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CHAPTER 1

FAILURE IS FOR REAL

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry; so I laughed, then I cried."

Discouragement was etched indelibly on Jim's face. He spoke with urgency and only occasionally showed the trace of a smile. "Living for Christ is fine if you are on the top of the pile," he surmised with conviction, "but it's a different story when you are at the bottom."

Two years before this, I had met Jim (not his real name) when he was in high school. He had recently accepted Christ as his Savior. I'll never forget his impromptu prayers. "Lord, it's me again," he'd say. "Remember old Duncan Bell? Well,

You know I don't like him, so I need all the help You can give me."

After high school Jim was accepted for Royal Canadian Mounted Police training in Canada. From the first day, he sincerely tried to be a witness to his comrades. He read his Bible, refused to share sordid jokes, and would not participate in sensual amusements. In short, he "lived for Christ," as most preachers urge us to do.

And that was the beginning of his troubles. Friends dubbed him "the religious nut." Some scorned his piety. Others schemed to have him blamed for activities he did not do. He was ousted (often literally) from the games and social events of his companions.

Perhaps this is what Christians should expect. Are not the godly promised persecution? Did Christ not say that we should rejoice when we are reviled, because our reward would be great in heaven? Yes.

But one fact troubled him. In any group, one person is always first, but by necessity, one must also be last. Jim had that distinction.

He got the lowest score on examinations and barely passed in practical achievements. He was not a leader; neither did he have a winsome personality. Worse yet, he commanded little or no respect.

As we talked together, he stared aimlessly into space. "My friends are rejecting Christ," he commented, "but maybe it's just because they don't want to be like me, and on that score I don't blame them. Who'd want to be like me?" He forced a smile to hold back the tears. "I'm a failure, and I know it."

My mind raced over all those sermons I have heard about how we should do well at school or at our vocations to be a "testimony." But that advice couldn't apply to Jim. God had

not given him the ability to gain the respect of others by intellectual or physical accomplishments.

So I explained to Jim—or at least I tried to explain—that maybe God didn’t expect as much from him as He did from others. Maybe he should accept his limitations and learn to be satisfied with his role in life. But my explanation was either deficient or unconvincing, or both.

A year later Jim committed suicide.

Shocking? Yes. I did not suspect that Jim had become that discouraged. It was the last desperate act of a Christian who believed that success was forever beyond his grasp.

Since that time I’ve come to know many who are like Jim. They read the how-to-be-a-success books, they try positive thinking, and yet they are hounded by the suspicion that they are failures.

Most of us have unclear (usually false) notions of success. We hear testimonies of converted movie stars, professional singers, or those who are “successful” in some vocation. Unconsciously, we assume that all Christians should be like them.

Perhaps we have forgotten that not many wise, noble, and mighty are chosen by God. We judge ourselves and others by a false standard.

A *few* noble, wise, and gifted are called. But they are exceptions. God usually chooses the weak, the ordinary, and the despised. Why, then, do so many of us believe we are failures? Perhaps we have a totally *false notion of success*. More of that later.

Many Christians feel trapped because of ugly circumstances. Some have made wrong choices or have been discouraged because they are “out of God’s will.”

Consider Beth. She accepted Christ at the age of ten.

A dozen years later, she fell in love with a promising young executive. She blissfully entered marriage without a single reservation about her serious-minded husband. *Of course* God would bless their marriage. *Of course* they'd live happily. But optimism does not guarantee success.

For more than twenty years she has lived with a hot-tempered, egotistical, and irrational husband. He rashly punished the children for misdeeds he falsely supposed they committed. He even now demeans his wife in public and is insensitive to her needs. The children are floundering in rebellion, trying to adjust to the world.

Before her marriage Beth sang, played the piano, and displayed other artistic abilities. But these gifts were quickly squelched under the ironhanded rule of a jealous husband. Now most of her life is behind her. She is broken in spirit and weary of life itself. She belatedly asks, "Was my marriage in the will of God? If not, can God ever bless me again? Where does someone begin when it's too late to begin from the beginning?" Is any type of success still open to someone who has been trapped in a senseless marriage?

Such questions can only be resolved by a correct understanding of the will of God. Often we assume that God is unable to work in spite of our weaknesses, mistakes, and sins. We forget that God is a specialist; He is well able to work our failures into His plans.

Finally, there is Brian. He and his wife were accepted for missionary work in Africa. Evidently they had misjudged their ability to adapt to the alien culture of a primitive tribe. Soon after they arrived in Africa they began to resent their new role. They felt it was unfair for them to sacrifice promising careers for people who did not appreciate them. They felt isolated, resentful, cheated.

Had God called them to Africa? It seemed so. They would not have been there if they had not believed that God had led them to missionary work.

That sense of calling had now disappeared. Or, at least, it *seemed* to them that God was not keeping His side of the bargain. They promised to go if He would bless. They went, but there was no blessing.

In order to save face and to give themselves the satisfaction of knowing they were not quitters, they stayed to the end of the four-year term. By that time the conflicts with fellow missionaries and the pressure of the foreign culture had left this young couple emotionally scarred.

When they returned home, their friends anticipated glowing reports about their missionary endeavors. Could they return home, and with a bit of exaggeration, give the reports the people expected? That was one possibility. But how could they explain why they would not be returning to Africa? Would that not belie their glowing reports? No, they preferred to become a statistic, “a missionary casualty.” They relocated in a large American city and simply informed their friends that they would not be returning to Africa for “health reasons.”

Such an adjustment was both easy and difficult: easy because Brian was able to get a job readily; difficult because they were hounded by the realization that they were failures. Permanently.

No success in America could erase the gnawing fact that they had not been able to survive spiritually in the fierce struggles of cross-cultural adaptation. One thought lodged in their minds: *they were now doomed to be second-class citizens of the kingdom of heaven.*

Furthermore, they found it awkward to pray for God’s

blessing. If they were called to Africa and were now out of God's will, could they *sincerely* expect God to bless them? Can God bless those who skirt the hard road and substitute an easy one?

There are thousands of Jims, Beths, and Brians. Some have been forced into marriage by pregnancy; others have faced bankruptcy. Many parents have had to watch their children rebel against Christianity. Countless others are defeated, pessimistic, and guilt-ridden. They are convinced that they will be second-class citizens in the kingdom.

There is another class of failures: those who mistakenly believe they are successes. They may earn an honest living and be fine supporters of the church. They unconsciously (or sometimes all too consciously) consider themselves examples for others to follow. Yet they do not realize that from God's perspective they are failures. One man put it this way: "I climbed the ladder of success only to discover that my ladder was leaning against the wrong wall!"

Heaven will be filled with surprises. Many "successful" Christians will be nobodies, and some whose lives were strewn with the wreckage of one failure after another will be great in the kingdom.

This book is written *for those who believe they are failures and for those who falsely believe they aren't!* It is a message of hope for those who are filled with regret; it is a message designed to disturb those who mistakenly feel they have "made it" in life.

The pages that follow are a modest attempt to rid us of worldly notions of success and humbly return us to God's perspective.

By what standard does God measure success? What happens when we are disobedient? What can we do when it is too late to begin again?



CHAPTER 2

CHOOSING YOUR YARDSTICK

A college student wrote the following letter to her parents:

Dear Mom and Dad,

Just thought I'd drop you a note to clue you in on my plans. I've fallen in love with a guy called Jim. He quit high school after grade eleven to get married. About a year ago he got a divorce.

We've been going steady for two months and plan to get married this fall. Until then, I've decided to move into his apartment (I think I might be pregnant).

At any rate, I dropped out of school last week, although I'd like to finish college sometime in the future.

On the next page, the letter continued,

Mom and Dad, I just want you to know that everything I've written so far in this letter is false. NONE of it is true.

But, Mom and Dad, it IS true that I got a C- in French and flunked my Math. It IS true that I'm going to need some more money for my tuition payments.

This girl made her point! Even bad news can sound like good news if it is seen from a different perspective. Success and failure are relative: their meaning depends on the standard of comparison we use.

Unfortunately, we often judge ourselves and others by inadequate yardsticks. We are quick to compare ourselves with a superficial standard. On this basis, we either conclude that we have “made it” in life, or else we assume the opposite, that we have failed miserably and are beyond hope.

Neither conclusion may be correct. Remember, it's the standard that counts. Let's consider a few common notions of success, all of them distortions that we have borrowed from the world.

COMPARING OUR ABILITIES

Have you ever overheard students discussing the results of their exams? One says, “I got an A”; the other sulks, “He gave me an F.”

Human nature? Yes. We tend to blame others for our failures and take credit for our success. Also, we usually use our friends as a basis of comparison.

This is not all wrong, of course. A student should strive for high grades; a Christian businessman ought to succeed financially (and honestly). But often a spirit of comparison

breeds envy and discontent.

Consider the man who will not become involved in the church because he feels inadequate. He even might disguise his pride (which lies at the root of all such attitudes) and call it humility. He will convince himself that this feeling of inferiority shows that he is truly humble. Actually, he is so concerned that people think well of him that he will not expose himself to any situation where he can fail. He plays it safe and does nothing.

Parents are often guilty of making their children targets of unfavorable comparison. "Why can't you be like Matt!" they shout with disgust. They forget that no child is *the* standard by which others are to be judged.

God did not make us like General Motors makes Buicks (the only difference is the color and serial number). God did not give everyone the same ability, intelligence, or aptitude. And if we wish to make everyone the same, we are discrediting the wisdom of God. Our abilities (or lack of them) are not an accurate barometer of success or failure.

COMPARING BANKBOOKS

Listen to a conversation in a barbershop or at a Starbucks. You will soon learn that the most popular basis of comparison is *money*. You would think that the chief end of man is to earn money and enjoy it forever!

A wife who compares herself with her friends is tempted to become dissatisfied with her husband's income. She feels cheated because she cannot buy the clothes or furniture her wealthy friends enjoy. She is in bondage to the social status of her neighbors.

If money is a basis of judging success or failure, it is

obvious that Jesus Christ was a failure! Consider this: when He had to pay taxes, He asked Peter to find a coin in a fish's mouth. Why? He didn't have a coin of His own.

Christ was born under the shelter of a stable's roof. Most of us would be appalled if our children could not be born in a modern hospital! When He died, the soldiers cast lots for His garment. *That* was all He owned of this world's goods. He died naked, in the presence of gawking bystanders.

Was Christ a failure? Yes, if money is the standard by which He is judged. The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man did not have a place He could call home.

Of course, earning money (and even saving some) is both legitimate and necessary. But the amount we earn is not a barometer of God's blessing. The sun rises on the righteous as well as the wicked. In fact, it is usually the wicked who prosper and God's children who are often penniless.

Yet, even Christians (who above all people of the earth should know better) still think they are better (or worse) than others because of the amount they earn! Money does not commend us to God.

Remember the parable of the rich man and Lazarus? Lazarus was a beggar whose body was covered with sores. He and the dogs shared the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Later, both Lazarus and the rich man died.

Lazarus was taken to Abraham's bosom; the rich man was confined to Hades. Abraham's rebuke was, "Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish" (Luke 16:25). Money is *not* a valid basis for judging success.

COMPARING FRIENDS

Have you ever met a name-dropper? You will recognize him when you do. He is the man who casually informs you that he met the president of the United States at a luncheon and that he is closely acquainted with outstanding athletes. He calls celebrities by their first name. If he could write a book, he'd entitle it *Ten Famous Men Who Met Me*.

More seriously, we often like to be associated with the “right” people. Our pride is nurtured if we can dine with the famous and be entertained by the wealthy. The fact that God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom often does not dampen our enthusiasm for celebrities.

However, knowing the greatest men and women does not elevate us one centimeter in the sight of God. The best of men are still sinners. If we take pride in the “greats” of this world, we have a warped view of God's values. He chooses the base, the lowly, and the unknown.

James (the author of the epistle of James) was Christ's half-brother. They grew up in the same home, played together, laughed together, and worked together. After Jesus began His public ministry, neither James nor his other brothers could believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Later, the dramatic events of the crucifixion and resurrection convinced them that they had indeed grown up with the Messiah, the King of Israel.

What an opportunity for James to tell his friends, “I knew Him when . . .” But he never did. Neither in his speech in Acts 15 nor in his letter does James ever allude to the fact that Jesus was his half-brother.

The reasons are simple. Being related to *anyone* (including Christ in the flesh) does not improve one's relationship with God. Furthermore, when James did accept Christ as the

Messiah he did not inherit any special privileges that are not available to all who believe. Before God, every individual is either accepted or rejected on *the same basis*.

God is not impressed with celebrities or those who would like to be. He is impressed by only one man—Christ. And only those who accept Christ by faith receive God’s approval.

The point? No person is a success because he (or she) is acquainted with the famous of today; conversely, no one is a failure in the kingdom because his friends were not well known.

In the book of James, worldliness is specifically described as an attitude of personal favoritism. It is seeking the friendship of the rich (and, we might add, the famous) and ignoring the poor (James 2:1–10).

The conclusion? “If you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (James 2:9). Your social status has nothing to do with God’s standard of success.

COMPARING RESULTS

A friend of mine who pastored a small church told me how depressing it was for him to attend pastors’ conferences. There he would suffer through the reports of the wonderful success of other churches. It seemed that all churches had either doubled in their membership or tripled their income during the preceding year.

His church, on the other hand, was small and had a history of difficulties. It had problems with bitterness, complaining, and factions. On some occasions the pastor was publicly humiliated by irate members. His story (which could be the subject of an entire book) reminds us that carnal Christians

can be just as obstinate as worldly pagans.

What did the pastor do? He lived with the abuse. He preached Scripture and taught doctrine. Eventually, a few individuals began to show signs of spiritual growth. In the lives of a handful, there was fruit. But most of the seed fell by the wayside; it was choked by thorns of worldly anxiety or drowned in the slough of resentment.

When I heard the full story, I said, “Roy, I would not have stayed there for a month!” His reply was a rebuke: “I’ve always wondered if I had love for people. God put me in the most trying situation I could endure. He wanted to teach me how to show love in a place where there was none.”

Was he a success? Not if nickels and noses are the measuring sticks! Results *can* be a barometer of God’s blessing—but not necessarily.

There is at least one instance in Scripture where God called a man to be a failure—according to human standards. After Isaiah responded to God’s call by saying, “Here I am. Send me” (Isaiah 6:8), God gave him a discouraging assignment:

Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (Isaiah 6:9–10)

Isaiah was told *in advance* that the people would *not* respond to his ministry. He was to preach only to provide a further reason for God’s coming judgment! Obviously, you can’t always evaluate a preacher by the number that come forward when he gives the invitation.

I don’t mean to imply that statistics are totally irrelevant

to success. Those who vehemently object to “numbers” are often the ones who have no numbers to count! In the book of Acts, statistics were a part of the record: three thousand were converted on the Day of Pentecost and another five thousand later. But statistics are not the whole story. Results (even *scriptural* results) are not necessarily a proof of God’s blessing.

Remember the Israelites at the water of Meribah? They were impatient with Moses. They had repeatedly accused him of bringing them into the desert to let them die. He had brought them out of Egypt, but he couldn’t take them into Canaan. Tempers flared. The people felt cheated.

God told Moses to speak to the rock. He, in a fit of anger, hit the rock instead. Yet water flowed! The children and cattle had cool, clear water.

Perhaps a small minority said, “Moses disobeyed. He will be punished.” Yet possibly the majority responded, “Why complain? Aren’t you glad that we have water? Who cares how it got here. At least we will not die of thirst!”

Water flowed. The people were jubilant. Was Moses a success? Yes, *in the eyes of men*. No, *in the eyes of God*. His disobedience brought water, but it also brought punishment.

Results in themselves are not a proof that God is pleased. It is possible to win attendance contests and disseminate the gospel and see results; all these activities can be done without pleasing God! Such results can be achieved by deceptive gimmicks or for purely personal satisfaction. It is not enough to do God’s work; it must be done in His way and for His credit.

Was Jeremiah a success? Was John the Baptist? Christ? Not by purely human standards. If these men had turned in annual reports, they would not have received achievement awards.

Are *you* achieving results? If so, thank God. If not, take

heart! You might not be as great a failure as you think.

When Christ was on earth He predicted that someday Peter would have his hands stretched out and someone else would clothe him and carry him where he did not wish to go, that is, to his martyrdom. When Peter heard this, he was distressed. He wondered what would happen to his friend John. Would he live until Christ returned, or would he die a horrible death, too? Peter asked, “Lord, what about this man?”

Christ replied, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” (John 21:21–22).

If God wishes to bless others more than us, if they are famous and we are unknown, if they are wealthy and we are poor, if they are gifted and we are mediocre—what is that to us? Christ says to us individually, “*You follow Me!*”

A spirit of comparison is worldly, carnal, and devilish. Read carefully Paul’s words: “Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding” (2 Corinthians 10:12).

As Christ would say, “*You follow Me!*”

THE SINGLE EYE

What made Moses a great servant of God? Maybe it was his faith. Perhaps it was patience. I’d like to suggest that it was his humility. When God told him he could not enter the land and Joshua would replace him, Moses showed no trace of jealousy. We might have expected him to say, “Why should this young upstart do in three days what I couldn’t do in forty years?” But he didn’t. Instead he prayed for God’s blessing on his young successor.

Why was Moses not jealous? Because he did not compare his *career with someone else's*. If God wanted to use Joshua in a spectacular way, fine.

Think of this: Christ left the eternal glory of the Father to suffer the ultimate humiliation of a shameful *human* death. Yet He never complained because He had to abandon the glory that the other two members of the Trinity retained. If He had compared His role in redemption with those of the Father and the Holy Spirit, He might have felt cheated. Why should He—equal with the other two members—be the one to become the scum of the earth?

If Christ had compared Himself with other men (remember, He was fully human), He might have thought that He should be the greatest of them. Yet (incredibly) He became the lowest of them. When the disciples were wondering who would perform the duties of a household servant, Christ took a towel and basin of water and washed their feet!

How could the One who was so high stoop so low? One reason is that He did not compare Himself with others but *cared only about meeting the standard that the Father had ordained*. “I delight to do your will, O my God” (Psalm 40:8). That’s all that mattered.

Is it realistic for us to follow His example? John the Baptist came close to it. Large crowds had gathered to hear John speak. He generated so much excitement that a special synagogue delegation came to ask him who he was. Some thought he was the Messiah. John was not flattered.

Later, the large crowds left John and began to follow Christ. John’s disciples were concerned about their leader’s reputation. They did not want their teacher left in the cold.

John was not concerned. He responded, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven”

(John 3:27). When one person is more effective than another, it is because God has ordained it so! All abilities and talents are gifts of God. Jealousy in the Body of Christ is an ugly sore, a malignant tumor.

John continued (v. 28), “You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’” John evaluated his ministry from a proper perspective. He did not say that he was useless (as those with a false humility are apt to assert). He realized that He was sent before the Messiah but that he himself was not the Messiah. He had a realistic self-image.

In the Middle East, it was customary for the friend of the bridegroom (today we call him the best man) to be sure that no one went into the room of the bride except the proper lover, that is, the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom stood by the door so that only the bridegroom could enter. Therefore, the bridegroom would have to identify himself, usually by speaking a few words.

John, using this imagery, told his disciples, “The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete” (John 3:29). John said that his responsibility was merely to introduce the bride to the bridegroom, that is, to introduce Israel to Christ.

John’s joy was not found in the crowds. He was not elated because some people mistook him for the Messiah. His satisfaction was found in knowing Christ. And *any* part he could have in introducing people to Christ was neither too great nor too small.

His reputation was not threatened when his ministry was eclipsed by someone greater than he. He could watch his popularity plummet in the wake of another’s ministry; there

was no jealousy, only joy. In his words, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Is such humility unrealistic? John the Baptist was a great man; he could afford to be humble! Christ said that among those born of women there had not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Perhaps if *we* were that great, we would also be that godly. Perhaps if we had known Christ personally as John did, we could accept the end of our career!

Would you like to be as great as John the Baptist? You *can* be. Regarding John, Christ added, “Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28). How do we become great (so secure that we need not compare ourselves with others)? By becoming so small that comparison becomes ridiculous! The least is the greatest; the last shall be first.

Are you ready for the implications of this?