

AREA PRESIDENCY MESSAGE

The Parable of the Loving Father

By Elder LeGrand R. Curtis Jr.

Africa West Area President



Elder Curtis

As the Savior was teaching in Galilee, a group of publicans and sinners gathered to hear Him. This caused the Pharisees and the scribes to murmur at the kind of company that Jesus was keeping (see Luke 15:1–2). The Savior’s response to this murmuring was to tell three parables that deal with those who have gone astray.

First, He told the parable of the lost sheep, emphasizing the effort to find the sheep that strayed and the joy of its return. The application of the parable is made clear by Jesus: “Likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:7).

Next, He told the parable of the lost

coin, once again stressing the effort made and the joy of recovery. The application, once again, is clearly stated by the Savior: “Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:10).

The Prodigal Son

The third parable is commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it might be more aptly called the Parable of the Loving Father. In it, the Savior told of a man requesting and obtaining his inheritance from his father and going to a far country. There the son “wasted his substance

in riotous living” (Luke 15:13). Once the money was gone, he tried working for a farmer, but still found himself in want. He even envied the swine he was feeding, who at least had something to eat (see Luke 15:16).

- *“He Came to Himself”*

As he mused on his predicament, the son’s thoughts turned to home. He realized that the hired servants in his father’s house lived better than he did. He “came to himself” and acknowledged that he had “sinned against heaven” and against his father. And so, he resolved upon a plan. He determined to go home. He prepared to acknowledge to his father his errors, confess his unworthiness to be his son, and plead to be allowed to be his father’s hired servant. And, with that speech prepared, he headed toward home. (See Luke 15:17–18.)

- *The Father Runs to Meet His Wayward Son*

At this point in the story, the Savior includes some very important details. While the son is “yet a great way off,” the father sees him, has compassion on him, runs to him, falls on his neck and kisses him. The son tries to give his speech but does not get far



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beyond acknowledging his sins. The father calls for a robe and a ring to be put on his son, and orders the fatted calf to be killed for a feast to celebrate the happy reunion. The father's joy in the return of his son is unbounded. (See Luke 15:20–24.)

The Loving, Forgiving Father

All three parables speak of the recovering of that which was lost, but the focus of the third parable is different from that of the first two. The focus of the third parable is on the actions of the father of the returning prodigal. For me, the most important aspect of this parable is what it tells us of our Heavenly Father's reaction when any of us turns toward Him: He "runs" to embrace us. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught:

"The tender image of this boy's anxious, faithful father running to meet him and showering him with kisses is one of the most moving and compassionate scenes in all of holy writ. It tells every child of God, wayward or otherwise, how much God wants us back in the protection of His arms."¹

I have seen God's love for the returning prodigal played out time after time as I have watched people come back to Him. As a priesthood leader, the first time I listened to a repentant member confess wrongdoing, I was somewhat taken aback by the strength and depth of God's love for her that I felt. That feeling has returned every time I have helped someone with the repentance process. As a bishop, I had a man move into our ward who, years previously, had been a faithful, temple-going member. In the intervening years

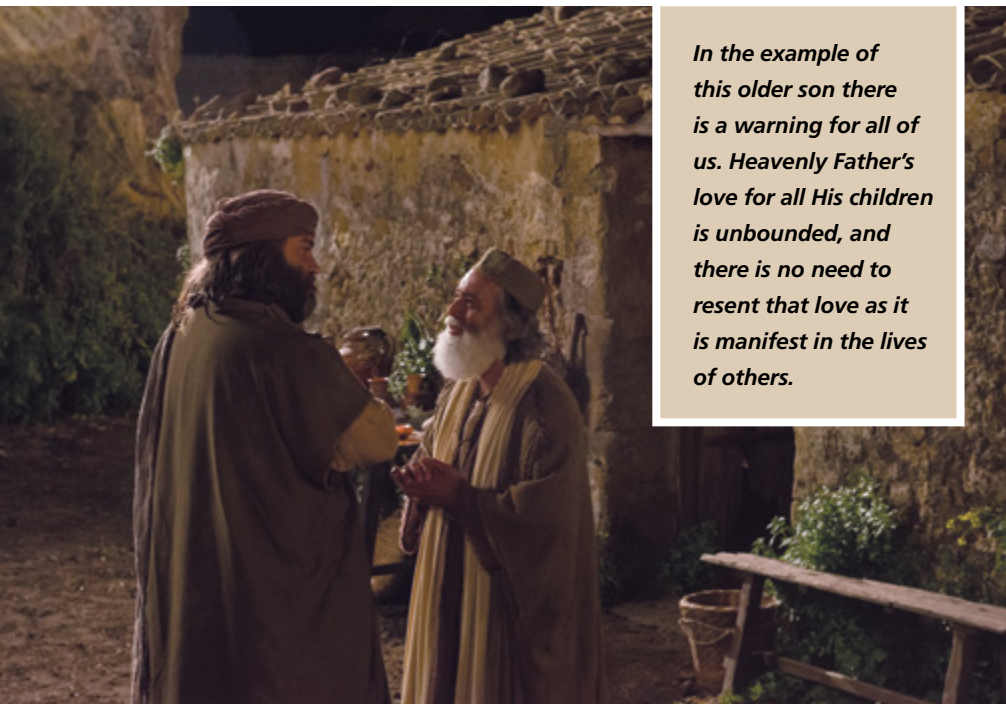
he had drifted away from God and the standards of the Church. When he relocated to our ward, he was ready to come back to God. He repented and then worked to qualify for a temple recommend. When he was finally ready, I was with him when he returned, for the first time in decades, to the house of the Lord. As we sat together in the temple, Heavenly Father's love for him filled both of us. The embrace, kiss, robe, and ring described in the parable of the prodigal son all seemed to be rolled into one as I sat with a son of God who had "come to himself," repented, and made it back to God's holy temple.

Returning to God

Over and over again, the invitation to return to God is made in the scriptures. The voice of God told the Nephites, "how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart" (3 Nephi 10:6). Through the prophet Malachi, the Lord said, "Return unto me and I will return unto you" (Malachi 3:7). The Prophet Joseph Smith, in the revealed dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple, prayed, "And when thy people transgress, any of them, they may speedily repent and return unto thee, and find favor in thy sight, and be restored to the blessings which thou hast ordained to be poured out upon those who shall reverence thee in thy house" (D&C 109:21).

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The Older Son

Of course, the parable of the prodigal son does not end with the father embracing his formerly wayward son and celebrating his return. The father had an older son who had *not* wasted the family assets in riotous living but had dutifully stayed at his father's side. But when this older son learned of the celebration for the return of his brother, he was angry. He resented the attention and money spent on the other son, and he condemned him for his previous sinful way (see Luke 15:25–28). In the parable, the loving father left the feast and went out to the older son to entreat him to join the celebration. His words to this son are full of love for both sons:

“Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

“It was meet that we should make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:31–32).

In the example of this older son there is a warning for all of us. Heavenly Father's love for all His children is unbounded, and there is no need to resent that love as it is manifest in the lives of others. Not only is there plenty of love for us, but we share more fully in the love as we not only celebrate the return of the prodigal, but also assist as many as possible to return to the fold “safe and sound” (Luke 15:27).

One of the great blessings that we have as members of God's Church is the opportunity to assist Him in helping His children return to full activity in His Church. President Thomas S. Monson has called on all of us to go to the rescue of those who have drifted away.² As we do so, we help God's children feel the warm embrace of a loving Heavenly Father longing to welcome them back into His fold.

Over the years I have seen many loving Relief Society presidencies. One of those presidencies was exceptionally good at welcoming people into our ward, and along with other members of the ward council, finding ways that the new members could participate in ward activities. After

we got to know these new people better, we were sometimes surprised to learn that they had not been very active in their previous wards. As these new ward members enjoyed the fellowship of the other members, we watched them progress in the Church and, in several instances, were with them in the temple when they received temple ordinances. On one such occasion, the father of one of these members approached me in a temple sealing room and said, “I can never thank you enough for what your ward has done for my son.” He did not have to thank us; all of us present felt the loving spiritual embrace of our Heavenly Father for this man's son and his family.

Conclusion

As Jesus taught the publicans and sinners, He was doing what all of us should do: help our brothers and sisters know Heavenly Father and come to Him. Through the parable of the prodigal son, we catch a glimpse of the love that Heavenly Father has for His children, and how He feels when one of them takes steps to repent and return to Him. This is a love that “passeth knowledge”.³ It is not

only our privilege to feel the love that He has for us, but also the love that He has for our brothers and sisters as we assist in the great work of helping them “come to themselves”, and, more importantly, come to God. ■

NOTES

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Other Prodigal,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 62; *Liahona*, July 2002, 69.
2. See, for example, Thomas S. Monson, “Our Responsibility to Rescue,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Oct. 2013, 1.
3. Ephesians 3:19.

in 1978, soon after the revelation on the Priesthood. James and John were both baptized, along with many others who had been awaiting the arrival of the missionaries who came with the authority to baptize, organize the Church, and confer the Priesthood on worthy males. It was a long-awaited and joyous time.

James Ewudzie continued to have strong spiritual impressions. On one occasion he was asked to bless a baby. When he finished, he felt a humble feeling and heard, in his mind, that the Lord would bless the country of Ghana with the blessings of the temple. From then on, James listened to the words he heard in his heart. When the temple finally came to Ghana, it was a great blessing for everyone.

On another occasion, James had been visiting with Brother Billy Johnson about the Book of Mormon. They loved the story of Abinadi and were discussing the story. When he went home that night, he dreamt that the angel Moroni appeared to him and five other men. The men followed the angel and as they came to an avenue, he stopped and pulled out the gold plates. It was a testimony to James that the Lord had brought the gold plates to Joseph Smith to be translated for the world to see the truth. James wondered why so many miracles were happening in Ghana at that time. Perhaps because of their willingness to accept dreams and visions, the Lord used these means to help the

OUR HERITAGE

James and John Ewudzie— Instruments of the Lord

James Ewudzie—In 1970, Ghana was a place where groups calling themselves The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were starting to establish themselves in Accra and Takoradi. The Lord was inspiring James and his brother John to be instruments in furthering the work of the gospel in Ghana. Both James and John came in contact with these early Church groups through a friend, Brother Billy Johnson.

James had many dreams that helped him understand the gospel as it was being taught by Brother Johnson. At the end of a Church meeting one Sunday, Brother Johnson asked if anyone

had a dream that they could relate to the congregation. In West Africa, it is common to have dreams concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ. James did not want to reveal his dream, but he felt the Spirit push him to the front of the group. He told the people of his dream that a certain house had caught fire. A woman from the audience knew that the house he had described had burned that very day, which James had not known about. James realized that the Lord was mindful of the Saints in Ghana and was preparing them.

Missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arrived

Ghanaians read and accept the Book of Mormon as inspired and additional scripture.

John Dan Ewudzie—John was introduced to the early church which called itself The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by his older brother James. The congregation met in an old cocoa warehouse in Cape Coast. John was happy to be a member of the Church. He participated with Brother Billy Johnson as well. Brother Johnson would call John when the services were about to begin and he would read from the Book of Mormon. As he read to the congregation, other members would translate what had been said. Many of the people called him Nephi, because he would read from the Book of Mormon every meeting.

John had dreams of the Church as well. As was the custom for some of the men in these early Church groups, John would fast and pray for three days with Brother Johnson. At the conclusion of the fasting, he felt very close to the Lord. He would go home and dream of many things. In one dream, he was playing in a field of beautiful flowers, varieties he had never seen on earth. He followed along a path and saw beautiful children. The air smelled sweet and fragrant and different from Ghana. A man told him it was where the prophets lived. Then he saw a man dressed in the clothing of the bible, and he saw the prophet Abraham. Such vivid dreams and



James (middle) with John (right) and their brother Thomas.

visions were not uncommon with these faithful African Christians.

The Church in Ghana—James and John Ewudzie were a part of the great beginning of the restored gospel in Ghana. Brother Billy Johnson had a great influence on their lives and on the starting of the Church in Ghana. Everyone loved him, and members wanted to be with Brother Johnson and do what he asked them to do. The RSU, which was the Restored Scripture Union, was established for men to study and read the Book of Mormon, taught by Brother Johnson. The men were able to fast, pray, and study the scriptures with the organization. The men fasted often to receive missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and they traveled from branch to branch proselyting with the Book of Mormon and the Church pamphlets they had received. Many other missionaries from other denominations, both black and white, came to Ghana to persuade Brother Johnson and his fellow Saints to follow their teachings and

join their churches. However, Brother Johnson would say, “These are not our brothers who are from America.” When the missionaries finally arrived in 1978, it was a happy day for them. Brother and Sister Mabey and Brother and Sister Cannon came to Ghana. They taught the Saints there about the gospel and how to conduct Church meetings, discarding many of the traditional customs. Following interviews with these faithful patient Saints, many baptisms took place. On December 9, 1978, a group of 80 people were baptized in Cape Coast. The Church was finally established and it flourished with hundreds more baptized soon thereafter.

Returning to Ghana from a trip to Salt Lake City, Utah, James went to the newly dedicated Ghana temple and was sealed to his wife. His children were not sealed to them that day. James’ family consisted of two daughters and a son who had been ill with meningitis and had not walked or spoken for nine years. After the sealing, James heard a voice telling him

to return quickly to have his children sealed to him as well. One week after the sealing was done, his son LeGrand Richards passed away. He was happy because he had learned to listen to the still small voice.

SEMINARY

A Seminary Teacher in Bauchi

By **Ifeanyi H. Agriga**

S&I Coordinator, Abuja, Nigeria

It has been a challenge to work around the Northern part of Nigeria as a result of insecurity and the insurgency by some militants. One of my great motivations is realizing what one of my seminary teachers in Bauchi state (Northeastern Nigeria) does every morning.

Brother Adebayo Dada wakes up very early in the morning and rides about 1.2 miles (2 km) to pick up two of his students and continues for about 3 miles (5 km) with them to the church to join the other students for early-morning seminary class. He takes the two students back home after class every day. He does this daily despite the fact that Bauchi is a Muslim-dominated area and faces some security threat by militants.

I was so touched by the sacrifice of this wonderful brother who has been

These two Ewudzie brothers, along with their brother Thomas, have continued as leaders in the Cape Coast area for many years. Their valiant testimonies and dedication to the work of God is an inspiration to all. ■

a member of the Church for less than 3 years that I felt I should share this.

Brother Adebayo found the Church through a friend at school who gave him a copy of the *For the Strength of Youth* booklet. He quickly read the pamphlet and was intrigued by the standard the youths of the Church were counseled to live. He particularly became interested with quotations

from the Book of Mormon and asked his friend concerning the names in the Book of Mormon.

The friend, a member of the Church, explained to him what she knew about the Book of Mormon since there were no missionaries in Bauchi to refer him to. She bore her testimony at the end of the discussion.

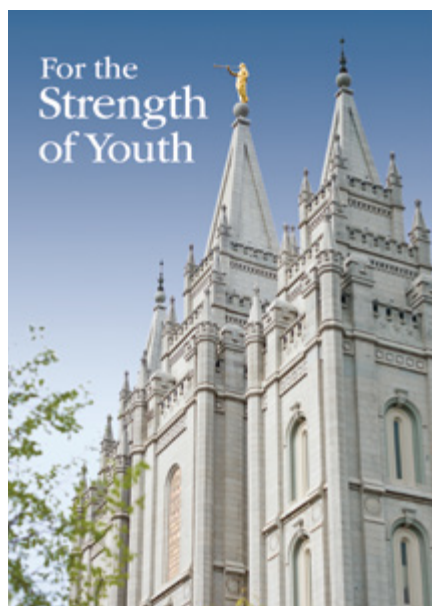
Brother Adebayo felt a desire to study the Book of Mormon for himself and commenced an earnest study of the Book of Mormon. A few days later, his friend invited him to a branch conference, which he honored and felt a kind of peace that he has never felt before.

After an intense study of the Book of Mormon and honest prayer, he decided to be baptized a member of the Church. A few months later, he was called to be a seminary teacher.

This call, according to Brother Adebayo, afforded him the opportunity to further learn the gospel. He developed love for the Savior and the students as he magnified his calling.

Brother Adebayo's wish is that "my students will understand and rely on the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ, qualify for the blessings of the temple, and prepare themselves and others for eternal life with their Father in Heaven."

Thank you to the many wonderful seminary teachers out there who are blessing the lives of the youth of the Church with well-prepared lessons about the Savior and His teachings. ■



RELIEF SOCIETY

Sisters from Bantama Stake speak on the Love of God

Hallie Ansah, Bantama Second Ward, Bantama Stake, Kumasi

I'm so grateful unto the Lord for His great love for me. I had been experiencing strange movements (as the doctors put it) in my body. I had to undergo many laboratory tests and scans. These medical procedures cost a lot, running into thousands of cedis. As I prayed to the Lord, asking Him for help and good health, He sent someone to my aid. The person, upon hearing of my predicament, decided to pay the bigger chunk of my bills. In the end all I had to do was pay only a fraction of the total bill!

Without this great blessing, it would not have been possible for me to receive

treatment for my ailment. I thank the Lord for His great love for me.

Alice Owusuaa, Bantama Second Ward

God really loves His children. He abides with us wherever we may be when we are faithful in obeying His commandments. He hears our prayers and blesses us to know that He is up above watching over us and providing for our needs.

Recently, I needed a job badly and someone informed me of a job opening that had been advertised. I applied for the job and was invited for an interview. Thankfully, most members of the panel

were impressed with me and recommended me for the job. However, one of the managers, who wanted to hire his favorite, tried to prevent them from hiring me. The Lord, through His infinite love, gave me favor in the eyes of the head manager who defended me and spoke highly of me on all fronts so that I could not be bypassed easily. I got the job and the head manager encouraged me to work hard and upgrade my educational status in order to qualify for a higher position if one became available. I know it is by God's grace and love that I am where I find myself today. I am truly grateful to the Lord for His many blessings. ■

YOUTH

Thanking God for His Love

By **Ifeoma Samuel, Port Harcourt East Stake**

The suppertime call rang out and Oroma and Grandpa took their places at the table. Grandma's homemade bread and other goodies met Oroma's bright eyes as she folded her hands and waited . . . and waited. Though Grandpa was hungry too, he was adjusting his knife and fork and plate as he finished a little conversation with Grandma.

The wait was too long for hungry Oroma, so she put her little hand on

Grandpa's arm and said, "Let's pray, Grampy, let's pray." So with their heads bowed, Grandpa thanked Heavenly Father for His love in giving His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, and for the food that He had again provided for them, asked such blessings for those that lacked in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Grandpa's prayer had especially pleased Oroma, so when eyes opened she looked up at her grandpa with a satisfied smile

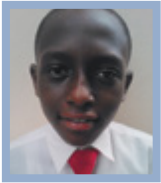
and said, "Heavenly Father *loves* that!"

What truth and lesson we have from a five-year-old! The Lord does love to hear our thankfulness for everything He has provided for us. Salvation from our sins through His precious blood is, of course, the greatest. But our food, health, parents, grandparents, family members, and safety are also included in His daily care for us. Ephesians 5:20 says, "Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). ■

PRIMARY

My Favorite Scripture



Derrick Selom A., 11 yrs; Tesano Ward, Tesano Ghana Stake

My favorite scripture is Isaiah 41:10: "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

I like this scripture because it encourages me to have faith in Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father. It gives me the feeling that God is near me.

Derrick



Martell Kafui Kpegba C., 11 yrs; Tesano Ward, Tesano Ghana Stake

My favorite scripture is Doctrine and Covenants 89:7, "And again, strong drinks are not for the belly, but for the washing of your bodies."

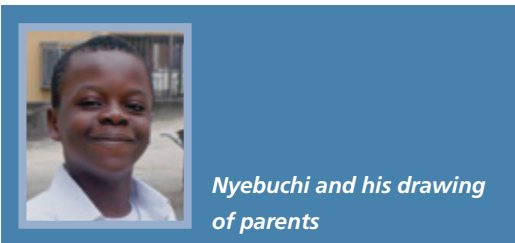
It is my favorite scripture because it teaches me how to keep my body clean and safe. ■

Martell

God loves me and so He gave me . . .

Nyebuchi R.-I., 11 yrs; Rumuogba Ward, Port Harcourt East Stake, Nigeria

Parents

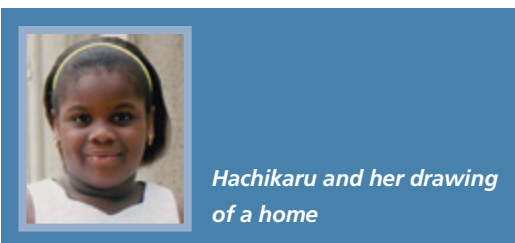


Nyebuchi and his drawing of parents



Hachikaru R.-I., 8 yrs; Rumuogba Ward, Port Harcourt East Stake, Nigeria

A home ■



Hachikaru and her drawing of a home



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