



THE NATION'S
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STORIES



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The Prodigal Son

Luke 15.11–32

There was once a man who had two sons...

Jesus went on to say, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger one said to him, ‘Father, give me my share of the property now.’ So the man divided his property between his two sons. After a few days the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. At last he came to his senses and said, ‘All my father’s hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! I will get up and go to my father and say, Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.’ So he got up and started back to his father.

“He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms round his son, and kissed him. ‘Father,’ the son said, ‘I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.’ But the father called his servants. ‘Hurry!’ he said. ‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put

Even now, the term ‘Prodigal Son’ is still used to refer to tearaways and miscreants – and stories of wealth-squandering ‘prodigals’ continue to crop up in newspapers and on TV.

**DID YOU
KNOW?**

a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.' And so the feasting began.

"In the meantime the elder son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house, he heard the music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him, 'What's going on?' 'Your brother has come back home,' the servant answered, 'and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound.'

"The elder brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. But he answered his father, 'Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! But this son of yours wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!' 'My son,' the father answered, 'you are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.' "



12

Joseph and his Brothers

Genesis 37.1–36

One night Joseph had a dream ...

Jacob continued to live in the land of Canaan, where his father had lived, and this is the story of Jacob's family.

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, took care of the sheep and goats with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's concubines. He brought bad reports to his father about what his brothers were doing.

Jacob loved Joseph more than all his other sons, because he had been born to him when he was old. He made a long robe with full sleeves for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved Joseph more than he loved them, they hated their brother so much that they would not speak to him in a friendly manner.

One night Joseph had a dream, and when he told his brothers about it, they hated him even more. He said, "Listen to the dream I had. We were all in the field tying up sheaves of wheat, when my sheaf got up and stood up straight. Yours formed a circle round mine and bowed down to it."

"Do you think you are going to be a king and rule over us?" his brothers asked. So they hated him even more because of his dreams and because of what he said about them.

Then Joseph had another dream and said to his brothers, "I had another dream, in which I saw the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowing down to me."

He also told the dream to his father, and his father scolded him: "What kind of a dream is that? Do you think that your mother, your brothers, and I are going to come

DID YOU KNOW?

The story behind one of the most well-known, long-running and frequently-performed musicals in the world. Joseph would probably make the list purely on recognition from Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat

and bow down to you?" Joseph's brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept thinking about the whole matter.

One day when Joseph's brothers had gone to Shechem to take care of their father's flock, Jacob said to Joseph, "I want you to go to Shechem, where your brothers are taking care of the flock."

Joseph answered, "I am ready."

His father said, "Go and see if your brothers are safe and if the flock is all right; then come back and tell me." So his father sent him on his way from the Valley of Hebron.

Joseph arrived at Shechem and was wandering about in the country when a man saw him and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

"I am looking for my brothers, who are taking care of their flock," he answered. "Can you tell me where they are?"

The man said, "They have already left. I heard them say that they were going to Dothan." So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

They saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted against him and decided to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer. Come on now, let's kill him and throw his body into one of the dry wells. We can say that a wild animal killed him. Then we will see what becomes of his dreams."

Reuben heard them and tried to save Joseph. "Let's not kill him," he said. "Just throw him into this well in the wilderness, but don't hurt him." He said this, planning to save him from them and send him back to his father. When Joseph came up to his brothers, they ripped off his long robe with full sleeves. Then they took him and threw him into the well, which was dry.

While they were eating, they suddenly saw a group of Ishmaelites travelling from Gilead to Egypt. Their camels were loaded with spices and resins. Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain by killing our brother and covering up the murder? Let's sell him to these Ishmaelites. Then we won't have to hurt him; after all, he is our brother,

our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed, and when some Midianite traders came by, the brothers pulled Joseph out of the well and sold him for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

When Reuben came back to the well and found that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes in sorrow. He returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is not there! What am I going to do?"

Then they killed a goat and dipped Joseph's robe in its blood. They took the robe to their father and said, "We found this. Does it belong to your son?"

He recognized it and said, "Yes, it is his! Some wild animal has killed him. My son Joseph has been torn to pieces!" Jacob tore his clothes in sorrow and put on sackcloth. He mourned for his son a long time. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "I will go down to the world of the dead still mourning for my son." So he continued to mourn for his son Joseph.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, the Midianites had sold Joseph to Potiphar, one of the king's officers, who was the captain of the palace guard.



24

Psalm 23

Psalm 23.1–6

The Lord is my shepherd ...

The LORD is my shepherd;
I have everything I need.
He lets me rest in fields of green grass
and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.
He gives me new strength.
He guides me in the right paths,
as he has promised.
Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
I will not be afraid, LORD,
for you are with me.
Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.

You prepare a banquet for me,
where all my enemies can see me;
you welcome me as an honoured guest
and fill my cup to the brim.
I know that your goodness and love will be with me all
my life;
and your house will be my home as long as I live.

One of the most recognisable, repeated and memorised poems in the world. Often read at funerals and recited by churchgoing characters, like Dot Cotton in the BBC's EastEnders series.

**DID YOU
KNOW?**

33

An Eye for an Eye

Exodus 21.23–25

Eye for eye ...

“But if the woman herself is injured, the punishment shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

In the 20th Century, high profile advocates of non-violence and pacifism referred to this phrase when explaining their outlook. For example, Martin Luther King Junior wrote in 1958: ‘Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind.’¹²

DID YOU
KNOW?

34

Job

Job 3.1–26

Would Job worship you if he got nothing out of it?

Finally Job broke the silence and cursed the day on which he had been born.

O God, put a curse on the day I was born;
put a curse on the night when I was conceived!

Turn that day into darkness, God.
 Never again remember that day;
 never again let light shine on it.
 Make it a day of gloom and thick darkness;
 cover it with clouds, and blot out the sun.
 Blot that night out of the year,
 and never let it be counted again;
 make it a barren, joyless night.
 Tell the sorcerers to curse that day,
 those who know how to control Leviathan.
 Keep the morning star from shining;
 give that night no hope of dawn.
 Curse that night for letting me be born,
 for exposing me to trouble and grief.

I wish I had died in my mother's womb
 or died the moment I was born.
 Why did my mother hold me on her knees?
 Why did she feed me at her breast?
 If I had died then, I would be at rest now,
 sleeping like the kings and rulers
 who rebuilt ancient palaces.
 Then I would be sleeping like princes
 who filled their houses with gold and silver,
 or sleeping like a stillborn child.
 In the grave wicked people stop their evil,
 and tired workers find rest at last.
 Even prisoners enjoy peace,
 free from shouts and harsh commands.
 Everyone is there, the famous and the unknown,
 and slaves at last are free.

Why let people go on living in misery?
 Why give light to those in grief?
 They wait for death, but it never comes;
 they prefer a grave to any treasure.
 They are not happy till they are dead and buried;
 God keeps their future hidden
 and hems them in on every side.

Instead of eating, I mourn,
and I can never stop groaning.
Everything I fear and dread comes true.
I have no peace, no rest,
and my troubles never end.

35

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

Acts 2.1–41

What looked like tongues of fire spread out and touched each person there ...

When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

There were Jews living in Jerusalem, religious people who had come from every country in the world. When they heard this noise, a large crowd gathered. They were all excited, because each one of them heard the believers speaking in his or her own language. In amazement and wonder they exclaimed, “These people who are talking like this are Galileans! How is it, then, that all of us hear them speaking in our own native languages? We are from Parthia, Media, and Elam; from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; from Pontus and Asia, from Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene. Some of us are from Rome, both Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism, and some of us are from Crete and Arabia — yet all of us