

THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT OF ADOPTION

Overcoming the Orphan Mindset



The Boy Who Pushes the Plow

CHRONICLES OF A REFORMER

The Power of the Spirit of Adoption

Overcoming the Orphan Mindset

THE BOY WHO PUSHES THE PLOW

CHRONICLES OF A REFORMER

"I will cause a boy who drives the plow to know more of the Scriptures than you do."

— William Tyndale

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation (NLT). Other versions are marked where used.

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

Chronicles of a Reformer is a series written alongside *The 9 Seasons of the Kingdom of God*: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat.

Contents

Introduction: The Plowboy and the Father's House	5
PART ONE: BORN TO BE ADOPTED	
Chapter 1: The Gospel We Left in the Orphanage	9
Chapter 2: Orphaned in the Garden	15
Chapter 3: Saved into a Family	24
Chapter 4: Orphans No More: Annie and the Spirit of Adoption	34
PART TWO: A TALE OF TWO ORPHANS	
Chapter 5: A Tale of Two Orphans	44
Chapter 6: The Rebellious Orphan	52
Chapter 7: The Religious Orphan	60
PART THREE: THE IMPOSTER	
Chapter 8: Identity and Intimacy	69
Chapter 9: Overcoming the Imposter	77
Chapter 10: Diagnosing the Flesh	85
PART FOUR: HEIRS, NOT SLAVES	
Chapter 11: No Double Jeopardy	97
Chapter 12: Legally Free, Still Enslaved	107
Chapter 13: A Daniel Generation	115
Epilogue: Abba	122
The Season of Repentance: Keep Your Lamp Burning	126

The Plowboy and the Father's House

His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers.

Malachi 4:6

Almost five hundred years ago, William Tyndale told a learned churchman, “If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.” He gave his life to put the Bible in the hands of ordinary people, because he believed they had a right to know God for themselves, not just to hear about Him secondhand.

That’s where the name on the cover comes from. I write as the boy who pushes the plow. I keep my name and my face off these books on purpose. I don’t want you following me. I want you to meet the Father.

And that’s what this book is about.

The Most Overlooked Truth

I want to say plainly, on the first pages of this book, what I believe with all my heart:

The Spirit of Adoption is one of the most powerful realities in the Bible, and one of the most ignored and misunderstood.

Because we’ve ignored it, much of the Church has settled for a poor man’s gospel. We know we’re forgiven. We hope we’re going to heaven. But we live like orphans: anxious, striving, competing, performing, hiding, and never quite sure we belong. We’ve been set free legally, but we are still living in the orphanage of an unrenewed mind.

Jesus didn’t only die to keep us out of hell. He died to bring us home. Paul says that because we are God’s children, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Galatians 4:6). That isn’t a formal title. It’s the cry of a child who knows exactly whose he is.

You can be forgiven and still not feel fathered. God wants you to have both.

Why I Wrote This Book

For years I watched good, sincere believers wear themselves out. Some ran from God like the younger son in Jesus' parable, chasing freedom in a far country. Others stayed close to the house like the older brother, working hard, keeping score, and quietly resenting the Father's grace. Different behaviors, same root. Both were living as orphans in a family that had already claimed them.

I've seen it in myself too. I know what it's like to try to earn what God has already given, and to fear what Christ has already defeated.

This book is my attempt to help you leave the orphanage for good.

The Season of Repentance

If you've read the other books in the *Chronicles of a Reformer*, you know I teach nine seasons of the Kingdom of God: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat. When I first taught those seasons, I gave Repentance a subtitle: *Orphans No More*.

That's because repentance is much more than feeling sorry. The word means a change of mind. It's turning around, looking at the Father the way He really is, looking at yourself the way He sees you, and walking home. The prodigal son repented the moment he "came to his senses" (Luke 15:17), and the first thing that changed was what he believed about his father's house.

Repentance is the moment an orphan realizes he has a Father and starts walking home.

What You'll Find Here

Part One, Born to Be Adopted,

goes back to the beginning: how humanity was orphaned in the garden, what it really means to be saved, and what the Spirit of Adoption is. It ends with the story of a little orphan girl named Annie, who teaches us more about sonship than many sermons.

Part Two, A Tale of Two Orphans,

looks closely at the two brothers in Luke 15, the rebellious orphan and the religious orphan, and asks which one we've been.

Part Three, The Imposter,

faces the flesh nature that still tries to live in sons and daughters, and shows how identity and intimacy break its hold.

Part Four, Heirs, Not Slaves,

deals with generational curses, generational mindsets, and the freedom that was signed for us long before we knew about it.

How to Read This Book

Read it with others. Orphans isolate; sons and daughters gather around a table. In the days of Malachi, when people were tired and cynical about God, those who feared the Lord began talking with one another, and the Lord leaned in to listen (Malachi 3:16). Find a few people and lean in together.

Every chapter ends with a section called

For the Road

: three questions and one line to carry with you. Don't hurry past them. Talk about them, pray about them, and be honest.

As always, eat the chicken and throw away the bone. Hold everything I say up to the Word of God. I'm a son still learning to live in my Father's house.

The door is open. The light is on. Let's go home.

You were never meant to live as an orphan. You were born again to be a son or daughter.

PART ONE

Born to Be Adopted

Who did Jesus save us into?

The Gospel We Left in the Orphanage

No, I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you.

John 14:18

In Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*, the boys in the workhouse are slowly starving. Every day they get one small bowl of thin gruel, and every day the bowls are scraped clean. Finally the boys draw lots to decide who will ask for more. The lot falls on Oliver. He walks up to the master with his bowl in his hand and says the line that made the book famous:

"Please, sir, I want some more."

For that request he is treated like a criminal.

The Lord once showed me that scene as a parable for the state of His Church. Too much of His Church looks more like an orphanage than a family. The building is full of people who are hungry to experience a Father, and the system around them keeps telling them their hunger is the problem.

I want to say something as clearly as I can, right at the beginning of this book, because everything else rests on it.

The Spirit of Adoption is one of the most powerful realities in the Bible, and one of the most ignored and misunderstood.

When we ignore it, we end up with a poor man's gospel. We are forgiven but not fathered. We are legally free but still living in the orphanage of an unrenewed mind. We know Jesus died for us, but we don't know that He brought us home.

We are often taught that Jesus died to forgive our sins and save us from judgment. We are rarely taught that the Fall left humanity spiritually orphaned, separated from the identity, security and intimacy we were created to experience with our Father.

Spiritual orphanhood produces fear, rejection, shame, striving, self-protection and the pressure to prove our worth. We can walk into God's house and still think like

servants or outsiders, working for what the Father longs to give us through relationship.

Saved from What, and into What?

What does it mean to be saved?

Most of us were taught that being saved means escaping hell. That's true, and thank God for it. But it's not the whole truth. The Greek word the New Testament uses for "saved" is *sozo*, and it means to be made whole, healed and delivered.

If we don't know what we've been saved from, and what we've been saved into, we'll settle for fire insurance. We'll treat Jesus like a policy we bought once and filed away, instead of a Lord we follow and a Father we live with.

Jesus didn't only save us *from* something. He saved us *into* something. He saved us into a family.

So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children.

Romans 8:15-16

Abba is not a formal title. It's the word a child uses at the kitchen table. It's what a little one calls out in the night. And Paul says the Holy Spirit Himself puts that word in our mouths.

Jesus didn't just get you out of hell. He brought you home to the Father.

What Is the Spirit of Adoption?

The Spirit of Adoption, made available by the blood of Jesus, rescues us from slavery to sin and from what I call "orphanity," and brings us into God's family as His sons and daughters. Through faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit seals that inheritance in us, gives us the confidence to cry "Abba, Father," and assures us that we are co-heirs with Christ. None of it is earned. It rests entirely on what Jesus did on the cross.

But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, “Abba, Father.” Now you are no longer a slave but God’s own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.

Galatians 4:4–7

Notice the order: God sent His Son so He could adopt us. Then He sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts so we would know it. The first is a legal reality. The second is an experienced one.

Adoption carries both a reward and a responsibility. The reward is intimate access. We come to God not as slaves or servants trying to earn approval, but as children secure in our belonging, our inheritance and our identity. We are chosen and loved, not tolerated.

The responsibility is that a true son or daughter doesn’t live independently of the Father’s will. They reflect His character, receive His discipline and walk in His ways. The same Spirit who assures us of our inheritance is the Spirit who leads us, corrects us and shapes us into the image of Jesus.

Adoption gives you a place at the table and a place in the family business.

Orphan Spirit, Orphan Mindset

Here is a distinction that will run through this whole book.

The orphan *spirit* keeps people from being legal children of God. That is the condition of everyone who hasn’t been born again. The orphan *mindset* is something else. It keeps people who really are God’s children from experiencing what it means to be unconditionally loved and adopted into His family.

That’s why you can be in the Father’s house and still not reflect His heart.

You can be a legal child in the Father’s house and still live like an abandoned kid in an orphanage.

When we live with an orphan mindset, marked by fear, insecurity, performance and rebellion, instead of trusting Jesus and the Spirit who teaches us to cry “Abba,” we stay

trapped in spiritual orphanity. We have the adoption papers, but we still sleep with our shoes on, ready to run.

Orphans compete for limited resources. They compare. They hoard. They perform for approval. And that is exactly what you see in much of the Church. Jeremiah Johnson put it bluntly:

“God is dealing with the competition, jealousy, and rivalry going on in His house. Who has the most people, services, campuses, money, largest social media following etc is an orphan talent show you don’t want to be a contestant on!”

Jeremiah Johnson

Sons and daughters don’t need to win a talent show. They already have the Father’s attention.

Attendees, Leaders, or Disciples?

One of the clearest signs of an orphanage is that nobody grows up. People are fed, housed and kept busy, but they never become fathers and mothers themselves.

James Curry described the crisis this way:

“We’ve become experts at producing Christians who attend, consume, serve on teams, and even lead ministries, but we rarely produce actual disciples of Jesus who can obey Him, multiply their faith, and survive spiritually without a pastor or program holding their hand.”

James Curry

Most churches don’t have a discipleship strategy. They have a leadership pipeline dressed up as discipleship. But leading a team is not the same as being a son or daughter who can raise other sons and daughters. If everything collapses the moment one key person steps away, it was never family. It was personality-driven survival.

The goal was never to keep people busy serving our vision. The goal is to raise children who carry the Father’s heart into the world.

I believe God is going to change, in one generation, the way the world defines Christianity. He is going to move His people away from being known by our brands, performance, properties and systems, and back to being known by our standing in Christ, purchased by His blood and sealed by the Spirit of Adoption. We’ll stop living

in the shame and guilt of never being good enough and start living in the reality of being Abba's children in the family of God.

Hungry for More

Go back to Oliver for a moment.

It took courage for that boy to ask for more. And in a sense, that hunger is what set his whole life in motion toward a family that would finally take him in.

How many believers are longing for more of God, and the religious voices around them make them feel their desire is carnal entitlement instead of spiritual hunger? Sons and daughters are supposed to be hungry. Jesus told us to keep on asking, keep on seeking and keep on knocking, because our Father loves to give good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:7–11).

Hunger for more of God isn't greed. It's a sign that you were made for His table.

Your hunger isn't the problem. The orphanage is.

Father to the fatherless, defender of widows—this is God, whose dwelling is holy. God places the lonely in families; he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy.

Psalms 68:5–6

What You Misdiagnose, You Will Mistreat

There's a principle I come back to again and again: what you misdiagnose, you will mistreat.

If we think our problem is only that we've broken rules, we'll treat it with more rules. If we think our problem is that we're not trying hard enough, we'll treat it with more effort. But if the real problem is that we are sons and daughters still living like orphans, then no amount of rule-keeping or striving will heal us. Only a revelation of the Father will.

That's why this book starts here. In the chapters ahead we'll go back to the garden where humanity was first orphaned. We'll look at the two brothers in Jesus' most famous parable, one who ran away and one who stayed home, and discover they were both orphans in their hearts. We'll face the imposter that still tries to live in us. And we'll learn to walk out of the orphanage for good, as heirs and not slaves.

In the series of books I've been writing, I teach nine seasons of the Kingdom of God: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat. This book lives in the season of Repentance. Repentance isn't only feeling sorry. It's changing your mind about who God is and who you are, and then turning around and walking home.

The Father is not waiting for you with a list. He is watching the road.

For the Road

1. When you think about being "saved," have you thought more about what you were saved *from* or what you were saved *into*? How would your life look different if you focused on the second?
2. Where do you see the orphan mindset in your own life: competing, comparing, performing, hoarding, or keeping one foot out the door?
3. Is there a hunger for more of God in you that you've been told, or have told yourself, is wrong? What would it look like to bring that hunger to the Father?

You were not saved into an orphanage. You were adopted into a family.

Orphaned in the Garden

Seth was the son of Adam. Adam was the son of God.

Luke 3:38

What's the first thing a doctor does when a baby is born?

He lays that baby on the mother's chest. Before the weighing and the measuring and the paperwork, the child is placed where it can hear a heartbeat it already knows.

When my son was born, that didn't happen. His life was in danger, and they rushed him straight to the ICU. I remember standing on the other side of the glass, looking at him, and wondering what he might be thinking. Did he know we were there? Did he know how badly we wanted to hold him?

Standing at that window, the Lord showed me something I have never forgotten. I'll tell you what He showed me at the end of this chapter. But to understand it, we have to go back to the beginning, to a garden, a tree, and the day the human race was orphaned.

Adam, the Son of God

When Luke traces the family line of Jesus, he walks it all the way back, father to son, generation by generation, until he reaches the first man. And then he writes a phrase that should stop us in our tracks: "Adam was the son of God."

Adam had no earthly father. He came from the hand and breath of God. He walked with God in the cool of the day. The first man didn't have to find his identity or earn his place. He was a son in his Father's garden.

Think about the order of creation. Light, sky, land, seas, plants and every living creature were all made before man drew a breath. God did all of it without our help. Then, on the sixth day, He formed humanity and placed us in a finished world. It's as if He was saying, "You didn't build any of this. I made it for you." Our worth was never in what we could achieve for God. It was in walking with Him.

From the very beginning, God wasn't looking for workers. He was building a family.

So what went wrong?

Three Reasons God Forbade the Tree

The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. But the LORD God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."

Genesis 2:15–17

Some people read that command and see a controlling God, a cosmic killjoy holding out on His kids. But God didn't forbid that tree because He was cruel. He forbade it because He wanted to protect them. Any good father puts a fence around the pool.

I believe there were three reasons God didn't want Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

1. Death would enter the human race.

Eating from that tree brought spiritual death immediately and physical death eventually. It created the need for a Redeemer. Paul draws the line from Adam to Jesus:

For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:17

2. Humanity would become spiritual orphans.

The moment they ate from that tree, it would orphan the entire human race. Their choice severed intimate fellowship with God and left humanity outside of His intent to have a family, in need of adoption and reconciliation to a holy God.

3. People would judge good and evil subjectively.

Truth would become subjective to mankind instead of objective. Humanity would lean on its own judgment instead of God's wisdom, and the result would be moral

confusion and chaos. “There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death” (Proverbs 14:12). By the end of the book of Judges, that path had a slogan: “all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

Mark Hart put it well:

*“God didn’t give Adam and Eve the right to decide what was good and evil.
He gave them the right to choose between good and evil.”*

Mark Hart

That’s the difference between a son and an orphan. A son trusts his Father to define what is good. An orphan has to decide for himself, because he no longer believes anyone is looking out for him.

Why Put the Tree There at All?

A friend of mine came to me after hearing me talk about the fall in the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and asked, “Why did God put that tree there in the first place? Yes, He told them not to eat from it, but why put it there at all?”

My answer was simple: because love always requires a choice. Without the freedom to disobey, it isn’t love; it’s control. God didn’t create robots programmed to obey. He created people in His own image, sons and daughters He wanted to share a family with. And family can’t be forced. It has to be chosen.

The tree wasn’t a trap. It was an invitation. Every day Adam and Eve walked past it, they were choosing the Father again. Moses set the same choice before Israel:

Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses... Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live! You can make this choice by loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him.

Deuteronomy 30:19–20

And the Father made His choice first. He planned in advance to adopt us into His family through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:5). “We love each other because he loved us first” (1 John 4:19).

That's the power of the Spirit of Adoption. An orphan obeys because he's afraid of what will happen if he doesn't. A son obeys because he's been chosen, and he chooses to stay.

God doesn't want robots who can't disobey. He wants sons and daughters who choose to stay.

Did God Lie, or Did the Devil?

"You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil."

Genesis 3:4-5

Here is a question worth wrestling with. God said, "If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die." Adam went on to live 930 years (Genesis 5:5). So did God lie?

No.

Death in Scripture is not the end of existence. It is separation. Physical death is when the soul is separated from the body. In a similar way, the death Adam and Eve experienced in the garden was their spirit being separated from God. They were created to live forever. That day their spirits died, cut off from the life of God, and their bodies began the slow decay that every human body has known since.

Think about your phone. One minute you have five bars and you're talking clearly with someone you love. The next minute the call drops. The phone still works. The screen still lights up. But the connection is gone. That's what happened in Eden on the spirit level. Humanity kept living, but the connection with the Father dropped.

So did the devil lie? Yes. His lie was that God was withholding something from them, that they had to take something to become "like God." But they had already been made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). The enemy convinced them to grab for what the Father had already given.

The first lie in the Bible was a lie about the Father's heart.

That's still his strategy. He wants you to believe God is holding out on you. Once you believe that, you'll start reaching for what you think you need instead of resting in who you already are.

Image of God, Children of God

Here's one of the most offensive statements you can make in our culture: not all people are God's children.

All of humanity is made in the image of God. Every person you will ever meet carries dignity and worth because God made them. But not all of humanity are God's children, because in the Fall we became spiritual orphans, infected by the sin nature.

But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

John 1:12-13

If everyone were a child of God from birth, then neither the sacrifice of Christ nor adoption by God would be necessary. The truth is that only those who have been born again, born of the Spirit by believing in Jesus Christ, are the children of God.

The Old Testament's main word for sin, *chet*, and the New Testament's word, *hamartia*, both carry the idea of missing the mark, like an archer whose arrow falls short of the target. But sin goes deeper than missing God's expectations. It means failing to reflect the image we were made in and failing to walk in the identity of a child of God. Before sin is ever something we do, it is a condition we were born into, a nature that falls short of God's glory.

Born in Sin

David said it plainly: "For I was born a sinner—yes, from the moment my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). Paul said that before Christ we were by nature under God's anger, just like everyone else (Ephesians 2:3).

We aren't sinners because we sin. We sin because we were born sinners.

That means no matter how healthy or how dysfunctional your family of origin was, you were born a spiritual orphan. A loving mom and dad can give you a lot of good

things, but they can't give you a new spirit. It is not natural descent that makes someone a child of God. It is being born again.

Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.'"

John 3:5-7

When the religious leaders insisted, "God himself is our true Father," Jesus told them, "If God were your Father, you would love me" (John 8:41-42). Being religious didn't make them sons. Being born into the right family line didn't either.

The story of humanity is the story of two races: those born in Adam and those born again in Christ.

Super Mario Theology

When I was a kid, the original Super Mario Bros. was the game. Eight worlds, four levels in each, thirty-two stages in all. Every fourth level ended in a castle with Bowser, or one of his minions disguised as him, waiting for you.

I hadn't beaten it. But I didn't want to admit that to my brother. So I lied and told him I had beaten the whole game, and that it "only had five levels."

That's funny when you're a kid. It's not funny when we do it with God.

We do the same thing with our faith all the time. We shrink God's truth down to the size of our experience. If we haven't seen it, it must not be there. If a passage makes us uncomfortable, we skip over it like a warp pipe to a later world. We cling to a shallow theology because it lets us avoid admitting how much of the game we haven't played.

That's subjective theology, and it's the fruit of the third reason God forbade the tree. When truth becomes subjective, my experience becomes the judge of God's Word instead of God's Word being the judge of my experience.

There was a season when I noticed that certain scriptures offended me. I could have argued with them. Instead, I started to see that if Scripture offended me, it was my flesh being offended. So I went looking for the root of the lie I was believing.

If the Word of God offends you, don't change the Word. Find the lie.

The flesh, the imposter we'll face later in this book, always embraces the same lie: that my opinion and my feelings matter more than what the God of Scripture says.

Man's Wisdom That Masquerades as Truth

"Truth by definition is exclusive. If truth were all-inclusive, nothing would be false."

Walter Martin

The source of absolute truth is the Bible. If the Bible calls it sin, your opinion doesn't change that, and neither does mine. But we have replaced objective truth with people's opinions, and many of those opinions have been repeated so often that we think they're in the Bible.

Here are six I hear all the time.

- **"Everything happens for a reason."** God works all things together for good for those who love Him (Romans 8:28). That's not the same as saying everything that happens is good, or that God caused it.
- **"To thine own self be true."** That's Shakespeare, not Scripture. Your self is the very thing that needs a Savior.
- **"God helps those who help themselves."** The gospel says the opposite. God helps those who can't help themselves.
- **"God won't give you more than you can handle."** He will often allow more than you can handle, so you'll learn to lean on Him.
- **"God just wants you to be happy."** He wants you to be holy and whole, and He gives a joy that doesn't depend on your circumstances.
- **"Blood is thicker than water."** Jesus said that anyone who does the will of His Father in heaven is His brother and sister and mother (Matthew 12:50). The family of God is formed by His blood, not ours.

Some popular preachers tell their audiences that nearly everyone is basically good. It sounds kind. But if nearly everyone is good, who needs a Savior?

Any gospel that elevates humanity more than it glorifies God is not the gospel.

The true gospel focuses on the glory of Jesus Christ, not man. Otherwise, man would not need a Savior, and the orphan would not need a Father.

Behind the Glass

Now let me take you back to that ICU window.

As I stood there looking at my son through the glass, the Lord showed me that I was watching the story of every man and woman created in His image. Our sin kept us from experiencing His love. He longed to hold us, but His holiness would have destroyed us, because we had been orphaned by Adam's sin.

Listen! The LORD's arm is not too weak to save you, nor is his ear too deaf to hear you call. It's your sins that have cut you off from God.

Isaiah 59:1-2

I wanted nothing more than to pick my son up. The only thing between us was that glass. And for all of human history after Eden, there was a wall between the Father and His children that we could not climb over.

But.

God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.

Ephesians 1:5

The cross was not a knee-jerk reaction to fallen humanity. God wasn't caught off guard in the garden. Before the first sin, the Father had already planned to bring His children home, so that His Son would be "the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Romans 8:29).

The Father was never content to watch you through the glass. He sent His Son to break it.

You were born on the wrong side of the window. But the Father has never stopped longing to hold you. In the next chapter we'll see how He did it.

For the Road

1. Where have you been tempted to believe the serpent's lie, that God is holding out on you? How has that belief shaped the way you pray or the choices you make?
2. Which of the six sayings of man's wisdom have you believed or repeated? What does Scripture say instead?

3. Is there a passage of Scripture that offends you? What lie might be underneath that offense?

You were orphaned in a garden, but you were never forgotten by the Father.

Saved into a Family

No, in you alone do the orphans find mercy.

Hosea 14:3

A cold heart is a presence issue long before it is a performance issue.

That's why the enemy works so hard to get us to wander away from the Father's house, and why he fills our minds with lies about the Father's character. He fully understands something about human nature: you will not want to stay near someone you do not trust.

You can try harder. You can sign up for more, serve more, read more. But if your heart has gone cold toward the Father, more effort won't warm it. The cure is coming home and staying close long enough to find out who He really is.

In the last chapter we saw how humanity was orphaned in the garden. In this one we'll see what Jesus did about it. He didn't only save us from something. He saved us into a family.

Formula or Revelation?

By "formula," I mean a transactional approach to God: "If I say the right words and do the right things, what will I receive in return?" The focus remains on what God can do for me.

By "revelation," I mean having your eyes opened to who Jesus is and the worth of what He has freely given you. Like the merchant who discovered the pearl of great price, you recognize a treasure worth surrendering everything to possess. You are willing to lay down your life, follow Him, and guard the relationship you have received.

That surrender does not purchase salvation; it is your response to discovering its value. You follow Jesus because He Himself has become your treasure.

Many people have heard the gospel and can recite it. Few understand it and carry it in their hearts, and you can tell the difference by the fruit of their lives.

We have turned the gospel into a formula. Say this prayer, raise your hand, walk the aisle, "accept Jesus into your heart." Voddie Baucham has challenged that language as strongly as anyone:

"Nowhere in the New Testament will you find that salvation is about 'accepting' Jesus. Nowhere, nowhere, nowhere. It's not there. What you are told again and again and again is to repent and believe."

Voddie Baucham

Jesus began His ministry with exactly that message: "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:15). Even when John speaks

of receiving Him, he defines it as believing in His name (John 1:12).

Repentance is more than an emotional moment at an altar.

Tears may come with repentance, but repentance is when you change.

How we introduce someone to the gospel shapes how they will follow Jesus. If their first attraction is a promise of prosperity, they may grow disheartened when the wealth doesn't come. If it's the lights and the emotional highs, they may drift away when the excitement fades. The deepest danger is failing to root their faith in this truth: Jesus Himself is the gospel. He is not a means to earthly gain. He is the substance of our salvation, the anchor for the soul, the pearl of great price. People grounded in His character and His lordship don't get shipwrecked when the crushing seasons come.

Here's a question that sticks out to me. Matthew tells us that Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, "announcing the Good News about the Kingdom" (Matthew 4:23). If the gospel is only that Jesus died for our sins, how did Jesus preach the gospel before He went to the cross?

The cross is the most powerful act in human history. It may also be one of the most misunderstood. Jesus died for our sins, and praise God for it. But the Good News He preached was bigger than a transaction. It was the Kingdom of God coming near, and a Father calling His children home.

A Wicked Heart and a New Heart

The world will tell you to follow your heart. The Bible wisely tells you to guard it, because your heart isn't always clear about what you truly need. "Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life" (Proverbs 4:23).

Why would God tell us to guard something we were supposed to follow? Because of what the Fall did to it.

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve.

Jeremiah 17:9-10

Under the law, in Adam, we were slaves to a dead spirit and a wicked heart. Scripture says it from beginning to end. Before the flood, God saw that everything people thought or imagined was evil (Genesis 6:5). David said that no one does good, not even one (Psalm 14:3), and Paul quoted him (Romans 3:10–12). Jesus said that evil thoughts, greed, envy and pride come from within, out of a person's heart (Mark 7:21–23).

That's the bad news. Here's the good news.

And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.

Ezekiel 36:26–27

In Christ Jesus you have been given a new heart and a resurrected spirit. “This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). God promised through Jeremiah that He would write His law on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). He saved us “through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5, NIV). Paul tells us to put off the old self, to be made new in the attitude of our minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22–24).

Notice that God doesn't patch up the old heart. He doesn't ask it to try harder. He takes out the heart of stone and puts in a new one, and then He puts His own Spirit inside so that the new heart has the power to obey.

The miracle of the gospel is found in the forgiveness of sins, and also in the profound transformation of the sinner's heart into a new heart that walks in obedience. The new covenant promises both. God doesn't only want us to become His children. He wants us to know His heart and trust it without wavering.

I'm not shocked when someone confesses desires that are at odds with Scripture. That confession only shows how deeply we all need to be born again. We were born with a nature bent toward rebellion, and no amount of human effort can fix it. What concerns me is when there is no evidence of a new heart at all.

Jesus didn't die to make bad people good. He died to make dead people alive.

He came to transform spiritual orphans into children of God and give them a new heart and a new mind that reflect the Father's character. We are saved by adoption through Christ Jesus, not by moralism, humanitarianism or self-denial.

John Q: A Picture of the Gospel

Have you seen the movie *John Q*?

It's the story of a father whose nine-year-old son, Mike, collapses and is told he needs a heart transplant to live. John and his wife sell nearly everything they own trying to get their son on the transplant list. When the system still won't help, John takes over the hospital's emergency room and holds it hostage until his son is put on the list. As the standoff goes on, his conversation with his son is broadcast for the whole world to see. And finally, when there seems to be no other way, John tells the doctor to take his own heart and put it in his son.

"Take mine."

I see the gospel all over that story.

1. **The son needs a new heart to live.** So does every one of us. No tune-up will fix what's wrong with us. We need a heart transplant (Ezekiel 36:26).
2. **The father sells all he owns to save his son.** God gave everything, including His only Son, out of love for us (John 3:16). Jesus left the riches of heaven and became poor for our sake.
3. **The father holds up the hospital to get his son a new heart.** God went to unthinkable lengths to redeem us. "God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8).
4. **The father's conversation with his son is broadcast to the world.** The good news of God's love is meant for every nation. God didn't send His Son to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17).
5. **The father is willing to give his own heart so his son can live.** That's Gethsemane and the cross. "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

But here's where the movie and the gospel part ways. In the film, at the last minute, a donor heart becomes available. Mike is saved, and John doesn't have to die.

There was no last-minute donor for Jesus. No other heart was waiting to take His place. His sacrifice was deliberate and necessary. He gave His own life so that we

could receive a new heart by His Spirit.

Isaiah saw it seven hundred years before it happened:

But it was the LORD's good plan to crush him and cause him grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have many descendants.

Isaiah 53:10

Many descendants. The cross was always about a family. The Son laid down His life so that the Father could have many sons and daughters.

At the end of the movie, a now-healthy boy looks across at his father and calls out to him, "Dad."

The cross didn't only spare your life. It gave you a Father to call out to.

Two Meanings of Saved

In the first chapter we saw that the New Testament word for saved, *sozo*, means to be made whole, healed and delivered. Let's take that one step further.

Jesus did not consider His incarnation, life, ministry, healings, deliverances, disciple-making, death, resurrection and ascension to be enough by themselves to establish New Testament Christianity. After He rose from the dead, He breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). Then, before He ascended, He gave them one more command:

"Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before."

Acts 1:4

Jesus knew His followers needed more than forgiveness. They needed power. They needed the Spirit of the Son in their hearts.

So I believe being saved has two meanings.

- 1. Receiving the blood of Jesus as payment for your sin debt, and receiving the Holy Spirit, saves you from hell.**
- 2. Being baptized with the Holy Spirit and having your mind renewed saves you from a deceitful, wicked heart and the consequences of sin.**

The first is the door into the Father's house. The second is learning to live there.

Somewhere along the way the Church lost sight of the fact that Jesus' mission was not only about rescuing us from hell, but also about saving us from our fallen orphan mindset. That's why so many believers are sure they're going to heaven and still live anxious, guarded, performance-driven lives here. They've walked through the door. They just haven't unpacked their bags.

Remember the distinction from Chapter 1. Before we trusted Christ, the orphan spirit kept us from being legal children of God. In Christ, it's the orphan mindset that keeps us from fully experiencing what it means to belong. The blood of Jesus deals with the first. The Holy Spirit, working through a renewed mind, deals with the second.

When you haven't surrendered to the fullness of the Holy Spirit, it becomes hard for others to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8) through your life. They may hear that you've been forgiven. But they can't yet taste a Father's love when they're around you.

Born to Be Adopted, Born to Grow the Family

The story of the Bible is the story of God and humanity, centered on God's desire to have His own family.

You see it even in the prophets. After all of Israel's wandering, Hosea gave the people the words to come home with:

Bring your confessions, and return to the LORD. Say to him, "Forgive all our sins and graciously receive us, so that we may offer you our praises. Assyria cannot save us, nor can our warhorses. Never again will we say to the idols we have made, 'You are our gods.' No, in you alone do the orphans find mercy."

Hosea 14:2-3

C. S. Lewis said it in one sentence:

"The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God."

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Don't confuse your earthly assignments with your divine purpose. The primary purpose of your existence is to bring joy to God and to live for His pleasure. Once you grasp that, you will no longer struggle with feelings of insignificance. If God considers you worth His eternal companionship, what greater significance could you have? He invites every person to become His cherished child.

So here are two truths to carry with you.

1. You were born to be adopted into God's family.

2. You were born to grow the family of God.

The first truth settles your identity. You are not an accident, a project or a hired hand. Before you ever did anything right or wrong, the Father wanted you in His family. The second truth gives you your mission. Every son and daughter of God carries the family business: bringing more orphans home.

Get those two out of order and you'll end up back in the orphanage. If you try to grow the family before you know you belong to it, ministry becomes a way to earn your place. But when you know you're His, reaching others becomes the overflow of a full heart.

Adopted children don't just sit at the table. They pull out chairs for others. The same Father who brought you home is still watching the road for every son and daughter who hasn't made it back yet.

Dudley Hall, in his book *Orphans No More*, describes the difference between an orphan and a son:

"Orphaned by Adam's sin, we are adopted on the basis of Jesus' sonship. The relationship is made experiential by the presence of the Holy Spirit in us crying, 'Abba, Father.' No longer defined by our separation from God, we are sons whose passion is to honor our Father. Spiritual orphans spend their lives longing to belong. Spiritual sons are at home in the Father's house and spend their lives working with him."

Dudley Hall, *Orphans No More*

Orphans long to belong. Sons and daughters already do, and they go and bring their brothers and sisters home.

In the next chapter we'll watch all of this play out in a story many of us grew up with: a little red-headed orphan named Annie, and a father who wanted her for his own.

For the Road

1. Were you taught to approach God mainly for what He could give you, or did you come to recognize Jesus Himself as your greatest treasure? How has that shaped the way you follow Him today?

2. Where do you most need the second meaning of saved, the Holy Spirit renewing your mind and rescuing you from a deceitful heart?
3. Who in your life is still living outside the Father's house? What would it look like for you to help grow the family?

Jesus didn't only save you from hell. He saved you into a family, and He's still setting places at the table.

ORPHANS NO MORE

ANNIE & THE SPIRIT OF ADOPTION



I will not leave you orphans...
John 14:18

Orphans No More: Annie and the Spirit of Adoption

No, I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you.

John 14:18

A little red-headed girl lives in a New York orphanage during the Great Depression. Around her neck she wears half of a locket. Her parents left it with her when they left her, along with a note promising they would come back with the other half. Every night she waits. Every day they don't come.

Most of us know the story. The 1982 film *Annie* is a family musical, and I'm not going to pretend Hollywood set out to preach a sermon. But when I watch it, I see the gospel of adoption almost scene by scene. I see the orphan mindset that still lives in so many of God's sons and daughters. And I see a father who wouldn't quit.

So I want to walk through Annie's story with you one picture at a time. Hold the pictures loosely. A movie is not Scripture, and no illustration is perfect, so eat the chicken and throw away the bone. But sometimes a simple story slips past our defenses and lets the Holy Spirit show us what we've been reading for years and never really seen.

The Cry of the Orphaned Heart

Annie begins as an orphan longing for her lost parents.

Although she is surrounded by other children, her heart remains fixed on belonging, identity and reunion with her parents. Her longing reflects the cry of the orphaned heart, the desire to know, "Who am I, and to whom do I belong?"

Those are two of the oldest questions in the human heart. Ever since the garden, every son and daughter of Adam has been asking them. Religion tries to answer the first question with a job description. The world tries to answer the second with a crowd. Only a Father can answer both.

You can be surrounded by people and still be an orphan on the inside.

Some of you are sitting in a church full of people right now, and your heart is still at the window, waiting for someone to come for you. Hold on. Someone is coming.

When Grace Enters the Orphanage

Grace enters Annie's life as an unexpected messenger of favor.

Grace Farrell, the secretary of the billionaire Oliver Warbucks, arrives at the orphanage to choose a child for a stay at his home, and she selects Annie. Even her name is significant: grace reaches into the orphanage and brings Annie into the father's house.

Annie didn't apply for the position. She didn't work her way to the top of a list or prove she was the best-behaved girl in the building. She was chosen. That is how grace has always worked. We didn't find our way out of the orphanage. Grace walked in and found us.

Grace doesn't wait for you to climb out of the orphanage. Grace comes in to get you.

In the Mansion, Still Thinking Like an Orphan

Annie enters the mansion carrying an orphan mentality.

She immediately assumes she must earn her place by working, offering to scrub the floors and wash the windows. She is standing in one of the finest houses in New York, and the first thing she reaches for is a bucket.

She understands servanthood, but she does not yet understand sonship.

That is what an orphan mindset does. It can change addresses without changing its mind. Many of us came into the Father's house the same way. We got saved, and almost immediately we started looking for the mop. We assumed our place depended on how useful we could make ourselves.

Serving is beautiful. Jesus Himself came to serve. But there is a world of difference between serving because you belong and serving so that you can belong. One flows from the Father's love. The other is an orphan trying to pay rent.

Grace Confronts Performance

Grace confronts the spirit of performance.

Grace tells Annie that she is not there to work. She is a guest. This reflects the gospel: we do not earn the Father's love through striving, performance or religious labor. We are welcomed through grace.

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

Ephesians 2:8-9

Orphans tend to see every relationship as a transaction. "What do I have to do to stay here? What do you want from me?" They've learned that nothing is free, so they keep their hands busy and their bags packed. Grace has to keep telling them the same thing until it finally sinks in.

The Father's house is not a job site. You were invited in by grace, and grace is what keeps you there.

When Wounds Distort the Father

Daddy Warbucks initially appears distant and intimidating.

He is a busy, powerful man with a mansion full of staff and a schedule full of important people. His sternness can symbolize how many wounded people initially perceive God: as harsh, inaccessible, demanding, or too important to care personally about them.

If your earthly father was absent, angry or impossible to please, you will be tempted to lay that picture over your heavenly Father. You'll read His Word through that wound. You'll hear correction as rejection and silence as distance. The Father hasn't changed. The lens needs healing.

Your wounds can distort how you see the Father, but they never change who He is.

Relationship Replaces Fear

Relationship gradually replaces Annie's anxiety and fear.

As Annie spends time with Warbucks, goes to the movies with him and experiences his kindness, she begins to see the heart behind his authority. A night out at the movies does what no lecture could have done.

Intimacy transforms her perception of the father.

You can't argue an orphan out of fear. Love has to outlast it. The more time we spend with the Father, the more we discover that His authority was never the opposite of His kindness. His authority is how His kindness protects us.

Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.

1 John 4:18

Struggling to Receive Something Greater

Annie initially struggles to receive what is being offered.

When Warbucks offers her a new locket, she won't take it at first. She still wears the broken half of the old one, and she still dreams of finding her biological parents. Spiritually, this can represent the personal dreams, former identities and imagined answers we sometimes cling to, even when the Father is offering something far greater.

I understand that. Letting go of an old hope can feel like betraying it. Some of us have carried half of something for so long that we've built our whole identity around the missing piece. We would rather keep waiting for what never came than open our hands to what the Father is holding out right now.

The hardest thing for an orphan is often letting go of an old hope long enough to receive a new one.

Adoption, Not Merely Assistance

Warbucks offers Annie adoption, not merely servant or financial assistance.

He does not simply want to improve her circumstances. He wants to give her his name, his home, his protection and a permanent place in his family. This mirrors the biblical Spirit of Adoption: "You received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father'" (Romans 8:15, NKJV).

Many believers have accepted God's assistance and never received His adoption. They come to Him for help with the bills, the diagnosis, the crisis of the week. God is generous, and He does help. But He never intended to be a benefactor you visit when you're in trouble. He wants to be a Father you live with.

God wants to do more than improve your circumstances. He wants to give you His name.

When Desire Becomes Vulnerable to Deception

Counterfeit parents appear when Annie's deepest desire becomes vulnerable to deception.

Warbucks offers a reward to anyone who can prove they are Annie's parents. Rooster and Lily show up calling themselves Ralph and Shirley Mudge. They pretend to be Annie's parents for selfish gain. Their deception illustrates how the enemy exploits unhealed identity and desires by offering counterfeit belonging, false identity and imitation love.

The enemy doesn't need to plant a new desire in you. He only has to find one that hasn't been healed. Then he dresses up as the answer.

But I am not surprised! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

2 Corinthians 11:14

The enemy rarely shows up looking like a monster. He usually shows up looking like what you've been waiting for.

Not Every Offer of Belonging Carries the Father's Heart

Not everyone who claims to offer belonging carries the Father's heart.

Rooster and Lily know enough about Annie's story to appear convincing, but their motives are corrupt. They have the right details and the wrong heart.

Counterfeit love seeks to use and possess. True fatherly love protects, sacrifices and gives.

That is how you tell the difference. Ask what the love is reaching for. Jesus put it plainly: "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life" (John 10:10). A counterfeit father wants something from you. The true Father gives Himself for you.

Orphans are easy targets for anyone who promises family, whether it's a relationship, a crowd, a cause or a leader who knows exactly which words you're starving to hear. Discernment is simply refusing to hand your heart to anyone who hasn't shown you the Father's nature.

When a Promised Dream Becomes Bondage

Annie is kidnapped by the very people who promise to fulfill her dream.

Rooster and Lily never intended to give her a home. They wanted the reward. What appears to be the answer to her longing becomes captivity.

This reveals a sobering truth: when an unhealed orphan heart chooses familiarity over discernment, its greatest desire can become the doorway to bondage.

The thing you crave most can become the door to your captivity if you won't let the Father heal it.

So don't stop desiring. Bring your desires to the Father first. The longings He heals, He can safely fulfill.

The One Sent from the Father Rescues

Punjab's rescue can be viewed as a reflection of Christ.

Annie escapes Rooster and climbs high onto a bridge, with nowhere left to go. Punjab, Warbucks's bodyguard, pursues Annie, intervenes when she cannot save herself and delivers her from her captors. In this devotional interpretation, he represents Jesus, **the One sent from the Father** who rescues us from deception and **brings us safely home**.

For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.

Luke 19:10

Maybe you're up on that bridge right now. You followed a promise that turned into a trap, and you've climbed as far as you can climb. You can't save yourself from there, and you don't have to.

Jesus doesn't wait for you to find your own way down. He comes to get you.

The Father's Love Receives and Remains

Daddy Warbucks receives Annie after her rescue.

He does not punish her for still longing for her earthly parents. He remains committed to her, showing that

the Father's love is patient

even while He heals our misplaced hopes and incomplete understanding.

That's the Father Jesus described in His most famous parable.

So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

Luke 15:20

Some of us are afraid to come home because we chased the wrong thing. We think the Father is waiting with a list of everything we got wrong. He isn't. He receives us, and then He stays.

From Uncertainty to Permanent Belonging

The final adoption replaces uncertainty with permanent belonging.

Annie is no longer merely an orphan visiting a wealthy man's home. She becomes a daughter with a father, a family, a name and an inheritance.

God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.

Ephesians 1:5

Notice the last line. Adopting you wasn't a burden God reluctantly took on. It gave Him great pleasure. A visitor always wonders when the visit will end. A daughter doesn't.

You are not on a trial stay in the Father's house. You live there.

A New Covenant of Belonging

The locket represents a new covenant of belonging.

Annie's old locket symbolized separation and her hope of recovering a former family. Warbucks gives her a new locket, symbolizing a new identity and an inseparable relationship.

The old locket was only ever half of a promise, and the people who made that promise never came back. The new one comes from the father who did. In the same way, Jesus didn't leave us holding half a promise. At the table on the night He was betrayed, He

lifted the cup and called it “the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood” (Luke 22:20).

Your old identity was half a locket. Your new identity is sealed in His blood.

United with the Father

Whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

1 Corinthians 6:17 (NIV)

The new locket can reflect our spiritual union with God.

Adoption is more than being rescued from a bad situation. It is being joined to the Father and given an entirely new identity.

Plenty of people would be glad just to get out of the orphanage. But the Father didn't rescue you so you could live on your own somewhere down the street. He joined you to Himself. Your life is now hidden with Christ in God, and nothing can pull that union apart.

From Orphanhood to Sonship

The deeper message is the movement from orphanhood to sonship. And yes, sonship belongs to daughters too. Annie is the proof.

Annie moves:

- from **striving** to **receiving**,
- from **uncertainty** to **security**,
- from **counterfeit belonging** to **genuine family**,
- and from merely **visiting** the father's house to **permanently living** there as his daughter.

Put the whole story together and you have the gospel of adoption. Grace brought Annie out of the orphanage, relationship changed how she saw the father, rescue delivered her from counterfeit love, and adoption gave her a permanent identity in the father's house.

Grace brings you out, relationship changes how you see Him, rescue sets you free, and adoption gives you a name.

More Than Cancelled Debt

The gospel is not merely the cancellation of our debt. It is the restoration of our relationship with the Father. Jesus came to bring God's lost children home, give us a new identity and welcome us into His family.

That's the gospel we left in the orphanage. Many of us know our debt has been paid, and we're grateful. But we still live like Annie on her first night in the mansion, holding a bucket and waiting to be sent back. The Father didn't pay your debt so you could scrub His floors. He paid it so He could call you His own.

"See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1).

He has seen you from a long way off. He is already running. Take off the old locket, put down the bucket and come home.

For the Road

1. Which scene in Annie's story feels most like where you are right now: waiting at the window, scrubbing the floors, holding onto the old locket, or up on the bridge?
2. Are there old dreams or former identities you're still clinging to that keep you from receiving what the Father is offering?
3. Have you received God's assistance without receiving His adoption? What would it look like to stop visiting the Father's house and start living there?

You are not an orphan visiting the mansion. You are a daughter or son with a Father, a family, a name and an inheritance.

PART TWO

A Tale of Two Orphans

Which brother are you?

A Tale of Two Orphans

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons.”

Luke 15:11

A man I’ll call Desmond had been an atheist for most of his life. For some time he had felt God knocking at his door, and by the time we sat down to talk, we both knew the conversation was a divine encounter.

As I shared the gospel with him, he looked at the ground, then back up. I could see disbelief crossing his face while his heart and mind wrestled with what he was hearing. Finally he met my eyes, and to my relief, hope was still there.

“I suspected it was Jesus all along trying to get my attention,” he said. “The whole time you were talking, I somehow knew you’d say He was the way of salvation. I also know you’re telling the truth. But I have some questions. May I ask them?”

“Of course.”

“I’ve known a lot of people who use the name of Jesus, and they aren’t free at all. As a matter of fact, they’re some of the most bound people I know. Why?”

It was a good question. It may be the most honest question an outsider can ask the Church.

I told him that many who bear the name of Jesus have never truly bowed their knee. They prayed a prayer, joined a church or confessed with their lips, but they never surrendered the throne of their lives. Others began well, and then pain came: betrayal, loss, unanswered questions. Many lower their theology to match their pain. They say, “I’m only human,” and settle for lukewarm faith and cheap grace. Some deconstruct biblical Christianity until they have constructed a god of their own personal preferences.

“That’s the broad, crowded road,” I said. “Jesus described a narrow road that few find. Don’t let the failings of broken leaders or lukewarm saints steal the reality of the cost

of discipleship. Run the race to win. Let Scripture do the talking. Fix your eyes on Jesus, surrender fully, and pursue Him with everything. The cost is high, but the reward is great. Christianity is not safe, but God is faithful, and He will always finish what He started.”

Desmond’s eyes glistened. “I want that,” he whispered. “I want the real thing.”

“Then welcome to the narrow road, brother. It will cost you everything, but it leads to life.”

You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.

Matthew 7:13-14

Desmond’s question deserves a longer answer than one conversation can give. Why are so many people who carry the name of Jesus still bound? Jesus answered that question Himself, in the most famous story He ever told.

You can be in the Father’s house and still lack the Father’s mind and heart.

A Man Had Two Sons

Luke 15 opens with tax collectors and other notorious sinners crowding in to hear Jesus, and the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complaining that He was eating with them. Jesus answered with three stories: a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. Read closely, it’s really two lost sons.

The younger son goes to his father and asks for his share of the estate now, while his father is still alive. The father divides his wealth between his sons. A few days later the younger son packs everything and moves to a distant land, where he wastes it all in wild living. Then the money runs out, a famine sweeps the land, and the young man ends up feeding pigs for a local farmer. He’s so hungry that the pods the pigs are eating start to look good. No one gives him anything.

Finally he comes to his senses. Even his father’s hired servants have food to spare. So he rehearses a speech: *I have sinned against heaven and against you. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. Take me on as a hired servant.* And he heads home.

While he is still a long way off, his father sees him. Filled with love and compassion, the father runs to him, embraces him and kisses him. Before the speech is even finished, the father is calling for the finest robe, a ring, sandals and the fattened calf. “This son of mine was dead and has now returned to life.”

Meanwhile, the older son is out in the fields working. He comes home, hears music and dancing, and learns that his brother is back. He is angry and refuses to go in. So the father comes out and pleads with him. The older son answers, “All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to.” And the father says, “Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.”

We call it the parable of the prodigal son. I’ve come to see it as a tale of two orphan mindsets. The younger son is the rebellious orphan. The older brother is the religious orphan. One left the house. The other never left it. Neither of them knew the heart of their father.

Listen to the older brother’s word: *slaved*. He lived under his father’s roof for years and thought like a slave the whole time.

One son ran from the Father’s house. The other lived in it like a hired hand.

Many of us were taught that this is a story about a backslider. Maybe. But I’ve often wondered whether the younger son could just as easily be a seasoned saint who grew frustrated with the Father’s process, because deep down he never really trusted his Father.

When the present doesn’t match the promise, we’ll be tempted to lower our theology to match our pain, or to raise our religious performance to silence our shame.

The first is the younger son’s road. The second is the older brother’s. And underneath both is the same hunger. Both the rebellious orphan and the religious orphan are in search of justice. The rebellious orphan seeks it through resources: “Give me my share.” The religious orphan seeks it through recognition: “You never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends.”

Neither one asked for the father.

Taking Away, Adding To

Here is one of the clearest ways to tell the two orphans apart.

A rebellious orphan mindset will try to take away from the Word of God. That is deconstruction. A religious orphan mindset will try to add to the Word of God. That is legalism. A son or daughter of God will challenge the traditions of men in order to return to the truth. That is reformation.

Do not add to or subtract from these commands I am giving you. Just obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you.

Deuteronomy 4:2

The Bible closes the same way, with a warning against adding to or removing from the words of the prophecy (Revelation 22:18–19). From Moses to John, God guards His Word on both sides.

Adding to God's Word can sound like extra devotion. It isn't safe. Go back to the garden. When the serpent questioned Eve, she answered:

"It's only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, 'You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.'"

Genesis 3:3

God never said anything about touching it. Rick Joyner points out that this small step past what God actually said was part of the original fall, and he warns, "Adding to the word of God can be as destructive as taking away from it." It may look harmless to go a little further than God directed, but it reveals a pride the enemy can easily exploit. That is why the Pharisees, the people most zealous for God's Word, became the greatest enemies of the Word Himself when He walked the earth.

Take away from God's Word and you'll make Him smaller. Add to it and you'll make Him harder to reach. Either way, you stay outside the house.

There's one more way to say it. The religious orphan doesn't know the love of God. The rebellious orphan doesn't know the fear of the Lord. A son or daughter knows both.

Three Kinds of Grace

Every orphan has a theology of grace, whether they can explain it or not. I see three.

1. Rebellious orphans: cheap grace.

Grace treated as a license to sin, without repentance and without discipleship. Paul asked whether we should keep on sinning so God can show us more grace, and answered his own question: “Of course not!” (Romans 6:1–2). The church in Corinth tolerated sexual immorality in its own fellowship as though grace covered it, and Paul rebuked their complacency and called them to holiness (1 Corinthians 5:1–2).

2. Religious orphans: earned grace.

The belief that God’s favor is achieved through human effort or rule-keeping.

I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.

Galatians 2:21

The Pharisees tithed their spices down to the last leaf and neglected justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23–24). They kept the rules and missed God’s heart.

3. Relational sons and daughters: biblical grace.

God’s unmerited favor, secured by the blood of Jesus. It justifies us, declaring us righteous. It adopts us as His children, restoring the relationship. And it empowers us through the Holy Spirit to grow in holiness. We are saved by grace through faith, as a gift, and not by our works (Ephesians 2:8–9). The picture of it is the father running down the road and putting a robe on a son who still smells like pigs (Luke 15:20–24).

The rebellious orphan trades costly grace for cheap grace. The religious orphan trades costly grace for earned grace.

Cheap grace costs you nothing, so it changes nothing. Earned grace costs you everything, and it is still never enough. Biblical grace cost the Father His Son, and it makes you a son or daughter. We’ll look closer at cheap grace in the next chapter and at earned grace in the one after.

Fear, Duty or Love

The way you obey reveals who you think your Father is. There are three kinds of obedience:

- **Fear-based obedience:** “Something bad will happen if I don’t obey.”
- **Duty-based obedience:** “Something good will happen if I obey.”
- **Love-based obedience:** “I get to express my love and trust for You when I obey.”

If you love me, obey my commandments.

John 14:15

Jesus didn't say, "If you're afraid of Me," or, "If you want something from Me." He said, "If you love Me."

Look at the two brothers again. The younger son comes home ready to obey out of fear: *Just let me be a hired servant so I don't starve.* The older brother has been obeying out of duty for years: *I never once refused to do a single thing you told me.* He did everything right and expected to be paid for it. Neither one obeyed out of love, because neither one believed he was loved.

Love-based obedience doesn't do less than duty. It does the same things for a different reason.

Orphans obey to stay safe or to get rewarded. Sons and daughters obey because they trust the One who is asking.

The Legalist and the Narcissist

Inside the Church, among people who really are born again, we still face the whole range of the orphan mindset. On one side is the legalistic believer, who assumes God's acceptance depends on their performance. On the other side is the narcissistic believer, who knows God loves them but uses that love as an excuse to avoid correction and accountability.

The legalist clings to personal works. The narcissist exploits grace to justify self-centered living. Both come from a distorted identity. One is rooted in the fear of not being enough. The other is rooted in a proud, selfish identity.

I call the first one the Moralism. His is the ideology of control, and his motto is "Earn my keep." I call the second one the Narcissism. His is the ideology of selfish ambition, and his motto is "Pursue my dreams."

I spent a lot of my life in football, so let me put it in those terms. The moralist is like a player who thinks the aim of the game is simply to keep the rules. He never jumps offside, never draws a flag, and never makes a play. The narcissist is like the player who ignores the playbook. He forgets the value of the team and tries to make every play himself to stuff his stat sheet, and in the process he wrecks the coach's game plan.

Neither one wins games. The coach doesn't want a player who's only afraid of penalties, or a player who's only playing for himself. He wants a player who knows the game plan, trusts the coach and plays for the team.

The legalist is afraid of the rules. The narcissist ignores them. A son knows the heart of the One who wrote them.

You can even hear the difference when life gets hard. When faced with a divine delay, a rebellious orphan asks, "Why me?" A religious orphan asks, "What did I do wrong?" Both questions assume the delay is a verdict. But our situations don't always reveal our moral standing. More often they are divine training for maturity. A son can wait without accusing his Father or accusing himself.

What's Keeping You Out?

So let me ask you the question the father in the story was really asking both of his boys. What's keeping you out of the Father's house, out of His presence, right now?

- Is it your plan? That's rebellion.
- Is it your performance? That's religion.
- Or is it both?

Whether you're a rebellious orphan or a religious orphan, the prescription for repentance is the same. It is the revelation that it's the Father's goodness, kindness and patience that bring us home. Neither son was won back by a lecture. One was met by a running father. The other was met by a pleading one.

Did you notice that the father left the house twice in that story? Once to run down the road for the son who had squandered everything, and once to step out into the yard for the son who had resented everything. He didn't wait for either of them to get their theology right before he went out to them.

If your theology hasn't changed your life, you'd better change your theology.

That's what happened to Desmond. He didn't want a religion, and he didn't want a license. He wanted the real thing. The real thing is a Father who comes out to meet you, wherever you're standing, and invites you in to the feast.

The Father went out to both sons. He's coming out to you.

The Tale of Two ORPHAN MINDSETS

LEGALISM



My Works

I earn love and approval.



Rules & Rituals

I follow to be accepted.



Fear & Guilt

I live in fear of failing.



Performance-Based Worth

I try to earn my worth.



My Righteousness

I trust my performance to make me worthy.

LAWLESSNESS



My Will

I do what I want.



Rejection & Pride

I reject authority and truth.



Empty & Lost

I search for meaning but feel empty.



Isolated

I push others away.



My Way

I choose my own truth.

TREE OF
KNOWLEDGE
OF GOOD AND EVIL



INDEPENDENCE

ROOTED IN SELF RATHER THAN
TRUST IN THE FATHER.

For the Road

1. Which brother do you see more of in yourself: the one who wanted his share and left, or the one who stayed and slaved? Where have you seen a little of both?
2. Is your obedience driven mostly by fear, by duty or by love? Think of one specific area of obedience and ask the Holy Spirit to show you why you do it.
3. Where have you been tempted to take away from God's Word, or to add to it? What would it look like to let Scripture do the talking?

The Father didn't wait for either son to get it right before He went out to meet them.

The Rebellious Orphan

An inheritance obtained too early in life is not a blessing in the end.

Proverbs 20:21

“I want my share of your estate now before you die.”

Those are the first words the younger son speaks in Jesus’ story (Luke 15:12). He doesn’t ask how his father is doing. He doesn’t ask what his father wants. He asks for his stuff, and he asks for it now. He wants what the father has without having to stay with the father.

And the father gives it to him.

That is the rebellious orphan. His identity has come unhinged from God’s wisdom and greatness, and his personal will has become the center of the universe. He wants the inheritance without the relationship, the blessing without the Blesser.

You can’t have the liberty of building your own house and the privileges of living in the Father’s house at the same time.

When the fear of the Lord goes dormant, humanism is born. The Fall turned us from self-sacrificing children of God into self-centered consumers of God’s blessings. Paul warned Timothy that “in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money” (2 Timothy 3:1–2). Put simply, it’s all about me.

The rebellious orphan has a particular way of seeing the Father. He thinks, *The Father is holding me back*. A son learns to say, *The Father is protecting me from my lack of wisdom*. The orphan mindset misunderstands the Good Shepherd’s intentions, and so God’s people struggle to discern whether the Father is training them or restraining them.

Most of us have a little of the younger son in us. So let’s look at him honestly.

Seven Marks of a Rebellious Orphan

1. A rebellious orphan is always more interested in his personal liberties than in the Father's heart.

A rich young man once came running to Jesus, asking what he had to do to inherit eternal life. He told Jesus he had kept the commandments since he was young.

Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. "There is still one thing you haven't done," he told him. "Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

Mark 10:21-22

I bet Jesus felt like running after that young man and working out some way for him to stay and be His disciple. But you can't say yes for someone else who is working out his salvation. Empathy isn't agreeing with someone's decisions. It's understanding the logic, or the feeling, of choosing your own way. That doesn't mean we lower our boundaries and expectations. Jesus didn't.

The rich young ruler kept the rules, but his possessions had his heart. The younger son broke the rules, and his possessions had his heart too. Both walked away from the One who loved them because they valued what they owned more than who they could follow. Paul's remedy for that self-focus is simple: "Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too" (Philippians 2:4).

2. A rebellious orphan wants the Father's possessions more than the Father's presence.

For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

2 Corinthians 3:17

The rebellious orphan thinks freedom is found in getting his share and getting out. But freedom lives where the Spirit of the Lord is.

If there is freedom where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is bondage where your personal opinion is.

3. A rebellious orphan questions the Father's promises because he lacks patience for the Father's process.

So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up.

Galatians 6:9

When we learn to distrust Father God, He becomes more of an Advisor with suggestions than a King with commandments. We start to treat Him as a peer, and finally as someone who doesn't quite know what He's doing. Isaiah asked, "Who is able to advise the Spirit of the LORD? Who knows enough to give him advice or teach him?" (Isaiah 40:13). The younger son thought he did. A few days after he got his share, he packed up everything and left (Luke 15:13).

4. A rebellious orphan embraces his new identity in Christ but not his new responsibilities in Christ.

He loves hearing that he's a child of the King. He's less interested in hearing that the greatest among us must be a servant (Matthew 23:11). Jesus warned about this kind of hearing:

But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.

Matthew 7:26-27

5. A rebellious orphan wants the rewards of a child of God but none of the responsibilities of a child of God.

Our fallen minds tend to grab one truth and overemphasize it instead of holding a biblical balance. When you hear someone talk endlessly about identity and never about obedience, it may be because they have a hyper view of grace and are more focused on their rewards in Christ than on stewardship and personal responsibility. The opposite error is real too, and we'll get to it in the next chapter. But the rebellious orphan wants the robe and the ring without ever picking up a tool in the family business.

This is where the two orphans meet in the middle, from opposite directions.

When love is contingent on performance, you birth legalism. When trust is granted without accountability, you birth lawlessness.

6. A rebellious orphan confuses stewardship with ownership.

King Nebuchadnezzar looked out over Babylon and took credit for all of it: “By my own mighty power, I have built this beautiful city” (Daniel 4:30). Moses warned Israel that God had fed them manna in the wilderness to humble them, “so you would never say to yourself, ‘I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy’” (Deuteronomy 8:16–17).

An ownership mentality takes what God accomplished through you and credits it to your own effort, instead of acknowledging what He empowered you to do in His strength.

David Ravenhill tells a little story about the farm animals. The rooster says, “I’m up before everyone.” The cow says, “I provide milk for everyone.” And the donkey says, “They cried out, ‘Hosanna! Hosanna!’” Ravenhill’s punch line: “The problem is the donkey forgot about who was riding on his back.”

A steward never forgets who is riding on his back.

7. A rebellious orphan needs the weight of responsibility to reveal the weight of his ignorance.

After the younger son spent everything, a severe famine hit the land, and he began to starve (Luke 15:14–16). The pigpen taught him what his father’s warnings never could. Sometimes the only thing that can show a rebellious orphan how little he knew is the weight of carrying his own life.

The Father Doesn’t Chase

Notice something that might bother you. The father in the story didn’t chase his son down.

We’d be tempted to call that negligent, or to say it lacked empathy, grace and mercy. But it’s the same thing Jesus did with the rich young ruler. Jesus loved him, and He let him walk away. Like the father in the parable, Jesus didn’t chase people down when the weight of following Him seemed too great for them.

Love doesn’t drag a son home in chains. It lets the far country do its work.

Then comes the turn:

When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, "At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, '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.'"

Luke 15:17-19

Here is the hardest thing for a rebellious orphan who has come to the end of himself: not turning to personal sacrifice to win back the Father's favor. Listen to his plan. *Make me a hired servant.* He's coming home, but he's planning to work off his debt. That's the moment a rebellious orphan can turn into a religious one. Trying to earn the free gift of salvation instead of resting in the Spirit of Adoption is a form of religion. God saved us by His grace when we believed, and it is a gift (Ephesians 2:8).

The father never let him finish the speech. While the son was still a long way off, the father saw him, and "filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

The Father won't chase you into the far country, but He will run to meet you on the road home.

Cheap Grace

In the last chapter I said the rebellious orphan trades costly grace for cheap grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined it better than anyone:

"Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Costly grace, he wrote, is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. Above all, it cost God the life of His Son.

Paul saw cheap grace coming. "Should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not!" (Romans 6:1-2).

We want our righteous beliefs without righteous actions. We want to sow carnal seeds of disobedience without reaping the carnal consequences.

This is how a believer can be legally adopted by grace and still be trapped in the spiritual wilderness of an orphan mindset. We seek the Father's salvation but resist

His standards. We think our own will is superior to His supernatural plans and His divine timing.

Entitlement Births the Prosperity Gospel

Both orphans struggle with entitlement: the belief that we are inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment. The rebellious orphan builds his entitlement on a self-appraised identity in his gifts and talents, and draws his confidence from his intellect or his abilities.

And entitlement births the prosperity gospel.

Everyone believes in the prosperity gospel. That's why we get offended when things don't go our way.

We may never preach it from a pulpit, but we feel it every time we think God owes us a smoother road.

How we introduce someone to the gospel is vital, because it shapes how they will understand the cost of discipleship. If their first attraction hinges on the promise of prosperity, they may grow disheartened when the wealth doesn't come. If their interest is sparked by lights, entertainment or emotional highs, they may drift away when the excitement fades. Worse, if their faith isn't rooted in the truth that Jesus Himself is the gospel, it is at risk of shipwreck when the crushing seasons come.

The gospel is not about earthly blessings, convenience or carnal comfort. It is the transforming revelation of Christ's life, death and resurrection. Jesus is the source and sustainer of our hope, the author and finisher of our faith, the anchor for the soul and the pearl of great price. Those who are grounded in His unchanging character, sacrificial love and lordship will be unmovable when trials come.

Accidentally Liberating the Imposter

A couple of years ago, a close friend of mine was passionately sharing a revelation of grace that I later realized was part of the "hyper-grace" movement. At its core, it defines a relationship with Jesus as "friends with benefits": all the rewards of salvation with none of the responsibilities.

My friend himself was truly rooted in biblical grace. But he began to see what was happening to people in his circle who were listening to this message. Marriages broke, and some walked away from the faith.

I realized this false revelation of grace was embracing the love of God without the fear of God. I told my friend that it wasn't liberating anyone's true identity in Christ. It was liberating the imposter, the orphan mindset. It was seeking the Kingdom of God and "my happiness," when Jesus told us to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

I don't want a bunch of friends who care about my happiness. I want a family of believers who care about my righteousness.

If we're going to deal with the full spectrum of the orphan mindset, we can't only address the moralist, whose acceptance of the Father's love depends on his performance. We also have to address the narcissist, who is fully aware of the Father's love but thinks that love absolves him of any personal responsibility.

Scripture is sober about where that road can lead.

Cling to your faith in Christ, and keep your conscience clear. For some people have deliberately violated their consciences; as a result, their faith has been shipwrecked.

1 Timothy 1:19

Near the end of his life, Paul wrote one sad sentence about a former coworker: "Demas has deserted me because he loves the things of this life" (2 Timothy 4:10). We'll come back to the imposter in Part Three. For now, know this: the grace that sets you free will never set your flesh free to rule you.

The Wolf You Feed

There's a modern parable often told about an old man and his grandson. The grandfather says there is a battle going on inside all of us between two wolves. One is evil: anger, envy, jealousy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, lies and false pride. The other is good: joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.

The grandson thinks about it for a minute and asks, "Which wolf wins?"

The old man answers, "The one you feed."

Paul said it long before anyone told that story:

Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.

Galatians 6:7–8

Don't confuse what you planted with God's punishment.

The younger son fed the wrong wolf until he was feeding pigs. His father didn't send the famine. The son reaped what he had sown. But the harvest isn't the end of the story. The moment he turned toward home, the father was already watching the road.

Maybe you're in the far country right now. Maybe you took your share and spent it, and you're rehearsing your hired-servant speech. Put the speech down. The Father is running toward you with a robe, a ring and a pair of sandals, and He's calling for a feast.

For the Road

1. Which of the seven marks of a rebellious orphan do you recognize in yourself? Be specific.
2. Where have you been treating the Father as an advisor with suggestions instead of a King with commandments?
3. Which wolf have you been feeding this season, and what is one practical way to starve it this week?

The Father won't chase you into the far country, but He is already running to meet you on the road home.

The Religious Orphan

His father said to him, “Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.”

Luke 15:31

When we read the story of the prodigal son, we almost always look at the younger brother. He’s the one with the pig pen, the famine and the long walk home. But Jesus didn’t end the story with him. He ended it with a man standing outside a party he refused to attend.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working” (Luke 15:25).

He never left. He never wasted a dime. He never ran off to a distant land. He was close enough to the house to hear the music and the dancing. And still he would not go in.

That is the religious orphan. He lives on the Father’s property and works the Father’s fields, but in his heart he is a hired hand. He is so busy earning his keep that he has never learned to sit at the table.

We need to remember who Jesus was talking to when He told this story.

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

Luke 15:1-2

Jesus wasn’t only telling the story of the prodigal son to gather prodigals back home. He was telling it to the Pharisees, so they would see lost sinners the way He and the Father see them: as sons and daughters worth running after, forgiving and restoring.

The parable of the prodigal son was aimed at the older brother.

A Hired Hand in the Father's House

The religious orphan is the moralist. His ideology is control and his motto is “Earn my keep.” He relates to God the way a worker relates to an employer. He sells his labor under a contract, and he expects to be paid in favor and wages.

Listen to how the older brother talks to his own father: “All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to” (Luke 15:29).

Slaved. That’s the word. He lived in the Father’s house and felt like a slave the whole time. The religious orphan adds to God’s Word, and the first thing he adds is a price tag on the Father’s love.

To a religious orphan I would say this: works aren’t the wages of your salvation; works are the evidence of your salvation.

The religious orphan is always looking for love by earning his keep instead of receiving love through the Spirit of Adoption.

There’s a difference between a husband who works through a list and a husband who knows how to love his wife. Both may take out the trash. Only one of them is doing it from the heart.

Eight Marks of a Religious Orphan

Here is how I’ve taught it. If you see yourself in some of these, don’t run from it. The Father came out to the older brother too.

1. A religious orphan would rather be in the fields doing ministry than in the Father’s house doing family.

The older son was in the field. Ministry can become a place to hide from relationship. Jesus said the mark of His disciples would not be our programs but our love.

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.

John 13:34–35

Christianity without loving Christians is another gospel. Busyness can be the enemy of your soul. Martha was serving Jesus and missing Him at the same time, and He told her, “My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it” (Luke 10:41–42).

2. Religious orphan leaders want the rewards of close friendship but not the responsibilities that come with it.

Some leaders want your service but won't stand with you when you're in need. They want your wealth but not your wisdom. They want your giving but won't give you their time. You can serve faithfully for years and still be kept at arm's length. The Pharisees were like this. A religious orphan mindset has no value for close relationships, only for your resources.

3. A religious orphan cannot celebrate a church or a revival he did not start.

The older brother heard the music and "was angry and wouldn't go in" (Luke 15:28). When ministry is done to receive the praises of men instead of out of love for the Father's house, someone else's breakthrough feels like your loss.

If someone says, "I love God," but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?

1 John 4:20

4. A religious orphan is always critical of a method of love that allows "sinners" to encounter the love of God.

The Pharisees complained bitterly to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with such scum?" And Jesus answered, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent" (Luke 5:30–32).

Would anyone ever mistake you for a friend of sinners? Do you claim to love the Shepherd but lack love for His sheep? The Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one, and when He finds it He calls His friends together to celebrate (Luke 15:4–6). The religious orphan would rather hold a meeting about why the sheep got lost.

5. A religious orphan sees individual recognition as the reward of discipleship, rather than the intimacy cultivated through discipleship.

"You never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends" (Luke 15:29). He wanted a goat. He could have had the Father.

I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me.

John 15:15

6. A religious orphan is always trying to earn his keep.

He feels like a slave in the Father's house rather than a son or daughter. We just looked at this, but it belongs on the list because it sits under all the others.

7. A religious orphan can identify a fellow believer's sin but cannot see the plank in his own eye.

"This son of yours," he says (Luke 15:30). Not "my brother." He has already disowned him, and he knows every detail of his brother's sin.

Jesus put it plainly: "Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye" (Matthew 7:5).

Charles Spurgeon saw the same danger:

"The greatest enemy to human souls is the self-righteous spirit which makes men look to themselves for salvation."

Charles Spurgeon

The orphan mindset mistakes shaming God's people for real consecration. Ministry has turned into a competition instead of a place where people learn to embrace the Spirit of Adoption. Remember who went home justified: not the Pharisee who listed his good works, but the tax collector who "beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner'" (Luke 18:13-14).

8. A religious orphan often needs the pain of moral collapse to reveal that he has nothing to offer for his salvation but the sin that made it necessary.

The religious orphan loves the Father's justice toward others but despises His patience and mercy toward them. He has forgotten who he once was, or who he could have become, apart from the Cross of Jesus Christ.

*Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you?
Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to
turn you from your sin?*

Romans 2:4

Look at how Paul spoke of himself. He called himself “the least of all the apostles” (1 Corinthians 15:9), “the least deserving of all God’s people” (Ephesians 3:8), and finally “the worst of them all” among sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Many have read those lines as a picture of growth. The nearer we draw to the holiness of God, the more honest we become about our own need. Mature sons and daughters don’t grow out of needing grace. They grow deeper into it.

The closer you get to the Father, the less you have to prove.

Adding to the Word

We saw in Chapter 5 that the rebellious orphan takes away from God’s Word and the religious orphan adds to it, all the way back to Eve’s “or touch it.” Adding to the Word is the religious orphan’s favorite tool. Here is how it works today. The religious orphan mindset will take a personal conviction and try to elevate it to a biblical commandment. The rebellious orphan mindset does the opposite. It takes a biblical commandment and tries to demote it to someone else’s personal conviction.

Jesus confronted the first move directly:

Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God. For you ignore God’s law and substitute your own tradition.

Mark 7:7–8

To walk in freedom, sons and daughters need to know the difference between four things.

- **Principle.** A foundational truth from God that guides moral behavior for everyone. “You must not steal” (Exodus 20:15). “You must not have any other god but me” (Exodus 20:3). The Ten Commandments are principles.
- **Personal Conviction.** A strong belief that shapes how *you* walk with God. “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5, NKJV). Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the king’s food (Daniel 1:8). A believer may choose not to drink alcohol at all. That conviction is real, and for that person, going against it is sin (Romans 14:23). But it isn’t a commandment for everyone.
- **Wisdom.** The godly application of knowledge to get the best outcome. It begins with the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 9:10), and God gives it generously to anyone who asks (James 1:5). Solomon discerned the true mother of the baby with it (1 Kings 3:16–28).

- **Preference.** A choice based on what we like. Martha preferred serving; Mary preferred sitting at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:38–42). Preferences are fine until we demand that everyone share them. Then the rule is to consider others more important than ourselves (Philippians 2:3) and treat them the way we want to be treated (Matthew 7:12).

When a preference is preached like a principle, people end up carrying weight God never gave them.

The Weight of Expectations vs. the Weight of Conviction

Let me give you a picture of how that happens.

Picture a young believer I'll call Alex. He is hungry to grow, and he admires an older mentor, Mr. Thompson, who seems to have an unshakeable relationship with God. One day Mr. Thompson tells him what changed his own life: "Try praying for an hour every day."

Alex takes it to heart. But weeks go by and he struggles. His mind wanders. He gets restless. Instead of feeling closer to God, he feels guilt and shame for not measuring up. He starts to wonder if he's really committed at all. The more he focuses on the hour, the more distant God seems. Without realizing it, his goal has shifted from seeking God's presence to meeting a standard he thinks is expected of him.

Then one evening he reads Romans 14:5: "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (NKJV). And he sees it. The principle is that God's children pray. The hour was his mentor's conviction, and it may have been a beautiful one. But it was never a commandment. So Alex starts where he is, praying as he's led, sometimes for minutes, sometimes far longer. Free from comparison and condemnation, his prayer life grows.

That's the difference between the weight of expectations and the weight of conviction. Expectations come from people and leave you ashamed. Conviction comes from the Holy Spirit and draws you closer.

Hear me: I'm not against an hour of prayer. I'm against turning a Father's invitation into a slave's quota.

The Father Is a Good Forgiver... Are You?

Jesus said something that should stop every religious orphan in his tracks.

If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much!

Luke 6:32-33

The Father is a good forgiver. The question is whether His sons and daughters are.

It's possible to come home from the far country and then turn into the older brother. A lot of us were rescued from rebellion and slowly drifted into religion. We remember being forgiven, but we have forgotten how to forgive. We once needed mercy; now we manage it.

Whether you're a rebellious orphan or a religious orphan, the prescription for repentance is the same: a revelation that it is the Father's goodness, kindness and patience that brings us home. That's why the story has two scenes of a father going out. He runs out to meet the younger son. Then he leaves the party and goes out to plead with the older one.

The same Father who ran to the prodigal walked out to the Pharisee.

Nothing but You

There is a story told about Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians the Church has ever known. In the thirteenth century, a friar named Dominic of Caserta is said to have watched him praying before a crucifix in a chapel in Naples. As the story goes, the voice of Christ spoke from the cross: "You have written well of me, Thomas. What reward would you have for your labor?"

Aquinas answered, "Lord, nothing but You."

That is the answer the older brother never learned to give. He wanted a goat. Aquinas wanted the Father.

Here is the good news for every religious orphan reading this. The Father's words to the older son were not a rebuke. They were an invitation: "Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours" (Luke 15:31). You don't have to earn what has always been yours. You don't have to stay in the field. The music is still playing, the door is still open, and the Father is standing outside, waiting for you to come in.

For the Road

1. Of the eight marks of a religious orphan, which one stung the most? Why do you think that is?
2. Is there a personal conviction or preference you have been treating like a commandment, for yourself or for others? What would change if you held it as what it is?
3. Who is your “younger brother,” someone whose return you’ve struggled to celebrate? What would it look like to go into the party for their sake?

You don’t have to earn your keep. Everything the Father has is already yours.

PART THREE

The Imposter

Why do sons and daughters still live like orphans?

Identity and Intimacy

You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.

Psalm 16:11

Here's a question that makes a lot of believers uncomfortable:

“God loves you. But can God trust you?”

Some people hear that and get nervous. Others get offended. The religious orphan hears it and starts working harder. The rebellious orphan hears it and says, “That sounds like works to me.”

Both reactions miss the point. God's love for His children isn't up for negotiation, and you can't earn it. But trust is something different. Trust grows in relationship. We'll come back to that question, because the answer depends on something deeper.

In the last three chapters we looked at two brothers. One wanted the Father's stuff without the Father. The other wanted the Father's approval without knowing the Father's heart. In this part of the book I want to ask *why*. Why do people who have been legally adopted still live like orphans? And I want to start with a simple formula that has helped me more than almost anything else.

Sonship and Bride-ship

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”

Genesis 15:1 (NKJV)

Notice that God didn't promise Abram a reward apart from Himself. He said, “I am... your exceedingly great reward.” That verse holds the whole formula.

Identity (sonship) + Intimacy (bride-ship) = a healthy relationship.

Identity is knowing who you are and whose you are, and knowing you are valued. That's sonship.

Intimacy is closeness and friendship with God that reveals His value and His worth. That's bride-ship.

Sons and daughters know they belong. The bride knows she is loved and loves in return. Scripture uses both pictures for God's people because we need both. A son without intimacy knows his rights but doesn't know his Father. A bride without identity knows how to serve but doesn't know she's chosen.

The religious orphan mindset will always focus on working harder to earn a seat at Abba's table. The rebellious orphan mindset will always focus on its personal liberties in Christ. But with a bride-ship mindset, the focus is simply this: *look at Him*. When you see His love and His beauty, it makes everything worth it. The bride in the Song of Songs isn't counting what she's owed. She's saying, "Your love is sweeter than wine" (Song of Songs 1:2).

When the Formula Breaks

Take away either half, and the relationship breaks in a predictable way.

Intimacy without identity = performance.

That's the older brother. He was close to the house every day, but he didn't know he was a son. So he worked. He related to his father like a worker to an employer, trading labor for wages. When you don't know you're accepted, closeness turns into a job.

Identity without intimacy = presumption.

To be presumptuous is to be bold and confident to excess, to fail to observe the limits of what is permitted or appropriate. A presumptuous person shows little respect for others by doing things he has no right to do. That's the younger brother. He knew exactly what was his by birth, and he demanded it, and he walked out the door. He had the name without the nearness.

Both brothers struggled with entitlement, the belief that you are inherently deserving of special privileges. The religious orphan builds his sense of entitlement on his perceived intimacy with God: "I've served, I've sacrificed, I've been faithful. I deserve this." The rebellious orphan builds it on a self-appraised identity: "I'm a child of God,

so I can do what I want.” One gets his confidence from his performance. The other gets it from his position.

Our fallen minds love to grab one truth and overemphasize it instead of holding the biblical balance. When you hear someone emphasize nothing but identity, it may be because they have a hyper view of grace and are more focused on the rewards of being in Christ than on stewardship and personal responsibility. When you hear someone emphasize nothing but intimacy and responsibility, they may be missing their security in Christ, the Father’s love and the rewards of sonship.

We don’t have to pick a side. Jesus shifts our focus. Through His blood and the Spirit of Adoption, we move from position to presence and from performance to purpose.

We are no longer defined by what we achieve or what we possess, but by who we are: beloved children of God.

Can God Trust You?

Now come back to the question we started with.

Any good father loves all his children the same, but he hands the car keys to the one who has shown he can handle them. Love is the starting point of the relationship. Trust is what grows inside it.

If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won’t be honest with greater responsibilities.

Luke 16:10

It’s possible to be legally adopted by grace and still be stuck in the spiritual wilderness of an orphan mindset. That happens when we want the Father’s salvation but resist His standards, because deep down we think our own will and our own works are better than His plans and His timing.

The orphan says, “The Father is holding me back.” The son says, “The Father is protecting me from my own lack of wisdom.” Same boundary, two completely different hearts. The psalmist doesn’t describe the one who delights in God’s law as restricted. He says joy belongs to that person (Psalm 1:1-2).

A presumptuous son can’t be trusted, because he only wants what’s in the Father’s hand. A performing son can’t rest, because he’s never sure what’s in the Father’s

heart. But a son or daughter who has both identity and intimacy wants what the Father wants. And that's the kind of child a father can trust with anything.

If your theology hasn't changed your life, you'd better change your theology.

Purpose over Performance

Many Christians base their joy on their performance rather than His presence. Many base their promotion on their position rather than their trust in His process.

Look at the order of creation. On the first day God made light. On the second, the sky. On the third, land, seas and plants. Then the sun, moon and stars, then the creatures of the sea and the air. Day after day, the universe took shape, and no human being lifted a finger. Then, on the sixth day, God formed man from the dust. It's as if Heaven wanted to whisper something to us from the very beginning: *All this was made without you.*

You weren't created to be God's labor force. You were created to walk with Him. Your worth was never in your works. It was in His love, which reached for you before you ever drew breath.

Weak people chase personal pleasure. People with spiritual hunger chase divine purpose. As the saying goes, the two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you find out why.

So what is our purpose? Don't confuse your earthly assignments with your divine purpose. Your assignment may be teaching, building, parenting, preaching or playing football. Your purpose is bigger and simpler. The primary purpose of your existence is to bring joy to God and live for His pleasure. Paul says God decided in advance to adopt us into His family through Jesus Christ, "and it gave him great pleasure" (Ephesians 1:5).

Once you grasp that, you'll no longer struggle with feelings of insignificance. If you matter so much to God that He wants you with Him forever, what greater significance could you have?

Look at John the Baptist. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11). And yet the people said of John, "John didn't perform miraculous signs" (John 10:41). The greatest man born of a woman, by Jesus' own measure, never performed a single miracle. What made him

great was purpose. He knew who he was and who he wasn't. "He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less" (John 3:30).

Performance asks, "How am I doing?" Purpose asks, "Who am I doing it for?"

The moment we think the applause is for us, we've forgotten our purpose.

Presence over Position

A single day in your courts is better than a thousand anywhere else! I would rather be a gatekeeper in the house of my God than live the good life in the homes of the wicked.

Psalm 84:10

The psalmist would rather have the lowest position in the Father's house than the highest one anywhere else. A gatekeeper doesn't have a title anyone envies. But he is *there*. That's what he wants.

The religious orphan gets his happiness from his performance or his position in the field instead of from the Father's presence. The rebellious orphan finds his joy in his personal dreams and individual liberties instead of trusting the Father's plan. But the mature child of God finds joy and peace by locking eyes with the Father of Lights, knowing that the storms of life and the noise of people's praise all fade away when we gaze on His beauty.

Ian Simkins said it in one line:

"You can be in the Father's home and still be missing the Father's heart."

Ian Simkins

That's what both brothers had in common. One was gone and one was home, but neither one had the Father's heart. The orphan mindset can't see the joy of the Father's house, because it's consumed either with its own will to experience pleasure or with its own works to earn favor.

John Piper asked a question in *God Is the Gospel* that exposes which one we really want, the gifts or the Giver:

“The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?”

John Piper, *God Is the Gospel*

A son wants the Father’s house. A bride wants the Father’s Son.

The Orphan Mindset vs. the Spirit of Adoption

Here is a side-by-side picture I use when I teach this. Read it slowly. Most of us will find ourselves in both columns.

Area	The orphan mindset	The Spirit of Adoption
Image of God	Sees God as a withholder and a taskmaster	Sees God as a refuge and a source of joy
Relational dynamic	Distrusts God, relies on self	Secure and full of delight
Theology	Operates by legalism or self-will	Operates by love and thanksgiving
Confidence	Insecure, lacks peace	At peace, fully loved
Acceptance	Strives for approval from God and man	Rests in the Father’s full acceptance
Motivation for works	Seeks to impress, or lacks motivation because of fear	Driven by gratitude for unconditional love
Discipleship	Duty-based or unmotivated	Joyful, motivated to share God’s love
Purity	Sees holiness as earning favor, which leads to shame, or sees God’s standards as unattainable	Desires holiness to stay close to God
Self-image	Self-rejection or arrogance	Positive, purposeful and affirmed
Comfort source	Seeks counterfeit affections	Finds comfort in God’s presence

Area	The orphan mindset	The Spirit of Adoption
Peer relationships	Competitive and jealous	Humble and united
Handling failures	Accuses others to elevate self	Seeks to restore others with love
View of authority	Distrustful, sees authority as painful	Respectful and honoring
Receiving correction	Resistant and easily hurt	Welcomes it as a way to grow
Expressing love	Guarded and conditional	Humble, patient and selfless
God's presence	Feels conditional and distant	Feels close and intimate
View of the Father's house	Feels like bondage, more like a servant	Experiences freedom and liberty
Worldview	Self-serving ambition, willing to compromise	Represents God's love to others
Motto	"Every man and woman for themselves!"	"Jesus' blood and the Spirit of Adoption empower me to change the world!"

Don't use this chart to condemn yourself. Use it to locate yourself. If you found more of the left column than you wanted to, don't conclude that you aren't God's child. The Father simply has more of His heart to give you.

The Reward Is Him

In the last chapter we heard Thomas Aquinas answer the question "What reward would you have?" with "Nothing but You." That's what this whole chapter has been building toward.

The reward of the adopted child of God is His love, His security and His manifested presence. Not a bigger platform. Not a better title. Not a goat to party with our friends. Him.

That's why identity and intimacy belong together. Identity tells you that you're welcome in the house. Intimacy tells you why you'd want to be there. When you know you're a son or daughter, you stop performing. When you know you're loved by the

Bridegroom, you stop presuming. And when you have both, the Father can trust you with more, because what you want most is Him.

The Father's greatest gift to His children is the Father.

He isn't holding you at arm's length until you get the formula right. He has already given you His name, and He is inviting you closer. The door of His house is open, and the One inside is better than anything the house contains.

For the Road

1. Which half of the formula comes easier for you, identity or intimacy? Which one have you neglected, and how has that shown up in your life?
2. Where have you been measuring yourself by performance or position instead of purpose and presence?
3. Look at the chart again. Pick one row where you see the orphan mindset in yourself. What would the Spirit of Adoption look like in that area this week?

You are His child and His beloved, and your reward is the Father Himself.

Overcoming the Imposter

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1

The rapper NF opens his album *The Search* with a song called “Intro III,” and it is one of the most uncomfortable things I have ever heard. In it, Fear talks to him. Not about him. To him. Fear calls him by his first name. Fear reminds him that they have been together since he was a kid, that Fear was there in the basement and in the bedroom when he was crying for his mom. Fear takes credit for the music, the success, the crowds. Fear even mocks him for wanting to be free: you don’t like the prison I built you?

NF has said he was shaking in the studio when he recorded it.

When I teach on this, I ask two questions. Who has heard this song? And who can relate to it?

Every one of us knows that voice. It knows our history. It knows where we were hurt and what we were afraid of as children. It speaks in the first person, so it sounds like us. And it has convinced a lot of sons and daughters that it is the real them.

The lie NF is wrestling with is that Fear created him, that Fear made him who he is. So Fear reasons with him: you need me to write, you need me to live, you need me. And it raises a question every believer has to face. Is it possible to cut off the parts of yourself you don’t like? And at what cost?

Here is what I’ve learned. Facing your biggest fear doesn’t cripple you. It makes you stronger. And the voice that claims to be your oldest friend is actually an imposter.

The Enemy Is After Your Confidence

Listen to how the apostle John talks to the church.

Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if we don't feel guilty, we can come to God with bold confidence. And we will receive from him whatever we ask because we obey him and do the things that please him.

1 John 3:20-22

Who is John writing to? Believers. "Dear friends." People who are already in the family.

So here is the question. If I am a born-again believer, how is it possible for my heart to condemn me? How can a child of God walk around under that kind of false guilt? And what is stealing our confidence with God?

The answer is the imposter. The flesh.

If you are in Christ, the enemy isn't after your salvation. He is after your confidence.

He can't undo what the blood of Jesus has done. He can't tear up your adoption papers. So he goes after the next best thing. If he can't keep you out of the Father's house, he'll try to keep you from walking into the Father's presence with your head up. A child who is afraid to ask is a child who stops asking.

The Confidence Killer: Condemnation and Shame

The old dictionaries define condemnation as the judicial act of declaring someone guilty and sentencing them to punishment. When a building is condemned, it is declared unfit for use. But here is something interesting. When property is condemned, the owner doesn't always lose ownership of the land.

The enemy loves to walk through your life with a clipboard and nail a sign to your door: *Unfit for use*. He just forgets who holds the deed.

God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him.

John 3:17-18

Jesus is the divine Fixer Upper. He doesn't look at a condemned house and walk away. He buys it, and then He moves in. He is the only one who can save our souls from eternal condemnation, and He is the only one who can rebuild what sin tore down.

The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.

Romans 8:3

Condemnation has a twin, and its name is shame. Shame is what happens when the appraisal of self, or the appraisal of other people, speaks louder to the human heart than the appraisal of God in the Scriptures. Put simply, shame comes from a heart that doesn't believe the gospel is enough. It doesn't believe that our need for a Savior, and the blood of Jesus purchasing our adoption and setting us free from the debt and penalty of sin, is enough to tell us what we're worth.

Shame is a second opinion you were never supposed to ask for.

Brennan Manning, in *Abba's Child*, described the false self that shame produces:

"Impostors are preoccupied with acceptance and approval... Living out of the false self creates a compulsive desire to present a perfect image to the public so that everybody will admire us and nobody will know us."

Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Admired by everybody and known by nobody. That's the imposter's life. It can't say no with the same confidence it says yes, because it is terrified of not living up to someone's expectations. It rides a roller coaster of highs and lows, chasing outside things like money, recognition and status to tell it who it is.

Who Is the Imposter?

An imposter is a person who pretends to be someone else in order to deceive others, usually for some kind of gain. And we're going to see in the Scriptures that there is an imposter living in every believer, and it wants to shipwreck your purpose and destiny in Christ.

The Bible's name for it is the flesh: the sinful nature.

I want to be honest about something. In Christ you can feed the flesh. You can live a life of compromise and inconsistency, look just like the world around you, and still truly be born again. I'm not saying that to give anyone a license. I'm saying it as a warning: you can be a legal child of God and let the imposter run your life.

So who is the true self? Your renewed spirit in Christ is the real you. It is who God envisioned you to be before Adam's sin orphaned humanity.

In this chapter and the next we're going to work through four questions:

1. Where does the flesh nature come from?
2. How does the flesh nature affect our new nature in Christ?
3. What are the symptoms of the flesh nature?
4. How do we overcome the flesh nature?

We'll take the first two here and the last two in Chapter 10.

Where Does the Flesh Come From?

The short answer is original sin.

Reinhold Niebuhr is credited with a line that captures it well: original sin is that thing about man which makes him capable of conceiving of his own perfection and incapable of achieving it. We can picture the life we were made for. We just can't get there on our own.

Watch what happens the moment Adam and Eve eat from the tree. The first thing they feel is shame, and the first thing they do is hide. When God calls out, "Where are you?" Adam answers with the first confession of fear in human history: "I was afraid because I was naked" (Genesis 3:9-10).

Fear and shame were never part of the original design. They came in through the Fall. And that answers a question I like to ask people: who gave us a spirit of fear? It wasn't the Father.

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.

2 Timothy 1:7

The spirit of fear was born in the fall of humanity, and it opened the door for the imposter to be released into the whole human race. The story of humanity is really a story of two races: those born in Adam and those born again in Christ.

So where does the flesh live in a believer who has been born again? Paul says we are spirit, soul and body.

Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again.

1 Thessalonians 5:23

When you were born again, your spirit was made new. But the flesh still tries to set up shop in your soul: your mind, your will and your emotions. That is where the battle is fought.

I'll admit I've been a glutton for punishment when it comes to being offended by Scripture. Over time I started to see that when Scripture offended me, it was my flesh being offended. So I began to go looking for the root, the lie I was believing in my mind.

The imposter embraces the lie that my opinions and feelings matter more than what God says.

The source of absolute truth is the Bible. If the Bible calls something sin, my opinion doesn't get a vote.

How the Flesh Fights the New Nature

Romans 7 is one of the most honest chapters ever written. Paul, the apostle who wrote much of the New Testament, admits he is a mystery to himself.

I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.

Romans 7:15

Paul wants to do good. Deep down, in his true identity, he loves what pleases God. But he finds another power working in him, waging war against what he knows is right and taking him captive. The Passion Translation calls it "the unwelcome intruder of sin" in his humanity. And Paul draws a conclusion that every believer needs to hear: when my behavior contradicts my desire to do good, the one doing it is the intruder, not my true identity.

None of that excuses sin. What it does is locate the enemy. You can't fight what you think is you.

Paul's willpower couldn't win that war, and neither can yours. So he cries out the question we've all asked: "Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from

this life that is dominated by sin and death?” And then, in the very next breath: “Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 7:24–25).

Then Romans 8 opens like a courtroom door swinging shut. The case is closed.

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.

Romans 8:1-2

Notice where Romans 8 goes from there. It moves from no condemnation, to life in the Spirit, to adoption: being led by the Spirit and crying “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:14–15). Freedom from the flesh and the Spirit of Adoption live in the same chapter. You can’t separate them.

Trying harder never cured the imposter. Belonging to the Father does.

And Jesus knows exactly what this feels like. He emptied Himself and took on our humanity (Philippians 2:5–8). He never sinned, not once, but He faced the full weight of temptation in a real human body.

This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin.

Hebrews 4:15

He won in the flesh, so that He could live His victory in us. Every righteous requirement of the law is now fulfilled in those who follow the Spirit instead of the sinful nature (Romans 8:4).

The Civil War in the Mind

There is a civil war going on in the mind of every person, a battle between the Spirit and the flesh. Jesus named it on the worst night of His life.

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Matthew 26:41 (NIV)

Kris Vallotton has said, “All of your thoughts are not your own.” That’s a freeing sentence. Not every thought that passes through your head deserves a vote. Not every

voice that uses the word “I” is you. Fear spoke to NF in the first person. The imposter does the same thing to us.

So how do we tell the difference? The flesh lives in the soul, and the soul is good at disguises. Intellectual people tend to pay too much attention to the facts. Empathetic people tend to pay too much attention to their feelings. What matters is the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

Think of a railroad. A train runs on two parallel tracks. Take one away and the train is in the ditch. The Word of God and the Spirit of God are those two tracks, and the will of God runs on them. People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4).

The Spirit of God will never violate the Word of God.

It’s hard to hear God’s voice when you’ve already decided what you want to hear. That’s why we need the Word to cut through our own preferences.

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.

Hebrews 4:12

God’s Word is the spiritual surgical tool that separates the desires of the soul from the desires of the Spirit, the flesh from the true identity. Prayer and the Word filter what comes up from our soul, because the flesh lives in the soul and not in your renewed spirit. Many people think they are liberating their “true self” when they set God’s commands aside. In reality they are liberating the orphan nature.

Fear of Failure Is False Humility

One of the imposter’s favorite costumes is humility.

Fear of failure looks humble. It sounds modest. But it is a false form of humility, because it is focused on how we look in the eyes of people. The fear of the Lord is focused on something else entirely: running our race and fulfilling the destiny God gave us.

And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?

Mark 8:36

There's a scene in *Doctor Strange* that nails this. The Ancient One tells Stephen Strange that he has always excelled, but not because he craved success. It was because he feared failure. Strange says that's what made him a great surgeon. She tells him it's exactly what has kept him from greatness. Arrogance and fear are still keeping him from the simplest lesson of all: it's not about you.

Fear of failure and pride are two sides of the same coin. Both keep the spotlight on me.

Fear ignites self-preservation. Love ignites self-sacrifice.

The orphan protects himself because no one else will. The son or daughter can afford to lose their life, because they already know they are loved (1 John 4:18).

Let's go back to NF one more time. At the end of "Intro III," the whole thing turns. Fear thought it had him in prison. Then comes the realization: he was the one holding the keys.

Beloved, that's where many of us are. The imposter has built a prison out of shame, condemnation, fear and failure, and it has convinced us we can't leave. But Jesus already paid the debt and opened the door. The Spirit of Adoption has put the keys in your hand.

You don't have to argue with the imposter. You just have to walk out and go home to your Father. He has been waiting at the door the whole time, with no clipboard in His hand, only open arms.

For the Road

1. What does the imposter's voice usually say to you, and in whose words does it speak? When did you first start hearing it?
2. Where has condemnation or shame stolen your confidence to come to God and ask? What would bold confidence look like this week?
3. Is there an area where fear of failure has been dressed up as humility in your life? What would it look like to let love, instead of self-preservation, make the decision?

The imposter lives in your soul, but it does not get to tell you who you are. Your Father already did.

Diagnosing the Flesh

So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves.

Galatians 5:16

Twenty-five centuries ago, the Chinese general Sun Tzu wrote a line that soldiers, coaches and businessmen have been quoting ever since:

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Most of us only want half of that sentence. We like learning about the enemy. We'll read about the devil's schemes all day long. What we don't love is the second half: know yourself.

But in the last chapter we found out that one of the enemies we're fighting has moved into the house. The imposter, the flesh, lives in the soul of every believer. So if you want to know the enemy, you have to be willing to know yourself.

We've already looked at where the flesh comes from and how it wars against our new nature in Christ. Now we come to the last two questions: What are the symptoms of the flesh? And how do we overcome it?

Here's why this matters so much. If you treat the flesh like a demon, you'll keep asking someone to cast out what God told you to crucify. If you treat a demonic attack like a bad habit, you'll keep trying to manage what Scripture tells you to resist.

You can't cast out your flesh, and you can't renew the mind of a demon.

A good doctor doesn't start with the prescription. He starts with the symptoms. So let's look at three of them: independence, fear and pride.

Symptom One: Independence

Independence means not relying on others to support you, being able to stand on your own. In the world, that's a goal. In the family of God, it's a symptom. Here is what it sounds like when the flesh is running on independence:

1. **"I will only take correction from God."** It sounds spiritual, but it's a wall. And it's strange but true: the people who are the most sensitive and offended when they are corrected are often the boldest and bluntest when they correct others. They of all people should know what it feels like to have spiritual surgery with little or no anesthesia.
2. **"I don't need friends. Just me and God is enough."** God has never been impressed by Lone Rangers. He put us in a family.
3. **Will not submit to or serve someone else's vision or dream.** If it isn't my vision, I'm not interested.
4. **Believes they have been sent by God to correct everyone else's problems.** Everyone else is the project. I'm the inspector.
5. **Cannot ask others to pray for them.** Asking feels like weakness, so they carry everything alone. But Scripture tells us to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other so that we may be healed (James 5:16).
6. **Trusts their own opinion or wisdom more than the Word of God.** This is the root of all the others.

Orphans learn to survive by depending on no one. It's how they stay alive in the orphanage. But what kept you alive as an orphan will keep you sick as a son or daughter.

Independence is an orphan's survival skill that never got unlearned.

The Orphan Heart Disease Called Independence

There is a heart disease in the orphan mindset, and its name is independence. Hebrews diagnoses it by pointing back to Israel in the wilderness.

That is why the Holy Spirit says, “Today when you hear his voice, don’t harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled, when they tested me in the wilderness. There your ancestors tested and tried my patience, even though they saw my miracles for forty years. So I was angry with them, and I said, ‘Their hearts always turn away from me. They refuse to do what I tell them.’ So in my anger I took an oath: ‘They will never enter my place of rest.’”

Hebrews 3:7-11

These were people who had been delivered. They had walked through the sea on dry ground. They ate manna every morning. They were God’s people, legally free from Egypt. But their hearts hardened, and an entire generation never entered the rest God had for them.

Becoming part of God’s family happens the moment we put our trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Trusting His will is a relational experience, and that’s where many of us struggle. When we doubt God, our hearts harden, and we stay stuck in the wilderness of disobedience. When we choose to trust His process, we can enter the promised land of rest.

And notice the cure Hebrews gives for a hard heart. The cure is family.

You must warn each other every day, while it is still “today,” so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God.

Hebrews 3:13

So the question for every one of us is this: will our wilderness be forty days or forty years?

Here’s another way to ask it. When we face a divine delay, the rebellious orphan tends to ask, “Why me?” The religious orphan tends to ask, “What did I do wrong?” Both questions miss something about the ways of God. Our circumstances don’t always say something about our moral standing. More often they are divine training for maturity. Is this a divine mistake, or a divine training?

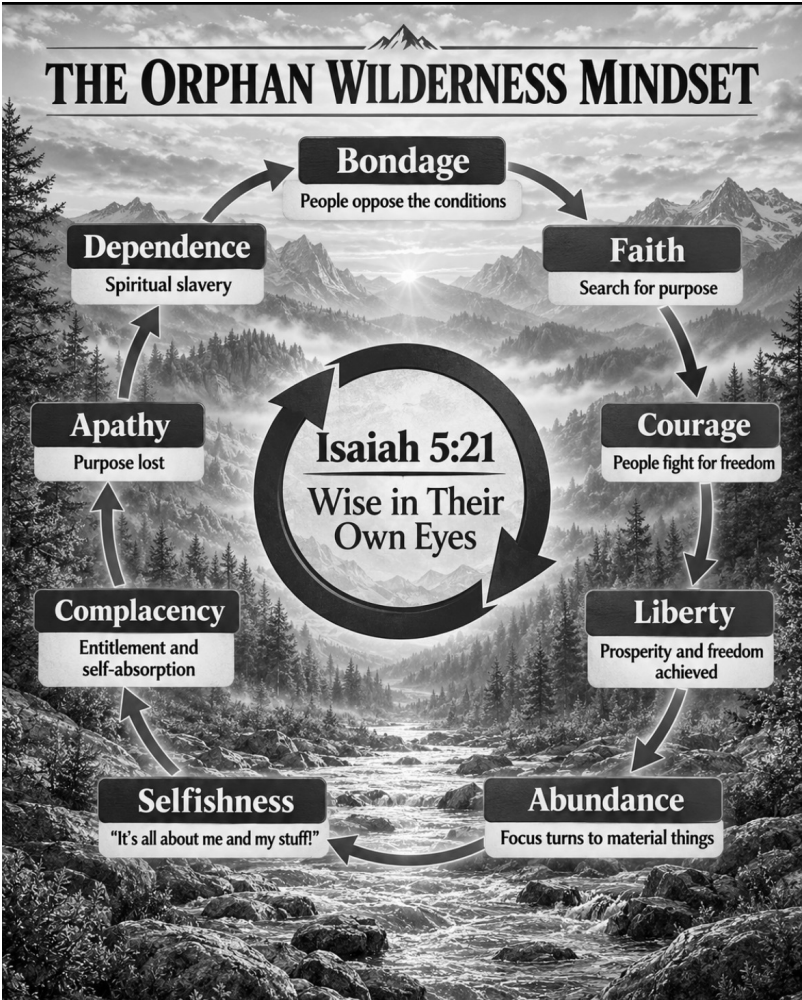
The wilderness was meant to be a classroom for Israel, not a cemetery. The difference was whether they would trust the Father who was leading them.

The Orphan Wilderness Cycle

What sorrow for those who are wise in their own eyes and think themselves so clever.

Isaiah 5:21

Israel's trip from Egypt to the Promised Land should have taken eleven days. It took forty years. They didn't wander because God lost the map. They wandered because they kept walking in a circle.



That circle is in the diagram. People have long noticed this pattern in the rise and fall of nations. It's often called the Tytler Cycle, though no one is sure who first described it. I believe it also describes what happens in the heart of a son or daughter who still thinks like an orphan.

It starts in bondage. Israel groaned under Pharaoh's whips, and they hated it. Bondage produces a cry, and the cry produces faith. They looked to God for a way out. Faith gave them courage to walk between the walls of the Red Sea. Courage brought liberty: no more slave drivers, no more bricks without straw. And liberty brought abundance: manna every morning, water from the rock, clothes that never wore out.

So far, so good. That's the top half of the circle, God's deliverance.

But the wheel kept turning. Abundance turned into selfishness. "If only the LORD had killed us back in Egypt. There we sat around pots filled with meat" (Exodus 16:3). Selfishness turned into complacency, which takes the miracle for granted. Complacency turned into apathy, where people lose their purpose. And apathy turned into dependence on anything but God. Eventually they were ready to choose their own leader and walk right back into chains: "Let's choose a new leader and go back to Egypt!" (Numbers 14:4).

That's the bottom half, the drift back into bondage.

Moses warned them before they ever crossed the Jordan:

*For when you have become full and prosperous and have built fine homes to live in, and when your flocks and herds have become very large and your silver and gold have multiplied along with everything else, be careful! Do not become proud at that time and forget the LORD your God, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt.
Deuteronomy 8:12-14*

What turns the wheel at the center of the circle is being wise in our own eyes. An orphan trusts his own judgment because he's never learned to trust a Father. So the moment things get good, he takes the wheel back. He forgets who rescued him, and he starts living like the provision was his idea.

An orphan can leave Egypt and still walk in circles, because Egypt hasn't left him.

A son breaks the cycle by staying dependent on the Father at every stage. He's dependent in abundance as much as in bondage, and on the mountaintop as much as in the valley. Abundance isn't the enemy. Forgetting is.

"So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

Freedom isn't something you visit. It's a place you learn to live, one day of dependence at a time.

Symptom Two: Fear

Fear is a painful emotion stirred up by expecting evil or sensing danger is coming. Here's what it looks like in a believer:

1. **Always believing the worst-case scenario is going to happen.** Fear is when you have more faith in the enemy to attack you than faith that the Father will protect you.
2. **"I can believe the promises of God for everyone else but myself."** It is possible to have great faith for your friends and none for yourself.
3. **Not secure in my salvation, because I think I haven't done enough.** That's the religious orphan earning his keep again.
4. **I avoid sharing my past or my testimony, because I don't want to be rejected or seen as less in the eyes of others.** The very story God wants to use is the one fear wants to bury.
5. **Spiritual apathy and complacency, out of the lie that I can never live up to God's standards.** Sometimes what looks like laziness is really hopelessness. If I can never measure up, why try?

Fear is faith in the wrong father.

Remember, God has not given us a spirit of fear (2 Timothy 1:7). Fear came in through the Fall. The Spirit of Adoption came in through the cross. One says, "You're on your own." The other says, "Abba."

Symptom Three: Pride

Pride is an inflated view of yourself, an unreasonable sense of your own superiority in talent, looks, wealth, accomplishments or position, and it usually shows up as distance, reserve and contempt for others. Here are five ways it hides in the flesh:

1. **When you view being wrong about something as always negative.** It is okay not to know everything. It is okay to be wrong. We learn, grow and develop from our mistakes. They become building blocks for a success defined by character, humility, honesty, perseverance, integrity, hope and, most of all, faith.
2. **You cannot celebrate someone else's success.** You know you're there when someone's good news is bad news to you. Scripture tells us to be happy with those who are happy (Romans 12:15).

3. **You are inclined to see more of what is wrong with a person than what is right.**
4. **You are intolerant of mistakes or immaturity.** You have a hard time forgiving others, and you despise their process, forgetting how long the Father was patient with yours.
5. **You glory more in your own cross than in the cross Jesus bore for you.** Pride can even make a trophy out of suffering. Paul said, “As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

Scripture is blunt about where this leads: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5). Pride doesn’t just hurt people around us. It puts us at odds with the very grace we need.

Look at these three symptoms side by side and you’ll notice they all have the same center. Independence says, “I don’t need you.” Fear says, “No one will take care of me.” Pride says, “I’m better than you.” Every one of them is an orphan standing alone.

Every symptom of the flesh is an orphan trying to survive without a Father.

How Do We Overcome the Flesh?

Now the good news. The flesh is real, but it isn’t in charge. Here are three ways to overcome it.

#1: Deny Yourself

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.”

Matthew 16:24–25

To deny yourself doesn’t mean denying your true identity. It means denying the imposter, the flesh nature inside you. Jesus isn’t asking you to hate who He made you to be. He’s asking you to stop feeding who you were never meant to be.

This is where the orphan gets it backward. The orphan holds on to his life because no one else will. The son or daughter can let go, because the Father is holding them.

#2: Depend on the Counsel of the Holy Spirit

There is the grace that forgives, and there is the grace that releases sin-killing power. Most of us know the first. Far fewer of us walk in the second.

But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live.

Romans 8:13

Rely on the counsel of the Holy Spirit as much as you rely on the blood of Jesus to purchase your sonship. The blood brought you into the family. The Spirit teaches you how to live in it. That's why Paul's response to all of God's mercies is to give our bodies to God as a living and holy sacrifice (Romans 12:1). We can't do that in our own strength. We do it with His help.

Think about the night Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. He asked Peter, James and John to stay awake and pray with Him. Three times He came back and found them asleep. "Couldn't you watch with me even one hour?" He asked Peter (Matthew 26:40). Their eyes were heavy, and they slept right up until the armed crowd came to take Jesus away. Because they slept instead of prayed, they were caught unprepared, and within hours they had all run.

These weren't bad men. Their spirits were willing. But they tried to face the hardest night of their lives on their own strength, and their flesh gave out.

Prayerlessness is just independence wearing pajamas.

#3: Depend upon the Word of God

Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.

Psalms 1:1-3

The flesh feeds on whatever we let into our minds. The Word of God feeds the new nature. There's an old saying: watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become your actions; watch your actions, they become your habits; watch your habits, they become your character; watch your character, it becomes your destiny.

The flesh starts at the level of a thought. That's why the Word has to go there first.

Remember the question from earlier: forty days or forty years? Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness and hardened their hearts. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, hungry and tempted, and He came out in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:1-14). The difference is how He answered. Every time the enemy came at Him, He didn't argue from His feelings or His hunger. He answered, "It is written" (Matthew 4:4-10). The tempter even tried to get Him to doubt His sonship: "If you are the Son of God..." Jesus didn't need to prove it. He already knew who His Father was, and He knew what His Father had said.

The Word is how a son answers the imposter.

The Father Is the Cure

If you read through those symptom lists and found yourself on every page, welcome to the family. Most of us do.

Diagnosis isn't meant to condemn you. Remember, there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). A diagnosis is meant to get you to the right Physician. The point of seeing the flesh clearly is so you can stop calling it "you" and start bringing it to the cross.

Deny yourself. Lean on the Holy Spirit. Plant yourself by the river of the Word. And do it all as a son or daughter, not as an orphan trying to fix himself before Dad gets home.

You don't overcome the flesh to earn your place in the family. You overcome it because you already have one.

The Father isn't waiting for you to be symptom-free before He lets you in. He wants you home, so He can heal you at His table.

For the Road

1. Which of the three symptoms, independence, fear or pride, showed up most in your life as you read? Which specific statement hit closest to home?
2. Is your current wilderness looking more like forty days or forty years? What would it look like to trust the Father's process instead of hardening your heart?
3. Of the three ways to overcome the flesh (deny yourself, depend on the Holy Spirit, depend on the Word), which one have you neglected most? What is one step you

can take this week?

The flesh is real, but it doesn't get the last word. The Father does.

PART FOUR

Heirs, Not Slaves

How do we leave the orphanage for good?

No Double Jeopardy

So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free.

John 8:36

In the 1999 movie *Double Jeopardy*, a woman named Libby Parsons is convicted of murdering her husband, Nick. There's just one problem: Nick isn't dead. He faked his death and set her up. Libby serves six years in prison, and when she's paroled she slips away from her parole officer, Travis Lehman, to find her son and settle the score with the husband who framed her. Her reasoning is simple. She has already been tried and punished for killing him. They can't convict her for the same crime twice.

Lawyers will tell you the movie bends the law. But while I was watching it, I heard the Lord speak something to my heart that I have never been able to shake:

There is no double jeopardy in the Kingdom of God.

The Fifth Amendment says no one can be prosecuted twice for the same offense. Heaven had that principle long before any constitution did.

Jesus didn't only die for us. He took the punishment for our sins and carried our burdens as His own, dying in our place.

But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed.

Isaiah 53:5

If the penalty has been paid, it can't be collected again. Yet many of God's sons and daughters live as though their case could be reopened at any moment. They're forgiven, but still waiting for the other shoe to drop. They're adopted, but they still believe something in their family history has a legal claim on their future.

That is what this chapter is about.

What I'm Not Saying

Before I build my case, let me be clear about what I'm not saying.

Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not!

Romans 6:1-2

No double jeopardy is not a license to sin. Anyone who hears “the penalty has been paid” and answers “then I can do whatever I want” hasn’t understood the Father’s heart at all.

Good works aren’t the wages of your salvation. Good works are the evidence of your salvation.

You don’t pay for your salvation with good works. But a saved life will produce them. Jesus said we would recognize a tree by its fruit, because a healthy tree produces good fruit (Matthew 7:16–18). Fruit doesn’t make the tree alive. It shows that the tree is alive.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer held these two truths together this way:

“Only those who obey can believe, and only those who believe can obey.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Sons and daughters are led by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:14). The Spirit who assures us we are heirs is the Spirit who leads us into holiness. Freedom from condemnation and the call to obedience live in the same house.

The Blood, Not the Bloodline

Now here is what I am saying.

The wicked run away when no one is chasing them, but the godly are as bold as lions.

Proverbs 28:1

Too many believers are running from something that isn’t chasing them anymore.

Many believers place more faith in the power of their ancestral bloodline to constrict them than in the power of Jesus’ blood to consecrate them.

Some sincere Christians know more about what their great-grandfather did than about what Jesus did. They can tell you every pattern that “runs in the family,” but not what runs through their veins as a child of God.

Fear places more faith in the enemy’s ability to harm you than in the Father’s power to help you.

Don’t give the enemy’s curse more authority than Christ’s cross. Don’t place more confidence in the blood flowing through your family line than in the blood Jesus shed to redeem you.

What Balaam Couldn’t Do

The book of Numbers shows how this works, even under the old covenant. Balak, king of Moab, hired a prophet named Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam opened his mouth to curse, and blessing came out instead.

But how can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I condemn those whom the LORD has not condemned?

Numbers 23:8

Balaam tried again and finally admitted, “God has blessed, and I cannot reverse it!” (Numbers 23:20). Israel was under divine protection. No pagan prophet, no hired curse and no outside attack could overturn what God had blessed.

But read on. In Numbers 25, Israel’s men stepped outside God’s will through sexual immorality with the women of Moab, who drew them into idolatry. What Balaam could not accomplish by cursing them from the outside, Israel opened the door to from the inside. A curse wasn’t stronger than God’s covenant. The people chose rebellion and reaped the consequences.

Jeremiah saw the same principle in his day: the land was full of adultery, and so it lay under a curse (Jeremiah 23:10). Even in the Old Testament, the enemy could not curse the children of God. Only their own willful disobedience opened that door. Proverbs puts it this way:

Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse will not land on its intended victim.

Proverbs 26:2

A curse without a cause may flutter overhead like a bird, but it will find no place to land.

So hear both halves of this truth. Covenant protection doesn't make disobedience harmless. But many believers fear the curses of the enemy more than they grieve their own compromise before God. Place your confidence in Christ's finished work, and take His call to holiness seriously.

What the Old Testament Actually Says

Let's establish what the Old Testament means by a generational curse. The idea, sometimes called ancestral sin, is that individuals inherit judgment for the sins of their ancestors. It comes from the Ten Commandments, where God warns that the sins of those who reject Him will affect their children to the third and fourth generations, but that He shows unfailing love for a thousand generations to those who love Him and obey His commands (Exodus 20:5–6). When the Lord passed before Moses on the mountain, He proclaimed Himself merciful, gracious, slow to anger and filled with unfailing love, forgiving sin, yet not excusing the guilty (Exodus 34:6–7).

Notice what God puts first. Three or four generations of consequence on one side; a thousand generations of unfailing love on the other.

The same is true of Deuteronomy 28. Before Moses lists a single curse, he spends fourteen verses on blessing: blessed in the city and the field, blessed in your children and your crops, blessed wherever you go and whatever you do, the head and not the tail. Then come the curses for those who turn away.

I call this *possible versus probable*. Most of these passages highlight the mercy and patience of God more than His wrath. They tell God's people what is available through obedience and what is available through disobedience. So why has so much of Church culture focused on the negative side for so long?

I've observed that many believers talk about the fear of generational curses far more than they trust in the promise of generational blessings. They have more faith in the father of lies than in the Father of lights.

There is no junior Holy Spirit.

John says "the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world" (1 John 4:4). Paul says God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, "but of power, love, and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). The council was astonished at the boldness

of Peter and John, ordinary men with no religious training (Acts 4:13). Their confidence didn't come from their pedigree.

A faith that boasts in the enemy's power more than God's is not the faith of the apostles. A true disciple carries more authority than all the legions of hell, because the blood of Jesus covers them and the Holy Spirit lives in them.

Eight Curses in the Old Testament

The Bible doesn't hide from the subject of curses, and neither should we. The Old Testament refers to at least eight kinds:

1. **Covenantal curses.** Disobedience to God's commands and failure to keep covenant with Him, including ignoring the laws given to Israel in the Torah (Deuteronomy 28; Leviticus 26).
2. **Curses on individuals.** Specific sinful actions bring a curse on a person, as when Cain murdered Abel (Genesis 4:11–12), or when Noah cursed Canaan after Ham's sin (Genesis 9:22–25).
3. **Prophetic curses.** Pronounced by prophets in response to collective sin, idolatry, injustice or unfaithfulness among nations, such as the oracles against Moab (Isaiah 15–16) and Babylon (Isaiah 13).
4. **Retribution prayers.** Curses invoked in prayer against enemies who have committed grievous wrongs, as in Psalm 109.
5. **Curses related to idolatry.** Turning from God to follow other gods breaches the covenant and invites a curse (Deuteronomy 29:16–21).
6. **Curses on the land.** Widespread disobedience, injustice and moral corruption bring desolation on the land itself (Isaiah 24:6; Jeremiah 23:10).
7. **Curses as legal penalties.** Breaking specific laws of the Torah, such as dishonoring parents or perverting justice, brings a curse (Deuteronomy 27).
8. **Generational curses.** Persistent sin and disobedience by ancestors, especially idolatry and covenant breaking, affect later generations (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9).

Every one of these is real in the biblical record. But they are the language of the old covenant.

In Christ, generational curses may be found in the biblical record, but they are not the inheritance of the Christian.

Here's something worth sitting with. The apostles never instruct believers to break generational curses. As Martin Mokaya has pointed out, they were writing to new believers in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome, whose parents and grandparents, all the way back, had sacrificed to idols. If generational curses were a pressing issue for those believers, the apostles would have taught on it. Instead, when the New Testament speaks of the curse, it speaks of what Christ did with it.

For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.

Colossians 1:13-14

Five Reasons Generational Curses Are an Indictment of the Cross

I'm not mocking anyone who has wrestled with this. But when a believer lives in fear of a generational curse, that fear puts the Cross itself on trial. Here are five reasons why.

#1 Nobody likes to pay for something twice.

Some time ago I accidentally paid twice for a membership on Discord. I didn't panic, and I didn't try to earn my way out of the second charge. I simply contacted the owner. Once he saw the records of payment, he refunded me and canceled the membership I didn't need.

If a man running an online community won't make me pay twice once he sees the receipt, why would we think the Father would? The Cross is the record of payment. Paul was astonished that the Galatians were going back to human effort to finish what the Spirit had begun (Galatians 3:1-3).

But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

Galatians 3:13

To say a Christian must still pay for the sins of their ancestors is to say Jesus' payment wasn't enough.

#2 "It runs in the family" has been canceled in Christ.

At the doctor's office they always ask, "Does this run in your family?" There's wisdom in that question for your body. But many believers have carried it into their spiritual lives, as though their destiny were written in their family medical history.

God already confronted that thinking through Ezekiel. Israel had a proverb: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, but their children's mouths pucker at the taste." God said they would not quote it anymore (Ezekiel 18:2–3). Then He gave His rule:

The person who sins is the one who will die. The child will not be punished for the parent's sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child's sins. Righteous people will be rewarded for their own righteous behavior, and wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness.

Ezekiel 18:20

There's a saying in the health world: "Don't blame on genetics what diet did." Sometimes what looks like a family disease is really a family diet, the same habits passed down at the same table. The spiritual version is just as true:

In Christ, don't blame on your bloodline what cultural influence and sinful choices did.

#3 Genealogies matter in the Old Testament, not in the New.

Under the old covenant your tribe and your lineage mattered a great deal. Under the new covenant, Jesus redefined family:

Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!

Matthew 12:50

Paul says we Gentiles were wild olive branches, grafted in to share the richness of the cultivated tree (Romans 11:17). You were not born into this family. You were brought in.

Kingdom over culture means your skin color doesn't take priority over the color of the blood of Jesus.

In Christ there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. We are all one in Him, and if we belong to Christ, we are Abraham's true children and heirs of the promise (Galatians 3:28–29). Your spiritual genealogy now begins with Christ.

#4 Generational curses in Christ are illegal, and they try to make us orphans again.

God sent His Son to buy our freedom so He could adopt us as His very own children, and now we are no longer slaves but heirs (Galatians 4:4–7). A generational curse says, in effect, “You still belong to your old family, and its debts are still yours.” That’s the voice of the orphanage. It invites you to live like an orphan again in a house where you have already been adopted.

#5 Generational curses mix the old covenant with the new covenant.

God promised through Jeremiah a new covenant, not like the one Israel broke, written on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31–33). Christ took on the curse of the law for us. Every curse listed in Deuteronomy was placed on Him as He hung on the tree. By becoming sin for us, He drew the curse onto Himself, and the penalty for our disobedience was fully paid by His obedience. Today the blessings don’t merely remain in effect. They have been multiplied and placed on us as His adopted children.

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.

Ephesians 1:3

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

2 Corinthians 5:17

You are not merely an improved version of your ancestors. You are a new creation.

Curse or Consequence?

Now, does that mean nothing from your past can ever touch you again? No. Corey Minor put it simply:

“Don’t confuse a consequence with a curse.”

Corey Minor

A curse is a divine pronouncement of judgment because of disobedience, and it can touch individuals, communities or generations. A consequence is the natural result of

our own actions within the moral order God built into the world. A curse is a direct act of judgment. A consequence grows out of the choices we make.

Here is the curse:

But if you refuse to listen to the LORD your God and do not obey all the commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overwhelm you.

Deuteronomy 28:15

And here is the consequence:

Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.

Galatians 6:7–8

Take sexual immorality as an example. A curse would be a judgment decreed by God as punishment. But what usually follows sexual sin is consequence: sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancies, guilt, shame, broken trust, low self-worth. Those are real, and they call for real pastoral care. But they are the harvest of a seed, not a sentence handed down from heaven.

So freedom from generational curses doesn't mean freedom from the consequences of persistent, unrepentant sin before a holy God.

Grace removes the curse. Repentance stops the sowing.

Then the Holy Spirit begins to heal what the harvest left behind.

There's one more distinction, and the next chapter will give it the room it needs. A generational curse was a legal claim. What many believers still fight is a generational mindset, an illegal claim that keeps working only because we keep believing the same lies. Think of the enslaved people in Texas who were legally free for about two and a half years before the news reached them. The blood of Jesus breaks the legal authority of the curse. The renewing of the mind by the Holy Spirit breaks the hold of the mindset.

The Prescription Is the Blood

So what's the prescription? The blood of Christ, and the river of the Spirit that flows from it.

Jesus said that anyone who believes in Him would have "rivers of living water" flowing from within, and John tells us He was speaking of the Spirit (John 7:38–39). Ezekiel saw a river flowing out from the temple, and he was told, "Life will flourish wherever this water flows" (Ezekiel 47:9). That's what the Spirit does in a family line once marked by death.

The bloodline may explain where you came from, but the blood of Jesus determines who you have become.

Remember that refund. I didn't have to beg. I didn't have to prove I deserved it. I only had to point to the record of payment. Some of you have been paying a debt that was settled two thousand years ago. You keep sending installments of shame, fear and striving to a creditor who has no claim on you.

Your Father has looked at the record. The account is marked paid. The case is closed. And He isn't standing at the door waiting to prosecute you again. He's standing there waiting to welcome you home.

For the Road

1. Is there anything in your family history you've believed has a claim on your future? What would change if you believed the Cross settled that case?
2. Think of a struggle in your life. Is it more like a curse you're waiting to be delivered from, or a consequence of seeds you've been sowing? What would repentance and healing look like there?
3. Where have you given the enemy's power more attention than the Father's power? How can you begin to talk more about generational blessings than generational curses?

Your case is closed. The blood of Jesus speaks louder than your bloodline.

Legally Free, Still Enslaved

So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.

Galatians 5:1

On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation took effect. With the stroke of a pen, it declared that the enslaved people held in the states in rebellion were free. Texas was one of those states.

But a declaration on paper in Washington was a long way from a cotton field in Texas. There were few Union soldiers there to enforce it, the news was slow to reach the people it was written for, and many enslavers simply did not announce it. So men, women and children who were legally free kept rising before dawn, kept working the fields and kept answering to masters who no longer had any lawful claim on them.

That went on for about two and a half years.

On June 19, 1865, Union troops under Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas. That day Granger issued General Order No. 3. It began:

"The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free."

General Order No. 3, June 19, 1865

Some 250,000 enslaved people in Texas were free by executive decree. They had been free since January 1863. They just hadn't known it. That day came to be known as Juneteenth.

Thank God someone finally carried the news. If no one had ever told them, they would have stayed in bondage much longer. A freedom that had been signed still had to be announced, believed and walked out.

Read that again slowly, because it's one of the clearest pictures of the Church I know.

You can be legally emancipated in the Kingdom of God and still be held prisoner in your mind as a slave.

Signed at Calvary

Jesus Christ signed your emancipation proclamation on Calvary two thousand years ago. When He cried, "It is finished," the paperwork was done. Every legal claim sin, death and the devil had on you was canceled in the courts of heaven.

But the enemy would love to keep that news from reaching your field. He knows what Hosea knew:

My people are being destroyed because they don't know me.

Hosea 4:6

Older translations put it more bluntly: destroyed for lack of knowledge. Satan can't reverse what Jesus signed. So he works on what you know. He wants you to keep tying yourself down in shame and condemnation, to keep living as a slave to sin, to keep saying "Yes, sir" to a master who lost his title deed at the cross.

You don't have to answer him anymore. You can put down the plow of performance and "never good enough." You can take the freedom purchased by the blood of Jesus and live free of guilt. You can collect your inheritance in Christ and start seeking first the Kingdom and His righteousness. You can start living like Abba's child, because through the Cross you have been made whole and clean.

That's your inheritance. But you have to trust His will and His voice, because it's the truth that sets you free.

And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

John 8:32

The word *reformation* is a synonym for *correction*. I believe the Church needs a Juneteenth correction: a day when sons and daughters who have been free all along finally hear it, believe it and walk off the field.

Freedom that nobody announces is freedom nobody lives in.

Curse or Mindset?

That story draws a line I want you to see clearly. In the last chapter we looked at generational curses. Here's the distinction:

- A **generational curse** was a spiritual legal contract over a bloodline, based on the habitual sin of the ancestors. It belonged to the old covenant.
- A **generational mindset** is an illegal contract over a person in Christ, based on lies they believe about themselves, about others, about the devil and about God.

The ownership papers that existed before January 1, 1863, were a real, enforceable bondage. That's the picture of a curse. Living like a slave after the Proclamation, because nobody told you or because you refused to believe the good news, is the picture of a mindset.

The enemy's access through your family line was stripped at the cross. Any whip you still feel is being swung by someone who lost all jurisdiction two thousand years ago, and he can keep swinging it only as long as you keep believing his lie: "You still belong to me." The moment you hear, believe and receive the truth, you can walk off the plantation of every ancestral pattern and never pick up those chains again.

That isn't breaking a generational curse. That's waking up to a freedom that was legally yours the moment you trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The blood of Jesus breaks the legal authority of the curse. The renewing of the mind by the Holy Spirit breaks the influence of the mindset.

You need both. The blood settles the case. The Spirit renews the mind that has to live in the verdict.

The Man in the Iron Mask

In the 1998 film *The Man in the Iron Mask*, the musketeers break a prisoner out of a remote fortress. Under the iron mask he has worn for years is Philippe, the identical twin brother of King Louis XIV. On the night Louis was born, the queen gave birth to twins. To avoid a war between his sons, their father sent Philippe away to the countryside with no knowledge of who he was. When Louis became king, he had his brother locked in the mask so no one would ever see his face.

Philippe tells Athos that for days he shouted, "What have I done?" until he finally stopped shouting. He decided there must be something about his face that made men cruel.

He had it backward. There was nothing wrong with his face. The problem was whose face it was. He looked like the king, because he was royalty.

The devil is determined to keep you from seeing yourself with the value and significance God sees in you.

The enemy's schemes don't only target your behavior. They target your identity. He knows that if you ever see your true face, the face of a son or daughter of the King, the mask comes off for good. That's why the battle is so fierce. But no mask can hide what God has said about you. The One who lives in you is greater than the one who lives in the world (1 John 4:4).

The Ticket in the Shirt Pocket

Imagine a man named Tom. He works a dead-end job and struggles to make ends meet. He lives in a run-down apartment, often skips meals and dreams of a better life. What Tom doesn't know is that a lottery ticket he bought months ago is a winner, worth more money than he could spend in a lifetime.

For months Tom lives in poverty, believing nothing will ever change, while the winning ticket sits crumpled in an old coat pocket. Then one day, cleaning out his closet, he finds it. He checks the numbers. Disbelief gives way to joy, and his whole life changes overnight.

That's only a picture. But something very close to it really happened.

In 2017, a 68-year-old New Jersey man named Jimmie Smith found a New York Lotto ticket in the pocket of an old shirt hanging in his closet. He had bought it in May 2016, and winners had one year to claim their prize. After seeing a news story about an unclaimed jackpot, he checked it. The ticket was worth \$24 million. He claimed it on May 23, 2017, just two days before it would have expired.

For almost a year, a millionaire had been walking around his own house without knowing it.

Then there's the other side of the story. In 2013, a man in Newport, Wales, named James Howells threw out an old hard drive. It held thousands of bitcoin. It went to the landfill, and for years he has tried, without success, to get it back. He knows exactly what he lost. He just can't reach it.

If you don't know what you possess, you'll never know what you can produce.

Is it possible that the father of lies is keeping New Testament believers ignorant of what they already possess in Christ? I believe he is. Many of God's children are living below the poverty line of their inheritance with the ticket in their pocket.

And notice what we usually go looking for when we do check our pockets. In Christ, many want power over sickness, death, the demonic and poverty, but few want power over temptation, the flesh, the carnal mind and the desires of this world. Real freedom includes both. The inheritance isn't only rescue from what's outside you. It's victory over what's inside you.

Slaves No More, but Sons and Daughters

Consider a teenager adopted out of an impoverished orphanage. He's used to sleeping with his clothes on. He's used to hiding food. He's used to never having his own room. He's used to fighting for a bed to sleep on.

Now he has a room with his name on the door, a full refrigerator and parents who love him. And he still sleeps in his clothes and hides food under the bed.

If you were his parent, wouldn't that break your heart? Not because he's being bad, but because he's still afraid in a house where he's already been adopted.

That's how many of us live with our Father. Paul explains it like this:

Think of it this way. If a father dies and leaves an inheritance for his young children, those children are not much better off than slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father had. They have to obey their guardians until they reach whatever age their father set.

Galatians 4:1-2

Then he announces the turn: God sent His Son to buy our freedom so He could adopt us, and sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts so we would cry "Abba, Father." Now we are no longer slaves but God's own children, and heirs (Galatians 4:4-7).

An heir who thinks like a slave owns everything and enjoys nothing. Peter says you are a chosen people, royal priests, God's very own possession (1 Peter 2:9). You don't have to hide food in the Father's house.

You were not adopted to live as a well-fed slave. You were adopted to live as a son or daughter.

Two Marriages

Paul uses another picture in Romans 7. A woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives. If he dies, she's free to marry another.

So, my dear brothers and sisters, this is the point: You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are united with the one who has been raised from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God.

Romans 7:4

Picture it. Her first marriage was bound in stone: rituals, rules and a mirror that only ever showed her faults. Her second marriage came with a new heart, a life-giving Spirit, mercy and the power to be renewed and live righteously. If she tried to serve both husbands, it would tear her apart. The first covenant's purpose had been fulfilled, and the new had come.

Paul says the law was our guardian until Christ came, protecting us until we could be made right with God through faith. Now that faith has come, we don't need the guardian anymore (Galatians 3:23–24). Do we still offer animal sacrifices or keep New Moon festivals? No, because we live in a new covenant. But if we don't know which marriage we're in, we'll try to serve both husbands with the best of intentions.

That doesn't make the law worthless. Its moral commands reflect God's character, and the Spirit now writes them on our hearts and produces their fruit in us (Galatians 5:22–23). Its ceremonies and food laws pointed to Christ and are fulfilled in Him. Its civil code governed ancient Israel, yet its principles of justice still teach us to treat others as we'd want to be treated (Matthew 7:12). What has changed is the marriage. We don't obey to stay married. We obey because we're loved.

I think of it like this. A boy rushes home before curfew because he's afraid of his parents' punishment. His steps are quick and his heart is tight. Years later, he comes home early in his marriage too, but not to avoid a scolding. He comes home because he knows being late would bruise his wife's trust. The act looks the same. The heart behind it is completely different.

The law asks, "What will happen to me if I break the rule?" Love asks, "What will happen to the heart of the One I love?"

The Pauper in the Palace

So how do you start living in the verdict? Paul tells us:

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

Romans 12:2

Transformation doesn't come by changing your address. It comes by changing your mind. The teenager is already in the house. What he needs now is a renewed mind that believes the house is his.

Kris Vallotton said it in a way I've never forgotten:

"If you put a person with a pauper mentality in a palace he will turn a palace into a prison. If you put a person with a prince mentality in a prison he will turn the prison into a palace."

Kris Vallotton

You will always reproduce around you the environment you cultivate within you. That's why two believers can sit in the same church, under the same preaching, with the same promises, and one lives like royalty while the other lives like a refugee. The difference isn't the palace. It's the mind.

Repentance means letting God change your mind until it matches your adoption papers.

Working From Freedom

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne spends nearly two decades in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Year after year he holds on to hope, though he can't be sure all his patient work will ever lead to freedom. In the end, it does. He emerges into a pouring rain, a free man.

Proverbs says hope deferred makes the heart sick (Proverbs 13:12). Andy refused to let deferred hope kill him. That's a lesson for us. But there's one place where our story is different from his.

Andy had to work for his freedom. We don't.

In Christ we don't work for freedom. We work from freedom.

The tunnel has already been dug. The wall has already been breached. The cross is the open door, and the Father's voice is calling you out. Everything you do from here, your

obedience, your service, your fight against the flesh, comes out of freedom, not toward it.

Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise.

Hebrews 10:23

So if your soul is downcast today, talk to it the way the psalmist did: “Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God!” (Psalm 42:5).

General Order No. 3 has been read over your life. The Son has set you free. And your Father isn’t waiting at the edge of the field to see whether you’ve earned it. He’s waiting to walk you home.

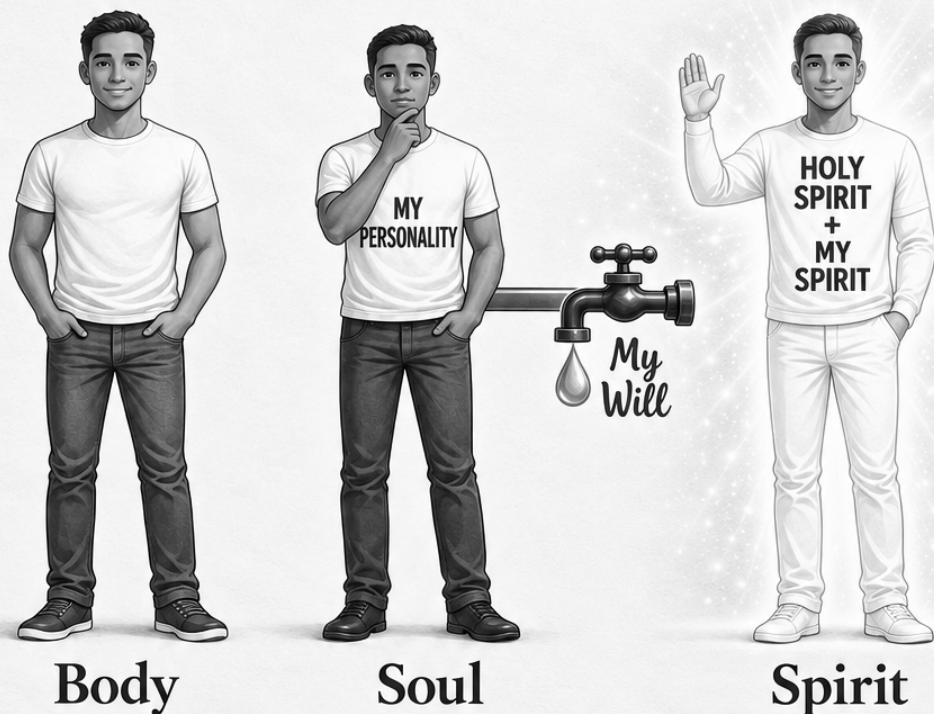
For the Road

1. Where are you still “working the field” in an area of your life where Jesus has already declared you free?
2. What lie about yourself, others, the devil or God have you been agreeing with? What truth from Scripture breaks that agreement?
3. Is your obedience more like the boy racing home before curfew or the husband coming home out of love? What would change if you obeyed from freedom instead of for it?

You’ve been free since Calvary. It’s time to live like you heard the news.

Romans 12:2

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.



This illustration portrays body, soul, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). The far-left “body” represents the visible, physical man; the middle figure, labeled “MY PERSONALITY,” depicts the unrenewed mind, will, emotions, and self-life that still dominate many believers who wrestle with their carnal nature; and the far-right “spirit” figure shows the born-again human spirit made alive by the Holy Spirit at salvation (But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. — 1 Corinthians 6:17).

Yet the flowing tap of “Living Water” (John 7:38) is not automatically available; it is released only when we come into agreement with the Truth who now indwells the born-again believer.

A Daniel Generation

But the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits.

Daniel 11:32 (NKJV)

When Daniel arrived in Babylon, he was a young man far from home. He had been carried off from Jerusalem as a captive, one of the young men from Judah's royal and noble families whom King Nebuchadnezzar brought to his palace (Daniel 1:3–6). They changed his name. They changed his menu. They tried to change his mind.

On paper he belonged to Babylon. He was a legal slave with a prince mentality.

He never forgot whose son he was. He refused the king's food. He prayed with his windows open toward Jerusalem. He walked into a lions' den and walked out again. And decades later, under a different empire, he was still standing.

Daniel soon proved himself more capable than all the other administrators and high officers. Because of Daniel's great ability, the king made plans to place him over the entire empire. Then the other administrators and high officers began searching for some fault in the way Daniel was handling government affairs, but they couldn't find anything to criticize or condemn. He was faithful, always responsible, and completely trustworthy.

Daniel 6:3–4

Older translations say the king promoted him because “an excellent spirit was in him.” That's the secret of Daniel's life. It wasn't his pedigree or his position. It was the spirit he carried and the God he knew.

In the last chapter we saw that a pauper in a palace will turn the palace into a prison. Daniel was the opposite. A prince in a prison turned Babylon into a place where the God of heaven was honored.

It's time for a Daniel generation to stand up.

The Prescription for Fear

Everything we've walked through in this book comes back, in the end, to fear. The orphan is afraid there won't be enough. The rebellious orphan is afraid the Father will hold him back. The religious orphan is afraid she'll never measure up. The imposter feeds on fear of failure. The curse-hunter is afraid of what's lurking in the family tree.

God's prescription for the spirit of fear isn't a technique. It's a generation that knows Him. God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love and self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7). Daniel didn't know everything about Babylon's politics, but he knew his God, and the people who know their God are strong.

Notice what Daniel 11:32 doesn't say. It doesn't say the people who know *about* their God. Orphans can know a great deal about the Father. They can quote His rules and describe His house. Sons and daughters *know* Him. They've sat at His table. They've heard His voice. They can face a hostile culture without fear, because they aren't fighting for a place in the family. They already have one.

A generation that knows the Father will never be ruled by the fear of the enemy.

When Religion Magnifies the Darkness

Jesus clearly warned that one of the greatest dangers to His people would come from false teachers and prophets who claim to follow Him but are aligned with deception (Matthew 7:15; 24:24). There are real dangers in witchcraft, the occult and false religions. But the most subtle threat comes from those who distort His teaching, disregard His words and defy His will while looking very pious. They're driven by a religious spirit that masquerades as the Holy Spirit.

Here's one of the telltale signs of a religious spirit: it magnifies the power of evil and shrinks the God of the Scriptures. It talks constantly about what the devil is doing and rarely about what Jesus has done. It leaves you more impressed with darkness than with light, more afraid of the enemy than in awe of the Father.

Isaiah asked the question every generation has to answer:

Who has believed our message? To whom has the LORD revealed his powerful arm?

Isaiah 53:1

And then he showed us where God's powerful arm was revealed: in a Servant who was despised and rejected, who carried our weaknesses and sorrows, who was pierced for our rebellion and crushed for our sins (Isaiah 53:3–5). The strongest thing God ever did looked like weakness on a cross. There is no power in hell that can stand against that arm.

Any message that leaves you more afraid of the devil than amazed by the Cross didn't come from the Father.

Mindsets That Masquerade as Curses

In the new covenant, generational mindsets often masquerade as generational curses. A believer says, "My family has always been this way," and calls it a curse, when what has really been passed down is a way of thinking and talking.

Take the power of words.

The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences.

Proverbs 18:21

Many families pass down words the way they pass down recipes. "We never get ahead." "Men in this family don't stick around." "You'll turn out just like your father." Spoken often enough, those words become a forecast, and then a lifestyle. That isn't a curse landing on you from heaven. It's a harvest of the words you keep planting.

Proverbs 30 names four things the earth can't bear: a slave who becomes a king, a fool who has plenty to eat, an unloved woman who gets married, and a servant girl who takes her mistress's place (Proverbs 30:21–23). All four describe someone whose position changed while their mindset didn't. They have a new title and an old heart. They've been lifted into a new place, but they bring the fear, the grasping and the insecurity of the old place with them.

That's exactly the struggle of a believer who hasn't yet submitted to the process of a renewed mind. The position has changed completely. You're seated with Christ. But if the mind hasn't been renewed, you'll rule your new life like a slave and wonder why it keeps feeling like bondage.

So how do you honor where you came from without being ruled by it? Isaiah told God's people to look to the rock from which they were cut, the quarry from which they were dug (Isaiah 51:1). Don't forget the Rock you were carved from. But be

honest about the tree you were pruned from too. Your family of origin gave you real things, some good and some painful. You can thank God for the good, grieve the painful and still refuse to let either one have the final word. The final word belongs to the Father who adopted you.

What runs in your family doesn't have to run your life.

The Serum and the Spirit

In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers starts out as a frail, sickly young man. He has immense courage and strong moral character. His heart is in the right place, but his body can't carry out what his heart longs to do. He's rejected again and again.

Then he's chosen for the Super Soldier Serum, and his entire being is transformed. He receives strength, speed and endurance he never had. Now he can finally fulfill the calling that was in his heart all along.

That's a picture, not a doctrine, but it's a good one. On our own, we're like Steve Rogers before the serum. We may have good intentions, but we're limited by our human nature and our sinful tendencies, and we fall short of living out our faith. When we yield to the Holy Spirit, a profound transformation happens. He renews our hearts and minds. He gives us the strength to overcome sin, the wisdom to make godly decisions and the love to serve others selflessly.

It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

Zechariah 4:6

The blood of Jesus releases us from the spiritual bankruptcy of our sin debt. But it's through the Holy Spirit's power that we walk in our divine inheritance and build a life of righteousness according to His will.

The blood cancels your debt. The Spirit releases your inheritance.

A Foster Kid Finds a Family

In the movie *Shazam!*, Billy Batson is a foster kid who keeps running away. Home after home, he's searching for the birth mother he lost as a little boy. Then he's placed with a foster family that takes in kids like him and actually loves them. Billy keeps them at arm's length. When he finally tracks down his mother, she isn't the person he

has been dreaming of, and he realizes the family he kept running from is the family that wanted him all along.

By the end, Billy doesn't keep his power to himself. He shares it with his foster brothers and sisters, and they stand together as a family.

That's the story of the Spirit of Adoption. So many of us spend years looking backward, trying to find our identity in where we came from, while the Father is setting a place for us at His table. And when we finally come home, we discover that the power He gives isn't for us alone. It's for the family.

Anna Thevaos put it in a way that lifts my head every time I read it:

"Lift up your head, man and woman of God. You are not under a generational curse, you are under generational blessings because of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior."

Anna Thevaos

You're not the end of a generational curse. You're the beginning of a generational blessing.

The Father's Table

Every church likes to say, "We do church by the Book." But is that true? If we really want to see what the Father's family looks like when it's healthy, we should look at the first church in Jerusalem.

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.

Acts 2:42-43

I see five marks of the Father's house in that passage. I call them the 5 Ps.

1. **Pizza.** They broke bread together. Simple shared meals build relationship, and every table points back to the Lord's Supper, where we proclaim His death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Family eats together.
2. **Participation.** They were devoted to fellowship. We're told not to neglect meeting together but to think of ways to motivate one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24-25). Orphans watch from the edge. Sons and daughters take part.

3. **Preaching.** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Faith comes from hearing the Good News about Christ (Romans 10:17). Children grow on their Father's words.
4. **Prayer.** They were devoted to prayer. "Never stop praying" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Persistent prayer keeps the family dependent on the Father and aligned with His heart.
5. **Power.** Awe came over everyone, and signs and wonders followed. Jesus promised we would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon us, and we would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The family business isn't done in our own strength.

None of those five is a program. They're the habits of a household. Luke says they worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper and shared their meals with great joy and generosity, and each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved (Acts 2:46–47).

That's what happens when orphans become family. The table gets longer.

Too often the Church has started to mirror Hollywood culture instead. We require people to act like performers who earn a seat at the table through striving. The Father's house was never meant to be an audition. It's meant to be a family that recognizes sinners as spiritual orphans in need of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus and acceptance through the Spirit of Adoption. Nobody at the first church in Jerusalem was trying out for a part. They were simply living as brothers and sisters, and the watching city found that more compelling than any stage.

A Daniel generation will need that kind of table. You can't stand alone in Babylon for long. Daniel had Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, friends who prayed with him when the king's decree threatened all their lives (Daniel 2:17–18). Sons and daughters were never meant to be brave by themselves.

An orphanage feeds people. A family sets a place for them.

A Generation That Knows the Father

I believe God is raising up a Daniel generation. Not a generation of perfect people, but a generation that knows its God. They'll live in Babylon without bowing to it. They'll be faithful, responsible and trustworthy in places that don't share their faith. They won't be impressed by darkness, because they've seen the arm of the Lord revealed at

the cross. They won't spend their lives fighting curses that Jesus already carried, because they know whose name is on their adoption papers.

And they won't be orphans. They'll be sons and daughters who have come home.

That's where this whole book has been heading. Not to a better strategy, a stronger performance or a louder prayer, but home. Back to the Father who never stopped watching the road. Back to the table where there's always enough. Back to the One whose Spirit rises up within us and cries the oldest, simplest word a child knows.

Abba.

For the Road

1. What would it look like for you to be "a prince in a prison" this week, carrying an excellent spirit in a place that doesn't honor God?
2. What words have been passed down in your family that you've mistaken for a curse? What does the Father say instead?
3. Which of the 5 Ps is missing from your life right now: the shared table, participation, the Word, prayer or the Spirit's power? Who could you invite to the table with you?

The people who know their God will be strong. Get to know your Father, and you'll never live like an orphan again.

EPILOGUE

Abba

So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

Luke 15:20

On the night before the cross, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus fell to the ground and prayed. Mark records the first word He spoke: “Abba, Father” (Mark 14:36).

In His darkest hour, the Son of God didn’t reach for a formal title. He reached for the word a child uses. And because He went to the cross that night, that same word is now in our mouths. The Spirit of His Son has been sent into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:6).

That word is the whole message of this book.

The Father Who Runs

Think about the father in Jesus’ story one more time.

He didn’t wait on the porch with his arms crossed. He didn’t make his son finish the speech he’d rehearsed about becoming a hired servant. He saw him “while he was still a long way off,” and he ran. In that culture, dignified older men didn’t run. This one did, because his love was greater than his dignity.

Then he gave his son a robe, a ring and sandals. A robe for honor. A ring for authority. Sandals because servants went barefoot and sons did not. And he threw a party.

Later, he went out to the older brother too, the one who had stayed home and kept score, and pleaded with him to come inside. “Everything I have is yours” (Luke 15:31).

That is your Father. Whether you’ve been far away or close by and miserable, He is coming out to meet you.

The Father isn’t waiting for you to clean yourself up. He’s running to meet you on the road.

The Oil No One Can Lend You

Jesus told another story about ten bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom. All of them had lamps. Only five had oil. When the midnight shout came, the foolish ones begged to borrow, and they were told, “We don’t have enough for all of us” (Matthew 25:9).

I keep coming back to that parable because it tells the truth about intimacy.

Nobody can lend you their relationship with the Father. A pastor can’t. A parent can’t. A spouse can’t. You can sit near people who know Him, sing their songs and use their words, and still be living like an orphan on borrowed oil.

But here’s the good news. You don’t need to borrow. You’ve been adopted. The same Spirit who cries “Abba” in the heart of every true son and daughter has been given to you. The oil is fresh every time you come to Him as His child.

No one can lend you their intimacy with the Father, but He freely gives His Spirit to every one of His children.

A Blessing for the Road

So here is my prayer for you as you close this book.

May the Spirit of Adoption make the Father’s love real to you, not just as a doctrine but as your daily home. May you leave the orphanage of fear, striving and performance, and never move back in. May every lie of the imposter fall silent before the voice that calls you beloved. May you live from your Father’s acceptance, not for it. May you be a father or mother to someone who has never known one. And whenever you feel far away, may you remember the Father who runs.

Abba is waiting. The robe is ready. The table is set.

Keep your lamp burning, and come home.

The Season of Repentance

Keep Your Lamp Burning

Friend, wherever you are right now, and whatever you've done, I'm glad you're here. Can I ask you something gently? Do you believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God? That He loved you enough to die for your sin, not just the world's, but yours? And that God raised Him up out of that grave?

If something in you is saying yes, then He's already drawing you. Repentance isn't Him pushing you away. It's Him calling you home. It means turning from the sin that's been hurting you, receiving the forgiveness He's freely holding out, and trusting Him enough to let Him be Lord of your life.

I won't lie to you. Following Jesus is going to cost you. It may cost you comfort. It may cost you the approval of people you care about. It will definitely cost you control. And I can't promise you it won't cost you your life. In China, India, and across the Middle East, believers are losing their freedom, their families, and even their lives for the name of Jesus, and that's well known. But He is worth it all. Knowing Him is the pearl of great price, the one thing worth selling everything else to have. Once you put your hand to the plow, you don't look back. So can you trust Him with your whole life, even when obeying Him hurts?

Here's the good news: you don't have to have it all figured out, and you don't have to be strong enough. You're not. None of us are. Just come honest. Bring Him your sin, your questions, your weakness, all of it. Salvation is His gift, not your achievement. Your part is to receive Him by faith and start walking with Him.

That's where the oil begins. Don't let your lamp go out.