

THE PAINFUL PATH OF A PRODIGAL

BIBLICAL HELP AND HOPE FOR THOSE WHO
LOVE THE WAYWARD AND REBELLIOUS

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CRAIG K. SVENSSON

“A powerful and heartbreaking story that is real, raw, and yet full of gospel centered hope. This book belongs in every pastor and biblical counselor’s library. I have watched Craig and Sue walk this path and I praise the Lord for the strength and grace he has given and continues to give. I believe our redeeming God will use this marvelous book to draw prodigals to himself and comfort and sustain parents who find themselves on this difficult journey.”

—PASTOR STEVE VIARS, D.Min, Senior Pastor of Faith Church, Lafayette IN, author of *Putting Your Past in its Place* and *Loving Your Community*

“In *The Painful Path of a Prodigal*, Craig Svensson has written a very moving and very needed book with a unique perspective for parents of prodigal children. While clearly hope-giving, this book is also filled with biblical candor and lament. And, as the subtitle indicates—*Biblical Help and Hope for Those Who Love the Wayward and Rebellious*—Craig shares wisdom for parenting life. Craig’s biblical counsel reminds me of Philippians 1:9-10: ‘And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.’”

—BOB KELLEMAN, Ph.D., VP/Academic Dean at Faith Bible Seminary, Lafayette, IN, and Author of *Raising Kids in the Way of Grace*

“In *The Painful Path of a Prodigal*, Craig has written an indispensable book for those enduring the sorrow, grief, and confusion of dealing with prodigal children. For family members or friends of prodigals, questions multiply. From the heart of a father who intimately understands the myriad of incredibly difficult issues that arise, the reader will find practical, hopeful direction to navigate this arduous journey well. Craig’s insightful book addresses common situations with clarity, care, discernment, and biblical wisdom. I enthusiastically recommend this book for anyone in the midst of the deep suffering that attends loving a prodigal.”

—PAMELA GANNON, RN, MABC, ACBC certified Biblical Counselor at Grace Bible Church, Adjunct faculty at Montana Bible College, Bozeman, MT; Coauthor with Beverly Moore of *In the Aftermath: Past the pain of Childhood Sexual Abuse*

“With wisdom born from experience and careful consideration of biblical truth, Dr. Craig Svensson offers compassionate hope and help to parents facing the difficult reality of a wayward child. Furthermore, for pastors, counselors, mentors, and friends of the parents of prodigals, Dr. Svensson’s work should be the first resource they read to provide the most helpful guidance during this life-consuming trial.”

—BRENT AUCOIN, Ph.D., Pastor of Seminary and Soul Care Ministries, Faith Church, Lafayette, IN

“In my years serving young women through biblical counseling, I have often been confronted with the devastating effects that one person’s rebellious choices can have. In addition to the challenging counseling required for the young lady caught in the tangle of her sin’s consequences, I frequently was called on to offer many additional hours of help to the friends and family of that prodigal. While we believe God always uses the sinful choices of others to further refine and grow us, navigating specific internal and external responses that are loving but righteous is a challenge. I am thrilled to now have a book like this that can be offered in those difficult moments. As only one who has previously walked this tragic path can, Dr. Svensson humbly and hopefully offers true biblical counsel, comforting even while he challenges the reader to love and serve like Jesus in heartbreaking situations.”

—JOCELYN WALLACE, Inaugural Executive Director at Vision of Hope Residential Treatment Center, Lafayette, IN

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ISBN

Print: 978-1-63342-164-6

Mobi: 978-1-63342-166-0

ePub: 978-1-63342-165-3

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NALC9NIVR19

BP 25 24 23 22 21 20 19

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cover Design by Andy Heckathorne www.andyheckathorne.com
Typeset by www.greatwriting.org
Printed in the United States of America
eBooks: www.shepherdpress.com/ebooks

Shepherd Press
Wapwallopen, Pennsylvania
www.shepherdpress.com

*To our gracious Creator, who gives “beauty for ashes, the
oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise
for the spirit of heaviness”*

ISAIAH 61:3, KJV

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PREFACE

This book did not begin from a well-crafted plan. Its origin remains somewhat mysterious to me. It began on a cold winter night several weeks after our prodigal son's tragic death. Due to several chronic illnesses, sleep has often been elusive to me over the last twenty years. But in the early weeks after our son's death, sleep was frequently beyond my grasp. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw images of the photos shown to me by members of the county coroner's office. It seemed as though the photo of his pale dead face was etched on my inner eyelids.

Rather than continuing to toss and turn, and risk disturbing my wife's sleep, I slinked with the stealth of a cat to my writing room—intending to work on a book about living with chronic illness that I had begun in preparation for an upcoming sabbatical leave from my university. I rubbed my hands together to warm my fingers as I waited for my laptop to complete its magical process of coming alive. Inexplicably, rather than opening the file of my early book draft, I created a new document and began to type. From my mind to my fingers flowed elements of our story on a fifteen-year journey with a prodigal son who descended into the depths of drug abuse and its associated problems. Over the ensuing weeks, I continued to write about the biblical lessons we learned through our journey. I cannot explain why. I simply felt compelled to write. I am not sure when my thoughts turned from personal journaling to writing a book. Upon our son's death, my wife and I embraced Isaiah 61:3 as a personal prayer—specifically, that God would give “beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” In whatever ways possible, we asked him to turn this tragedy into a means

of good for others. The time came when I began to pray and ask if perhaps the Lord might have me share our experiences with others, and the lessons we learned, in order to help them in their time of affliction. The thoughts of making our personal story so public was scary. Still, could I fulfill the call of 2 Corinthians 1:3–5 and share the comfort we received with others in need of comfort? Indeed, was it a biblical obligation?

My dear wife was taken aback when I first told her of my compulsion to write and to consider sharing our experience with others. I gave her a draft with the promise that not another soul would see it unless she was comfortable with my doing so. It took her about a month to generate the fortitude to begin reading the first page. Sometime later, with her cheeks drenched with tears, she said “Yes, you need to share this with others.”

Parents of prodigals struggle deeply with the challenges they face in relating to their wayward offspring. Siblings, spouses, and children of prodigals face similar struggles. How do you live for Christ in the midst of such personal turmoil? How do you live with a grown child whose destructive choices have turned them into a person so unlike the adorable offspring into whom you poured much of yourself? Ultimately, how do you bear the pain if they never return?

As a visiting seminary lecturer, interim preacher, and Bible teacher, I have taught the Word of God to pastors and pastors-in-training, mature and immature believers, children and adults, as well as audiences of skeptics. As a professor and dean of one of the top pharmacy schools in the nation, I have taught students in a variety of health professions the proper and improper use of drugs as well as conducted extensive research on adverse drug effects. None of these roles prepared me to be the parent of a prodigal who descended into the depths of substance abuse and its associated destructive behaviors. But this difficult journey forced me to search the Scriptures for guidance.

Loved ones of prodigals often feel overwhelmed and isolated. Too often, their faith becomes unmoored. My goal is to help anchor the faith of parents, siblings, spouses, and offspring struck by the storms their prodigal creates. I also hope to help a group untouched by other authors—loved ones of a prodigal who never

returns. Grounded in the truth of Scripture, family members of prodigals can know inner joy and serve as a light for Christ at a time when they feel their world is collapsing around them. The goal of this book is to help those loved ones use Scripture as their guide in facing the difficult, and often perplexing issues arising from engaging with those who have abandoned themselves to reckless living. If it achieves this goal, we will give thanks for the exchange of “beauty for ashes.”

The Painful Path of a Prodigal

1

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

Having forewarned me it would be difficult to look at, the man slid a photo across my office conference table. I forced my eyes to look down at the image. There was no need to gaze long upon the face. My heart wanted to deny it was he. However, those were clearly his eyes. The nose as I had seen it since his birth. Though his overall features were distorted, there was no denying who the picture captured. Gripped by this reality, I raised my eyes to the man across the table—who sat silent while awaiting my verdict. Deep within I wanted to scream, “I never saw this face before. I do not know who he is.” Yet I did. I knew with certainty. My voice cracked as I acknowledged to this visitor from the county coroner’s office that the photo had captured my youngest child. The body they found was the boy I once held so tenderly. Thus, just one month after his thirtieth birthday, an end came to a fifteen-year journey of watching his painful descent into drug abuse and its attendant ugliness. Now I knew what my wife and I long feared—our prodigal would never come home.

People find great hope in the story of the prodigal son told by the Lord Jesus. It pictures the gracious love our heavenly Father shows in forgiving all who repent and turn to him. Many a follower of Jesus whose child chose a path of sinful living have clung to the hope their child’s story would have a similar glorious ending. Untold numbers have returned in repentance and to restoration. We join the angels in heaven praising God for each who returned. But many have not. Many never did, nor ever will.

How do you live the abundant life Jesus promised when the shadow of a prodigal who never returned follows you for the remaining days of your life? You might conclude my wife and I

began to learn those lessons the day the coroner visited my university office with photos of our son. In fact, those lessons began during the journey, while hope remained. Though difficult, they prepared us for living when the time for hope was past.

Not all children who wander from the faith are prodigals. Some offspring are not walking with the Lord, but are otherwise upstanding citizens in the eyes of society. They hold gainful employment, fulfill parental duties well, and are good neighbors. Their spiritual well-being is a concern. They need prayer, the truth spoken in love, and the effectual work of the Spirit in their life. Nevertheless, such do not fit the category of prodigal as presented by Jesus. While the word prodigal does not appear in the Bible, most people with a knowledge of Scripture identify it with the son in this parable. The word itself derives from the Latin *prodigus*, meaning “wasteful.”¹ Consider how Jesus describes such an individual:

There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.” And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

Luke 15:11–13

This young man rejected the path on which his father led him, giving himself over to a life of sin. He did the unthinkable in asking for his inheritance while his father remained alive. Receiving the goods, he bundled them up and journeyed far away. He violated all cultural norms of familial fidelity.² In apparent short order, his chosen path led to his ruin. Coming to his senses, he returned home to the father he had previously spurned.

This book is not about the well-adjusted but lost offspring—

1 Online Etymology Dictionary, www.etymonline.com

2 For a discussion of the cultural context of this parable, see Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants. 2nd Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

though his eternal need is just as great.³ This work is for those who are living, or have lived, with one who has abandoned himself to reckless living—a prodigal in the truest sense of the word. It is for the many whose loved one has entered a downward spiral, shattering relationships, incurring judicial action, destroying trust, and molding your beloved into a stranger you hardly know anymore.

At the same time, loved ones do not become prodigals overnight. There are serious heart issues that evolve before someone enters into full-bore rebellion and embraces a reckless lifestyle. Hence, many of the biblical principles covered in the chapters ahead are relevant for those whose loved one has started down a descending path, but has not yet outright rejected the road on which you would lead them.

Living through the difficult years with a prodigal was excruciatingly painful and often confusing. We faced difficult choices unimagined by parents whose children never wandered far from the faith. The challenge of the choices faced is painfully real for those who journey down this hard road. If your loved one is still alive and remains far from the faith, you should hold on to hope they will be a prodigal who one day returns. Our God delights in bringing rebellious souls into his forever family. So, continue to pray earnestly for their return. We prayed this way for fifteen years. Tragically, our story did not end as desired. Nevertheless, we learned much during this heartbreaking journey. We are grateful for how the Lord used it to humble us and cause us to cling to him more closely. Despite the pain, we can praise God for the fruit born from a hard road. A very hard road.

This book is for those with a prodigal (or one started on this path) or those who wish to help them (e.g., pastors, counselors). Some living with a prodigal are not the parent. They are the siblings, spouses, or even children of prodigals. Though somewhat different in their experience, many of the difficult issues are similar for all that are related to a prodigal. I write from the perspective of a parent and, therefore, refer to the prodigal as an offspring or child. But the biblical applications are relevant for

3 For simplicity, singular references to a prodigal in this book use the masculine. This does not negate the reality of female prodigals.

all who engage those on this destructive path. There is also some explicit discussion in later chapters for spouses of prodigals. I earnestly hope to help those who travel with prodigals think biblically as they march through their journey.

I also hope to fill the void of help for those whose prodigal will never return. It occurs more frequently than many would acknowledge. But there is much hope and help in the Word of God—even for those whose prodigal will never return.

If you are looking for a book to offer a path certain to bring your prodigal to Christ, you will be disappointed. There is no formula to assure repentance and restoration. But I will help you understand why this is true. If you join me through the pages ahead, I will turn the light of Scripture on some of the most difficult issues faced by parents and other family members of prodigals, issues such as: As a parent of a prodigal, how do I deal with the judgment of others? How do I live with my failures as a parent or spouse of a prodigal? When is it loving to let go and allow the prodigal to bear the full consequences of their destructive choices? Why do children become prodigals? How do I battle the anger my prodigal can often provoke within me? How do I have confidence in my prayer life when prayers for my prodigal go unanswered? Is God's grace sufficient for the trial through which I am walking? These and other questions are the focus in subsequent chapters.

You will benefit most by closing the book at the end of each chapter to think and pray. Every situation is unique. You need God's wisdom to know the right steps in your journey. Take the time to seek it. If you are the parent of a prodigal, I would encourage you to read this book aloud with your spouse—with an open Bible as your companion. As parents, you will tend to respond emotionally to the many challenges presented by your prodigal. Together, you need to learn to think biblically about these issues, and filter your emotions through biblical truth. If you are the adult sibling of a prodigal, I would encourage you also to read it aloud with your spouse, if you are married. Your spouse may not have an emotional bond with your prodigal sibling, but you need to agree on how you will respond to the issues they bring into your relationship. If you are an unmarried child of a prodigal,

gal, you may find help in reading it aloud with your believing parent—if this is practical. The believing parent will need your support in special ways. In like manner, you will need their help in processing the challenging issues introduced into your family by a prodigal parent.

Some truths to be considered in the pages ahead may be hard to hear. At times, Scripture paints a painful picture of reality. Jesus taught some hard things—not hard in the sense of difficult to understand, but hard to receive as truth. Some turned from Jesus when they found his words hard to receive (John 6:60-66). We must neither fear nor shy away from the hard truths of Scripture. Ultimately, the truth will set us free (John 8:32). We must be willing to consider those difficult truths from Scripture—for we know any pain induced is limited to the here and now.

Loved ones of prodigals walk a painful path. It is easy to think comfort will only come by the repentance and restoration of your prodigal. However, if we link our joy solely to the response of the heart of our wandering loved one, the journey will be unbearable and a tragic outcome will be devastating. True joy and comfort can only be found when our hope rests solidly in our heavenly Father. It is to him, through his Word, that we must turn for guidance on this painful journey. Let's allow the light of his Word to help us see how to navigate these difficult waters.

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2

LIVING WITH THE JUDGMENT OF OTHERS

He stood the better part of a foot taller than me and approached aggressively with steely determination in his eyes. Apart from his pointer finger, he clenched a raised hand into a fist. While wagging this hand uncomfortably close to my face, with gritting teeth he declared, “The Bible says ‘train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he shall not depart from it.’ If your son is rebelling it is your fault and no one else’s!” After unleashing his accusation, he stomped off.

Moments earlier, in our church prayer meeting, I had asked for prayer for our son who was rebelling from the way we were leading him. The reaction it generated from this man not only took me by surprise, it also caused me to think twice about sharing our struggles with our church family. It was only the first of many acts of judgment thrown our way from fellow followers of Christ. We learned to dread the judgment of others and, for as long as possible, became silent sufferers. We did not feel safe in our own church family.

Those whose children openly rebel know too well the oft-spoken adage that the church is the only army that shoots its own wounded. My wife and I struggled to understand the aggressive reaction of this brother who threw a Bible verse at me like a javelin. I was appealing for prayers to help us through what would turn out to be a long painful journey. Instead, it provoked an angry and accusatory response. Other heartless comments over the years left us puzzled about why people would so quickly judge fellow believers as parental and spiritual failures, even when the conduct of our other children would suggest otherwise.

Perhaps the answer is that many parents embrace a form of

spiritual determinism. They believe your child will not go astray if you follow key steps in parenting. Many published books contain the notion that, if you follow a set of principles articulated by their author, you will assure a godly heritage. Some believe they have the formula to fix things if you've messed up. Writing to parents of prodigals, one author declared he discovered "principles for getting the prodigal back to God." Certain the problem lies with the parents of prodigals, he stresses the need for parents to change, insisting that "when you do, you will see the change in your prodigal."

My wife was at a women's program where one speaker confidently proclaimed, "If you follow these biblical principles, your son or daughter will not end up in jail." At that moment, our son was in a prison in Iowa. The message seemed to be that his imprisonment resulted from our failure as parents. Not long thereafter, a well-known pastor declared on his radio program, "I have never seen a child depart from the faith where the father was a truly godly man." Without ever speaking to me, this shepherd of Christ's flock declared me ungodly. Maybe both speakers placed an accurate judgment at my feet. God will be my judge on this in a future day. Yet we have known of many couples who journeyed down a similar path with a prodigal, and these couples exhibited a pattern of Christ-honoring conduct as parents.

After our son's death, well-meaning (but misguided) believers made similar off-the-mark comments. Most in our current town did not know our son. Despite this, some came up to us after his death making statements such as, "Surely, with such godly parents your son was a believer." In their minds, the godliness of the parents assured their offspring would embrace the faith. We were unsure if they thought of the inverse relationship—if the child is ungodly, so must be the parents.

THE ERROR OF SPIRITUAL DETERMINISM

Spiritual determinism is a comfortable place to land as a parent, unless you have a prodigal. It leaves one with a sense of control—though a false sense to be sure. Who would not want a guarantee that our kids will turn out okay as we take up the challenge of

parenting our newborn offspring? The most dangerous element of spiritual determinism is that it feeds our pride. It makes us feel we are in control. It places us in the position of thinking we can determine the outcome of our parenting. Spiritual determinism turns what should be humble obedience to God's precepts into a self-boasting confidence that we can assure that all will turn out right. But it is a lie.

Those who embrace spiritual determinism must deal with some challenging truths from Scripture. For example, where did God go wrong when his first children rebelled? Where did Jesus fail in his discipleship leading Judas to betray him to death? Did Satan and the other angels who rebelled fail to receive proper instruction or example from the Father? We could add those named in Hebrews 11 as commendable models of faith, yet there were many on this list whose offspring departed from the faith. These and other realities from Scripture make spiritual determinism indefensible. The rebellion of others does not mean failure by those responsible for their instruction.

Importantly, the Lord Jesus said faithfulness to the gospel would be a source of division in human relationships—including the family.

*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in
one house there will be five divided, three against two
and two against three. They will be divided, father against
son and son against father, mother against daughter
and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against
her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her
mother-in-law.*

Luke 12:51–53

This division caused by gospel-faithfulness will sometimes bring lethal consequences:

*Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father
his child, and children will rise against parents and have
them put to death.*

Matthew 10:21

The words of Jesus are clear: rebellion by children against the gospel will be a part of the experience of some Christian parents because the gospel is a source of division. We respond with sympathy to those whose parents have rejected them because of their faith. For we know, the gospel divides. We pray for a special measure of God's grace for those who experience rejection from a spouse arising from their faith because we know the gospel divides. Jesus said it would also divide parents from their children. Spiritual determinism ignores this plain truth.

BIBLICAL INSTRUCTIONS TO PARENTS

There are passages in Scripture to guide parents on how to raise their children, though there are fewer than one might expect if the following of exact instructions were sure to produce spiritual offspring. Consider the many details given in the Law for the worship of Israel. In comparison, we find few specific instructions about raising children to assure the spiritual well-being of the next generation. The book of Leviticus overflows with intricate instructions on the ceremonial elements of the law, but not one instruction for raising children. Several chapters in Deuteronomy give explicit commands to teach children the law (4:9–10; 6:7; 11:19), but not a word on so many other aspects of parenting that fill modern books on the family. The New Testament is similarly sparse. The focus is being the kind of follower that honors Jesus. It seems one's greatest impact on others—be they neighbors or one's own children—occurs through a life that models the Savior in thought, word, and deed. The explicit instructions on parenting in the New Testament are pointed, but few:

“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Ephesians 6:4

“Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.”

Colossians 3:21

There you have the total of New Testament specific teaching on parenting. Directed at fathers, it provides both a warning and a general path on which to lead one's children: "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." It provides no promise regarding the outcome. However, it gives a clear focus for paternal responsibility. Ephesians 6:4 declares the responsibility of fathers to provide intentional spiritual instruction for their children. We are to teach them the nature by which the Lord chastens—or disciplines—to mold us into the image of his dear Son. They must hear and see how the Lord uses the circumstances and trials of life as his refining instruments. We are to lay before them the truth of Scripture. They must hear the commandments of the Lord, which we obey as an expression of our love for Jesus (John 14:15). These are the expectations placed upon fathers.

The Old Testament also provides some helpful advice: "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24), and "Discipline your son, for there is hope" (Proverbs 19:18). The early chapters of Proverbs provide explicit instruction and warning to sons (though this instruction seems directed to young adults and not children).⁴ These and other passages show there is a right way to parent and there are wrong ways to raise the next generation. Nevertheless, the Bible does not support a view of parenting as an unalterable mathematical formula:

Teaching our children rightly

+

living a godly example

=

faithful children

Oh, if only it were so simple!

4 It is difficult to conceive that one would warn young children, as opposed to young men, about the dangers of a seductress—as is done in early chapters in Proverbs.

THE MEANING OF PROVERBS 22:6

Many believe that Proverbs 22:6, the passage with which my brother in Christ confronted me, promises that if we raise our children rightly, they will not depart from the faith. Consider what the passage says: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

First, it might be helpful to remember the man believed to have penned this proverb departed from the faith: “For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father” (1 Kings 11:4). Furthermore, we are told “Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done” (v. 6). In his old age, Solomon himself became a prodigal—one who it appears never returned.

Second, there are other examples of godly kings of Israel whose sons rebelled against the Lord. Consider the case of Josiah. We are told in 2 Kings 23 that “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him” (v. 25). What a remarkable statement about the faithfulness of this king. No king following him exceeded his godliness. Sadly, we learn his son Jehoahaz, who reigned after Josiah’s death, “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (v. 32). There is also the contrasting picture of the godly King Hezekiah, who “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done” (2 Chronicles 29:2). Yet this godly man arose from the house of Ahaz—one of the most evil kings in the Davidic line. These and other examples from Scripture should cause one to question a formulaic approach to Proverbs 22:6, wherein following its prescription assures a spiritual prodigy. How then should we view this verse?

No verse should be interpreted in isolation. We must see it in the full context of Scripture. To declare Proverbs 22:6 as deterministic in the spiritual state of one’s offspring, you must find Scripture supporting the notion of one person controlling the eternal destiny of another. Of course, Scripture is devoid of sup-

port for this view. Consider the experience of the apostle Paul. In Philemon 24, he includes Demas as among those who were his fellow workers. Sadly, he later says, “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me” (2 Timothy 4:10). Paul’s discipleship was not enough to bind him to a faithful walk. Consider also his passionate appeal for his fellow Israelites: “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers” (Romans 9:3a). His teaching was not enough to win his fellow Israelites to Christ. The example of the betrayal of Judas—who failed to embrace the offer of the Master that he had followed for over three years—is the most profound example showing that teaching rightly does not assure a faithful disciple. Scripture does not support a view of this passage from Proverbs as assuring a spiritually righteous outcome. What then does this passage mean?

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom to provide instruction to the young and naïve (Proverbs 1:2-6). This book declares the Lord made the world in which we dwell through wisdom (3:19-20). The overall structure and content of Proverbs assumes cause and effect are operational in both the physical and moral realm in which we dwell.⁵ If you do such-and-such, this is what will happen. Not always, but most of the time—due to the inherent principle of cause and effect embedded in the order created by God. For example, Proverbs 15:1 tells us “A soft answer turns away wrath.” More often than not, this is true. However, most people with a meaningful amount of gray hair on their heads could recount experiences in life where it has not held true. We have encountered angry individuals whose vehemence was unchecked by a soft reply. Even Stephen—whose countenance was viewed by his enemies as like the face of an angel (Acts 6:15)—could not forestall the anger of his opponents with his gracious declaration of truth. The apostle Paul fared no better in a similar situation (Acts 22). Thus, though it is not an absolute, Proverbs 15:1 is a piece of practical wisdom that experience shows we would do well to follow. It is sound advice to the young and immature, as well as the old and forgetful.

5 Greg W. Parsons. “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150:151-170, 1993.

We should not hear the wisdom sayings of Proverbs as unconditional promises from the Lord.⁶ Neither internal evidence from the book itself, nor references to it elsewhere in Scripture, would support such an approach to this valuable portion of the Bible. Hence, “proverbs tell what generally takes place without making an irreversible rule that fits all circumstances.”⁷

Seen in this light, Proverbs 22:6 is a truism that should motivate parents to provide intentional instruction for their children. When you teach them rightly, they will follow. Not always, but most of the time. When offspring of Christian parents are not walking in the ways of the Lord, it may reveal parental failure to instruct as the Lord commanded. Alternatively, it may mean their children rejected the instruction and example they were given. In fact, Scripture tells us that more children will choose the path of rejection in the last days (2 Timothy 3:2).

Other interpretations of Proverbs 22:6 seek to remove the contradiction between the declaration that a child will not depart from parental teaching on the things of God and the experience that some children do depart. Each is a recent and minority view with significant deficiencies. One which appears to be growing in popularity posits that the text is sarcastic in nature—as in “train up a child in the way he wants to go (which will surely be to evil), and when he is old he will not depart from that path.” Jason DeRouchie, Professor at Bethlehem College and Seminary, has done an admirable job concisely explaining why this interpretation arises from an unsound hermeneutic.⁸

Spiritual determinism is unsupportable when examined in the light of Scripture. As parents, we cannot assure the outcome of our children—for good or bad. This does not mean we should abandon instructing our children. We must teach, both in word and by example. Failure to do so has consequences.

I devoted my professional career to educating future nurses, pharmacists, and physicians. They may fail to gain critical knowledge in two ways. First, *I* could fail to make it a part of

6 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan, 1981), 98-99, 203.

7 Parsons, “Guidelines for Understanding,” 159.

8 Jason DeRouchie, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/train-up-a-child-in-the-way-he-should-go>

the content I teach. Second, *they* could refuse to put in the time and energy necessary to learn. I should be held accountable for the first failure, the second is the responsibility of the student. My inability to force them to learn does not mean it is futile for me to teach to the best of my ability—giving careful attention to determining the right content and delivery. Most will learn. The failure of a few does not negate this truth. Nor does it remove my responsibility to teach well.

Parenting is a high calling. We will impact the lives of these young ones in our homes. We have a responsibility before God to do our very best. The uncertainty of the outcome for any specific child does not reduce or remove this responsibility.

RESPONDING TO THE JUDGMENT OF OTHERS

How then should we respond when the painful judgment of others falls upon us? First, we should allow it to humble us. We must realize our sovereign God puts critics in our lives for our good. If the Lord uses the wrongful judgment of others to strike a blow to my pride, I should rejoice as this “enemy within” is losing its grip—whatever the means by which this is accomplished. Any chisel the Lord uses to chip away at my pride is welcome. While there remains far too much pride within us, my wife and I have often spoken of how puffed up we would likely be if all our children were model Christians.

Second, allow the experience to rid you of the fear of man. We worry far too much what others think of us. We often travel down the path of sin because of our desire for admiration from men. Proverbs warns us that “[t]he fear of man lays a snare” (29:25). Walking down this path is akin to stepping into a trap. No man judges rightly, since there is much he doesn’t know. Most importantly, others do not know our innermost thoughts and motives. It is best they don’t know these things. For if they did, they would think even less of us. The judgment of the Lord should be our only concern (Proverbs 29:25; 1 Corinthians 4:3). Remember the example of Jesus, who “when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23b).

Third, examine your own life to determine where you have been guilty of judging others. We live in an age where quick and uninformed judgment of others is a common pastime. We are sometimes infected with this ailment ourselves. When experiencing wrongful judgment, look to see where you have wrongly hurled accusations at others. Then repent and learn.

Fourth, return good for evil. When wrongly judged by others, we have the blessed opportunity to model our Savior—who “when he was reviled, he did not revile in return” (1 Peter 2:23a). If we believe they have judged our character wrongly, what better way to make this clear than through a godly response to their accusation? Do not allow their misplaced accusation to cause you to fail in your obligation to “let us do good to everyone” (Galatians 6:10)—including your false accuser.

Fifth, speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). While the time and place must be appropriate, invite them to consider the truth of Scripture with you and to learn about your experience—so they might learn to judge wisely. I failed my brother spoken of earlier on this account. I allowed my sense of personal offense to justify avoiding my obligations toward him in my role as a Bible teacher in our church. Subsequent events revealed he was unprepared to handle his own trials biblically. Might I have helped him if I had taken the difficult move toward him years earlier?

We must realize the Refiner will use even the wrongful judgment of others to rid the dross from our lives. It will be painful, but it will produce sanctification. For this, we can be thankful. The wrongful judgment of others is ultimately for our good when it makes us more like Jesus.

While we experienced our fair share of judgment from others, some believers in our sphere did not feel threatened by our painful journey with our prodigal. They served as a source of great encouragement and tangible help. A few men invested their time and energy to reach our son. Others were just there to show Christian love to him. Each of our pastors have shepherded us well in the most difficult of moments, never leaving us with any sense of judgment from them. We have seen the body of Christ minister well to those dealing with this particular tragedy, and for this, we will be eternally grateful.

We often felt the sting of the judgment of others while our son remained in our home; less so in the years of his living apart from us. We could do nothing about the attitude of others. Learning to leave judgment in the hands of the Lord is the only healthy place to be.

*But with me it is a very small thing that I should be
judged by you or by any human court.*

1 Corinthians 4:3a