


stumbling
toward



WHOLENESS

HOW THE
LOVE OF GOD
CHANGES US

ANDREW J. BAUMAN
FOREWORD BY DAN ALLENDER



Ever since I read *Stumbling toward Wholeness* by Andrew Bauman, I want to give a copy to everyone. Whether you are stumbling or marching, heading in many directions at once or confidently toward one, or looking for wholeness or who knows what—this book is for you. As you read it, you will realize you both stumble and march, you know what you long for, and you live with an inexplicable ache; and somehow, somewhere along this path, faith finds you. Do you have the audacity to consider the possibility of wholeness in this fractured world? Answer yes. Pick up this book. You are on the path to a radically new way of life.

SHARON A. HERSH, MA, LPC, bestselling author of *The Last Addiction: Why Self Help Is Not Enough*

What a bold, brave, and thoughtful reflection on the prodigal-son story. Andrew Bauman invites us into the drama and equips us to identify the feelings of shame, betrayal, contempt, and grief that we all wrestle with as we stumble toward wholeness. I came away encouraged by the boundless love of the Father for us all.

CRAIG DETWEILER, president of The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology

A few years ago, a friend of mine said, “We are at a time in the life of the church where stories of failure are much more important than stories of success.” I couldn’t agree more. And while that may sound counterintuitive, it shouldn’t surprise us. In fact, what should surprise us is that our fascination with success stories has gained so much ground inside the church. After all, the Bible makes it clear that it is in our weakness that we discover God’s strength; it is in our guilt that we discover God’s grace; it is in our shame that we discover God’s salvation; it is in our rebellion that we discover God’s rescue; it is in our slavery that we discover God’s freedom; it is in our failure that we discover God’s faithfulness. This is one of the many reasons I deeply appreciate Andrew Bauman’s book: It’s real and it’s raw. It’s uncomfortably honest and therefore unfathomably hopeful. We need more books like this—books that acknowledge brokenness and need—for it is only then that we will see and appreciate the one-way love of God that comes our way minus our merit. Thank you, Andrew, for reminding me that “it is finished.” I keep forgetting.

TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN, author of *One Way Love: Inexhaustible Grace for an Exhausted World*

This book takes a brave look at the story of the prodigal son and invites the reader to find true freedom in the loving arms of the Father. It calls us to embrace the resurrection that is found on the other side of repentance.

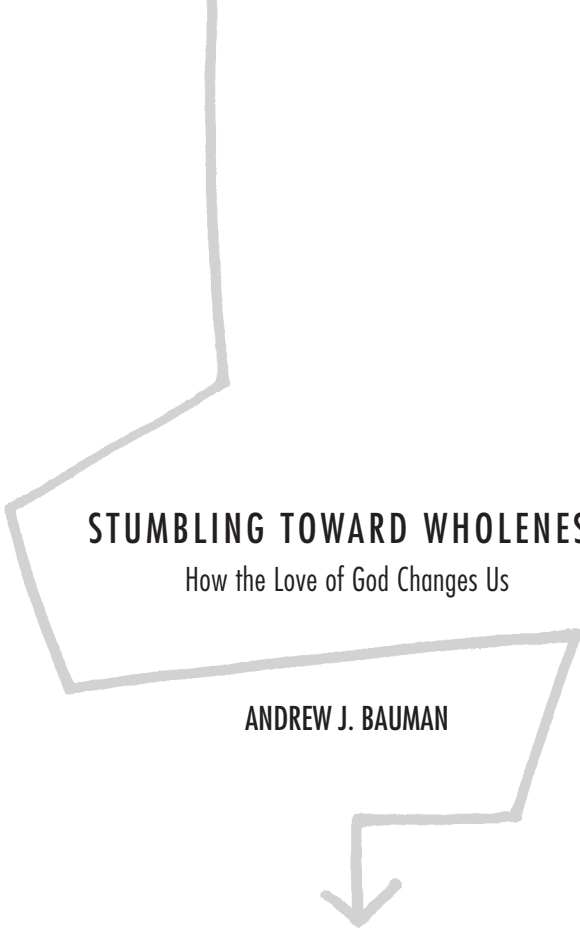
BRAD COOPER, pastor of direction and culture, NewSpring Church

Stumbling toward Wholeness is exactly what the title implies: It's Andrew Bauman's life, in process, shared beautifully and vulnerably with us as a gift. Yet, like any good story, it tells a larger story, imagined through the ancient biblical tale of a father and his two sons. It's his story and their story, but somehow it's also our story. And this is the beauty of Andrew's work. You'll be invited into the tears and laughter of a prodigious Lover who sees you, pursues you, and embraces you.

CHUCK DeGROAT, professor of pastoral care and counseling,
Western Theological Seminary

Today I add Andrew Bauman's name to Luke, Nouwen, and Rembrandt as my beloved guides through the magical prodigal story from Jesus. Illumination is an ancient sacred practice. *Stumbling toward Wholeness* helped me anew to carry my grief, my shame, my confession, and my mourning, nudging me with its honesty and wisdom toward healing, joy, and hope.

TONY KRIZ, author of *Aloof: Figuring Out Life with a God Who Hides*



STUMBLING TOWARD WHOLENESS

How the Love of God Changes Us

ANDREW J. BAUMAN

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CONTENTS

Foreword xi

Acknowledgments xv

SYNOPSIS OF LUKE 15:11-32 *A Story of a Loving Father and
His Wayward Sons xix*

INTRODUCTION *Stumbling toward Wholeness xxiii*

PART ONE TRAVELING TO THE FAR COUNTRY: THE RUNAWAY SON

CHAPTER ONE *Battling Affections Gone Mad 3*

CHAPTER TWO *Exposing Our Shame 17*

CHAPTER THREE *Confronting Our Self-Contempt 39*

CHAPTER FOUR *Wrestling with Goodness 55*

PART TWO STAYING HOME: THE ENTITLED ELDER BROTHER

CHAPTER FIVE *Demanding Our Due 71*

CHAPTER SIX *Owning Our Contempt for Others 87*

CHAPTER SEVEN *Addressing Abandonment and Betrayal 101*

PART THREE RETURNING HOME: THE WELCOMING FATHER

CHAPTER EIGHT *Grieving Our Wounds 113*

CHAPTER NINE *Engaging Kindness 131*

CHAPTER TEN *Embracing Resurrection 145*

Notes 165

FOREWORD

SINCE I WAS TWENTY-TWO, I have been exploring the question, *How do we become whole?* There is a theoretical impulse behind the quest, but what drives the search is the fact that I know that who I am is not who I am meant to be. I knew that before I knew the gospel, but in the early years, I shrugged off the inner war with diversions and addictions. I came to know the gospel, and one of the early stories that I surrendered to was the story of the prodigal son.

There was much about the Bible and Jesus that was foreign and unlikable to me. I may have become a Christian, but early on I wasn't that fond of my new faith or many of those who unquestioningly followed Jesus. Yet I was smitten by the story of the prodigal. I knew him intimately. The older brother was a fool, and I had known many like him. It took years for me to understand that the prodigal was a secondary character in the story and that the older brother and I were far, far more alike than initially seemed possible.

The character who allured me and terrified me was the father. I knew instinctively the story was fiction: There was no father like this in the ancient Near East or in the Midwest, where I grew up. But what if it was true? What if there really was a father like this character? Can a single story redeem one's hope in goodness? Certainly, one story can break one's heart. I began a relentless pursuit to explore the possibility that one story, three characters, and an improbable, compelling, disturbing plot—really a parable—can change the human heart.

Andrew Bauman has dared to take one of the core stories of the New Testament and set out on an epic journey to address the question, *Can the human heart really change?* His courage and wisdom is immense, and what he offers is life changing. One would think that after more than two thousand years of reflection on the gospel, we would have it down. We don't. In the same way, we have been attempting to answer the question, *How do we change?* And all answers are heuristic and incomplete. That is not a critique of this book or all efforts to engage the question. It is, in fact, a profound commendation of this book and Andrew's courage to explore a mystery that will always elude us even as it drives us forward.

Andrew has drawn from countless sources and imbibed the wisdom of those who preceded him. He has translated those stumbling forays into a new tongue and story, and it lights up the sky. Most of us know how to find the North Star. We know how to find the Big Dipper. And when I gaze

up into the night sky and marvel at the stars, sometimes I am stunned by the splendor that surrounds me. This wise book will do the same for you.

Stumbling toward Wholeness will take you forward into your war of prodigal addiction and self-righteous envy. It will far-more expose your deepest desire to offer yourself and others the open-armed, lavish delight of the Father. His delight is our destiny—our greatest fear and our fondest hope. These three characters in the hands of a masterful storyteller such as Andrew can change your heart.

I have seen the waywardness of Andrew. I have seen the proud self-absorption of Andrew. And I have felt and received from him tears of delight and a welcoming embrace when I have failed him. What he writes arises out of his own search and the integrity to name what is true about his brokenness and the glory of his beauty. He understands all too well that it is only the true prodigality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that gives us covering for our shame and restoration of our beauty. You will find this quest a life-changing encounter with the companions of this story. You will find Andrew to be a broken and beautiful guide for reading the night sky and finding the one North Star that will lead you home.

Dan B. Allender

SYNOPSIS OF LUKE 15:11-32

A Story of a Loving Father and His Wayward Sons

(a.k.a. The Parable of the Prodigal Son)

THE YOUNGER SON WAS READY—all set to make a life on his own (with his father's money, of course). He was breaking free from the doldrums of his youth and heading out to blaze his trail.

The father gave in, knowing that love works only by holding loosely. I wonder what the youngest son was feeling as he packed his belongings. Exhilaration? Terror? Hope? Was he seeking some deeper calling or fulfillment? A break to make a name for himself away from his father? Would this be his chance to finally begin the life he had always dreamed of?

He soon realized he had made a huge mistake. His new buddies stuck around only when he was financing their festivities. His empty wallet was his first indication that he was in trouble, and when things couldn't get any worse, they got much worse. A famine came over the land, turning the young son's dream into a nightmare. He was forced to turn his attention from matters of pleasure to matters of survival, becoming so desperate that he was envious of the pig's slop.

Suffering brought him back to his wits. It's one of those life lessons that we hate to learn and learn to hate. Heading back home a failure, having reached the point of near death, he was ready to give up. He began to practice a monologue of self-contempt, devising a plan to earn back the love he had frivolously squandered.

I wonder if the father watched for him every day. I imagine the father looking over the hill out the front window for any figure shaped like a man. How patiently he must have waited, filled with longing for his boy's return.

Then one day it happened. Somewhat like a UFO or unicorn sighting, the unconceivable became true. The father saw a staggering shadow in the distance. He ran with a wild, immodest abandon to his son. He held and kissed him, not wanting another moment to pass without the depth of his love being felt.

The son, perhaps becoming uncomfortable and knowing he was undeserving of such wholehearted love, delivered his speech: "Father, I screwed up. Let me work to replace what I took from you."

The father was too busy delighting in his son's rebirth to pay attention to the penance. He joyfully called to his workers to bring all the best goods—the fancy clothes, the leather sandals, the family signet ring, and the fattest cow they could find—enough to feed the entire village. He proclaimed that everyone must come celebrate the miracle of resurrection that had taken place.

Meanwhile, there was yet another son, his shirt still stained

with sweat from his labors as he trudged toward the house from the fields. He had been managing the entire household all day and was anticipating a much-needed respite. As he got closer, he heard the ruckus coming from the house and asked a servant, “What is going on?”

“Your brother has come home!” came the reply. “It’s time to eat!”

The elder brother’s thoughts raced with accusation against his younger brother: *How dare he come home! How dare he eat the food that I labored over! How dare my father celebrate his rebellious child!* The elder brother seethed with anger and turned away, not wanting anything to do with this type of manipulation and deceit.

As the father partied, he wanted to share his joy with his entire family. Knowing that his older son was missing, the father went to the backyard and found his oldest son filled with bitterness. “I have worked so hard for you and never complained or asked for anything, and you have never given me squat. Now this traitor son of yours has wasted our wealth, and you respond by throwing him this colossal celebration?”

The father responded lovingly, “How could I not? When I thought he was dead, part of me died with him. But he is alive, and I feel alive again. I love him, and I love you.” Because the father had known deep heartache, he possessed the capacity to experience boundless joy and invite others into what it means to be fully human.

INTRODUCTION

Stumbling toward Wholeness

MY FAMILY PUT THE “MENTAL” in fundamentalism. We weren’t (and currently aren’t) crazy; we were just broken. (Aren’t we all?) My father was a lawyer and an insecure preacher, and my mother a pastor’s shy daughter and an obedient woman who just wanted to have a biblical marriage and strong family. We acted as if we were the model Christian family, but beneath the surface, we were all dying inside. We had become buried underneath a growing pile of lie upon lie—the result of my father’s addictions. We were focused on the family, the illusionary family, attempting to present perfection to the outside world, yet living shrouded in secrets. Truth was too difficult to confront, so we hid.

I was only eight years old when my parents split. I remember the white ’86 Toyota minivan with brown racing stripes in which my mother carried my sixteen-year-old brother, my twelve-year-old sister, and my eight-year-old self from our home in Clearwater, Florida, to a “vacation” in the mountains

of western North Carolina. I remember my father standing in the driveway weeping as I looked out the back window. My confusion as thick as my sense of loss, I asked myself, *Why is my dad not coming on vacation with us? He always drives the van on long road trips!* I was desperately trying to make sense of a world turned upside down.

After an eleven-hour drive, we arrived at our tiny blue rental house situated on several acres of farmland. It was nice and it was isolated. I remember walking by myself down the dirt road, in a daze, looking for friends—looking for myself—bored and forlorn. My older siblings didn't want to play, so I wandered, alone, feeling the burden of depression that was far too weighty for a little boy to bear. I was living inside a drama that was not my own, but I would bear the consequences. These consequences down the road would include my own sexual addiction and my wrestling with depression, anxiety, intense loneliness, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Unaddressed woundedness always catches up to us no matter how fast and far we run.

All of us have “backstories” that have made us who we are. Whether our stories are joyful or tragic, ordinarily straightforward or hopelessly convoluted, we don't write our narratives when we are young; we live into what we are given. We are carried along, first one way, then another, until we arrive at the thresholds of the rest of our journeys. At times we choose courses of destruction, other times paths toward transformation. Either way, I believe we are stumbling toward God in an attempt to make sense of our wildly holy stories.

I didn't always have this view. The sermons of my childhood focused almost exclusively on the sinfulness of people and neglected the mysteries of what grace and redemption actually mean. The main thing I took away was that I was a sinner. That made it easy to believe my own critical internal voices—or at least other people's voices of condemnation that I had picked up along the way and made my own—for example, my fourth-grade soccer coach, who called me “a lazy piece of crap”; or my eighth-grade science teacher, who insisted that I was “a slithering slug who leaves his grimy trail wherever he goes.”

I was a lonely kid who was rarely pursued or engaged on an emotional level by any adult man. I was looking everywhere in my life to be fathered. I was never taught how to be a motivated, hardworking student, and I needed a thoughtful guide. I'm sure my teachers believed their criticism would propel me toward constructive action, but it only sent me deeper into shame and depression.

I'm sure you have voices of your own—curses that stay with you and go on to inform your inner world for the next thirty-plus years. These curses become our internal voices of self-contempt. There is a kingdom of darkness that uses those curses to mock and remind us that we are of little consequence at best or irredeemable at worst. I know that voice of darkness well. And I once heard it shouting from one of the most familiar and beloved stories in the Gospels: the story of the prodigal son.

I remember hearing my share of sermons about the prodigal son. Because of my self-contempt, I distorted this

life-giving, love-affirming parable in Luke's Gospel into a message of condemnation. I focused on the rebellion of the wayward son and took it to mean that one's failures, mistakes, and problems are the defining aspects of one's soul. I thought of myself as the runaway son, unable to imagine my redemption. After all, I had been involved in so much sin already. This character fit perfectly with my view of myself. I knew I was bad, and my shame told me I did not deserve to return to my Father's house. I knew I had better accept Jesus into my heart or I would burn in hell forever. So I "got saved" seven times, just to make sure. But no matter how many times I was "washed in the blood," I still felt dirty. No matter how hard I tried, I could not be good enough, and feeling loved by my heavenly Father eluded me.

In the religious culture I grew up in, John 3:30—"He must become greater; I must become less" (NIV)—was used as gasoline to fuel my shame. Self-contempt was blessed as humility, and any love of self was labeled as haughty and self-centered.

What I know now, two decades later, is that the greatness of God is most fully realized and appreciated when we say yes to ourselves, when we consider our wholeness part of our sanctification. Although we cannot ignore the reality and seriousness of our sin, there is an inherent goodness to us that we must realize in order to become fully ourselves and completely reconciled to God. That's not to say that we aren't sinners; it's just acknowledging that we can't become "less" until we've become "whole."

German Catholic theologian Johannes Baptist Metz states, “Understood correctly, our love for ourselves, our ‘yes’ to our self, may be regarded as the ‘categorical imperative’ of the Christian faith: You shall lovingly accept the humanity entrusted to you! You shall be obedient to your destiny! You shall not continually try to escape it! You shall be true to yourself! You shall embrace yourself! Our self-acceptance is the basis of the Christian creed. Assent to God starts in our sincere assent to ourselves, just as sinful flight from God starts in our flight from ourselves.”¹

Assent to ourselves is not some humanistic, narcissistic plea to make God in our own image. Quite the contrary. This affirmation of the goodness of self simply takes seriously the fact that God has created us in his likeness. To live into who we are meant to be in God’s family, we must wholeheartedly embrace the radical truth that we are image bearers of the divine, beloved by the God who created us.

When we recall that we are created in the divine image and that God looked on us and called us very good, we begin to realize the self-contempt that so often gets sanctified in our faith communities is actually a prideful stance: We unconsciously think that our self-hatred can cleanse us, that we can sit in God’s place and forgive our own sin. We become consumed with self by unconsciously cutting ourselves down, sabotaging our own success, and isolating ourselves from life-giving relationships.

At other times, we have a puffed-up view of ourselves as “better than” because we try so hard to be righteous. We

become indignant, self-pitying, and resentful when we don't get what we think is our due for good behavior. But secretly we fear being seen as undeserving. This is simply another distortion of the image of God in us.

I've come to understand that Scripture in general—and the parable of the prodigal in particular—informs us that all redemptive change begins when we see ourselves accurately, through God's eyes. When we deeply accept our Father's embrace, we will be neither self-rejecting nor prideful; rather, we will become humble and grateful. We will no longer be in bondage to self, justified in being self-indulgent, self-annihilating, self-loathing, self-righteous, or self-aggrandizing. Instead, we will see ourselves as God sees us and move into true freedom—to change, to serve, to love.

A JOURNEY TOWARD TRANSFORMATION

There may be an exact original audience and a specific original intent of the great story in Luke 15. There are great theologians who believe there is only one point and one way to interpret it. Those theologians may be right. This cherished parable has been studied by people far more knowledgeable than me. However, one of the beauties of teaching in story (parable) is that each culture, each generation, will inevitably find fresh nuances and additional meanings hidden within the Master Teacher's story. A good story does more than just tell the facts; it is evocative and reveals truth.

I am not the first to come to the conclusion that the

characters in Luke's narrative are present and interacting within each of us. Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* is based on his observation of Rembrandt's famous painting depicting the father, son, and brother in this story. Rembrandt captures with precision the younger son's exhaustion, the elder brother's disparaging gaze, and the father's wholehearted embrace.

Nouwen's reflections on the painting take him on a journey: At times he identified with the younger son—"feeling quite lost . . . homeless and very tired." At other times he could relate best to the older brother: "For my entire life I had been quite responsible, traditional, and homebound. . . . I saw how much of a complainer I was and how much of my thinking and feeling was ridden with resentment."² Nouwen ultimately embraces the idea that he is to be like the father: "For a long time the father remained 'the other,' the one who would receive me, forgive me, offer me a home, and give me peace and joy. The father was the place to return to, the goal of my journey, the final resting place. It was only gradually and often quite painfully that I came to realize that my spiritual journey would never be complete as long as the father remained an outsider."³

I had never seen the story through this lens. I was stunned to realize that the runaway son, the judging elder son, and the gracious father all have warred within my bones. The rebellion of the son, the judgment of the brother, and the love of the father battle for supremacy inside me. Obviously, my own story and understanding of transformation influence

my interpretation of the parable, but I don't think I stray from the truth when I say that the story of the prodigal son, elder brother, and father is the story of us all. Indeed, each of us possesses these three personas, and we have to somehow reconcile them to one another.

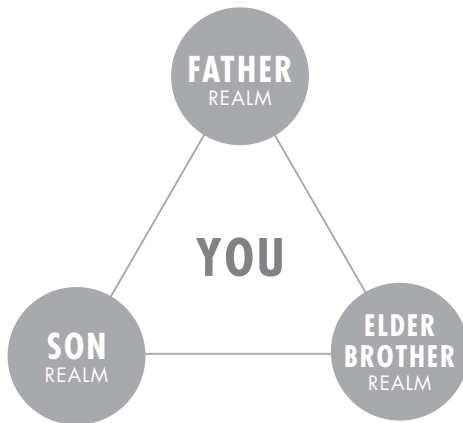
As a result of reading Jesus' parable of the prodigal with this approach, my work as a psychotherapist, my spiritual practices, and my journey toward seeing myself the way God does have changed dramatically. This journey has required courage and a willingness to look deep within to address the obstacles to living in the Father's embrace. I write with a conviction that self-reflection and devotion to God not only can coexist but also can flourish together.

Some Christians have come to believe that turning inward for healing is a self-serving, godless endeavor. Yet I have found on my own healing path that by bringing a posture of prayerful contemplation to the process of self-examination, I come to know God much more fully and intimately. God is *in* us: "Do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is *in* you?" (2 Corinthians 13:5, emphasis added). "God . . . was pleased to reveal His Son *in* me" (Galatians 1:15-16, emphasis added). And we are meant to experience this peculiar grace that creates space for God to make his home in us. This integration of God within is what is meant by assent to self. And this is good news for those of us trying to make sense of our lives, attempting to become healthier individuals and lean more fully into the mystery of who God is in ways that truly change us.

A ROAD MAP FOR THE JOURNEY

The problem with writing a book based on the parable of the prodigal son is that many of us grew up hearing this story again and again, which is another way to say that we have never heard it at all. The familiarity of the parable can actually block us from living its deep truths fully, or even for the first time. However, if we return to Jesus' story with a soft heart and an open mind, inviting the Holy Spirit to accompany us, we will see that each of the characters in the parable is alive and constantly at work inside us, moving us toward transformation.

I have found it helpful to imagine that each character in the parable represents a realm of our being. We are designed by God to dwell in the realm of the father, where love and mercy abide, but most often we lose our way as we traverse the shame-strewn realm of the son and the contempt-strewn realm of the elder brother.



The Son Realm

When we live in the Son Realm, our ultimate goal is relief from our pain. We are driven by avoidance of heartache, pursuit of relief, and escape into pleasure. The prodigal son left the relationship with his father to pursue counterfeit forms of comfort and pleasure. He ended up in a place of shame, addiction, and isolation. Like the son, we all struggle with shame and self-contempt as ways to help manage the pain of our pasts or our current unpleasant realities. We fear our own hunger, our ravenous need for love and intimacy, yet we continue to choose the safety of separation.

In this realm the pull is to act like a victim and remain powerless to change. In the process of transformation, moving beyond the Son Realm requires that we explore our unhealthy attachments and addictions and make peace with our shame. We must embrace our inherent God-given dignity as image bearers and beloved children of God and turn ourselves toward home.

- **GOAL:** Relief
- **FELT STRUGGLE:** Shame/Self-Contempt
- **PULL:** Victim
- **CORE FEAR:** Hunger for Love
- **RESULT:** Isolation
- **WHAT DRIVES US:** Avoidance of Pain/Pursuit of Pleasure
- **WHAT WE MUST ADDRESS:** Self-Rejection and Core Dignity

We are all runaway sons and daughters, caught in cycles of self-destruction, either blatant or subtle. We struggle with allowing ourselves to be unconditionally loved by others and by our gracious Father, who welcomes us home. We must confront our shame narratives because they push us further away from God's plan for our healing.

The Elder Brother Realm

All of us are not only the son but also the elder brother. The runaway's brother stayed at home and worked his father's land, but he was motivated by duty rather than love. It is easy to hijack the true gospel with performance-based righteousness. This posture makes us feel "holier than thou" and gives us the illusion of control. But similar to the prodigal, it is a search for pleasure, relief, and survival—just attempted differently.

In the Elder Brother Realm, we must face our sense of entitlement: the belief that we deserve God's blessings because of our good behavior. We must wage war against the harsh judgment and contempt we are inclined to feel toward others. We all carry a harsh judge inside ourselves. This judge is insecure, yet self-aggrandizing; entitled, yet so full of self-loathing that he condemns in others what he cannot bear within himself. Beneath this rage is a deep well of sadness and a sense of loss and betrayal. The elder brother is just as lost as his younger sibling. He feels that his hard work, dutiful spirit, and good behavior should be his ticket to the

party, but they are the very things that block him from the inclusion he was meant for.

Whether male or female, each of us is the elder brother at times. Our goal when we find ourselves in this realm is our version of justice. We want what is “right,” too often at the cost of mercy and grace. This fierce sense of self-righteousness makes us feel powerful. However, when we are in this realm, we also feel vulnerable, and our core fear is being exposed as “not good enough after all.” We become prideful in order to cover up our fear of being wrong or “less than.” When faced with betrayal and deep pain, it is much easier to rage than to enter into grief. It is all too easy to lash out at others to escape the war within.

- **GOAL:** Justice
- **FELT STRUGGLE:** Entitlement
- **PULL:** Power and Righteousness
- **CORE FEAR:** Exposure
- **RESULT:** Others-Centered Contempt and Judgment
- **WHAT DRIVES US:** Comfort
- **WHAT WE MUST ADDRESS:** Pride and Insecurity

The Father Realm

It is easy to stagnate in the realms of the son and the elder brother, yet deep inside the heart of an image bearer of God is the hope that this is not where the story ends. This hope

moves us slowly toward the third realm, where we can begin to experience God's unfathomable love and delight.

In stark contrast to the realms of the son and elder brother, the goal in the Father Realm is full restoration and healing. The father demonstrates many of the traits we are called to integrate within ourselves.

When we enter the Father Realm, our tasks are to befriend grief, extend kindness toward ourselves and others, and surrender control. The pull is for us to be like God in our kindness, but we must address our core fear of potential rejection. In the parable, the father has already been left and rejected by his youngest son in favor of the son's need to explore. And though he hopes his son will return, he will never know if his son is returning for money and provision or because of a genuine desire to reunite with him and his family. The cost of living in the Father Realm will be vulnerability to increased pain but also capacity for deeper celebration. In the Father Realm, there is always great risk in great love. As the parable displays, the father is at risk of his son's continued withholding of love. In order to open his heart and extend unconditional love in the face of past and potential relational pain, the father must give up control and make himself vulnerable.

However, the Father Realm is where God's face is clearest. The father boldly grieves his younger son's apparent death and his older son's blindness to steadfast love. This posture of courage is one we are all called to imitate, because the deeper we allow ourselves to risk pain in relationships, the

more capacity we have to experience joy. The father's gracious love toward both sons shows us there is space to offer unconditional love to our own shame, contempt, entitlement, and judgment and to extend this grace to others. If we can join the father in this radical kindness toward our own and others' sins and failures, no longer judging but allowing God's kindness to guide us, then we, too, can experience restoration and celebration.

- **GOAL:** Restoration and Healing
- **FELT STRUGGLE:** Embracing Grief/Kindness to Self and Others/Surrendering Control
- **PULL:** Kindness
- **CORE FEAR:** Rejection
- **RESULT:** Celebration and Resurrection
- **WHAT DRIVES US:** Willingness to Risk
- **WHAT WE MUST ADDRESS:** Issues of Control

RETURNING HOME

The story of the prodigal son and his family depicts wildly good news: No matter where we find ourselves on our journeys, God (the father in the story) loves us as we are and longs for connection with us. This is true whether we are the self-centered, self-despising prodigal or his self-righteous, demanding brother. Unconditional love is actually what it says it is: without condition. God delights in us, period.

The righteousness granted by the Father through the work of Christ is greater than any past, present, or future failure and shame.

Learning to recognize the realms in which we are inclined to dwell can deeply influence our journeys of inner healing, strengthen our relationships with others, and deepen our bonds with the Great Healer. Sometimes we will find ourselves or those we are walking alongside in more than one realm at a time. The process of healing is not a straight line and is never completely finished. Change takes time, and we have to develop kindness and patience as we wait for the stubborn part of ourselves to catch up with what our minds know is good. Whether we relate more to the wayward prodigal or to his hard-hearted brother, readjusting our view of ourselves as the father's beloved "sons" and reclaiming our language toward accurate self-understanding is the birthplace of meaningful change. Joining the Father in how he views us launches us on a journey toward transformation, dismantling self-contempt, shame, and entitlement and affirming God's extravagant delight in us, his cherished creations.

In my own quest to make sense of my story, my understanding of God has become clearer and kinder, and so have I. My family has courageously undergone much transformation as well. And though it takes crucifixion to get to resurrection, we have learned that the more we live in truth, the more we experience God. Looking back at myself as a little boy and looking at my life now, I realize that I was and

currently am on a quest to return home. I am seeking rest and refuge—a safe place in a world that often feels confusing and unkind.

My prayer as we explore and rediscover the classic parable of the prodigal son is that you, too, will return home in the most profound way. When we know both our greatest depravities and our highest glories, we can celebrate the goodness and wholeness of redemption—not because we have escaped suffering, but because we have lived to tell our stories of shame, betrayal, and reunion. I hope you will allow the pursuing, suffering, sacrificing love of God to entice you to move beyond shame, contempt, and entitlement and on to grief, kindness, and transformation. If you are feeling stagnant, may you be disrupted. If you are in need of comfort, may you find peace. If you feel exhausted, may you sense the breath of God at your back as you take in the words of Jesus. May you experience God's grace that breaks the curse of condemnation and know the love and delight of the Father who lives within you.

Whether you are at the beginning of your healing journey or years down the road, my hope is that this book can be a gracious and supportive companion on your treacherously splendid pilgrimage back home.

PART ONE

TRAVELING TO THE FAR COUNTRY: THE RUNAWAY SON



- **GOAL:** Relief
- **FELT STRUGGLE:** Shame/Self-Contempt
- **PULL:** Victim
- **CORE FEAR:** Hunger for Love
- **RESULT:** Isolation
- **WHAT DRIVES US:** Avoidance of Pain/Pursuit of Pleasure
- **WHAT WE MUST ADDRESS:** Self-Rejection and Core Dignity

CHAPTER ONE

BATTLING AFFECTIONS GONE MAD

*Addiction is not the problem. Addiction is
the attempt to solve a problem.*

GABOR MATÉ

*Even though you get the monkey off your back,
the circus never really leaves town.*

ANNE LAMOTT

[Jesus] said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him."

LUKE 15:11-16

DURING MY SOPHOMORE YEAR OF COLLEGE, I was flunking out of school. Drugs, alcohol, and sex kept me numb enough to survive, but I knew I needed a change of environment to remain alive. I packed all my belongings in the back of my '89 Isuzu Trooper and moved from my apartment on campus

to live in a small tent about seven miles from the school in what was known as “pocket wilderness” in the East Tennessee Mountains. The woods felt safer than the hyperconservative college I attended. The woods didn’t judge me for my tattoo, earrings, and untamed appearance. It held my tears and doubt with kindness. I remember long days sitting by the river, skipping class and soul writing, praying to something or someone for help, craving a new life and yet not knowing how to get one.

Even in the darkest of days, I heard whispers of God in those woods. He continued to woo me to the life I was seeking, but my loneliness was by far the loudest voice I heard in this season of running away.

One afternoon I decided to return to campus to check my mail. I met eyes with a resident director about thirty feet ahead of me. I smiled and nodded; he did the same. I was happy someone of influence saw me and acknowledged my presence and was pleasant. He walked toward me as I gathered my mail. He was actually going to talk to me; I was so lonely, so hungry for connection, that my heart leaped.

His first words were “I’m going to have to give you a demerit for wearing shorts in this building.” I had forgotten that I had shorts on instead of the required long pants (it was eighty degrees outside). My smile quickly changed to shock. He had no way of knowing that just the other day I had held a gun in my hand, imagining how the bullet would pass through my brain. This is exactly why I had run to the woods for safety. His one sentence killed something in my

heart: He was more concerned with my behavior and following the rules than about my very life.

Why was I breaking the rules? Why was I acting out? We often hope that our internal struggles will be evident to others. I was lost and needed Christ's people to locate me, to see my face and kindly name what they saw. I wanted him to say, "I haven't seen you in a while—I have missed you" or "How are you really doing? You look sad." I longed for his eyes to be soft and his heart open to listening to my untold stories, to truly love me instead of judging and dismissing me. I know he thought he was just doing his job, yet he missed a divine opportunity to love me at a desperate time in my life. His lack of acknowledgment and kindness seared my heart. I was breaking the rules and acting out because I wanted to literally get "caught"—to be held and known by someone larger than myself.

We often miss the desperate pleas of others. In an attempt to do what is "right," we miss the heart of Christ's command to "love one another" (John 13:34). That was my last semester at this particular institution, and though I continued to struggle with my identity and place in God's story, I was thankful to get out of that season of desperation alive. I continued to stumble forward, seeking folks who would be able to enter my pain with wisdom and care.

I (and all of us) bear a trajectory similar to that of the son in our parable. A litany of addictions, deep-seated shame, extravagant living, wasteful spending, and sexual promiscuity—these and other forms of sabotage in our lives

represent a rebellion from what is good, a sprint away from love, a fear of hope, an exodus from the glory available to us.

GETTING BENEATH THE SURFACE

There's a popular saying: "We should focus on the sin beneath the sin."¹ The behavioral sin on the surface is often a symptom rather than the core problem. In the church, more damage has been done by deep relational sin than by surface behavioral sin.

Relational sin is simply a refusal to love; it's the choice (at times unconscious) to use, betray, or commodify an image bearer of God. Jesus seems to suggest as much in the Sermon on the Mount. He seems to say that behavioral sin is not of primary importance; more important in the Kingdom perspective is the relational sin beneath the behavior. When we treat a person poorly, the core sin is not the bad behavior per se, but the disregard of the person's dignity as an image bearer of God.

Most of us have little problem admitting our sinfulness. Our failures can be easily recognized. Many times, though, we focus on the *what* of sin instead of looking more deeply into the *why*. Sinful behavior can be an easy target that allows us to ignore a condition of the heart that needs tending. Because we feel unworthy of love, we move away from healing and consequently are more likely to harm others. Sinful behavior, then, can be both symptom and side effect of brokenness.

I don't know what started the movement of the prodigal son away from his home, but I know that his travels to the far country started with a decision to push away relationship and love and journey toward comfort and false intimacy. He operated under the illusion that he could do life by himself, on his own terms. The truth was that he had the means to travel and party only because his father liquidated his assets.

The hearers of Jesus that day would have been astounded by this story. No one would ever treat his or her father that way. For the prodigal to ask for his inheritance early (before his father's death) was equivalent to "wishing his father *dead*."² So this is our first glimpse of the father: a demonstration of sacrificial love. When his son makes his outlandish request, the father honors it at great cost to himself, both in terms of finances and in terms of his reputation. But the son wasn't thinking about sacrificial love; he was seeking a comfortable life, running from responsibility and relationship.

We run from all sorts of things. When my parents were in the beginning of the end of their marriage, I decided to run away. I don't know whether I was reacting to the tension in our home, overhearing arguments, or just feeling an overwhelming fear that my entire world was no longer safe. I loaded my small backpack with vital provisions of graham crackers and juice boxes, went out on the back porch, and turned left to find a small break in the fence that I was able to crawl under. As I hid in the nearby woods, it was weirdly comforting to hear my parents frantically searching for me, though I had been gone for only a couple of hours. It was

as if I needed to know that I mattered, that they would try to find me. As the sun began to set, I returned home to the tearstained face of my father. I remember my surprise when I saw my absence had affected him.

We rarely grow out of the temptation to escape to places of comfort and release. Many times children are more authentic in acknowledging their pain, and we as adults must learn to listen and see. Our adult forms of running away can look quite different from those of childhood, but they are actually not that different at all. As a child, I just packed my bag and walked out of my family chaos, while as an adult, I stayed quiet and escaped through addiction.

ADDICTION

The energy behind running away is a commitment to relief and a refusal to sorrow and struggle. Addiction is one of the most common manifestations of escape from self. We see this in the prodigal-son story as he depletes his resources and a famine overtakes the land. With his resources gone, he finds himself lost and desperate, looking for something to connect with and belong to. He attaches to the countrymen who give him a job, but the job is unsatisfactory (our wrong attachments will never give us enough of what we want). We then find him hoping to eat the pods he is feeding the pigs. The hearers of this story would have known of this food, thought to be carob pods that are sweet but not satisfying, and incapable of sustaining human life. The picture

of the young, lost orphan longing to eat what would not satisfy him is a vivid picture of addiction.

Henri Nouwen wrote, “I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found.”³ One of the most significant ways I embodied the runaway son was my search for love in my thirteen-year addiction to pornography. I come from the first generation where anyone old enough to click a button could access pornography.

I was twelve when my family first got dial-up internet in my home. My friend Steven was an excellent teacher; he showed me how to search for naked women and erase the history so our parents wouldn’t find out. We knew how to use the computer better than our parents, and this new uncharted nude world at our fingertips was always accessible and incredibly exhilarating. We were not afraid of getting caught, as we had become masters of deception and had internalized our shame. Within a few days of finding my new hobby, I had seen more naked women than my grandfather had in his entire life. I felt alive.

We will always be drawn to life, whether that is genuine life offered by God or its counterfeit. During the years I was addicted to porn, I had long seasons of sobriety at times. I had accountability partners and belonged to men’s groups. I prayed ten thousand times for God to remove temptation—for him to forgive me, or at least show me mercy and make me a eunuch. But I was still addicted, and it was a horrible struggle. Nothing worked. God remained silent, and I could never bring myself to the knife.

My use of porn began as an innocent curiosity. Since there was so much silence in our home concerning sexuality, I needed to find answers, and Steven had them. Sadly, those “answers” slowly began to grip my life with a steady clinch, and my curiosity turned habitual. I would make sure my mom and siblings were gone and go into the sanctuary of the computer room to soothe. My computer screen remained lit, I still liked naked women, and shame bound me more and more.

All affections in the far country work this way. It’s not hard to imagine that the prodigal in Jesus’ story tried to find satisfaction in money, shallow friends, popularity, and sexual promiscuity. When life becomes all about self and when the energy of life is about relief from our self-imposed hunger for true connection, then love becomes manipulation, strength becomes cowardice, and dignity becomes arrogance. Pornography addiction is a perfect example of this. I stopped seeking intimacy with a real-life partner who could have the power to hurt me. While using pornography, I didn’t have to consider the needs of a partner, as it was a completely selfish act, whereas genuine love is about giving and receiving pleasure, a shared human experience of goodness.

Evil is that thing that is set against God and, because we are created in God’s image, is set against us. Evil is self-propagating, emulating God’s creative work in its own destructive effort, committed to steering us away from love and toward lesser things. Whenever we find ourselves ensnared in addiction, we can, if we are careful and diligent,

discover in it a godly desire turned upside down. So driving each of our affections gone mad is a God-instilled longing for beauty, strength, hope, relationship, and delight. In other words, there is a deeper desire driving our addiction. What we need and want, what we are made for ultimately, is relationship.

In Jesus' telling of the prodigal parable, we are not privy to what the son was after, specifically. Was he searching for fulfillment of longings he could not satisfy at his father's table? What was keeping him from connecting with his father's love? Jesus doesn't tell us, but because his parables are intended to cause us to reflect on our own journeys, we might surmise that the prodigal both craved and feared intimacy, as we do. The young son struck out on his own to find life apart from owning his deep longing for connection and relationship with his father.

This was true in my prodigal journey. Running toward pornography addiction was actually the closest thing to heavenly connection that I could access at the time. My family had been devastated by my father's infidelity, which led to a formal severing when my parents split. My pornography use started after my parents' separation, as I longed for some form of relief and beauty in the desolation of my life. I ached to be touched, to be held, to feel pleasure, and to numb my pain. Pornography met those needs, as any addiction does for a time, but it never answered the deepest questions of my heart. Behind the thin veneer of each of our stories is a common thread of hoping for genuine connection and sabotaging any

chance of it. In fact, says therapist and author Dan Allender, “Every addiction is an attempt to slay hope.”⁴

This is not just the banter of a therapist trying to justify his own poor choices. In the late 1970s, Bruce K. Alexander, a psychologist, noticed this curious connection between addiction and relationships. He saw that rats kept isolated in cages would inevitably become addicted to the numbing chemical offered them, choosing water laced with morphine over tap water. However, when put in a “rat park” full of other rats (relationships), toys, and activities (healthy pleasure and playful delight), a significantly lower number of rats would choose the numbing substance and become addicted.⁵ In humans, this connection was noticed with Vietnam veterans. Many would take heroin in Vietnam to self-soothe and escape from the horrors of war in a faraway land; however, most would discontinue heroin use as they reentered their normal world full of relationships and families.⁶

It seems that the story of the prodigal son is teaching us what science is just now coming to understand: It is relationship that drives us, damages us, and heals us. Until we discover how we have moved away from relationship and toward false connections and name what we truly crave (authentic intimacy), we will be stuck, much like the prodigal lost in the pigpen.

MOVING TOWARD REDEMPTION

The prodigal will never leave the pigpen by focusing on only the sadness of his desire for the “pods,” like leftovers instead

of a meal. If he focuses on only his disgraceful position, he will never risk the shift for something better. The prodigal rejects relationships and community and commits himself to selfish living. He wastes his money and it runs out. Any friends in his new community do not seem to stick with him after his money is gone. There is a famine in the land, leading to further trouble and despair. One of the signs of addiction is to continue one's behavior despite the consequences, and his change in fortune did not change the prodigal.

There is a great ironic twist of shame in the story. Pork is a forbidden food for Jesus' audience, yet here is the Jewish boy feeding pigs. The young man has gone from being full of confidence and having money in his pocket to being lonely and defeated, feeding the livestock and desperately needing reprieve. The same pigs that were restricted from his diet became his companions, and he envied the food they ate. Hearers of this parable knew it to be a tragic tale, but Jesus knew that addiction and shame were not the end of the prodigal's story. In the eyes of the storyteller, this was the beginning of redemption.

Addiction and shame are not how our stories have to end either. But to move toward hope, we must face our false dependencies, not just keep telling ourselves lies such as "Just one more time" or "It's not that bad" or "No one is getting hurt." When caught in addiction, we lose sight of the great and noble purposes for which we were created. The evil one hates any design that enables us to reflect the glory of God. In fact, John tells us that the evil one came to "steal and kill and

destroy” (John 10:10). We creatively collaborate with the evil one’s schemes to destroy us in various ways. Addiction can blind us. We may not notice that we need more and more of something to get the desired relief. When our false source of relief is not available, we become desperate or experience withdrawal; in other words, if we stop our addiction, we pay a price. The reward system in the brain is rewired as we crave more and become satisfied with less. But remember that under each of these desires gone mad is a godly longing that must be owned. That godly longing is the goodness and restoration God has in store for us.

Addiction is only one manifestation of running away and escaping our desires. We may not have the classic “loud” addictions of substance abuse or sex, but few of us avoid the much more dangerously subtle ones. Our relationships with food, work, or achievement, for example, can serve the same purpose as heroin for a drug addict. In either case, the drive is for escape from our own terrifyingly holy desire for authentic connection. We fear this much more than we’d like to admit.

Pornography had me in its grip because it offered a relatively risk-free mirage of intimacy without the relational risk of rejection. My true desire for authentic love seemed too daunting, and I settled for the cheap imitation rather than having the courage to suffer for the return home I was made for. Fortunately for me and for you, our stories don’t have to end in the pigpen. But to move toward hope, we must face not only our addictions but also the inevitable shame that accompanies them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How have you interpreted the parable of the prodigal son in your own life?

In what ways has your journey been similar to the prodigal's, if only in subtle ways? How have you moved away from relationship and toward false connections?

What consequences can you identify from your attempts to satisfy your soul with something other than relationship with the Father (for example, addiction, shame, self-contempt, isolation)?

What purpose has been served by your own pursuit of pleasure or avoidance of pain? Can you identify the deeper longings that might lie beneath "running away"? Name some of the fears that have driven you to run from authentic connection. What is one example of how this is playing out in your life today?