



Creating a Prodigal-Friendly Church
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OVERTURE: GRACE AND MR. PERLMAN

*Overture: Introduction to an
opera or other musical work.*

*“Grace ’tis a charming sound, harmonious to mine ear,
heaven with the echo shall resound, and all the earth shall hear . . .”*

PHILIP DODDRIDGE¹

You could call it the Miracle on West 65th Street. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, it happened at that address, in New York’s Lincoln Center, during a violin concerto.²

The concert hall was bustling with warm, preperformance hubbub before the announcer spoke. *Ladies and gentlemen, kindly take your seats now; this evening’s performance will begin in two minutes.* People glanced at tickets and hurried to find their rows. They edged their way down the narrow lines of seats to find, at last, their allotted places. *Excuse me. Thank you. You’re welcome. Is this my seat?*

Miracles often come without warning or fanfare, and this time was no exception. There was no hint that they were all on the threshold of an experience that they would never forget, a moment to celebrate decades later.

The purposeful din of the orchestra’s tuning faded and the lights dimmed, hushing a thousand conversations. The audience was eager for the concert to begin, ready to savor the talents of Itzhak Perlman, arguably the world’s greatest violinist.

Perlman is usually the last person to take his place on stage, for though his fingers are staggeringly nimble, his legs don’t work

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nearly as well. He was struck with polio when he was just twelve, and now he struggled across the huge platform to take his seat, his stumbling, ungainly walk aided by crutches and leg braces.

At last, he sat down, removed both braces from his legs, and placed his violin beneath his chin. He was ready—and in more ways than one. Perlman's brilliance is no fluke. He practices for nine hours daily. And for forty-five minutes before every concert, he is alone in his dressing room, with two security guards at the locked door. They have explicit instructions to let no one in under any circumstances. *Mr. Perlman has finished practicing. Now he is praying. Do not disturb.*

And pray he must. The concerto is considered one of the most important and difficult works in the violin repertoire. Its technical demands on the soloist are huge. Brahms' *Violin Concerto in D Major* is simply "unplayable" according to one virtuoso. That miracle night, Perlman was set to perform this extraordinarily challenging piece that would last over six minutes.

A few seconds into the solo, the sound of a string breaking on Perlman's violin ricocheted around the hall. The unwelcome *twang* was an uncouth intruder among a myriad of perfect notes. The orchestra immediately stopped playing, their music tapering off chaotically. The crowd gasped. Protocol permits a musician to call for a pause, allowing time for them to hurry off stage to replace the string. It's quite impossible to play a complicated violin concerto a string short.

Impossible, that is, unless your name is Perlman. With a wave he signaled the orchestra to continue. And then the unthinkable happened.

Instantaneously transposing the music for three strings instead of four, Perlman delivered the piece flawlessly, his dancing fingers producing sounds of unprecedented purity and passion. Six minutes later, spent and soaked in sweat, he lowered his violin. The crowd sat in stunned silence for eight seconds. And then they rose as one to their feet, a wall of wild cheering and thunderous applause. The orchestra joined in, banging their instruments

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in homage and shouting themselves hoarse. Perlman called for a microphone, motioned for silence, and then the man with two busted legs and one busted string spoke:

“All my life, it has been my mission to make music from that which remains.”

His brilliance was expressed through something broken. The shattered string, which could have stopped the music, only served to accentuate Perlman’s staggering talent. Greater glory came because the melody-maker used a temporarily useless instrument.

GOD’S GRACE: MUSIC TO OUR EARS

And that is precisely what God has always done with us, creating beautiful music through broken people. How desperately the world needs to hear the charming sound that is grace. There’s no shortage of harsh noise on this planet, but rather a famine of real music. Daily our ears and hearts are bombarded with the ominous, deep bass sounds of terrorism and war; we are both tormented and tempted by the shrill ditties of commercialism and perplexed by the monotone, haunting chants of fundamentalism. But there is yet beautiful music to be heard in the universe. God longs for the lilting melody of his love to be heard, true music to the ear for those who have ears to hear it.

Though all of us need to hear this song, prodigals desperately need to hear it. A prodigal is someone who has walked or drifted away from God, sometimes because they’ve been seduced by another sound. They’ve heard the Father’s love song, but they felt like they were always “facing the music” rather than being wooed by it. Some got bored with the sound; the gospel became repetitive and predictable, like an endless sound loop played while you’re on hold, a nagging ditty. Still others heard the song, but pushed it to the background — elevator music.

Others heard it loud and clear, but it didn’t seem quite real, like a wedding singer belting out Beatles numbers. Some of them may have been briefly inoculated with a mild dose of vacuous religion, but the vaccination turned bad and they showed God their

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backs. Marching off to the so-called far country, that place where the thrill rules, where eternity is ignored and the next second is everything, they have lived unconcerned about God's ways and unmoved by his love. Perhaps there have been occasional chats with him over the years, but the call has always been long distance, and usually of the 911 type. Now they want to make the relationship local, not just for emergencies.

And there are other prodigals who have never given God a second thought, but now they can't get him out of their minds, and they're showing up at churches hoping to hear the sound of a welcome-home party. Strictly speaking, perhaps they're not prodigals, but their desire to come in from the cold into the warmth of the kingdom party is wonderful—and deeply challenging, especially for some of us guests who have already been seated around the banqueting table for a while. The prodigals' arrival home creates a reaction. Some of us join in with the welcome party, and some are less happy. There are those who celebrate, and some who rage at their homecoming. Still others are coldly indifferent. *A prodigal is home? Alright, but he'd better fit in, toe the line, and clean up quick.*

When a prodigal comes home, it's an answer to prayer—and the beginning of a potential crisis. The presence of "sinners" made "holy" people feel uncomfortable in Jesus's day. Two thousand years later, the tension continues.

WHY THIS BOOK?

In my first book on this subject, *Will Your Prodigal Come Home?*, I sought to bring words of honesty and hope to those who love prodigals, those who worry and hurt as they wait for a homecoming. I tried to show that we can carry guilt about our prodigals that is not really ours to own. Adam and Eve had the perfect parenting of God—and yet they still walked away. God has always had trouble with his kids. I called us to release our prodigals to come back home to *God*—not to our church, our ways, or our opinions. I celebrated the truth that God truly is the persistent "hound of heaven" out there in the far country, searching out the

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prodigals: the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son are all part of but *one* parable. The father who anxiously scans the horizon and then sprints to welcome his son is also the diligent shepherd wandering the bleak hills, looking for those who have told him to get lost and who have gotten lost themselves. His character is explored in yet another story of the woman who turns her house upside down as she searches high and low for a coin and then throws an impromptu party when it's found. I encouraged faith-filled prayer for the return of our prodigals and offered some words that can be used as prayers to those whose pain has rendered them speechless.

But all our hoping and praying will be to no avail if prodigals return to churches that are efficient, “prodigal-making” machines. Speaking recently at a conference about reaching prodigals, Rob Parsons put it memorably: “We need to pray that the returning prodigals will meet the Father before they bump into the elder brother.”³ We urgently need prodigal-friendly churches for but one reason: prodigals matter.

Right now, as your eyes pass over this print, tens of thousands of so-called prodigals are thinking about taking a hike home to God. Their fun ran out with their money—or maybe money couldn't buy enough fun—and now they're bored, scared, lonely, and empty. They deserve a boisterous welcome party that they could never earn. Will we surprise them with love?

And at this very moment, there are people who love prodigals, who are aching terribly, haunted by worry, some of them jumpy and fearful every time the phone rings. Perhaps you are one of them. There are parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends who are weeping for prodigals, desperately praying that they will come safely home. It hurts like hell (I use the phrase thoughtfully) to love a prodigal. God forbid that the prayers of those so broken and bruised would be sabotaged by someone like the loud, aggressive big brother in the story, a pious party pooper who wants to pull the plug on the band and save the fatted calf for a “nicer” occasion. Those who cry for prodigals matter.