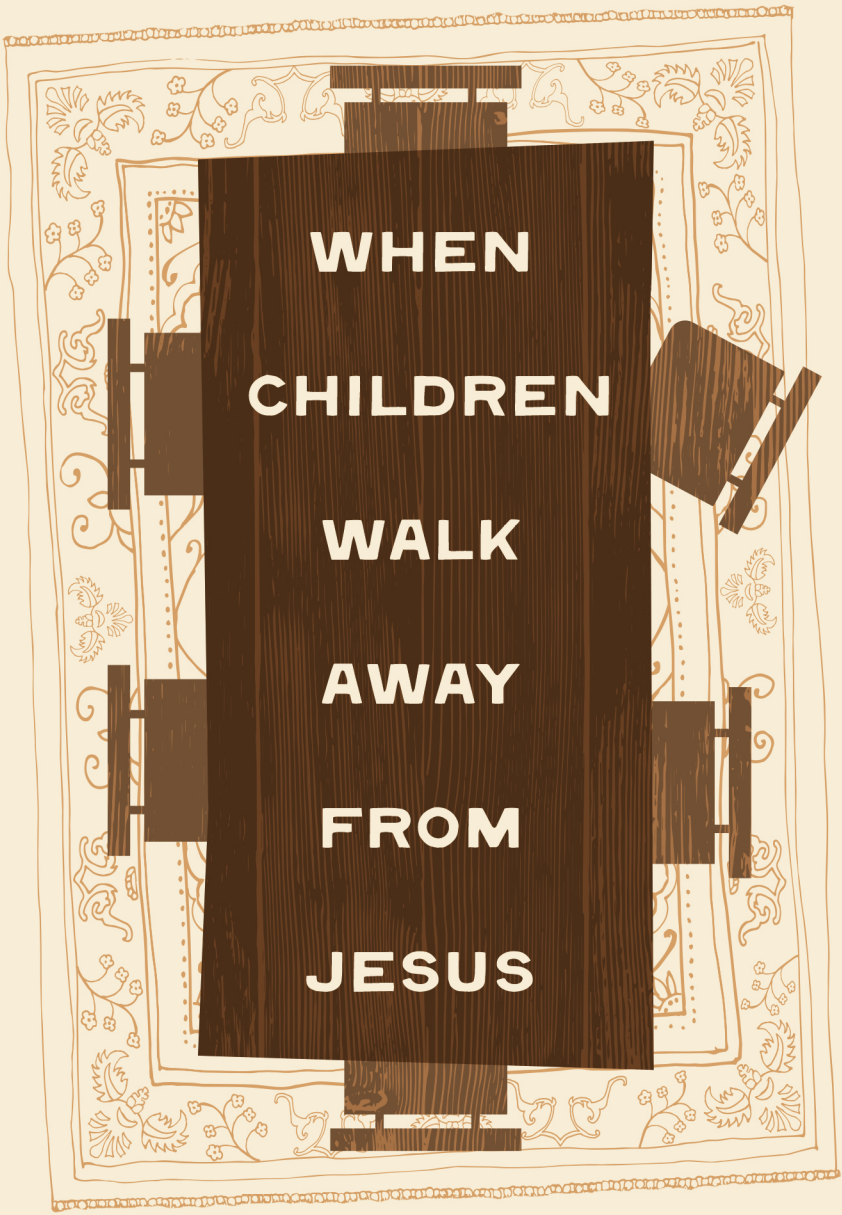
Paul Mallard



Comfort & Hope for Parents of Prodigals

"Is there any area of our lives in which we need comfort and hope more than in our parenting? Paul Mallard gives us sound biblical guidance, practical wisdom, and enough hope to keep praying for our children, whether they are walking with Jesus or not."

REV. DR MICHAEL P. JENSEN, Rector,
St Mark's Darling Point, Sydney

"In every congregation, faithful disciples are wrestling with the painful heartache of unbelieving children. With a tender tone but not avoiding difficult topics, Paul Mallard provides faithful pastoral counsel, full of the grace and truth of our Lord Jesus. There is help here not only for parents in pain but also for those seeking to support them, and those who pray for wandering prodigals."

JONATHAN PRIME, Director for London, FIEC

"Paul Mallard has drawn on decades of pastoral experience to provide practical wisdom for parents in pain. Writing with biblical conviction and compassionate understanding, Paul addresses the problems parents of prodigals face and the questions they ask. Highlights for me include Paul's application of 1 Corinthians 13 to loving rebellious children; his ten ways to pray for unconverted loved ones; his exhortation that 'we must not let our unsaved children drive a wedge between ourselves and our spouses'; his counsel on relating to loved ones who experience same-sex attraction and gender confusion; and his affirmation that the strong bond of parental love is a reflection of the love of God, which never lets his people go. I was helped by reading this book and quickly thought of others to whom I'd like to pass it on. I expect you will find the same."

COLIN S. SMITH, Pastor Emeritus, The Orchard; President,
Open the Bible (openthebible.org)

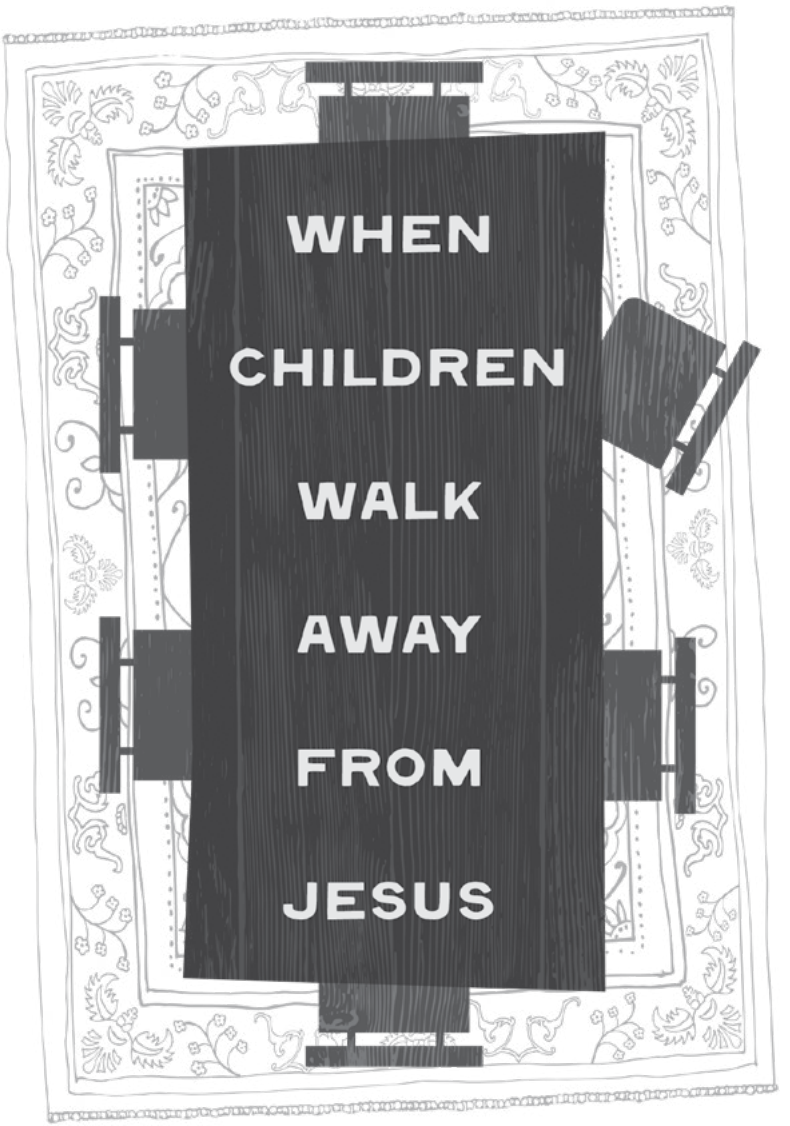
"As a redeemed prodigal and now a parent myself, I found Paul's words to be grace-filled, practically helpful and full of hope. Regardless of the stage of life, *When Children Walk Away* will spur on and encourage every Christian parent longing to see their child's life redeemed by the power of Jesus."

SARAH WALTON, Co-author, *Hope When it Hurts;*
Author, *The Long Road Home*

"Every now and again, a book is written which makes me think to myself, 'Why wasn't this written years ago?' This is one of those. It's a subject that is constantly relevant because it's a topic that is always painful, difficult, distressing and confusing. Paul writes with a pastor's loving wisdom, a preacher's clear communication and a theologian's faithful understanding. Every church member is going to benefit from this volume: it's for those directly affected by the sadness of unbelieving children and grandchildren; and it's for every believer as we stand with hurting brothers and sisters. Above all, while grounded in biblical reality, Paul offers us all hope: 'The arm of the LORD is not too short to save' (Isaiah 59:1)."

ADRIAN REYNOLDS, Pastor; Author; father and grandfather;
Associate National Director, Fellowship of Independent
Evangelical Churches, UK

Paul Mallard



Comfort & Hope for Parents of Prodigals

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Rick and Julie have three children.* They all grew up in the same home with the same Christian atmosphere. They all went to the same school, the same church youth group and the same Christian camps. All three of them professed faith and were baptised in their late teens. But now the contrast could not be starker. One of their sons is following Christ and serves in the church; their daughter attends church but is only nominal in her faith; their second son has drifted away from the faith entirely and lives with his girlfriend.

How do you explain the difference?

Rachel is a single mum. Her journey to faith started when she brought her son Daniel to a local church's parent-and-toddler group. They began attending services on Sundays, and Rachel was saved. Daniel also professed faith and, at the age of 19, went off to Bible college to train as a youth pastor. Rachel and all her friends at church were

* In this book I will use a number of illustrations from the personal experience of parents in pain. In each case I have their permission, but I have changed their names.

thrilled. He finished his course and got his first job. And then, out of the blue, he announced to his mum that he had lost his faith. It was just a fairy story, and Christians were hypocrites.

What went wrong?

George and Stella have a daughter called Kate. She seemed a happy little girl, but when she started high school, things fell apart. She was bullied and eventually developed an eating disorder. People at church prayed for her, but it seemed to get worse. After school she went through a series of toxic relationships. One day she told her parents that she was a lesbian. She said that if they didn't affirm her chosen life, she didn't want anything more to do with them. They pleaded with her, trying to find a way to maintain the relationship, but she was adamant. At the time of writing, George and Stella have not seen Kate for over two years.

How could this happen?

Having spent 40 years as a pastor, I could tell you many stories of children who were brought up in a Christian home and are now following Christ wholeheartedly.

But this book is not about those kinds of children.

It's about the other type of story I've seen play out. This book is for parents with children who were brought up in a Christian home but have since walked away from Jesus. Sometimes their rejection of Christianity happens suddenly and dramatically. In other cases, it's a gradual drift over many years. In either case, it's heartbreaking.

This may be your family's story. If it isn't, you will certainly know someone for whom this is a continuous source of crippling pain. For every family where the children seem to be well established in the faith, there will

be another where one or more of the children have deserted it. In most cases, the relationship between parents and children functions pretty well—the children respect, love and care for Mum and Dad. But they've tasted Christianity first-hand and want little or nothing more to do with it.

Who is this book for?

It is for you if you are experiencing the pain of a unsaved child.

It is for you if you are watching someone go through this.

It is for you if you want to minister to prodigals, their parents and their grandparents.

It is for you if you are afraid of losing your children.

It is written to help you to find grace and hope in loving children who do not love Jesus.

CHAPTER 1

WHY DOES IT HURT SO MUCH?

Joy... and Pain

One of the great joys of pastoral ministry is that you often get to visit new parents when their child has just been born. It can be very revealing. The moment that the midwife puts that tiny squalling cosmos into their arms, they know that things will never be the same again.

I think, for example, of a huge rugby player I knew, who was built like a refrigerator, gently cradling his newborn daughter and staring into her upturned face. I looked at him as he looked at her and thought, "The poor bloke has had it! He has just fallen in love. And nothing will ever be the same again."

Or there was the couple who had been married for 20 years and never thought that this would happen. After so many disappointments, they finally got the unexpected gift of a child. They looked as if they would explode with joy.

We had accepted that this would never happen and were determined to find all our satisfaction in the Lord. And then he surprised us! We are the most blessed people in the world! And at the same time, it's terrifying!

Our children are one of the greatest gifts that God can place into our hands. They are a joy and a delight and a privilege. But at the same time, the responsibility can seem overwhelming. That's why it can be terrifying. What if we get it wrong?

And sometimes our worst fear is realised. The children we cherished from before the first breath was in their lungs have rejected Christ and show no signs of ever returning to him.

So, along with the joy, parenthood can bring the most excruciating pain. You cannot love someone without opening yourself to injury. Love makes us vulnerable, and the more we love, the more we suffer. Grief is the price we pay for love.

And there is no pain like parental pain. A foolish child will break your heart. The Bible warns us as much.

Wise and Foolish Children

King Solomon was the wisest man of his time. The book of Proverbs records his God-given wisdom. After a series of profound meditations on the nature of wisdom (1 – 9), he begins a long list of individual wise sayings (10:1 – 22:16). At the head of the list, we find these words:

A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish son brings grief to his mother. (10:1)

Solomon speaks about sons, but it applies to daughters too. The contrast is stark—our children can be wise or foolish, and this will bring us either joy or grief.

Wisdom must not be confused with intelligence. Someone can have a very high IQ and yet behave like a fool. It is similarly possible to have few paper qualifications and yet to live a profoundly wise life. The secret of wisdom is the fear of the Lord:

> *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,*
> *but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (1:7)*

This verse acts as a kind of motto text for the whole book, from chapter 1 to the end (31:31). So what does it mean to fear the Lord? Fearing God goes hand in hand with loving and trusting him. We can enjoy and delight in God while treating him with reverence and awe. We can call him our Father, but we must remember that, in the words of the Lord's Prayer, our Father is "in heaven"—exalted far beyond us. Our greatest concern must be that his name is hallowed, his kingdom is established and his will is done.

Solomon says that a wise child will fear God and bring joy to his parents. Submitting to their instruction, he or she will successfully negotiate their way through the temptations of this world, whether they be dishonest gain (1:10-19) or sexual immorality (2:16-18). But a foolish child who turns their heart away from God will bring grief.

This is such an important warning that Solomon repeats it several times:

> *To have a fool for a child brings grief;*
> *there is no joy for the parent of a godless fool. (17:21)*

A foolish son brings grief to his father
and bitterness to the mother who bore him. (v 25)

On occasions we find the anxious parent stepping off the pages of the book to appeal to their child:

My son, if your heart is wise,
then my heart will be glad indeed;
my inmost being will rejoice
when your lips speak what is right. (23:15-16)

So a foolish child is one who rejects godly parental guidance and does not fear the Lord. A child can be foolish in all sorts of ways, but the most foolish thing that any child can do is to reject Jesus Christ. We may have all sorts of aspirations for our children, but surely our greatest longing is that they might come to know the Saviour. When they turn their back on him, it feels like a sword to the heart.

And this foolishness can take many forms.

A Wide Spectrum

Sometimes this foolishness is easy to spot.

Our children may get in trouble with the law or pursue destructive behaviours such as bulimia or self-harm. Their actions may have grave consequences—an unwanted pregnancy or a failed marriage. There may be the harmful effects of addiction or substance abuse. Perhaps you're having to watch as your child embraces a lifestyle of sexual promiscuity or same-sex relationships or gender confusion.

Jesus' famous parable of the prodigal son gives us a picture of this kind of out-and-out rebellion (Luke 15:11-32).

> *There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them. (v 11)*

The younger son does not want to spend his inheritance in philanthropic projects but in self-indulgent adventures. He is often referred to as *prodigal* because he behaved in an extravagant way (which is what the word actually means). He is wasteful, reckless, imprudent and immoderate. Eventually he loses everything and ends up with the pigs. Here he comes to his senses:

> *"How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." So he got up and went to his father. (v 17-20)*

On returning home, he is barely able to utter his words of repentance before his father embraces him and celebrates his return.

> *But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate. (v 22-24)*

We may think that this is a fitting conclusion to the story. But we have forgotten the second son. And he is just as much a rebel against his father—but in a different way.

When he hears about the celebration, he is furious and refuses to join in, castigating his father:

> *Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! (v 29-30)*

Perhaps we feel some sympathy. But the father sees more clearly than his older son:

> *"My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (v 31-32)*

Jesus is teaching against the backdrop of the angry murmuring of the religious leaders who are scandalised by his acceptance of sinful people at his table (v 1-2). The two sons—like the religious leaders and the sinful outcasts of Jesus' day—stand at two ends of a spectrum.

The first son cast off parental guidance, wasted his material possessions, and might have lost his life in the process. He scorned the precious relationship with his father. He was destitute economically, socially and spiritually. The second son worked tirelessly in the family business, but he also rejected his father's values. By his attitude of heart and refusal to forgive, he showed that he despised his father's grace and kindness. Both boys bring grief to their father.

This parable illustrates the wide spectrum of ways in which an unbelieving child may distance themselves from

their parents—and ultimately from God himself, whom the father in the story represents.

At one end of the spectrum is the child who rejects both their parents' faith and their parents' values. This may be caused by some terrifying and life-destroying addiction. Or the fractures in the relationship may be because of lifestyle choices that are acceptable in the world's eyes but not in the Lord's. Sometimes the alienation seems to have no obvious root cause, but the child simply drifts away from the parent over time. Contact becomes rare or non-existent.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is the "respectable" child who stays close to their parents and shows them great honour. Perhaps they attend church and encourage their own children to be part of a Christian community. They have good marriages and fruitful careers. They may even share many of the beliefs of their parents. I knew one young man who was convinced by the "young earth" account of creation—that God created the world in six literal days. Even when studying physics at university, he refused to abandon this position. But he openly confessed that he was not a Christian. He was convinced of the truthfulness of the Christian faith but had no personal trust in Jesus. And this is the crux of the matter. It is possible to say all the right things and to behave in a respectable, almost "Christian" way, and yet be unsaved.

And of course there is a wide range of experience that sit somewhere in between. Where does your child fall on this spectrum?

If your child is more towards the *respectable* end, the temptation is complacency. They may be happy and well. They may seem like good people. But they still need Jesus.

If your child is in open rebellion, the temptation is to despair. But don't give up. No one is so far gone that they are outside the orbit of God's grace. He is more than capable of running out to meet them and welcoming them home.

We'll say more about both of these temptations later. But first it's important to acknowledge that wherever your child lies on the spectrum, an appropriate response to their lostness is grief.

Kids Break Your Heart

The word translated "grief" in Proverbs 10:1 refers to extreme emotional pain—akin to the pain of bereavement.

Think of the grief of King David. His rebellious son, Absalom, endangers his father's life and tries to snatch the kingdom from him. But when David hears that Absalom has been killed in the battle, he is overcome with grief.

> *The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!"*
>
> *(2 Samuel 18:33)*

If we read on into the next chapter of 2 Samuel, we discover that this grief is so overwhelming that it causes David to lose all perspective. He neglects his kingly responsibilities as sorrow smothers his heart. Joab, the commander of his army, is driven to warn David:

> *Now go out and encourage your men. I swear by the LORD that if you don't go out, not a man will be left*

> *with you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come on you from your youth till now. (19:7)*

In David's case, the death of Absalom meant that there was no hope of restoration. If our children are still alive, we must never abandon hope. One of the purposes of this book is to engender such hope. However, we must also be honest about the reality of the pain which we feel. It is a kind of bereavement.

The word *bereave* comes from an Old English word meaning "to deprive of, to take away by violence, to seize, to rob". When your children walk away from Jesus, it feels as though something precious has been taken away from you. You have invested so much in their upbringing. When you first became a parent, you didn't realise just how demanding it would be, but you raised your children with all the grace, grit and gumption you could muster. You did your best to guard your home and protect your children. You sought to prepare them for the future and for the time when they would leave you and launch out on their own. You wanted them to have roots and wings. You longed for them to live wise and God-honouring lives.

Perhaps it came as a huge shock, then, when these delightful children turned into rebellious teenagers. When they rejected your faith, you experienced both deep pain and a debilitating sense of failure. We may know in theory that all of us are born with a sinful heart and need to experience God's grace personally—but when *our* kids don't come to faith, we often blame ourselves. A sense of failure is one of the constant companions of parenting. We will return to this in chapter 3.

But there's one way this swirl of parental love and grief can also strangely encourage us.

The Gravity of Love

When my kids were small, they loved playing on what they called the death-slide at the indoor soft play centre. You know the kind of thing I mean—a slide with a near vertical drop. You sit on the edge looking down, trying to pluck up the courage to go over the top. But if you get too close, gravity takes over and down you go. There is no arguing with gravity.

There is a kind of gravity about parental love which you only discover when you become a parent. Of course our children love us, but the love that we have for them is usually more profound and sacrificial. We often don't really appreciate the sacrifices that our own parents made for us until we become parents ourselves. Our children may disappoint us and neglect us and break our hearts, and we will still go on loving them. The pull towards them is like gravity. The author Max Lucado captures this in a powerful story about a mother and daughter:

> *Longing to leave her poor Brazilian neighbourhood, Christina wanted to see the world. Discontent with a home having only a pallet on the floor, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove, she dreamed of a better life in the city. One morning she slipped away, breaking her mother's heart. Knowing what life on the streets would be like for her young, attractive daughter, Maria hurriedly packed to go find her. On her way to the bus stop she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures. She sat*

in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself. With her purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro. Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for street walkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture—taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note.

It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village. It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet. Yet the little village was, in too many ways, too far away. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation. "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." She did.[1]

I can't help but hear an echo of the story of the prodigal son. As we reflect on the gravity of a parent's love, perhaps we can enter the heart of God. Our love for our children gives us a glimpse of his love for us—which is greater by far.

The prophet Hosea compares God's love to the love of a father, with the nation of Israel being his rebellious son. The Lord says:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
But the more they were called,
the more they went away from me.
They sacrificed to the Baals
and they burned incense to images.
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
taking them by the arms;
but they did not realise
it was I who healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with ties of love.
To them I was like one who lifts
a little child to the cheek,
and I bent down to feed them. (Hosea 11:1-4)

Can you feel the tenderness of God's love here? Hosea deliberately uses images which reflect the affection and compassion God has for his people.

Because of Israel's sin, the Lord must chasten the rebellious nation. But he cannot stop loving his son:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Admah?

How can I make you like Zeboyim?
My heart is changed within me;
all my compassion is aroused.
I will not carry out my fierce anger,
nor will I devastate Ephraim again.
For I am God, and not a man—
the Holy One among you.
I will not come against their cities. (v 8-9)

When we love our wayward children, we are experiencing something of God's heart towards us. The Lord set up human families for this very purpose—to show us something true about him. Parental love—however costly—is a beautiful God-given gift.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you think your wayward child is more like the younger son or the older son, or somewhere in between?

2. This chapter touched on lots of different things we might be feeling: complacency, despair, grief, pain, shock, hope, love. Which of those best describe the way that you're feeling at the moment with regard to your unbelieving child? How have your feelings changed over time?

3. What do you think it would look like to "feel rightly" in this situation?

4. In what ways have you experienced the gravity of parental love? How does it give you an insight into the heart of God?