Bob: Steve and Judy Douglass remember clearly the night their son Josh became angry and violent. The police were called in.

Judy: The police came; he ran. A policewoman chased him down, and he’s about to hit her. She said: “Son, don’t do that. I don’t want to hurt you.” He put his hammer down, and he went with them. He went to JDC in his handcuffs. He called about three in the morning; he said, “Can you come get me out of this place?!” “No, we can’t.”

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Friday, December 20th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You’ll find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. What do you do, as parents, when the son you love wants to walk away from you and from Jesus? How do you respond? We’ll talk with Judy Douglass about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. We are hearing, this week, a powerful story about a mom and a dad, and two sisters, who reached out in love to a new brother, who came into the family, and found challenges along the way. Judy Douglass is joining us again on FamilyLife Today. Judy, welcome back.

Judy: Thank you.

Bob: Judy is the Director of Women’s Resources for Cru®. You guys know a little bit about Cru; don’t you?

Dave: We were on Cru staff for 15 years—some of the best years of our life—when we first got married. It was awesome.

Bob: You have stayed connected with Cru over the years, both with your involvement with FamilyLife®—because FamilyLife is a division of Cru—but also with working with Athletes in Action and chaplains in the NFL—many of those guys are Cru connected; right?

Dave: Oh, yes; most of the chaplains in the NFL are Athletes in Action staff. We support Cru staff members financially and prayerfully. We love this ministry.

Judy: And we love that! [Laughter]
Bob: Judy and Steve—when did you join staff?

Judy: Nineteen sixty-four.

Bob: Today, Steve is the president of Cru International/Campus Crusade for Christ®. You guys have been faithful for decades.

You have been sharing with us, this week, the story of your son Josh, who—you were foster parents for Josh for a couple of years; then, had the opportunity to adopt him. You knew that he had scars. You didn’t know how those scars would manifest themselves during his adolescent years.

He spent a year-and-a-half in a residential program, because he was acting out so much that he couldn’t stay in school. You guys had to do something. When he graduated from that residential program and came back into your home, were you thinking: “Okay; it’s going to work now. Things are going to be okay from this point on”?

Judy: Mostly, I was thinking, “Things were going to be better”; and it was. I would say, for the next six months, he really was doing well, wanting to walk with God. He’d made a genuine decision and commitment of his life. I ended up homeschooling him for the next semester to get him up to grade with the program they’d used in the program he was in. He did okay. We had special things to make up for his lack of academic prowess.

I was committed to him in a way that I hadn’t been. He felt that; he knew it—we became close. The downside of that was that my husband and daughters lost out—not totally—but it did pull me, emotionally, away from them some and focused on Josh. Some of that was necessary, because he required so much attention. When I started homeschooling him, it put us together a lot.

Ann: Looking back, would you do that any different?

Judy: I would pay more attention, I think, to the fact that I was getting pulled away; so that was a challenge.

He did fine, but he begged to go back to school. Finally, with all sorts of: “These things must be…”/”These things must not be…you can go to school.” It took him three weeks to find his old friends, and so he quickly went down.

Wonderful things would happen; for example, Steve became president. Josh McDowell said—

Bob: —President of Cru.
Judy: —President of Cru.

Bob: Right.

Judy: Josh McDowell said: “I have a gift for you, Steve. I’m going to take your son for a month.” Josh McDowell took Josh for a month. It was incredibly wonderful. They studied Proverbs together; and Josh McDowell made our Josh work, and work, and work. I thought, “How did you do that?” We still hadn’t figured out how to make him work.

He’d come home for a while, and he’d do well for a while. His Christian life was: occasional high points, and long low points, and occasional high points. God sent other people into his life to do that—he would grow, and he would profess faith; but he couldn’t live it out very long.

Bob: You know, you think about—and my mind went immediately to 1 Corinthians 15, where it says: “Do not be deceived. Bad company corrupts good morals.” You think about kids, who feel alienated and isolated; when those kids meet other kids, who feel alienated and isolated, it’s like: “Ah!

Dave: Yes.

Bob: “Somebody—

Judy: “Family! I’m home.”

Bob: Yes; “Somebody who thinks like me!

Ann: “I’m home.”

Bob: Right; it’s: “Somebody who can relate to what I’m going through.” There’s an environment, where alienated and isolated people congregate; that’s not a good environment for any of them to get better.

Ann: Is there any way we, as parents, can control that? Looking back, what would you have done?

Judy: The way we tried to control—once they’re 16 and get a driver’s license, it becomes almost impossible to control. Now, maybe, you can track them; but then, we couldn’t track them. [Laughter] Those are hard things. He had good times, and he had bad times. In the process, I’m on my knees, calling out to God. I gathered other people to pray with me—I said: “We can’t make it happen. It’s going to have to be God. Will you join us?”

For several years—June 2nd was his spiritual birthday—so I named June 2nd the Worldwide Prodigal Prayer Day and asked people to pray, with me and us, for Josh; we
did that. After about three years of that, God said, “You know there are a lot of others.” I said, “Yes, I know!” He said, “Why don’t you make it a Prodigal Prayer Day for anyone/everyone?”

That was the beginning of what has become a virtual, online prayer community. There are, right now, 900 people in this group. Any day, you can go onto our website. Most of these people have never met each other. People have posted: “Today, my son went to jail,” or “Today, my son’s coming home from jail; and we’re terrified,” or “They’re this,” or “They’re that,” “They’re on drugs,” “They’re addicted in various ways.” Other people come and pray for them. Many pray; some people actually write out their prayers, which gives hope and encouragement to them. It’s a sweet, sweet place.

**Bob:** By the way, we’ve got a link on our website at FamilyLifeToday.com to that website. If folks, who are listening right now, say: “I need someone to pray for me. I need somebody who would just come alongside me in this journey,” you can go to FamilyLifeToday.com and look for the link to the website Judy’s talking about to pray for prodigals.

After Josh is back home, and he’s now a teenager, was there a day you’d identify as the darkest day in your journey with him?—a day when you said, “This was when I thought, ‘I don’t know if I can do this anymore’”?

**Judy:** Well, there were several. One, he ended up in juvenile detention for a couple of days; because he had his wisdom teeth out, and his pain medication—he decided to take it all. He was out of his mind, and he was going to his car to drive. Steve saying, “No; I can’t let you go drive in the condition you’re in.” He said, “You can’t stop me.” He said, “Well, I’m going to.” He goes and gets a hammer to come and hit Steve.

But Steve—Josh’s friend had given Steve a baseball bat, which he’s holding up as he stands beside the car. Josh had called 9-1-1 when he went to get the hammer and he said, “Somebody’s about to get hurt.”

**Bob:** He called the police—on himself?! Wow!

**Judy:** He called the police; we’re so glad he did. He didn’t think that, maybe that it was on him; but anyway. We’re out there, trying to keep him from hitting Steve with a hammer, without hitting him, instead, with a baseball bat.

The police came; he ran. A policewoman chased him down, and he’s about to hit her. She said: “Son, don’t do that. I don’t want to hurt you.” He put his hammer down and he went with them. He went to JDC in his handcuffs. He called about three in the morning—he said, “Can you come get me out of this place?!” “No, we can’t. Even if we wanted to, we can’t. You have to stay for the hearing.” It was over a holiday, so he was there for two-and-a-half days when he went to court.
They almost sent him home with us. Steve said, “Look, we’re his parents, and we care; but we’re also the victims here.” Instead, they sent him to Boys Town for three weeks, where he worked the program well, and was Star Guest of the Week twice. Then he was very remorseful and sad that he had done that. It was a time—we’re sad; but oh! What God did!

**Bob:** So, bring us to what God did.

**Judy:** Well, two parts, then. He [God] met me in helping to understand what is best—not the only thing—but what really makes the difference in loving and caring for these kids, who are hurting in some way/who are making these destructive choices. I got to know lots, and lots, and lots of them—the parents, mostly. He says, “How do I respond to you when you sin?”

“Okay; there’s mercy; there’s grace. Yes, there’s correction; but I never feel like, ‘You’re angry at me, Lord. I never feel like You’re going to punish me.’ Yes, there are consequences. Yes, I need boundaries, just like my son needs boundaries.” But He just said—“Romans 2:4 says that ‘It is with His lovingkindness that He draws us.’” He said to me: “Keep loving him; be kind; show mercy; show grace.”

That’s why my book is a book about grace, because that’s what God just said: “I treat you with grace all the time.” He helped me to understand that ways you do boundaries and consequences matter—how you do that. You need them, obviously; that is in this book as well—that message of grace and boundaries done in kindness and love.

**Bob:** I think it’s important for listeners to hear you saying, “There are boundaries; there are—

**Judy:** Oh, absolutely.

**Bob:** You’re not saying, “Well, you’re in charge of things now.” But you’re saying the way in which those boundaries are established, so that the child always knows that boundary is established by a loving parent.

**Ann:** I think that’s the trickiest part—

**Bob:** Yes, it is!

**Ann:** —because with prodigals—and I’ve talked to so many parents—they don’t know the balance between the love/the unconditional love and the boundaries. What you’re saying is you can enforce boundaries as long as it’s done in a way that’s loving and for his best interest, or her best interest.

**Bob:** What do you do with the child who says, “If you put that boundary up, you don’t love me.” Did Josh ever say to you, “You don’t love me”? 
Judy: He probably said that, yes. You just say, “I do love you,”—which is what God says to us—“I do love you. Do you like what’s happening here?”—“No,” or “Are there going to be consequences?”—as much as you can, use natural consequences; it’s better than manufactured ones.

To me, Luke 15 is such a guide to how I respond to a loved prodigal.

Bob: —the parable of the prodigal son.

Dave: Walk us through that. What do you mean?

Judy: Well, the son says, “Give me my inheritance,” which meant he [father] had to sell some things/his property, and diminish his income, and give it to him. He let him go. The son goes out and blows it—spends all his money, lives an extravagantly sinful life, which is basically what “prodigal” means—and then comes to his senses.

Some of that loving them is letting them have to come to their senses, because they began to see the consequences of their own choices. They learn better than if I point out to them—it doesn’t mean I don’t say something; but if I’m always saying: “If you do that…this,” “If you do that…this,”—it’s like, “You need to learn these things for yourself.”

Yet, the father isn’t just: “Oh, there he is. He’s coming back. What shall I do? How shall I handle this?” because we want to know: “What’s the best way to handle it?” How did he handle it?—he runs to him; he throws his arms around him; he puts his robe on him. He says, “You’ve come back!” The son’s trying to say, “Please forgive me.” He doesn’t even let him; he just says: “I’m so glad you’re home!” He says, “Let’s go have a party.” The older son says, “How could you do that?” He says: “Your brother was lost, and he’s found. We have to rejoice.” They need to know how loved and welcomed they will be.

Bob: You said: “Here’s what God did. The first thing He did was He helped me understand how to put boundaries in place but demonstrate unconditional love in the midst of that.”

Judy: Unconditional love.

Bob: What did God do in Josh’s life?

Judy: It took awhile. [Laughter] I would say Josh didn’t really begin to become an adult and live beyond all that until he was 26/27. He wasn’t always in a terrible place. He married a girl that he was living with for awhile. They had a marriage for seven years; it was never good. Generally, they were trying to make it work. We were very supportive of that—trying to encourage them and keep them going.
When that started falling apart for a lot of reasons, he almost took his life. He went over to see her when they were apart and said: “I’m so sorry. I’ll take the blame for everything.” Some of it was his, but some of it was hers. She just said, “I want nothing to do with you,” and slammed the door on him.

Then I get a text from him, saying, “Just pray I go to heaven.”

Bob: Wow.

Ann: Oh, boy.

Judy: For an hour, we texted back and forth. I really believe his assurance that I loved him, no matter what, was what kept him from pulling the trigger. That was maybe the hardest thing I lived through with him—was that hour.

Bob: Judy, do you—I mean, listeners are listening and wondering, “What is the end of this story?” The end of the story hasn’t been told yet because Josh is working out life; right?

Judy: He is.

Bob: We look at things today and say, “It’s not perfect.”

Judy: No, it’s not perfect.

Bob: Everybody, who would like to have there to be a ten-minute Hollywood ending at the end of this—where we go—we ride off into the sunset, and it’s all glorious from here on—that’s just not the way this works; is it?

Judy: No, it’s not.

Bob: But you still see God at work in Josh’s life in powerful, new, fresh ways.

Judy: I see God at work in Josh’s life; but I see, even more, God at work in my life because of this and through this. When I talk about this, the main message I give is that God has given me incredible gifts through this child/this boy/this man, with whom I have a wonderful relationship—and Steve has a wonderful relationship, and my girls do—that’s one big change that’s happened. He’s also a gentle, loving dad.

He still has lots of areas. Spiritually, he’s got growth needed; spiritually, he’s in a better place by far. He texts me every two or three days and says, “Pray for me today,” and tells me something he needs prayer for.
**Ann:** At the end of your book, you have a word from Josh, which was really brave and courageous of him to be able to write. I wanted to read the last couple paragraphs that he wrote. He said:

> If you love someone like me, remember that God is in control. He works it all out in His plan. Keep affirming your prodigals and be firm with them. Look for the good things to say, not just pointing out all that they do wrong. Try to introduce them to people who will be a good influence. Love them consistently and keep praying for them. I always want people to pray that I will keep walking straight. There are so many ways to step off the path. I need God’s help to keep growing, working, and making right choices. So, love your prodigals wherever they are on their journeys.

**Bob:** You wonder if you guys had said, “I don’t think we can bring Josh into our home,” what trajectory/what pathway, whether Josh would still be alive today.

**Judy:** Absolutely. We pretty much felt, if not for us or someone like us, he would be dead or in jail; those were his only two options. We would’ve missed the incredible gifts that we received as a result.

The last chapter of the book is called “Gift.” It’s taken you, from all the hard stuff and the learning to trust God in it, to realize God has done a work in your life. Everything He has done is a beautiful gift, so that I think I gained more than Josh has.

**Ann:** Which we would all say, as parents: “We learn more than even our kids learn.”

**Bob:** Judy, thanks for being on FamilyLife Today. Thanks for sharing the story.

**Judy:** I’m grateful. Thank you.

**Bob:** The book Judy has been talking about is called When You Love a Prodigal: 90 Days of Grace for the Wilderness; Hope and Strength for Your Journey. You can order the book from us, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or you can call to order at 1-800-FL-TODAY. Once again, the title of the book: When You Love a Prodigal, by Judy Douglass. Order online at FamilyLifeToday.com, or call 1-800-358-6329—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY,” to order your copy of Judy’s book.

David Robbins, who is the president of FamilyLife is with us today. David, you have some thoughts about the conversation we’ve been having this week with Judy Douglass.

**David:** Oh man, it’s such an important conversation/a good conversation; because it is so often, the conversations I have when I’m interacting with people, who are being
touched by FamilyLife. Judy has reminded all of us, this week, that even in the most difficult wilderness journey, like parenting a prodigal, God has a purpose and a plan; and His presence will be there with us.

One of our FamilyLife Today listeners recently wrote to us and said: “I have a co-worker with a prodigal child. She started listening to the FamilyLife Today podcast at my suggestion. It’s given her much hope and direction.” That listener went on to talk about her own experience as a FamilyLife Today listener—she said: “I have personally gained so much insight since I started listening regularly, just four years ago. The lessons I’m learning about how to make our marriage better and how to grow in our relationship with our kids and grandkids has been priceless.”

You know, Bob, I am so grateful for stories just like this. I get so excited when I hear about listeners, not only benefitting, but having the heart to pass it on to others. One of the ways that you can bring help and hope to others is by helping to keep FamilyLife Today on the air, right here, on this station and in this local community. We have an extraordinary opportunity right now.

Bob: We do. We have some friends of the ministry, who have come to us and said that they will match every donation we receive, during the month of December, dollar for dollar. The amount of that matching-gift fund has recently increased. It’s gone from $2.5 million to $3 million. We still have a ways to go if we’re going to take full advantage of this matching gift. We’re asking listeners today: “Will you go online and make a yearend donation?—or call 1-800-FL-TODAY to donate. Our website is FamilyLifeToday.com; it’s easy to give online. Or you can make a simple phone call: 1-800-358-6329; and donate by phone.”

If you’re able to help with a donation of $50 or more, we’d love to send you, as a thank-you gift, a new devotional for couples called The Story of Us. This has 52 devotions, one a week, for couples to use during the new year. We’d love to send a copy of that new devotional to you. Again, donate online at FamilyLifeToday.com; or call 1-800-FL-TODAY to donate. Please pray for us between now and the end of the year, that God will supply our needs; and hopefully, we can take full advantage of this matching-gift opportunity.

We hope you have a great weekend. I hope you and your family are able to worship in your local church this weekend as you prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. On Monday, we’re going to hear a conversation I had, not long ago, with Keith and Kristyn Getty, modern hymn writers. Keith was a co-writer on the song, In Christ Alone. They’ve written many modern hymns together. We’ll hear about their story: growing up in Ireland, how they met, how they got married. We’ll visit with the Gettys Monday. I hope you can be with us for that.
I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I'm Bob Lepine. Have a great weekend. We'll see you Monday for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

*FamilyLife Today* is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas; a Cru® Ministry. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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