**The Plan**

**Prodigal Message #19**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Memory verse of the week:**

**Proverbs 21:31 ESV: “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord.”**

Dan and Brenda felt like God was at work. Having not been able to have children of their own and after two failed adoption attempts, two children from Russia (a 9-year-old boy and an 11-year old boy), essentially fell in their lap. Dan and Brenda felt like God was at work. Their friends and their church celebrated God’s goodness. However this “blessing” soon turned into a nightmare when their adopted sons fell into heroin and varied drug abuse, rebellion, and frequent arrests. A few years later, when the chaos was at its peak, Dan recounted,

*It wasn’t because we weren’t looking for help. I think we were looking in every direction that we could—from counselors to lawyers to policemen. Sometimes we found sympathetic ears, but oftentimes people didn’t really know what to do or say. It was very frustrating and lonely to be in that situation. I knew that our family was totally out of control. It felt like I had two full-time jobs, and my second job—parenting my two prodigals sons—felt like waging a war. I never knew if any of my family would be there when I came home from work. Sometimes the boys were just taking off, and Brenda got to the point where she wanted to leave too.*

*I could see that the wheels were falling off of this thing, and I didn’t have any more answers. I got to the point where I recognized that I didn’t have any control. That was a hard and scary place to be. I then realized that God didn’t want me to have a sense of control; He wanted me to decide whether I could really trust Him with my life.*

**So Dan and Brenda came to Prodigal—they needed a** “**plan**.”

**Introduction**

Everyone who walks through the doors of the Prodigal Ministry has at least a few things in common. They have a prodigal and have reached a point where they’re sick and tired of being sick and tired. They don’t like where they’re at, and their common cry is the need for a plan. In almost every instance, they’re searching for someone who understands and cares. They’re searching for a plan that will eliminate their prodigal chaos and restore order to their lives. This message deals with developing just such a plan.

**Who is the “plan” for?**

From the outset, you must realize that **a plan is primarily for you,** **not your prodigal**. However shocking or troublesome this may seem, you have to realize that your plan can not control your prodigal’s actions. It will almost certainly be more beneficial for them if they obey your plan, but you cannot control or compel their obedience. You can only control *your* obedience. If your plan is sound, scripturally based, and processed in wise community, then all you have to do in order for your plan to succeed is to be personally obedient*.* A plan can be successful even if your prodigal does not respond as you desire but, instead, stays on a destructive path. Your plan’s purpose should be for you to restore order and peace to your family, home, and life as well as for you to grow in your faith as you depend solely on God for the outcome of your prodigal situation.

**When is a “plan” needed?**

Every task that is undertaken will benefit from a well thought out plan**.** So, when is a plan needed? The answer is, “**Now**!” Everyone should have a plan for their life, even if they are not in prodigal chaos. So, before you get out of bed tomorrow morning, ask yourself these questions, “Why am I getting up today? What would God have me do today?”

A good plan evaluates where you are now and envisions where you want to go. And a successful plan anticipates all possible obstacles. Your Personal Mission Statement (PMS) reflects your character and values, which, in turn, guides the details of your plan. If your plan revolves around the belief that you are in control, then your focus will look quite different than a plan that is built on a biblical worldview and a dependence on God and the truth of His Word. An effective plan reduces chaos, restores order and peace, and provides a safe and loving environment for everyone involved. So, if you don’t currently have a plan, when should you develop one? **Right now**!

**When is someone ready for a “plan”?**

Even though we all *need* a plan, we’re not always *ready*. We only become ready **when we can finally handle the TRUTH**. There is a truth about your prodigal, about yourself, and about God that must be identified, accepted, and addressed.

The truth about your prodigal is that they’re on a journey. Their journey is unique, as is your own. We all individually have a race marked out for us (Hebrews 12:1; see also Ephesians 2:10). We are only in control of one journey and that is our own. We are to raise our children in their youth to be responsible, but how they handle those truths in adulthood is solely their responsibility—not ours. If we can accept these facts, then we can truly give our prodigals to God and allow them to reap what they sow—for their benefit as well as our own. We discussed this process at length in last week’s message (see Prodigal Message #18: “Laying Your Isaac Down”).

So, you’re not ready for a plan until you can truly “lay your Isaac down.” And you won’t be able to do that until you have hit your own bottom. You must realize that your current plan—if you even have one—is not working and that something has to change. Once you realize that your plan is non-existent, inadequate, or failing, you must next identify the reasons for such failure. In the overwhelming majority of cases, plans fail because of control issues resulting from a lack of knowledge of God and as a result, a lack of trust in Him.

This message comes near the end of the Prodigal curriculum in hopes that the principles you have learned and the work you have put in will have led you to the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2). Hopefully, this process has led you to the understanding of what you are and are not responsible for. You are to be a watchman for your prodigal, pointing out the dangers ahead and the proper path to travel on, yet allowing them to experience, and be shaped by, the consequences of their decisions if they disregard your guidance (Proverbs 24:11–12; Ezekiel 33:1–9). Hopefully, you have developed a clear understanding of the role that discipline plays in all of our lives and how such discipline is often the most loving thing that you can do for your prodigal. Only through such transformation—that is, the understanding and acceptance of such principles—can you fully trust God with your prodigal.

In summary, when you realize that God is supreme, that He is in control, that He has a race marked out both for you and your prodigal, that He is good, and that He is enough no matter what circumstances you face, then—and only then—are you ready for a plan. In light of last week’s message, you will be ready for a plan when you are ready to lay your Isaac down.

**Elements of a good “plan”**

As we have mentioned frequently throughout the Prodigal curriculum, your purpose determines your plan. At the Prodigal Ministry, we believe that the best plan is based on truth as defined by God’s Word (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Once a plan is developed, it must be processed carefully in the context of wise biblical counsel (Proverbs 15:22). This counsel must share a priority for God’s Word, but it’s critical that they also have prodigal experience. Even the wisest and most astute biblical scholars may struggle if they have no experience in dealing with addiction, manipulation, and prodigal chaos.

An effective plan follows the well-known “KISS” principle: “Keep It Simple Stupid!” Simple plans are those that are specific and measurable. The great part about simple plans is that they are easy to understand and follow. The hard part is that they clearly point out when boundaries have been crossed and, thus, when painful—but necessary—consequences must be carried out.

Finally, plans are more likely to be implemented and have a higher chance of success when all responsible parties are on the same page. One of our most seasoned Prodigal leaders humorously—but all too truthfully—pointed out that “prodigals always catch the slowest gazelle.” In other words, if there is a weak member in your “herd” (such as a codependent enabler), then the prodigal will instantly identify them and work feverishly to manipulate them in order to undermine the plan and the accountability it intends. So, everyone associated with the plan must be unified in their commitment to the plan.

**Plan development**

Over the years at the Prodigal Ministry,we have discovered that although plans are highly sought after, many people have difficulty developing them. However, we have seen much greater success in plan development when Prodigal leadership leads the way in helping participants understand their chaos clearly. This is the first, and potentially the most critical, step in developing a solid plan.

Once you have completed the two introductory groups at the Prodigal Ministry, Prodigal leaders will have collected your personal story of grace, your PMS, and your plan worksheet. As you transition from these groups to a working closed group, your leader will process all of this information along with the information that they personally gather from their personal interaction with you. Compiling everything together, they will place all of your information on a one-page “working diagram” that they will then present to you and your closed group for consideration and feedback. That diagram will present a picture of your “current chaos.” We have found that visually capturing one’s present chaos in a visual “snapshot” offers great clarity and benefit.

Next, your closed group leader and fellow experienced closed group participants will compassionately help you process your current circumstances honestly and biblically. The goal of this process is to come up with a diagram that you all can understand and agree on and that, most importantly, accurately defines the issues that are before you—that is, the “chaos.” The second goal can be achieved only after the problem is clearly defined, and that second goal is the development of a coherent and prudent plan that effectively deals with the chaos. Furthermore, you will—and this is critical—honestly review the fears and obstacles that may prevent you from implementing your plan.

At this point in your plan development process, you will need to define your “boundaries and consequences” (see Prodigal Message #17: Boundaries and Consequences). You will also need to determine which boundary violations are “deal killers” which demand the sternest of consequences—what we call “nuclear.” Nuclear consequences are typically defined as the withdrawal of all financial support and housing. They almost always come after an extended period of executing lesser consequences for repeated prodigal rebellion. Any nuclear consequence is the final and most severe consequence in any plan, so it must only be triggered as a last resort, when your prodigal commits a crime so severe that it merits such punishment. Such crimes might include your prodigal committing a felony, continuing to use or abuse drugs, getting arrested, or lying. While lying might, at first glance, seem out of place on a list of severe crimes, it might, in fact, be the worst infraction of all, as it undermines trust faster than anything else. For example, it’s easier to tolerate the admitted relapse of an honest and repentant prodigal than the repeated lies, denial, and manipulation of a rebellious prodigal (see the Parable of the Two Sons; Matthew 21:28–32).

There are no clear-cut rules for how and when you execute consequences for boundary violations. When Prodigal leaders provide wise counsel, we give direction, not *directions*. The specific details of the plan, including boundaries and consequences, are decided by the participants themselves, though those decisions should be informed by wise biblical counsel. There’s no such thing as a “perfect plan” in the prodigal journey. That’s why processing prodigal issues in a loving and supportive, but honest and critical, closed group setting is crucial. It helps participants develop a plan that is biblically sound. And that’s really all you can hope for—you have to leave the rest to God!

**Plan development for prodigal spouses**

Plans that involve prodigal spouses look different than those that involve prodigal children, parents, sibling, or friends. This is because of the uniqueness of the marriage covenant. Unfortunately, we live in a day and age in which the sanctity of marriage is being increasingly minimized. The worldview of this age says that you deserve to be happy, and if you are not happy in your marriage, then you should divorce and find someone else that makes you happy—until they don’t. God, however, looks at marriage much differently. He sees marriage as a “one flesh” union (Genesis 2:24–25; Matthew 19:3–6) which is intended to model the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22–33). Such a unique union molds, shapes, and sharpens each partner. And it displays, via a healthy relationship, the love of God to a world that so desperately needs it.

Now, while a full discussion is beyond the scope of this message, there are indeed “marriage killers” that can lead to separation or even divorce.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, let it be said that the exceptions for divorce are narrowly defined and should only be considered as a last resort; we should do absolutely everything we can to ensure that our marriages last a lifetime.[[3]](#footnote-3) For those participants who have prodigal spouses, Prodigal leadership offers wise counsel, often with the help the local church’s marriage ministry,[[4]](#footnote-4) to assist them in the development of a plan that is appropriate to their unique situation. Suffice it to say that defining boundaries and consequences for a plan involving a marriage covenant is complicated and cannot be generalized here. Such work must be tailored to each participant’s unique situation and worked out with great care, prudence, and prayer.

**Expectations for “plans”**

In our prodigal journeys, expectations are often just planned disappointments. What we think should happen and the timetable by which those things should occur rarely—if ever—do. Each of us only has one human perspective. God, however, holds the universe in His hands and has the “big picture” firmly in view. So trust Him!

We should always be optimistic and have high hopes, as all things truly are possible with God (Matthew 19:26; Mark 9:23). However, it would be irresponsible not to have a healthy understanding of the realities of dealing with prodigals and prodigal chaos. For example, it is common for parents to assume that once a plan is developed and delivered, the prodigal will test the waters for a long while before potentially escalating to actions that require nuclear consequences. Oftentimes, however, escalation is rapid. Sadly, the “nuclear option” often presents itself much sooner than anticipated. Therefore, plans must not be presented until its ultimate consequences are able to be enforced immediately and effectively. So, while we should hold on to hope and optimism, we should always hold our expectations loosely so as to avoid crippling disappointment.

**Additional plan “pearls”**

* Establish consequences which are commensurate to the offense.
* If the offense is “not working,” then a consequence to do *more* *work* is not typically helpful.
  + Some kind of loss of privilege would be a better option.
* The consequence of “getting a job” is more difficult to monitor than simply requiring that a certain amount of rent or payment be supplied by a certain day. Obviously, ill-gotten gains is unacceptable. On the other hand, having a four hour per week job may meet the job requirement, but it’s manipulative and doesn’t meet the goal of becoming responsible.
  + It’s best to specify a certain dollar amount rather than a percentage of a paycheck.
* Always provide a way “**home**.”
  + “Home” does not mean your physical home; it means the reconciliation of the relationship. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, the father was ready and waiting for his prodigal son to return home—and he did once he had come to the end of himself and repented of his erring ways. In the same way, you must always let your prodigal know that you love them and that you are ready for them to come “home.” Now, while your love for them should be unconditional, just like the Heavenly Father’s love for us, your trust of them must be earned. You desire a restored relationship but acknowledge that such reconciliation must be on appropriate terms.

**Questions to consider**

When you have developed your plan, you must then examine it in order to make sure it is sound. The following are some questions you need to consider when analyzing your plan:

* Can I really monitor this plan? (drug-testing, for example)
* Can I really enforce this plan? (selling a vehicle, for example)
* Who are the people that are going to hold me accountable to my plan?
* Am I tired and discouraged from just reading this plan because it’s too complex?
* What message does my plan send to my prodigal?
  + That he or she is capable? Or incompetent?
  + That I love him or her? That I care? That I believe in him or her?
  + That my trust can be earned with time and responsibility?
  + That I love God and trust Him with my life? Or that I trust only in myself?

The answers to these questions should indicate whether your plan is wise, biblically-based, and able to be carried out. The answers should be simple and intuitive; they shouldn’t require a lot of effort to come up with.

**What does a prodigal “win” look like?**

As leaders of the Prodigal Ministry, we have prayed long and hard about what fruit a good plan would produce and what “victories” God would want participants to take with them as they complete their time at Prodigal. Those fruits and victories are as follows:

* Richer **hope** in Christ
  + God has given us hope in only one person, and that is the person of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 1:1; Titus 2:11–14; Hebrews 9:8).
  + Each person should be able to articulate their story of grace verbally, clearly, and as simply as possible. We ask each person to write out their individual stories in their introductory group work so that it is clear, understandable, and ready to be shared. We must stand ready to give an account of the hope we have in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:15).
* Deeper **relationship** with God in Christ
  + A personal identity that is secure in the knowledge that you are a valued and beloved child of God
  + Greater trust in, and dependence on, God
  + Assurance that God is good, sufficient to meet our needs, and in control
* Clarity of purpose in a **Personal Mission Statement** (PMS)
  + Biblically sound
  + Simple and easy to follow
  + Focused centrally on bringing glory to God rather than glorifying ourselves
* Asuccessful **plan**!

**What does a successful “plan” look like?**

* Personal faith further developed
* Relationship and dependency on God deepened
* Godly leadership established
* Optimal recovery environment provided for your prodigal to come “home”
* Faith modeled to others
* Chaos minimized
* Hope restored

**Stand firm or stand down?**

Most Prodigal participants have cried wolf too many times. They have had past plans that were either ill-conceived or were not carried out due to fear and lack of trust in God. You must be honest about your fears, address them, and overcome them, or they will destroy you and your plan. The greatest fear of anyone who has a prodigal is that their prodigal might die. If you’re paralyzed by such a fear, then, as painful as it might be to hear, your prodigal may very well use that fear to their advantage. You must deal with the reality that you are not in control of the life and death of your prodigal. You must first trust God with your prodigal, and then you can move forward with your plan.

If you continue to voice empty threats, there is a point at which your prodigal will stop listening and responding. So, if you’re not completely ready to implement your plan, then it’s best to wait until you are. Just as your plan helps your prodigal hit their bottom, so also must you hit your own bottom and be ready to lay your Isaac down before you can truly be able and willing to develop a good plan and implement it once and for all.

When you implement and stick to a plan that places God in control, one in which you trust God alone for the outcomes, you bring Him glory. Such faithfulness and obedience models belief in, and commitment to, Jesus Christ. So, the wise development and careful execution of a plan must be your top priority—for you, for your prodigal, and for the glory of God in Christ Jesus.

**Conclusion: Dan and Brenda**

Remember Dan and Brenda? Well, with the help of their Prodigal Ministry family, they developed a plan and faithfully—though painfully—followed it. There are no guarantees concerning the outcome of our prodigal journeys, but we can find encouragement in Dan and Brenda’s story. Dan recounts,

*The hardest thing was asking Nathan to leave our home. I could see it coming for almost a year before it happened, as we watched the direction of our boys’ lives careening toward self-destruction. I asked Nathan to leave—and he did. He left our house with very little money, no job, no driver’s license, and no car (he had never learned to drive). He walked out of the door with a suitcase. It wasn’t an easy morning watching him pack; it was the hardest thing we ever had to do.*

*But through it all, I feel like Brenda and I have learned that God really can help you live in the midst of turmoil, doing what He has called you to do. Before we came to Prodigal, we allowed our boys to take control of our lives. I wasn’t available to the Lord, and I wasn’t living victoriously. It was consuming me.*

*I believe the Lord has taught me things that I would never have learned otherwise. God has also shown me that letting our son suffer and letting him reach his bottom is part of loving him. Now we can see that our suffering was God allowing us to go through a process that helped us learn who He was and who we were in Christ. We had gotten to the point where we could say, “Lord, whatever it takes for him to get where you want him to be, we’re all in.”*

*Nathan began this nine-month journey of absolute and utter failure in everything that he did. He was fired from jobs. He lived with friends and was repeatedly kicked out. And within nine months, he was on the streets, destitute.*

*Nathan was finally desperate enough to listen to someone, maybe for the first time in his life. He chose to go to rehab. He went in as a non-believer, but three months later, he listened to the voice of the Lord and accepted Christ as his savior.*

*When I came to Prodigal, it was a great reassurance to hear that this prodigal journey could actually be about me. I realized that my boys weren’t changing at all, but* I *was. I was learning things that I had never learned before. I was learning more about who God was and seeing myself more clearly. The most amazing part is seeing a new baby Christian, our son Nathan, ministering to other people. How does that happen if not by God’s grace?*

Later in Dan and Brenda’s journey, their youngest son, Luke, was in the same rehab program that Nathan had been in, and Dan was recovering from emergency surgery to repair his fractured hip. Dan updated Prodigal leadership in an email one evening:

*Seriously, it is amazing to see Ephesians 3:20 in this [“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us”]. Last evening, Brenda contacted Breaking Free to inform Luke about my accident and broken hip. While in the program, they keep the guys on a pretty short leash, for obvious reasons. Normally, the guys get a 5-10 minute call each weekend to a family member (imagine ANY 21-year-old restricted to 10 minutes a week on a phone). Luke has been there 11 months, which is miraculous. He got a 20 minute call last night, and he called me. We talked about how he was doing, and he asked me for advice on how to better process some of the accountability things he struggles with in the program. Then, at 18 minutes, he stopped and asked if he can pray for me. Were it not for a broken leg, I might have fallen out of bed! Then, for two of the most memorable minutes of my life, my prodigal son prayed a beautiful prayer for his dad.*

*God is good. All the time.*

**Closed Group Discussion Questions**

**Day 1**

This week’s message clearly points out that the prodigal plan is about YOU. Discuss the challenges or the encouragement of encountering this truth.

**Day 2**

This week’s message lists the objectives that the Prodigal Ministry would like to see implemented in your life before you leave your time with us. List those objectives and how you are doing so far in reaching them.

**Day 3**

This week’s message discusses the distinction between when you *need* a plan and when you are *ready* for a plan. How can you apply this concept to your current situation? List why you need a plan and elaborate on your readiness to develop and deliver it.

**Day 4**

This week’s message discussed the elements of a good plan. What elements were new to you? Which ones did you find helpful?

**Day 5**

It is critical that you understand your chaotic situation clearly in order to develop a plan that results in order, peace, and joy. Please clearly define your present chaos and list the big issues before you that you must overcome.

**Day 6**

What are the obstacles preventing you from developing and executing the plan you want and so desperately need?

**NOTES**

1. The audio version of this message is available at: [http://s3.amazonaws.com/Wccaudio/recovery\_20170](http://s3.amazonaws.com/Wccaudio/recovery_20170725_prodigal.mp3)‌[725\_prodigal.mp3](http://s3.amazonaws.com/Wccaudio/recovery_20170725_prodigal.mp3). The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/jven0jpJQWE>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See “Watermark’s Pastoral Statement on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage,” Watermark Community Church, Dallas, TX, October 27, 2014, <http://www.watermark.org/blog/marriage-divorce-remarriage/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Blake Jennings, “Divorce and Remarriage,” sermon at Grace Bible Church: Southwood, College Station, TX, November 8, 2014, <http://www.grace-bible.org/resources/sermons/divorce-and-remarriage-southwood>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, Watermark Community Church has a marriage ministry called *re:engage*; [http://www.water](http://www.watermark.org/dallas/ministries/re-engage)‌[mark.org/dallas/ministries/re-engage](http://www.watermark.org/dallas/ministries/re-engage). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)