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Waiting for the Prodigal

May you and I receive the revelation to know how to best approach those in our lives who are lost.

The Savior Jesus Christ spent His earthly ministry teaching of His healing and redemptive power. On one occasion in Luke chapter 15 in the New Testament, He was actually criticized for eating and spending time with sinners (see Luke 15:2). The Savior used this criticism as an opportunity to teach us all how to respond to those who have lost their way.

He replied to His critics by asking them two important questions:

“What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?” (Luke 15:4).

“What woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it?” (Luke 15:8).

The Savior then teaches the parable of the prodigal son. This parable isn't about 100 sheep or 10 pieces of silver; it is about one precious son who is lost. Through the parable, what does the Savior teach us about how to respond when a family member loses his or her way?

The prodigal son informs his father that he wants his inheritance now. He wants to leave the safety of his home

and family and seek after worldly pursuits (see Luke 15:12–13). Please note that in the Savior's parable the father lovingly responds by giving the son his inheritance. Certainly the father must have done everything he could to convince the son to stay. However, once the adult son makes his choice, the wise father lets him go. The father then demonstrates sincere love, and he watches and he waits (see Luke 15:20).

My family had a similar experience. My two faithful brothers, wonderful sister, and I were raised by exemplary parents. We were taught the gospel in our home, we successfully made it

to adulthood, and all four of us were sealed in the temple to our spouses. However, in 1994 our sister, Susan, became disenchanted with the Church and some of its teachings. She was persuaded by those who mocked and criticized the early leaders of the Church. She allowed her faith in living prophets and apostles to diminish. Over time, her doubts overcame her faith, and she chose to leave the Church. Susan has given me permission to share her story with the hope that it might help others.

My brothers and I and our widowed mother were devastated. We couldn't imagine what possibly could have led her to abandon her faith. My sister's choices seemed to be breaking our mother's heart.

My brothers and I had served as bishops and quorum presidents, and we had experienced the joy of success with ward and quorum members as we left the ninety and nine and went after the one. However, with our sister, our persistent efforts to rescue her and to invite her back only pushed her further and further away.

As we sought heavenly guidance as to how we might properly respond to





her, it became evident that we had to follow the example of the father in the parable of the prodigal son. Susan had made her choice, and we had to figuratively let her go—but not without her knowing and feeling our sincere love for her. And so, with renewed love and kindness, we watched and we waited.

My mother never stopped loving and caring for Susan. Every time my mother attended the temple, she placed Susan's name on the prayer roll and never lost hope. My older brother and his wife, who lived closest to Susan in California, invited her to all family events. They prepared dinner in their home each year on Susan's birthday. They made sure they were always in touch with her and that she knew of their genuine love for her.

My younger brother and his wife reached out to Susan's children in Utah and cared for them and loved them. They made sure that her children were always invited to family gatherings, and when it came time for Susan's granddaughter to be baptized, my brother was there to perform the ordinance. Susan also had loving home teachers and visiting teachers who never gave up.

As our children went on missions and were married, Susan was invited to and attended these family celebrations.

We tried diligently to create family events so that Susan and her children could be with us and they would know that we loved them and that they were part of our family. As Susan received an advanced degree at a California university, we were all there to support her at her graduation. Although we could not embrace all of her choices, we could certainly embrace her. We loved, we watched, and we waited.

In 2006, after 12 years had passed since Susan left the Church, our daughter Katy moved with her husband to California so he could attend

law school. They were in the same city as Susan. This young couple looked to their aunt Susan for help and support, and they loved her. Susan helped care for our two-year-old granddaughter, Lucy, and Susan found herself helping Lucy with her nightly prayers. Katy called me one day and asked if I thought Susan would ever come back to the Church. I assured her that I felt she would and that we needed to continue to be patient. As another three years passed, with continued love, we watched and we waited.



Six years ago this weekend, my wife, Marcia, and I were sitting on the front row of this Conference Center. I was to be sustained as a new General Authority that day. Marcia, who is always in touch with the Spirit, had written a note to me that read, “I think it is time for Susan to come back.” My daughter Katy suggested that I leave and call Susan to invite her to watch general conference that day.

Prompted by these two great women, I walked to the foyer and called my sister. I got her voice mail and simply invited her to watch that session of general conference. She got the message. To our delight, she felt impressed to watch all the sessions of conference. She heard from prophets and apostles she had loved in earlier years. She found new names she had not heard before, such as President Uchtdorf and Elders Bednar, Cook, Christofferson, and Andersen. During this and other unique heaven-sent experiences, my sister—like the prodigal son—came to herself (see Luke 15:17). The words of prophets and apostles and the love of her family moved her to turn and begin the walk back home. After 15 years our daughter and sister who was lost had been found. The watch and the wait were over.

Susan describes this experience just as Lehi described it in the Book of Mormon. She let go of the iron rod and found herself in a mist of darkness (see 1 Nephi 8:23). She states that she did not know she was lost until her faith was reawakened by the Light of Christ, which brightly magnified the stark contrast between what she was experiencing in the world and what the Lord and her family were offering.

A miracle has occurred over the past six years. Susan has a renewed



testimony of the Book of Mormon. She has received her temple recommend. She has served as an ordinance worker in the temple, and she currently teaches the Gospel Doctrine class in her ward. The windows of heaven have opened to her children and her grandchildren, and although there have been difficult consequences, it feels as if she never left.

Some of you, like the Nielson family, have family members who have temporarily lost their way. The Savior's instruction to all who have 100 sheep is to leave the ninety and nine and go after and rescue the one. His instruction to those who have 10 pieces of silver and lose one is to search until you find it. When the lost one is your son or your daughter, your brother or your sister, and he or she has chosen to leave, we learned in our family that, after all we can do, we love that person with all of our hearts and we watch, we pray, and we wait for the Lord's hand to be revealed.

Perhaps the most important lesson the Lord taught me through this process happened during our family scripture study after my sister had left the Church. Our son David was reading as we studied together Luke 15. As he read the parable of the prodigal son, I heard it differently that day than I

had ever heard it before. For some reason, I had always related to the son who stayed home. As David read that morning, I realized that in some ways *I* was the prodigal son. All of us fall short of the glory of the Father (see Romans 3:23). All of us need the Savior's Atonement to heal us. All of us are lost and need to be found. This revelation that day helped me know that my sister and I both needed the Savior's love and His Atonement. Susan and I were actually on the same path back home.

The Savior's words in the parable as He describes the father greeting his prodigal son are powerful, and I believe they may be the description of the experience you and I will have with the Father when we return to our heavenly home. They teach us of a father who loves, waits, and watches. These are the words of the Savior: “When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

May you and I receive the revelation to know how to best approach those in our lives who are lost and, when necessary, to have the patience and love of our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ, as we love, watch, and wait for the prodigal. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■