonstrate this kind of love to your very loved wanderer.

So here are portions of Psalm 103 (with verse numbers noted), followed by a few comments from what God said to me that morning:

Praise the LORD, my soul;  
 all my inmost being, praise his holy name.  
 Praise the LORD, my soul,  
 and forget not all his benefits—

vv. 1–2

He has done so much for us, given so much to us to praise Him for, yet we so easily forget. But I don't want to forget, especially in the hard times.

who forgives all your sins  
 and heals all your diseases,

v. 3

That morning, I went through this for myself, thanking Him for forgiving my many, many sins. And then, as I had no trouble recounting my prodigal's many sins, I was grateful for God's mercy toward him, as well as for the healing; I have plenty of areas of my life that need healing, but my prodigal has more parts of him that need healing than I can name. God is working on his healing too.

who redeems your life from the pit  
and crowns you with love and compassion,

v. 4

Most of us have some acquaintance with the pit, but our prodigals seem to live there. God redeems our lives and theirs!

who satisfies your desires with good things  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

v. 5

Too often it is our prodigals' desires for unhealthy things that send them spiraling down. May they grow to desire the good things God freely gives.

The LORD works righteousness  
and justice for all the oppressed.  
He made known his ways to Moses,  
his deeds to the people of Israel:  
The LORD is compassionate and gracious,  
slow to anger, abounding in love.

vv. 6–8

Every day I am grateful that God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love toward me. I pray that I can act as God does toward my loved one.

He does not treat us as our sins deserve  
or repay us according to our iniquities.

v. 10

By this time that morning, I was on my face with gratitude that this is true. May I pay it forward with grace and mercy.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him;

v. 11

There's that amazing love of God again!

as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.  
As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;  
vv. 12–13

Sometimes I think we need a greater measure of the Father's  
compassion for our prodigals.

for he knows how we are formed,  
he remembers that we are dust.  
v. 14

This is a verse I claim for myself over and over—He knows I am  
dust. May I remember the same is true for my prodigal. God knows  
we are dust, yet His love for us is higher than the heavens.

But from everlasting to everlasting  
the LORD's love is with those who fear him,  
and his righteousness with their children's children—  
v. 17

Can you claim this? The Lord's love is with us as we fear Him,  
and His righteousness is with our children's children!

with those who keep his covenant  
and remember to obey his precepts.  
The LORD has established his throne in heaven,  
and his kingdom rules over all.  
vv. 18–19

I find I must recall every day that God is on His throne in heaven—  
and that He rules. He will do what He says and what He wants. And  
what He wants is to bless us and lead us into the good He desires  
for us.

May God speak love and truth into your heart and mind from this psalm. May you rest in His love and live it out with your prodigal.

### RESPONSE:

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1. Which of the benefits of God's love for you encourages you most?
2. Which is the most difficult for you to extend to your loved one?

## DAY 3: Banishing Fear

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.

1 John 4:18

The fear can be overwhelming, can't it?

Pregnancy. Addiction. Overdose.

Wrong friends. Cutting. Suicide.

Her wasting away because she won't eat.

The call from the jail or the hospital. An accident—injuring self or others.

His doing something crazy while high. A visit from the police.

Harm to your other children. Living without God.

Your not knowing where they are or what they are doing.

Failing school. Having no future. Fear for your own life.

That's quite a list. All are quite possible, whether your prodigal is your teen or adult child, a spouse, a sibling, a parent, or a friend.

Fear can be pervasive when you love a prodigal.

I know it has been for me. Friday nights were always the worst in the darkest days of his prodigality, because he and his friends felt it was their right to have a wild Friday night.

And even today, when he is seeking to make good choices, to choose a better life, the fear lingers and lurks: Will the past return to haunt him? Will one more hard life event trip him up again?

So how do we not live in fear? We live in love—God’s love for us and for our prodigals.

Perfect love casts out fear. And only our Lord has perfect love. He *is* perfect love.

There are other things we know are true: He is God—sovereign, almighty, omnipotent, the Most High God. He is good—He does all things well, and He is always looking for ways to do good to us.

He invites us to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).

Yes, He is love. He doesn’t just love. He *is* love. And all the realities of His love—for you and me, and for our loved ones, that we have explored so far—apply here.

But bad things still happen. Wrong choices lead to painful consequences—some of which last a lifetime: People are hurt physically and emotionally, are imprisoned, have an unexpected child. Die.

So where is God’s love in all those things?

We have no way of knowing all the unseen ways in which God—because of His great love—has intervened, protected, rescued. We don’t know what we don’t know.

But we do know that He allows us—and our prodigals—to make choices, to follow our own paths, to pursue our own desires. And sometimes those choices, paths, and desires have extreme consequences.

When I can’t understand what is happening, when it seems there is no good in sight, when I feel that surely someone *did* snatch my loved one from God’s hands, I can’t rely on what I see or what it seems God is doing or allowing.

So I must go back to who He is: He is God. He is good. He is love. I must lean into that love, believe that His love can bring good from the worst situation and that He is able to rescue and redeem the most degenerate.

That love will cover me with grace and flood me with peace. And that love can banish my fears. And yours!

### RESPONSE:

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Recall a time when your prodigal's choices filled you with fear.

1. What were you afraid of? Did that fearful situation materialize?
2. Has God's love driven out fear for you? If not, how could you experience that reality?

## DAY 4: Conditional or Unconditional?

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

We humans are such a this-for-that species.

- We give a gift—with some expectation of a gift in return at the appropriate time.
- We do a favor—and even if we don't voice it, there is a hint of *you owe me* in our minds.
- We do something really sacrificially loving—and believe God will reward us.
- We give our love and our lives for those we love, especially for our children—knowing they can't even comprehend our

gift, much less repay it. And if we love a prodigal—oh, how that love is tested.

The word *unconditional* means what it says: without conditions or limitations, complete.

We all know that the love with which God loves us is called unconditional. There is no verse that I can find that uses the word *unconditional*. But we know it's true. Romans 5:8 tells us that even when we were sinful enemies of God, He loved us. And Romans 8:38–39 assures us that nothing—not even our own actions—can separate us from His love.

Thank you, Lord, for that unconditional love.

He does tell us to let His love flow through us to others, but He loves us even if we don't love others.

I have not done this easily.

Perhaps you could say the same.

For my love for my prodigal I often received attitude and back talk and experienced lack of gratitude, lies and rebellion, demands, disrespect, anger, hurtful words. Cold responses to our expressions of love. Stabs in the heart.

For me, the hard reality with my prodigal was that he felt loving me would be a betrayal of his birth mother. Over the years my love grew and gave. But could he ever say “I love you” back to me?

*Please, Lord.*

God's response? “Judy, unconditional love has no conditions. It does not require love in return.”

It took my prodigal twelve years to say “I love you.” I am grateful that now he says those words often.

Yet still I struggle with loving unconditionally. There finally came a time when there were no more abusive, hurtful words from my loved one. But then I felt unappreciated and ignored—unloved. Perhaps that's true for you too.

Again I hear, “*Unconditional love doesn't require love in return.*”

Of course, without Christ, I am not capable of unconditional love—nor are you.

Which brings us back to our central verse: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

He gives us His unconditional love, poured out on us and in us and through us by the Holy Spirit.

Isn't that like our loving Father: He extravagantly, sacrificially, unconditionally loves us. He asks us to do the impossible—to love in the same way. Then He sends His Spirit to make the impossible possible. He enables us to love unconditionally.

What a gift for those of us who love a prodigal!

#### RESPONSE:

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1. How has God's unconditional love become real for you?
2. When have you been challenged to keep loving in the face of your loved one's lack of love?

## DAY 5: With Patience and Kindness

Love is patient, love is kind.

1 Corinthians 13:4

How could we consider what love looks like without turning to 1 Corinthians 13:4–8? Here our Lord defines love, and many of the descriptions of love apply to us and our loved ones.

First, let's examine patience and kindness.

Through my wilderness years, I developed a pretty strong commitment to loving my prodigal as Jesus loved him—and that included treating him with patience and kindness, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13. I think I became increasingly faithful to that, especially as he began making better decisions.

But there's the snag: He began making better choices, so it was *easier* for me to be patient and kind.

I think Jesus' love model calls us to be patient and kind even when our prodigals are causing us deep pain with *terrible* choices.

### **What Does It Look Like to Be Patient?**

The word *patient* is defined as “bearing provocation, annoyance, misfortune, delay, hardship, pain, etc., with fortitude and calm and without complaint, anger, or the like.”<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, over time, our prodigals have provided provocation, annoyance, misfortune, delay (whether waiting a few minutes or a few years), hardship, and so much pain.

Do we have fortitude? Do we stay calm and uncomplaining? Do we get angry?

Personally, I often do not respond well. I am not a patient person. I seem to have a gift to persevere, but I don't do so with patience. Even when I stay calm, even when I refrain from anger, I manage to complain—impatiently!—to my husband, or a close friend, and surely to the Lord.

### **What Does It Look Like to Be Kind?**

I probably do better at kindness. *Kind* definitions include: “of a good or benevolent nature or disposition, as a person; having, showing, or proceeding from benevolence; considerate, or helpful; humane; gentle; loving; affectionate.”<sup>2</sup>

I hate to see anyone hurt, so kindness is a more natural response from me, although my subtle remarks can be hurtful and unkind. Once, when my prodigal neglected to wish me a happy birthday, my response was subtly unkind.

I find it helpful, in the midst of a stressful situation, or certainly afterward, to ask myself if my behavior, words, thoughts, and attitude reflect the patience and kindness to which God has called us. Do I get annoyed or provoked? Is there anger in my voice? Are my words kind, gentle, considerate?

Unfortunately, I fail this little test too often. Fortunately, God knows I can't love with patience and kindness in my own power. I am grateful that I can ask the Holy Spirit to fill me, empower me, and even love through me. The Spirit is capable of true patience and real kindness, and He is willing and able to love through me with that supernatural power.

When I fail at loving as Christ loved—with patience and kindness—I can count on God's mercy to forgive my sin. But my loved prodigal might not be so full of grace. Rather, my lack of demonstrated love might drive him further away with genuine pain, a sense of rejection, and perhaps with him hurling an accusation of “hypocrite!” at me.

As my frustration and irritation level rises with some new offense, I remember God's patience with and kindness to me. Once again I am confounded by His love. If necessary, I ask forgiveness from God, and if I can, from my loved one.

#### RESPONSE:

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1. What are some ways you have treated your loved one with kindness? With unkindness?
2. How has God enabled you to patiently keep loving?

## DAY 6: No Record of Being Wronged

[Love] keeps no record of wrongs.

1 Corinthians 13:5

Let's continue in 1 Corinthians 13.

I did it again. Our prodigal and a friend were with us. We were telling stories—one of my favorite activities. I couldn't resist—I told not one, but two stories of bad choices he had made in the past. He did not laugh. He even looked hurt.

I asked for his forgiveness. Several times I have had to apologize for bringing up his past choices.

Clearly, I have kept some record of his wrongs. After all, I am a writer and speaker, so stories are my currency. And there is great benefit in remembering the past, learning from it, and moving into a better future.

But probably you have, as I have, let the hurt of your prodigal's choices—past or current—linger in your mind: how they have hurt, offended, and angered you. I have a mental list—sometimes even a written account—of those offenses. Some are minor irritations, others are clearly wrong, and some are deep wounds.

Perhaps you remember when

- he yelled and cursed at you.
- she lied to your face, intentionally deceitful and not at all remorseful.
- he threatened you, and how frightened you were for your other children.
- you waited up all night, not knowing where she was, what she was doing.
- you bailed him out of jail.
- the police knocked on your door to tell you about the accident she was in.

The list goes on and on.

And then there are the words you have hurled back at your loved one:

- “You always lie to me.”
- “You are never responsible.”
- “Will I ever be able to trust you again?”
- “You never care about anyone but yourself.”

You know. You have said these words. I certainly have. These words and such thoughts reflect the reality of keeping “a record of wrongs.”

Our loved prodigals wrong themselves, those who love them, and others. Sometimes those wrongs pile up and threaten to crush us. How can we trust, believe, hope? How can we forgive?

We can do so because Jesus has shown us how: He came in love and was rejected. He healed and was accused instead of thanked. He was scourged and crucified, bearing our sins, while the crowd hurled insults, soldiers beat him, and Pharisees scoffed.

And His response was, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

He could have called legions of angels. He could have destroyed them on the spot. He could have said, “I’ll be back—and I’ll get even.”

But He didn’t. He forgave them.

And that’s what He asks us to do. As we let the Spirit fill us with the same love Christ has, we are freed from making our lists, from keeping a record of the way our prodigals have wronged us.

We are empowered to forgive and to truly love.

#### RESPONSE:

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1. What is an especially painful memory for you? Do you think your prodigal intended to hurt you?
2. Does Christ’s example of forgiving help you to forgive your loved one for the pain inflicted on you?

## DAY 7: What Real Love Looks Like

It’s amazing how many times the words *love* and *hate* are thrown around when there is a prodigal in the picture.

Most of us have heard “I hate you” more than once. And though it stings, we know it is said in the frustration of an angry moment as the most painful thing to inflict on us. But I wonder if there is another retort far more hurtful: “You don’t really love me.”

This can be just a barb, but it can also cause us to pause. *Why would she say that? Surely she knows I love her. Everything I do is out of my deep love.*

The Apostle Paul exhorts us to really love. Note how the New Living Translation presents these thoughts:

“Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good” (Romans 12:9).

“Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions” (1 John 3:18).

So the obvious question is, what does real love look like? How do we show this truth by our actions? Below are five thoughts on demonstrating a real love for our prodigals.

**Love speaks truth.** Often the first expression of love we jump to for a prodigal is “tough love.” After all, we have a responsibility to provide correction and discipline to help them turn from their wicked ways. We must speak truth to them, explaining what is right and helping them understand that choices have consequences.

Scripture affirms that this is following God’s example, “because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son” (Hebrews 12:6).

Real love will let them experience natural consequences, or add some consequences appropriate to the choices made and the nature of our relationship with this prodigal.

But tough love is not always God’s approach, nor should it always be ours.

**Love gives mercy.** Earlier we were reminded not to keep a record of wrongs suffered. Any list we have needs to be forgiven. But of course our prodigals keep sinning (as do we). So often, maybe even daily, there are new offenses that do not need to be put on a list but need to be forgiven.

Peter tells us this wonderful truth: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

So many times I have thanked God that His love has covered my multitude of sins. Can I do no less than to forgive my loved one?

**Love extends grace.** Even as God has repeatedly forgiven my many sins, He has also given me grace over and over. Sometimes it is grace *instead* of the consequences I deserve, or favor with someone who could help or hurt me, or maybe it is even the strength or courage or power to do something I have not been prepared to do.

I have sought to live by words that God repeatedly affirmed as His desire for me to extend grace to my prodigal: “*When you make mistakes with this boy*”—and I made many—“*err on the side of grace.*”

“And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8).

If God can extend that much grace to us, He can enable us to do the same toward our prodigals.

**Love bestows blessing.** Over the years, my loved prodigal has done many things that made me want to return in kind, to say, “See you later,” to give up, to speak a curse.

Every time, God reminds me of His instruction through Peter: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:9).

So I have practiced speaking blessing to him, doing something kind for him, reading a blessing I have written for him. It has transformed my attitude over and over, and it has convinced him that my love for him is real.

**Love confers honor.** Sometimes I can start thinking I’m better than my prodigal. After all, I haven’t done what he has. I walk with God fairly consistently. I keep loving him no matter what.

But God is quick to remind me of His words in Philippians: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (Philippians 2:3–4).

Can we do that? Can we put aside our “better living” and not think more highly of ourselves than we do our prodigals?

Can we live out this instruction from Romans? “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10).

As always, when we understand the human impossibility of truly loving anyone—including our prodigals—the way Christ loved, we must go to our knees and say, “Yes, Lord, I need you. Please fill me with your Holy Spirit. Give me your supernatural power to love as you have loved me.”

#### RESPONSE:

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1. What did it feel like when your loved one said, “I hate you”?
2. How have you been able to show real love, as described in this devotion?

## DAY 8: Love Goes to War

We have an enemy. And so do our prodigals.

- That enemy is a liar. He will say anything he needs to in order to lead our loved ones astray (John 8:44).
- That enemy is a schemer. He is tricky and sneaky—always seeking ways to divert and entrap those who so easily succumb to his ruses (Ephesians 6:11).
- That enemy has hurled curses across generations, many aimed at us and our prodigals (Revelation 12:9–12).
- That enemy is a lion. He is on the hunt, looking to devour and destroy those we love (1 Peter 5:8).

But we love, and love goes to war. Love enters the battle. Love fights.

On June 2, 1997, three significant things happened regarding our prodigal:

First, he met Jesus. He was fourteen and in a residential program. His house dad called to tell us that our son had received Christ and they had baptized him.

Second, I had the only real vision I have ever had. I could see God above me, with a vat full of something that He was pouring into me. I asked what it was. *“It’s my love for Josh. You’re going to need it.”*

Third, that night and the two nights following I was in an intense spiritual battle. It seemed that Satan was not happy that Josh—one of his own—had been snatched from his grasp, and he was determined to keep Josh from truly following Jesus. For three nights I didn’t sleep; I prayed for my son.

Then God released me from those all-night prayer vigils. But not from fighting for my son.

We began our annual June 2 Worldwide Prodigal Prayer Day because that battle grew fiercer. It has not been easily won. The evil one has not been able to snatch this boy—now a man—from God’s hands. But he has wielded great influence, enticed with temptations, and sent harm and destruction his way many times.

But he will not win, not with my prodigal and not with yours. Because we love our prodigals. And love goes to war.

We are a father standing between a child and harm, the mama bear protecting her cubs, a friend indeed standing strong, a brother who has his brother’s back.

We will put on our armor (Ephesians 6) and stand against the enemy. He will not defeat us or destroy our loved ones.

How do we fight?

We resist the devil (James 4:7), demolish strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4), break the chains, and set the captives free (Isaiah 61:1–3). (We will look more thoroughly at resisting the devil in chapter 6, “Prayer.”)

Of course, no matter how strong our love, we do not have the power in ourselves to win this war. But we have living in us the Power that overcame sin and raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11).

As we let the Holy Spirit fill and empower us, we see—for ourselves and for our loved prodigals—the fulfillment of this promise of God’s rescue through His unfailing love:

But I trust in you, LORD;  
I say, “You are my God.”  
My times are in your hands;  
deliver me from the hands of my enemies,  
from those who pursue me.  
Let your face shine on your servant;  
save me in your unfailing love.

Psalm 31:14–16

#### RESPONSE:

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1. In what ways have you seen the evil one pursue your prodigal?
2. What Scripture has been a sword for you in fighting for your prodigal?

## DAY 9: Never Give Up

When our son came to our family at almost ten years old, he had experienced significant rejection and abandonment. He did not trust. He was certain that we also would reject and abandon him. And he gave us many reasons to do so.

It took more than ten years before he truly believed we were committed to him.

Why did it take so long? I’m sure there are many reasons, but two come to mind at this point: Betrayal destroys trust, and trust

takes time to heal and rebuild. Our efforts to love him well seemed inadequate to overcome the past.

But we did choose to love—as God had loved us. We were guided by these challenging descriptions of real love: Love “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:7–8).

These are not wishy-washy descriptions. “Always” means always. And “never” means never.

**Love always protects.** Surely this abandoned boy needed protection. For starters, he needed to be protected from the past, from patterns, and from himself.

- The past—things taken from him, things done to him.
- Patterns learned—how to live and love as a survivor, that no one could be trusted.
- Himself—what he believed about himself, the choices he made.

There were many other areas of concern, and we tried to provide that protection as well.

**Love always trusts.** We wanted to trust him, and to assure him that we trusted him. That was difficult. We sought to help him learn to live in a trustworthy way. But trust for us really meant trusting that God was always working to redeem and restore this child—that *He* was trustworthy. And over time our trust in our son would grow. (See chapter 5, “Trust.”)

**Love always hopes.** Sometimes hope was all there was for us. Our son didn’t have hope that he would make it through school, get back with his mother, know his dad, overcome his life habits, or have a future. Sometimes we despaired along with him. But God’s promise of hope for a future kept us steady, hoping, and giving hope. (See chapter 8, “Hope.”)

**Love always perseveres.** The results of his birth mother’s choices while pregnant with him made school difficult for our son. We ended up homeschooling through high school, which he did not appreciate.

Each day, as I gave him school assignments, his attitude annoyed and even angered me. I would leave his room declaring to God, *“I quit. He doesn’t care; why should I? I can’t keep doing this.”*

God always had the same response: *“So when did I give up on you, Judy?”*

And I replied, *“I know. Never. But you’re God.”*

*“Yes, and I love this young man. I have shared that love with you, and you can do this. You can persevere in loving him.”*

So I did.

**Love never fails.** Always—and never. God’s love flowing through us always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. And it never fails.

I’m grateful for that, because I fail. Too often I try to love in my own power. I let the rejection of my love make me want to withdraw. I want to give up.

But God’s love never fails. And He promises to love through me. Which brings us back to where we started: We love because God loved us first.

**Love keeps loving.** We love it when God does big miracles quickly, but we all know that He usually works over time. When you love a prodigal, you must be patient. Don’t despair. Keep praying.

And keep loving your prodigal as God has loved you.

#### RESPONSE:

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1. When have you felt like giving up on your prodigal?
2. How has God enabled you to keep on loving?