

## The One About the Dad Who Wouldn't Give Up

I'm the younger one. And to be honest, I've always been jealous of my older brother. He always seemed to be my father's favorite. He was so much better at following the rules than I was. He seemed to live up to all of dad's expectations. He was perfect. I, on the other hand, could never do anything right. And I wanted more from life than what my father had and what my **father** wanted my life to be. And so one day, I just got fed up. I got tired of my dad telling me what to do and trying to convince me to follow in his footsteps. I wanted freedom! I wanted to do things my way! I wanted to go to the city -- away from my father, and away from the shadow of my brother. I craved a life of excitement in a place far far away.

So, I did something that I **now** realize was unthinkable. I asked my father for my inheritance. You see, my father had drilled the law of Moses into my head enough that I knew that the Torah spelled out that my older brother would get  $\frac{2}{3}$  of my father's wealth, and that I would get a measly  $\frac{1}{3}$ . And since I was leaving that place for good, I saw no reason not to demand that my father give me my  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the farm that was rightfully mine any way. My father would never miss it, and it was enough that I could get my own start and begin to live my own life. I had never really heard of this being done before, and I learned later that the rabbis told my dad, "While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place. At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hour of your death, **then** distribute your inheritance." (Sir 33:20-21, 24 NRSV). My father told me that if a son received his inheritance before his father's death, the son was expected to stay home to provide for the father in his old age. He argued that the land is what stood between my family and a life that could lead to poverty in their old age. But when my dad told me these things, I would have none of it.

My mother even tried to talk some sense into me. She told me that I was treating my father as if he were already dead, and that if I forced his hand I was in essence disobeying the law to "honor my father and mother." I was turning my back on my family and would bring the family great dishonor in the community. She said the townspeople would thank God that they didn't have such a disrespectful son themselves, and that they would thank God that they weren't such a pushover as my dad. But I would listen to none of their arguments.

And so my father relented.

He carved off  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the farm for me, and I sold it. Not even caring that the land represented his life's work and was his entire identity.

I took the cash and all my other worldly possessions and set off for the city in a far away country -- it felt like a foreign land. Not only was it a long way away in terms of miles, the ways of living there were far apart from the country bumpkin ways of my hometown. It was exactly what I wanted -- to distance myself from my father, my family, and their old-fashioned ways of living. "Let the partying begin," was my motto! And so the partying did, indeed, begin. At one point my mother accused me of living a dissolute life. And when I found out what that meant, she was absolutely right. I was living a life that was unrestrained by anyone, not caring one bit whether people approved of me or disapproved of me. I did exactly what I wanted, when I wanted, as long as it made me happy. I never took into consideration how I was harming myself, my family and friends, or even strangers along the way. Let's just say I was **not** a poster child for upright, moral living.

Not surprisingly, before I could find a way to turn my inheritance into a way to support myself, every single dollar was gone. My "dissolute" living was an expensive lifestyle. I was

suddenly destitute, and I found myself in need of work just to feed myself. To make matters worse that fabulous far away land had been struck by a drought. There had been no rain---for a very long time. It was burning hot. The crops began to die. People's livelihoods were literally drying up. Livestock and even people began to starve.

I can't even tell you how miserable it is to be hungry. My stomach growled uncontrollably the first few days I went without food, and then my body just kind of shut down -- I guess it had given up completely on getting food. Even if **had** some money, I'm not sure where the food would come from. Every family was hoarding what they had for their own sons and daughters. I felt so lost and alone. And I found myself thinking about my family back home a lot.

But my suffering would get worse before it got better. I was about to stoop to depths I had not thought were possible. You see I was so desperate that I hired myself out to a farmer who sent me to his fields to feed the pigs. It may not sound so bad to you, but such a thing was against everything I had been taught by my Father and the Rabbis. These words from the law of Moses had been drilled into my head from a young age: "the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you. You shall not eat their meat, and you shall not touch their carcasses." (Deut. 14:8). And yet here I was. So desperate that I was reduced to being a servant to pigs -- handling unclean pigs. Instead of **being served** a great feast as I imagined I would before I came to the far away land, **I** was serving food to pigs....

- bringing them dinner,
- being humiliated by their snorts,
- being rudely pushed and shoved around,
- being stepped on,
- smelling their rank smell.

Unclean was right in more ways than one!

And the really sad part is that the pigs were well-fed, and I was starving. I would have given anything just to have a bite of their food. But no one offered me any food or any money....I wouldn't get paid until the end of the week, and the farmer would be furious if I took food out of the mouths of his pigs. I had no friends, no family, no food.

And in the depth of my despair, it hit me that even my father's **servants** were well-fed, and yet here I was starving. And suddenly I came to myself. I had this moment of clarity. I could clearly see myself for who I had become, and I could clearly see myself for who I was meant to be. I realized my life was a mess - it was ruined. It was painfully obvious to everyone, and finally it was painfully obvious to me, too, that my life wasn't working, and that I needed to change. In fact, I felt that if I didn't change, I would die here.

I came to see myself honestly, and I realized I needed to go home, ask my father to forgive me, and beg my father for mercy. The words of warning my father and mother had given me before I left played over and over in my messed up head. I had humiliated my father, deserted him, purposely distanced myself from him, ignored everything he had taught me, and demanded that he give me riches. I had finally come to myself, and I was horrified and afraid of the distance between us.

So, although I was certain that my father would reject me and probably even refuse to talk to me or even look at me, I left right then and there -- walking for home. It was a long trip. I had a long time to imagine the worst. And so I memorized the words that I would say. I would drop to my knees at his feet and say:

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your child; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

And so, I walked on and on practicing the words I would say.

But while I was still a long way off, before I even saw **him**, my father saw **me**! He must have been waiting for me and watching for me even though I had been gone all this time. My father was filled with compassion -- compassion and love for me! And he ran to me. He put his arms around me and kissed me. Then he hugged me so hard I thought he would squeeze the breath out of me! I felt like he was never going to let me go!

But I pulled away and began my speech: ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your child.’

But before I could finish, my father turned away from me and called out to his servants:

‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on my child; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this child of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’

And they all began to celebrate.

My father welcomed me home **not** as a servant, but as an heir, a child of his; he welcomed me back into the family that I had deserted. He restored me into the family and into the community. He gave me honor with a robe. He gave me authority with a ring. And he killed the fatted calf - a feast large enough for the whole town to come and join in the celebration -- he was showing everyone that no matter how badly I had acted, he had never given up on me and continued to love me as his own child--and he wanted everyone to know it.

You see this story is not really about me. It is about my father. It’s about my father who **never gave up on me**. It’s about my father -- **running** toward me because he saw me from a long way off, and he couldn’t wait any longer to get me into his arms, and to say, “I loved you all along. Welcome home. Let the partying begin!”

Let us pray.

How deep the father’s love for us. How vast beyond all measure. Holy God, we can’t even imagine the deepness of your love for us, your wandering children. Would you give us this day a moment of clarity. Grant that we might come to ourselves and recognize how far we have strayed from you. Everlasting God, would you also help us to experience the vastness of your love for every single one of us -- would you help us to know exactly whose we are and where we truly belong. Would you send forth your Spirit to guide us on our journeys home. Would you give each one the joy of living close beside you. We want to join in the celebration of being home! Let the partying begin. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.