

What am I doing here?

He watched a herd of pigs, his only companions these days, crowding feet and snouts into the feeding-trough – and almost envied them. Born to greater things, destined for higher service, you can almost hear the tearful whisper as he asked himself, ‘What am I doing here?’

He cast his mind back to that morning months ago when he had left the security of his father’s house. There had been a sparkle in his eye then, not to mention a bagful of money in his hand. But the money had soon been squandered on short-lived pleasures, of which not even the memory remained to comfort him now.

What a fool he had been! He had turned his back on his father’s house, wasted away his inheritance, and ended up in a pigsty.

Shivering in the cold wind, he tried not to think of his room and the place of honour he had enjoyed back home. He had held a position of responsibility in the family business then, putting his God-given gifts and abilities to full use. But now he was reduced to feeding pigs, and his only shelter was a reeking sty.

He longed to fill his empty stomach with the pods the pigs

were eating but doubted he would be able to digest them. If only he had someone to talk to! Maybe it would take his mind off his hunger. But he was alone and he found his mind wandering back to home again and the companionship of his father – a gentle, loving man who had always tried to instruct him in the ways of God. How he wished he had listened to him now.

The turning-point for the Prodigal Son came when he faced up to himself honestly and took the only righteous course of action open to him: he returned home to ask his father's forgiveness. God blessed him for it by fully restoring him to his family.

The Revised Authorised Version describes his realisation of the need for change in the words: 'He came to himself' (Luke 15:17). Stripped of all the externals that had recently made up his life, he was forced to see himself and his situation as they truly were.

And this is where we must begin if we mean business about getting our lives in tune with God and keeping them there.

One preacher said of the Prodigal: 'He took off his coat and came to his shirt. He took off his shirt and came to his vest. Then he took off his vest and *came to himself!*'

We must do something similar, consciously stripping off the layers of tradition and habit that make up our lives. We must look beyond the familiar religious routine and the comforts and securities we have clung to for so long. Weighing very carefully the advice and opinions of others, we must ask ourselves, like the Prodigal Son, 'What am I doing here?'

Then, aware of our tendency to make excuses for ourselves, we must determine to answer that question with complete honesty and, in the light of God's Word, make whatever changes the answer requires.

'Be on guard for yourselves'

The Bible's call to 'be on guard for yourselves' (Acts 20:28 NASB) isn't a call to a life of introspection. It is a call to keep a check on our own lives for the sake of our own well-being – part of an ongoing process designed by God to keep us right in the centre of his will and on the cutting edge of his purpose.

It doesn't matter whether we have been saved for ten years or ten weeks. It doesn't matter whether we hold a position of leadership or not. Self-examination is necessary for us all.

The apostle Paul gave a similar command to his young *protégé*, Timothy. 'Pay close attention to yourself,' he urged (1 Timothy 4:16 NASB). He was concerned with the effectiveness of the young man's ministry – his teaching, preaching, exhorting and use of spiritual gifts – but in the midst of it all he pinpointed a priority on which all the rest depended: 'yourself'.

'But surely it's my pastor who is responsible for my spiritual well-being,' you may reply. 'I take my direction from him.'

True, God has provided spiritual leaders to shepherd us in our faith, and those of us in leadership ourselves need to take our ministry seriously. As those who keep watch over others, we will be called to account to God for the way in which we have led (Hebrews 13:17) and, as teachers, we will incur a stricter judgment for the word we have taught (James 3:1). Nevertheless, those of us who follow leaders and are taught by them are not absolved from responsibility for our own condition. We must one day give *an account for ourselves* (Romans 14:12).

While leaders certainly need our love, respect and co-operation, we must not fall into the trap of relying so heavily upon them that we fail to think for ourselves.

Leadership is no guaranteed safeguard against missing the way in our spiritual pilgrimage – remember the faithless kings of Israel who deliberately led the people astray, and the recurring problem of false prophets throughout Scripture. Remember, too, Jesus' continual confrontation with the hypocritical Pharisees, leaders whom he accused of being 'blind guides. If

a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit' (Matthew 15:14).

The responsibility is ours.

'Examine yourselves,' urges Paul, 'to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves' (2 Corinthians 13:5). How can we do that? What are the questions we need to ask?

We have already posed the question, 'What am I doing here?' But the experience of the Prodigal Son suggests there are several other matters we need to consider before we can answer that question realistically.

Where am I?

The first thing is to ascertain *where you are now and how that measures up to where you should be.*

Are you truly 'in your Father's house' – a local church where the Word of God is not only preached but put into practice, where God is worshipped in spirit and in truth (John 4:24) and where the Spirit of God moves unhampered? Or are you, like the Prodigal Son, struggling to survive, without vision and without hope, far from home?

One Christian woman, Helen, was in membership with a church for eight years before her disillusionment finally resulted in a decision to leave.

'Basically there was a resistance to the Bible,' she recalls. 'Some, including myself, wanted to go on with God into new and exciting pastures, but others, including the minister, wanted to stay as they had been for years, and they actively opposed the work of the Holy Spirit. Preaching often wasn't put into practice and I knew that, if my hunger for God was to be satisfied, I'd have to move on.'

Richard's experience was similar. 'The church was stuck in its own tradition instead of moving in the way God was prompting,' he says. 'Our minister was born again and baptised in the Spirit, but the church was dividing into those who wanted to go on with God and those who wouldn't accept change. In

the end I had to leave and find a people who shared my vision of what God wanted to do.'

Brian's dissatisfaction sprang from the lack of that true worship which he believes is a hallmark of New Testament Christianity (John 4:24).

'There was also a lack of emphasis on certain foundational biblical doctrines,' he adds, 'including water baptism, baptism in the Holy Spirit and the functional role of apostles and prophets. After I attended a Christian conference in 1984, God clearly told me to move to a church which practised these things. It was hard to find myself drifting away from friends but I know I've made the right decision - and I've lost a good deal of frustration!'

How about you? Are you in your Father's house?

What am I doing?

*Are you being encouraged to discover, develop and use the gifts and abilities God has given you? Or is that part of your inheritance wasting away, choked by unbelief, prejudice or the fear of others? Are you doing your Father's work in the family business, which is the kingdom of God, or have you been reduced to maintaining a dull and unrewarding *status quo*?*

Bob, a church deacon, was training to become a minister. Keenly aware of the new responsibility he was facing and realising his need to be equipped by God, he found his hunger for him growing. In response, he went on a special week of evangelism, during which he received the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

'It was like light flooding in,' he relates, 'and it changed my whole relationship with God. It affected my worship, my prayer life, my understanding of the Bible - it was very exciting!'

'On returning to my church, however, I soon realised there was a resistance to the Holy Spirit. The church was heavily weighed down with structure and the leaders wouldn't do anything that might cause opposition. They were preoccupied

with holding together what they had, but I had a desire to reach further into God and impact people outside the church. I knew God was trying to build something that wasn't structure-oriented but would touch people's lives.

'Leaving wasn't easy, but it was necessary to enable God to develop and fully use the gift he has placed within me. The greatest satisfaction comes from knowing that I have served God's purposes wholeheartedly and have been able to touch many lives as a result.'

How about you? What are you doing with your gifts and abilities?

What am I feeding on?

Are you feasting at your Father's table on the uncompromising Word of God preached with authority and power? Or are you dieting on a watered-down, wishy-washy version which leaves you as undernourished spiritually as the Prodigal Son would have been physically had he really tried to exist on a diet of pods?

We have all seen pictures of the terrible effects of malnutrition on a human body, but have you ever stopped to think what effect spiritual undernourishment has on your spirit?

Remember Helen, who left to find a church where her hunger for God could be satisfied? Looking back four years later, this is what she has to say: 'If you're not getting spiritual food to satisfy you, then find a place where you will be satisfied - or you'll just shrivel up and die.'

To whom am I joining myself?

Who are the people you have joined yourself to? Are they genuinely and unashamedly born again? Do they love God and his Word? Are they committed to serving his purposes and supporting each other? Are the leaders born again and Spirit-filled, competent and caring?

The sad fact is that many who are born again into the family of God, and whose rightful place is in Father's house, are

attempting to join themselves to the unjoinable and to find fellowship with those who, spiritually speaking, are not their fellows. Many unbelievers are pleasant folk, and in everyday life we extend to them all the normal courtesies. But when it comes to local church life there can be no true oneness without each individual's having had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

Paul puts it this way: 'Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.' Then he adds a series of penetrating questions, of vital relevance to our church connections: 'What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?' (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

The answer is obvious, and Paul concludes with a powerful call to separation (v17). Obviously we are not talking here about unsaved persons *visiting* the church or even attending fairly regularly. We refer to the situation where unbelievers are accepted as full members, or where the minister or pastor is himself unsaved.

It is inconceivable and unacceptable that genuine believers, righteous in Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, should remain in religious forms and systems where the truth is denied. To do so will lead, in the end, to our own spiritual loss as surely as if we had cast our treasure before swine. Our own eternal foundation may remain secure, but we will have built upon it with materials more in keeping with a farmyard than with a temple (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

"Therefore come out from them and be separate," says the Lord' (2 Corinthians 6:17).