

GOD'S
HEART
FOR THE
PRODIGAL

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A DEVOTIONAL JOURNEY
OF MERCY, REDEMPTION,
AND UNFAILING LOVE

Written by the parents of

ZACH WILLIAMS

STEVE & JENIA WILLIAMS

with ROBERT NOLAND

KLOVE
BOOKS

God's Heart for the Prodigal: A Devotional Journey of Mercy, Redemption, and Unfailing Love

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A WORD FROM ZACH

Following the release of my memoir, *Rescue Story*, and sharing about what the Lord has done in my life, I've had the privilege of hearing from so many readers. One of the primary elements brought to light in the book was the unwavering commitment of my parents, Steve and Jenia Williams (Jenia is pronounced *Jee-nee*). Mom and Dad's deep walk with the Lord, relentless prayers, and ever-present unconditional love and grace for me was a major catalyst that God's Spirit worked through to bring this prodigal back home to Him. That same love and grace also played a part in my wife, Crystal, turning her life over to the Lord around the same time I did. That's also true for my sister, Amy, and her husband, Toby. Today, as a family, we're fully committed to Jesus. While, of course, all glory goes to God, I want to give credit and offer gratitude to my parents for their perseverance on my behalf.

Their journey of faith over the course of more than ten years led me to the concept for this devotional. I wanted to offer Mom and Dad the opportunity to speak to those who are walking through their own prodigal season with a

son, daughter, grandchild, spouse, other family member, or friend. Or maybe, just like me for so many years, someone who is struggling and desperately searching for answers, grasping for hope and help. While you'll hear from me and Crystal, the primary voices will be my mom and dad as they share their wisdom, experience, and godly counsel. Because they know what a parent's broken heart feels like. They understand what it means to ask God some tough questions like "What did we do wrong?" And they have the callouses on their knees from years of submitting to the Lord, asking Him to rescue their kids.

Now on the other side, after more than a decade of experiencing God's favor and blessing following His answers to their prayers, they most definitely have something to say and have won the right to be heard. In this devotional, they'll talk honestly about this difficult place in which many find themselves with a loved one. They can speak firsthand with empathy to offer encouragement and inspiration, and they will challenge you to become stronger in your own faith through this difficult season, lifting up your prodigal as you keep watch down the road for him or her to come back home—just like I did.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

• Zach •

First, there are three ways to use this devotional:

1. By yourself, just as you would read and engage with any devotional book.
2. With a small group, whether that be at church, in a Bible study, or with Christian friends.
3. In a support group, getting together with others who are walking through life with a prodigal loved one.

Regardless of how you use the book, before you dive in to the first day, here are a few thoughts we hope will help you start strong and finish well in these pages:

Commit to setting aside intentional and undistracted time as you go through each day. If you miss a day or two, don't give in to the temptation to feel any guilt; just jump back in. Commit, never quit.

Choose the best time and place in your day to read and engage. Stay away from distractions like your phone, device, or TV. Find a place where you can be on your own and focus on connecting with God. Your relationship with Jesus and the prayers for your prodigal are worth every moment you invest.

Read and take in *all* the content. We worked hard to make every word count, and God certainly did with His Word. So don't scan like you would a text or email; engage each day like reading a personal letter from us, because that's actually what this is. If you prefer to use a different Bible version to read the scriptures, that's great. The point is to connect with God's Word. All Bible verses are italicized to easily distinguish them from the other text.

Application/Discussion Questions are at the end of each day. The purpose of these is to guide you to connect and apply the day's content to your life. The more open and honest you are in your answers, the more opportunity to grow in spiritual maturity. If you go through this devotional with a small group or support group, you can use these questions for discussion.

Here's the format for each day, divided into three sections:

Music—My parents handpicked one of my songs to match up with each day's message. Listening to a song as you start the day can help get your mind and heart into the right space to hear from the Lord, while the lyrics can connect to

the topic of the day's content as another way to encourage and inspire you.

Message—This main segment includes a testimony, teaching, and text from Scripture. Here, we share from our hearts some of the truths the Lord has taught us through our own journey.

Reflection—In this segment, there are two questions:

1. The *personal* question is for you to receive from Him. Prayerfully think through and apply the truth of God's Word to your own life.
2. The *prodigal* question is meant to help you process your loved one's story. Apply the truth of God's Word in anticipation of your prodigal's journey back home.

Whether by yourself or with others, we encourage you to write down your answers. Studies have shown that writing can create a stronger, more impactful experience. The questions may also be used for discussion in a small group or support group.

At the end of each day, there is journal space for you to write down anything you believe the Lord is showing you. Or you can use this if you need more space for your answers to the application questions. Jotting down your thoughts, impressions, and God's directives is a great way to process both your feelings and your faith. Journaling is a proven

method to help anyone walk through a difficult or even traumatic season.

Pray. Allow time each day to talk with God and tell Him everything. Open up to Him. Listen for His voice in your spirit. Share your heart and speak your mind. Be honest. Be specific. No *thees* and *thous* or fancy spiritual language is necessary. Two great scriptures to remember are Psalm 46:10, “*Be still, and know that I am God,*” and the prayer of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3:9, “*Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.*”

Finally, if there are a number of people in your church or Christian community around you who are dealing with a prodigal in their lives, consider starting a support group. Going through the devotional together in a weekly meeting would give you content and direction for thirty meetings. Whether you go through each day in advance or read it aloud in your time together, you can use the questions to discuss and process with one another. The synergy of your prayers for each prodigal could be the most powerful aspect of the group.

As you get started, our prayer is that, by the end of the next thirty days, you will be closer to Jesus and your prodigal will be closer to home.

*Jesus looked at them and said,
“With man this is impossible,
but not with God;
all things are possible with God.”
(Mark 10:27)*

Day 1

.....

The Unconditional Love of the Father

• Music •

Listen to today's song:

“Far Too Good to a Man like Me”

• Steve and Jenia •

For the next thirty days, inside these pages, we want to invite you to walk with us for encouragement, inspiration, and growth in your faith and relationship with Jesus. Our prayer is to offer hope and help if you

- Have a son or daughter who has strayed from faith in Christ

- Have a grandson or granddaughter who has strayed from faith in Christ
- Have a spouse who has strayed from faith in Christ
- Have a brother or sister who has strayed from faith in Christ
- Have a close family member who has strayed from faith in Christ
- Have a loved one who seems to have no interest in God
- Are struggling in your own faith and searching for answers

To introduce our title and theme, we'll begin with Jesus's parable in Luke 15 about a prodigal son.

Let's look for His point behind His teaching. Starting with verse 11, He told the story of a father with two sons. One day, the younger son came to his dad and asked for his share of the estate. Now, imagine an adult child coming to a wealthy parent to say, in effect, "I don't want to wait on you to die to get my share of your estate. Let me have it now, because I want to leave." While that had to be a difficult and painful moment, Jesus told us that the dad did as he was asked and divided up the property between the two sons, allowing the one to essentially cash out his birthright.

With his pockets full of money, the younger son packed a bag and left for a distant country. So, what happened? Did he invest his money or buy a business to become a success and make Dad proud of his decision? No. Verse 13 says, "[He] squandered his wealth in wild living." As has always been the case with the world, when the money runs

out, the party's over. After the son went completely broke, a famine struck, taking his circumstances from bad to worse. He finally found a job in a man's field feeding pigs, and after a while, as he was literally living in a pigsty, even the pods the swine ate started to look good to him.

But verse 17 starts with an interesting phrase: "*When he came to his senses.*" Most of us know exactly what that means—the sudden realization that we've made a huge mistake and massive regret begins to sink in. And then the classic question: *What was I thinking?!* Suddenly, the place the son couldn't wait to leave became the very place where he knew he had to return. His wake-up call made him realize what he had turned his back on and how he had taken his father's care and generosity for granted. He remembered how the hired hands had plenty of food with leftovers to spare. That's when he made the decision to return home. Embarrassed and humbled by his choices, the son planned out his speech to Dad:

*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against
you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son;
make me like one of your hired servants.*

(vv. 18–19)

Imagine the young man's surprise at his father's response:

*While he was still a long way off, his father saw him
and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his
son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

(v. 20)

As he began giving his dad the rehearsed speech, begging for forgiveness and for permission to come back home, the father essentially ignored his plea and called out to the servants:

“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.
(vv. 22–24)

When the older son protested and asked why his father was throwing a huge party for his brother who “*squandered your property with prostitutes*” (v. 30), Jesus ended His story with the dad’s response:

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”
(vv. 31–32)

Jesus’s point was that the father loved both sons the same, reflecting the unconditional love of our heavenly Father who shows no favoritism. The prodigal’s father wasn’t angry and judging his wayward son but rather watching and waiting at the end of the road, ready to restore his child from the effects of sin in this fallen world, ready to celebrate his return.

If you are a parent, grandparent, spouse, sibling, or loved one of a prodigal, first, trust that the Father is at work behind the scenes, and, second, pray and hope in faith for the day when you get to experience him or her come home. Through a relationship with Jesus, the heavenly Father is waiting at the end of the road to welcome anyone with open arms to forgive, redeem, and restore.

Day 2

.....

At the Crossroads

• Music •

Listen to today's song:

“Rescue Story”

• Steve •

Growing up in small-town Arkansas, Jenia and I started going steady when I was in the ninth grade and she was in the eighth. From that year on, we've been a couple. In the home where I grew up, my parents were in one bedroom and my two brothers and I were in the other. Jenia's family owned and ran a gas station, so they lived in a larger, nicer house. I could always count on eating well when I got invited to dinner with her family. While they certainly weren't rich, by comparison to my family, I thought they

were. Besides those few differences, Jenia and I had a lot in common and fell in love.

When I was nineteen and she was eighteen, we got married. Overnight, we were “adults” out on our own, no longer under the authority and rules of our churchgoing Christian families. Feeling our independence, we started to spread our wings and see what we might be missing out on in the world.

My grandfather on my mom's side had been a heavy drinker, but later in life he came to Jesus. As a result, my mom wanted nothing to do with the lifestyle that liquor brings. That, along with my grandfather and two uncles being Baptist preachers, meant I grew up in a very strict home. As happens with a lot of kids who are raised in the “thou shalt nots,” as soon as I was responsible for my own life, I started to rebel.

Even though I was married, all my high school buddies were still around. Whether Jenia and I met up with friends on the weekend or I went out with the guys, I started drinking. Then, drugs came into the picture and I began to experiment. This direction was obviously not good, especially with a history of addiction in my family. Like Jesus's story of the prodigal, what starts out as just having fun and partying can quickly spin out of control and end in tragedy. Eventually, some of the guys I was hanging out with went to prison or died young.

There came a point where Jenia's raising in a well-respected family kicked in and she started to realize that what began as social drinking for us was turning into substance abuse for me. When I got drunk at home, my wife

drew the line. As she tried to talk some sense into me, I wasn't yet willing to grow up, so the stress continued mounting between us until we made the decision to separate.

Thank God, within about six weeks, I reached a crossroads and started realizing the damage I was doing and what I was losing. I had to face up to my addictive DNA and poor choices. Like the prodigal son, I finally came to my senses and knew I had to go back home to set things right. I believe this experience was exactly why I always found grace for Zach through the years when I saw my old life in his. And, of course, also with Crystal, Zach's wife; my daughter, Amy; and my son-in-law, Toby.

To fully commit to Jenia and I getting back together, I knew I had to separate myself from the constant temptations. I realized Jesus had to be at the center of my life and our marriage. I am grateful to God that, once I made that decision, I committed 100 percent and also that I hadn't become addicted to any substance. Jenia had been ready for a change, so we both surrendered our lives to Christ.

Following our new commitment, I discovered what became one of my favorite Bible stories. John 11:21–27 tells us about when Jesus arrived at Lazarus's tomb and the conversation He had with the dead man's sister Martha.

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”
Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”
Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

Like Jenia, me, and Martha in this story, we each have to decide if Jesus is who He says He is. There has to be a point where we each choose whether we will make that same personal confession, *"I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God."* There are times when a prodigal leaves behind a family of faith and strays from Christ. Then there are times when, even with a church background, we realize there was never a personal faith at all and the decision for Jesus has to be made for the first time.

We want you to be certain you've answered Jesus's question for yourself: *"Do you believe this?"* If you haven't or need more understanding, go to page 221 in the back of this book for an explanation of the gospel. If you have trusted Christ, then focus today on praying that whatever decision your prodigal needs to make regarding Jesus, God's Spirit will draw him or her to Himself.

Day 3

.....

Faith in the Fire, Joy in the Trials

• Music •

Listen to today's song:

“Old Church Choir”

• Jenia •

I was raised in Bono, Arkansas, with three brothers, the youngest being ten years older than me. By the time I started school, they had either joined the military or gotten married. Even though Steve said he felt like my family was better off financially than his, that was not my perspective at all. My parents were blue collar too. My father worked for my uncle at his car dealership in Jonesboro until it closed, then Dad purchased one of the three gas stations in town.

Mom worked in my school's cafeteria, eventually becoming the manager and head cook. Our family lived a simple life and our work ethic was always strong. But I will admit that with three older brothers, I was a bit spoiled.

Raised in a loving Christian home and going to the local Methodist church, I believed all the stories about Jesus but never really felt I "knew Him," like I heard others talk about. At around thirteen, feeling somewhat convicted after a sermon, I walked down the aisle. While I don't remember inviting Jesus into my life, they told me I was joining the church.

By the eighth grade, I was a cheerleader who set my sights on a tall, dark, and handsome ninth-grade basketball player named Steve Williams. We dated through high school and then, after graduation, he went off to junior college. I had no idea he had started drinking heavily and was also dabbling in drugs with his buddies. When I was eighteen, after I had been out of high school for a year and was working in a shoe store, we got married. Being honest, our first years together were not pretty, mainly because we started partying every weekend. I never acquired a taste for alcohol and couldn't understand drinking to the point of hanging your head over a toilet. But, being young and figuring this was just what I was supposed to do, I went along with it . . . for a while.

Early in our marriage, our lifestyle brought us to the point where we separated. After about six weeks apart while working to reconcile, we started noticing a big change in the lives of some of our friends who had come to Christ during the popular Jesus Revolution that was sweeping

the nation at that time. What we saw happening to them was what we knew we needed. A few of those friends had formed a band playing “Jesus music,” and when we went to hear them at Bono Baptist Church, Steve and I were ready. Together, we surrendered our lives to the Lord. (Yes, Christian music played a part in us, as Zach’s future parents, coming to Jesus.)

Hungry to learn the Bible, we wanted to be where other brothers and sisters were excited about what God was doing. In that search, we felt like He was calling us to Liberty Bible College in Pensacola, Florida. Moving was a huge step of faith for me because I had only lived in the same small town where I was born. But, in June of 1977, after selling our house in Arkansas, we loaded up a U-Haul and moved to an apartment there, trusting God to provide. About a month in, we gave a sacrificial offering at church for mission work. The next morning, a man knocked on our door and offered Steve a job in the drywall business—exactly what he had been doing at home. That season in Pensacola was one of the best of our lives as we were surrounded by a strong Christian community that became like family.

On June 27, 1978, Zach was born with a very healthy set of lungs. As he shares in his book, *Rescue Story*, we received a prophecy at our church about his life while Zach was being dedicated to the Lord as a baby. About a year later in 1979, after finding out we were expecting again with Amy and that my dad had been diagnosed with cancer, we decided to move back home to Bono. I was thankful that my father was able to get to know his grandkids before he passed away in 1981.

After a couple of years at the family service station, Steve began his drywall business and we were able to build a house near my mother. Because Steve was self-employed, I knew I needed to find a job with insurance, so fifteen years out of high school, I started college to become a nurse and graduated at the top of my class. For the next thirty-plus years, I worked in the nursing field, all the while being a busy wife and mom as the kids were involved in sports and other activities.

When Zach and Amy began to stray from the Lord as teenagers and young adults, Steve and I went through some of the darkest days of our lives. Many times, we picked ourselves up off the floor to press on and trust the Lord. Because we knew His Word is true, we believed His promises, like Paul told us in Romans 10:17:

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

The other crucial factor that got us through those prodigal years with our kids was choosing to allow the joy of the Lord to give us His strength and hope. Not happiness, but joy. Happiness depends on circumstances, while joy depends only on God being in our circumstances. In the first chapter of his book, James gave us the foundation for biblical joy:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let

perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

(James 1:2–5)

When we search for and learn God's promises throughout the Bible, we have to make the intentional choice to hold on to them by faith. His truth can then bring us joy in trials, help us persevere, and give us wisdom in the journey.

Day 4

.....

A Home for Your Heart

• Music •

Listen to today's song:

“Heart of God”

• Steve and Jenia •

Here's a big-picture question we want to invite you to thoughtfully answer, being honest with yourself and God. If there were any lyrics in today's song that connected with you, include those.

How do you view God? What is your
image or perception of Him?

.....

In today's world, a lot of people seem to have a negative view of God. It's also true that many appear to have no thought of Him at all. Often, at least part of the reason may have something to do with the person's raising by their earthly father (or his absence). Because as parents and children we are flawed and fallen humans, we tend to project the image of our dad onto God. But here's an important truth: Whether you had a great dad, never knew him, or saw him only every other weekend, no father on earth will ever match up to our heavenly Father. So, such a comparison, even in the best-case scenario, can never be accurate. In the Gospel of John alone, Jesus referred to God as Father over one hundred times. His emphasis lets us know that Jesus, as Son and Savior in the Trinity, wants us to understand the heart of our Creator.

For me (Jenia), I've never viewed God as distant and removed, like He's just sitting up there on His throne in heaven. With all His many names and qualities, I see Him *first* as my Father. As a little girl, I remember crawling up in my daddy's lap and how he would give me his undivided attention. My father would listen to me and was always willing to help. That definitely shaped my image of God, and it's still how I see Him today, even years after my earthly father has passed. Like in Zach's song featured

today, I see only God's love and open arms, coming from the heart of the original Father. *My Father.*

For me (Steve), even when I was living in disobedience and not headed in the right direction with my faith, I still never saw God as being “out to get me.” I've spoken to a lot of people over the years who see Him as angry and vengeful about their sin, but that's simply not true. The reason is because Jesus took “the wrath of God” (His holy response to sin) on Himself on the cross. Romans 5:9 states, “*Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!*” That's the heart of God and the heart of the gospel—the good news. No matter what your relationship with your dad was (or is), your heavenly Father knows what to do with every single problem and struggle in your life. He literally has *all* the answers. And we can find those in a relationship with Him through Jesus.

In John 14:2–10, Jesus told us about the Father, how His life is available to us, and how we can spend eternity with Him.

“My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If

you really know me, you will know my Father as well.

From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father

and that will be enough for us.”

Jesus answered: “. . . Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.”

Answer these questions for yourself:

- How closely do Jesus’s words about God as Father line up with the answer you wrote on the first page today?
- Which do you tend to trust more—Jesus’s explanation of God as Father or your own version?
- Do you believe that when you have “seen Jesus” (in the gospels), you have also “seen the Father”?

The most important decision you will ever make has very little to do with the relationship you had or have with your earthly father, whether awesome or awful. The crucial choice is your answer to the question, do you believe Jesus is the way to the Father, the doorway to the heart of God? If you do, you’re starting this devotional on the right foundation. If not, the great news is that today can be your day to “come to the Father” through the Son. Or at least start your journey toward Him. (Go to page 221 for more help.)

Day 5

.....

Carrying the One Back Home

• Music •

Listen to today's song:

“Lookin’ for You”

• Steve and Jenia •

After we fully surrendered our hearts to Jesus and committed our marriage to Him, we realized the Christian life isn't just a Sunday morning exercise, it's an all day, every day experience in an authentic relationship with the Father through Jesus. Church may be on Sunday morning, but communing with Jesus is 24/7. Christian community can occur anytime we are with brothers and sisters in the Lord. There are days and times of the week where we can meet

in a building, but our walk with Christ is a moment-by-moment, day-by-day lifestyle.

As Zach shared in detail in his book, *Rescue Story*, he spent many years running away from the life we had raised him to live, mired in alcohol, drugs, and the rock and roll lifestyle. On a European tour, while in a van going through Spain while his bandmates slept, God answered Zach's desperate prayer to show him He is real by letting him hear Big Daddy Weave's song "Redeemed" on the radio. That night started him down the road of coming home to the Father, which was also miraculously happening back home with Zach's wife, Crystal.

Zach's sister, Amy, went through her own prodigal journey before turning her life around and coming back to the Lord, along with her husband, Toby, one of Zach's high school buddies. So, in our family, we all know the prodigal story well, not just from the Bible but from firsthand experience. We all know exactly what life far away from God is like. But we also understand the reality of coming back home to the Father, experiencing forgiveness, mercy, and, by His grace, the life He offers us each day.

In Luke 15, before Jesus told the parable of the prodigal, He talked about lost sheep. He began this teaching because the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the religious leaders of the day, were condemning and accusing Him of welcoming sinners and eating with them. These men considered themselves to be above engaging and interacting with the people Jesus walked and talked with every day.

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

(vv. 3–7)

As a family, we came to see how being a lost sheep is about relation, not location. In fact, this past Sunday, ironically, a lot of church pews had lost sheep sitting in them—those whose hearts are far from the Lord, even though everyone would agree they were in the right location. That's not judgment toward anyone; it's simply the reality of living in a fallen world. It's about the spiritual, not the physical. It's about your heart, not your head. For those reasons, anyone can wander and lose their way.

Our response to life when we're in the valley of failure and disappointment can bring about a rebellion toward God and His ways that, before we know it, can cause us to be far from home. Like Hebrews 2:1 warns, "*We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.*" Yet no matter what causes us to become estranged from God, He goes out to find every sheep and bring them home. Whether someone has been running away from the Father for six weeks or ten years, the good news is as long as they are still breathing, there is

always hope and His love is always present. Jesus will leave the ninety-nine to go out, find the one, and bring him or her home. But we must remember that, because He is a loving God, He will not and does not force anyone to go with Him. The ones who are brought home are the ones who agree and allow Him to bring them home.

