

The Wall of Weariness: Loving the Wayward



by DAVE HARVEY AND PAUL GILBERT

It's the spouse living in rebellion. A child revolting against his parents. A sibling spinning out of control. It can be a friend trapped in a hidden addiction. Do you love a person going rogue? Someone who is renouncing his or her roles and rejecting the ways of the Lord?

The situations that our wayward loved ones put themselves in can be remarkably complicated and play out with variations that would boggle the good sense of Solomon. For those of us who love them, there's one thing that we share in common.

Fatigue.

Fatigue is the collateral damage when a friend or family member strays. Prodigals possess a strange power. They suck life out of those who love them. Yes it's weariness, but it's also something more. It's weariness filled with fear. It's weariness that makes your mind feeble, saps your passion, and wrecks

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your confidence. Then, there is the despair and exhaustion, bone-tired exhaustion. And it's not hard to see why. If you love a prodigal you're always on-call emotionally. If they're at home, the floors are tiled with eggshells—you either dodge them or crush them in your quest to protect and motivate them. If they're gone, then you wait, wonder, and worry about what might happen today. What foolish decisions will they make? What influences will they follow? Will they be safe?

Then there's the carrot and stick thing. Any positive comment or civil tone, any small sign of life, the smallest flash of courtesy or positive report will inflate your heart with a desperate hope that you stand on the threshold of a breakthrough. *The last conversation must have worked. God is finally answering our prayers. Repentance must be just around the corner!*

Then they get worse. Your soaring hopes, which skipped upon the clouds only an hour before, lose altitude and come crashing to earth.

Living with a prodigal can inspire a lot of wishful thinking.

So you talk to them. Oh boy, do you talk! You are convinced that if they can just see this one thing, hear this one idea, discuss this one resource... THEN my prodigal will fall to earth, dust themselves off and set a course for home. And because talk creates the illusion of progress, it becomes a form of self-medication. As others have noted, "The temptation to create conversations that are designed to get the fool 'to see' is stronger than the most addictive drug known to mankind."¹ And yet prodigals continue to make withdrawals from the relational bank—rarely deposits. So the deficit grows daily, inducing a physical and spiritual malaise that erases joy and darkens the world with gloomy shades of grey.

It's an exhausting way to live.

Prodigals and the Heart

Ralph and Susan understand. Their teenage daughter Jan decided to drop out of high school—not to work, but to have more time for her growing "leisure pursuits." Discussing it yields little progress since Jan went incommunicado months ago. She now inhabits a sullen world where her family might as well be aliens—people from another planet who invade her space speaking gibberish.

¹ Dan Allender and Tremper Longman, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), 281.

Their hearts break for Jan, but Ralph and Susan are learning a hard lesson about themselves: prodigals reveal every spiritual weakness in the home. Jan's conversational passivity provokes anger in Ralph and fear in Susan. Exasperated by their inability to break through, they turn on each other and are locked in a cycle of accusation and apology. Sleep eludes them, worry consumes them, and energy escapes them. Ralph and Susan are exhausted. Wayward people exact a toll. Bound up in waywardness is betrayal, foolishness, lawlessness, selfishness, and thoughtlessness. This means you're always bracing against the next blow and steeling yourself in preparation for the next crash.

Jesus understands *exactly* how you feel.

In Jack Miller's book about his daughter's waywardness, his wife captured well the emotional pile-up when a prodigal starts to spiral:

When Barb announced she “was not a Christian and didn't want to be one,” my world came crashing in on me. I reacted with anger and fear. I simply couldn't handle it....

I felt humiliated and betrayed.²

Anger, fear, betrayal, humiliation—these are heavy feelings that don't lift quickly.

If that's you, prepare yourself for hope. Jesus understands *exactly* how you feel. Not simply because he sympathizes (Heb 4:15), but because Jesus experienced it. And he wants to help ease our weariness so that we can fight courageously for the future of our prodigal.

Good News for the Weary

The author of the book of Hebrews wrote to people who were tired of being sinned against. These were people who had endured persecution, degradation, and unjust suffering. They were publicly exposed to reproach, they had their property seized, and they courageously identified with scorned

² C. John Miller and Barbara Miller Juliani, *Come Back, Barbara* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing, second edition, 1997), 26.

saints. God's grace was certainly sufficient, but struggle and exhaustion were their constant companions (Heb 10:32–34). According to the book's author, they had a "need for endurance" (10:36).

There's never a good time for suffering, but these guys were hardly game-day ready. Just read some of these descriptors: unbelieving hearts (3:12), dull of hearing (5:11), sluggish (6:12), sinning deliberately (10:26), and weary and fainthearted (12:3). They had drooping hands and weak knees (12:12). These are pretty poor assets when you're facing a big race.

They needed to endure, to "run with endurance the race set before them" (Heb 12:1). For them it was persecution, not prodigals. But their fundamental need was the same as yours: to get past the pain of how they've been treated and to refocus on moving forward. To move beyond the rejection, the resentment, the worthless feelings, the fatigue.

How did they do it? How do we do it? How do we not grow weary or fainthearted? The writer of Hebrews makes it plain: "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Heb 12:3). We know, this sounds strange. "You mean an important aid to my weariness is to consider how difficult things were for Christ?" Well, sort of.

There are some specific and powerful ways that Christ's suffering helps our weariness. But before we share them with you, we want to tell you a story.

The Wayward-Weary Home

"It's horrific!" I (Dave) was barely five minutes into my call with Sal and Leslie, but they were clearly at a breaking point in dealing with a wayward child, floating somewhere between "scraped raw" and "change your identity and flee the country."

"I mean it's otherworldly. One conflict just bleeds right into the next one. A minor issue escalates immediately into nuclear war. There's never a break. Never! I mean, the level of chaos in our home is like—" Sal paused, searching for the right words. "I don't know, it's just hard to explain. It's like we're living with some kind of combat fatigue."

I've never been in combat, but it wasn't hard to grant them the analogy. Talk to a husband, wife, sibling, or parent who has navigated this world and they will often speak of lost days, sleepless nights, relational isolation,

and an inconsolable anxiety. Marriages are strained, bank accounts drained, self-confidence maimed... all sacrificed to care for the wayward loved one.

Sal and Leslie were battle-weary. They felt sapped, besieged, enfeebled, disoriented, weakened, and wounded. And those were just the physical effects! There was a more diabolical attack beneath the surface—a skirmish in the soul where the enemy and flesh warred against faith, hope, and love.

What do you tell them? How does Christ's suffering speak to that kind of weariness?

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Christ's Suffering Brings Meaning to the Weariness of *Why*

Why. Intractable, inscrutable, unyielding, *why* is a cross that wayward-lovers must carry. After all, it's one thing to be soul-weary and know the cause. Sam's child has an illness and it drains him. Carol lost a loved one and she's up all night grieving. The cause may be life-altering and earth-shattering, but at least they know it. But there's a kind of desperation inflicted upon the soul when a loved one goes rogue. Remember: any time you see a wayward person, there are often family members in the shadows wrestling to reconcile the vast difference they experience between what a family is supposed to be and what their family really is. How did we get here? What did we do wrong? What should we do now? Why is this happening to us?

Occasionally there are clear answers, but often there are not.

Job could relate. Unable to understand why he suffered, Job cried, "For he crushes me with a tempest and multiplies my wounds without cause" (Job 9:17). Like many of us when faced with piercing affliction, he looked up at the heavens. He felt alone. "I cry out to you God, but you do not answer!" (Job 30:20).

Multiplied wounds without cause—if you've loved a wayward person,

you get it. When someone you love goes wayward and you don't know the cause, the suffering and fatigue seem irrational and arbitrary. We ride the curved back of the question mark straight into a wall of exhaustion. One woman who watched her husband deteriorate from Godward to wayward said, "You pound on 'why' because you think the answer reveals the mysterious virus causing the problems. You think, 'if I had obeyed God this wouldn't be happening.' You ask relentless questions about yourself, your marriage, and look for what you may have missed. It ends with you collapsed into a heap, exhausted, and defeated by the question!"

For some, "why?" is the most wearisome question on earth. But according to the author of Hebrews, Christ's suffering does not leave *why* unanswered. The cross helps make sense of the weariness of *why*. Christ's suffering at the hands of wayward sinners reminds us that gigantic good can come from the dreadfully bad things that exhaust us. Let me explain. Imagine for a moment that you were standing before the cross while the Son of Man hung suspended between heaven and earth. Flogged beyond recognition, exhausted beyond comprehension, a mass of bloodied flesh nailed to a tree. Jesus gasped for air, practically suffocating from the torment. It was utterly horrific.

Imagine further that you had been present for the prior three years of Christ's earthly ministry. What did you see? You were astounded by his power to heal; you marveled over his supernatural works; you delighted at his wit and wisdom; you were convicted by the marks of his righteousness. Everyone knew they were in the presence of a phenom. No living being had ever seen or heard anything like him.

But now... THIS! You stand before the cross bewildered, unreservedly flummoxed, totally stupefied! After all, the One who was so godly, so wise, so beautiful, so other-worldly was dying a gruesome death. The most perfect being ever born of a woman—the Son of Man, the Great I Am, the Savior—was being murdered by wicked men. He was dying. Soon he would be gone forever. If you could somehow find the words to convey your horror, they would likely escape through your clenched teeth as, "Why?" With a tone that's equal parts anger, confusion, and despair, you cry, "Is this how God deals with the righteous? Is THIS how God rewards those who follow

him wholeheartedly? Is *THIS* justice?”

“It’s insane,” you say. “How can good ever come of this?”

But wait! In less than a weekend, this spectacle of suffering will reveal a great miracle. The cross and resurrection revealed, once and for all, the immeasurable, unfathomable love God has for the wayward. At the cross, amid the blood, anger, and hostility, it all seems so arbitrary. But what we really behold is the subversive work of divine salvation where God’s justice was vindicated, sin’s penalty was paid, and God’s enemy was decisively vanquished. The midday darkness settling over the land was actually the dawn of a new day of power.

The cross stands as an eternal reminder that there’s always, *always*, an inconceivable good at work even in the worst events of your life.

This is the point: When you’re looking at Jesus on the cross, things look bad. The elusive *why* remains unanswered. You see only the irrational hostility, the misery of hopelessness, the agony of defeat—another hero whose young life was snuffed out.

But the appearance is not the substance.

In the drama of Golgotha, God was not merely the backstage director ensuring everything went according to script. He was the drama’s author, existing entirely outside of the production. He knew the beginning and the end. He wrote every part played and determined every word spoken. And his intentions were always loving and good.

In the end, Job realized this too. God was not absent. He wasn’t asleep on the job. He answered Job’s cries by reminding him that he is God, that he is not surprised, and that he’s in control. So, the good news for you is that God wrote your family drama, whatever it may be. And his intentions have always been loving and good! We see the trees; God sees the forest. Does your situation look pretty bad? God wants to plant some encouragement deep within your heart: the appearance is not the substance. The cross stands as an eternal reminder

that there's always, *always*, an inconceivable good at work even in the worst events of your life. The Author says so, and he wrote the script.

Christ's Suffering Keeps Our Weariness in Perspective

Fatigue isolates. All of our relational energy gets pumped into survival. Combine that with the shame factor or the "if-only-I-had-done-this" factor and you often have people navigating their path alone in dealing with a wayward loved one. In the echo chamber of solitude, it doesn't take long for dangerous thoughts to surface: *No one can relate to the pressures I feel. No one understands the absurdities within our family. No one gets what it's like for me to struggle daily with the weight of my loved one's sin.*

Actually, there is. And Jesus wants to encourage you from his experience. "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Heb 12:4).

Tucked in the interior of a secluded garden, Jesus knelt to pray. The stress was enormous as he prepared to become God's sacrificial lamb. Great drops of blood appeared on his forehead and streamed down his face—a bodily response to the crushing burden of sin that would be placed upon him. Denial, betrayal, torture, crucifixion, forsakenness—all of it just a few hours away. He knew the hearts of men (John 2:23–25). This would not end well.

Christ became an expert witness on what it meant to be overwhelmed by loving wayward people. "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But then, as though catching himself, he whispered, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matt 26:39).

Jesus sweat blood. He felt the strain, he fought back the temptations, he endured the scorn and humiliation of fools. Then he died, a bloody corpse on a cross. Jesus struggled against the sin of countless prodigals. He resisted any escape to the point of shedding his blood. "Violence and death," says P. T. O'Brien, "thus represent the supreme degree of opposition in a struggle against sin."³

Jesus was not only the pioneer of our faith, but he was also the pioneer in our temptations and struggles with wayward people. You are not alone; you are not crazy; your situation is not incomprehensible; your fatigue is not

³ P.T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 462.

unbearable; your suffering is not intolerable—Jesus has gone before you in this experience. He gets it. In fact, Jesus’ sweat and spilled blood ensure “that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16).

Are you weary? Take heart. Jesus understands, and he knows exactly what you need. Christ knows you’re tempted to lash out. He understands why it’s hard to sleep. Jesus knows what it’s like to feel forsaken. Don’t give up. You can bear their sins a bit longer without striking back.

But it’s not just about surviving an endurance test. There are practical things to be done that can fortify your perseverance. Think of them as endurance boosters:

1. Don’t neglect your physical health. Exercise, eating, and sleeping are not dispensable. Loving wayward people is a marathon, not a sprint. Neglecting your body is like adding ankle weights for the race. You become more easily wearied, worn-out, and tempted to withdraw. Don’t do it.

2. Don’t neglect your spiritual health. Take time to read and meditate on God’s promises. Confess your fears, your desire for control, your anger, then repeat. A season with a prodigal is like living at a rock concert—the music is always jacked up to a hundred decibels. Spiritual disciplines mute the racket and raise the gospel-decibels so we can hear from our Father in heaven. It’s a defining moment in your life. Fast, journal, write out your prayers; recruit a band of brothers and sisters to help.

3. Don’t neglect your emotional health. There’s much sadness right now; take time to grieve. Talk with close friends and leaders. Let fellowship be an oasis in the desert. Tell them how you feel and ask them to pray. And even though he knows, tell God exactly how you feel too. Every day. Look to the Psalms when you don’t know how to put your emotions into words.

4. Don’t neglect your relational health. When life gets hard, people withdraw. You will feel alone and isolated. That’s exactly what our enemy wants. Don’t give him the upper hand. Make sure that you are continuing to connect relationally with your church. Spend time with other Christians. Seek out those who have suffered similarly. Ask for help. Find out what fed them during their trials. Confess your sins to others as they surface. Trust God by relying on those who love you.

5. Don’t neglect your intellectual health. Push your thoughts beyond

your prodigal. Read biographies, work through a Bible study, do your hobby. This is not frivolous or meaningless; it will supply your soul through back channels. You are still human, you still have interests—don't let your world shrink to the size of your problems. Feed your sanity. It will help you keep it.

6. Don't neglect your familial health. You are a wife, a son, a parent. Yes, the wayward one is not present in the way you long for, but the others remain. Their confusion and pain abound. They need you, and they need your strength. The loss of one need not produce other casualties. Get busy loving and caring for them. Date your wife. Serve your sister. Gather the family to pray. Let those you love see the faith you hold.

Don't let your world shrink to the size of your problems.

7. Don't neglect your history. This is not the first time you've suffered. You bear other scars. Yet God has always been faithful. Remember back to the other times he came through. Remember how your fears prophesied your doom, but God delivered you. Remember, God raises the dead! He's done it in your soul. He's done it in your past. He can do it for your prodigal.

Above all, fight to keep the right perspective. Fleeing to Christ *will help*. By beholding him, we remind ourselves, "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood."

Christ's Suffering Calls Us to Not Grow Weary in Doing Good

Jesus loved prodigals to the very end. "It is finished" (John 19:30) was not a declaration of defeat but a statement of success. Christ had overcome sin. Love won. Forgiveness was available. Prodigals could come home.

But it can take time. Prodigals move slowly.

Last night I (Dave) spoke to a woman who said she has been seeking to love her wayward child who now lives in another city. She supplied a number of ways she was reaching out. It was a pretty impressive, intentional, love-saturated list. She asked me what else she might do. I simply said, "*And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up*" (Gal 6:9).

She got the point. Your prodigal is not your enemy. Giving up is your enemy. Weariness is your enemy. Thank God that there are certainly situations where a period of waywardness can be short. May it happen more! But most prodigals are more like the son in Luke 15:11–32, a saga that spans the length of time it would take to travel far, indulge much, sow bad seeds, reap consequences, collapse under consequences, get a clue, then travel slowly home.

Here's the formula for waiting: buckle up; don't grow weary; do good; don't give up! Most importantly, don't miss the promise: for in due season,

Your prodigal is not your enemy.
Giving up is your enemy.

we will reap. “Due season” is not here yet. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” (Eccl 3:1). Now is not the season or the time. But you will reap.

A Rugged and Redeeming Love

When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said, “Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord” (Hos 1:2). What a story! Through it, God wanted to show Hosea and us something about love. So Hosea obeyed and made Gomer his wife. He married a wayward woman.

A strong impulse that motivates the wayward heart is the desire to flee. Flee from God, from roles, from responsibilities, from consequences. Gomer fled. Hosea let her go. It was a display of rugged love. In the midst of this comes one of the most astonishing passages in Scripture.

And the Lord said to me, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.” So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. (Hos 3:1–2)

Go again. Hosea went once; now he's being called to do it yet again. *Go and pursue her, go and redeem her, go and do good!*

Hosea went. Gomer was redeemed. The point was made. God's love endures. God's love perseveres. God's love is longsuffering and patient. God does not give up. Aren't you glad God didn't grow weary of you? Aren't you grateful he never gave up? He didn't give up and neither should you.

Maybe you're married to Gomer right now and you must let her go, only to take her back again someday. Maybe Gomer is your teenager, or a close friend who's preparing for flight. Letting go does not mean forsaking love. Letting go does not mean abandoning mercy. Letting go means rugged love. What does this love look like? Love is rugged when it's strong enough to face evil. When it's tenacious enough to do good. Courageous enough to enforce consequences. Sturdy enough to be patient. Resilient enough to forgive. Trusting enough to pray boldly.

Rugged love never gives up.

Don't Give Up

We don't have all the reasons why God allows our wayward loved ones to wander, but we do know this: through this present mess, God is working. And if you feel like you're dying each day, be of good cheer. Remember the promise in Psalm 30:5, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

In the fullness of time, dark nights end, cold winters subside, and fruit comes forth. We live to laugh again because the One we rely upon is the one "who endured from sinners such hostility against himself."

We know you're tired. Don't give up. Christ endured. And through his grace, you will too.

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