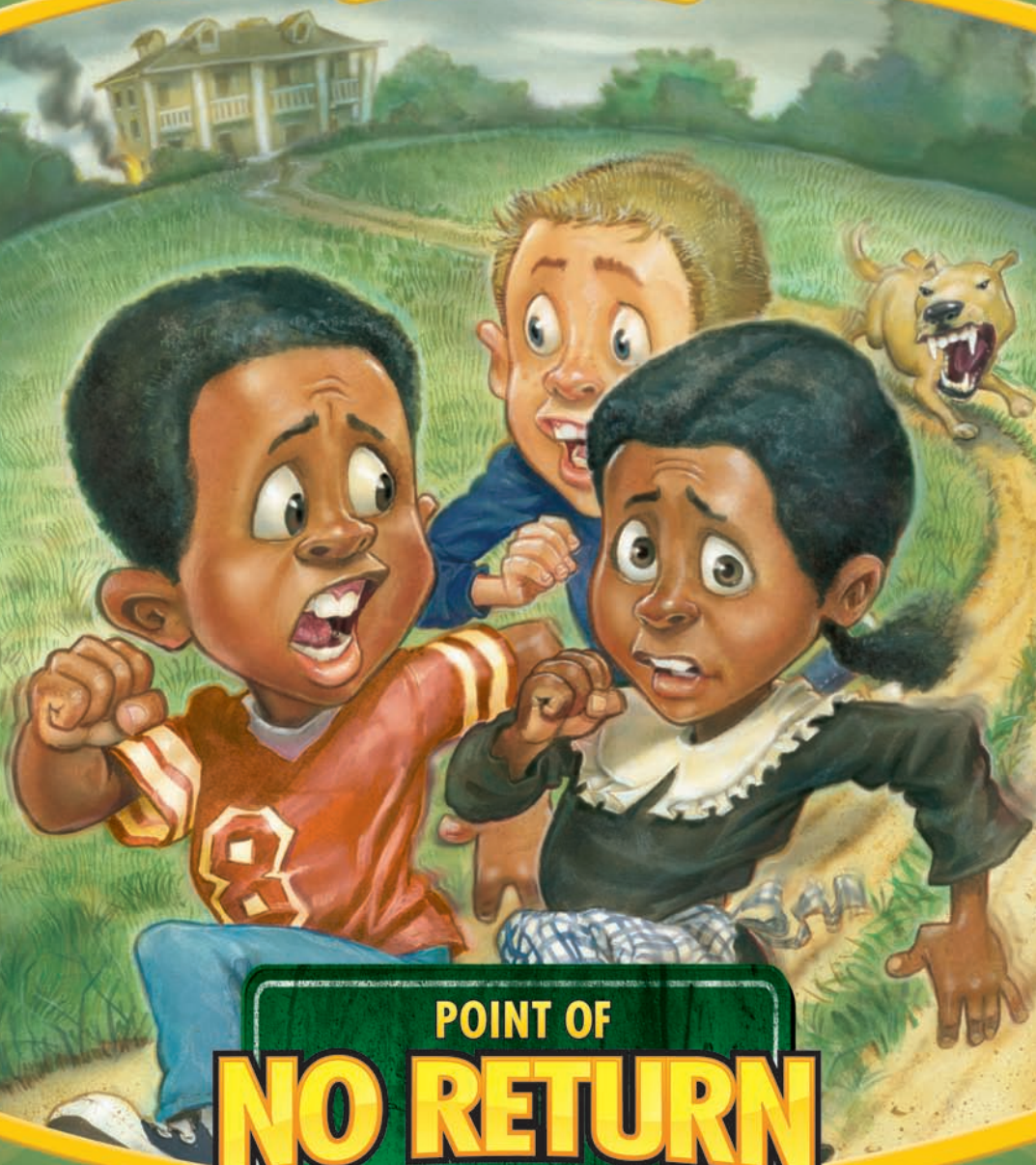


FOCUS ON THE FAMILY PRESENTS

4 BOOKS
IN ONE VOLUME

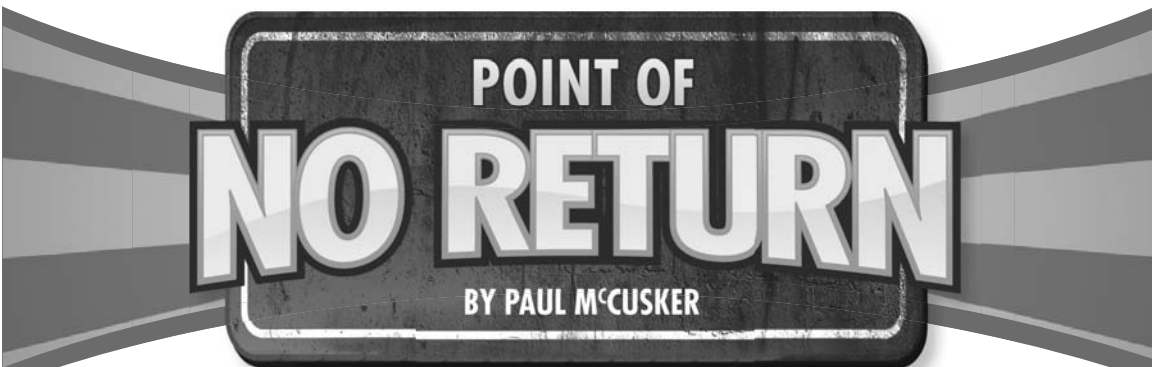
Adventures in
ODYSSEY



POINT OF
NO RETURN

PAUL McCUSKER

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY PRESENTS

A graphic of a tunnel with perspective lines on the walls, leading towards a dark, textured rectangular sign in the center.

**POINT OF
NO RETURN**
BY PAUL M'CUSKER



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

Point of No Return

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A Focus on the Family book published by
Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

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The books in this collection were originally published as:
Point of No Return, © 1995 by Focus on the Family
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The Stranger's Message, © 1997 by Paul McCusker

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A note to readers: The Adventures in Odyssey novels take place in a time period prior to the
beginning of the audio or video series. That is why some of the characters from those
episodes don't appear in these stories; they don't exist yet.

Editor: Liz Duckworth
Cover design: Jacqueline Nuñez
Cover illustration: Gary Locke

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
McCusker, Paul, 1958-

[Selections]

Point of no return : four original stories of suspense, time travel, and faith / Paul
McCusker ; [cover illustration, Gary Locke].
v. cm. — (Adventures in Odyssey ; 3)

Summary: Four stories set in the fictional town of Odyssey follow the adventures of the
Whit's End gang as they learn valuable lessons in helping their fellow man, forgiving, and
living their faith.

Contents: Point of no return—Dark passage—Freedom run—The stranger's message.

ISBN-13: 978-1-58997-332-9

[1. Conduct of life—Fiction. 2. Christian life—Fiction. 3. Friendship—Fiction.]

I. Title. II. Series: McCusker, Paul, 1958-
Adventures in Odyssey ; 3.

PZ7.M47841Po 2006

[Fic]—dc22

Printed in the United States of America
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 /16 15 14 13 12 11

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BOOK ONE

POINT OF NO RETURN

CHAPTER ONE

Friday Night

JIMMY BARCLAY looked into the deep blue water. It was still. Faintly, he could see his reflection looking back. It didn't look much like him, though. In fact, it could have been a complete stranger . . . but it wasn't. That had to be his young face looking up out of the water. The blue, still water.

There was also the scent of pine.

He got on his knees and looked closer at the deep blue water—pondering it. He waited.

This was really stupid, he knew. At his age—a mature and wise 10 years old—he shouldn't be in this situation. He never should've let Tony talk him into it. How many kids of 10 try to smoke their best friend's father's cigar? What made it worse was that Jimmy thought people who smoked cigarettes were Neanderthals. So why did he try the cigar?

He rested his head against the porcelain, sending a tiny shiver through the toilet bowl. The deep blue water rippled. The scent of pine was overwhelming. *Mom must have cleaned in here today*, he thought. He couldn't imagine when, though. His mother worked part-time as a dental receptionist and was on every committee the church could think up.

A new wave of nausea worked its way through Jimmy's stomach, and he prepared himself for it. Again, he stared into the deep blue water. Again, it was so still.

At that moment, he tried to remember how many puffs he had taken on the cigar before Tony said he was turning green. He couldn't remember. Too many. Way too many.

The wave subsided, and he sat down. He rested his head against the cabinet that housed the sink and prayed for deliverance. He begged his stomach to make up its mind: *Either do it or don't do it. Let's stop playing around.*

Of course, I wish you wouldn't do it, Jimmy told his stomach.

From his room down the hall, he could hear music. Tony, his best friend, was listening to—singing along with—some CD he had brought over. Jimmy winced. It sounded as if Tony had the volume turned up full blast.

Jimmy wondered how long it would be before Donna, his older sister, would hang up the phone downstairs and yell at him to turn off the music. He thought about hollering for Tony to turn it down but was afraid to. He didn't know what it would do to his stomach or his mother's freshly cleaned bathroom. He leaned over the deep blue water again in case.

Tony screamed along with a song.

How could he be so energetic when Jimmy was sitting on the bathroom floor ready to die? Easy. Tony was good at talking Jimmy into doing stupid things and never doing them himself.

Jimmy grabbed the sides of the bowl, sure that something was about to happen. He held on and waited.

This is so very very very dumb. When will you learn? When will you stop acting like such an idiot? You're a jerk, Jimmy Barclay, and you'd better never let this happen again.

As if to say it agreed, his stomach settled down. It seemed suddenly at peace.

After a moment, Jimmy stood up slowly. His head swayed a little. He dropped the cover over the deep blue water and turned to the door. Everything would be just fine.

He paused at the mirror and looked hard at himself. *A little green around the gills maybe—but nothing too terrible. Just Jimmy Barclay looking a little sick. Boy, it's a good thing Mom and Dad are out.*

He opened the door, turned out the light, and headed for his room. He didn't notice that the music had stopped. It didn't click in his mind that all was deathly silent. When he entered his room to find Tony sitting quietly on the edge of his bed, he still didn't think much of it. . . .

Until he saw his mom at his CD player and his dad looking over the remains of the cigar.

There are no words to describe the look on their faces, but most kids know it when they see it. Jimmy knew it well. His stomach turned upside down, and he considered running back to the bathroom.

"Get ready for bed, Jimmy," his dad said as he walked out of the

room with the cigar. His mom looked at him with an expression of complete disappointment and followed.

And that was it.

Jimmy looked at Tony.

Tony shrugged and said, "I didn't hear them coming. I would have done something if I knew they were coming."

"How could you hear them with the music going full blast?" Jimmy asked. "They probably heard it at the restaurant and came home to investigate."

His dad yelled from the kitchen, "Do you need a lift home, Tony?"

Tony looked at Jimmy. Jimmy shrugged.

Tony shouted back, "Oh, no thanks. I'd better walk."

"Good night, then," Mrs. Barclay called out.

"I guess that means I'm leaving now," Tony said to Jimmy, grabbing his jacket from the foot of the bed.

"I guess so."

"See ya," Tony said as he drifted out of the room. "Call me when you get paroled."

"Thanks, *pal*."

Tony opened the front door and called out a final farewell to Mr. and Mrs. Barclay before retreating into the crisp Friday night.

Jimmy sighed.

From somewhere on the front lawn, Jimmy could hear an outburst of Tony's laughter.

• • •

George Barclay, Jimmy's dad, was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Mary, Jimmy's mom, was at the counter pouring herself a cup. Donna also sat at the table with a stricken look on her face. Obviously, his mom and dad had already read her the riot act. Jimmy guessed that they held her partly to blame for what had happened. She had been on the phone when she should have been keeping a closer eye on him.

"You're home early," Jimmy said brightly.

After a moment of silence, his dad spoke. "We're home early because I decided to go see your grandmother tomorrow. I may leave first thing in the morning."

Grandma Barclay was Jimmy's dad's mom. She had been sick over the past couple of weeks, and they were worried it might be a relapse of her cancer. She lived a couple of hundred miles away.

"Oh—you're going by yourself?"

His dad looked darkly at him and said, "Your mother was going to come with me, but it's clear that we can't leave the two of you alone."

Guilt poked at Jimmy's stomach. "I can go with you," he offered.

"No, you can't." His dad looked Jimmy full in the face now. *That* look was still there. "You're on restriction. For the rest of your life. Maybe longer. And when we get a minute, your mother and I are going to talk about what to do with you. I can't figure which is worse: the fact that you lit matches in your room or the fact that you tried smoking a *cigar*. Maybe they're equal. And there's Tony coming tonight when we told you before you left that you weren't to have friends in. And that music you were playing at a speaker-blowing volume. Not forgetting to mention the water balloon battle you had in my study *last* weekend, the fire you started in the garage with the blowtorch the week before, the call we got from the librarian about you and Tony knocking books off the shelves, the fight you had with Kelly next door over that bike, and, and . . . Jimmy—"

He stopped as if his anger had tied up his tongue. "Just go to bed," he finally said.

• • •

In his room, Jimmy began unloading his pants pockets. It was something he always did before undressing and going to bed because, if he didn't, his mom might accidentally wash something like coins, a crumpled dollar, some gum he had bought at Town Center Drugs, lint . . .

So much for the left pocket. He emptied the right. More lint.

He tossed everything onto his dresser, where his eye caught the framed photo of Grandma Barclay. She'd lost a lot of weight since that picture was taken. The cancer did it. It had been eating her alive a few years ago, but everyone prayed for her, and it went into remission. Jimmy wasn't so sure prayer had made her better, but he didn't dare say so out loud.

You wouldn't know how ill Grandma was if you saw only the pic-

ture with its soft-focus close-up that made her wrinkles less noticeable, gave a nice shine to her white hair, and accented her bright blue eyes. They were stunning eyes, the kind that made Jimmy feel funny because he suspected they could somehow see much deeper than eyes should be allowed to see.

Grandma Barclay was a very devout woman. As far as anyone knew, she had never missed a day of church in her life. Hers was a deep-rooted, practical faith. It was as real and natural to her as breathing. Jimmy's father felt the influence of that faith and tried to instill it in both Jimmy and Donna. Donna liked church. Jimmy thought it was boring. He would've stopped going if his parents didn't make him attend. He once talked to them about letting him stay home, but they wouldn't hear of it. He had to go, and that was that.

Jimmy's parents fussed with him for a while about his lack of faith. They did everything they could to get him interested. But lately it was as if they had given up on him. His mom said that they had decided to stop worrying and let God do the rest.

That was fine with Jimmy, because God seemed to want to leave him alone, too.

Grandma didn't fuss about it at all. When she found out Jimmy didn't like church, she just smiled and said he would enjoy it eventually. *He would have to. The call in his life was too strong.*

Jimmy didn't know what she meant by that. He wondered but didn't want to risk a lecture by asking. He got off easy, and that's all that mattered.

But sometimes he thought about *the call* and tried to figure out what a call would sound like. Not that it would make any difference. When Jimmy grew up, he wanted to be a singer in a rock band.

All these thoughts swirled around in his churning mind as he fell asleep. The last thing he would remember was the sound of thousands of fans cheering him as he performed in a huge auditorium.