

Lifeline

The heart of God, Part 2: Returning home

By Barbara Boatwright

“But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.” — Isaiah 63:16

Rembrandt's painting *The Return of the Prodigal* is considered by some art historians to be the greatest picture ever painted. The artist lived a life of excess and great tragedy coupled with a deep faith and knowledge of the scriptures. His many paintings taken from scripture reflect his empathy for the human condition and sense of spiritual understanding and insight into the pain of our fallen humanity. His first wife, Saskia, bore four children during their brief eight years of marriage. The first three died within weeks of their birth, and only eight months after their son, Titus, was born, Saskia succumbed to tuberculosis and passed away.

Rembrandt had a daughter some years later by his then common law wife, who was banned from the church “for committing acts of a whore with Rembrandt, the painter.” He did not marry her to avoid losing the assets of a trust established by his late wife. Despite his tremendous financial success as an artist and his wife's inheritance, Rembrandt outspent his earnings and eventually had to sell his home and substantial collections to avoid bankruptcy. He ultimately died a pauper and was buried in an unknown grave where his remains were later removed and destroyed, according to the custom of the time.

In many respects, Rembrandt's life is reminiscent of the prodigal son in his famous painting, completed only two years before his death in 1669. But it is not the prodigal son who is at the center of the story. It is the Father, whose heart longs only for his children to be home. Perhaps as a prodigal himself, Rembrandt understood something of great value about the heart of God. One commentator stated that the work “represents symbols of homecoming and forgiveness, of the darkness of human existence illuminated by tenderness, of a weary and sinful mankind taking refuge in the shelter of God's mercy.” There is no desire in the Father to punish his children; he knows they have already experienced much suffering by their own internal and external waywardness. He simply wants them to know that the love and life purpose they have searched for in so many wrong ways is only found in Him.

God has always been Father. He is looking to bring His children home.

Our wayward and rebellious sin nature has grieved the heart of God since the beginning (Genesis 6:5-6). After sin entered the human race, Adam and Eve were driven from the garden and experienced separation from a secure and loving relationship with their Father God. Like Lucifer, “the fatherless one,” who is eternally



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separated from God, Adam and Eve walked out of the garden alone into a world of fear and insecurity where they would work by the toil of their hands to survive. They became spiritual orphans. Anything an orphan has must come from the work of his own hands, to store up for himself because there is no one to fall back on. They have no inheritance. Orphans have no sense of identity or family, no sense of belonging. Since Adam and Eve, there has existed an empty hole in the orphan heart of humanity, an underpinning of isolation we all experience and a deeply rooted desire to belong and be loved.

J.I. Packer wrote, “You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's Holy Father. ‘Father’ is the Christian name for God.”

The entire Bible is really a story of family separation, restoration, reconciliation and belonging.

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come for you.” — John 14:8

Before we were ever created, the plan was in place for our loving restoration into the family of God through Jesus' atoning work on the cross. Later, as Jesus comforted His disciples at the Last Supper, He spent a good bit of time talking about His Father (John 14). He reminded them in verse six, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know the Father.” As He continued, Jesus explained that He would be leaving them, but not as orphans, promising that His Father would send the Holy Spirit, our great Counselor and Comforter (verses 15-18) to live within them. He ended the discourse once again with the promise that “he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (verse 21).

“Can a woman forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion for the child she has born? Though she may forget, I will not forget you. See, I have engraved

you on the palms of my hands...” — Isaiah 49:15-16

Theologian Henri Nouwen was first introduced to Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* on the heels of a six-week lecture trip from which he returned exhausted, anxious and lonely, “like a vulnerable little child who wanted to crawl onto its mother's lap and cry.” When he saw a poster of the painting, Nouwen stated, “The tender embrace of father and son expressed everything I desired at that moment. I was, indeed, the son exhausted from long travels ... I desired only to rest safely in a place where I could feel a sense of belonging, a place where I could feel at home.”

Two years later, while discerning the decision to leave his position at Harvard University and live the rest of his life with mentally handicapped people in a L'Arche community, Nouwen had an opportunity to see the original painting at The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. He was given special permission to sit before the display for two days, which inspired his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Nouwen's insights into the meaning of each element in the painting and the parable are profound.

Nouwen invites us to notice the difference in the father's hands. In his words, “The father's left hand touching the son's shoulder is strong and muscular ... That hand seems not only to touch, but with its strength, also to hold. Even though there is gentleness in the way the father's left hand touches his son, it is not without a firm grip. How different is the father's right hand! This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and very tender ... it lies gently upon the son's shoulder. It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand.” He continues, [God] “is mother as well as father ... He holds, she caresses. He comforts and she consoles. He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present ... is it too much to think that the one hand protects the vulnerable side of the son, while the other hand reinforces the son's strength and desire to get on with life?”

We wayward children are indeed made in the image of God, male and female. We are known and loved even before our bodies are formed (Ps 139:16). We can rest in the promise that God is a father to the fatherless who sets the lonely in families (Ps 68:5). Rembrandt's painting gives us a beautiful glimpse into the limitless love and mercy of the Father in His desire to welcome us home and restore our identity as His sons and daughters, with all our inheritance. The question remains: Will we receive it?

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Answers to the right questions

By Debbie Martinez

When going through a divorce and dealing with the aftermath, it seems we are just on autopilot, doing what needs to be done, mindlessly walking through the days and weeks. Our daily goal is just to get from sunrise to sunset with as little frustration as possible. Each day we are faced with having to make a multitude of choices and each one is as significant as the one before.

In her book *The Right Questions*, Debbie Ford

discusses the importance of asking yourself ten questions before you say or do something. By being mindful and reflecting on these questions based on what God tells us and consequently the answers, you will be making decisions for the right reasons which will only push you in the right direction and with less frustration. For things to work in your favor, you must first ask the right questions.

I'm not suggesting that by asking the right questions, the decision will be easy or without difficulty,

but at least you will not be second guessing your choices. You will enter onto your path with conviction and know that you are making this decision for all the right reasons. Moving forward, I encourage you to keep Debbie Ford's ten questions in the forefront of your mind and how they relate to what God says about making choices. They are:

Will this choice propel me toward an inspiring future or will it keep me stuck in the past? James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask

God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”

Will this choice bring me long-term fulfillment or will it bring me short-term gratification? Proverbs 26:11 says, “Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.”

Am I standing in my power or am I trying to please another? Proverbs 10:9 says, “He who walks in integrity walks securely, but he who perverts his ways will be found out.”

Am I looking for what's right or am I looking for what's wrong? Philippians 4:8 says, “Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Will this choice add to my life force or will it rob me of my energy? Proverbs 16:25 says, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”

Will I use this situation as a catalyst to grow and evolve or will I use it to beat myself up? Proverbs 16:9 says, “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.”

Does this choice empower me or does it disempower me? Proverbs 21:5 says, “The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone



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who is hasty comes surely to poverty.”

Is this an act of self-love or is it an act of self-sabotage? Proverbs 14:1 says, “The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.”

Is this an act of faith or is it an act of fear? Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

Am I choosing from divinity or am I choosing from humanity? James 4:7 says, “Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

Choosing to think this way is a very mindful and discerning approach to making decisions instead of being reactionary, which doesn't always lead to the best outcome. If we take the time to ask ourselves these questions and reflect

on God's word, it keeps our decisions in line with what is best for us instead of fighting against it. It raises our consciousness level to truly realize that our choices today affect our tomorrows.

The Right Questions by Debbie Ford is a book worth having in your personal library to read and reread until it becomes your way of life.

Debbie Martinez is a certified Mindful Life Coach specializing in divorce, a Florida Supreme Court Certified Family Mediator, Florida Supreme Court Qualified Arbitrator, Parent Coordinator and trained in Collaborative Divorce both in Florida and South Carolina; she also writes for The Florida Villager and is a contributor to The Huffington Post. She may be reached via Debbie@transformationthrudivorce.com and her website is www.transformationthrudivorce.com.



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