

MICHAEL W. SMITH

with ROBERT NOLAND

THE WAY
OF THE
FATHER

LESSONS
FROM MY DAD,
TRUTHS ABOUT
GOD



EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

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To my father, Paul Smith

These pages are to honor the son, father, grandfather,
great-grandfather,
child of God, and Jesus-follower you were,
and how you always
led by example as a servant-leader
in everything you did.

To my Abba Father:

God is my strength, God is my song, and, yes!

God is my salvation.

This is the kind of God I have
and I'm telling the world!

This is the God of my father!

Exodus 15:2 MSG

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

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CONTENTS

Introduction – Dancing in the Aisle	
<i>The Father's Legacy</i>	1
Chapter One – That's My Son!	
<i>The Father's Heart</i>	5
Chapter Two – Curveballs and Swing Shifts	
<i>The Father's Excellence</i>	15
Chapter Three – The Marshall Plane Crash	
<i>The Father's Grace</i>	29
Chapter Four – Who's That Girl?	
<i>The Father's Faithfulness</i>	41
Chapter Five – Never Met a Stranger	
<i>The Father's Invitation</i>	53
Chapter Six – Loving on the Brokenhearted	
<i>The Father's Rescue</i>	63
Chapter Seven – A Profound Presence	
<i>The Father's Community</i>	73
Chapter Eight – Go Get 'Em!	
<i>The Father's Call</i>	91

EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

Chapter Nine – If There’s Any Good in Me	
<i>The Father’s Love</i>	103
Chapter Ten – Walking Down This Dusty Road	
<i>The Father’s Strength</i>	115
Chapter Eleven – Not an Event, but an Experience	
<i>The Father’s Righteousness</i>	127
Chapter Twelve – Choirs and Crooners	
<i>The Father’s Conversation</i>	141
Chapter Thirteen – Sugar Cookies and Wiffleball	
<i>The Father’s Inheritance</i>	155
Chapter Fourteen – I Release You	
<i>The Father’s Home</i>	167
Chapter Fifteen – You Are a Masterpiece	
<i>The Father’s Offer</i>	179
Acknowledgments	189
About the Authors	191

Introduction

Dancing in the Aisle

« The Father's Legacy »

My father was my hero. The kindest, gentlest man I have ever known. The person in my life who was always the most like Jesus to me and consistently reflected the qualities of my Abba Father.

Before anyone in the music industry had ever heard my name, back when I was in middle school playing in garage bands in our hometown of Kenova, West Virginia, my father was always my biggest fan.

Even though he is in Heaven now, my dad, Paul Smith, is still my hero.

My father spent forty-plus years as a blue-collar worker at the Ashland Oil Refinery in Catlettsburg, Kentucky. Making the ten-minute drive twice a day, he crossed over the border between West Virginia and

THE WAY OF THE FATHER
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

Kentucky going to and from work. Even if he was sick, injured, or exhausted, all those years he was at his station working the swing shift. His work ethic and commitment to his coworkers were only surpassed by his love for his God and our family.

The memories of Dad's life, his words, and his wisdom are with me constantly as I parent and grandparent today. Between my mom, my sister, Kim, and her family, and my wife, Debbie, and our five adult children and all the grandkids, we have four generations living near one another. I'm so grateful to be part of a long line of love and godly legacy through the grace and mercy of Jesus in our family.

In his later years, Dad was diagnosed with dementia. He struggled with the disease for five years until his passing. During his first year or so in the battle, he would come to my concerts, sing at the top of his lungs, and dance in the aisle. *Yes, literally dance in the aisle to my music.* When he heard his son's music, a childlike quality came out in him during the season between the disease setting in and before he was homebound. Dad would introduce himself to the people seated around him and then ask, "You know who that is up there?" as he would go on to make the connection for them.

DANCING IN THE AISLE
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Looking into the front rows from the stage, the beam from my dad's countenance always appeared much brighter than the spotlight on me.

My dad went home to be with the Lord in November 2015. I miss him terribly. Grief certainly has no time constraints. But on a daily basis throughout his life, he gave me a glimpse of what God is like. Of course, as with all mortals, he had his faults. Yet the truth for me is that I just didn't see very many of them. You might suspect as his son I would say that, but *anyone* who knew Paul Smith in any of his circles throughout his life would tell you the same thing.

Soon after Dad's transition to Heaven, I knew I wanted one day to share all that his life taught me through telling stories from our journey as father and son, how he inspired and encouraged me, and how every day he quietly shaped who I have become. But alongside talking about the ways of my earthly father, I also have to share how our Father in Heaven has profoundly guided and molded my life, as well as Dad's, all of our days.

Here in these pages, I want to let you in on some lessons I learned from my dad and how those connect

THE WAY OF THE FATHER
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

with truths I have come to believe about God, my Abba Father—principles and promises from the two most prominent and powerful influences in my life and ministry.

Chapter One

That's My Son!

❖ The Father's Heart ❖

When I was growing up in Kenova, West Virginia, Dad coached me in baseball. No matter how I played, he thought I was the greatest. Even though I wasn't. One year, my Little League team played sixteen games with fifteen losses. As our season began that year, Dad made our team a deal: when we would win a game, we would all go to Dairy Queen—his treat. Well, even after the game where we got beat 30–0 and we were all hanging our heads in Little League shame as if our eight-year-old worlds had come crashing down, my dad walked into the dugout and said, “Boys, we'll get 'em next time. Now, let's go to Dairy Queen!”

Suddenly, striking out and cowering all the way back to the dugout or watching the ball somehow pass

THE WAY OF THE FATHER
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

right over your glove to allow another home run was replaced by the sweet vision of a hot fudge sundae with the trademark curlicue top.

No matter the score or how poorly we played, my dad took us to Dairy Queen after *every* game. Often, because Kenova was such a small town, we would walk in the doors only to realize the team that just soundly beat us was already there, celebrating their domination on the diamond. We all knew what they were thinking and whispering to themselves: “What are you guys doing in here? We just annihilated you. Dairy Queen is reserved for winners!”

Those were the simple expressions of grace through demonstrations of kindness and generosity that my dad regularly did for others. They weren’t the exception but the rule for him. On that Little League team, he gave every one of us young boys a constant reflection of how much God loved us. Our team always received what Dad chose to give us, rather than the focus being solely on how well we had performed in any game. It was as if my dad said to us with few words and a heart of action, “You might not feel like you deserve to be here. Maybe others say you shouldn’t be here. But I’m the coach. I’m the father in charge. I

THAT'S MY SON!
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

say you can, so you will. It's about my provision, not your performance." This is reminiscent of the apostle Paul's words in Ephesians 2:8:

God saved you by his grace when you believed.
And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift
from God.

I played baseball with Dad as my coach until I was fifteen years old. That last year, for the first time in all my years of playing, I didn't make the all-star team. But by that point, I knew that music was the new connecting thread in the fabric of my life. So, my dad turned in his glove and became my unofficial, unpaid, but always fiercely loyal PR agent. And even before I ever came to Nashville, he would brag about me and tell everybody how great I was, constantly telling me, "You're the best, son." And I would respond, "Well, yeah, but you're my dad. You're *supposed* to say that."

On one of my trips to the Grammy Awards when I was nominated, I didn't win. Afterwards, I called Dad from Los Angeles and said, "Hey, I didn't win the Grammy, but I want you to be okay with it because I'm okay with it." Dead silence on the other end of the phone. I asked, "Dad? Are you there?" He said, "Yes."

THE WAY OF THE FATHER
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

Then I realized he was mad. Not at me but at every single voting member of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences that had decided to give the golden megaphone trophy to someone else. Finally, Dad responded with, “Man! What are those people smoking?!”

Together, Dad and Mom gained a reputation everywhere they went. They modeled the grace of God with a spiritual synergy only a lifelong couple who love Jesus can offer, but nothing in their lives caused that to come easily. Rather, it was by choice for them both.

When my mom was just eight years old, she and her three siblings were abandoned by my grandmother. My mother’s mother walked out of the house with her suitcase in hand and *never* came back. Mom could have been angry about that abandonment for the rest of her life, but she chose instead to let God parent her. She chose better over bitter. And her life constantly reflected that truth, the decision to allow her Heavenly Father to take that role for the rest of her life.

My grandfather died suddenly of a heart attack when my dad was just sixteen years old. Dad was an

THAT'S MY SON!
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

only child, having had a brother who was stillborn. They had a funeral and chose a burial plot for the newborn they were never able to know. Tragedy and grief had deeply affected their family, and then at such a young age, when a kid desperately needs a father, Dad was responsible for a widowed mom.

Individually and together, my parents chose to put their faith in their Father and allow His strength and grace to carry them on their journey, every day of their lives.

Over the years—long after Mom and Dad had moved near my sister and me and our families in Franklin, outside of Nashville, Tennessee—I've become savvy to someone stalking me as I go to the store to run errands. I can feel strangers staring at me down the aisle, and then when I go to another aisle, here they come. Next aisle, same thing. Like a game of tag or hide and seek in Whole Foods.

Finally, I just let the person catch up to me to say something like, "You're Michael W. Smith, right?" I smile and answer, "Yes. Nice to meet you." But often, the next thing that would come out of the person's mouth was, "Oh, we just loooooove your mom and dad." Those words have always brought a smile and

THE WAY OF THE FATHER
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

a deep sense of gratitude to me. Not an autograph or a quick selfie in the produce department, but rather, “We love your parents.” Amazing.

In our culture today, I am well aware that many people don’t have my testimony of strong, godly parents. There was not a great father who reflected the image of God. Not even a good father. For some, no father at all. But part of the great news of the gospel is that God was the first and the ultimate Father, so He can father *you*. In fact, He *wants* to father you. He *longs* to father you. At any age and any stage of life, He is there, ready. Regardless of the presence or absence of your dad or your mom, God can be a Father to you.

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

One day I was working on an album at my studio in Franklin. By that time, Dad was at the point of struggling daily with dementia. My mom called me frantically and said, “Son, your dad has fallen down, and I can’t help him up! He’s gone completely white, and I think we’re going to lose him! I’ve called 911. Please get here as soon as you can!”

THAT'S MY SON!
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

When I pulled up to their house, I saw a fire truck, an ambulance, and several other emergency vehicles, all out front with the lights flashing. I walked in to find Dad, just as Mom had described. I thought to myself, *This is it. He's gone. Dad's going to go to Heaven today.* Even though I knew he was ready and prepared, I wasn't. I just wasn't ready to let him go.

Finally, the paramedics got him onto the stretcher and wheeled him outside and into the ambulance. But then believing they didn't have time to get him to the hospital, they began to work on him right there in the back of the ambulance.

Now, my dad had all these personal sayings like, "What in the wide world of sports is going on here?" When he wanted everyone to be quiet and listen to him, he would say, "Hold the phone! Hold the phone!" While the paramedics were working to try to save Dad, I was standing and watching at the open back doors of the ambulance. All my parents' neighbors had come out and were standing around Mom and me. They all looked very concerned, and some were praying.

Within a few minutes, I saw Dad raise his head up just a bit. He slowly opened his eyes and saw me standing there. Suddenly, with increasing volume as

THE WAY OF THE FATHER
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

he gained strength, he called out his infamous phrase, “Hold the phone. Hold the phone! HOLD THE PHONE!” Shocked by his sudden revival and outbursts, the paramedics stopped their chest compressions and backed up.

My dad then announced to those first responders and every neighbor gathered around, “Y’all know who that is out there? That’s my son, Michael W. Smith!” I just smiled and thought to myself, *Oh Dad, you are just too much*. But his very first thought coming back into consciousness in this world was of me and his love for me as a father.

No matter who you are or your circumstances in life today, please know this—that very scene plays out in Heaven all the time as *your* Abba Father looks at you and says, “You know who that is right there? That’s my child. That’s my girl. That’s my boy.” His first thought is of you. And His love for you is that of a Father.

We can never step into our destiny until we know *who* we are. And who we are can only be determined by *Whose* we are. We can’t get to that place of intimacy in our hearts with God until we receive the grace with which, as your Father, He lets you step into the

THAT'S MY SON!
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

winner's circle even when you lose. Even when your record is sixteen tries with fifteen losses. The only way to live from a strong place of faith is by accepting that knowledge, belief, and truth for yourself.

Regardless of who you are or who your parents are or were, regardless of their presence or absence, how good or horrible they might have been, I want to encourage you to wake up in the morning, look in the mirror, and find the strength in your heart to tell yourself, "I know I'm not there yet, but I like who I'm becoming." Why? Because of what Paul stated in Romans 8:10–11:

And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

I believe that to be true of you and for you. Together, we can confess with confidence, "Father, I love what you're doing. I know I've got a long way to

THE WAY OF THE FATHER
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

go. I know I blew it yesterday. But today, I love who You are making and molding me to be, in *Your* image.”

Unfortunately, the words “God loves you” have become somewhat of a cliché in our Western culture. But here’s the other side of that thought that can change your life: you have to *let* God love you.

You have to receive His gift of grace into your life. Whatever your struggle, whatever your pain, whatever you have walked or crawled through, whatever you did to someone or someone did to you, God *can* father you. Just like my mom, just like my dad, let *Him* be your parent.

That has been my message since my dad went on to Heaven and as I have had the privilege of taking my music around the world. That is also my message in this book. I so want to deliver this simple truth that can set you free: God is a good, good Father. *Your* good, good Father.

And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. (Philippians 1:6)

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I want to express my love, deep gratitude,
and honor to my family:

My mom, Barbara

My wife, Debbie

My kids: Ryan, Whitney, Tyler, Anna, and Emily

My sister, Kim, and her family: David, Mary Claire,
Caroline, and Sarah Kate

All our grandkids!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael W. Smith, a multi-platinum recording artist, has won three GRAMMY Awards, forty-five Dove Awards, and an American Music Award, and has sold more than fifteen million albums. He has also given back to the global community, having raised funds to battle AIDS in Africa alongside U2's Bono; started Rocketown, a safe haven for young people in Tennessee to meet and find hope; and helped to improve more than 83,000 children's lives through Compassion International. With a career spanning more than four decades, Smith has acted in and scored multiple films and written fourteen books, including a children's book series. He lives with his wife, Debbie, in Franklin, Tennessee. They have five adult children and sixteen grandchildren.

Find out more about Michael at MichaelWSmith.com.



THE WAY OF THE FATHER
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

Robert Noland spent ten years as a touring musician, songwriter, and producer in Christian music and then twenty years running a para-church ministry where he first began writing Christian resources. Since 2014, he has become a best-selling author, writer, and creative consultant based outside of Franklin, Tennessee.

Find out more about Robert at RobertNoland.com.