HOPE lies ahead

Encouragement for Parents of Prodigals from a Family That's Been There

James Banks & Geoffrey Banks

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Our Daily Bread
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Hope Lies Ahead: Encouragement for Parents of Prodigals from a Family That's Been There

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Dedicated to all who have ever prayed for a prodigal—
and especially to those who prayed for our own.
James

Dedicated to those who are still battling in their
addiction and to their families who love them.
Geoff

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Introduction

The end of a matter is better than its beginning,
and patience is better than pride.
—Ecclesiastes 7:8

The fact that my son Geoff and I can write this book together is nothing less than a miracle. We've been on a long and difficult journey together, and it's only because of God's mercy and kindness that we are able to tell about it.

Imagine for a moment that you could sit down with the father in the parable of the prodigal son years after the son came home (Luke 15:11–32) and talk with him about all that had happened during that challenging time. What was he going through at home when his son was in the far country? How did he get through the day when someone he loved deeply was in such a bad way? What was it that made him run to his son when the young man

was still "a long way off" (Luke 15:20), instead of turning his back and disowning him? Then imagine that while you're having that conversation his son is also in the room, filling in the details from his own perspective. His son isn't the prodigal he once was, but he knows how prodigals think. He's been there. He's learned from his mistakes (the hard way). Both his glance and his words are direct.

That conversation is what you have in this book. In each chapter, I will begin with my perspective, and Geoff will follow up with his. Ours is a story about much more than addiction. It is about sins and mistakes we both made and the love that met us nonetheless. It is about the power of prayer (a lot of prayer!) and forgiveness and learning how to cling to God in the dark. It's also about the new beginnings He alone can give.

Just like in the parable of the prodigal, there's celebration in this book. My son "was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:24 NASB), so you'll find some joy in these pages and also some shouts and sighs of relief. There might even be dancing. But just remember this: when dads dance, even though it may be old school and out of fashion, it's still from the heart.

We would like to ask you just one favor as you read this book. Please don't be "an older brother." You know the guy. "The older brother became angry and refused to go in" to the party (Luke 15:28). He had his reasons. He knew what his younger brother had done, and he held it against him. Because we have tried to be as open and honest as possible, there will be places where it would be easy to judge us. But please read our story gently. Part of our motivation in sharing our past—faults and all—is that we want to encourage others to take the same risk. Our churches need to be places where people can be honest about their struggles, so we can pray for each other and love each other into the help that God alone can give.

It's all about getting to Jesus. Just think about some of the people Jesus hung out with. Do you remember what the uptight

religious folks said about Him in the very same chapter of Luke, right before He gave us the parable of the prodigal? "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Yes, He does, and that's something to celebrate!

In the end, the parable of the prodigal son isn't about an earthly father at all. It's about love incarnate who came to save us all. As I wrote in my book *Prayers for Prodigals*, "Jesus is God seeing us in the distance and looking on us with compassion. He is God running to us and throwing His arms around us. He is heaven's kiss welcoming the repenting sinner home."[1]

He is all of those things and more—infinitely more! It is our prayer (mine and Geoff's) that you will meet Him here. His fingerprints are traceable on every page of our story. "To him be the glory forever!" (Romans 11:36).

James Banks

1

Breath of Life

James

The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use for it.
Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

Geoff was almost born in the car.

It was a sunny summer morning, and I was scheduled to preach sixteen miles away at a church in Ojai, California. Cari's labor started early that morning, but after a quick checkup our doctor assured us that Cari and the baby were healthy, and there was enough time for me to make the trip. So she stayed at home and rested while her mother took care of her.

After the service I had the distinct feeling I shouldn't stick around to shake hands. I headed back (a little faster than I should have) over the winding mountain road between Ojai and Santa Paula with the top down on my 1964 Plymouth Valiant convertible. Yet when I arrived home, Cari insisted that we wait longer.

Cari wanted our son to be born as naturally as possible. She had taken great care of herself throughout both of her pregnancies, but our daughter (born eighteen months earlier) was delivered via C-section due to a frank breach presentation at birth. Our doctor informed us that Cari would likely be able to have a natural delivery this time, but because of the previous C-section it was considered a somewhat higher risk. Still, Cari's goal was to spend as little time at the hospital as possible.

Soon the contractions began coming so quickly that we knew we had to leave. On the quick road trip to the hospital, we drove past our friend Carol's house, the top still down on the car. She told us later, "I saw you guys and knew what was happening. I had to laugh. Cari, you looked fine. James, you were white as a sheet."

Eleven minutes after we arrived at the hospital, Geoffrey was born. There wasn't even time to put in an IV. Our doctor, who was also working the emergency room that day, met us at the door and led us to a birthing room. But as Geoff began to emerge, something unexpected occurred. The umbilical cord was caught around his neck, and his breathing was compromised. Dr. Tubbs examined the cord and moved his hands quickly in the air, calculating the direction the cord was wrapped and rehearsing his next move. Moments later he skillfully removed the loop.

Suddenly Geoffrey was there, with broad little shoulders and a head full of dark brown hair. But he had yet to draw breath, and his little face was darkening quickly. Dr. Tubbs checked his air passages while we waited. Seconds passed like hours.

Then it came—a hesitant sound crescendoing into a full-throated, deep-chested cry. Geoffrey took his first breath, and we breathed deeply and wept. Our hearts were full as we held our beautiful

boy in our arms and welcomed God's gift of life with wide-eyed wonder.

Like rapids on a river that come out in a calm place, the dramatic moments at Geoff's birth would be behind us for a time. Little did we know that those first rough water moments of waiting and worry were only a precursor of difficult moments to follow. Those would occur years later—but at that time we were happily anticipating every day to come. My close friend John visited us in the hospital room that afternoon. As he held Geoffrey in his arms, he looked at him thoughtfully and then looked at us: "Have you given this baby to God?" he asked. We bowed our heads together in that moment, praying that Geoffrey would one day know Jesus as his Savior and walk with God into a full and blessed life.

Geoffrey's childhood was blessed. His early years were idyllic. He was happy and loved—and lovable. He was surrounded by people who cared for him, and every physical and emotional need was met. His life was filled with fun and friends and sports and faith. We read to him daily, and he was there with us in church and Sunday school week after week, year after year.

Never in our worst nightmares would we have thought that this winsome, bright little guy would one day be a prodigal. Yet that is indeed what happened. When we think back over our son's life, we realize that one of the hardest things about being the parent of a prodigal is the nagging thought that I should have done something differently. Even though our children make their own choices—possibly choices that we ourselves never would have made at their age, still we wonder, *Couldn't I have changed the circumstances under which those choices happened?* We replay the past in our heads and look at that friend, or that school, or any other number of contributing factors and think, *If I had only known, we never would have gone there*.

But that's where the problem lies. Even though you do your best to be there for your child and to be attentive, there's so much that escapes us. There is a sense of guilt, as if we should have known.

Twenty-twenty hindsight glares at us judgmentally from our past, even though there was no way of knowing what would happen at the time. How could we know—how could we have control over every circumstance, every decision our children make? And how could we know that decisions that seemed good at the time would have such devastating consequences?

We can feel this even more deeply when we see families around us who seem to have it all together. Just as it's always easier to tell someone how they should raise their kids (parents of prodigals are sometimes the recipients of that kind of advice), it's also easy to slip into thinking that others' lives with their children are painless and trouble free. The child who is getting straight As and high honors doesn't struggle in the same way as the one who is getting drunk or high. But both may be just as far from God. Parents who have done what they can to lovingly share their faith at home will feel that weight.

Parents of prodigals often struggle in silence. It's easy to feel that when we come to church we can't share what is really going on at home, and it's not just because we're worried about what others will think. It's just that the problems are complicated, and they take time to share. And we may have brought our problems to God so many times that we feel prayed out and have run out of words. Still, God's Word affirms that He cares so deeply that He tracks every tear: "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle" (Psalm 56:8 NLT).

An old hymn affirms, "No one understands like Jesus." We see this clearly in an incident recounted by John when Jesus encounters a man who was blind from birth. His disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). That question hits too close to home for the parents of prodigals. If we're honest with ourselves, we see vestiges of our own depravity in our children and shake our heads at the mess. But Jesus wouldn't go there. "Neither . . ." he responded. "But this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (v. 3).

That's a great spiritual starting point for those who are wondering what to do next as they walk through prodigal years. Jesus doesn't look backward; he looks ahead. When it's easy to look for someone to blame, Jesus doesn't do it. And when he does talk about the past, there's nothing bitter about it. Just a reference to something that God can redeem.

Hope lies ahead. And that is because the Good Shepherd whose "goodness and love will follow" us "all the days" of our lives (Psalm 23:6) overtakes us in unexpected places. God's redeeming love is so indefatigable that He is able to take something the enemy has twisted and bend it back to a blessing. Roads that we wish we had never gone down can come out in places that are breathtakingly beautiful, precisely because of where we have been—and we could not have gotten there any other way.

"This happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." Little did we know—when our prayers seemed to go unanswered or when we sat in the courtroom and wept or when we visited rehab for the umpteenth time—that God would use Geoff's story to bring hope and encouragement to parents and prodigals all over the world.

We'll share our story here as candidly as we can—Geoff in his own words and I in mine. But the last word is God's. He brings light out of darkness and makes hope shine forth just when it seems like none can be found. "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Ephesians 3:20–21).

Geoff

Undermine their pompous authority, reject their moral standards, make anarchy and disorder your trademarks. Cause as much chaos and disruption as possible but don't let them take you alive.
Sid Vicious

I woke up cold, angry, and sick. It was about four in the morning, and I was lying on a hard, cement, jail-cell floor on an inch-thick mat. Because of rampant drug addiction in our area, the county lockup was overpopulated, and there were no bunks left to sleep on. Being a heroin addict, I couldn't go more than six hours without dosing or I would be horribly sick. It had been almost twenty-four. Every inch of my body was in pain, and my skin was crawling.

I couldn't think straight or even form coherent sentences, but one thing continually ran through my head: *How did I end up here? How did I end up like this?* When I started using drugs, I never even thought about where it would take me. I didn't want to be an addict. Nobody ever does. We just want to feel alive.

A week prior to waking up on that floor, I was desperate. I had a hefty heroin addiction, and I couldn't hold down a job longer than a week. This led to all sorts of nefarious methods of getting money: selling drugs, robbing people, or stealing from my family. I did whatever it took to feel okay. To feel normal. It never seemed as though I was doing something wrong; I thought I had to do these things to survive. That feeling is almost indescribable. It's an instinctual need deep down in your stomach that gnaws at your soul until you satisfy it.

Earlier that day, I had driven over to a friend's house, but I'm not sure what exactly was on my mind. If he was home, I was just going to hang out. But if he wasn't, I knew what I was there for. I knocked on the door to no avail and went around to the back to see if he was asleep on the couch. His sliding glass door was unlocked, so I let myself in. After walking around my friend's home and calling out for him, I realized no one was home.

A normal person would have left, but I wasn't that kind of person. I immediately began scanning the room for something of value—something that would help me feel normal. My eyes finally rested on a large rifle that was hanging on the wall of the hallway. Without thinking, I wrapped it in a blanket, left the house, and tossed it in the back of the car—already anticipating the drugs this would score me.

I didn't realize—or perhaps I didn't care—that stealing that gun would lead to my arrest and a nightmarish detox on the floor of an overpopulated jail. I thought it was a quick fix to all my problems.

When I look back at those years of my life, that seemed to be my mantra. I didn't realize I would end up in jail. I didn't realize I would be addicted. I didn't realize I would hurt my family. I didn't realize my friends would die. I didn't realize this wouldn't fulfill me. I didn't realize how lost I was.

In the beginning, my life didn't seem like it was careening toward addiction and crime. I had a storybook childhood, better than most of the kids around me. I grew up in an awesome neighborhood with lots of friends, and I made great grades. Doing school and making friends seemed easy to me. Teachers and parents alike told me how intelligent I was and how good looking I was, and they encouraged me with phrases such as "If you put your mind to it, you can do anything you want."

It's easy to look at an ideal situation like mine and wonder why I would do what I did—why I would take the gifts God gave me and exchange them for drugs and crime. How could I make such a decision? Did I want to hurt the people I loved, or did I not just care?

The truth is, I never wanted to hurt anyone or disappoint a soul, but somehow I did exactly that. Addicts desperately want to please people; they desperately try to make people happy. With misinformed intentions and a deceived mind, I quickly followed pleasure toward the grave.

Somewhere in my life I had become dependent on compliments. When I heard someone affirm me, it temporarily filled my massive need for acceptance—this God-given demand for love. Little did I know that no human love could ever satiate that need. As time went on, I tried time and time again to fill it. When I moved from grade school to middle school, my social importance moved from my family and teachers to my friends and peers. Instead of wanting to hear "You did a great job, son," I settled for "Dude, that was so cool!" I slowly got sucked into a bad crowd, and the downward spiral began.

In reality, we all have this same need for love, and we all spend time trying to fill it with deficient things. Some of us attempt with success or a relationship, while others try with drugs. There is a myriad of false satisfactions in the world, and often we don't understand when someone chases after an unfamiliar one. Moreover, we often don't see how we do the same thing in a different way—running from God in pursuit of ourselves. So we carry on looking at others, becoming frustrated and sometimes giving up. We don't realize that the battle is too difficult to tackle alone, for "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12 ESV).

It was a battle I was not prepared for, so it took me from the comfort of a loving Christian family to the unbearably uncomfortable floor of a county jail. I was one of the sick, the unbelieving, and the addicted that Jesus came to save. But I wanted no part of what He had to offer.

No prodigal is beyond the reach of God

Every inch of my body was in pain and my skin was crawling. I couldn't think straight or even form coherent sentences . . . How did I end up like this?

Geoff's situation seemed hopeless: a heroin addict going through a nightmarish detox on the floor of an overpopulated jail cell. His parents felt their son slipping away. They loved him so much and felt so powerless. And so they prayed—through the hurt, the questions, the frustrations. And through it all, God walked with them.

Hope Lies Ahead shares Geoff's prodigal journey and James's perspective as his father. Each man writes his own story and candidly addresses the spiritual and practical challenges families with prodigals face. As someone who loves a prodigal, you'll know you are not alone and that there is hope!

JAMES BANKS has been a pastor and church planter for more than thirty years. Through articles, devotionals, videos, podcasts, and books—including his best-selling *Prayers for Prodigals*—he encourages people to pray. He and his wife, Cari, live in Durham, North Carolina, and have two adult children. Learn more at JamesBanks.org.

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