

Louie Giglio

Not Forsaken

Finding Freedom as
Sons & Daughters of a Perfect Father

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*To my dad, Louie Giglio.
In spite of all the obstacles you had to overcome
with your father you were a great dad to Gina and me.*

*To my father-in-law, Milton "Bud" Graves.
A man of honor, wisdom, and strength.
I'm so grateful for all I've learned by watching you.*

*To every dad who's doing all you can to shower
your kids with a father's blessing.*

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Daddy, Watch Me!



Remember those lazy summer afternoons at the neighborhood pool when you were a kid? And remember how the atmosphere would change in a heartbeat if Dad showed up?

Mom was like a superhero, shuttling you and your siblings or friends from event to event, game to game. She was always there, like an air-traffic controller making sure all the important affairs in your life stayed in the air and stayed on schedule. No dentist appointment or friend's birthday party would be missed.

So of course Mom was at the pool. Who else would have carried all the floats and the cooler and the towels and snacks?! (Moms, we love you!) But Mom was often the under-appreciated, stabilizing force in your universe—like gravity or Newton's law of physics.

But then Dad would make an appearance and we'd lose our minds!

Thoughts like this one take me back to our annual family vacations in Florida when I was growing up. We stayed in the same motel every year, a fairly simple 1960s setup right on the beach comprised of two double-story buildings, their efficiency rooms facing one another across

a grassy lawn. The swimming pool was tucked in between the two buildings near the parking lot.

All of us kids (we normally took our vacation with two or three other families) spent most mornings in the pool waiting for our dads to return from their deep-sea fishing outing or their early morning round of golf. When the dads showed up back at the motel, exhausted I'm sure from being out in the sweltering heat, the oh-so-common exclamation arose from the swimming pool.

Daddy's here! YAAAAAY!

Our excitement soon led to chants of: *Dad, Dad . . . come in the pool!* Soon followed by the invariable cry shouted by kids the world over:

Daddy—watch me!

Do you remember a moment like this one? As soon as your dad arrived you couldn't wait to show him what you could do, what you had learned—your best dive, your best splash, your best underwater swim, your best jump. So you called out again, and you called out louder: *Daddy! Watch me! Daddy! Daddy! Look what I can do! Watch me float on my back! Watch me jump into the pool! Watch me, Daddy! I'm going to do my running dive! Hey—look at me! Are you watching me, Daddy! Daaa-aaa-aaa-dddy!*

What was happening in that moment?

Maybe you wanted so desperately for your dad to look your way. You wanted him to validate your new skills. You

wanted him to acknowledge how special you were to him. You wanted him to celebrate you. You wanted him to cheer for you.

Maybe you simply wanted your father to notice you.

You wanted him to look your way and say, *I see you*.

You wanted him to *be there*.

For you.

Can you still feel that moment—or a moment just like it? Maybe for you a scene like this one played out on the trampoline in the backyard. Or maybe it unfolded at your basketball game when you noticed your dad walk into the gym during halftime. Or maybe your “dad’s here” moment happened at your piano recital when, after peeking repeatedly around the curtain before your turn to perform, you finally saw the outline of your father’s frame in the doorway.

In each case you weren’t implying Mom’s opinion didn’t matter—that her approval wasn’t important. In fact, I want to say off the bat that this book is not intended to discount the amazing and irreplaceable role Moms play in our lives. Their blessing is essential, and we can’t fully flourish in life without it. It’s just that there was something different—and special—about what your daddy thought about you.

THAT PRIMAL CRAVING

This book is for everyone who has a father. And for all those who know what it’s like to long for a father’s

blessing—a father’s approval, affection, and attention. It’s for anyone who longs to hear your daddy say, *I love you and I’m so proud of you.*

Maybe that blessing has been there in your life. But maybe it hasn’t. Or maybe the blessing was there for a time, but then you sensed it slipping away. Or maybe the approval was never there in quite the way you wanted it to be. You always felt it was performance-based, not unconditional.

That’s the raw spot where we want to go to in this book. Because that longing for a father’s affection and approval is innate and universal—and a lot of us didn’t always get what we were desperate for from the man who was responsible for bringing us into this world.

That longing is unquestionably there when we’re growing up. We crave our dad’s attention and approval when we’re little kids, and we want so badly to hear him say:

That was incredible, baby girl.

Wow, Ace (that’s what my dad called me), that was the best game of all time.

I see you, Princess! Do it again!

Way to go, son! You’re getting so much better!

Yet, that longing is still there when we’re older too, even though it may show up in different and more complex ways. Every one of us is desperate for the approval of a father—no matter what our age. A recent study in *Psychology Today* underscores this need for a father’s approval, even at the

stages of life where we have matured and reached levels of success. Dr. Peggy Drexler writes:

In my research into the lives of some 75 high-achieving, clearly independent women, I knew that I would find powerful connection between them and the first men in their lives. What surprised me was how deep (and surprisingly traditional) the bond is, how powerful it remains throughout their lives, and how resilient it can be—even when a father has caused it grievous harm. No matter how successful their careers, how happy their marriages, or how fulfilling their lives, women told me that their happiness passed through a filter of their fathers' reactions. Many told me that they tried to remove the filter and—much to their surprise—failed. We know that fathers play a key role in the development and choices of their daughters. But even for women whose fathers had been neglectful or abusive, *I found a hunger for approval*. They wanted a warm relationship with men who did not deserve any relationship at all.¹

Did you catch that key phrase—the “hunger for approval”? The same can be said for sons as well as daughters. According to Dr. Frank Pittman, author of *Man Enough*, “Life for most boys and for many grown men is a frustrating search for the lost father who has not yet offered

protection, provision, nurturing, modeling, or, especially, anointment.”² That word *anointment* refers to being chosen, blessed . . . approved. We are all desperate for our fathers’ approval. But it’s not always there.

Without this approval, we can feel given up on, abandoned, deserted, or disowned. We can feel ignored or isolated or jilted or judged. There’s some kind of thirst we can’t quench on our own, a hole we cannot fill no matter how hard we try. This void, this lack of a father’s presence and

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approval, can feel like a shadow that is always there, an intangible missing piece we don’t even know how to find. In the words of Dr. Drexler, our happiness or satisfaction or contentment or peace, still passes through “a filter of [our] father’s reactions.”

And when that approval isn’t there, in one word, we feel . . .

forsaken.

That word, *forsaken*, means to be left behind or to be left in a difficult condition by someone when you really needed that person to stay. But know this—the God of heaven is not moving on without you. He’s not walking out on you or trying to inflict pain on you.

Maybe the word you would have chosen would be *angry*. Or *abandoned*. Or *misunderstood*.

But underneath it all is a sobering sense that your father cared about something more than your best.

I know that even mentioning this need for a father's approval might be problematic for you, striking a nerve close to the surface or tapping into a hurt you tried to bury eighty feet underground, and you're thinking, *I don't want to go there*. It's also possible that although you're just a few pages into this book, you realize the issues with your dad are more real than you'd like to admit. Maybe the walls are already rising around your heart.

On the other hand, some of you had great fathers, and you know what's it's like to live in the rays of a father's blessing, the marvelous light of a father's love. If that's the story of your life's journey that's something to celebrate and be grateful for, but don't toss this book aside thinking it's not for you. I promise there's a great reward waiting for you in these pages as you discover more of what it means to be a loved son or daughter of the King.

The greatest likelihood is that many of you have never known the blessing—or the *full* blessing—of your earthly dad. What's worse, some of you are stuck with the fact that the possibility of ever hearing your dad say, *I love you and I'm proud of you*, is gone—washed away by death or distance or disinterest. The blessing you long for is mired in a pit of regret, pain, or abandonment. This is your reality,

and there's little or nothing you can do to change it. You feel like it's too late.

All of us have different experiences with our dads. But what unites us is the need that's woven into our souls—the need to be loved, and treasured, and noticed, and accepted by our father. No matter how defiantly we may try to dismiss the craving that's in our hearts for a father's blessing, we still need it. Deep down we all simply must have it. We all are incomplete without it. Our lives move on from the summer days at the pool as kids, but the need for a father's approval is always there.

I understand that this book is landing in the hands of people from all walks of life and all ages. If you're twenty-three years old and coming off the heels of eight years of misery since your dad split, then you may be more in touch with what I'm saying than others. But, it's also true that if you are a forty-nine-year-old living on the Upper East Side of New York City whose career is booming and who is reading right now at your Hamptons weekend house, you are just as likely to be in desperate need of the approval of your father.

We're all intrinsically wired to flourish under the waterfall of our father's blessing. If something goes wrong, and that needed flow is diverted, the sting we feel is real, and the downstream consequences cannot be ignored—even if we try to push them into the distance.

For me this came into super clear focus when I was eighteen years old and one of the biggest decisions of my

life seemingly came out of nowhere. Like a lot of college freshman, I didn't yet have a solid life map. My plan was to ride the wave of tennis as far as I could. Having made that the main obsession of my life through the later years of high school, I thought I'd give it a go at Georgia State University and hope for the best. Yet, that train didn't even get out of the station before I sustained an injury early in fall tryouts. I soon realized this path was both unrealistic (I just wasn't good enough) and unattainable because of the torn muscle in my side, even if I had been good enough. I could have chosen to grind away at it, but I'd be so far behind I'd never catch up.

But, God had a different plan anyway.

He hadn't gifted me to crush one-handed backhands with pinpoint precision. No, my skill set orbited in the zone of communication. Public speaking, to be specific. Though I hadn't fully realized it for myself, I was comfortable speaking in front of people (some researchers say this is the number one fear of most people) and had above average ability. That led to opportunity, whether speaking to the student body at school or giving a short talk on a mission trip with the youth group from church. And that led to a path I never could have imagined back when I tore that muscle in my side.

Whenever an occasion arose where someone needed to step up and speak into the moment, people invariably looked my way. And while those early attempts at influencing and encouraging people through spoken messages were

rough around the edges, people would say I did well, and then more opportunities would come my way.

Shortly after my tennis dream went down the tubes, untangling my heart from that obsession, God arrived with a startling announcement—He was calling me to preach. I'll admit I hadn't seen that one coming, but it made sense. All my experiences and passions, as well as my budding ability, aligned with His call. It felt like I was suddenly zeroing in on understanding the unique way that God had gifted me, and seeing how that might lead to a life path.

OUR INTRINSIC WIRING

God has wired each of us with unique abilities, aptitudes, and desires. Somewhere in the nexus of these lies our created gifting—the pathway that we will follow on earth. The heart of our reason for being is to know and love our Maker and enjoy Him forever. Nothing is more important than that, nothing surpasses that core purpose. Yet, within our relationship with God, He tailors us to make our unique contributions to the greater good for His glory, giving our individual lives very specific meaning and direction.

His plan for you is not mere existence. It's way beyond mere drudgery or a job you can't stand and aren't good at. He has woven into your heart a gift and a dream so that you can invest your days in meaningful pursuits that make your heart come alive and help others hearts come alive also.

Back at Georgia State with my newfound calling, I began to understand that my purpose was to tell the story of Jesus to the world. This realization was accompanied by trepidation and excitement, but my heart was on fire with a desire to say, *Yes*, to God, a desire that overwhelmed my fears. My pastor encouraged me to devote two weeks to prayer, and to immerse myself in God's Word. He also encouraged me to read the book, *So Send I You* by Oswald Chambers. That book led me to a passage of Scripture that confirmed what God was saying to me *and* what I was saying to God.

At the end of the two weeks I had my answer and was ready to tell my church that I was "surrendering" my life to God's call to ministry—to preach.

I was pumped, except for one thing—I needed to tell my dad.

My dad was awesome. But when it came to the most important part of my life—my relationship with Jesus—we didn't have much common ground. Ours was a bi-denominational family from the start. Dad was a non-practicing Catholic and an on-and-off attendee of our Baptist church, but never much an adopter of the "Jesus way." Mom was a praying saint. She was all in for Jesus, and the church. Mom was going to be thrilled at my calling. There was no problem there. But Dad wasn't going to know how to process my decision, and I wasn't sure how I was going to tell him. So, I was putting off talking to him about it as long as I could.

The days kept rolling by, and here it was the Sunday afternoon before the evening service where I planned to announce my decision during the response time at church. I knew time was running out. I couldn't make such a declaration in front of the whole church without telling my dad first. But how could I break news like this to him? Late in the afternoon I walked into the kitchen of our modest apartment where my dad was warming some leftovers on the stove. I swallowed hard, opened my mouth, and heard words coming out.

Dad, I have some big news. I feel like God is calling me to be a preacher. I'm going to tell the church at the service tonight, and it would be great if you could be there.

Awkward pause.

Dad just blanked. He was shocked. Caught off guard. Granted, I'd put him in a tough spot by springing the news of my decision in such a haphazard way. Finally, he managed to get out the words, *That's great, Ace.*

But his expression said it all.

I could sense the wheels turning in his head—*my son is going to be a Baptist preacher.* All of his golf and poker buddies' sons were either playing football for Auburn, or planning to be attorneys or accountants or something respectable. One buddy's son was going to take over the family business. This week, while a new hand was being dealt at the Friday night card table, the question would eventually come: *Lou, what's your kid doing, again?*

Um, he thinks he's going to be a preacher.

That's the last thing my dad wanted to say through the haze of cigarette smoke around the poker table. God had placed a captivating calling on my life, but as far as I could tell my dad was disappointed. I knew from that initial moment standing in the kitchen on that Sunday that we might never be able to fully share in the journey I was embarking on for the rest of my life. In the days that followed I could sense a tension building in my heart. On the one hand, I was so pumped about finding my true calling in life. But on the other hand, I also really wanted my father's approval. I wanted his blessing.

Sadly, my dad didn't turn up at the church service that night. What at first was an awkward gap between my walk with Jesus and his was now a little gash—right in the side of my heart. I knew Dad didn't mean any harm by not coming, but it hurt a little anyway. More than anything, I just wanted to have his approval.

Don't we all? We want our dad to see us. To acknowledge what we can do. To value who we are. To cheer for us and tell us they love us.

I understand that for some of you, the story about my dad's reluctance to initially celebrate my calling will resonate, while for others it produces a completely different range of emotions. You're thinking, *You're lucky, Louie. My dad wasn't even there to talk to about my life choices and big decisions. And if he had been, he just might have knocked me across the kitchen in anger and cursed God.*

Or for some of you, the phrase you heard when you confided in your dad about your dreams was, *Good luck with that. I doubt you'll ever amount to anything.*

Maybe your dad mocked your ambition. Or maybe he tried to superimpose on you his plan for your life.

We all have different experiences with our dads, but the craving for our father's approval is the same.

Some of you possess that blessing fully and you are thinking, *I love my dad!* When you shared your dreams with him he gave you that assuring nod and grin, and told you he'd do everything he could to help you. That kind of father is a gift, and if you have a dad like this I hope you'll thank him again today! Yet, for others there's a palpable, uneasy silence right now as you're reading, and you're thinking about bailing on this book. You don't want to peel back the layers of your heart about your relationship with your dad. It's too painful, and the hurts are too recent, too real.

But I encourage you to stay with me. Keep reading. Why? Because God is offering you a promise that has the power to change your life forever.

THE FATHER'S RESPONSE

The promise is this—no matter where things are with your earthly dad, you have a perfect Father in heaven who loves you and wants to pour out His blessing on you.

The Scripture says it this way, “Even if my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up” (Ps. 27:10).

Even if the blessing of our dad escapes us, the love of our heavenly Father can still find us. Even if our dad is dead and gone, our Father God can still hold us close and lift us up. Just because we have experienced a breakdown in our relationship with our dad, it doesn't mean we can't experience a miracle recovery in our relationship with God. Even though we may bear wounds inflicted by our dad, God can restore us and raise us up healed and whole.

This may be a far-fetched notion for you, like some *pie-in-the-sky* promise that's impractical or impossible. Or you may be thinking, as a lot of people do, *If God is anything like my earthly father, then I don't want anything to do with Him anyway.*

We all have different father stories to tell. Mine is mostly a good one, and although my dad wasn't perfect, he loved my sister and me, and did his best. Your experience with your dad may be the worst, a tale marked by tragedy that's too painful to even talk about. But here is the possibility we will uncover in this book: no matter what has happened on this side of eternity between you and your dad; you are *not forsaken* by God.

Maybe you can quickly recount the exact places and times and ways you *were forsaken* by your dad. You were abandoned. The memory is vivid and real. You were knocked down. You were lied to. You were hurt. You were rejected. You were devalued. You were ignored. You were held to a standard that no one could meet.

Yet, even when we are forsaken by the one whose blessing we need the most—one of life’s most debilitating blows—there is still a staggering promise available: “The LORD will take me up.”

God is a Father, but He’s not the same as your earthly dad. His heart is good, and His arms are strong.

While your life story to date may be a tangled mess of betrayal, disappointment, and defeat, history records that the God of heaven is for you. He made you. He sees you. And He wants you to know the joy of being a child of God, and of having the most excellent father possible. He Himself wants to be your Father, and He wants to shower you with His blessing. He wants to raise you up, show you the ropes, help you grow strong, and cheer you on as you pursue your God-given passion. He wants to put a safety net of His love under you so you can spread your wings and take flight without the crippling fear of failure holding you down.

It’s not the same as having your dad back, or having him become a different kind of father than he was or is. But the blessing God wants to give you is not to be discounted. In fact, the blessing of Father God is actually way beyond any human relationship. The best possible earthly father giving the most excellent blessing can’t compare to the smile of your heavenly Father. His love is supernatural and powerful, unending and unassailable. And His love means this for us:

NO MATTER WHAT HAS HAPPENED ON
THIS SIDE OF ETERNITY BETWEEN YOU
AND YOUR DAD;

YOU
ARE
NOT
FORSAKEN
BY
GOD.

#notforsaken

No one who knows Him as Father will be forsaken.

No one will be left behind.

No one will be orphaned.

No one will go unwanted.

No one's story will end with abuse and betrayal.

No one will have to live without a father's love.

No one, ever.

TAKING THE LEAP

All God is asking you to do is to give Him a chance. As we journey together through these pages, He wants to open your eyes to see Him as the kind of Father He truly is. He wants to tear down any misconceptions that have formed in your mind about Him as a result of your experiences or because of what you've heard others say about Him. And He wants to walk with you through the hard stuff, the pain you have endured as a result of a broken or strained relationship with your dad. He wants to begin to heal the hurt and make your heart live again.

God wants to bring you to the place where you believe and receive that what He says is true when He's talking about you as a son or daughter of the King of the universe. And He wants you to live fearless and free. He always stands poised and ready to take a step toward you. You just need to give Him the nod. Then simply be willing to take a baby step toward Him.

Go back to that summer day at the pool, because it can help us understand what this step towards God is going to look like. For many of us, Dad's arrival at the pool uncorked cries of *Daddy, watch me*, and sometimes, if we were lucky, Dad would jump into the water, too. That's when things really got fun. For me, it mostly meant trying to "dunk" my dad—to get him underwater by wrapping my arms around his head and putting all my weight on him—something I never managed to do until I was in my teens!

But when we were younger, Dad always wanted us to jump to him from the edge of the pool. Remember? Maybe we barely knew how to swim, but Dad wanted us to jump. Standing in waist-deep water a foot or two from the edge of the pool, he held his arms out and beckoned us to *jump!* While a few kids never looked back or hesitated, simply blasting off into their dad's waiting arms, most of us surveyed the scene more cautiously. We looked at the water—a seeming ocean waiting to swallow us up—and then back at Dad. Water. Dad. Water. Dad. Mom. Water. Dad.

Eventually, we jumped, overcoming our fear—and we discovered that Dad's heart was good, and his arms were strong. We'd repeat this as Dad backed farther away from the side of the pool and called us to trust him more. Each time, his heart was good, and his arms were strong.

Maybe for you there's a hiccup in the mix because crazy Uncle Billy got into the action and he was a little devious or deranged and actually backed away as you were in flight, allowing you to sink into the abyss before he plucked you

to safety. You're still a little scared reading this now. But by and large our dads were true. Their hearts were good, and their arms were strong. The result was a brief moment of airborne terror and a lot of laughter and joy once in our father's hands.

Similar to the summer pool scene, God is inviting you to take a step toward Him. It may look risky, and you may be fighting thoughts that cause you to run from the notion, fearing you'll plunge to the bottom of the deep end. If you come up at all, you'll resurface the pain of the past. Something may be telling you that if you jump, God will be like crazy Uncle Billy, and He'll let you down.

But here's a more likely scenario: after a small and uneasy moment while you begin to loosen your grip on whatever you're using to cope with the absence of your father's blessing, you'll take that tiny jump, and you'll find your heart laughing in the arms of a Father who is offering you the best blessing you could ever know.

The journey through these pages may not be pain free, but I am confident in the power of the message in this book, and have seen it transform hearts throughout the years. I first shared these truths at a college Bible study more than thirty years ago, and I've had the privilege of sharing them with singles, teens, and people of all ages. Every time I share them, God breaks through in people's hearts (including mine) and opens eyes to see Him like He truly is. I'm praying He's going to do it again—for you.

Knowing God intimately as a perfect Father that you can love and trust and lean on and follow may seem like a mirage in a desert of deflated hopes and dreams. But it's both possible, and likely, that by the time you finish the last page of this book you'll be in a completely different place in your approach to God, and in your understanding about the way He's been pursuing you all this time.

The groundwork comes next. I invite you to turn the page and keep reading, because it's time to discover the most important thing about you.