

# THE PRODIGAL SON

By Caleb Yoder

I grew up on a farm. People always considered me a child prodigy. I had not only book smarts, but could fix just about anything. By my teenage years, I couldn't wait to get out of small-town Kansas. I just wasn't going to spend my life baling hay or shoveling manure. I mean that would be just a waste of my gifts! I was meant for bigger and better things. I have one brother, and we are as different as water and oil. He has no desire to leave, and from age 5 has always dreamed of running the farm. We got along ok, but the last thing I'd ever tolerate is following his orders!

My old man is just the most generous soul you can imagine. It was a long-shot, but because I was obsessed with getting off on my own with at least a little cash, I asked if he'd divide the inheritance early. He looked a little hurt, but he agreed!

So dad had the value of the farm assessed and started selling off assets. He sold a quarter of land at auction, a couple of tractors, and the combine.

All that still came short of half the assessed value. We had 50 head of cattle that were finished, so with the proceeds of that sale they had just enough to give me my share of the estate in cash. I started feeling lightheaded adding up dollar figures that were several orders of magnitude greater than anything I'd ever earned in my life.

My dad and brother didn't say much. They talked in hushed tones about how to keep the farm going without folding. They would rent some ground in several places. They'd hire a cousin to do the cutting. Both would take jobs in town and do all the choring before dawn and after dusk. I could see the hurt on dad's face, but honestly in that moment I just didn't care. Not my problem!

I found a nice sports car at a dealership in Wichita and headed off to Vegas for a different life. I knew I could play a pretty good hand of poker. It wasn't long before I was gaining confidence to make bigger and bigger bets and add to my mound of cash.

I must say, it was really exhilarating. For once in my life, I could really shine and impress people. I was popular. I bought a big house. I put in a well-stocked wet bar, and started hosting parties. *This* was the life I'd been waiting for!

That exhilaration didn't last. In fact, it all came crashing down. I had a few fateful poker tournaments that lost me a lot of money. I was determined to win that money back. I was unstoppable, you know? After a few too many drinks, I bet the remainder of what I had.

Just like that, it was all gone. The bank foreclosed on the house. The friends disappeared. Even my phone and wallet disappeared. There was only one person who would have known where I kept things. He had been my best buddy, and now he was *gone*.

I tried to find work, but no one would hire me. I finally found a local burger joint that was willing to pay me cash under the table to clean after hours, only because they were so short on staff.

I was so hungry by that point. I got by with food I found in the trash, until a half-eaten burger upset my stomach and it all came back out.

I was miserable! What was I doing? Why had I made such stupid choices? I hated myself.

I had this thought: Maybe I could hitch-hike back home! Maybe I could ask my dad for work. Maybe he'd let me just work for food and let me sleep in the barn.

It's a miracle some truckers were willing to pick me up and that I didn't collapse by the side of the road. I wasn't even past the mailbox when dad saw me and started running in his overalls and work boots. I think this might be the only time I ever saw him run like that.

That evening already, he invited the neighbors to an outdoor barbecue with some home-raised steak. I felt such an incredible mixture of feelings. I felt loved and a sense of belonging like never before. And for the first time, I also felt the betrayal that I had brought on my family.

I looked around for my brother and finally spotted him at a distance by the machine shed. We briefly locked eyes. As weeks have gone on, my heart feels the extremes of both joy and deep remorse at the same time. My brother's contempt for me could fill the Pacific. I know he wishes I'd never come back. Honestly, I don't blame him. I know I screwed up big time. I can tell he's lost all respect for my dad.

My heart is at such a weird place. The arrogance and the resentment from my younger years is gone. I've definitely been humbled, that's for sure. And I think I can live with myself, though I wish I knew how to repair the damage I've done.

I just regret losing my brother, and don't know if I'll ever have him back. I think of our shenanigans as boys, the pranks we pulled that got us into some *big* trouble. And now.... only his look of contempt.

I'm responsible. But I don't know what I can possibly do to fix this. As for my dad, well, he's tired, working 70-hour weeks between the farm and the job in town when he should be retired. Incredibly though, he seems happier than I ever remember him. Lighthearted, makes way more jokes, laughs till his whole body shakes.

All dad can say is: "Why shouldn't I be happy? You were lost and now are found. You were dead and now are alive."