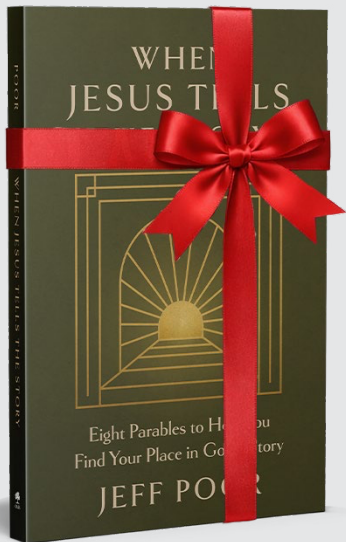


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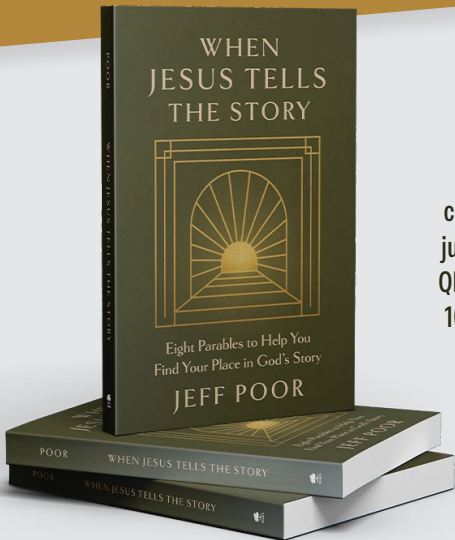
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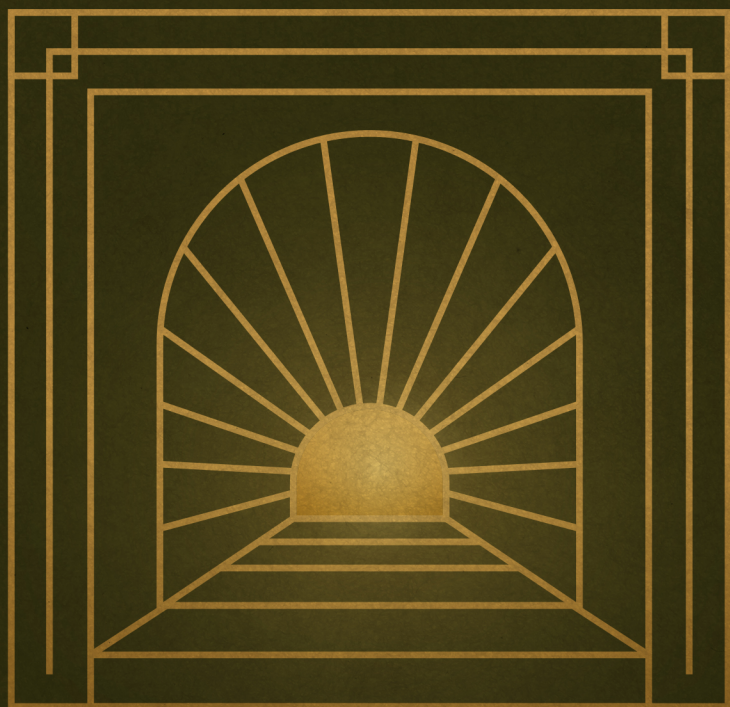
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Eight Parables for Finding
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*To Gail, Jett, and Micah—thank you for
being on this journey with me.*

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INTRODUCTION

EVERY GOOD STORY requires a decision. The main character reaches a pivotal moment when they must choose whether to step into the unknown or stay where they are, to trust the guide or go their own way, to take a risk or let fear keep them frozen.

Our lives are no different.

At the beginning of our relationship, my wife and I decided we wanted lives that made a lasting impact. We wanted to take risks and go on adventures. We wanted to let Jesus tell our story. So we decided we were going to live differently. Rather than living for what we wanted, we chose to let God have control—even when it meant we didn't know where he was leading. We had no idea how weighty it was, or how it would affect nearly every aspect of our lives. To let Jesus tell our story sounds inspiring. On paper, living purposefully looks great. But sometimes reality reveals a different experience.

At the time, we had no idea how much this decision would cost us. Over the coming years, God would lead us into places we never wanted to go. We would face loss and heartbreak. We would question everything. We didn't know what we were saying yes to. But isn't that what makes a story worth telling? If we know the ending, the story is ruined.

Good stories force us to step into the unknown, face conflict, make sacrifices, and come out the other side markedly different. That's what makes a story compelling. A story with guaranteed success, absent the highs and lows, isn't a good story. Every well-crafted tale has seemingly impossible stakes, peaks, and valleys. Over the first decade of our marriage, we had our fair share of all the above.

As we emerged from the pandemic, my wife and I were convinced that God was calling us to plant a church in Colorado. In early 2021, we went through an assessment to affirm our calling, completed training, selected a location, and then dove into our mission. At first, it was an exciting new adventure, and we were confident God was going to do something incredible. We thought this was going to be the most exciting chapter in our story yet. It became one of the darkest.

Almost immediately after our new church plant was put into motion, I was overcome with anxiety and stress. I had never felt anything like it before. From the time I woke up until I went to bed, all I could do was worry. Counseling, supplements, exercise, and prayer made little difference. What I thought was going to be a grand adventure turned into a crushing weight.

Once we were on the ground in Colorado, our assignment brought even more challenges. The next three and a half years were full of loss, failed plans, dashed dreams, and pain. It was one of those seasons when nothing seemed to go right. Everything we set out to do was an uphill battle, both in our personal lives and in our church plant. Nothing went as planned, and it felt like everything we were building came tumbling down.

In hard seasons, my usual approach is to put my head down and push through. And that works . . . until it doesn't. At first, I told myself I was just tired—that if I worked harder, prayed more, and pushed a little longer, things would turn around. But they didn't. Week after week, the weight grew heavier. Discouragement turned into hopelessness. And through it all, I felt completely alone—abandoned by God.

Was this really the story he had authored for my life?

After a few years of this, I had nothing left. To be honest, I don't remember much of that time. My wife tells me that after work, I would just sit on the couch and stare. I was empty. Eventually, we

pulled the plug on our church plant and decided to move on, despite not having the slightest idea what “moving on” meant. This wasn’t just a professional failure to me; it was deeply personal. It felt like God had written us off.

I had been through hard seasons before. I buried family members. My wife and I endured infant loss. A tornado once ripped through the church where I worked. I knew what loss felt like. I had faced trials and navigated adversity. But this was different. All those other things were just life—tragic and painful, yes, but not personal, not intentional. This time, it felt like God had dangled a dream in front of me and then ripped it away.

At my lowest point, I used colorful language to tell my wife that I was done. I wanted out of this story. If this was how God was going to write it, then I’d take the pen back. I’d write my own story, my own way. I was ready to settle for that. I don’t remember her reaction, and I was too heated to hear it anyway. But she had more faith and confidence in God than I did. She knew that God wasn’t done, that the story wasn’t over. I just couldn’t see that yet.

Over the next few months, I tried to take back the commitment we had made all those years ago to let God write our story. But I kept running into one question I couldn’t shake: *Did I really want to abandon a purposeful life for an easy one? Was that really what I wanted my life to be about—a predictable, safe story in which I controlled every page, every chapter?*

As much as I wanted to leave, I knew I had to stay. I knew I would someday be glad I chose what was purposeful over what was easy, even if it cost me. When I stopped fighting and trusted God, things changed. This happened more out of exhaustion than trust. I simply had nowhere else to turn, and that’s where God met me. The valley finally gave way to a mountaintop. God was faithful, even though I was not. What I had lost was restored: a new job, a

renewed purpose, and a great story to tell. In that dark season, God did incredible work in me.

When my wife and I first decided we wanted to let Jesus tell our story, we thought we were choosing adventure, purpose, and impact. And we were. But we were also choosing uncertainty and surrender. We didn't know that the very things we were praying for would come wrapped in pressure and pain. We didn't know that obedience would strip away comfort. We didn't know that impact would require drastically redefining what success looks like.

I began to see that a story worth living isn't one in which everything works out. It's one in which you are formed—where your faith deepens, where your dependence grows, where your life becomes less about proving something and more about trusting Someone. This chapter was painful, but it was even more purposeful. God shaped me in ways I couldn't see at the time, and I wouldn't trade this chapter for anything.

The Stories Jesus Told

During his time on earth, Jesus used parables to pull back the curtain on what life with God could look like. These weren't random illustrations or clever teaching tools; they were invitations. Jesus was calling people to leave their small, self-focused stories for the greater, purposeful story God was telling.

Jesus knew that answers alone don't change people; stories move our hearts. That's why he often responded to a question with a parable instead of a direct answer. He was after something deeper than understanding; transformation. Stories sneak past our defenses. They make us wrestle, reflect, and see ourselves differently. They don't just give us knowledge; they invite us to live in a whole new way—to take a step toward the life God created us for.

Stories also make the truth stick. In a culture where few could read, Jesus spoke in a way people could remember and repeat. He wrapped eternal truths in everyday moments so they could travel. His listeners carried these stories home and told them again and again. Through them, the truth about God spread. Two thousand years later, those same stories still reach us, still challenge us, and still invite us to step into God's bigger story of redemption and renewal.

But Jesus didn't tell stories just to be remembered. He told them to inspire action. His parables weren't meant to be studied from a distance but to be lived out in real life. They show us what forgiveness, grace, and love look like when they take shape in ordinary people. Every parable ends with an open door—an invitation to join in what God is doing—because that's what stories do: awaken our imagination and show us what's possible. They remind us that life with God isn't just about believing the right things; it's about stepping into the story he has been telling from the beginning. Jesus used stories to help people see that their lives could be part of something greater, something eternal.

That invitation still stands. The parables of Jesus continue to whisper through the pages of Scripture and into our hearts. There is a better story being told, and Jesus is inviting you into it.

Which Story Will You Tell?

Whether we realize it or not, our lives tell a story. One day, someone will stand up and tell it. The question is, what kind of story will it be? Will it be a safe one, in which everything is predictable and under your control? Or will it be the kind of story only God could write?

I believe this is true for all of us: God has an incredible story to tell through us. I don't believe that because I'm naturally optimistic. I've simply watched God long enough to see this pattern. I've seen it in my own life and in the lives of others. I also see it in Scripture.

God doesn't tell small, insignificant stories. He takes shepherd boys and makes them kings. He takes orphaned girls and makes them queens. He takes fishermen and turns them into leaders of a movement. He takes a cross—the worst moment in history—and makes it the hinge of redemption.

I won't pretend it will be smooth sailing. When we let Jesus tell the story, we will experience moments of joy and purpose that we cannot yet fathom. But we will also walk through seasons of profound brokenness and heartbreak.

The story God has for you isn't easy, and it's certainly not free. It will cost you, and I want you to know that up front. But I also want to encourage you because this story is worth the struggle. When you let God tell your story, he writes something so much better than what you can write on your own—a story worth living. You may not have control over every twist and turn in your life, but you do have control over whether you trust the Author. Will you follow God's lead and step into his story, or will you settle for something smaller, safer, and more predictable?

Now before you answer that, I want you to think about one more question: What do you want said at your funeral? I know we don't love thinking about that. But the reality is, death is coming for all of us. And a few days after that moment comes, someone will stand up and share the story of your life.

As a pastor, I often get invited into these sacred moments. I've met with many grieving families and been to more funerals than I can count. But I'll never forget the *first* funeral I took part in. It was during the summer before my senior year of college, and I was interning at a local church. One of my responsibilities was to shadow the lead pastor—to watch, listen, and learn.

One day, a family came in asking for help with a funeral service. Their father had passed away, and the family was looking for a church to help with the service. The church was committed to serving the

community, so we said yes. A few days later, the pastor and I sat down with a handful of grieving relatives to plan the funeral.

After a few minutes of expressing sympathy, the pastor asked, “Tell me about your dad.” They paused for a moment. Then one of them said, “Well . . . he really loved the Broncos.” We all chuckled. The pastor nodded and said, “We can definitely include that in the eulogy. What else would you want people to know about him?” Another pause—this one longer and heavier. Finally, someone said, “I mean, he *really* loved the Broncos. He never missed a game.” That was it. This man had lived for nearly seventy years, and his legacy—the story his life told—was that he loved a football team.

Now, I don’t share this story to mock or belittle the man. I didn’t know him. I’m sure his family experienced moments of kindness, laughter, and love. And I believe God had something incredible and meaningful for him, just as he does for you. But this example illustrates the sad reality that most people go through life without ever reflecting on the story they’re living—which *leads* them to settle for something less than what God has for them.

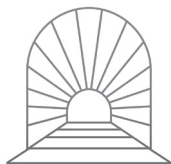
The question for you is this: What story do you want told of you? What do you want said at your funeral? Because whatever you want said then, you have to put into action now. I don’t believe you were made for mere survival. I don’t believe you were created for a life built around comfort, convenience, or keeping everything safe. You were made for more than a mundane, day-to-day existence. I believe God wants to tell a story through your life that carries weight—a story marked by faithfulness, courage, repentance, sacrifice, joy, and impact. Not because you are extraordinary, but because he is.

I believe God has something incredible for you, and I wrote this book to help you discover the story that Jesus wants to tell in your life. In the chapters ahead, we’re going to walk through some of Jesus’s parables—not as familiar stories to brush over but as invitations. Each one reveals something about the kind of story God wants

to tell in your life. In each chapter of this book, I encourage you to pause when you get to the Scripture reference, open your Bible, and read the parable before you continue. This isn't busywork; it's meant to help you examine your own life and see what God might be inviting you into.

When I look back on my own life, I can see times when I played it safe and tried to keep everything under my control; times I took risks and followed God's purpose; and moments when I tried to take the pen back and write something easier. But every time I did that, I ended up with less meaning, not more. It was only when I surrendered—when I let God lead through the pain, the loss, and the unknown—that my story became worth telling, because it's God's story, not mine.

That's what the parables are all about. They show us what it looks like to trust God with the pen. They remind us that even when the plot twists and the path grows dark, the Author is good. He is telling a story of redemption, and he is inviting you into it. So as we turn the page and look at the stories Jesus told, remember this: They're not just words on paper—they're an invitation to let Jesus tell the story.



1

COMING HOME TO A BETTER STORY

The Prodigal Son

IF YOU'VE EVER hiked at high elevation, you've probably noticed small stacks of rocks along the trail. They're called cairns, and they help mark the way you should go. Above the tree line, where the path fades and the terrain opens into endless rock fields, those cairns are sometimes the only markers guiding you forward. When the way isn't clear, they remind you that you're still on the right track.

A few years ago, I was hiking Mount Blue Sky, a 14,000-foot peak west of Denver. The hike is not especially long—just over five miles round trip—but it's rocky from the very first step. Just over a mile from the summit, the trail cuts around the side of the mountain. In this section, the rocks grow larger, and the path becomes less defined. When I reached this part of the hike, I lost the trail. At first, I wasn't worried. I knew roughly which direction to go and convinced myself that *roughly* was good enough. But on a mountain, *roughly* is how people get hurt. One wrong step can twist your ankle, send a rock sliding, or worse.

I had wandered off the trail, and I didn't even know when it happened. When I realized I was lost, I paused and looked for a cairn, but there were rocks everywhere. On a mountain full of rocks, finding a stack of them felt impossible. I knew I needed to get back on the right path, so I climbed higher, hoping for a better view. Nothing. I dropped down lower, thinking I'd somehow missed it on my way up. Still nothing. With no other option, I decided to keep moving toward the summit, hoping to eventually stumble back to the path.

After a while, I stopped to catch my breath and take a drink of water. That's when I saw a lone hiker moving steadily across the slope above me. She looked like she was walking on a path, not scrambling over rocks. I called out, "Are you on the trail?" She nodded. Relieved, I climbed up toward her, and a few minutes later, my boots landed back on the narrow path I had lost.

Peace came over me as I realized I was back where I needed to be. I no longer had to wander; I could move forward with confidence. I wondered what would have happened if I had never admitted I was lost. If I had kept pushing forward on my own, pretending I had it under control, I could have ended up missing the summit entirely.

Most of us find ourselves lost at some point in our lives. Maybe it's not being lost on a mountainside but in our own story. We wander, climb, and work hard, but we aren't really sure where the path is—or even where it's supposed to lead. We chase careers, relationships, purpose, and even faith, but somewhere along the way, we lose sight of the story we're in. We've been writing our own paragraphs, building the life we thought we wanted, chasing what we thought would make us happy. But eventually, we look up and realize we've lost the plot. We're longing for something more but unsure how to get there.

Often the deeper fear isn't just that we're lost but that we've wandered too far—that we ignored the markers, that we made choices

we can't undo, that we stayed in places longer than we should have. There are moments when it's not just confusion we feel but panic: *What if I've wasted too much time? What if I've drifted too far from who I was meant to become? What if the summit I once hoped for is no longer reachable?*

Before we can find the path to the story Jesus is inviting us into, we first have to admit we are lost. Before we can move forward, we have to face the reality that we've been wandering. Jesus tells a story for people like that—not for those who feel confident and in control, but for those who have drifted, who have run, who have wondered whether it is too late to come back.

Coming Home to a Better Story

Read Luke 15:11–32

In Luke 15, Jesus is surrounded by two groups: the “tax collectors and sinners” on the one hand and the Pharisees and teachers of the law on the other. Two kinds of people—one group that knew it was lost and another convinced it wasn't. Both were lost, just in different ways. To help them see the story they were actually living—and the one they were being invited into—Jesus told three parables. The first was about a lost sheep, the second about a lost coin, and the third about a lost son.

The parable of the prodigal son begins with a shocking request: A son asks his father for his share of the family property. In that culture, asking for an inheritance before the father's death was unthinkable. It was like saying, “I want your money, but not you.” The crowd listening to Jesus would have expected the father to disown the son. But in an act almost as shocking as the request, the father opens his hands and lets the son have what he wants.

The younger son quickly packs his bags, leaves home, and heads for a distant country, where he squanders his wealth in wild living.

He's writing his own story, doing whatever he wants, concerned with nothing but his pleasure.

At first, it feels like success to him—freedom beyond anything he's ever experienced. But the freedom doesn't last. The story he chose cannot sustain the life he hoped it would. And that's exactly where the younger son finds himself: The money runs out, the friends disappear, a famine hits, and the dream collapses.

Now the son is in dire need. Desperate, he takes a job feeding pigs—the lowest of the low. For a Jewish audience, this would have been shocking and humiliating. Pigs were considered unclean animals under the law; faithful Jews didn't raise them, eat them, or even touch them. Then Jesus adds another layer: The son becomes so hungry that he envies the pigs. He longs to eat the pods they're eating. He has sunk so low that even the animals he's feeding seem better off than he is. Jesus is painting a vivid picture here—not just of physical poverty but of spiritual emptiness. The younger son has nothing left. He is not just far from home geographically; he is far from his father's heart.

When the younger son is in the lowest place imaginable, something transformative happens. The text says, “he came to his senses” (Luke 15:17). This is one of the most important lines in the entire parable. For the first time, he sees clearly. He begins to see the story he is currently living. He's not just hungry; he's lost. And he starts looking for a path back into a better story.

The younger son decides to return to his father, hoping he can find his way back. As he starts the long, shame-filled walk, he rehearses his apology. He's not expecting to be welcomed back as a son; he knows he's screwed up too much. He only wants to survive. Anything more than that seems impossible.

Then comes the twist: “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

Notice these details; they aren't there by accident. While the son is still a long way off, his father spots him. The father has been waiting for his return, scanning the horizon every day. Once he sees him, the father takes off running to greet his son. Jesus's audience surely would have gasped at this detail. Grown men didn't run in first-century Middle Eastern culture; it was seen as undignified. But this father doesn't care—his son is home, and he can't wait to be reunited.

When the father reaches his boy, he doesn't wait for his son to grovel or ask for forgiveness. He embraces and restores him before his son can even finish his apology. The son begins, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21). But the father cuts him off, calling to his servants: "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. . . . For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:22–24). The robe, ring, and sandals are symbols of restoration. The father doesn't take his son back as a servant; he welcomes him home as an heir. The son who was once lost has now been found. He stepped back onto the path that leads not only to safety and restoration but also to a better story.

But the story doesn't end with the party. The older brother hears the music and, once he learns what's happening, refuses to go inside. While the younger brother ran away in open rebellion, the older brother faithfully remained. He worked the fields, fulfilled his responsibilities, and did what was expected of him. Yet when his younger brother returns, his true heart is revealed. In his mind, he has earned something, and now he sees his father extending extravagant mercy to the very person who squandered everything. To him, it feels unjust. But the language he uses reveals more than he realizes. He speaks like a hired servant, not a son. He views his faithfulness as leverage. His obedience was never rooted in love; it was transactional. He stayed physically close to the father, but his heart was distant.

The father goes out to him as well—not with rebuke but with tenderness. He reminds him that he has always been included, always been near, always had access to everything the father possesses. The celebration is not about favoritism; it is about restoration. What was dead is alive. What was lost has come home. The tragedy is not that the father loves the rebellious son. The tragedy is that the obedient son never understood his father's heart in the first place.

Both sons were lost. The younger son gets lost in a faraway land, while the older son gets lost at home. But both were living a story far from their father's heart. He pursues both sons and invites them into his story. He won't force them; they have to choose to accept the invitation. The story ends with an open question. There's a party celebrating the younger brother's return, but the older brother remains outside. Will he accept the invitation? Jesus doesn't tell us whether the older brother ever went inside because the point isn't how he responds—it's how we will respond.

When Jesus finished this story, the crowd must have fallen silent. They had just heard something that cut straight through their assumptions about God, about sin, and about what it means to be lost. Some people were probably nodding along, thankful that God welcomes prodigals. Others were quietly fuming, realizing Jesus had exposed their hearts too. The story wasn't only about the rebellious younger brother; it was also about the proud, resentful older one.

This is not simply a story about rebellion; it is a story about lostness in all its forms—about living a life apart from the father, whether through reckless independence or careful obedience. In both cases, the issue is the same: living outside the father's heart.

Every great story has a moment when the main character hits rock bottom—the point when the illusion breaks and the protagonist finally sees things for what they really are. In the parable of the prodigal son, it happens when the son “came to his senses.” That's

one of the most hopeful lines in the Bible and in our lives. It is the moment we recognize we have been lost.

Living a Better Story: Returning Home

The story of the prodigal son isn't just a picture of forgiveness; it's a roadmap for how we can step into the story Jesus wants to tell in our lives. All of us have moments when we realize we are off the trail and need to find our way back. Living a better story means realizing the story we've been telling isn't working—and deciding to return to God. For some of us, that realization comes after years of running. For others, it comes after doing everything “right” and still feeling empty. But no matter how we got here, Jesus's story shows the same path forward: starting with honesty, moving through surrender, and ending in renewal.

Come to Our Senses

The turning point in the story happens when the younger son “came to his senses.” That's the moment everything changed—not because the son figured out how to fix his life, but because he finally saw his life for what it was. *Coming to our senses* describes what it means to wake up spiritually. It's when the story we've been telling with our lives begins to show its cracks—when we wake up in the proverbial pigpen. It's when we ask, *Where is my story heading?*

Not every prodigal story ends in a physical pigpen, but each one does end with emptiness. Maybe we've been living the success story—measuring our worth by productivity, salary, or achievement—but no matter how much we achieve, satisfaction fades. Or maybe we've been living the pleasure story—chasing comfort and whatever feels good in the moment, only to discover something is still missing. Or maybe it's the control story, in which we try to manage everything and everyone around us, even though deep down we

know control is an illusion. Or maybe it's the performance story, in which we do all the *Christian* things for all the wrong reasons.

Coming to our senses is about stepping back and evaluating the story we are choosing to live. It's asking whether the direction of our decisions actually leads where we hoped it would. It's recognizing when the life we're composing on our own terms isn't producing freedom, joy, or wholeness. To be lost doesn't mean God isn't writing a story; it means we've tried to take the pen. We've defined success, identity, or fulfillment apart from him, drifting from the Father's heart even while believing we're in control.

We have to ask ourselves: *What story are we building right now? What is shaping our choices? Where does this path actually lead? If nothing changes, what will this story produce in five years—or ten?* Coming to our senses is the moment we realize we don't just need better circumstances; we need to return to the Father and let him rewrite the direction of our lives.

That kind of clarity rarely happens in noise. We have to slow down long enough to see the story we're living. We cannot change what we refuse to examine. If we want to step into the story Jesus has for us, it begins here—not by trying harder or promising to do better but by coming to our senses.

Return to the Father

Once the younger son came to his senses, he realized his story wasn't working. He saw it for what it was: living in a literal pigpen. So he started out on the path home. He didn't have a plan; he just knew he couldn't stay where he was.

That's what returning to God looks like. It doesn't mean we have all the answers or even know what to do. It means we stop running and turn back toward the Father. For some of us, that step may look like an honest prayer after months of silence. For others, it may

mean opening Scripture again, reaching out for help, or confessing what we've been hiding. The step itself may feel small, but the direction is what matters. It's not how polished the step looks but that we take one. Every time we move toward the Father, we discover he has already moved toward us. God does not wait until we've cleaned ourselves up; he meets us in our mess. He is not distant or reluctant; he is ready to restore.

The father ran while his son was still far off—before the apology, before the proof, before the performance. Returning home is not about earning our place; it is about receiving it.

Experience the Hope of Renewal

Leaving our old story behind can feel like a risk. *What will others think? What will God say? What will change?* So many of us get stuck here. We may not like our story, but at least it feels familiar.

When the son started his journey home, he could not have fathomed what his father had in store for him. He had screwed up more times than he could count; he was too far gone, or so he thought. But there's no hesitation on the part of his father; he instantly restores his son and throws the party of a lifetime. This is the heart of our heavenly Father. When his children return, he doesn't bring condemnation; he restores us and throws a party.

This is what awaits us when we return: forgiveness, restoration, and joy. The story God is telling is better than the one we have been trying to control. Remember, the invitation is not only for prodigals who ran; it is also for those who have drifted into performance and resentment. The older brother struggled to accept this. He had done the right things and expected a reward. He could name every sacrifice, but somewhere along the way, he missed the heart of his relationship with his father. He was physically close, yet relationally distant. Renewal was offered to both sons. One needed to leave the

pigpen; the other needed to leave his pride. Both needed to step fully into the joy of being with their father.

That is the choice before us. We can remain outside—comparing, striving, waiting to feel worthy—or we can step inside and receive what has already been prepared. Either way, we are choosing a story. One keeps us wandering; the other brings us home.

The parable of the prodigal son is an invitation to choose a better story. It's a cairn marking the way back to God. Jesus leaves the story open because the ending depends on how we respond. We can keep writing a story that never fully delivers, or we can return to the Father's story.

When we do, we discover what both sons were invited to find: a Father who runs, restores, and rejoices when the lost come home. And there, in his presence, a better story truly begins.

WHEN JESUS TELLS THE STORY

Eight Parables for Finding
Your Place in God's Story

JEFF POOR

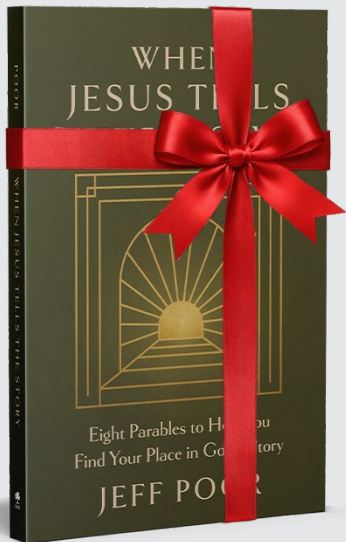
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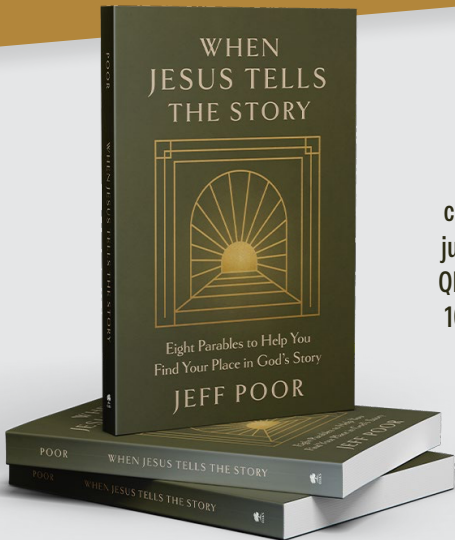
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