

Chapter 2:

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO
COME HOME



A NEW LIFE COMMUNITY CURRICULUM SERIES



A MINISTRY OF TEEN CHALLENGE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



Chapter 2:
**IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO
COME HOME**

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Chapter 2:

It's Never Too Late to Come Home

“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

Have you ever felt like you've wandered too far from home? Like your mistakes and poor choices have taken you to a place where you can't possibly return? Perhaps you've carried the weight of shame, believing that your past disqualifies you from God's love. Or maybe you've convinced yourself that you're not worthy of forgiveness and a fresh start.

The good news is that with God, it's never too late to come home. His love for you is unchanging, unconditional, and unending. No matter how far you've strayed or how long you've been away, your Heavenly Father is eagerly waiting for your return.

In this chapter, we'll explore the profound truth of God's love through the lens of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. This story isn't just about a wayward child; it's a powerful revelation of the Father's heart.

The Prodigal's Journey

Let's examine the key parts of this parable found in Luke 15:11–24:

1. *The Son's Departure (v.12-13)* *“The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.”*

In Jewish culture, inheritance was typically divided after the father's death. By asking for it early, the son displayed a shocking disregard for their relationship. He was essentially telling his father, *“I wish you were dead.”*

His actions revealed a heart that valued possessions over relationship, and immediate gratification over long-term wisdom. How often do we find ourselves doing the same, prioritizing temporary pleasures over lasting joy in God? We set off for our own “distant country,” foolishly believing we can find fulfillment on our terms.

As Henri J.M. Nouwen profoundly stated in *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, **“I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found.”** The son's departure in the parable reveals the depth of his rebellion and selfishness.

2. The Famine Comes (v.14-16) *“After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.”*



The son's resources ran out, leaving him in desperate circumstances. His experience mirrors the emptiness and despair that often follow when we seek fulfillment apart from God. The temporary pleasures of sin never satisfy; they always leave us wanting more. Sin can also lead us to do things we swore we'd never do, taking us to places of shame and embarrassment. If we were to look in the mirror, we might not even recognize ourselves or the person we have become.

For a Jewish audience, the idea of feeding pigs would have been particularly shocking and degrading. The son was not only destitute, but also engaged in work that was culturally and religiously repugnant. Sin can bring us to such depths, leaving us longing for things that can never truly satisfy our souls.

“The farther I run away from the place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world.”

—Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

3. The Turning Point (v.17-19) *“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’”*

This moment of realization marks a crucial turning point. The son “came to himself” — he saw his situation clearly and recognized his need to return home.



Sin often clouds our judgment and distorts our perspective. The son's recognition that even his father's servants were better off than he was shows a humbling realization of what he had left behind. It's a powerful reminder that true fulfillment and provision are found in the Father's house.

4. The Father's Response (v.20-24) "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."

The father saw the son "while he was still a long way off" — he had been watching and waiting for his son's return. God, too, anticipates our repentance. He's not passive in our return; He's actively looking for us, ready to welcome us home. Before the son could even deliver his rehearsed speech, the father was already embracing him.



Personal and Group Reflection Questions

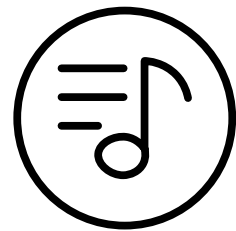
- What parts of the Prodigal Son story (Luke 15:11-24) resonated most with you?
- In what ways can you relate to the prodigal son?
- What were/are the temptations that caused you to look for something else to satisfy you?

The Father Who Runs

One of the most striking images in the parable of the Prodigal Son is that of the father running to meet his returning child. This was a culturally shocking act — in that time and place, it would have been considered undignified for an older man to run. Yet the father’s love overrides all social conventions.

This powerful image of a father running to embrace his wayward child has inspired many contemporary songs and writings. They paint a picture of God as a Father who doesn’t wait passively but actively pursues us. He’s not standing still with arms crossed, waiting for us to crawl back in shame. Instead, He’s watching eagerly for our return, ready to run to us with open arms. One such song, “When God Ran” by Phillips, Craig, and Dean, beautifully captures this moment of divine pursuit and forgiveness:

*The only time I ever saw him run
Was when He ran to me
He took me in his arms
Held my head to his chest
Said, “My son’s come home again!”
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in his voice he said,
“Son, do you know I still love you?”*



Imagine the scene: The father sees his son from afar. Without hesitation, he hitches up his robes and runs. Can you picture the joy on his face? The tears in his eyes? He doesn’t wait for his son to reach him or for an apology to be made. He closes the distance himself, overflowing with love and forgiveness.

The son, who had rehearsed his apology and plea for restoration, is overwhelmed. **“He omits make me a servant. The slavish spirit vanishes in the clasp of the father’s arms. Bengel suggests that the father would not suffer him to utter the news,”** writes Marvin R. Vincent, D.D. in *Word Studies in the New Testament*. The son had planned to offer himself as a servant, thinking that was the only way to earn his father’s grace. But as Norman McLeod once said, when the father put his arms around the boy, *he just shut his mouth and said, “I take you to my heart, and that’s enough.”*

This is the heart of our Heavenly Father. He’s not just willing to take us back — He’s longing to! He’s scanning the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of us turning towards home. And when we do, His response is immediate and overwhelming.

The father in the parable doesn’t just welcome his son; he restores him fully. He embraces him, kisses him, and calls for a celebration. There’s no period of probation, no list of conditions to be met—just pure, unadulterated joy at his son’s return.

This is the kind of love God has for each of us. No matter how far we’ve strayed or how long we’ve been gone, He’s ready to run to us, embrace us, and welcome us home. His love hasn’t diminished. His forgiveness is complete. And His joy at our return knows no bounds.



The Father's Heart

Understanding God's love is crucial to our journey home. His love isn't based on our performance or worthiness. He loves us because He is love (1 John 4:8). The Father's heart beats with compassion, forgiveness, and an unquenchable desire for reconciliation with His children.

*"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are!"*

1 John 3:1

This verse reveals the extravagant nature of God's love. It's not just given, but "lavished" on us. And it results in a new identity — we are called and are God's children.

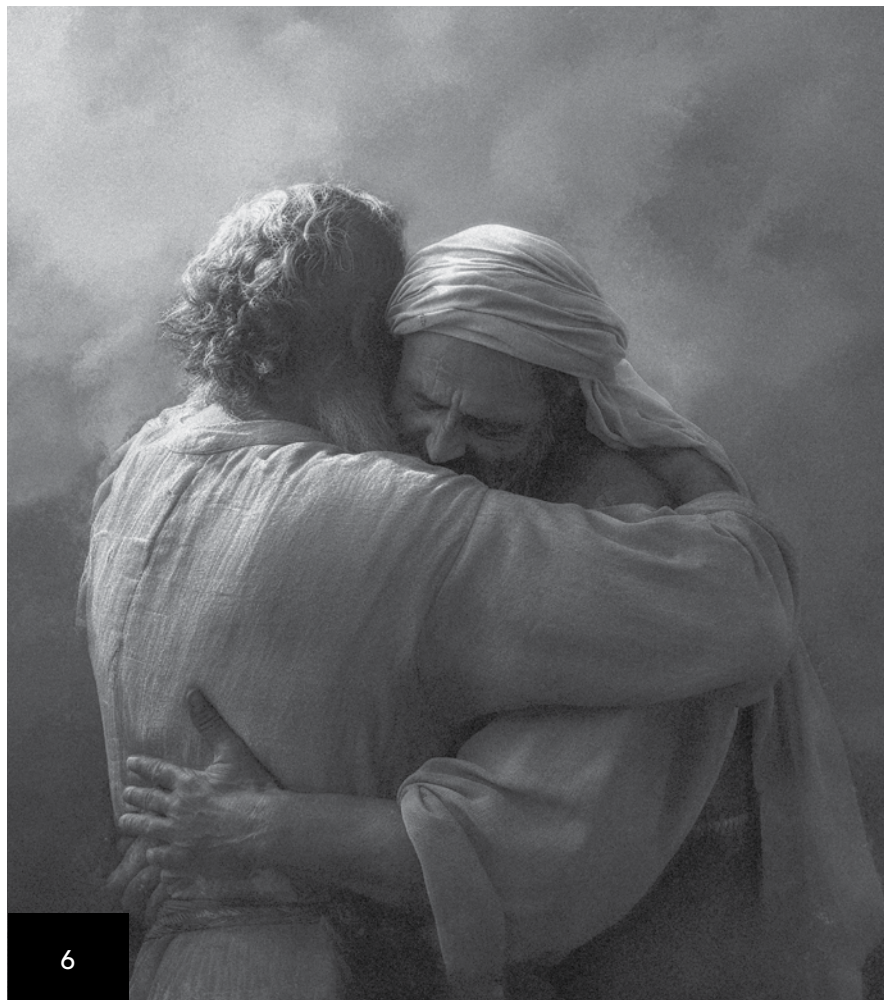
The father in the parable represents God's heart towards His lost children. Like the father, God is:

1. **Watchful** - He saw the son while he was still far off, indicating he was looking for him.
2. **Compassionate** - He was filled with compassion, not anger, judgment, or resentment.
3. **Eager to Restore** - He ran to meet his son, an act that would have been considered undignified.
4. **Generous in Forgiveness** - He didn't wait for a full apology but embraced his son immediately.

The Father's Restoration

When the father in the parable puts the ring on his son's finger and the robe on his back, it's a powerful symbol of complete restoration. These weren't just gifts – they were symbols of position and belonging. The ring likely signified authority, while the robe represented honor in the household.

This is a beautiful picture of how God restores us when we return to Him. He doesn't grudgingly take us back as servants – He joyfully restores us as sons and daughters. Our past mistakes don't disqualify us from His family. Instead, He reinstates all the rights and privileges of being His child.



In moments of deep personal struggle and brokenness, experiencing God’s love can be both overwhelming and transformative. Michael Mericle, a 2010 Teen Challenge alumnus, reflects on this profound experience, illustrating how God’s grace and acceptance can reach us even in our darkest times. He shares:



God stepped into my life in the midst of the wreckage and the chaos that I had created and sought me out and was willing to adopt me into His family. I mean, chose me; when looking in the mirror, I would not choose me.



This is the heart of our Father — a heart that chooses us, loves us, and restores us, even when we can’t see our own worth.



Break in the Journey



Personal Reflection and Group Discussion Questions

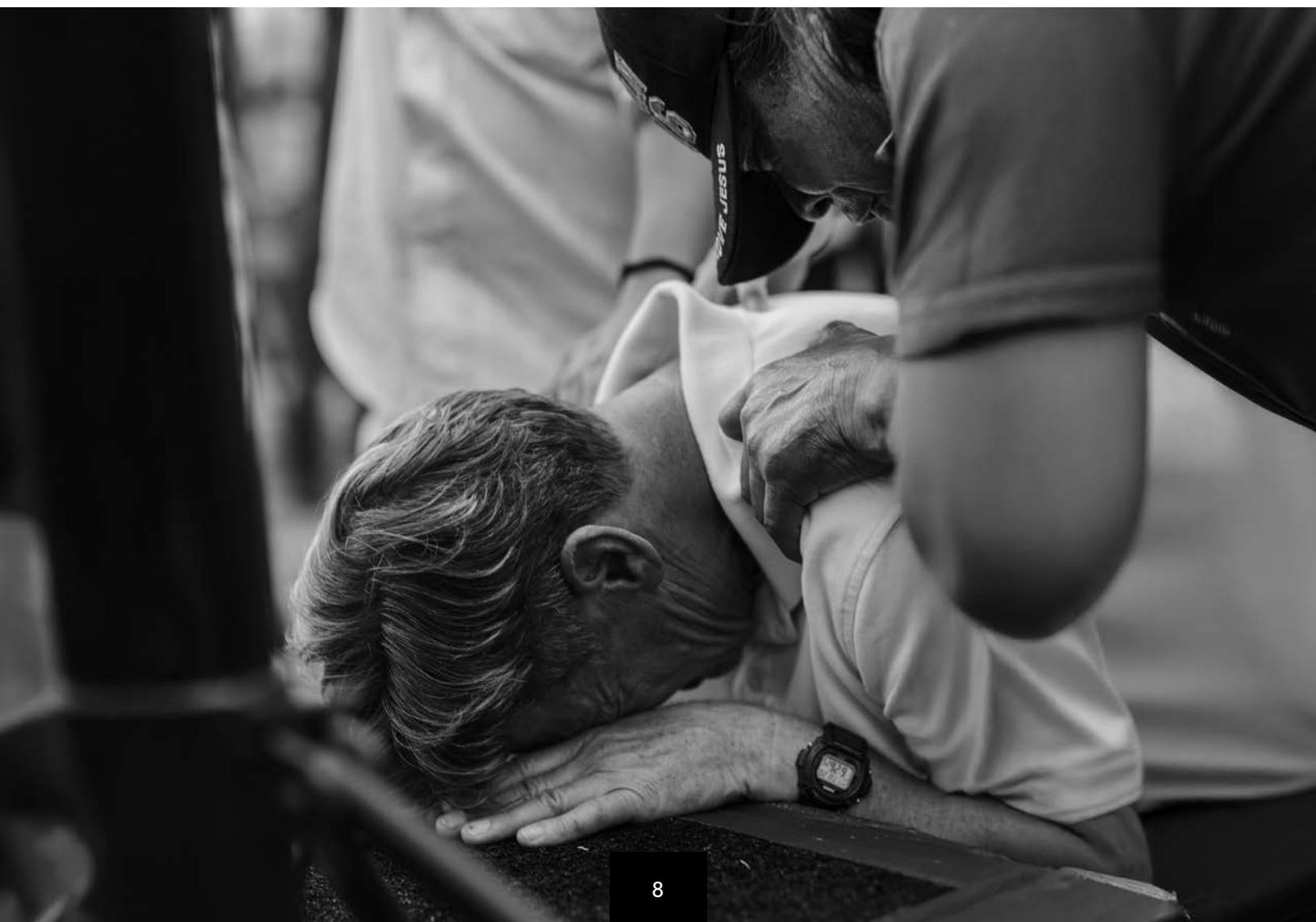
- The father gave his son a ring and a robe—symbols of authority, honor, and full belonging. How does it impact you to know that God doesn’t just forgive your past but restores you completely as His child? Where do you still struggle to believe this is true for you?
- Michael Mericle shared that God chose him even when he wouldn’t have chosen himself. Have you ever felt unworthy of God’s love? How does it change your perspective to realize that God intentionally chooses and adopts you into His family?
- The son’s mistakes didn’t disqualify him—his father’s love reestablished his place. What lies about your worth or identity do you need to release today in order to embrace God’s truth that you are loved, valued, and restored?

Coming Home

The journey of coming home to God often begins with recognizing our need for God, much like the prodigal son who “came to his senses” in the pig pen. Jesus spoke about this in the Beatitudes when He said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). To be poor in spirit means to recognize our spiritual bankruptcy apart from God, and admit that we desperately need Him.

Once we’ve recognized our need, the next step is to return to God—what the Bible calls repentance. It’s not just feeling sorry for our actions but deciding to change direction. As we turn back, we encounter God’s forgiveness. His Word assures us: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9)*. God’s forgiveness is not based on our worthiness, but on His character and Christ’s sacrifice.

Coming home isn’t just about being forgiven; it’s about being restored to our place in God’s family. When the father in the parable puts the ring on his son’s finger and the robe on his back, it’s a powerful symbol of complete restoration. These weren’t just gifts – they were symbols of position and belonging. Similarly, when we return to God, He doesn’t grudgingly take us back as servants. He joyfully restores us as sons and daughters! Our past mistakes don’t disqualify us from His family. Instead, He reinstates all the rights and privileges of being His child.



Jeremy Pierce-Sunia, a 2017 Teen Challenge alumnus, shared a powerful experience highlighting this deep sense of coming home. Reflecting on his time at Teen Challenge, he said:

“Two days into my residency at Teen Challenge, I came in on a Monday. On Wednesday that night we had a chapel, and I remember just feeling the sense of warmth like, ‘Hey, you know you’re finally home and I’ve been missing you.’ And I just kind of fell on the ground. I had tears coming out of my eyes. I don’t even remember what the pastor spoke about that night, but I do remember that I hadn’t felt God like that before. And it was like I felt that [God] had actually missed me when I was gone. And that I was back [home].”

So, what does it mean for us to “come home” to God? Here are some practical steps:

- 1. Recognize Your Need:** Like the prodigal son, we need to “come to our senses” and recognize our need for God. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* - Matthew 5:3
- 2. Turn Back to God:** Repentance isn’t just feeling sorry; it’s a decision to turn away from our old life and towards God. *“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”* - Acts 3:19
- 3. Receive God’s Forgiveness:** God’s forgiveness is always available, but we must receive it. *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).
- 4. Embrace Your Identity as God’s Child:** Coming home means accepting your place in God’s family. *“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”* (John 1:12).
- 5. Live in God’s Love:** Let God’s love transform how you see yourself and how you live. *“And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them”* (1 John 4:16).

As you journey through this chapter, you might find yourself standing in the “distant country,” feeling far from God. But no matter where you are on this journey, remember: **the Father is watching, waiting, ready to run to you with open arms. It’s never too late to come home. No matter where you’ve been or what you’ve done, His love and forgiveness are waiting for you.**



As Henri Nouwen beautifully puts it in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*:

“God has been waiting for me. He knows my inner struggle. He has seen my misery and guided me through all the dark valleys. When I look back at my life, I can see his presence always, even when I doubted it. Now he welcomes me home with the arms of endless love, and there is nothing he wants more than to embrace me as his beloved son.”

Personal Reflection and Group Discussion Questions



- Read Galatians 5:16-26. How do the “acts of the flesh” in verses 19-21 lead us away from God and into our own “distant country”? In contrast, what does it mean to “live by the Spirit,” and how can we practically apply that in our daily lives?
- What was your “come to my senses moment”? Have you had one yet?
- How can you make the decision to come back home to God?



As you reflect on the prodigal son and the Father's patient and boundless love, take a moment to let the lyrics of "How Deep the Father's Love for Us" sink in. This song powerfully expresses the immense sacrifice of Jesus and the unfathomable love of the Father, who gave His only Son to make us—unworthy as we are—His treasure. Don't let shame, fear, or unworthiness keep you from returning to your Father's embrace. He is waiting, arms open wide, ready to welcome you home.

How Deep the Father's Love for Us

How deep the Father's love for us,

How vast beyond all measure!

That He should give His only Son,

To make a wretch His treasure.

How great the pain of searing loss!

The Father turns His face away;

As wounds which marred the Chosen One

Bring many sons to glory.

How deep the Father's love for us,

How vast beyond all measure!

That He should give His only Son,

To make a wretch His treasure.

How great the pain of searing loss!

The Father turns His face away;

As wounds which marred the Chosen One

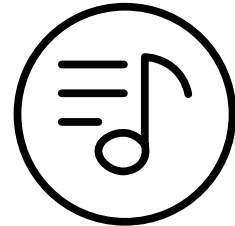
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross:

My sin upon His shoulders;

Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice

Call out among the scoffers.



*It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life:*

I know that it is finished.

*I will not boast in anything:
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;*

But I will boast in Jesus Christ:

His death and resurrection.

Why should I gain from His reward?

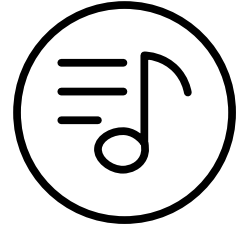
I cannot give an answer;

*But this I know with all my heart:
His wounds have paid my ransom.*

Why should I gain from his reward?

I cannot give an answer;

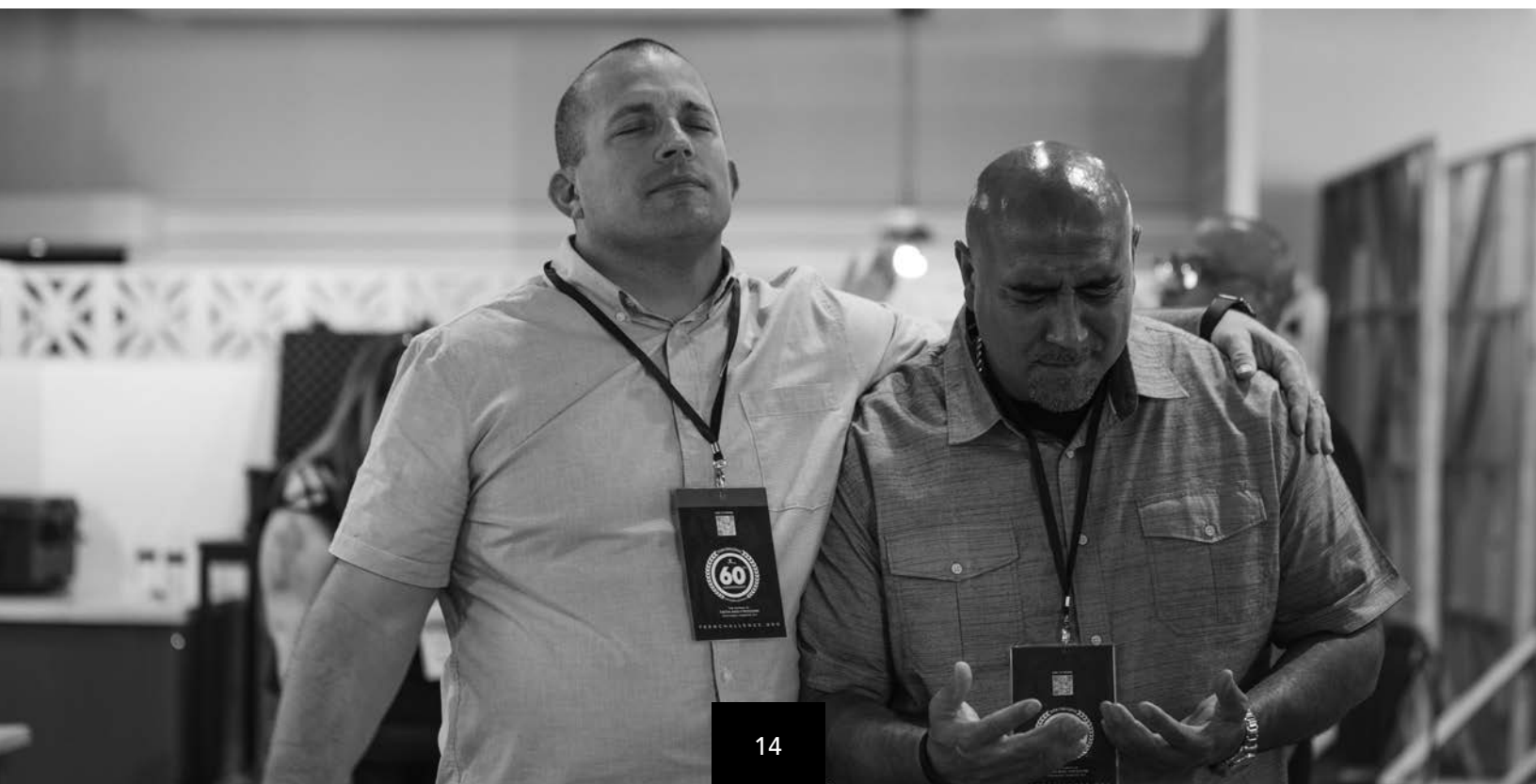
*But this I know with all my heart:
His wounds have paid my ransom.*





Personal Reflection and Group Discussion Questions

- How can you better manage your time this week to prioritize your relationship with God?
- How can you meditate on and experience the love of God this week?
- How can you serve your community or church this week to express gratitude for God's love?
- How can you be a leader in your family this week by demonstrating God's forgiving love?
- How are you developing a discipline of prayer in your life this week?
- How can you incorporate the reading and studying of God's word into your life this week?
- Read and meditate on 1 John. What stands out to you about God's love?



Verses to Reflect on From This Chapter:



- “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 (NIV)
- “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” 1 John 3:1 (NIV)
- “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:12 (NIV)
- “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.” 1 John 4:16 (NIV)
- “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.” Psalm 103:8 (NIV)
- “But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” Psalm 86:15 (NIV)
- “In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.” Psalm 18:6 (NIV)
- “I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.” Psalm 40:1-3 (NIV)
- “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?” Luke 15:4 (NIV)
- “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” Hebrews 10:23 (NIV)
- “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” John 3:16-17 (NIV)
- “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” 1 John 2:1-2 (NIV)



Everyone who belongs to Christ
will be given *new life*.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:22

