

HOME AND FAMILY



"THE PRODIGAL SON," LUKE 15:20-24. FROM THE "TREASURY OF BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS" BY JULIUS SCHNORR VON CAROLSFELD, DOVER PUBLICATIONS, N.Y., 1999

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Coming Home

By Richard Rice

If you really want to learn a language, you have to get a handle on word meanings that are hard to find in textbooks and dictionaries. When my daughter went to Collonges to study French her sophomore year in college, she had the good fortune to room with a teenager who couldn't speak English.

During the day, Alison learned the French of the classroom and the office. In the evenings, with her roommate she learned the words her teachers would never tell her. In other words, she really learned how to communicate. You know, the stuff that gets you beyond "Hello," "How are you?" "What time is it?" "Where is the train station?" and lets you express what you really think and feel.

The most basic words we use go way back to the roots of the English language, before the Norman invasion and the influx of scholarly Greek and Latin derivatives. They are solid, one-syllable Anglo-Saxon

expressions like *heart* and *home*. Words like these are heavy with sentiment and emotion. Nobody sings about residences and domiciles. But there are hundreds of songs about home. And nobody sings about cardiac conditions. But we have all heard about heartaches and heartbreaks.

When Loma Linda University's physicians performed the famous operation on Baby Fae twenty years or so ago, some people were concerned about what a baboon's heart would do to a little girl. The doctors were quick to emphasize that the heart has no psychological function. Its purpose is purely mechanical. It's just



a pump that sends blood around the body. It's a vital organ, of course, but it's not the seat of the soul.

Well, maybe not. But in spite of our anatomical insight, heart language persists. No organ in the body attracts such colorful descriptions. It is hard to talk about your emotions without using "heart" words. Hearts can be light or heavy, warm or cold, soft or hard. We do things wholeheartedly or halfheartedly. When we learn something really well, we learn it by heart. On Valentine's Day, we remember our sweetheart. And if you don't have one, you may be heartbroken.

We need home because we have hearts.

Words like *home* and *heart* often go together, as in the familiar adage, "home is where the heart is." Jesus brought the two together in one of his last "heart-to-heart" talks with his disciples. On the night before he died, he said, "Let not your heart be troubled. I'm going to prepare a place for you, and after that I'm coming back, and I'll take you home with me."

Home and heart go together. In fact, we need homes because we have hearts.

The ninetieth Psalm was written by a man who spent the most important years of his life wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. I've been to the Sinai desert several times. It's a fascinating place to visit, but it is so barren that it makes the desert terrain of Joshua Tree National Park in southern California look like a rain forest. Yet somehow, in that wilderness Moses found a home. No, it wasn't a tent or a lean-to or a cave in a canyon. It was a person. It was God.

"Lord," said Moses, "you have been our dwelling place in all generations. From everlasting to everlasting, you are God."

Or, as Isaac Watts put it centuries later, "O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."

What does it mean to call God a home? Well, what does it mean to call any place home? One factor is a sense of safety we have there. Home is a place of security. At least, it is supposed to be.

The summer I was eleven years old I spent most of my time hanging around with Ted, Bob, and Ronnie—a small group of friends who, like me, were going into seventh grade the following year. One hot afternoon,

we were standing in the breezeway of Ted's house trying to keep cool, when a younger boy, an annoying fourth grader who lived across the street, decided to make us his source of entertainment.

Terry walked across the street into Ted's yard and began to tease and pester us. We chased after him, but he escaped into his house. A few minutes later, he was back, and we chased him home again. This scene repeated itself several times. Each time we got more irritated and he had more fun.

Finally, we had had it. Terry taunted us again, and

again we chased him. Once again, he ran laughing up the steps to his house and into his living room, letting the screen door bang shut behind him. He assumed he would be safe. But we had discovered that his parents were gone at the time and he was all alone. So this time we didn't stop at the front door.

We barreled right into the living room after him. And his attitude changed dramatically. We had finally managed to frighten him. He bounded up the stairs and locked himself in the second floor bathroom just before we could grab him. So we stood in the hall pounding on the door and telling him how much worse things would be for him if he made us wait.

Suddenly, our quest for revenge was interrupted when someone urgently said, "Stop. Terry's parents are back! They're coming in through the back door." Sure enough, they were. Then it was our turn to run. We ran down the stairs, out the front door, across the street, and into the breezeway by Ted's house, where we stood gasping for breath.

After a few minutes, we regained our composure and laughed about the close call we had just had, when the door across the street opened once again. This time, Terry's mother emerged, and she walked toward us with a purposeful stride. We tried to act nonchalant, as if we didn't have the slightest idea why she wanted to talk to us. But it didn't work. I found out later that she had been a junior high teacher in her earlier years.

Terry, she said, went into his house for protection, and we had no business following him there. After all, what did we think a home was for? It was obvious she had only heard Terry's side of the story, so we gave

her our perspective, and the conversation ended on a friendly note. But we all knew that she was right. It was OK for us to chase Terry out on the street and even into his yard. But we should never have entered his house. Home is a place where people should be secure—even obnoxious fourth-grade boys.

Home is also the place that is always open to you, no matter what. On the outside, people care about you only if you're successful. But at home people care about you whether or not you are successful.

During my freshman year of college, I missed a quiz point in a Life and Teachings of Jesus class because I didn't know the meaning of the word *prodigal*, as in *prodigal son*. To be prodigal, I have remembered ever since—it is amazing what you learn from your mistakes—is to be recklessly spendthrift.

So this parable is named after the wasteful things the son did in the far country. But the real focus of the story is not on what happened when he left, but what happened when he returned. In other words, it is a parable of homecoming. Its bold and brilliant message is this: you *can* go home again.

The prodigal son went to the far country with a lot of money and came back with nothing. His friends lasted as long as his money did. And when it ran out, so did they. Finally, with nowhere else to go, he went home. And as Robert Frost put it, home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in. Home is a place of unconditional acceptance.

Something else that makes home what it is, is the sense of belonging it gives you. Your home is an essential part of your identity. Home is where you feel yourself, and find yourself. It's where you just fit in.

A friend of mine moved to another state years ago and faced the challenge of house hunting with his family. They looked at one place after another. They discussed the merits of this house versus the shortcomings of that house, and measured the mortgage payments against their bank account.

Their search wasn't going well until they came to one house in particular. They went their separate ways, walked through its rooms, looked out its windows, inspected the closets, and surveyed the yard. When the four of them went back to the car, they climbed

inside, looked at each other, and all of them said, "This is it. Our search is over. This is home."

They realized that this was the place where life could go right on for all of them. Home is the place where you know you belong.

If we think of home in terms of security, acceptance, and belonging, we can see why Moses described God as our eternal home, our dwelling place in all generations. Only in God do we find a permanent source of security, acceptance, and belonging. After all, when it gets down to it, it's not where you are, it's who you're with that makes a home.

Arthur Maxwell tells the story of a little girl whose father had returned from overseas and was looking for a place to settle with his wife and daughter.

During this time, someone asked the girl, "Where do you live?"

"We don't have a place to live right now," she said.

"Oh, you don't have a home?" the questioner repeated.

"We do have a home," the girl replied, "we just don't have a house to put it in."

The idea that we can be truly at home in this world, that we have a heavenly companion from whom nothing can separate us, faces some real obstacles today. The thought that we have a cosmic friend who is always there for us, eager to meet our needs and give us strength and comfort, is a beautiful sentiment. But the more we learn about the world we live in, the less like a home it seems to be.

There's a famous picture of the earth taken from a position 3.7 billion miles away as Voyager 1 sped toward the edge of the solar system fifteen or sixteen years ago. Our planet, this third rock from the sun, is so hard to spot in the middle of a vast sea of lights that they put a box around it to identify it.

In response to this dramatic photograph, Carl Sagan made this observation: "Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help



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According to "Characteristics of Dental School Feeder Institutions" (*Journal of Dental Education*, September 2004), La Sierra University tops the list of colleges and universities that send the greatest percentage of their students to dental school. The university is also among the top 50 schools nationwide that provide the greatest actual number of applicants to dental school.



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will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves."

Sagan's words echo those of another noted scientist, Jacques Monod, a Nobel Prize winning biologist. At the end of *Chance and Necessity*, a book on the genetic code, Monod asserts, "Man knows at last that he is alone in the universe's unfeeling immensity, out of which he emerged only by chance. His destiny is nowhere spelled out, nor is his duty."

Cosmology and biology seem to agree. We are utterly alone. There is no purpose for our existence. There is no hope for the future. Our cosmic environment is utterly indifferent to our existence.

As Steven Weinberg put it, "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless." There is no home for the human in this universe. There is no security, acceptance, and belonging here.

So is there any evidence that we are at home in the universe?

I've taught philosophy of religion many times over the past thirty-two years, and I enjoy studying and talking about the great arguments that philosophers have constructed to demonstrate the existence of God. Some thinkers appeal to the intricacy and complexity of the universe. Others argue that everything in the universe depends on something else, so there must be Something or Someone outside the universe who created it and keeps it going.

But the strongest evidence of all is the evidence of the human heart. "Thou hast made us for thyself," said Saint Augustine, "and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee." Is there a home for the heart? That is the great question of life. The best way to answer is not to seek it in the world around us, but to explore the world within. Because it is here, in the profound depths of our experiences, in our deepest joys, our darkest fears, our greatest anguish, and our most fervent desires, that we will finally encounter God. God is the heart's true home.

Years ago, my wife and I drove up to Pine Springs Ranch to pick up our son at the end of the first junior camp he ever attended. There wasn't much water at the ranch that summer and it was clear that none of it had reached him. He was bursting with stories about all the things that had happened during the week. He told us about the nature center, the bicycle races, the boys in his cabin, the horse he rode, and so on.

It was clear that we had missed him a great deal

more than he had missed us. So I guess for reassurance, we asked him if he ever got homesick. "No," he said, "but one of the boys in my cabin did. You know," he continued, "until my counselor explained it to us, I thought being homesick was just like being carsick or having a cold. I didn't realize that it just meant feeling lonely."

"Just feeling lonely" may not sound like much of a problem, but when you are homesick, deep inside, you know it can hurt more than any physical affliction.

To find a home is to find a place where you really belong. Bailey Gillespie and I began leading study tours to the Middle East and southern Europe in 1983, and we have returned almost every year since. Our guide in Greece for a number of years was a young woman who lives in Athens, the capital of the country. She is thoroughly urbanized and modernized, in every way a woman of the world.

But she once described what it would be like for her to return to the little village where she grew up. She said the people there would recognize her as someone they once knew, but to be sure they would ask her this question—whose are you? In Greek villages to this day, a woman's identity is determined not by asking her, "Who are you?" but by asking "Whose are you?"

To whom do you belong? Who has a claim on you? A man has identity in his own right. But a woman is always connected to a man—either to her father, or to her husband.

We may not appreciate the politics, but there's a wonderful spiritual lesson here. Finding the heart's true home is not a matter of location. It's not where you are, it's who you're with. And it's not a matter of identity, it's a matter of relationship. So much has happened to some of us over the decades that we may have to ask each other, "Now, who are you? And what have you been doing?"

Those are important questions, but not the most important. The vital question is not Who are you? but Whose are you? God is the heart's true home. And if you belong to him, then you'll always be at home, no matter where you live or what you do.

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