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can help millions."
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TAKE YOUR LIFE BACK



How to Stop Letting the Past
and Other People Control You

STEPHEN ARTERBURN, M.Ed.
DAVID STOOP, Ph.D.

Authors of the #1–bestselling Life Recovery resources

Take Your Life Back



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Take Your Life Back: How to Stop Letting the Past and Other People Control You

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Introduction

WE COMMEND YOU for picking up this book. Your interest shows an awareness that your life can be better and that something needs to change in order for this to happen. Maybe you've tried other things that haven't worked, and maybe you don't have a lot of hope that things can actually get better. But that's where *we* come in.

Numerous formulas and plans are available to help you find healing, purpose, and meaning—and we've written a few of them ourselves. Such plans and formulas will succeed *if* you can work them. But it's not easy to follow a plan if something or someone has a hold on your life. If there is a force within you or around you that continues to exert power over your life—power that overwhelms your best intentions, sabotages your greatest efforts, and frustrates your deepest desires—then no formula or set of keys or steps will help you until you are able to *take your life back*. True freedom comes when you gain the strength to no longer live in reaction to the negative power whose destructive control has kept you from living the life you were meant to live.

When I (Steve) was a young man, a force within me controlled everything in my life. It derailed the use of every talent, gift, and skill I possessed. It saturated my life with a deep darkness and the

most penetrating pain imaginable. At times, it kept me locked in my room and stuck in my bed. There were days when my only goal was to break the oppressive bondage long enough to get out of bed, stand up, and walk farther than the bathroom—at least to the kitchen, where I could catch a glimpse of outside light.

The hold on my life was so strong and so powerful that it almost killed me. I'll tell you more about that later in the book, but for now, suffice it to say that I have seen the pit from the inside.

The force that controls your life may be similar to the one that controlled mine. And it may be destroying any potential for joy or meaning to rise up in your life. If you're at all like I was, you may feel all bound up with *shame*—and until you take command of it and remove it from the center of your world, nothing will ever get better. But don't despair. That's why we're here to help you.

Because shame is so common and so destructive, we want to establish right here in the introduction that our desire—our goal—is for you to read this book without experiencing even a single pang of shame for where you are, where you've been, or what you've been through. Both of us (Steve and David) have had to deal with our own deep-seated shame. And just like you, most likely, we both have experienced some form of shaming from well-meaning professionals whose perspective and approach seemed so far above and beyond where we'd been. If you desire something better and want to take a significant step toward living differently, you can be assured that we're walking the pathway to freedom right along with you. We will show you how to move from reactive attitudes and behaviors to a place where you can *choose your response* to what life brings your way.

Not all shame is bad. Sometimes it motivates people to make good and necessary changes. But shame that comes from abuse, rejection, abandonment, neglect, or judgment—or even from well-meaning professionals—can infuse horror and self-loathing into the soul. That's the kind of shame we will help you get rid of—with some

INTRODUCTION

cooperation on your part—and replace with hope and healing, along with renewed purpose, vision, and meaning. We want to help you take charge of your past and your current circumstances so that you can look forward with confidence and faith to the road ahead.

Even if you're skeptical, believing that nothing can help and that this book will probably be no different from any other, at least you're still reading—you're still searching, still hoping. If you're not quite willing to buy in just yet, or if you're not sure you're willing to do what it takes to change, don't worry. Willingness is an acquired taste. It takes time, and it may not come easily. But if you're simply willing to stay with us, we will help you get the rest of the way by first eliminating the hold that destructive forces or influences have on your life. We will help you see your struggle from a different perspective, and we'll help you change the things that you have the power to change. As we help you take your life back, we hope and pray that any shame you still bear will melt away.

Thank you for allowing us an opportunity to help you. We have written several books together, but never with a greater desire to see people like you find hope, healing, meaning, purpose, and transformation. May God greatly bless you, and may you experience his presence as you read the following pages and begin to experience the life you were born to live.

PART I

The Reactive Life



1

THE PRODIGAL ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PALACE

WE'VE HEARD THE story of the prodigal son many times: the young man who insults and disgraces his father by demanding an early inheritance; who moves away from his father, lives it up, burns it up, comes crashing down, and eventually has to move in with some pigs—the ultimate symbol of unclean and destitute living. The term *prodigal* has come to characterize anyone who has ever acted out—through addiction, rebellion, recklessness, promiscuity, or any number of other destructive behaviors—and people who have surrendered ownership of their lives to an external controlling influence. For these prodigals—a group that includes both men and women, sons and daughters—the Bible says “their god is their appetite” and their focus is woefully shortsighted.¹ That’s why the appetites that carry them away are often the very same appetites that bring them home again.

In the parable, the wayward son wakes up cold and hungry one

morning and realizes that the servants back home have it better than he does—at least they have a roof over their heads and food on the table. So it isn't repentance, or even regret, that draws him home as much as it is simple hunger and poverty.² Still, he heads back, burdened with shame and rehearsing his appeal: "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."³ But when he arrives at his father's house—actually, before he even gets there—a remarkable thing happens. The father—whom the son has dishonored, insulted, and abandoned—comes running toward him, embraces and kisses him, and welcomes him home. There's no shaming, blaming, or even explaining to be done. The father simply enfolds him in his loving

At the very center of taking your life back is a return to the Father who has been watching and waiting and hoping for you to come home.

arms and calls for a celebration: "For this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found."⁴

At the very center of taking your life back is a return to the Father who has been watching and waiting and hoping for you to come home. There is no shame or recrimination, only celebration.

Maybe, after all you've done, it's hard for you to believe that anyone—much less God—would come running to you if you turned back toward home. That's precisely how scandalous this parable was in the ears of the people who heard it firsthand from Jesus. A wealthy landowner in those days would never have run anywhere. That would have been far beneath his dignity. Not only that, but the son had already dishonored his father by squandering his inheritance and running away. And yet the point of the parable is that God is always moving toward us, always calling us home, always ready to enfold us in his loving arms.

We expect judgment. God offers grace.

We expect condemnation. God responds with mercy.

We expect rejection. Jesus says, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”⁵

If you’ve been acting out, we encourage you to address those issues in your life. Even if it’s your appetites—not love, repentance, or desire for connection—that bring you home, it simply proves that God can use the destructive things in our lives to bring us to the point of surrender. But only when you’re willing to face up to your destructive behaviors will you even be able to begin taking your life back. If you will wake up and recognize where your decisions have taken you, and if you will return home to your heavenly Father, you will find him waiting to take you back in, just as the father in the parable is waiting and willing to welcome his son home.

That was my (David’s) experience. Like many teens, I acted out all through high school. Once I was old enough to drive and got a car, I did whatever I wanted. My parents were powerless to stop me, so they just ignored everything. I knew that what I was doing was wrong, but I didn’t care. I once felt guilty enough about what I was doing that I refused to take Communion, but I didn’t change my behavior.

One day, while I was in high school, a friend and I downed a bottle of whiskey, and I spent the school day pretty well wasted. I was out of control, but nobody intervened. Finally, after I graduated, I confronted myself and decided that I was on the wrong path and that it was time to get things right with God. When I turned back to God, there was no shame or condemnation—only the open arms of God the Father welcoming me back.

Acting In

Maybe you can’t identify with the prodigal son—you’ve done your best to live an upright life, and you’ve never acted out in self-destructive

ways. In fact, you don't have a lot of patience for people who have lost control of their lives and have gone down the wrong path. If that's the case, we encourage you to read the rest of the parable, where we're introduced to another brother, whose story may be easier to identify with.

In Rembrandt's well-known masterpiece *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, the brooding image of the elder brother dominates the right-hand side of the painting. The rich crimson fabric and embroidered edges of his robes establish his position as an insider, yet he stands emotionally distant and removed from the redemptive reunion of his father and brother. His hands are clasped under his robes, in stark contrast to the open, forgiving hands of his father.

The challenge for the elder brother is that he has done everything right, at least in his own eyes, and yet the abundant life that he believed was promised to him—and it *was*—has eluded him. All of his disappointment and frustration has turned inward, manifesting itself as anger, bitterness, hatred, judgment, jealousy, spite, envy, dissension, division, resentment, isolation, rejection, and abandonment. Having that much territory in the soul taken over

The elder brother has done everything right, at least in his own eyes, and yet the abundant life has eluded him.

by so many complicated, negative emotions doesn't leave much room for love or gratitude. Far from having ownership of his own life, he lives in bondage to disillusionment and to his own sense of entitlement. Any of us who have walked that emotionally destructive path have

handed over our lives to the obsession of what feels wrong, unfair, disrespectful, or unresolved. The elder brother needs to take his life back every bit as much as the younger brother does. And it may be that the elder brother has the more difficult journey back to wholeness because so much of his pain has been stuffed down beneath the surface of his life.

It's interesting that this story has been popularized as the parable of the prodigal son because Jesus didn't identify it that way. That title was added by someone along the way who was creating subheadings in the Bible text. If we were to name this story, it might just as easily be called the parable of the father's love or the parable of the angry brother.

We might also say that the elder brother is a prodigal in his own way. We've so often heard the term used to describe a rebellious child who has left the fold that it's easy to overlook the fact that the inward attitudes of the heart are what lead to the outward behaviors. The essence of being a "prodigal" is *wastefulness*. That includes wasting opportunities for good deeds and leaving valuable resources unused on the shelf.

The elder brother had so much at his disposal—"Everything I have is yours," his father said—and yet, in his resentment toward his younger brother's wild living, he hadn't availed himself of so much as a barbecued goat to celebrate with his friends. What a sad and shriveled life he chose for himself. But that isn't an uncommon way to live, especially when, as Christians, we're so busy keeping all the rules that we overlook the fact that God has given us the keys to his Kingdom. We're afraid that if we celebrate the return of wayward sons and daughters, we somehow condone their bad behavior: that forgiveness somehow equates with license. In the words of André Gide, we wonder, "Why more honor to a repentant sinner than to him . . . who has never sinned?"⁶ In our self-righteous anger, we become people who look down on other people—or people who look down on people who look down on other people. As author and singer Sheila Walsh said recently, "Self-righteousness is a paper-thin disguise. All it takes is for one messed-up 'loser' to come wandering home and our claws come out."⁷

The wayward prodigal reacted to his pain and woundedness by looking for life outside the walls of his father's house. And though

the elder brother stayed home, even he thought the key to a happy life was somewhere else.

Here's a vital truth: The life we desire is not "out there" somewhere. We have full access to everything belonging to God—right here, right now, right where we are. To live that abundant life, we must simply open our arms and unclench our grip on everything we've been so desperately trying to hold on to, and we must *recognize, receive, and accept* all that our heavenly Father has for us. That's the life for which we were saved. That's the life we need to take back.

To live that abundant life, we must simply open our arms and unclench our grip on everything we've been so desperately trying to hold on to.

What becomes apparent as we read this story is that neither son really knew his father. If either one

had, he would not have felt the need to *act in* or *act out* in negative and destructive ways. Both sons would have been able to accept the father's generosity and would have been thankful for all that was available to them. But clearly, some kind of wounding had driven a wedge between the members of this family.

Most teachings you'll hear on the story of the prodigal son portray the father as a picture of God, and thus we assume there can be no failure on his part in these broken relationships because he is perfect. But if we keep our focus on the human scale, as Jesus does in his telling of the story, we gain a different perspective. As we'll see in the next chapter, every generation has been wounded in some way by the generations that came before it, and every generation passes that wounding on to succeeding generations. So from that standpoint, the father in this story also represents countless generations of the wounded, stretching all the way back to the original breach with our Creator and ultimate Father. Woundedness is a consequence of the Fall, and we all wear it in some fashion.

Reactive Living

If we picked up the latest issue of *Reactive Living* (if such a magazine existed), we might find a picture of the prodigal son's elder brother on the front cover. The caption might read, "What about me?" That's what the reactive life is all about. No matter what happens, we *react* in our own self-interest. If we feel threatened, diminished, or overlooked, we react. We want what's fair for us, and we don't really care about anyone else. We're in pain, and when anything touches our woundedness, we react. We're on high alert for both insult and injury, and whenever the internal siren goes off, we react. Just like the elder brother, we react when we don't get what we want, when we don't get what someone else gets, or when we're not recognized for how awesome and amazing we are. It's an ingrained reflex. Whether we've experienced a perceived slight or a direct insult, we're not able to *respond* because we don't have enough internal self-control to keep ourselves from *reacting*.

The elder brother had done everything right, as far as he could tell. He had been obedient; he hadn't run away; he hadn't embarrassed or humiliated his father. He had done what a dutiful child does, and he expected to be recognized and rewarded accordingly. In our most selfish moments, we are all just like him—jealous of anyone who gets a bigger dose of grace and feeling entitled to a celebration just for being alive. We've all been there, focused on what's happening on the other side of the palace rather than enjoying and being thankful for all the blessings we've been given.

The elder brother had done what a dutiful child does, and he expected to be recognized and rewarded accordingly.

When we're constantly looking at what's happening with other people and measuring our satisfaction based on how fairly we feel we've been treated, we are forever at the mercy of whatever is going on *over there*. We've wired ourselves to react to whatever scale of

comparison we've established. If our dependency invites criticism, we react defensively to justify, minimize, and project our problems onto someone or something else. We may react with anger to drive someone away, or we may withdraw with a whimper to elicit sympathy.

These reactions are not always extreme, and they may not even be noticeable to other people. Our reactions are nuanced and variable, and we're able to adapt to the painful reality of our inner world and deflect attention away from ourselves and the source of our pain. After years of reactive living, we've carved a deep rut in which to run, and we're more afraid of what lies outside the rut than we are of staying stuck. When pressured or threatened, we react. And we stay stuck.

To be fair, our reactiveness is often rooted in pain that accrued when we were very young. Whether we were neglected, misunderstood, abandoned, used, abused, or tortured—or whether we experienced something equally horrific—we were truly victims. We learned to react negatively to others and to loathe ourselves. All of these attacks were undeserved, and at such an early age all we could do was survive. We weren't able to change anything. Even today, as adults, we have something within ourselves that resists the notion that meaningful change—much less complete transformation—is possible. We step back into the shadows because we don't have any proof that transformation can actually happen. So we continue to react to protect ourselves and whatever it is we think we have to lose.

The entire purpose for *Take Your Life Back* is to show you that real and lasting change *is* possible. Not only possible, but also achievable. At some point, we all must stop *reacting* and learn how to *respond* appropriately instead. If your life has been hijacked, it's up to you to take it back, with God's help—and the sooner the better.

Stepping Out of the Shadows

In Rembrandt's famous painting, the elder brother hovers on the edge of decision. Will he recede into the shadows of his inward

obsession, remaining captive to his anger and resentment; or will he step forward into the light and find healing even as he joins in his father's embrace of the one who has come home?

At any time, the elder brother could step out of the shadows and join the celebration. But he is stuck in his point of view, unable to see the situation from a different perspective. That's often what keeps people in bondage to *acting in*. If only he could reframe the picture and *see* it all through the eyes of his father, or *feel* it all through the heart of his prodigal brother, he might reawaken and take his life back free and clear.

For us, if we would see things from God's perspective (who sees the end from the beginning) or feel things with the heart of Jesus (who sacrificed everything to set us free), we could move from the dire picture painted in Philippians 3:19—headed for destruction, owned by our appetites, invested in our shame, and thinking only about life here on earth—to the promise of Philippians 3:20, which reminds us of our citizenship in heaven and our eager anticipation of Christ's return.

At any time, the elder brother could step out of the shadows and join the celebration. But he is unable to see the situation from a different perspective.

The elder brother's first step is to become aware of how he is feeling and how it affects his behavior. Change may begin with the realization that nothing he has been feeling is going to change anything. In fact, the more negative and angry he becomes, the less able he is to have a positive impact. Stewing in the residue of his bitterness changes nothing for the good. By accepting his own powerlessness, he might come to accept the frailties of his father and his brother as well.

He could try to understand what God is up to here. He could reframe the story from God's point of view and discover that he is merely a part of the story and not the whole story. He might feel some gratitude that he's alive and full of potential. And he might even

find a way to feel some gratitude that his brother has survived and is safe at home. He could count his blessings and express his thankfulness to God. But for now we must leave him as Rembrandt has him: a proud and prominent figure standing paralyzed on the perimeter by the bitterness that clutches his heart.

The position of the elder brother in the painting suggests that Rembrandt was aware that there were two prodigals. One had lived outside the palace walls, and the other within. One had acted out; the other acted in. Both had abandoned love, and both needed the grace and mercy of the father. Both needed healing and restoration. It seems that Rembrandt was aware that the elder brother's restoration would be a much more difficult task than the younger brother's. It's much harder to change when we're looking down than when we are down and looking up.

An Open Invitation

God invites us every day to come out of the shadows and into the light. He wants us to have the courage to reach out to others despite our fears and insecurities. As we humble ourselves before God, he empowers us to reach outside of ourselves.

If you have been battered and bruised into submission, don't think that continuing to suffer will make you well or that more time

will produce a different result. What we need isn't *in* us. It comes *from* God *to* us *through* others.

God invites us every day to come out of the shadows and into the light. He invites us to take back our lives.

Stepping out of the shadows is the first responsible move we can make toward recovery and redemption. That means acknowledging the problem and accepting our powerlessness. God promises to guide us and empower us, but our part of the equation is *responsible action*. Even in the worst of situations, we're called to make the best of things, to do what we can

to move toward wholeness. There is no life so painful that it absolves us of our obligation to pursue responsible living. Sooner or later, those painfully responsible actions become routine, and they bring with them security and hope, healing and redemption.

Maybe you have felt that you are without options. Maybe you've been so controlled by circumstances or by another person that having the freedom to choose for yourself seems impossible. Maybe you've resigned yourself to living life at the mercy or behest of another. If so, when you make the choice to get out or get better, it may feel weird or strange or even wrong. Even though it will be better, it may not feel like it at first. But the consequences of choosing to change are a better life and a better outlook. You must work through the discomfort of getting better so that you can find the abundant life you were meant to live.

On the other hand, if you choose not to get better, that choice has consequences as well—destructive consequences. We often think it's better to wait than to move ahead. Too much risk. Too much work. Too much pain. We think that if we can hold on wherever we are, something will finally break us out and set us free. But it doesn't work that way; such thinking only wastes valuable time.

Perhaps you see yourself as a prodigal who needs to come home. Come on home. Maybe you now recognize yourself as the elder sibling who has the more difficult journey toward health and wholeness. But no matter where you are or what you've been through, God wants to help you take your life back so you can live freely with him and for him. You have not gone too far or resented too intensely. God's invitation to take your life back is always there, awaiting your response. Let's begin the healing journey.