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GO GET THE WANDERER

THERE IS NOTHING quite like seeing a verse in Scripture for the first time! I mean, maybe you've read it a hundred times, but suddenly one day, God's voice reaches your heart from those words and you are rocked to the core. Until that moment, the words made sense—now they are a scalpel that cuts right to the core. Such has been my experience recently with James 5:19–20 as these statements have grabbed my heart:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Those forty words are the foundation for this chapter and this book. Read the verses again, and let them sink in.

Before we look closely at this passage, let's take a cultural step back. Does that word *wanderer* ring any bells for you? We don't use it in common language. But in 1961, Dion, one of those single-name artists, recorded a song called "The Wanderer." If you're from my generation you can probably hear the song in your head. It got as high as #2 on the charts and is now listed in *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of *The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time* at position 239. In many ways, that song captures the adventure and danger in a wanderer's life. His life roams around and never settles down. His relationships are temporary. He doesn't really connect with where he is, where he's been, or where he is going. He is lost, wondering vaguely if there's something better, but caught in the not-so-merry-go-round of wandering. Unfortunately, if you are a wanderer, or have been one, it's hard to admit this is reality even in rare quiet moments of reflection.

There is a command expressed in the title of this chapter: "Go Get the Wanderer." From Jesus' parable of the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep, to James' sober call to action, the message is the same: "Go get the wanderer! Go get them!" I'm going to be repeating the command a few more times in these pages.

I'm also going to try and motivate you to take action. Let's start with this reality—

THE PROBLEM EXISTS.

Men and women everywhere have a tendency to wander—even in the church. Sheep wander, even in the flock of the Good Shepherd. That's why James includes the problem in his practical letter to believers. The whole book of James is about growing up and going forward in your faith, getting to a place of maturity, and developing completeness as a disciple of Christ. Full-blown discipleship is what James is all about.

As he comes to the end of the book, James is talking about maturity expressed in praying for the sick. But not just anyone who is sick—praying specifically for the person who is sick because of sin. Is all sickness because of personal sin? No. Some people suffer sickness and hardship for the glory of God. When Jesus' disciples noticed a man who had spent his whole life blind they asked, **“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”** Jesus answered, **‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’**¹ They assumed only sin can explain sickness; Jesus knew better. Though it's not *always* because of sin, sometimes sickness *is* caused by sin. If you realize you are suffering because of your sin, you need to confess it and pray in faith. Ask others to pray for you. It's all there in James 5:16: **“Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”**² He then gave the example of Elijah who prayed for the healing of a land.³ Unbelievable. Most books in the Bible close with a final greeting, “Say hi to so-and-so and keep in touch.” Not this one. James ends his letter with a

call to go get the people who have lost their way.

Let's take these two closing verses a phrase at a time. The expression, "**My brothers,**" aims to get our attention: "Now don't miss this *last* thing!" The song "The Wanderer" we mentioned earlier laments the tendency of all human beings to wander. However, James' real concern is not wandering people, but wandering Christians. He's calling on brothers to care for brothers. He wants sisters to look out for sisters. He's thinking about people who embrace the truth and then wander away from it. No doubt you're thinking of some who fit the wanderer category. Or maybe you realize someone has *you* in mind.

So when James reaches out and says, "**My brothers,**" what he's saying is, "Listen up! Go get the wanderers, my brothers, my sisters." Everyone's included in this. I wish we still used the word *brethren*; it seems kind of old-fashioned, but everyone understood that *brethren* meant *brothers and sisters*. No one's off the hook on this one. James is emphatic—"My brothers and sisters—family of God! Go get the wanderer!" Wandering was a problem then, and it is now. Going astray is a reality we have to deal with if we're really family; if we are truly brothers and sisters.

Notice James' next phrase, "**My brothers, if anyone among you.**" Again, nonbelievers are not in view here. He's talking about people among us, folks who once were with us. These are fellow Christians you could probably think of right now. "They used to sit behind us in church. Where are they?" If you're typical, you probably sit in the same general location in the worship

center and come to the same service each week. You could probably run a little inventory of the people you sit near. “So what happens if the people who used to sit beside me or near me disappear? I don’t see them anymore. I haven’t heard why sister so-and-so is missing. Should I notify someone?” It’s very important that you find out what happened to them.

Think for a moment about this phrase: “**If anyone among you.**”

You may find yourself asking, “Well, who are we talking about exactly by the term *wanderer*? Can you give me some examples?”

We surveyed 100 people and the Top Five Answers are on the board to this question: Name a kind of person who wanders.

(1) A prodigal wanderer.

This person’s motto is, “You’re not going to tell me! Nobody tells me what to do. I do what I want to do.” Sometimes being a prodigal is related to being young and rebellious. Sometimes, though, it has nothing to do with age. You could be in your sixties, still be willful and stubborn, and say, “I want to do my thing, my way.” This is the prodigal wanderer. “I’m following my own path!”

(2) The pleasure-seeker.

This person isn’t willful, just selfish.

“I want what I want.”

“Why are you doing that?”

“Cause I *want* to!”

“Yeah, well those choices are going to hurt you.”

“Well, I don’t *care*! I do what I *want* to do because it feels good *now*.”

This is the person who has found a particularly tempting sin. The Bible says “**the pleasures of sin**”⁴ are for a season. They don’t last. But this person says, “I’m going to enjoy myself. This makes me happy, and it’s what I want to do. I’m having too much fun to worry about what’s coming down the road.” That’s the profile of a pleasure-seeker. They’re out there wandering. If you were to talk to them, they might be really nice about it. They’re not willful like the prodigal, but their behavior is care-less. You might ask, “Why don’t you stop?”

“Cause I don’t want to, and I haven’t heard a good reason why I should.”

(3) The wounded wanderer.

Now if you talk to a wounded wanderer, he or she has a story. “I used to go to church. I used to love God. I used to study my Bible.”

“What happened?”

Out comes the story, and it usually involves a person. Maybe it was a parent or a pastor or someone else who claimed to be in a place of spiritual authority. “People who I trusted failed me. They hurt, wounded, and disappointed me. I’m disillusioned now, so I’m not with God anymore.” Though their pain is not because of God, but caused by the actions of another person or group, God may really be who they blame.

(4) The ashamed wanderer.

This person lives with a sense of shame over mistakes and

sins of the past. What happened to them? Galatians 6:1 says, **“If anyone is caught in any transgression . . .”** Sometimes sin seems to run you down and tackle you.

“I was going along, trying to live for God. But I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up! I stumbled into something, and I can’t go back to church. People know what happened to me! People realize what I did! I’m going to feel so ashamed. I can’t *face* those people!” Sound familiar?

Part of what makes our church wonderful is that it’s filled with people who understand life’s detours. They know about shame and offer a very loving, safe place where broken people can come. That’s because they were once broken themselves! They say, “I was that person at one time in my life. I was *ashamed* to go to church.” For many in our church, that’s our story. And most of us know someone who is far from the Lord today because they just can’t face God’s people. Have we tried to reach them?

Here’s the last identifiable group of people we need to watch for:

(5) The distracted wanderer.

“Why aren’t you at church today?”

“Well, I don’t know. I couldn’t tell you how or when, but God disappeared from my life.”

Sometimes the distracted wanderers are even at church, but not really *there*! The lights are on, but no one’s home. Their attention is somewhere else. The afternoon football game may not start for hours, but they are into the pregame show in their

minds. Ask the distracted wanderer to come to church, and they say, “Sure! Where are we going for lunch afterwards?” They’re not *on* task. They just don’t get the point. They’re not plugged in. They can listen to someone pouring out his heart about life with God, and their response is, “Yeah, I’m not seeing it.”

You may have been that person. Your story is one sentence: “I just didn’t get it!” Or maybe you know and love someone like that?

Now listen to me: Go get the wanderer! Track down that person. They’re not going to come back without some help.

The problem of wanderers exists in the church. “**My brothers, if anyone among you . . .**” Notice it’s *anyone*. You just have to stop and say, “This could be anyone.” There are people who God’s Spirit is going to bring to your mind while you are reading this. Has it already happened? Has someone’s face unexpectedly popped into your mind? Guard yourself against the thought, “Oh, not him. Not her. They’re too far gone. They’re not coming back! I’ll start with an easier one!” But no one is beyond the reach of God’s grace. No one has gone so far that they are out of God’s sight.

When the text says *anyone*, you can’t say, “They’re too far gone.”

When God’s Word says *anyone*, you can’t say, “It’s too complicated or too messy. I can’t really get into that.”

You can’t make those excuses when God’s Word says *anyone*.

James continues, “**My brothers, if anyone among you . . .**” Now the big word: **wanders**. The NASB says “strays.” The Greek

term actually is *planetai* from which we get our word *planet*. In New Testament times they obviously didn't have Google Maps or a GPS. Ancient people kept track of direction when they traveled by using the sun and stars. Early on, they included the planets as guides—problem! The planets changed location in the sky, so there were not great results. “When I used to follow that planet, I would get to Indiana, but now I end up in Minnesota.” Planet tracking wasn't super reliable. The idea that the planets shifted—*planetai*—came to mean *something moving, wandering*. Here's a good definition: to wander is to proceed without a proper sense of direction. That's what wandering is—spinning out of orbit.

Planetai is the same Greek word used in Hebrews 11:38 regarding faithful people who were wandering without homes (but not without purpose!). The same expression appears in Matthew 18:12 when Jesus talked about people who were wandering like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus reflected the shepherd's heart of deep compassion for the wandering sheep.

Now there's a little confusion here with the word *wanders*. I don't want to get into a complicated grammar lesson, but in the original language of these verses, it's hard to tell whether James has a person in mind who just wandered off. “Whoa! I'm over here now. I didn't have any plan. I didn't expect to end up in this place. I just woke up one day and wasn't where I used to be.” That's one kind of wandering.

But another kind of wandering describes a person who was drawn away, a person who was taken by a wolf. Jesus talked

about wolves in sheep's clothing. In Matthew 7:15 He said, "**Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.**" These lost sheep used to believe the truth, but now they believe error. They used to listen to what was right, but they started listening to what was wrong, and it drew them away. Someone came and got them and took them away.

Both things happen: people foolishly wander off, or negative, destructive relationships come along, get in someone's head, and draw them away. So we have two wanderers in mind: the foolish "how-did-I-get-over-here?" wanderer, and the person who's been led away by someone. Both are true.

Let's pause here for a few moments because the longest journey begins with one step. While the remainder of the chapter focuses on the person who today may be far from the church, we must acknowledge that wandering begins with an initial step.

Kathy and I like to watch some of those news magazine programs. Not long ago we saw a *Dateline* story of a one-year-old Canadian girl named Erika. Somehow she wandered out of her house in the night while her parents were sleeping. She didn't realize where her little steps were taking her and she spent the entire night outside in an Edmonton winter. How cold is that? When her mother found Erika, she appeared to be totally frozen. Her legs were stiff; her body was blue. All signs of life seemed to be gone. But there is a popular saying among rescue workers: No one who's frozen is called *dead*; they're only dead

when they're warm and dead. Erika was treated at Edmonton's Stollery Children's Health Center. God helped the doctors bring her back to life. To the amazement of all, there appeared to be no sign of brain damage. They gave her a clear prognosis; she would soon be able to hop and skip and play like other girls her age. Sadly, the outcome of her amazing wanderer story isn't seen often enough in those who wander from the faith.

Maybe as you're reading this chapter, you recognize a warning about your situation. You haven't wandered off yet. You've taken one or two steps in the wrong direction. You're out on the ice right now. You're thinking, "Look at me! I didn't go down! I didn't fall through!"

Listen—take one or two more steps and the ice will shatter. I want you to realize this as we talk about going out and getting the wanderers, *you don't have to be that person.*

You don't have to crash through the ice, devastate your family, and bring that mess to the church in a basket where everyone has to spend months piecing it all back together, because you were too stupid or stubborn to listen. For everyone's sake, we hope you come back sooner rather than later!

You can wake up right now and get back to shore with the rest of us. Stop being foolish and playing around with nonsense that you know is going to trash you and the people you love! Don't do it! Come back! Maybe you've made a foolish decision or allowed desire—a wrong desire—to begin to grow. You're playing with the fire. "See? I'm not singed! I didn't get burned!!" Come back—right now! Receive this word as coming from the

Lord Himself. Don't wander off. Don't think you can beat the odds—you cannot!

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back . . .” Notice, from what do they wander? The Bible answers, *the truth*. This is not a term that invites creative translation—it's straightforward.

Isn't it interesting? It doesn't say, “wanders from Jesus.” Now, *Jesus is the Truth*. He said, **“I am . . . the truth.”**⁵ So in that sense we could say he wandered from Jesus. It doesn't say, “wanders from the church,” although the church is implied in the context. The Bible calls it **“the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”**⁶ Yes, James does include the Lord and the church in this passage. But at the center of it all—the core—is what we believe. God has made some statements and we believe them. When you wander, you are wandering *from* the truth. You're wandering *into* error. How's that going for you, wanderer?

If you're ready to be honest, you would have to say, “Not great.”

So it's time to come back. Yes, you come back to a place and to a people; certainly you come back to a Person—God. You will also come back to the truth itself. Jesus said in John 17:17, **“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”** This is very good news because it's a frightening thing to be away from the truth of God's Word. David said in Psalm 119:105, **“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”** Think of God's Word as light in your life. People who have wandered from the

truth are not in the light; they are in darkness. If you were in a large room that suddenly turned pitch black, you'd be calm for a moment or two. Then someone would scream. And, before long, it could get pretty crazy. It's not great to be in the darkness. **"Your word is a lamp . . . a light to my path."** God's Word is light *and* direction. God's Word shows us where to go, tells us what to do, and helps us know what's right and wrong. It's guidance.

Allow God to begin to stir in your heart what it's like to be in darkness with no sense of direction. Because that's the condition the wanderer finds himself in as he wakes up today. You can pray, "I don't know what he was doing last night. I don't know where he is going this weekend. But if he's out there, he's lost in the darkness. He doesn't know what's up or down. He doesn't know where to go. He doesn't know how to get out. Meet him there, Lord." His condition may seem obvious to the rest of us, but it's not apparent when you're the one in the darkness.

You might say, "It's so clear. They know where they left."

Remember, they lost their way. Wanderers need us to find them! That's what this is all about. We are praying for the same heart Jesus expressed as He looked at the crowds following Him: **"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."**⁷ Jesus left heaven to come find us!

James is inviting our attention: **"If anyone among you wanders from the truth . . ."** Someone has wandered from the truth. Do you have any compassion for this person? Is your

heart heavy for them, for the hard situations in which they find themselves?

“You know what? I *told* them this! I warned them. They’re just getting exactly what I told them.” Is that how you feel? Because that is *so* not God’s heart. Just think about what it would be like to wake up today, lost in the darkness. Couldn’t God stir compassion in you for such a person?

God loves the wanderer the *same* as He loves you and me. God forgive us for any sort of self-righteous thinking, “They’re getting what they deserve.” God simply does not respond that way. Not toward them—and not toward us!

Here’s the second point. Are you ready for good news?

THE REMEDY IS POSSIBLE.

Complete solutions are not typical in life. Would you agree? A lot of things happen for which there is no remedy.

What do you do at your house when a lightbulb burns out? You don’t try to fix it. You change it. That’s not really a repair; it’s a replacement. You didn’t fix the lightbulb. You pitched it and screwed in a new one. What happens to a business that goes bankrupt? You might start a new business, but the current one? You’re done with that. You can fix a problem, but you can’t fix something that’s dead. It’s done. It’s over.

Now here’s the really good news. We could not insist, demand, or require that almighty God receive back wanderers—but He *does*. He welcomes them. He restores them. He forgives. This is crazy—He *celebrates* them! **“There will be more joy in**

heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons.”⁸ Heaven is fired up every time a wanderer comes home. Isn’t that fantastic? So the remedy is possible.

Here in James 5:19 we see it: **“and someone brings him back.”** Think of the person you know who’s a prodigal—a pleasure-seeking, wounded, ashamed, or distracted wanderer. I want you to begin to picture differently the wanderers you know. Believe God’s Spirit is stirring in your heart and bringing to mind a specific person or two for you to approach and attempt to bring back. God is working in all of this. Of course you can think of the obvious person—a son or a daughter or a sister or a brother. The people we love most, the people closest to us, those are the people toward whom our hearts immediately go out.

But let me make a painful observation. Sometimes the obvious wanderer is not the person you’ll be able to go get. Chances are you’ve probably already made a couple of moves in that regard. Reading this might get you all motivated and you will want to get right in their face. “It’s time, man! You’re coming back right now!” That’s not going to go well because you’ve probably already cashed a lot of chips in their direction. Your wanderer’s guard is up. Here’s what I’d suggest: God is going to have to touch someone else’s heart to go get them. You may come to the place where you realize they’ll have to hear it from someone else. So pray for the obvious wanderer, but go get the less obvious one God puts on your heart. Then trust God to put the one closest to you on someone else’s heart. I’m not saying you shouldn’t do anything, but you may not be the point person

God will use in your loved one's life.

Instead, why don't you think of a person you knew in school or someone you haven't talked to for a long time who would be surprised to hear your voice? You might have to do a little bit of work to even find him or her. Maybe it's a friend you've grown apart from or someone you used to see in church.

A woman in our church wrote a beautiful letter to a couple she used to sit near every week. They would talk. She knew their first names. They would pray together before or after the service. Suddenly, she didn't see them. They were just gone. A few months later she saw the wife in a grocery store. She asked, "What happened to you? Are you okay?" The wife had to hurry, but it was obvious she was really burdened. Something had happened—maybe she was wounded. So our member wrote her a letter. She's trying to get those wanderers. Let God touch your heart with a person like that.

Notice in the text, not just anyone, but . . . "someone." **"If anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings them back . . ."** *Someone's* got to go get them. God will reach them through a person. Are you anyone's someone?

Actor Kirk Cameron got a lot of attention a few years ago for his work in the movie *Fireproof*. I didn't know him until he invited me to go out to California for an interview on TV. We have since become friends. One of the unusual things about Kirk, which I've kind of teased him about, is that he carries tracts wherever he goes—those little printed gospel presentations—quirky thought provokers. One of the types he hands out is

a million dollar bill that has the gospel on the back. Not real money, but a true message.

Kirk is bold with these things. He was at a resort in Santa Barbara and came across a whole bunch of NBA players with their bodyguards. They were sitting around a table having a very private, high-stakes card game. Kirk walked up to the table, pulled out his million-dollar tract, put it down, and said, “I’m in!”

They didn’t say a single word to him. They just turned and gave him a look that said, “In? You’re going to be in the ground if I’m still looking at you in thirty seconds.”

So he said, “Thank you, gentlemen,” and backed away from the table, leaving behind his bill.

I’m not trying to put down the tract-leaving approach, but most authentic life change in people I see happens face-to-face and life on life. You won’t be able to simply put a “door-knocker invitation” on the wanderer’s house and then wait to see them at church. Don’t sail a gospel blimp over their neighborhood. It’s going to take direct contact and a personal touch.

I was driving down to Indiana this week and saw a huge billboard. In big block letters—white on black—it said, “HELL IS REAL.” I seriously doubt a person will be driving down the freeway wandering from God and think, “Wow! Hell is real? Why didn’t someone tell me? Okay. That changes *everything*.”

The point is not to cut down the billboard or lose the gospel tract. God bless them—they’re trying to do something. The point is that God’s Word says, “**someone brings him back.**” *Someone*. It’s a person. Don’t just hang a door knocker or hope

they drive by a billboard. Don't avoid the tension of a personal contact. Go get the wanderer!

Begin to think, "Who is it for me? Who do I need to go find who didn't immediately leap to mind? Who's not with the Lord right now who I used to love and care for?" They may not know anyone else who can share the hope you have to offer. Meditate on the message of Psalm 126:6, "**He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.**" When we start caring the way Jesus instructs us, we can expect a certain weight of sorrow in the effort. But the joy He promises will make it worthwhile. Go get the wanderer.

THE STAKES ARE HIGH.

Notice how James 5:19–20 continues: "**My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know . . .**" There isn't a better word that could have been chosen to give you confidence. *Know* isn't an idea you have to think about. *Know* isn't something you have to wonder about—it is a fact you can bank on. It means *to know as certainty*. "**Let him know, that whoever brings back a sinner . . .**" If "**whoever**" is you, God wants you to know this truth. If you are thinking, "Will I do this? Should I do this?" don't back away. Here's what you need to know. First, the stakes are high in bringing "**back a sinner from his wandering.**" The NIV says "**from the error of his way.**"⁹ Whether it's the sin itself or the wandering the sin has produced, our role remains: "**Whoever**

brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death.” The stakes couldn’t be higher. You’re going to **“save his soul from *death*.”**

What does *that* mean?

James is not talking about physical death. We know death is coming—for all of us. So obviously, by bringing a wanderer back to the Lord, you’re not saving him from physical death. The passage is not talking about the first death, it’s talking about the *second* death. As Revelation 20:14–15 says, **“This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”** It’s talking about hell. Bringing back a wanderer is going to save him from hell.

If you’re thinking, “I can’t save anyone. That’s what God does!” You are absolutely right. We’re not talking here about people wandering in and out of salvation like some kind of spiritual merry-go-round, where one week you’re on and another you’re off. One of the characteristics of an authentic Christian is that they continue in the faith. False professions and fake Christians leave and never come back. True Christians, though they may wander, come back.

At this point, if you are following along, you no doubt have a question: “My sister—she’s really out there right now. Is she saved?” We don’t know. Here’s what we *do* know: if she comes back, she was saved. God may have worked through you to bring her back. The fact that she came back is a confirmation that she was saved or, at the very least, is now saved. If she

refuses to return, and ultimately dies in that condition, it's confirmation that she never was saved. In any case, it's not for us to decide whether a wanderer needs salvation or restoration—our concern is to go get them!

Philippians 1:6 says, **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”** God doesn't give up on any of His children. He is not finished with them until they are finished. He may allow them to wander, but He will not leave them there. We go in His name to bring them back. Their return confirms God's commitment to them.

The stakes are high. If they stay out there, it's an indication they really never knew the Lord and won't be with us in heaven—or they are not yet done wandering.

Because the stakes are so high, finding wanderers is a messy business. You can get your feelings hurt and your toes stepped on. You could get called arrogant: “Who do you think *you* are to tell me anything about my life?” Given these fair warnings, are we selfless enough to risk our own safety and security? God forgive us if we huddle in our holy enclave and don't have our hearts moved for people who are in danger of eternal consequences.

It's a risky business to go after wanderers. You will feel the weight in your heart as you start conceptualizing. Every person who's out there has a little house of cards they built using all their reasons, rationalizations, explanations, and blame-shifting for why they're not in the fold right now. If you talk to them, you're going to hear all that content. Most of them are

not waking up today thinking, “Wow! It really stinks out here in Wanderville. I need to go home.”

But here’s the interesting thing: just let them get in a car accident, or receive a piece of bad news from the doctor. That house of cards will come *crashing* down and they will *call* out to God. In their heart of hearts, they *know* what’s true. You have to believe He is at work in their lives.

Even if you are reproved and rebuffed; even if you’re put off this time—mark it down—when they start heading back toward the fold, they will remember you as the person who cared enough to go to them even when they didn’t want to hear the truth. Go get the wanderer. Show them there’s a way back.

James 5:19–20 again says, “**My brothers [and sisters], if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**”

The last phrase is the final lesson we can take with us as we look at various wanderers in Scripture. In the rest of this book we will see:

The problem of wandering exists.

The remedy for wanderers is possible.

The stakes are high when we go after wanderers. And last,

THE REWARD IS GREAT.

If you bring back a sinner, you cover a multitude of sins. Psalm 32:1 says, “**Blessed is the one whose transgression**

is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” First Peter 4:8 advises, **“Keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”** Here is a great truth: you can have a prodigal or a pleasure-seeker out there right now, and when you think about what they might be doing, it can break your heart. But an amazing transformation happens when they come home—when they really come back to you and to the Lord. When a wanderer is restored, we don’t spend time talking about *their* sin. It’s forgiven!

What did the father of the prodigal do? He waited and waited for that son who was living like a pig. But when he came home, he *ran* to him. He fell upon him and gave him a bone crushing hug! He threw a party for him! That father celebrated with these words: **“Your brother . . . he was lost, and is found.”**¹⁰ He came home. Love covers sin.

Here is one of the messages that the wanderer desperately needs to hear. If you’re a wanderer, don’t miss this. Your past can be forgiven. Your hurts can be healed. Your sin can be atoned for. That’s the great truth of the gospel. We celebrate what Jesus Christ has done for sinful people—starting with us! The reward is great.

One of my favorite hymns was written by a man named Robert Robinson. More than a hundred years ago, Robert Robinson composed the great hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” Interestingly, in the second verse, he included the thought, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it.” Do you feel that tendency—your proneness to wander? When we sing that hymn, we ask

God to seal our hearts against that tendency to lose our way.

Curiously, it appears that after Robinson wrote that hymn, *he* walked away from God—not for a year, but for *three decades*. His proneness to wander became a pattern. He tried to get away from it all. Of course, did God go with him? Thirty years after his song was published, Robinson met a young woman who happened to be reading a collection of poetry. He was so distraught that he asked her, “Read to me from your book.” She unknowingly read to him the very words of the hymn he had written years before! Imagine the situation. She said, “Oh, listen to this encouraging thought! Someone wrote these words: ‘Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here’s my heart, O take and seal it . . .’” Apparently, Robinson not only admitted to having written the lyrics, but also to his deep longing to feel again what he had experienced with God when those words were inspired.

God will go with you as you go get the wanderer. They are often waiting for someone to care. Even if they aren’t, we’re under orders to make the effort in Christ’s name.

God, I pray in this moment that You would, in this reader and myself, stir such a longing, God, such a burden, that we can’t escape it. Fill each person reading this with a strong desire to reach those who may be as lost today as they once were. How Your heart longs for these people and how stubbornly we have navigated through life in our own interest or in the interests of those closest to us. But God, I pray You would touch our hearts

today with someone we can touch, someone lost in darkness, someone we can go get, Lord. We can speak Your Truth to them. We can reach out to them in love. Let our eyes be not upon the response. Let us focus on obedience. Use us as You see fit.

Lord, I know that we have our own burdens. These are not easy days. Some of us might think, "Going after wanderers is for a different season for me. Right now I need to focus on myself." Lord, cause us to know in our hearts that when we take up the pursuits that matter to You, You rush to our aid. You meet the needs we cannot meet for ourselves. Let us believe that when we have on our hearts what is on Your heart, we are in the best position to receive the things we need.

Cause us to purpose that all we do, we do for Your glory—for Yours alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.