

SAMPLER

Foreword by John Eldredge

BECOMING A KING

The Path to Restoring
the Heart of a Man

MORGAN SNYDER

PRAISE FOR *BECOMING A KING*

“I’m always reluctant to write blurbs for books, and I didn’t want to write an endorsement for *Becoming a King*—but then I read it. It’s not sanctimonious advice written by somebody who’s never had his knuckles bloody or his hands dirty or his heart broken; it’s the honest account of a man who’s been where every man needs to go sooner or later. I don’t like to sign my name to things that don’t matter. This matters.”

Randall Wallace, Oscar-nominated screenwriter, film producer, director, *Braveheart*, *We Were Soldiers*, *Heaven Is for Real*

“Morgan Snyder has taken the journey that he so compellingly invites other men to embark on in his beautifully written and wisdom-filled book. Courageously honest and true, *Becoming a King* is a worthy read that you will come back to time and time again and, as Morgan expresses so well, a noble calling to pursue. As a woman reading *Becoming a King*, I was inspired with how to better come alongside the men in my life, to lovingly encourage them in their lives’ ultimate calling.”

Stasi Eldredge, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Captivating*

“Morgan Snyder simply asks better questions. His pursuit of the root system of manhood, fatherhood, and royalty brings us within reach of deep truths that could help us outlast the modern brutal storm. This book is for the soul-hungry, sick-of-the-BS reader, which is why I love it. And Morgan picks a much better fight than you’d find in any ring in Vegas or any back-alley bar. His fight is for his own heart.”

Jared Anderson, singer and songwriter of *The Great I Am*

“Morgan walks us into the basement of our souls, clicks on the light, and begins turning over skeletons and lies. What’s at stake? You and me. But fear not. He’s been here before. The scars are proof. This is neither theory nor theological wrangling. It’s an excavation of the heart. A rescue mission to steal back the truth of us. This book may well shatter the paradigm you have of yourself—only to restore the one your Father has written on your heart. I love everything about this.”

Charles Martin, *New York Times* bestselling author

“I love this book. It engages the deep matters of the heart. It is a book for men, but be warned. It is as much a book for women to understand what it truly means to grow as a man and to love a woman. Morgan awakens in me the hunger to keep moving forward with hope. His call to kingship will unnerve your complacency while calling forth the best of your heart to take on what is truly yours and to throw down what is not. This is a life-shaping journey into the heart of the Father.”

Dan B. Allender, PhD, author of *Healing the Wounded Heart*;
professor of counseling psychology, The Seattle School of Theology
and Psychology; and counselor and founder, The Allender Center

“*Becoming a King* is a rare and essential invitation to living true and becoming a man God can entrust with more. Though Morgan is younger than me, words could never describe how I’ve been mentored by him for more than a decade. He’s one I’d take a bullet for. What I’ve gained from this book is priceless and has already impacted me and generations to come. Every man, and every woman who loves him, needs this message.”

Rick Hinnant, *American Ninja Warrior* competitor and cofounder/
co-owner of Grace & Lace (as seen on *Shark Tank*)

“For the rare few willing to enter into the quiet places of the soul, *Becoming a King* will prove to be one of the most radical, reorienting, and encouraging books you will ever read.”

Zack Duhamel, Screen Actors Guild Award winner and actor,
Lone Survivor, *Dunkirk*, *Star Trek*, *Transformers*, and *The Matrix*

“I work with numerous men who are just now becoming kings and have been looking for a resource to use to come alongside them. I am profoundly grateful that Morgan Snyder, who truly knows this topic, has just handed me the tool I need!”

Carter Crenshaw, senior pastor, West End Community Church, Nashville

“If there is one book that you read this year on growing deeply as a man, this is it! I recommend not only Morgan’s book but Morgan himself. You can no longer say, ‘I don’t know where to begin.’ It begins with this book.”

Bill Lokey, chief clinical director, Onsite Workshops (2010–2019)

“What boy doesn’t love stories about kings and kingdoms and doesn’t love crowns and swords and armor? What grown man doesn’t still find himself drawn into their gallant stories? Maybe this says something profound about the way God made us as men as well as the desires he placed in our hearts. You are holding a map revealing the ancient path to the fulfillment of those desires. If you want to make that heroic journey, don’t put it down. Read it.”

Christopher West, ThD, president, Theology of the Body Institute, and author of *Our Bodies Tell God’s Story*

“*Becoming a King* is the map for living a wholehearted life. Morgan is a cartographer, lovingly drawing in the contour lines of a healthy man’s soul grounded in a vibrant life with God. Become who you were intended to be and accept the adventurous and gracious wisdom reclaimed from God’s intimate invitation to find and walk the ancient path of freedom.”

Aaron McHugh, author of *Fire Your Boss*

“What Morgan has done to curate and distill the message of *Becoming a King* over the past few decades is honestly something I respect more than almost any other journey I’ve been honored to witness over my lifetime.”

Chad Turner, chief financial officer, S&P 500 company

“I have waited a decade for Morgan Snyder’s first book. This man is a true warrior of the Light, and these pages teem with the wisdom that can come only from fighting on the front line, conveyed with honesty, seasoned with humility, and refined by deep reflection. His work will inspire this generation and undergird the next.”

Mike Carson, founding partner, Aberkyn, and partner, McKinsey & Company

“No one has challenged me to become the man I was created to be, and shown me the path to getting there, more than Morgan has over the past several years. It’s exciting that that path is now in print. I can’t wait to get this book into the hands of all the men I know and the women who love them.”

Greg Lindsey, lead pastor, Discovery Church Colorado, Colorado Springs

“I would not be the husband, father, business owner, and friend I am today without the message in this book.”

Zach Thomas, franchise owner, Chick-fil-A, author of *Leader Farming*

BECOMING A KING

The Path to Restoring
the Heart of a Man

MORGAN SNYDER



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To Cherie,

My bride, my chief editor, the champion of my heart and my truest companion. Your patience with me in my slow and bumpy process of becoming more of the man I was made to be has been a source of love and a window into God's heart beyond telling. You saw what I could not see. And you never gave up. Our deep yes to God twenty years ago was true to be sure. Yet to share two decades of responding to God's pursuit of our hearts and authoring of our story, together, has become the greatest treasure of my life. I love you with my whole heart.

*Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.*

—Jeremiah 6:16

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FOREWORD

Many years ago Morgan and I found ourselves deep in the Yukon wilderness, fulfilling a lifelong dream to bowhunt for moose. We had to overcome a wild set of challenges to even get there.

After driving down the Alaska Highway from Whitehorse, following the overflowing banks of the Yukon River, we flew by floatplane into remote wilderness with our guide, whom we nicknamed Muskrat (he wore a cap made of muskrat pelts he'd trapped himself). Then came a six-hour trek in an Argo (an eight-wheeled amphibious vehicle) deeper into moose country, chainsawing our way through tangled forest, paddling through swamps. Hours of grueling labor passed slowly. We were less than a mile from our camp when we hit a branch of the mighty Jennings River that we simply could not cross; the current was too strong.

It was getting late, we were exhausted, and we sat there assessing the gravity of the situation.

“One of you needs to put on some waders,” Muskrat said, “and take that winch cable across. Wrap it around some willows. If we try this without it, we’ll be swept to hell and gone.” I wanted to discuss more reasonable options, but Snyder was already pulling on the waders. I walked to the river’s edge and dipped a hand in the glacial waters; it was numb before I could pull it out. I wanted to say, “No—I’ll do it,” but I hesitated just long enough to make sure Morgan was already suited up.

That's the kind of guy he is: willing to go for it. Willing to take one for the team.

And because of that, we made it to our camp and spent one of the most magical weeks in the wilderness either of us will ever have.

I tell you this story for two reasons: because Morgan never will, and because you need to know what kind of man is offering you counsel in this book.

The plague on the church today is that too many leaders are teaching about too many things they have never really lived. It's all hip theory and sexy ideas that haven't been tested in real life, and it does a lot of harm. We need wisdom. We need guidance. We need to hear from men who have actually walked the "ancient paths." As you've noticed, there aren't too many around.

Now let me quickly add—Morgan lives in a typical suburban neighborhood with a wife and two kids and has a nine-to-five job and trash that needs to be taken to the curb every Tuesday morning. They own a minivan. It's important to reveal this stuff, too, because we need counsel and wisdom that can be lived out in ordinary life. As much as we'd all love to quit our jobs and go find adventure on the high seas, we've got our actual lives in front of us, and it's right here that we navigate the pressures, challenges, heartbreaks, and chaos of this world. It can be done. With joy, even.

The treasures in this book weave together into a map of the masculine journey, a guide into wholehearted maturity. It is a joy-filled process—liberating, strengthening—and the results are the kind of men God loves to bless; the kind of men he is earnestly looking for.

I've known Morgan for more than twenty years; we've seen a lot of wild stuff together: missions to places like Africa and Australia, hundreds of counseling sessions with men in some pretty dark places. I can assure you he has lived all of this deeply, with love and perseverance, before he took it in hand to write this book and offer what he's learned to you. In fact, it took him years to write it because he didn't want to rush.

That's the best endorsement I can give.

This journey will be well worth your time.

John Eldredge

Colorado, 2020

UNCOVERING THE ANCIENT PATH TO BECOMING

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
for I had wandered off from the straight path.

How hard it is to tell what it was like,
this wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn
(the thought of it brings back all my old fears),
a bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer.

But if I would show the good that came of it
I must talk about things other than the good.

—Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1 (c. 1308)

More than a decade ago, I found these words painfully true. In a personal wilderness, I awoke—lost, alone, disoriented, and very afraid. In a bitter place.

I had a beautiful wife, two healthy and happy kids, meaningful work, and the beginning of a little nest egg for the future. What more could a man ask for?

But when I was finally honest with myself, the steady waves of discouragement and anxiety were undeniable. Looking at my life as an iceberg, the 10 percent above the waterline looked impressive. But the 90 percent below told another story: I was not well; I was submerged in pain and confusion.

While I had already committed the decade of my twenties to focusing on becoming a more mature and wholehearted man, as I rounded the bend into the thirties, my inner life was not what I'd envisioned. Perhaps better said, *I* had not become *who* I'd envisioned. At least at most junctures, I'd made what I thought were good, honorable decisions to get where I was. But where I was wasn't good, at least not on the inside.

And so, as every good story goes, I left the comfortable and set my soul on a quest. In time I became aware that God had already set my rescue in motion, as I began to discover answers to my questions in the least likely places.

Where Are You?

Looking back, I wonder now if God's pursuit of me was that different from his engagement with Adam. You may remember the story: Adam and Eve had just eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, choosing to break trust with the One whose image they bore. Throwing off Love's authority and allowing the lines between good and evil to be blurred, they chose to call into question the goodness of God's heart.

Then the story takes a remarkable turn of kindness. Instead of withdrawal and attack, God offered relationship and pursuit. Love came *looking* for Adam and Eve, reaching out. Moving toward Adam in strength and engagement, the Hebrew Scriptures record, God offered this intimate and profound question: "Adam, where are you?"

This was not a question to collect data. God knew *where* Adam was. It was a question to pursue and connect soul to soul. And it might be one of the most important questions we ever ask ourselves. What's more, it might be the question God is curious about in this moment.

Where are you?

It was surely the question with which my heavenly Father pursued me in that bitter place a decade ago, and it's the question he continues to ask me today. To experience the depths of his intentions, we must pause to hear our own name beckoned by the heart of God.

Where are you?

The journey to becoming the kind of wholehearted man to whom God can gladly entrust the care of his kingdom will require courage, vulnerability, and beyond all, love. To open your masculine heart to receive a love that is being made available more deeply than you might even imagine. In order to do that, you must choose whether to risk being honestly vulnerable about where you are in your story. You are worth pausing—here in this moment—to consider how you are doing on the inside. Perhaps on a soul level there is disappointment or anger. Perhaps it is a deep sense of fatigue or of being overwhelmed. Perhaps a feeling of being behind. Whatever it is, let your soul speak for a moment. There are treasures waiting for you and deep hope infused in the pages ahead. The only way to receive all this is to start by being honest with yourself about the true condition of your heart, as a man.

Questions

I, too, chose to get really honest with myself. Over several weeks, my heart reached out in desperate pleas for God to make sense of my life. I poured out questions to him: *God, where are you in this? Where am I in this? How did I get here? Where do I go from here? Why is there such a disconnection between the goodness of my circumstances and the discontent within? What is this next decade supposed to be about? What are the pitfalls? What are the hopes? What's the one thing? Above all, how do I find the fullness of life I was made for and thirst after so desperately?*

Nothing. For weeks. Silence.

Then an impression from the Father started slowly coming to me: *Morgan, I am right here with you. I love your questions, and they will be your guides from here. To begin, I want to speak to your questions through the counsel of older, wise men. Go to the oldest men you know and respect, and ask them. Listen to me through their stories.*

God was inviting me to heal through relationships, through sitting at the feet of older, wiser men who had suffered and found life; my Father was

directing me to the ancient path of *becoming* and to the rare men who had chosen to walk along it.

Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.

—Jeremiah 6:16

And so it began.

The Ancient Path of Becoming

It began with a single letter. I found the oldest man I knew and respected, and I put pen to paper regarding the questions in my heart. In time I formed a list of all the older men who, in one way or another, had a place in my story. I sent letters to them, asking for their counsel. I asked those in faraway states or countries for a letter in return or a phone call. Responses from those in proximity came over time, in the form of conversations over a pint or with a cigar by a campfire. As the experiences grew, so did the list. I kept adding to the ranks more and more guides, men in front of me on the masculine journey. Over two years' time, the number grew to nearly seventy-five sages, with whom came a treasure chest of clues to an ancient path eager to be recovered. As I sat in their counsel with a stack of notes, I started to notice the themes of their responses, and with those in hand I began to add to their advice the counsel of the great heroes of our faith down through the ages. The Father's affection and assurance began to break through to my lost and weary soul.

Son, you're not behind. You are on time. And you're going to be okay.

The lives of these elders represented a variety of vocations, socioeconomic thresholds, faith practices, and journeys. Yet through the diverse experiences of these men, a common path emerged: each man had been entrusted with power and had to navigate a process of restoration to become the kind of man who

could handle it. There were consistent themes, spoken in many different terms but all with the same heartbeat. Men reclaiming their identity, their strength, their integrity, and their purpose through *becoming a student, becoming a son, and consenting to the slow and steady process of inner transformation*. As the years transpired, a map took shape around signposts rendered from the joy and suffering I witnessed in the lives of these men. After a decade, through the urging of trusted friends and growing out of my work rescuing and restoring the hearts of men, I began to realize this map was not for me alone. It was meant to be shared.

This book is my effort to share that map, to help others recover the narrow path to becoming a king.

And it is intended to reach the man, to find the few.

To share that outright is the best way I can think of to honor you. Books offering quick, easy steps to change your life will sell, but they aren't sufficient to bring long-term transformation. This book is for the few who want life and are willing to be transformed in the pursuit. It is for men who are thirsty for adventure, meaning, recovery of soul. It is for men who desire to engage this pursuit through a fellowship with a small, heroic tribe along the way. Men who have suffered enough to be open to the possibility that recovering a life in and with God and his kingdom is the context in which the masculine soul will flourish. It is for men who are willing to trust that the process of inner transformation leads to the kind of legacy we dream to leave behind as we one day depart from this world.

As you will see, there is little new in these pages but much newly recovered. My intent is to serve as a curator and distiller of an ancient path to becoming a king. Fueled by a relentless pursuit of becoming a wholehearted man, I've invested the better part of the last two decades seeking the heart of God and the nature of reality as shared by these modern-day fathers I have sought out and come to trust. As mentors, John Eldredge, author of *Wild at Heart*, and Dallas Willard, author of *The Divine Conspiracy*, were central to recovering a map to the restoration of the heart of a man. While there were many other modern-day fathers with whom I've had the privilege of cultivating personal relationships, there have been others among this fellowship of giants

who have recently crossed over from human history—men like A. W. Tozer, C. S. Lewis, and George MacDonald. Still others reach much further back into the story: the earliest disciples as well as more ancient forerunners of our faith such as Solomon, Isaiah, and Nehemiah—most of whom were, by all outward appearances, ordinary men whose noble hearts found life in and with an extraordinary God. Together, this collective has formed the basis for any wisdom saturating these pages.

This book is offered for those who choose to believe transformation of the masculine soul is possible and are willing to risk moving toward it. My intention is to build upon the faithful apprenticeship laid out before me and to share a map of the ancient path of becoming the kind of king to whom God greatly delights to entrust the care of his kingdom.

While it is my heartfelt intention for this book to deeply benefit women who desire to see the men in their lives restored, I wrote this book primarily for men. I hold fast to a facet of reality expressed in Genesis 1, that God authored gender and created humans as male and female in his own image. My experience is that recovering the fullness of what it means to bear the image of God *as a man* is central to the restoration of men and women.

After years of conversation with my wife and other women I deeply respect and admire, I'm convinced that men and women share many core desires and that these common desires are expressed in very personal ways, particular to the individual, to his or her calling, heart, preferences, and story. Being entrusted with a kingdom and lovingly reigning over it is one of our shared desires, as are the desires to explore, to discover, to create, and to be loved, to love, and to move ever closer to the Source of love. However, with humility, I'm choosing to honor the feminine soul and allow this book to focus on the masculine soul and the path to becoming a king.

This is a no-BS kind of message, and it requires soul-centered honesty, courage, and love. You'll find that to be my style. I will be myself with you, in the hope that you might find permission to become more of the unique man God created you to be.

Keep in mind, it is never too late. Be encouraged: this is a book for a man of any age who is willing to honestly consider what is lacking in his path to

becoming wholehearted. Clearly, there are ages in most men's lives at which a level of deep inner transformation is more readily achievable. Yet rather than focus on age, this book explores the epicenter of the process that the masculine soul goes through to grow, heal, and mature into full manhood.

When I started my journey down this path years ago, little did I know the accuracy of Louis L'Amour's words: "There will be a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning."¹

I invite you to a new beginning. To stand with me at the trailhead of a path into the wild. To risk taking one more step into the unknown. To trust that your suffering has not been wasted. To believe that you will find a good Father leading the way and celebrating your courage and vulnerability at every turn. May you find grounding in these truths as we plunge into the promise together.

You may be feeling weary, discouraged, defeated. You are not alone. There are other men who are holding on to hope that the abundant life is available. Men who know there is a life of deep meaning, adventure, beauty, courage, and intimate relationship, a life that is worth fighting for. There are men who want it and, perhaps like you, are growing in willingness to go for it. The offer is fullness of life for you and those you hold dear. It is available. It isn't cheap. It isn't easy. It isn't quick. But it's worth the cost.

Journey with me as we begin to make our way down the path laid out long before our days. It is a path that will remain long after we are gone. It is an ancient path we can recover even now. May we learn together how to become the kind of man—the kind of king—to whom God can entrust his kingdom.

To the few, the rare, and the brave:

Welcome.



BECOMING POWERFUL

The great problem of the earth and the great aim of the masculine journey boil down to this:
when can you trust a man with power?

—John Eldredge

Do you remember your first taste of power?

I can still hear the blades engaging on our 1976 Cub Cadet riding mower. I was eight years old, and after I rode on his lap a few times, my dad put me behind the wheel. I distinctly remember taking the throttle for the first time as my dad stepped aside and turned me loose. I was given rule and dominion over the half-acre lawn that hugged a strip of western Pennsylvania woods. And I loved it. For the first time, I felt the masculine surge of fierce mastery over a domain. Even now, several decades later, the smell of freshly cut grass takes my soul back to that moment of being entrusted with power.

What have you done with the desire to be powerful?

Here is the unapologetic premise of this book: the desire to be powerful—to lead, care for, and bring goodness to a man's realm—is central to the soul. The story line of what we do with power is the path to recovering the depth and breadth of what God meant when he made you and me. While it expresses

itself in infinite ways, this desire to be powerful is common to us all; it's in our design. Regardless of what we look like, where we come from, and what we do for work, all of us can identify with this desire uniquely expressed in our lives.

Think of what you long to have spoken about your life in your eulogy. What if, among stories of shared adventure and intimate relationships, the people closest to you were able to speak words like these:

He lived and led with wisdom, vulnerability, and courage.
He shaped the world for good and left a lasting legacy.
He loved well and loved deeply from a sincere heart.
And he finished strong.

The Imago Dei

The desire to be powerful transcends both social constructs and our boyhood dreams of becoming firefighters, policemen, NFL football players, Olympic athletes, fighter pilots, or soldiers. This longing transcends because it is the image of God in us.

We need to look no further than the opening chapter of Genesis for this reminder. God formed us from soil into his image, then breathed us to life in order that we might rule and reign under the authority of his goodness. To share valiantly and effectively in God's power was the first mission entrusted to humankind. With deep anticipation, God declared to Adam and Eve, "I want you to rule."

When we strip away the religious veil, this command is more rousing than we might first think; it is the invitation to become who we were *meant* to be. As bearers of God's image, we were meant to embody God's heart, character, and power, partnering with God to fulfill his purposes in our days. "Like a foreman runs a ranch or like a skipper runs his ship. Better still, like a king rules a kingdom, God appoints us as the governors of his domain."¹ A kingdom is, as Dallas Willard pointed out, simply the range of our effective will. It is where we have say, where our will is done. It is within the context of kingdom

language and kingdom thinking that we must reconsider God's design for effective power-sharing with created yet creative human beings.

God's desire to share his power with us is displayed across the narrative of Scripture. From God's convocation of Adam and Eve to his ultimate reinstatement of the human race at the restoration of all things, described at the end of the book of Revelation, God is inviting humanity to collaborate in his dominion.

Even at a midpoint in the biblical story, David marveled that God endowed humans with the capacity to wield power within a universe charged with grandeur and magnificence.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
 what is man that you are mindful of him,
 and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
 and crowned him with glory and honor.
 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
 you have put all things under his feet,
 all sheep and oxen,
 and also the beasts of the field,
 the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
 whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

—Psalm 8:3–8 ESV

Yet what do we do with the dissonance between the wonder of the invitation and the poor way we've fulfilled it? A glance at current events and an honest look in the mirror both reveal that something has misfired. Yes, there are men among us who valiantly bear the image of God. And there are no doubt also moments where we find ourselves living strong and true. Yet by no means is pervasive and integrated masculine goodness the major theme of our day.

For me, as for many, Dallas Willard served as one of the central modern-day fathers of the faith. For several decades he mentored men and women in kingdom living as a teacher, philosopher, and author. Dallas captured the deep dilemma of masculine power with these words: “The primary work of God is finding men to whom he can entrust his power. And the story of most men is being entrusted with power and it bringing harm to themselves and those under their care.”²

Willard suggested that throughout the narrative of Scripture and through the entire record of human history, again and again we observe this same pattern of men being entrusted with power intended for the good of others. And often that power is used for self-promotion or personal gain and in the end does not bring the greater good for which it was intended, neither to the man nor to the people and kingdom entrusted to his care.

Let that sink in. The power entrusted to most men often brings harm. Think of the stories that have come out in recent years.

Bill Cosby was a hero for a generation, an iconic family man. Yet at least fifty women have come forward accusing him of sexual assault. The harm he caused is incalculable; the fissure between his on-screen life and his private inner life has cost him—and many others—nearly everything.

Lance Armstrong. Seven-time Tour de France champion. Cancer survivor. Founder of the Livestrong Foundation, which has given hope to millions. Yet he chose to lie to the world—even to his own kids—about his reliance on performance-enhancing drugs to make every Tour championship title possible.³ His extensive drug use is one of the greatest scandals in professional sports history. Having seven world titles revoked was only the beginning of the unraveling of his wide influence.

No coach racked up more wins in the history of college football than Penn State’s Joe Paterno. More bowl victories than any coach in history. In his own words, “I don’t fish. I don’t golf. I don’t cut the lawn. . . . Football is my life.”⁴ And it was true. Enough for him to overlook the conduct of his long-standing assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky, who was convicted of fifty-two counts of child molestation. At the height of his professional achievements, Joe was fired by the board of trustees and died within a month.

Disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was indicted on several predatory sexual assault charges and has been accused of sexual misconduct by more than forty women. What has come to light—from Hollywood to corporate America to politics—is systemic abuse of power through sexual harassment, misconduct, and abuse in every arena of our society. More than fifty other high-profile men were called out in 2018 alone.

Organized religion has not escaped these tragic stories. The Catholic Church faces perhaps its greatest crisis in modern times with pervasive and systemic sexual abuse surfacing around the globe. A grand jury issued an 884-page report identifying more than one thousand child victims of sexual abuse by three hundred priests in Pennsylvania dioceses alone. The now-disgraced founding pastor and forty-year leader of Willow Creek Community Church was ushered into “early retirement” by confirmed cases of power abuse and misconduct. The *Houston Chronicle* published an article detailing 220 Southern Baptist church leaders accused of sexual misconduct who have been convicted or have taken a plea deal in cases involving more than seven hundred victims.

Nearly any search of the news can yield a fresh batch of dethroned monarchs, religious or secular. Men entrusted with power but who, having unaddressed and unattended rifts in their masculine soul, have brought harm to women and men and children under their care.

Fallen kings and fallen kingdoms.⁵

Scripture is replete with similar stories. Remember the cowardice of Pontius Pilate when he refused to stand up to the crowd and save the life of Jesus? How about the impact of David’s power upon the lives of Uriah and Bathsheba? The Old Testament Pharaoh killed thousands of Hebrew boys, and the New Testament King Herod repeated this horror in his jealousy and fear of a rival king. Though the characters change, the story line remains the same: broken, unfinished, uninitiated men breaking the lives of others with their power.

Think of the men who have held positions of authority over you in your own story. When did they use their power to meet their own unharnessed need for validation rather than offer their strength in the service of love? Coaches, teachers, pastors, bosses working out their core desire to feel powerful at the

expense of those entrusted to their care. The list is long, and the damage is real. Kings of this world are notorious for using the talent of young men to serve their own needs to build their kingdom.

More sobering, when I survey my own domain and all that has been entrusted to my care, I see that my own mishandling of power has wounded those I love most. Though in ways I am growing and maturing in my capacity to love well, the harm I've caused others is undeniable and long-standing. I am not yet the man I was made to become. Both in acts of commission, where my power has hurt others, and in acts of omission, where I have failed to engage, to bring a genuine strength in love, I have brought harm. Even this morning I found myself needing to pause and invite my wife to sit face-to-face, heart-to-heart, so that I could take renewed responsibility for places where I have failed to bring into our story the strength and love she deserves.

And so we return to the question, when can you trust a man with power?

Initiation by Fire

“It felt as though I was on a huge roller coaster. It was all I could do to hold on.” I was sitting in a truck, deep in the high country of Colorado, with one of the guides from whom I had sought out wisdom. He was reflecting on his years as a young husband, with young kids, in a young and growing career. He named the universal shift that happens for every maturing man, where we begin to move from being the center of our story to coming to the sobering realization that life is not primarily about us.

In the masculine journey, our early years of manhood often begin as a season of exploration and discovery. In youthful exuberance, we tend to view the world with ourselves at its epicenter. Passing through this in time, every man is faced with this profound, essential transition. While it may not be easy to name, the shift is felt deeply in the masculine soul.

I am not the center of the story.

A significant portion of my life is behind me.

And for better and worse, my decisions have deep consequences in the lives of others.

Sure, we are important and affect the lives of others at every stage of development. But at some point in young to mid-adulthood, we find our lives bound with others in inextricable ways. This shift is often initiated by marriage, having kids, and taking on a full-time job or other major responsibilities.

Signing up for a joint checking account with my wife, Cherie, and eventually purchasing a home in both of our names was sobering. The implications of “till death do us part” became concrete, hitting me with the pressure and fear that ultimately I did not have what was needed to come through.

When we stepped into marriage, both Cherie and I were intent on seeking God’s heart, filled with a sense of promise and possibility. While many rocks lay strewn on the path in our first years, I remember the joy of lingering conversation and sharing what we were learning and what questions were emerging as we explored life, each other, God, and the world.

And then we became parents. We were delighted by God’s good provision and felt the joy of being entrusted with these little ones. Yet as quickly as they came, so did all margin depart. I remember Joshua crying and being unable to comfort him, the sleepless nights, the disorientation of being the first among our peers to become parents, and feeling painfully out of place between couples with older kids and our peers who were single or newlyweds.

My dreams and desires became very simple: a few hours’ sleep, a beer, a cup of coffee, or—someday—maybe even ten minutes of stillness. As margin evaporated, the negative impact of my style of relating with Cherie increased. I could see the check engine light on the dashboard of my soul illuminated, but our lives seemed to be functioning well enough, and as long as the car is still drivable, who has time or emotional space to check under the hood anyway? So we kept on driving our life and our marriage. (It’s amazing how at times we can pay more attention to our vehicles than to the state of our souls.)

Do you remember this transition from a season of exploration and discovery into the season of being consequential to other people? While it caught me off guard, there were a handful of moments in which it was crystal clear that

I'd been catapulted out of one season of life and had landed with bumps and bruises in another. And I, too, found myself on a huge roller coaster. And it was all I could do to hold on.

I started to notice certain things for the first time. Professional athletes were actually younger than I was. One day my head was strangely sore after a short adventure with some buddies under the hot summer sun. I soon realized I had badly sunburned my scalp. I had no idea I'd lost enough hair to warrant replacing styling gel with sunscreen from the kids' swim bag.

With this shift into a new season of heightened responsibility, the pressure builds quickly and steadily, and most men reach for security with a determination to start building. The standard blueprint for this reactive building process often has three components:

1. **Making a name for ourselves.** Whatever we can do, big or small, we establish ways to secure our identity by what we do so it isn't rooted in who we are.
2. **Making a little money.** We lock onto our own version of the modern dream. We take the bait of thinking that building a bank account will validate us as a man or give us more of the lasting rest or satisfaction that our heart seeks.
3. **Getting something going.** Whatever it may be, we start building. We build resumes, social media networks, churches, businesses. We start hustling. Whatever it may be, much of it fueled by the desire to feel alive. To feel the thrill of accomplishment, success, and to have something of which we can be proud.

Consider these three central motives for building. Look back at your life over the years. Notice how these motives have been expressed and how much of your time and energy has been invested in succeeding in these pursuits. If we slow down and observe our lives, we often will find that many of our activities are a reaction to mounting pressure and responsibility. In and of themselves, none of these things are inherently bad. It is the motives with which we pursue them that must be unearthed. Notice how often, even if we are physically

present with the people and things we attest to care most about, we find ourselves not soulfully present and engaged. Rather than bringing to our families playfulness and affection, we bring fatigue and frustration. Why is it we spend our best energy at work and show up at home with mere scraps? We determine to achieve something to call our own, to start that company, to conquer that initiative. Yet why is it we find ourselves scrambling to prove to a boss, to our spouse, or—even more—to our own souls that we have what it takes?

And the desire and vision we have for being powerful collides painfully with our inability to maintain integrity of soul under the weight of the demands. What if the desire deep within our souls, expressed in so many forms, to be powerful is whispering to us an ancient truth?

We are meant to be powerful.

And in order to become powerful, to become a wholehearted king, to become a man who can delight the heart of God through what he does with power bestowed, we must take a journey down a rarely traveled and adventurous path. We must risk believing that these desires placed within us were meant for good. They were set deep inside us by the Father heart of God. And in order to recover life, we must first venture far enough down this ancient path to recover the possibility and the promise of becoming a son.



BECOMING A SON

Since we are the sons of God, we must
become the sons of God.

—George MacDonald

It was a summer day in 2008 when I collapsed by the driver's side door of my old Ford Explorer, my body crumpling to the surface of an asphalt parking lot searing under the summer sun. I had just buckled our three-year-old son into his car seat on the opposite side of the truck after returning a tool to Home Depot for my dad. We were in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with my parents, having sought refuge in my childhood home from our quickly deteriorating life. Several states away, Cherie was in a treatment center for severe depression and anxiety, and my mother-in-law was caring for our one-year-old daughter.

More than seven years earlier, our marriage began with such promise. Cherie and I both engaged in profound conversions of faith during our college years, which transformed our views of sexuality and marriage. We set off on uncharted waters, choosing to invite God to be the centerpiece of our growing relationship and our future marriage and sexual intimacy. The first years were vibrant with hope. We were both fully immersed serving alongside John and

Stasi Eldredge to develop Wild at Heart*—a mission committed to rescuing and restoring the hearts of men and women around the globe. Yet after the birth of our second child, Cherie began to experience increasingly severe symptoms of anxiety and depression. Over the subsequent months, I did everything I knew to do—pray, seek a variety of professional help, call on every form of support from our faith community, change circumstances around her daily life to ease the demands. But nothing curtailed the riptide pulling her out to sea. Each day her symptoms heightened to the point that she was unable to perform even basic tasks like packing a suitcase. The severity of Cherie’s condition did not fully hit me until the late hours of a summer evening, when a dear friend and counselor gently directed me, “You need to remove all the knives from your home.”

Days later I was checking my bride into a sterile-looking treatment center. She’d expressed the desire to participate and had given her consent, but after she was admitted and I turned to leave, she balked. I will never forget how she desperately groped at my arms, begging me not to leave her. I looked her in the eye, whispered, “I love you,” and walked out the double doors of the admittance hallway. When I got to my truck, I curled up in a ball and wept. I was a broken man. There I sat, three miles away from where our first kiss took place on our wedding day. What was happening to my life? All of it—my kids, my marriage, even my work in rescuing the hearts of men—felt like sand running through my fingers.

Cherie’s mom graciously suggested I take a road trip to my parents’ house with our three-year-old son, Joshua, to provide him some summer joy. I believe it was also her kind way of communicating that I, too, was a mess and that, frankly, I was a hindrance at this point in my wife’s healing. You see, all the while, I’d been trying everything, desperately grasping to save my wife’s life. I was burning through every option I could come up with—making calls and decisions, spending money and time—all in a frantic effort to save her. I was exhausted, and our boat was sinking more quickly than I could bail water.

On a nondescript summer day, my shattered soul finally came to a breaking point under the weight of my world, which I had been trying to hold up for days . . . for decades. It was the most terrifying and holy moment of my life.

* Ransomed Heart Ministries was renamed Wild at Heart.

Only later did I understand that collapse to be a severe mercy and the inception of the next chapter in God's long-range rescue of my heart. Two years had passed since I began collecting and integrating the counsel of mentors, but it was through this season of suffering that what I was hearing from them became what I experienced to be true. Though at the time I had intellectual assent that the Father of Jesus was my heavenly Father, what I lacked was the experiential knowledge of this relationship. And deeper than the present chaos of my life, this lack of experiential knowledge of God as my loving and present Father and of myself as his beloved and secure son was my central misery and the source of my greatest pain.

The recovery of our identity as God's beloved son and our experience of God's lavish love through sonship is foundational for our transformation into the kind of man who has the inner wholeness to wield power well. To understand any man's story, we must learn the narrative of the loss of the father and set our intention to see how the Father is searching for each man no matter how he lost his way, in order to restore what has been lost, stolen, and surrendered in the place of sonship. And we must consider what it would look like to participate in the restoration of the lost treasure of sonship.

The Heroic Fellowship

As John Eldredge and Brent Curtis articulated in *The Sacred Romance*, in John 1 we find a secret to the fabric of all creation. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).¹ In the beginning, before all time, existed the eternal heroic fellowship of the Trinity. The person of the Father and the person of the Son and the person of the Spirit were joyously interacting and collaborating together—as Dallas Willard put it, "a community of unspeakably magnificent personal beings of boundless love, knowledge, and power."²

At the center of creation itself was loving relationship, particularly the relationship between a parent and a child, a Father and a Son. In the overflow of the generous love of the Trinity, human beings were created for adoption

into the family of the Trinity as beloved sons and daughters. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul put words to the wonder of God's pleasure in creating humans as the focus of his love.

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

—Ephesians 1:3–6 MSG

The joyous intention of God in human history is that Jesus might be the firstborn of many brothers and sisters (Rom. 8:29), brothers and sisters who have been called by name by the Father and who are being transformed into the likeness of the Son of man with ever-increasing glory by the generative power of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

We were made to participate in the life of God, in fellowship with the Father, Son, and Spirit, as dearly beloved sons.³

But there is another character in the story line of God's beloved creation, a character whose intention is to disintegrate all that is good and beautiful and true. Satan knows that if he can dislodge a man from the place of secure sonship, he can not only stunt the restoration of the image of God in the man but also indirectly wound the heart of the Father (Zech. 3:1–2; Rev. 12:10). Satan is cunning and calculating in his methods and brutal and savage in his intent (1 Peter 5:8). And the primary target of his assault is the sacred seat of sonship from which we were born and to which we are invited to return. We don't have to look far in this world to see the sustained assault against the intimacy and connection intended between fathers and sons. And we don't have to look far in our internal world to see the disintegration of sonship as well.

Years ago I came across a very revealing story recounted by Gordon Dalby. He told of a nun who worked in a men's prison. One year she brought some

Mother's Day cards to distribute to any prisoners who were interested in sending cards to their moms. Word spread, and requests for cards began pouring in. The demand was so great that she reached out to Hallmark to see if they'd be willing to donate extra boxes of cards. That first year the warden drew numbers from a lottery to determine which inmates would receive the limited number of Mother's Day cards. With Father's Day quickly approaching, the nun got to work securing sufficient boxes of Father's Day cards, and the warden announced a free giveaway to all who were interested in sending a Father's Day card.

Not a single prisoner asked for one.

What are we to make of this story? What has happened to the God-intended bond between fathers and their children?

- Of U.S. students in grades one through twelve, 17.7 million (39 percent) live in homes absent their biological fathers.⁴
- According to 72 percent of the U.S. population, fatherlessness is the most significant family or social problem facing America.⁵

While the condition of fatherlessness is where most men find their souls, this wasn't the reality in which Jesus lived.

I remember sitting with John Eldredge, several years into my faith journey, and seeing through him what would become the most compelling portrait of the gospel I'd ever encountered. Through John's teaching on masculinity, I saw for the first time how Jesus is the embodiment of both unfailing compassion and masculine courage. He is at once gentle of soul (Matt. 11:28–30) and as relentless as a Navy SEAL in his warrior heart (Ps. 24:7–10).

I was starting to see the emasculated Jesus I had been handed for so many years. Could it be possible that Jesus embodied all the essential qualities that make the heart of a man come alive? And could it be true that the restoration of our hearts, as men, has been made available to us? The next day I cleared my calendar, skipped school, and headed up to the snowy high country of the Colorado Rockies, armed only with my Bible. I hiked in and hunkered down on the shore of an alpine lake. There I sat, confessing to the Spirit that I needed fresh eyes, cleansed of the religious veil, so that I could see Jesus—not as I'd

been taught but as he truly is in heaven. I walked through his life as portrayed in the gospel of Mark, from beginning to end, dropping all my presuppositions as best I could. I took the stories and the man at face value. I immersed myself in the reality of his life. And I've never been the same.

Jesus lived as a son. In any and every moment, he modeled for us what it looks like to live as a son. What love looks like, in human form, played out in his relational integrity and wholeness of heart. In total dependency and union with his Father. When we look at the mission of Jesus through a religious veil and see him as simply a merciful means to eternal salvation, we miss sonship entirely. The place of sonship was the foundation of Jesus' life, and it both attracted his students and filled them with ache and longing.

"Teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Although these words lead us into what has become known as the Lord's Prayer, Jesus' teaching on the heart of prayer has been all but lost to us under the barrage of religiosity. But it begins this way: "Our Father." If we would pause, allow our hearts to enter the scene, and become a student of Jesus alongside his other disciples, we would encounter a son inextricably united with his Father. The Scriptures are filled with glimpse after glimpse of Jesus' union with his Abba.

"I and the Father are one."

—John 10:30

"Whatever the Father does the Son also does."

—John 5:19

"This is life; that you might know the Father."

—John 17:3⁶

The disciples were in awe. Jesus' life had a quality of eternity as he rested in the strength of his Father. His life flowed with ever-present anticipation and expectation of goodness now and goodness to come, knowing that he was the delight of his Father and that satisfying goodness was being prepared for him (Isa. 42:1).

It was this very life—this vibrant, intimate, and abundant life in and with the Father (John 7:38)—that his disciples wanted to know and experience for themselves. It was from this space that they turned to their teacher and said, “Jesus, teach us. We want what you have. We want to know this life.” Jesus consented, paused, and turned toward them, saying, “Father . . .”

He could have stopped there with this one word—*Father*—and it would have been sufficient. You see, the human soul is always searching for the Father.⁷ The reach for the accessible Father was the beginning and the end of Jesus’ prayer life. Better said, his whole life. Jesus revealed ultimate reality through these words: “I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father” (John 16:28).

Here is the central idea. Whatever else we observe about the life of Jesus, we know this to be true: at every moment, Jesus modeled what it looks like to live as God’s Son. It was the bedrock of his life that allowed him to become the cornerstone of restoration for all of mankind. It’s amazing to think that even Jesus needed to receive the validation of his Father before he launched into his life’s mission. I wonder what it was like for him to hear those words from his Father: “Son, you are the real deal. You have what it takes. I delight in you” (Matt. 3:17, my paraphrase). His Father’s constant validation was a holy reservoir from which Jesus drew strength for the rest of his days.

What might it be like, deep in our masculine soul, to live in an atmosphere of abundance? To live with an abiding expectation of goodness now and goodness around the corner? To know a profound sense of robust well-being, a sense of being provided for, protected, and fed? To experience a union with God that nothing could dissolve? What would it be like to be so restored as a son that we could become our true self? To become the kind of king, like Paul, who over time was able to live energetically rooted in God, even in the midst of hunger, shipwreck, and torture?

*Now that I have been so immersed in the true nature of God and his kingdom,
now that I have thoroughly put to death the self-sufficiency and self-preservation of the false self,*

*now that I have been resurrected and restored to my true self,
now that I have become in my essence what God meant when he meant man,
now that I have become uniquely who God meant, when he meant me,
now that I have trained and become practiced in living a life in experiential
union with God himself,
now that it is no longer the separate-I who lives but the very breath, strength,
and life of God-with-me who lives in me,
I am ready for anything, anywhere.*

Imagine what it would be like to receive that validation from the Father, to have that reservoir from which to drink daily. To be integrated in our masculine soul. To live in ever-increasing union with the Father.

We would become *unstoppable*. Pause for a moment and let that sink in. Truly.

I suggest that it is available. And I submit that this reunion with our Father is the primary work that God is up to in your life and mine.

What's Not Working?

It is a simple yet profound question. And I was blown away to see what surfaced when I finally gathered the courage to give this question serious consideration.

It wasn't until several years into being married, having young children, pursuing my vocation, and navigating ever-deeper waters of life that I began to be more honest with myself about unanswered questions in my soul. I noticed a growing impatience with struggles my wife was facing. When circumstances afforded a pause, I observed fear and doubt and pressure rising within me from the depths. *What's not working?* It was late on a Friday night after a rough week in my marriage and in my work that I found myself writing this question on a blank page in my journal. With a pen in one hand and a beer in the other, I was surprised to see an extensive list materialize.

I came face-to-face with all I was carrying and the terrible emotional weight of the idea that life was up to me in nearly every arena of my life. For perhaps the

first time I became honest about the negative impact I've had in my most precious relationships as I habitually moved against people, disengaging from honest, heart-to-heart relationships to control outcomes and avoid shame. I saw the constant reaching—for exercise, for beer, for food, for caffeine, for sex, for relief from an unnamed pain rather than for the restoration my soul longed to know.

It was hard to put a name to it, but I felt behind. This sense of being behind touched every category of my masculine report card. From fitness to finance, relationships to responsibilities. From my marriage to my general hopes for maturing. (A good friend confessed, as we discussed this dilemma, that he even felt behind in his yard work.) Try as I might, I simply couldn't escape this reality that permeated so many areas of my life. As I looked deeper, fear of failure seemed to be ever present, always with a sense of scarcity and a feeling that things were not going to work out, whatever those things might be.

In it all, I could tell that what wasn't working was my ability to be present. So often caught up in the regret of the past or the worries of the future, I had become what A. W. Tozer called a practical atheist: believing God exists in the past and in the future, but for all practical purposes, a genuine reality of and connecting with God doesn't exist. I was never at rest. Always focused on the next thing. Always moving, trying to make life happen. And it wasn't working.

If we would stop and allow enough pause for our soul to rise to the surface, giving the question of what's not working honest consideration, perhaps we would become more aware of our pain. Pain is a symptom of a deeper ache and longing in our soul. Peeling back the layers and getting to the deepest layer of all the "not working," we might arrive at the core dilemma of the masculine soul. It is something we must name as fatherlessness, the reality of not experiencing the abundant and generous life being made available to us as a son.

The only tragedy greater than the profoundly deep fatherlessness our soul experiences is that we have come to accept that sense of fatherlessness as normal.

It is critical to recover the reality that our masculine soul is eternal. It comes from the Father—from an atmosphere of perfect intimacy, love, and affection—and will one day return to the Father (John 16:28). This eternal reality is written on our hearts (Eccl. 3:11), and the ache and longing we all feel testifies to that from which we come and that which God is seeking to restore

as Father. Regardless of the quality of fathering you did or did not receive from an earthly father, we all carry the design, the fall, the assault against sonship, and the possibility of its restoration deep within our souls.

Remember with me for a moment the perfect intimacy that existed between Adam and God at the birth of mankind. Adam knew he was God's favorite son. He delighted in the goodness of God and brimmed with life and strength as he learned day by day how to rule, to take dominion over all that had been entrusted to his care. And then came a day—and in that day, a moment—when he was faced with a decision. Eve had taken life into her own hands. She had fallen, and now he had a choice. And in that moment, he chose Eve over God.

“Adam, where are you?” the Father called out. The perfect intimacy of a father and a son had been both surrendered and stolen. A father was looking for his lost son. Now, of course, as we touched on in the introduction, the Father knew where Adam was; he is all-knowing. But the question was an honoring one. It was Adam who was lost and now out of touch with where he was, or better said, *who* he was. Adam answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid” (Gen. 3:10).

Adam's story is every man's story. Somewhere in our stories, the intimacy between Father and son was severed. Sin created a break, and the accuser has had a field day ever since, setting out to prove that fear and shame are nonnegotiables. He has set out to destroy the image of sonship and our identity as God's favorite son. Every man knows fatherlessness at some level, and so we go it alone.

Atlas and the Condition of Fatherlessness

My dad grew up on the precarious edge of the lower working class. His father, a man who spent his childhood being passed between many foster homes, spent his adult years first as a self-proclaimed junkman, recycling salvaged metal, and later as a tile man.

Decades ago my dad recounted a story, the images of which have never left me. One of his childhood joys was collecting spare change in a large glass bottle. When my dad was eight, his father went broke—again—and was forced to declare

bankruptcy. One day my dad came home from school, and his parents asked for his change jar. They literally broke the bank and, with the sum of my dad's entire change collection, were able to buy three bus tickets to relocate from Pennsylvania to Florida in order to rebuild a life through a loose connection with a distant relative.

Looking back, I wonder if something very deep and traumatic transpired that day for my dad. What sort of message takes root in the soul of a boy enduring this sort of trauma? Left with no redemptive interpretation, the heart of the boy has little choice but to learn a fateful lesson, perhaps something like, *Now it is up to me*. And perhaps even deeper, *I am worthy of love when I provide financially for my family*.

With every wound comes a lie; with every lie, an agreement; and with every agreement, a vow. Like most of us, my dad has worked ceaselessly for decades, motivated by a deep and steadfast love for his family but also no doubt by a wound—and through that wound a lie that suggests this is the only path for life and love.

After completing medical school, my dad married my mom, had four children, and became a successful surgeon, building a private practice through the hard work of going door to door with business cards in the steel factory communities of Pittsburgh. A town hero in many ways, he eventually traveled the country and parts of the world as one of the first physicians to teach laser surgery. In my childhood memories, he is a man of few words, but no one I have ever met worked harder to provide for his family. Simply put, he became my hero and was the strongest man in my world.

My best childhood memories are of the very rare summer evenings when my dad would finish surgery early enough to meet us at the local swimming pool right before closing. My dad was made for water: as a young boy, he dove for sand dollars to sell in local tourist shops; as a young teen, he cleaned pools to help support the family; as an older teen, he worked as a lifeguard on the beach. At the pool, he would take a swim with me holding fast to his strong shoulders. I remember watching him swim the length of the pool underwater in a single breath. I remember feeling like surely he could go for hours; I rested in the joy of this nearness and the strength I saw within him.

And vacations—as a kid, my dad had known “vacation” only as an out-of-reach ideal enjoyed by wealthy people who were different from him. As a father,

he worked seven days a week, but he made the sacrificial decision that in order to provide for us what he'd never had, he would fight for a seven-day vacation every year. As I look back, day six of vacation holds the very best memories of my entire childhood. Day seven started with the dreaded words "Party's over," as the stresses of the real world flooded back. I would watch it in my father's body language. Ah, but day six was the treasure of my boyhood. My dad was funny, free, playful, present. For eternal moments, we got the best of him, and I wanted for nothing.

Everything changed when my grandfather died. I was ten years old and attending my first funeral. I was sitting next to my dad when he began to weep. It was an awkward and fearful moment. I had never in my life seen my dad cry. It seemed that he didn't even know how to, as he did a weird sort of convulsing motion. I didn't know what to do. Out of instinct, I put my arm around him to comfort him for the first time. No words ever followed, and I had no outside source to interpret all that happened to my soul that day. While it took decades to put it into words, some deep fissure erupted in my masculine soul, and an agreement took root. *The strongest man in my world is not strong enough.* As I watched the strongest man in my world break, my anchor released, letting the current take my soul out to sea, and I responded with this unspoken vow: *I will become the strongest man in my world.* So began my story of fatherlessness.

Shortly after the funeral, I came across, for the first time, a picture of Atlas—the Greek mythological figure sentenced to hold the weight of the world. It answered in a broken way the deep masculine question in my soul—the central ache of a man to be enough. It was a perfectly cunning ploy of my Enemy. *I am a man now. I must be the strongest man in my world. If anything good is going to happen, I'm going to make it happen. Life is up to me. I'm on my own.*

While I could not have put those words to it at the time, three decades later my soul was able to paint a vivid picture of the crime scene. In some sad and broken way, it had felt good to have a mission. I couldn't know at the time it was simply my shattered soul making agreements with lies and making vows that would fuel my drivenness and push for success for decades to come.

In many ways, my story is every man's story. How about you? Where has the sense of fatherlessness taken root in your story? This is merely the first step of a thousand-mile journey of recovering a father-centered reality.

God, where do I feel behind in my life? What do I say to myself when something doesn't work out the way I want it to? What do I say when I fail? How do I feel in the presence of older men?

These questions might help you begin the excavation process. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you into the deeper places of your soul and story and, with curiosity and expectation, consider where these patterns of reacting to circumstances and feelings in particular situations began.

How Have You Learned the Father?

George MacDonald posed this question in his brilliant book *Unspoken Sermons*: “How have you learned the Father?”⁸

If we were to be honest and dive into our own inner world (and that of most men), we would discover that the story of fatherlessness is not the exception but the norm. If we were to pause, let that soak in, and be honest, it might help us unearth a core assumption obscured below the surface of our masculine heart. What comes to mind, emotionally and unedited, when you think of your full experience and observations of “father” in our culture? Look at the examples of many of the men you grew up around—coaches, teachers, fathers of friends, the men in your masculine heritage—in these specific places in your story. I’m asking you to pause and take stock honestly. Write down the first ten words.

For more than a decade, spanning five continents, I’ve asked thousands of men this question concerning what words come to our hearts when we hear “*father*.” The responses vary a bit, but the essence is startlingly consistent. Yes, there are some positive words, but the vast majority are words like these:

distant
unemotional
angry
absent
stressed
quiet

violent
abusive
fearful and worried
at work
independent
always on his phone
without friends
checked out
silent
self-sufficient

Here's why this is so significant to grasp: the primary place we establish our core beliefs about God as Father is how our father responded to us when we did something wrong. This is why MacDonald went on to say that it's better not to have known the Father than to have learned him wrong.¹⁰

The single greatest factor that will shape our freedom, our strength, and our ability to become a king is receiving a spirit of sonship and allowing our understanding of our true Father to be reformed in every facet where it was harmed, lost, or learned wrong.

Have you noticed that religious principles can take a man only so far? What are we to do with all our unanswered questions? No doubt, this book will answer a few, but in the process, it is intended to raise many more. Christianity is not merely a set of principles for living. It is an invitation into an interactive life and a kingdom, a reality by which we walk with a loving Father and are able to not only navigate life but also thrive as a son who is known, is being fought for, and is maturing and being made whole and holy through the loving pursuit of his Dad.

Surfacing Fatherlessness to Heal

This is why the Father relentlessly shines light on the condition of fatherlessness in each of our souls. I recently headed out of town to facilitate a retreat for a select group of leaders. Just as I was leaving cell reception, I received the call

from my wife. You know that call. “Something is wrong with the transmission in the minivan.” This was the critical moment. We all have knee-jerk reactions, unedited thoughts that rise up. As for me, these four habitual thoughts arose:

Why does this always happen?

I never should have left town.

We can't afford this.

I'm not sure what to do.

Have you noticed how quickly these sentences pop up in our mind if we are willing to listen? Agreements with lies bubbling up from the orphan within us? Do you see the layers of fatherlessness being expressed from deep in the soul? So many times when we experience hardship, we interpret it either as God holding out on us or as proof that we're on our own. What if the Father is pursuing us in our wounding? What if our Father is constantly bringing to light the fatherless places in us *in order to heal us*? In my story, this second great conversion of my life into sonship began with the Father surfacing the conditions of fatherlessness beyond what I thought I could bear.

Recovering Wholeness

I wasn't strong enough.

After my collapse, as I lay on the scorching asphalt outside the Home Depot, almost viewing myself as an outside observer, thoughts raced through my mind. Images of my wife in a hospital, my son in his car seat happily waiting for his dad, and me in this pile of utter disorientation and despair. And then I sensed a Presence. It was a Strength and a Presence I had never known. These words pierced my heart:

Son. Get up. We can do this together.

Somehow I found my way to my feet. Through what can only be described as supernatural intervention, something—*Someone*—came to my aid. I was miraculously able to wipe my tears, gain my composure, get in the truck, and

drive my son home. I managed to function through the day until I could get him bathed and ready for bed. We were snuggling together on twin mattresses pushed side by side on the floor of my childhood bedroom. While I was falling apart inside, my son was enjoying the trip of a lifetime, as he received the intimacy of shared adventure with his dad. In the quietness of the summer evening, Joshua leaned over, looked me in the eyes, nose to nose, and said, “Daddy, we are brothers.”

Something in me knew that while it was cute, it wasn’t technically true; I was his father, and he was my son. But immediately I felt the nudging of the Holy Spirit. *Stay with this. Don’t miss this.* I paused, lingered, and asked my son, “Joshua, how are we brothers?”

He responded rather matter-of-factly as a three-year-old can, “Daddy, God is my Father, and God is your Father, so that makes us brothers.”

I was speechless. Gentle tears bathed my face as my shattered, orphaned heart began to receive a revelation of God as Father, and to receive his affection and care, in a way I had never known. God spoke to me through my son, and my life would never be the same. Joshua was right.

I looked Joshua in the eye and said the most powerful words I’ve ever said. “Joshua, I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I’ve always tried to be the strongest man in your world. But you are right—we are brothers. And we need our Father more than anything else. Let’s pray and ask God to Father us.”

And so we began. “God, we are your sons. We ask you to Father us today.” It’s been more than a decade since that warm summer evening, and in all these years, we have not gone a day without asking God to be our Father.

The next several days, as Cherie continued in the treatment program, I was caught up in the early sacred experiences of becoming my Father’s son again. As Joshua and I moved through the geography of my youth, we felt the love of our Father as he poured out his affection, his provision, and his gifts for our hearts in response to our asking to come home as sons. We rode bikes as though we had found ourselves together in my childhood all over again. Down to the corner store to buy candy. Through the meandering path to the swimming pool. Joshua rode on my shoulders, just as I remembered riding on my dad’s. We explored the creek behind the house, catching crawfish and

salamanders. We played Cowboys and Indians and roasted marshmallows over moonlit campfires.

This was the very geography God was harnessing to heal the fatherless places in me and to begin initiating me in sonship. Act by act, moment by moment, my masculine soul began to heal. And as I healed, I loosened the Superman cape I hadn't even known I had been wearing around my neck for so many years. The Father began to show me that in an effort to be a good man, to be Atlas, I had taken on a whole host of identities in the hope of saving Cherie's life. In my unfathered places, I'd attempted to be not only her husband but also her father, her counselor, her girlfriend, and more. As the Father began to heal my heart, I realized I was simply unqualified for all of those roles except for husband. I began an entirely new level of repentance, as a son, truly entrusting my wife, for the first time, to the care of her Father.

Deep in my masculine soul, I began to embrace the revelation that ultimately I had no capacity to save my wife or my marriage. I began to acknowledge that in fundamental ways the fates of both were beyond my control. Instead a new question was being birthed.

What kind of man do I want to be?

I could feel this newfound strength rising up, a consecrated yes, not as an orphan but as a son: "I'm in. No matter the circumstance and no matter the outcome." It was suddenly clear that I could become the man I wanted to be in my marriage only by first becoming a son and receiving the provision, the protection, the care, and the abundance of a loving Father.

While the restoration of strength has taken time, almost overnight Cherie began to notice peace and joy returning as a direct result of my choosing to become a son. Some enormous pressure I'd unknowingly put on myself and on her began to lift. I had no idea that my commitment as Atlas to always come through was one of the central pressures that had her heart pinned down in despair. As an orphan, I had become the kind of person who was hurting the person I love most. Out of my newfound identity as a son, and out of my growing reservoir of settledness and strength, her heart experienced a newly recovered space to breathe and slowly begin to heal.

Being more than a decade removed from those days, I look back in awe at

how the heart and soul of my wife has become alive and free and beautiful in every way. She has become the greatest hero of my life. And it was all birthed in the harrowing and risky choice of us both entering into deeper relationships with the living God, me becoming a son and her becoming a daughter.

The journey of becoming a son began that day when my son spoke words of life into my soul, and it has continued every day since. What was then simply a risky ask to be fathered has turned into years of being grown, cared for, invested in, and strengthened by the Father through dozens and dozens of men. The journey of sonship is not a one-time event but an ongoing process, as Jesus modeled, of maturing in oneness.

When the son is ready, the Father appears.

The map of my soul is being redrawn. New habits are being formed that allow me to live more and more out of being a son of the greatest Father ever known. And it is that Father who makes himself available today, and every day, to each of us.

The hardest and gladdest thing in the world is to cry out, Father! from a full heart. The refusal to look up to God as our Father is the one central wrong in the whole human affair.¹⁰

The first doorway we must travel through on our path toward becoming a king is to choose sonship. It is a choice.

Are we willing to become our Father's sons again?

Will you open your heart to unlearn the Father as you have learned him and instead learn him as he truly is? The Father is pursuing you. He is opening up his heart and his kingdom and his treasures to you. He is asking, *Son, are you ready to become who you were born to be? We can finish this together.*

If we are ever to become the kind of men to whom God can entrust his kingdom, the journey must begin in the most unlikely of places. We must choose a spirit of sonship, taking the place set before us as the greatest gift of God's heart, receiving the identity against which every war has been waged by our Enemy, who knows who we are and fears who we could become.

In many ways, to consent to being a son is the hardest and the easiest of

the narrow gates through which we must enter. It is easy, because all it requires is a genuine turning of our souls to receive the lavish love of the Father. Yet it is the hardest, as it will require us to begin forsaking the many other places in which our wounded hearts have sought the independent and self-sufficient life for so many years. It will require relearning everything, throwing out our former map and receiving a new one that outlines a reality more dangerous and more joy-filled than we have ever dared to dream.

With these words of George MacDonald, I invite you to join me on this wildly adventurous narrow path: “Since we are the sons of God, we must become the sons of God.”¹¹

Father, I confess I am your son, and you are my Father. I ask you to Father me. By day and by decade. You have my yes.

If you are among the few who would consent to this narrow way and risk giving your soul over to this new reality, then to you I say wholeheartedly, “Welcome.” Let us receive this big idea and continue our quest to becoming a king. For you might not expect what’s around this next bend in the ancient path.



BECOMING TRUE

There are many people who think they want to be matadors, only to find themselves in the ring with 2,000 pounds of bull bearing down on them, and then discover that what they really wanted was to wear the tight pants and hear the crowd roar.

—Terry Pearce

It caught me completely by surprise. A friend sent me a photograph¹ of an extensive construction site in a densely populated city center flanked by towering structures. Enormous excavators appeared like larvae in the bowels of a compost heap, nearly engulfed by the chasm that would eventually contain the foundation of a new skyscraper. The hole for the foundation was deep, extending deeper than I ever would have envisioned for this sort of building. As I studied the photo, I could make out a host of men at the bottom of the chasm, doing the hard and steady work of removing debris and preparing the land. The Father was giving me an invitation and a metaphor. And I could feel the false man in me recoiling.

It wasn't until nearly a decade later that my experience was described by words I came across from Mike Mason: "A thirty-year-old man is like a

densely populated city; nothing new can be built . . . without something else being torn down.”² In the journey to recover the ancient path, we come to the sobering reality that we cannot build before we have properly excavated. To become a king, we must give our strength to the sacred work of excavating before we can participate with God in the process of building in his way and in his time.

While this ancient truth was knocking at my door, I had yet to become the kind of man who has ears to hear it or a heart to receive it. I was spending most of my energy tinkering with my outer world, trying to change other people so that I could feel better, trying to make life work. All the while, I had largely chosen to ignore my inner world—the world to which God most deeply wanted to draw my attention. The external world is easier to access, to measure, to evaluate. The inner world takes time, curiosity, and, above all, an honesty we often won’t consider employing until the pain is more than we can bear.

Pain

“I want to die.”

It just came out. I was sitting in the counselor’s office in the presence of a kind, older man—a man who, I felt, understood me more deeply than did anyone who had ever known me. “I want to die.” But I quickly realized that wasn’t quite true. There was something more true: “There is *a man in me* who wants to die.” Through this pain, I had finally come face-to-face with the false self in a life-and-death wrestling match.

The most dangerous dimension of the false self is that it often works for us, providing false nourishment, satiating the need for identity and validation apart from God. In my youth, I chased the feeling of power through relationships with women and through positions of leadership; these were my medications of choice. President of my class nearly every year and on to student body president in high school and even dorm president at my university. Wherever I went, I found myself in charge. To the outside world it may have looked like strength. In hindsight, as I look below the surface, I can see that it

was a young man unconsciously taking his question—the desperate need for masculine validation—to everyone but God.

It wasn't enough; it never is. And it was killing me.

Understanding People

If there is one central idea from which this entire conversation flows, it's this: our masculine heart, the truest us, created in the image of God, is always—at every moment—being expressed and operating through either the true self or the false self. It is critical to understand this idea, because it is the beginning of the lifetime process of becoming aware of which self is active, dismantling the false self, and restoring the true.

Anyone who spends time with me will quickly discover I am a very intense person. This intensity has been the fuel for some of my most courageous and admirable experiences, and it has gotten me into some of the deepest trouble of my life. For years, my intensity led me to personal exhaustion and, even worse, relational damage. I tried to repent of it. But try as I might, I could not. Through years of soul inquiry, I've come to understand that my intensity is a central way in which I bear the image of God. Part of God's nature is a deep intensity; we see it in Jesus as he flips the money changers' tables and moves toward the castoffs of society. It is a portion of himself he has deposited in me. And repenting of the image of God in us is a futile endeavor.

However, what has also become clear is that my intensity leads to both self-harm and harm of others when it is employed by the false self (the part of me that pursues a self-sufficient life that leads to death). In contrast, when it is expressed through the true self, in union with God, it leads to the kingdom coming in me and through me. Every moment, this God-given gift of intensity is being expressed through either the true self or the false self. Any strength expressed through the false self becomes a liability.

Some friends of mine and I founded a small brewery called Sons of Thunder, and we recently threw a Christmas party to introduce our latest brew, Wonderworker, a tribute to the true Saint Nicholas. I created artwork,

captured story, made guest lists, decorated, ordered T-shirts, arranged live music. Looking back, I see my intensity at play in the service of both the true self and the false self. In my true self, I was available to partner with God to bring joy and redemptive story to a group of friends. But in much of it, I operated out of my false self, pushing too hard, running over the ideas of others, and living under the chronic self-indictment of *Whatever I do, it's never enough*.

The more I become aware of how the image of God is being expressed in these two ways, the more I can address the false and operate as the unique man God meant when he meant me. Not only to decrease the harm that my intensity (in my false self) brings to myself and others but also to bring a measure of joy and strength (in my true self) to those I love.

What Were We Made For?

Two of our core needs are for loving relationship and meaningful work. In *Addiction and Grace*, Gerald May shared his observation from twenty years of counseling and walking with people. He suggested that every human's story comes into congruence around this central need: to love, to be loved, and to move ever closer to the Source of love.³

We are relational beings at our core. We were born out of the heroic fellowship and intimacy of the Trinity. Simply put, relationship is who and what we are. Love in relationship was meant to be the foundational energy and context of our beings. The bestowing of validation and identity from the heart of God to us is intended to be the headwaters of love flowing into our lives.

The early chapters of Genesis offer a glimpse into life and relationship as it was intended. Adam and Eve “were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen. 2:25). Exposed and vulnerable without shame. Free, alive, and relishing a union with each other and with God that knew no limits. Oh, friends, what it would be like to be that free. Yet, as in most great stories, that original design was shattered. Through both the grasping of Eve and the passivity of Adam, separation from the living God entered the world.

Moments before the fall of man, identity and validation were undisputable—seated in the Father’s love, in union with Jesus, and under the intensely adventurous and joy-filled leadership of the Holy Spirit. We were God’s favorite, and we *knew* it. Not a knowing like dates and facts for a history test but a *knowing* as a captain knows a ship on wild seas or a woman knows a man in unbridled and holy sexual intimacy. It is a knowing of the deepest sort. *Ginosko* knowing, as captured in the Greek—intimate, interactive heart knowledge.

Before the fall, Adam enjoyed and rested in love and validation. He had self-esteem and self-worth that sustained and strengthened him for the meaningful work the Father was training him to do. In union with God, he and Eve knew they were everything they needed to be to partner with God and contribute creatively to his creation. They had everything they needed to rule and subdue as well as cherish and steward creation. Adam knew, *I have what it takes*. Eve knew, *I am a life giver*. They were united as one with God; nothing was impossible.

After the fall, identity was called into question; Adam began an incessant search to answer the question, *Who am I?* Shame rolled in like the tide. Anxiety was born, and the reaching to fill the ache of the masculine soul apart from God began. It began as a reach for a fig leaf to cover all that was exposed and vulnerable. For the first time, man had no rest in knowing he was the beloved son, God’s favorite. “I am” was replaced with “I’m not,” and hiding was the only way to respond to the unnamed anxiety.



Through the fall, validation was called into question. Fear spread like a heavy fog. “I can” was replaced with “I can’t.” For the first time in human history, Adam doubted his strength. For the first time, Eve doubted her capacity to bring forth life and beauty. And thus began our desperate search for love in the form of validation and identity apart from God. Wholehearted authenticity, courage, love, vulnerability, intimacy—all evaporated. Shame grew. Anxiety filled the air. Hearts were unsettled. And both Adam and Eve turned to the false self to deliver them.

The False Self

Mostly what you meet when you meet a man is his false self—his version of Adam’s fig leaf—behind which he hides from fear and attempts to avoid anything that generates the feeling of dread and death. The false self can be understood as the sophisticated construct developed out of separation from God to avoid pain and shame and to provide identity, power, and meaning. It is a reaction to fear. Ultimately, the false self attempts to disengage from authentic and loving relationship with others, with self, and with God in order to self-protect. Our false self provides the illusion that we can make life work apart from God. It seeks an artificial peace and meaning by avoiding shame and fear, instead of a true peace and purpose through trust and love.

I want to unpack the false self more, because a deep and cultivated experiential knowing of both the true and false selves is essential in the journey of becoming a king.

The False Self Is Habitual

Much of the person we bring to any circumstance is a set of preprogrammed reactions. Most of what we do is not well thought through; it’s programmed and predictable. Ultimately, our capacity for habit is part of our God-given design. Thank God that every time I drive my car, I don’t have to consciously tell myself, *Right foot on the accelerator; hands at ten and two; check blind spots.* Our capacity for habit and unconscious action is part of God’s provision for us

so we can live creative and dynamic lives in a complex material world. The false self is our capacity for habit and unconscious thought, feeling, and action—gone wrong. Or better said, our self gone independent—free from a genuine, real-time connection with God. The false self is like a computer program coded by a broken world, our sin nature, and our Enemy. It persistently and habitually reacts to external stimuli in a way that may have nothing to do with God, even though our creedal statements profess belief.

“Morgan, I’d like to get a cat.”

“Morgan, I had some unbudgeted expenses this month I need to tell you about.”

My wife knows exactly what I’m going to say, right? We all have them—certain phrases, questions, and circumstances that cause our false self to go into habitual reaction mode. It’s the opposite of our souls being rooted in God and being informed not only by his counsel and direction but also by his life coursing through us to allow us to transcend our brokenness and rebellion.

For example, when my wife says, “Hey, Morgan, I’d like you to cancel your next adventure trip you have planned with your friends,” I can feel my body react as an expression of something being threatened deep within. Before thinking, before prayer, the false man within me has, out of habit, already rejected the comment and answered no, without exception. On the other hand, if my wife says, “Hey, there’s an opening on the calendar; why don’t you just take a day of solitude? Head out on a joyful adventure of your choice. Do what would be best for you,” I don’t have to think about it or pray about it; I have a reactive, predictable response. That is the habitual, programmed, reactionary false self. Its reference point is self, not God. Maybe I’m not supposed to go to the wilderness on this trip. Maybe we are supposed to host our extended family next month. Perhaps we are not. We were designed to thrive in an interactive, conversational relationship with God. To become the kind of man who can consent to God’s leadership and guidance in the everyday fabric of his life is one of the great indicators of becoming a king.

One of the saddest statements I ever hear about the human experience is when someone says of an older man, “Oh, he’s just set in his ways.” What this means is that he has perfected the self-life. He has cultivated an elaborate and sophisticated manner to make life work apart from God and to avoid pain; he has become static. It is what sets apart the elderly, someone who’s grown old in the maturing of his false self, from an elder, someone who has matured in his true self and its ever-growing union with God.

The False Self Is Self-Referencing and Self-Stabilizing

As Thomas Keating explained, the center of gravity of the false self is itself.⁴ The false self is like a bicycle wheel that’s balanced only when spinning. As soon as it slows, it becomes imbalanced until it falls down. In contrast, the center of gravity of the true self is God. It is therefore able to rest and doesn’t need a constant state of doing in order to be at peace. The false self can’t stop its active self-orienting and self-provisioning. When the motion stops, the false self will collapse. Thus the false self expends an incredible amount of energy to stay in constant motion rather than resting in the constancy of a dynamic, relational, loving God. The result is an exhaustion of soul that, if we are honest, we know far too well.

The Pursuit of the False Self Is Futile

The false self seeks preservation through means that simply can never deliver. In Western cultures, most guys can make life work well enough through a good bit of young adulthood that the false self continues to serve them. Yet the brilliance of God is that the false self becomes less and less capable of producing the life we seek.

The false self is a careful construct crafted largely to avoid shame and fear and make life work apart from God. As we are being formed, external problems often help reveal places within us that need to be tended to. The brilliance of God’s design for masculine initiation is that the more we truly want life as it was meant to be, the less efficient the false self becomes in producing what feels like life. As men, we become very sophisticated in faking it in most

relationships. But thankfully, as we grow and move deeper into relationships such as marriage, the false self begins to get exposed, because, as Mike Mason suggested, a wife is wonderfully “in the way, like a tree growing in the center of the living room.”⁵

Over time the man who wishes to truly become a more wholehearted king is invited by God to pass through an increasing death of the false self, only to find a greater life in the process. The false self can no longer produce the life it promised, and the man is left with two choices: to die or to be reborn. The choice of death takes many forms. Sometimes it is literally a suicide, but far more often it’s simply the death of quiet desperation or sanctified resignation.⁶ Many men will kill their hearts, get busy, and let their masculine souls go to sleep. They will keep going through the motions—paying bills, attending church, building careers, raising kids—all the while slowly deadening their hearts. While medicating for the pain, they lose touch with desire. And in losing touch with desire, they lose the very place where they can encounter and live in the lavish love of the Father.

Look around at the men in your world. It’s a pandemic, really: the anger boiling just under the surface; the addiction to some artificial life, in vicarious living through video games, fantasy football; the cynicism, the despair. Yet there *is* another way. Life gives way to death so that death can give way to a greater life. The story is written all throughout the teachings of Jesus. Remember, “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24). And this life that emerges through the process of passing through a death is the foundation of so many of the great stories intended to buoy our hearts and carry our hope.

We were meant to be reborn into a new life, a true life. The pain and loss of the false self and its death were meant to compel us to lean into the vibrant and accessible life of Jesus, the abundance of the Father’s heart, and the leadership of the Holy Spirit and, in doing so, become the man we were meant to be. We were intended for intimacy, relational integrity, and wholehearted courageousness—all of which are available only in and through the death of the false self and the restoration of the true self.

Repentance and Recovery

If Jesus' mission was to once again make the kingdom of God available to all of creation through the deliverance and restoration of the human race, how do we partner with Jesus to receive his deliverance and recover the *imago Dei* (image of God) in us? Jesus proclaimed repentance as the first step to entering the kingdom of heaven: "Repent!" "By God's action and initiative, the kingdom of heaven is now open to you again!" "The kingdom of heaven is right here." "Repent and enter the kingdom of God."⁷

What does repentance look like when it comes to the false self and our need for identity and validation? Dallas Willard defines repentance as "rethinking our thinking" and "reconsidering our considerations."⁸ Under the action and direction of God, we reconsider our preprogrammed reactions, holding each response accountable to a God-centered reality. We put to death the false self and choose to be born again.

Impact

Cherie and I were at odds again. We were noticing some of the unnamed patterns of relating that had operated during all our years together and set us on a course of destruction. Small things would trouble us—little foxes, the Bible calls them (Song 2:15). In my anger over a frustrating day, I would go to silence. Or in my deep struggle with financial fear, I would make aggressive moves toward control over our budget. We observed that even small hurts had become patterns of habitual harm inflicted upon each other. It was time for help.

I was sitting with a counselor (again), sharing the resentment building between Cherie and me, when he suggested, "How we relate with other people, particularly those closest to us, is one of the greatest indicators of our spiritual maturity." It isn't our doctrine or our service, our ability to come through or to provide. Nothing speaks more deeply than the quality of our relating with God and with others.

What is my impact on Cherie and the other people closest to me? How do I hope she experiences me? What do I fear her experience is of me? I took an honest inventory and came to a startling conclusion: my relating was a mess; so much was still entangled in my false self and my searching for love and validation rather than offering a genuine, loving strength. In the rubric of relationships, there's no relating more central to the human experience than relating with our spouse.⁹ This disruption of being exposed in the poor quality of much of my relating led me to soberly take honest inventory for the first time—well into our second decade of marriage—regarding how I genuinely relate with my wife, looking at what my impact is on her. *What does my style of relating evoke in her?*

Looking back, I could see the invitation the Father had been extending—to choose a narrow way to dig deep into my soul and do the excavation necessary to become ever more whole and holy. God is always at work in our story to integrate the shattered pieces of our soul. It is only in becoming increasingly wholehearted and living into deeper union with God that we are able to become the men we were meant to be. I have a hunch that's why it took years after Cherie's health struggles for us to come to the moment we found ourselves in more recently.

We were back in the loving shelter of our marriage mentors' counseling office, for what I considered a tune-up. Finally, no drama, no rescue or major issues to work through. We were there because we were choosing to invest in our marriage for some maintenance—so I thought. I sat relaxed on their couch, and for the first fifteen seconds, everything was going great. Until they asked Cherie kindly, "How are you doing?"

Then her tears. My internal alarms went off. I immediately went into self-preservation mode. *Are you kidding? She was just fine thirty seconds ago. We were just fine. What is this about?* But I have learned enough, grown enough, to pause, breathe, stay present, and trust God in this process. So I chose to settle in and come to the center of her sharing, as her friend, and listen.

She began to tell our story from a perspective I had not heard before, a perspective I don't think she had ever articulated, even to herself. She described those months, many years ago, of moving from health into the emotional unraveling that led us to a treatment center. As she described her experience,

she spoke of seeing herself in the context of our marriage as a little, delicate, beautiful bird trapped in a cage. She was the bird. I was the one who'd put her in the cage and wielded the key—the only key—to the lock.

At that moment there were two men inside me in the room. The false self in me was ready to walk out for good. *This is unfair, unjust, even cruel. All the energy I invested in trying to love her, rescue her, help her, and now I'm the perpetrator. This is BS. I'm done.* My false self was at his end. But there was a truer me, a more integrated me, a more being-made-whole me. And I, united with the Father, finally had eyes to see, to *own* the impact of my false self on the one I love the most and had hurt most deeply.

In the guise of rescuing the beauty, leading my family, and acting as the head of the household, I had systematically smothered her heart, rendered her all but voiceless, and put her in a cage so she could no longer fly. The damage had been done. Even if I had unlocked the door and thrown away the key, I didn't know if she would have had the capacity or the desire to come out while I was near. The true me, the more intact me, was crushed with sorrow. I had broken my wife's heart and was unable to see a redemptive road map for this story. There was no precedent I could lean into. As with most of the journey, everything God was asking felt far from suburban and deeply frontier for my masculine soul. I had hurt the one I love the most. Repeatedly.

Sixteen years earlier, I had vowed to love Cherie and to forsake all others. But that day in the counseling office, I realized I'd broken my covenant a thousand times over, choosing myself—my own self-preservation, my own agreements with fear and shame—over truly loving my bride. My broken heart had been accessed yet again, and it was being beckoned and invited to be made even more whole.

The impact of our false self is devastating to those we love most. We can fake it with others—at work, at church, just about anywhere else—maintaining a brilliant disguise that can work effectively for decades and fool even the closest of companions. But for those with whom we share a roof, it is not easy to hide. Not for long. It was only through the earlier soul work Cherie and I had done that we could see and then safely tend to these profoundly deep pockets of trauma in our marriage.

Awareness

The context of the journey of deliverance from the false self and restoration of the true self is unique, but the process is universal. It begins with awareness. The first step to becoming true is becoming aware of the false. *Who am I in my false self? What version of myself do I present to the world as a mask to self-protect? What is my effect on people? What do people feel when they are around me?*

You'll want to get to know the false self and get very familiar with him. We must become students of the person—the self—we have become. We must watch the false self at work and see how he expresses his self-protection by avoiding shame and acting out of fear through his predominant style of relating. We must become keen observers of his impact on others and how that relates to the story of their souls, so we might allow God to continually expose the parts of our heart and our soul that have yet to be integrated into wholeness. Only by coming to know the false self can you engage in the slow and steady process of putting him to death so that the true man might be resurrected in his place. It is only in consenting to the excavation of the masculine soul that we can become the kind of man and the kind of king within whom God can build a lasting kingdom.

To put to death the false self and invite God to restore the true self is the gate along the narrow path that can lead us deeper to coming to know the man God made us to be. Let us venture around the next turn along the ancient path and wonder together about this hidden treasure that can be found only through participating in God's excavation of our masculine soul.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan Snyder is a grateful husband of twenty years and a proud father of a wildly creative and witty daughter and a joyful and passionate son. He serves as a strategist, entrepreneur, teacher, writer, and speaker. His passion is to both be shaped by and shape the men and women who are shaping the kingdom of God. In 2010, he established BecomeGoodSoil.com, a fellowship of leaders whose global reach offers guidance for the narrow road of becoming the kind of person to whom God can confidently entrust the care of his kingdom. Morgan serves on the executive leadership team at Wild at Heart and Ransomed Heart Ministries and has contended for the wholeheartedness of men and women alongside John and Stasi Eldredge for more than two decades. He has led a decade of Become Good Soil Intensives and sold-out Wild at Heart men's events across the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, and Australia. Morgan goes off the grid every chance he gets, whether bow-hunting in the Colorado wilderness or choosing the adventurous life with his greatest treasures: his wife, Cherie; his son, Joshua; and his daughter, Abigail.

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