

KEITH JENKINS

**LANDMINES
OF MANHOOD**

**How to Lead
Without Blowing Up Your Life**

© 2025 Keith Jenkins. All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

Introduction:	Lost Without a Map	5
	How to Use This Book	9
1.	The Mission	11
	When You Chase Something to Prove Something	
2.	Identity	19
	When the Applause Isn't Enough	
3.	Faith	29
	When God Says "Not That Way"	
4.	Own It	37
	When Blame Becomes a Barrier	
5.	Sexual Integrity	45
	When Compromise Feels Safer Than the Truth	
6.	Pride	53
	When Strength Turns Against You	
7.	Brotherhood	61
	When Isolation Feels Safer Than Connection	
	Conclusion: Leaving a Legacy	67
	How You Finish Matters More Than How You Started	
	Affirmations	73



A vertical rectangular graphic on the left side of the page featuring a topographic map with contour lines and two small circular icons containing stylized animal silhouettes.

INTRODUCTION

Lost Without a Map

LOST IN THE JUNGLE

It was about 2:30 a.m. on the tiny island of Diego Garcia, a British territory just south of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. I was 22 years old, a young Marine, a squad leader, and for the first time in my life I felt the crushing weight of being responsible for other men's lives.

That night, twenty-five Marines were on security patrol with me. Each was loaded down with gear, M16 rifles. Kevlar helmets cinched, sweat streaming down their necks. The heat and humidity wrapped around us like a wet blanket, leaving us drenched.

The air was heavy and wet, thick enough to taste. Every breath filled my mouth with the tang of salt. The jungle seemed alive. Insects buzzed like power lines. Unseen creatures rustled just out of sight. Boots crunched over damp undergrowth, every step echoing too loudly in my head.

The only light came from my flashlight, its weak beam dancing across a wrinkled map that didn't seem to match anything around us. No GPS. No night vision. Just a compass, a map, and 25 men depending on me to safely navigate and execute the mission.

I could feel their eyes on me even in the darkness. Every Marine

on that patrol trusted me to know where we were. Trusted me to keep them alive. And the farther we went, the more I realized the truth. We were lost and I didn't know where we were. The map didn't match the terrain. Landmarks I was expecting weren't there. My gut screamed that we were off course. Every step felt like a gamble.

Pride whispered, "Keep moving. Don't let them see you hesitate. Don't let them doubt your ability. Don't let them see you sweat. Leaders never show weakness." I wanted to believe that. I wanted to fake confidence and press forward.

This was not the time to fake it. I stopped the patrol.

"Set security," I ordered.

My Marines dropped to one knee, rifles raised, scanning the tree line for threats. The air thickened with silence and expectation.

I swallowed hard. My throat felt dry as sandpaper. My pulse hammered in my ears as I spoke words no Marine leader ever wants to say.

"We're lost. We'll hold position until sunrise."

I braced for the reaction. Doubt. Disrespect. A crack in their trust. But it never came. The men nodded. they adjusted their gear and sacked out until daybreak.

In that moment, I learned something about leadership I have never forgotten. I didn't lose credibility. I gained it. Because men don't respect fake strength. They respect honesty. They don't follow bravado. They follow courage. They follow character. When you are vulnerable as a leader you gain credibility, you don't lose it. Most men view vulnerability as a weakness, but it is actually a super power.

THE PRIDE TRAP

You may not be in a jungle with 25 Marines at your back. But you are leading a patrol. Your wife. Your kids. Your friends. Your team at work. Your community. They are looking to you for direction. Every decision you make creates ripple effects that reach far beyond you.

But how can you lead them if you can't see the terrain ahead? How can you lead them if no one has ever led you safely through the minefields of this life. This is the reality of manhood. Most of us are navigating life without a map or an experienced guide.

No one ever showed us how to be a man. No one taught us what to do with our anger, our lust, our father wounds, or our pride. So we march blindly. We fake confidence. And we hope no one notices we don't know where we're going. But there's a problem with faking it. You can only fake it so long before something blows up.

The biggest danger for a man isn't being lost. It's being too proud to admit it. James 4:6 says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." The Greek word for "opposes" is *antitassomai*. It's a military term. It means to arrange in battle formation against. Think about that. God Himself lines up in battle against a man who refuses to humble himself.

Pride says: "I got this." "I don't need help." "I'll figure it out on my own." But God does not help proud men. He actively resists them.

Humility says: "I don't have all the answers." "I need help." "God, I can't do this without You." For that man, God does not resist. God gives grace. Grace that restores. Grace that strengthens. Grace that equips. Humility is not weakness. It is the starting point for real strength.

THIS BOOK IS YOUR MAP

The fact that you are holding this book right now says a lot about you. It says you are humble enough to admit you don't have it all figured out and you actively seeking answers. It says you care enough to grow. It says you are ready to chart a new path for yourself and for the people depending on you.

That is rare. Most men stay stuck because they are too proud to ask for help. But not you. You picked this up. You turned the page. That alone makes you dangerous—in the best way.

This book is a map. It will show you the terrain ahead. It will reveal the enemy's landmines—the traps he has set in your path to destroy your life, your marriage, your family, and your future.

As 1 Peter 5:8 warns, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." The enemy wants you to march blindly and confidently straight into his traps. But God wants to give you eyes to see, strength to lead, and wisdom to avoid disaster.

This is not a lecture. It is a field guide from a brother who has walked the terrain, stepped on a few landmines, and survived. No one navigates a minefield without a guide! I will show you where the danger is and how to disarm it before it blows up your life. I will point out the seven most common landmines that take men out. And I will hand you a map that leads to strength, clarity, and legacy.

You do not have to figure this out alone. You do not have to keep pretending. God is not against you. He is for you. He will give you the wisdom you need. He will prepare you for the terrain ahead. He will pour out grace that is greater than your mistakes.

You are already taking the first step. Keep going. Finish this book. Your life, your family, and your future are too important to stop here.

Let's chart a new path together.

Grace to you,

KEITH O. JENKINS, SR.



KEITH JENKINS

Keith Jenkins is a seasoned leader, communicator, and mentor whose life journey spans more than 30 years of ministry and a decade of service as a United States Marine. From Baltimore to Eugene Oregon to Los Angeles and around the world, Keith has built and served vibrant multicultural communities where diversity isn't just celebrated—it defines the ministry. A champion for the next generation, an staunch advocate for women in leadership ministry, and a committed collaborator and team builder. Keith has consistently invested in raising up voices and leaders for the future. His communication style is passionate, vulnerable, humorous, and authentic, connecting with people from every walk of life. Known as an agent of reconciliation, he brings deep cross-cultural competence and a pastor's heart, helping people bridge divides and discover purpose. Whether in the pulpit, on the page, or in personal relationships, his passion is to serve as a bridge—connecting people to God, to one another, and to the life they were created to live.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book was written with you in mind. I didn't design it to sit on a shelf and collect dust, but to be carried with you, opened often, written in, and worn out. Think of it less like a theological textbook and more like a field guide—the kind I carried as an infantry Marine. Those little green books traveled with us everywhere, got beat up in the mud and rain, but they gave us the tools we needed to navigate, survive, and move forward. That's the spirit behind this book.

Each chapter is intentionally short enough to be read in one sitting. You don't need hours of study to take something away—ten to fifteen minutes will get you through a section. But don't mistake short chapters for shallow content. The goal is clarity, not clutter.

At the end of every chapter, you'll find practical sections for reflection, questions to wrestle with, and action steps to consider. These are designed to help you dig deeper, either on your own or with a small group of brothers. If you're walking through this book in community, use those questions as conversation starters. If you're going through it solo, use them as checkpoints for personal growth.

I strongly recommend keeping a companion journal. Write down your insights, breakthroughs, and even your struggles. Don't just read this book—interact with it. Mark it up. Circle and underline. Let it become a tool that works with you in the trenches of life.

Here's the bottom line: this book was meant to travel with you. Throw it in your backpack, keep it in your truck, or set it on your desk. Use it as a guide to help you take real steps forward as a man—day by day, chapter by chapter. ●





CHAPTER 1

The Mission

WHEN YOU CHASE SOMETHING
TO PROVE SOMETHING

I started school early, thanks to my September birthday, which meant I would finish earlier than most. That summer I worked my first job and was proud of myself. I bought all my own school clothes and supplies. As my birthday and senior year approached, I felt a mix of excitement and anticipation.

On the morning of my birthday, my mother walked into my bedroom. Her voice was sharp and firm. “You better figure it out.”

That was it. No “Happy Birthday.” No pancakes. No balloons. Just those five words, cutting through the quiet like a blade. She repeated them once more and walked out.

I lay there on my twin bed, staring at the ceiling, angry and confused. I wasn’t a bad kid. I had just spent the entire summer working to ease some of the financial strain my single mom carried. What I didn’t understand at the time was that this was her way of showing fierce love.

She had seen firsthand what the streets of Baltimore could do to a young man: unplanned children, drugs, incarceration, early death. That is all the street life offers. She was determined that would not be my story.

“You are not gonna be like them,” she told me. “Dead, in jail, fathering babies never being a daddy, selling or strung out on drugs. You are going to do something with your life. You’re gonna figure it out.” Then she turned and left.

The truth was, I had no idea what to do next. College wasn't an option. I had not been prepared academically, and no one was pointing me toward anything. I felt lost.

A GLIMPSE OF MANHOOD

The only structure I had came from Jr. ROTC. in high school, where I met Colonel Adams, a retired Marine. He was a gruff, no-nonsense man, and I thought he was just a grumpy old white guy who gave me a hard time. For some reason he took a special interest in me. He made sure I got to class, something I was not naturally inclined to do. I didn't have a man in my life I trusted enough to ask about my future.

That Monday morning, I built up enough courage to walk up to him and ask about becoming a United States Marine. I had already been wearing a uniform during my formative years as a Cub Scout, the Boy Scouts and now Jr. ROTC in High School. I admired everything about Colonel Adams. He stood tall with his chest out, always looking you in the eye, carrying himself with poise and confidence

Truthfully, the first glimpse I ever had of a soldier was my father and like every little boy I wanted to be just like him. My dad was a two tour Vietnam Veteran who served in the Army. The recruiter did not have to work hard to convince me to enlist in the Marines. For the past several years I had watched a Marine in action and I was also trying to earn validation from my father. And then there was the uniform! The way it fit. The way it moved. The way it seemed to say, *I have direction*. Crisp lines. Medals and ribbons perfectly arranged. Not a speck on him from head to toe.

I did not know what manhood was supposed to look like. But I knew what it looked like on him. That uniform looked like power. Like discipline. Like respect. That uniform looked like the opposite of what I came from. And I thought to myself, *maybe this is it. Maybe this is what I have been missing. Maybe if I sign these papers, I will stop feeling like I am wandering.*

Every boy and every man is trying to answer the same two questions: *Am I enough?* and *Do I have what it takes?* Our fathers are meant to instill in us a sense of worth and value. Without their influence, a man is left to search for those answers on his own. More on that later.

I began my search at sixteen. I had enlisted in the Marine Corps through the delayed entry program. Signed, sealed and delivered. I thought I had just secured my future. And for a while, it worked.

The Marines gave me structure. They gave me challenge. They gave me goals that made sense. I could measure my progress. I could follow orders. I could earn a rank. But what I did not realize was that I was not just looking for structure. I was looking for an identity. I had no clue who I was much less what I was created to do (Mission).

THE MOCKINGBIRD AND A MAN’S TRUE MISSION

I did not realize it at the time, but I was following a script that had not been written for me. I did not know who I was, so I tried to become what I had seen. On the outside, it seems to work for a while. We earn titles. We gain respect. We feel like we are becoming somebody. But on the inside, something is missing.

That is what so many men do. We are told to “fake it, until you make it”. We copy what looks strong. What looks respected. What looks like power. We sign up for missions that were never meant for us because it feels better to move fast than to stand still and ask who we really are. And to wait long enough for the God of the universe, creator of all things including me, to answer. We avoid the hard work of discovering our true identity, and most of us are never taught to seek those answers by going back to God.

One of the most fascinating birds in creation is the mockingbird. Known for its ability to mimic the songs of other birds, it can reproduce up to 200 different calls and melodies. While impressive, this talent hides a deeper truth: *the mockingbird does not have a song of its own*. Its entire repertoire is borrowed. In a sense, its voice is *defined by imitation rather than identity*.

This picture reminds me of a struggle many men face today. Too often, instead of discovering and living out the unique mission and design God has given us, we mimic the “songs” of others. We chase cultural definitions of success, echo the ambitions of peers, or try to live up to a false version of manhood we have inherited. The result is a life that may sound impressive on the surface, but lacks authenticity and deep purpose.

God did not design men to be mere echoes. From the beginning, Scripture shows us that men were created with a distinct role and mission. Adam was placed in the garden “to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). He was given responsibility, authority, and stewardship. Throughout the Bible, men are called to lead with courage, to protect the vulnerable, to cultivate life, and to reflect the character of Christ. Each man carries within him a God-given assignment—a “song” that only he can sing.

The tragedy comes when men forfeit that calling and live instead as spiritual mockingbirds. We adopt someone else’s mission: chasing wealth because culture says money equals manhood, pursuing power because society equates dominance with worth, or even mimicking another man’s calling because we’ve never taken the time to discover our own. When we live like that, we may impress people for a season, but inside we remain restless and unfulfilled.

The gospel calls us back to authenticity. In Christ, a man’s true mission is rediscovered—not in borrowed voices, but in the Spirit’s leading. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” That means each man has a specific design, a unique assignment prepared by God Himself. We don’t need to mimic anyone else’s melody; God has composed one for us.

Living out that mission requires courage. It demands that we resist comparison, stop imitating the empty songs of the world, and instead tune our hearts to the voice of the Father. When a man embraces his God-given design, he doesn’t just make noise—he makes music that brings life, order, and hope to others.

So the question for every man is this: Will you live as a mockingbird, repeating someone else’s song, or will you discover and sing the song God has uniquely placed within you? The world doesn’t need more echoes. It needs men who are willing to find their true voice in Christ and live out their divine mission with authenticity and strength.

WHAT GOOD IS IT?

Jesus once asked, “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Matthew 16:26) That question isn’t just a

warning. It's a mirror. Because you can climb the ranks as I did. You can earn the medals. You can build the company, get the promotion, lead the church, win the crowd — and still lose yourself along the way.

That's the danger of a false mission. You're chasing something that seems good but isn't God. And eventually, the cracks show.

SAUL'S STORY

King Saul was chosen by God to lead Israel. He looked the part. Tall, strong, commanding. A warrior's presence. He started with anointing and purpose. But the mission outgrew his identity. In 1 Samuel 13, Saul was under pressure. His men were scattering. The Philistines were closing in. Samuel, the prophet, hadn't arrived to offer the sacrifice yet. So Saul made a fatal decision: he stepped out of his role and offered the sacrifice himself.

It seemed noble. Urgent. Even brave. But it was disobedient. Samuel showed up moments later and said, "You have done a foolish thing...now your kingdom will not endure." Saul's reign unraveled from that moment. Why? Because he moved without identity. Because he confused action with obedience. Because he panicked when pressure hit, and when a man doesn't know who he is, pressure will always expose him.

THE EXPLORER WHO PIVOTED

In 1914, British explorer Ernest Shackleton set out on one of the most ambitious expeditions in history: to cross the entire Antarctic continent. His crew boarded the ship *Endurance* and set sail, full of hope and courage. But the mission didn't go as planned. Their ship got trapped in the ice. Frozen. Stuck in a place no map could help.

For months, they endured brutal cold, starvation, and isolation. They drifted on floes. They made desperate treks across frozen seas. Shackleton eventually led a handful of men over 800 miles of open ocean in a lifeboat to get help. And when he returned? Every single man had survived. Not one was lost.

Shackleton became a legend—not because he completed the mission,

but because he had the humility to change it. If he had stubbornly clung to the original plan, they all would have died. But he knew what too many men forget: Finishing well sometimes means redefining success.

SIGNS YOU'RE ON A FALSE MISSION

So how do you know if you're chasing the wrong thing?

Here are a few signs:

- ❑ You're exhausted, but you can't stop
- ❑ You've succeeded, but you still feel empty
- ❑ You care more about optics than obedience
- ❑ You feel like a fraud if you're not performing
- ❑ You're afraid to stop moving because you don't know who you'd be without the mission

False missions are sneaky. They wear the uniform of purpose. They look like calling. They even feel spiritual. But underneath, they're driven by insecurity, fear, or pride.

THE MISSION GOD BLESSES

God is not against ambition. But He will not bless a mission that replaces intimacy with Him. He's not impressed by your speed. He's not moved by your grind. He's not applauding your resume. He wants your heart. He wants you to know who you are before you set out to do something great. Because the right mission, from the wrong identity, still leads to disaster.

That's why God told Gideon who he was before he fought. Why He renamed Peter before He sent him. Why He called David a man after His own heart before he was king. Why He said "This is my Son" before Jesus did anything.

Identity before mission. Always.

This is the landmine that looks like a mission. It comes disguised as purpose, but it's powered by insecurity. It looks noble on the outside, but underneath, it's driven by fear, comparison, or the need to prove something that no achievement can settle.

That's why it's so easy to step on. Because it doesn't feel like danger. It feels like momentum. It feels like making something of yourself. That is what I was chasing when I walked into the Marine recruiter's office. I was not looking for God's purpose or direction. I was looking for strength. For honor and respect. For identity. For something that looked like manhood. I was searching for answers to the questions every man is trying to answer, but apart from God the search is futile. And for a while, it seemed to work. Until it didn't.

Because when you don't know who you are, you'll sign up for a mission that was never yours. And then you'll wake up one day exhausted, empty, and wondering how you got so far off course. That's what happened to Saul. He was anointed. Called. Chosen. But he started listening to fear instead of God, and he lost everything. That's what almost happened to me. I was walking a path I thought would make me into a man, but it was slowly pulling me away from the truth of who I already was.

That is what happens to so many men. We take up the sword before we receive our identity, before we are given our name. We carry the flag before we hear the voice. And it blows up our peace, our relationships, our leadership, our clarity. But it doesn't have to.

Look at Shackleton. The mission changed. The map became useless. But instead of marching blindly toward the original goal, he had the humility to stop. He reassessed. He re-centered. And he brought every man home. That is what real men do. Not men who pretend they're not lost. Not men who fake confidence while marching straight into destruction. Real men admit when something is off. They pause. They ask questions. They seek counsel. They turn back before it's too late.

This is the landmine of false mission. And it won't just trip you up. It will take you out. If you want to lead well, love well, and finish well, you have to stop chasing every mission that makes you feel strong and start listening for the One who makes you whole. You don't have to prove you're a man. You have to hear the Father say, "You're my son." Everything else flows from that voice. ●

FIELD GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

FIELD NOTES

- ❑ A false mission looks noble but leads nowhere
- ❑ Saul lost everything not because of weakness, but because of panic
- ❑ Shackleton became a hero because he pivoted
- ❑ Obedience is better than optics
- ❑ God blesses identity-driven purpose, not performance-based identity

SCRIPTURE TO REFLECT ON

- Matthew 16:26
- 1 Samuel 13:7–14
- Proverbs 16:18
- John 15:5

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What mission are you currently chasing? Where did it come from?
2. Have you ever “won” at something and still felt empty?
3. What makes it hard for you to stop and ask, “Is this really from God?”
4. Which do you relate to more: Saul’s panic or Shackleton’s pivot?
5. What would it look like for you to lead from identity rather than insecurity?

PRAYER

Father, I confess that I’ve chased missions that looked good but weren’t from You. I’ve moved ahead of your voice. I’ve tried to prove something instead of listening to you. Help me stop. Help me recalibrate. Remind me who I am so I can walk in what You’ve called me to do. Amen.



CHAPTER 2

Identity

WHEN THE APPLAUSE
ISN'T ENOUGH

THE HONOR MAN

There is only one place in the world where Marines are made: Parris Island, South Carolina. All REAL Marines know this! Within the first couple of weeks, I found my mission. Our drill instructors told us about the competition for “Honor Man” within the platoon, the series, and the company. The Honor Man carried the guide-on flag. He set the tone. He earned the respect of his peers and the pressure of perfection from every drill instructor. He did not just follow orders. He inspired others to follow.

For me, it was never just about recognition. It was about redemption. It was the validation I craved. It was the affirmation I had never received. Something deep inside me had been aching for approval, for worth, for a voice that would finally say, *You did it. Maybe even, I’m proud of you.*

And maybe, if I did enough, pushed hard enough, became enough, my dad would show up. So I went all in. In a thousand different ways I was trying to get my father’s affirmation. Part of my motive for enlisting in the Marines was to earn his approval.

EARNING EVERYTHING

Our mornings started long before sunrise. My boots slammed the concrete. My lungs burned through PT drills. My uniform was drenched from drilling in the hot sun. My body ached constantly, but I did not care. Pain meant progress. Sweat meant I was doing it right. And silence, the absence of criticism from instructors, meant I was doing something well.

When other guys slacked off, I locked in. When they cracked jokes to ease the tension, I kept my mouth shut. When they collapsed from exhaustion, I kept moving. I was not trying to beat them. I was trying to beat something inside me. The voice that said I was not enough. The history that said I would never finish what I started. The ache that came every time I looked into the bleachers and never saw my father.

Honor Man was not just a title. It was proof. Proof that I was becoming the kind of man my dad could finally respect.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

The day they announced the results, everything stopped. The platoon stood at attention in the barracks. Seventy men, barely breathing. Sweat ran down our faces. Eyes locked straight ahead. The drill instructor walked in holding a clipboard. He read off names. Meritorious promotions. Commendations. Then he paused.

“And the Honor Man for this training cycle...”

He looked up.

“...Jenkins.”

It hit like thunder. Some men clapped. Some nodded. Some stayed silent. I felt it like electricity in my chest. I did it. Honor Man. Not just in my platoon, but across all platoons. Top of the class. First among equals.

I pictured the graduation. The dress blues. The ceremony. The moment I would carry the guide-on out in front of everyone. And in that picture, my dad was there. This time, he would show up. He had to. He was an Army veteran. He would understand what this moment meant.

He had missed sporting events and other milestones, always on the road. He had missed much of my life to this point. But not this. This would pull him in.

THE CALL

I had to tell someone. I needed to tell someone what had just happened and what I had achieved. There was only one problem. We were not allowed to call home.

Phone calls were given as a reward. At this stage, we were in the final stretch of training. Contact with the outside world was off-limits and monitored closely. Graduation was only days away. All we had to do was finish well. But I could not wait. I wanted to hear his voice. I needed to hear his voice. I needed him to hear mine.

There was a pay phone in our barracks. My hands shook as I picked it up. My heart pounded. I dialed. The phone rang for what felt like an eternity. No one answered. I had risked everything, and no one even answered the phone. It would not be the last time I risked it all for affirmation, only to be met with disappointment.

THE PRICE

The next morning, something felt different. The air was heavy. You could feel it. Then the door slammed open.

“ATTENTION ON DECK!”

The drill instructor stormed in like a man on a mission.

“Who made the UA phone call? Unauthorized.”

No one moved.

He paced the rows of bunks like a predator hunting for the weak. “You think this is a game? You think you can break protocol and not get caught?”

Still, no one spoke.

“Fine. Push-up position. All of you. Now.”

We hit the floor. Concrete pressed into our palms. Sweat began to pool beneath us.

“One! Two! Three! ONE!”

The count rose. My guilt rose with it.

They knew. Everyone knew it was me. But no one gave me up.

“You are all going to keep pushing until the guilty recruit admits it,” he barked.

Minutes passed. Then more. Arms trembled. Breathing turned to gasping. I could not take it anymore.

"It was me, sir."

The room went silent.

He turned and locked eyes with me. "You?"

"Yes, sir."

"You think being Honor Man means you are above the rules?"

"No, sir."

He stepped closer. "Jenkins. You were the Honor Man. Not anymore." Just like that, I was stripped of the title and the meritorious promotion that came with it. I was demoted to first squad leader.

THE EMPTY BLEACHERS

Days later, we marched onto the parade deck one final time. I stood in my service Alpha uniform, not dress blues. The new Honor Man, who had just been promoted in my place, wore those instead.

My uniform was flawless. Every crease, every button, perfect. As the ceremony wound down, the moment we had all dreamed of approached. The moment when we would be dismissed for the last time, having earned the title of United States Marine.

This was supposed to be my moment. The moment he would show up. The moment my father and my family would see what I had accomplished. I was proud, and I imagined they would be too.

Hundreds of family members cheered for their Marines. Mothers wept. Fathers beamed. Siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles swarmed their favorite sons. But no one was there for me.

I scanned the bleachers, just as I had done countless times at high school games. No dad. No mom. No one. The sharpest uniform on the field could not cover the ache in my chest. I turned and walked off with the others who, like me, had no one waiting for them.

I had earned everything. I had achieved what once felt impossible. And it still was not enough.

SAN JUAN HILL

In 1898, Teddy Roosevelt led his Rough Riders up San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War. The hill was heavily defended. The enemy had the high ground. Bullets tore through the trees. Men were dying. And Roosevelt—driven by something deeper than duty—mounted his horse and charged. He became a national hero.

The headlines called him fearless. A symbol of manhood. The charge made him famous and set him on the path to the presidency. But years later, Roosevelt confessed something that never made it into the newspapers. He said that in the back of his mind, as he charged that hill, he was thinking about his father.

Roosevelt had grown up in his shadow—a sickly child trying to earn the approval of a giant of a man. When his father died, that wound stayed with him. San Juan Hill wasn't just about victory. It was about validation. Roosevelt needed to prove to a ghost that he was strong. Brave. Worthy of being a man. And even after all the awards, all the accolades, all the success — that ache was still there. Because the deepest needs of your soul can't be satisfied with applause.

THE VOICE YOU WERE MADE TO HEAR

Jesus didn't begin His mission with a victory. He began it with a voice. He stepped into the Jordan River. John the Baptist hesitated, but Jesus insisted. John lowered Him into the water. The current closed over Him. And when Jesus came up, the heavens opened. A dove descended. The Spirit rested. And then came the voice that changed everything: "This is my Son, whom I love. With Him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

No miracles had been performed. No sermons preached. No demons cast out. No cross carried. The Father declared Jesus' identity before He did a single thing. That's how identity works in the kingdom. It's not earned. It's received.

WRESTLING FOR A NAME

Long before Jesus stood in the river, another man stood by a riverbank, too. His name was Jacob. Jacob had spent his life pretending. He had tricked his brother. Lied to his father. Built his success by manipulating people. But he was still empty.

One night, alone in the wilderness, a man appeared—a man who turned out to be God Himself. They wrestled all night. Jacob fought for control. For blessing. For identity. Then God did something strange. He asked, “What is your name?” It wasn’t because God didn’t know. It was because Jacob needed to say it.

“I am Jacob.” His name meant deceiver or schemer. Therefore what he was really saying is *I am Deceiver. I am Schemer. I am the one who pretends*. Then God renamed him, “You will no longer be Jacob. You will be Israel.” The one who wrestled with God and lived. Israel became the father of the nation of Israel as we know it. His 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. Before God gave him a mission, He gave him a name.

IDENTITY BEFORE MISSION

This is how God works:

Before the battle, the blessing.
Before the assignment, the affirmation.
Before the mission, the identity.

Jesus didn’t perform to earn it. Jacob didn’t win to receive it. Teddy Roosevelt didn’t find it through war. And I didn’t find it through Honor Man. You don’t work for identity. You work from it.

SIGNS YOU’RE HUSTLING FOR IDENTITY

You know your identity is misplaced when:

- ❑ You succeed but still feel insecure

- ❑ You crash after every compliment
- ❑ You take criticism as a personal attack
- ❑ You say yes to things just to be liked
- ❑ You are addicted to validation and afraid of being invisible

When you build your identity on applause, you become a slave to the crowd. But when your identity is anchored in the Father's voice, you can lead in silence and serve without fear.

WHAT THE FATHER SAYS

The Father is still speaking. And He's not waiting until you get it all right. He speaks now. You are my son. You are forgiven. You belong. You are favored. You are loved. I am pleased. Not because of what you've done—but because of who you are in Me.

When that voice becomes your anchor, everything changes. You stop chasing false missions. You stop performing for ghosts. You stop needing to be the strongest, fastest, most impressive man in the room. And you start becoming the man God designed you to be.

A man without identity is a man walking through a minefield blindfolded. It doesn't matter how gifted you are. It doesn't matter how brave, how disciplined, how spiritual you appear to be. If you don't know who you are, you're vulnerable. You're one step away from blowing up your confidence, your relationships, your purpose, or your legacy. And the worst part? You won't even see it coming.

That's what makes this particular landmine so dangerous. It doesn't look like a trap. It looks like a target. A mission. A trophy. A position. A uniform. A title. Something noble. Something good. But underneath that goal is a lie: *If I achieve this, then I'll be somebody.*

That's what I believed when I chased Honor Man. That's what Teddy Roosevelt believed when he charged up San Juan Hill. That's what Jacob believed when he stole his brother's blessing. And that's what every man believes when he tries to earn the identity God already gives for free. Because the truth is this: You don't become a man when the world claps. You become a man when the Father speaks.

The day I made Honor Man, I thought I had finally arrived. That

uniform, that title, that moment—it was supposed to be the culmination of everything I had worked for. But it wasn't. Because even when I won, I still didn't know who I was.

That's the landmine: doing all the right things for the wrong reasons. Marching with precision, but no direction. Looking confident while your soul is crumbling. The enemy doesn't need to drag you into rebellion to destroy you. All he has to do is keep you busy chasing approval. And you will walk straight into disaster.

That's why God speaks identity before He gives assignment. It's why Jesus heard "This is my Son" before the crowds ever gathered. It's why Jacob had to wrestle before he could walk in his new name. It's why your deepest battle won't be the one around you. It will be the one inside you.

Do you know who you are? Not what you've done. Not who raised you. Not what you feel guilty about. Not what you're trying to prove. Who are you when no one's looking and nothing is on the line?

Until that question is answered by the Father, every mission you pursue is a gamble. And no amount of success can protect you from the shrapnel that comes when identity gets detonated.

This is the landmine. And if you want to walk forward without it blowing up your life, you've got to start with the voice of the One who made you. You are His son. You are loved. You are enough. Now move from that place. ●

FIELD GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

FIELD NOTES

- ❑ Identity received is stronger than identity earned
- ❑ Jesus heard the Father’s voice before the mission ever started
- ❑ Jacob’s breakthrough came when he stopped pretending
- ❑ Real men wrestle for truth, not applause
- ❑ The Father is still speaking

SCRIPTURE TO REFLECT ON

- Matthew 3:17
- Genesis 32:24–30
- Galatians 4:6–7
- Romans 8:15–16

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What voices shaped your identity growing up?
2. Have you ever chased approval and found it didn’t satisfy?
3. Which do you struggle with more: criticism or invisibility?
4. What would it look like to live as someone already approved by God?
5. What false names do you need to surrender to receive the one God speaks?

PRAYER

Father, I am tired of chasing approval. I am tired of earning what You’ve already given. I want to live as Your son — loved, chosen, and called. Speak truth over me. I receive my identity from You. I will not pretend. I will not perform. I will walk in who You say I am. Amen.

