

The Seemingly
Illogical and Sometimes
Completely Baffling
Call of God

STOP
TRYING
TO BE
SUCCESSFUL

Pete
Portal

FOREWORD BY TYLER STATON

 24-7 PRAYER

Stop Trying to Be Successful is a book for the Christians of our day who are struggling to reconcile what they read in the Bible with modern cultural Christianity. It inspires a recalibration of our success metrics, centered on the life Jesus modeled, and asks us to follow. Pete is courageous in his admonition to reorient our hearts to relationship over relevance, to let the air out of our ego as we live in obscurity, and to examine the motives that drive many of our common church practices. While so many high-profile pastors are quick to post about their glory moments, Pete is authentic in his examples of growth and humility, displaying the work the Lord is doing in his life. It is a heartfelt, vulnerable, and often humorous reminder to engage in the long, slow work of the Holy Spirit in bringing about lasting change in us and our communities.

Jay Pathak, head of Vineyard USA

Pete is a prophet who lives out his calling and invites us to join him on a prophetic journey through this book. As you journey alongside him and absorb his teachings, you'll find yourself challenged, blessed, and encouraged to lead a life that is deeper, richer, and more fruitful than you ever imagined.

Brian Heasley, international director of prayer at 24-7 Prayer

Pete Portal has chosen violence. Not in the negative sense, but rather in the glorious tradition of prophetic messengers whose ministries have marked significant moments of divinely initiated regime change. Like John the Baptist, who grew in wilderness authority before his emergence as a heavenly sanctioned oracle, Pete is stepping out with a simple but sharpened double-edged sword for our times. God is anointing these words to

cut through the malaise of human pursuits that govern our age and illuminate entrance into the superior ethos of our native heavenly home. In the face of ever-increasing cultural complexity, this book is both a righteous rebuke and a profound gift of wisdom to the modern church.

Rev. Jonathan Tremaine Thomas, president and CEO of Civil Righteousness

I am a sucker for an upside-down Kingdom plotline. It's why I love the Sermon on the Mount; things are not as they appear to be! In this book, Pete Portal addresses the soul-level dissonances that we face as disciples of Jesus. We make choices, but are we picking the right things? Relationship or relevance? Transforming or transferring? Faithful presence to the culture wars or apolitical faith? He reinigorates the discussion around counting the cost of discipleship and joins Jesus in saying: "Leave your nets now!" Pete takes the call to imitate Christ in his humility seriously and invites us to journey deeper into the ways of Jesus by simply stopping our pursuit of success!

Kristie Turner Monteiro, mission director of Disciplemakers for Life at The Navigators

Whenever I look at the actual state of things (the world, the church, the guy in the mirror), I'm reminded of how desperately I need people such as Pete Portal who can speak from personal experience with prophetic clarity about a better way to live, pray, and define success. *Stop Trying to Be Successful* is an invitation to follow the call of Christ by pursuing depth over breadth, building real relationships, and engaging faithfully with the culture around me. I remember flying into Cape Town on my

way to stay with Pete and Sarah in Manenberg once, and the immigration officer asked where I was heading. I told her, and suddenly she bellowed, “No! You don’t want to go there.” A little desperately I told her I did, and this time she asked why. I smiled my widest smile and said, “Because I’ve heard that Jesus lives there!” At this she roared with laughter, ceremonially stamped my passport, and welcomed me to South Africa. *Stop Trying to Be Successful* carries the authority of someone who walks the talk, and I particularly appreciated the honest way in which Pete shares his struggles. It’s as challenging as its title implies (thank God for that), but it’s also inspiring, beguiling, and brimming with hope.

Pete Greig, 24–7 Prayer International and Emmaus Rd, England

Pete’s is a voice I trust. He hasn’t just developed deep and beautiful theology—he lives a life that keeps his heart breaking open. He is a witness to the glory of God, moving through grit, grime, and grace. An earthy, downward trajectory that leads to the Kingdom of God. This book is going to help you find your way there.

Danielle Strickland, author, speaker, and activist

In *Stop Trying to Be Successful*, Pete Portal is honest, raw, and brilliant. He redefines or rather properly defines the metrics of Kingdom fruitfulness. In a world of mega everything, this book is a refreshing reminder of what it looks like to walk in the joy of working out the call of God in your life. In our current culture of self-obsessed activism and personal rights, Pete does a masterful job of calling us deeply into Jesus and finding our

true expression in and through him. This is no self-help book. It is not a manual. It is a theologically rich and experiential framework, guiding us into true purpose and fulfillment with all its highs and lows. Read it. It is to be digested and incarnated!

Dr. Katia and Julian Adams, founding pastors of The Table Boston, authors (respectively) of *Equal: What the Bible Says about Women, Men, and Authority* and *Terra Nova: Fulfilling Your Call to Redeem the Earth and Make All Things New*

In this provocative book, Pete casts a vision. His vision is of a world where what we profess to believe and the lives we actually live are brought together in congruence. Addressing the worlds of faith and culture with astute analysis and prophetic incisiveness, Pete offers a timely and hope-filled clarion call for today's generation to reconsider how to live lives of true influence.

Ken Costa, dean of Leadership College London

Pete Portal offers a refreshing critique of contemporary notions of success, inviting readers into a(n) (un)success “in the world” that is only possible when we embrace success that’s “not of this world.” He offers a rich alternative vision of Jesus-inspired success, born of years of painful struggle living out the gospel in the heart of the impoverished South African township of Manenberg. Pete’s vision is born out of his location in a setting of poverty, rampant addiction, and gang violence, where dimensions of Christian faith cannot remain separated: contemplation inspires action, Holy Spirit revivalism engenders social justice activism, and power joins compassion. This book

feeds a growing hunger like few others, threatening to incite a renewal movement deep enough to warm up hearts growing cold, and positively contagious enough to reach and recruit many to join Jesus and choose the Kingdom of God as the best alternative now.

Bob Ekblad, cofounder and director of Tierra Nueva and The People's Seminary and author of *Reading the Bible with the Damned*

Pete's own lived faith authenticates and validates the challenging message he brings in this book. His writing stirs, encourages, and inspires us in equal measure on our journey with Jesus, and enables us to use different metrics in working out what constitutes a life well lived.

Simon Guillebaud, author and founder of Great Lakes Outreach, Burundi

Pete Portal has always written from the raw reality of where he lives and those he serves—here he adds not just descriptions of complexity but also a love-shaped certainty of how to face our uncomfortable selves. I especially paused on the paragraphs about pain. Everything in our world now seeks to eradicate pain—distraction, medication, denial—but it is the echo of an opportunity to grow empathy and to embrace pressure. Because he who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life faced pain, I can now be free to be healed and hold hope in my heart. What I love about Pete's writing is its truth and experience and perspective and possibilities and wonder—a fountain of refreshing thinking.

Lord Dr. Michael Hastings CBE, professor of leadership, Jon M. Huntsman School of Business

I love reading about heroes of the faith who have lived before us and changed the world, but I find it absolutely incredible when you get the privilege of meeting someone who is daring to live a life of such radical faith that they are changing the world right now. Pete Portal is one of those people I have had the honor of knowing. I have been so inspired and challenged by the way Pete has given his life to see heaven come to earth and captives set free. It is an honor to call him a friend, and I am very excited about this new book.

Jonathan Helsler, songwriter and founder of the 18 Inch Journey

When the church loses confidence in its mission, story, and central convictions, secular narratives begin to masquerade as Kingdom narratives. These are then embraced by the church, which then inevitably begins to lose its spiritual vibrancy and potency. We desperately need a wake-up call, which is why I love listening to Pete Portal preach and why I love his new book, *Stop Trying to Be Successful*. Pete has been raised up as a prophet for such a time as this. He offers a diagnosis for the cultural moment we find ourselves in, invites us on a journey of detoxing from the ways of the world that have damaged our souls, and leads us back to the person, example, and ministry of Jesus, where a whole new vision for life is presented. This is the kind of book you want to place in the hand of every follower of Jesus disillusioned by the world, or even the church, but desperate to rediscover the upside-down way of the Kingdom.

Pete Hughes, Lead Pastor, KXC, London, and author of *All Things New: Joining God's Story of Re-Creation*

Great leaders ask great questions. This book raises excellent questions, bringing significant insights and fuel for all disciples seeking to live a Kingdom life in the culture and world we inhabit. Much like Pete, this book is reflective, punchy, prophetic, and engaging.

Tim Hughes, Senior Pastor, Gas Street Church

In this book, you will find yourself rethinking how you have lived your life and asking bigger questions about how to be human in this world. Pete takes you on a necessary journey of reflecting on the life of Jesus and the vast difference between it and how we live our lives now. This book is an invitation to move closer and closer to being someone you were designed to be. Let us say yes to this invitation!

Eric Johnson, cofounder and Lead Pastor of Studio Greenville

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Three things are necessary for the salvation of man:
to know what he ought to believe; to know what he
ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do.

THOMAS AQUINAS, *Two Precepts of Charity*, 1273

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Foreword

THE CHRISTIAN MYSTIC Thomas Merton once said,

If you write for God you will reach many men and bring them joy.

If you write for men—you may make some money and you may give someone a little joy and you may make a noise in the world, for a little while.¹

I agree, and I think he missed something. Who am I to add to Merton? But here it goes anyway: If you write for God you will disrupt many men and women, but it'll be the best kind of disruption, like being awakened by the bumps of a flight landing on the runway—it's jarring for a moment, followed by the delightful surprise that you've reached your destination. That's how I'd characterize Pete Portal's writing—delightfully disrupting, jarring in a way that awakens me to my true destination.

Every summer, I make a pilgrimage back to the rural American South of my childhood, traveling highways to hug family members and reminisce about another year passed in a blur. Along

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those highway miles, I occasionally pass billboards or church signs reading “Where Will You Spend Eternity?” or the more aggressive “Turn or Burn!” These messages, a relic of a church era gone by everywhere in the modern West *except* the rural American South, hold within them a great irony. They do not make me think of Jesus but of the human authors behind the billboard messages.

I count Pete Portal a friend. I’ve laughed with him over dinner, prayed with him through tears, listened to his most honest and unfiltered rants, and heard his vulnerable confessions, and he mine. I can tell you what he’d readily admit: He is not a perfect man with perfect motives. He is writing for God in spite of himself, fighting the urge with each strike of the key to write for humankind, making nothing more than a noise, for a little while.

And because Pete is writing for God, I have only to issue a warning and an invitation as you embark on the journey through these pages.

I’m a “bad news first” kind of guy, so we might as well start with the warning: The book you’re about to read—equal parts Hudson Taylor–esque missionary tales, Mary Karr confessional memoir, and John the Baptist prophetic echo from the wilderness—is, like all words written for God, disruptive. But disruptive in a way that awakens you to the delight that you’ve been sleepily carried hundreds of miles nearer your soul’s true destination.

And, while framing it as bad news, I honestly believe that to be the highest compliment I could offer this (or any other) book. It reads not unlike the red-letter words of Jesus in the Gospels—ever inspiring, deeply comforting, and occasionally quite disrupting. But if you want to help anyone else in any real way, if you write to enliven the soul rather than massage the ego, you’re going to have to be all right with disruption, and Pete, whether vulnerably

trembling or self-assured I don't know, has made his peace with disruption and served it up to you and me right alongside the inspiration and comfort. And for that, I'm grateful as a reader, proud as his friend, and spurred on as his brother in the faith.

Do not read this book if you seek only to stay asleep, only to keep marching drowsily forward apart from any startling disruption. Because to crack this binding and peruse these pages is an exercise in disruption of the most delightful variety.

At this point, I'm guessing the bad news makes the good news evident: The disruption is the best part. Like an acquired taste you mature into as you inch toward adulthood, what is first bitter grows into a delicacy for anyone serious about following Jesus over the long haul. Our souls acquire a taste for conviction and self-reflection, and a resilience to return to the narrow way we never tire of wandering from.

It seems to me that the very words of Jesus that disrupted most profoundly at first, for those who stayed by him, revealed the most profound truths in the end. Take, for instance, his words in John 6, after feeding the five thousand: "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (verse 53). With those few words, Jesus' most popular moment became his undoing, by modern measures of success at least. Most of his followers left him, and even the Twelve, who stayed, did so in spite of the bitter aftertaste his disturbing words left in their mouths after such a satisfying lunch.

It was Peter who said it: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Peter and the eleven others, sure he and he alone could guide their souls, even if there were stretches of the journey that felt turbulent, welcomed the disruption. And so it was Peter and the others who sat with Jesus at the

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table we've never stopped gathering around, to receive the broken bread we continue to receive in remembrance of him, and listen to that same disruptive voice say, "Take and eat; this is my body" (Matthew 26:26). The disruption satisfied their souls in a way that even the miraculous meal among the masses on the hillside couldn't. And in the hours that followed, they watched Jesus lead the most (un)successful victory in human history.

So I guess you could browse the shelves at your local Christian bookstore. They'll be full of words that are attempting to import the way of Jesus into the pursuits of success we've swallowed whole and think we can carry with us all the way to abundant life. Those books would certainly comfort and inspire you. They'll probably make more noise than this one, to be honest . . . for a little while.

But *this* is not *that*.

This book will woo you, startle you, and arrest you. It'll provoke you, wrestle you to the ground, keep you up at night, widen your sleepy eyes, and, at the end of it all, you'll thank it for that. I did.

TYLER STATON

Author of Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools and Searching for Enough,
lead pastor of Bridgetown Church, and
national director of 24-7 Prayer USA



Introduction

To be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as "flourishing." And we *want* that. We crave it. We desire it. . . . We are oriented by our longings, directed by our desires.

JAMES K. A. SMITH

In a world where success is the measure and justification of all things the figure of Him who was sentenced and crucified remains a stranger and is at best the object of pity. The world will allow itself to be subdued only by success.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER



YOU PROBABLY WANT to be a success.

Chances are that's why you picked up this book.

And that's all right—it's a very reasonable thing to desire.

The questions *Am I successful?* or *What is success?* are deeply significant, and to ask such questions is a normal part of the human experience. The yearning for a life of purpose, as elusive as it can seem, is felt acutely by the majority of those who have ever lived—certainly by more than might admit it. (Those feelings of inadequacy you experience may be more common than you think.) And now more than ever it is understandable that you may feel you are not particularly successful, or not successful *enough*. We are assaulted by a combination of capitalism and consumerism, social media and cancel culture, polarized ideologies and virtue signaling, the wounds of our parents passed down and just plain old original sin—all of which can amalgamate into producing some pretty angsty, pressure-driven people.

It's not just you; I'm pretty sure we all have a bit of a problem with success (the word itself is so subjective), and our idea of it can often be fueled by wounds rather than vision, romanticized projections rather than reality. Because we are all somewhat flawed, any worldly contribution we try to make can get precariously entangled with a me-fixated narcissism on a fairly regular basis.

Most of us know that being successful is not simply about money, looks, large numbers, or power. That's just a caricature to which very few reasonable people actually subscribe, right?

Well, sure—at least on the surface.

The crazy thing is, despite seeing through it and being repelled by it in others (we see it's all vanity, inch deep), something in us *longs* for success on these terms. But much more interesting than skimming along the surface of “success” is excavating deeper into some of the core motivating beliefs we humans have about ourselves, such as mistaken pride in thinking we each control our destiny, or paranoia that tells us there's an inherent scarcity of everything in the world. These are the swell that carry along the undercurrent of comparison—where we see the lives of others and long for a different reality for ourselves. And comparison—so often eliciting either pride or despondency—rarely ends well.

I've Got What You Want

A cursory glance through the wisdom of online articles on the matter tells us that millennials typically understand that material wealth isn't the marker of success—there are enough old, sad, rich people to show that. Instead, success has now become synonymous with living a life that others want. Chase an experience. Go

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adventure. Wanderlust. #yolo. To succeed in life is to publicly consume as many unique experiences as you can during your short time on earth.

Social-media feeds are crammed full of early- to mid-thirtysomethings enjoying a kind of spandex-clad transcendence. Success for today's generation would seem to look a lot less like the overweight, suit-clad city trader selling their soul to the system, making loads of cash to buy a slice of suburban real estate with a Porsche in the driveway, and more like the lithe and mindful global citizen doing "life on my terms." Think coastal living, yoga on a stand-up paddleboard in the morning, slaying the emails in your industrial coworking space, eating a superfood lunch, nailing a couple of Zoom calls early evening before smashing some gua bao and margaritas with your peeps at the latest pop-up restaurant before taking an Uber home. #SquadGoals

There's no escaping the fact that technology has shrunk the world and "global capitalism has brought so many different ways of life closer to us than ever before. We can see vividly a greater number of people who we want to be."¹ This can bring up hidden feelings we thought we'd buried long ago.

I often feel unfulfilled. Sometimes completely lost. For years I haven't been able to admit that. Until fairly recently I would find myself looking at others and thinking, *Don't they ever struggle with life's big questions? Don't they ever want to give up? Surely I can't be the only one sinking under the weight of comparison?* Far from freeing me from my broken sense of self, the version of faith I was trying to live by was exacerbating the core wound I recognized in myself. That wound was a sense of feeling like a failure, unsuccessful. And like an unwelcome parasite, it fed on comparison to others.

About Time

There's a recognizable concern underscoring much of the mainstream literature on success: *There is not enough time*. I don't mean being in a hurry in an immediate sense (though that's definitely a thing); rather, a lifelong, drawn-out feeling that, from cradle to grave, we apparently experience an acute fear that time is running out.

Read any random couple of articles on “successful” people talking about how “successful” they are, and a lot of what's conveyed is a profoundly angsty relationship with time: “You only have one shot at life.” “I don't want to waste my time on earth.” “You can never get it back.”

It's as though we have an inherent recognition—and for some, dread—of the physical limits placed on us by virtue of being mortal and human. But what if unencumbered productivity, unceasing activity, and unrelenting progress—however that is defined—are signs less of success than of self-centered insecurity? Could busyness really be the counterfeit of significance?

It's as if we have, left unchecked, an insatiable appetite for accomplishment. It's not hard to see where this comes from. Paul Kingsnorth comments:

Modern economies thrive by encouraging ever-increasing consumption of harmful junk, and our hyper-liberal culture encourages us to satiate any and all of our appetites in our pursuit of happiness. If that pursuit turns out to make us unhappy instead—well, that's probably just because some limits remain un-busted.²

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He goes on to suggest that this is a fundamentally spiritual problem, because “a crisis of limits is a crisis of culture, and a crisis of culture is a crisis of spirit.”³

Mixing It Up

The Bible tells us this life is just a brief moment in light of eternity—and so, presumably, for the Jesus follower, time isn’t an issue. I wish this were true. Instead, we find that in many ways the culture of chasing the next, the more, the significant has snuck its way into the church.

Syncretism probably isn’t a word you use very often, but I think it might explain part of our problem with success. Syncretism means the mixing of different worldviews into faith, and at its worst it can dilute the message and subsequent power of the church’s witness in society.

Might we have adopted modern cultural norms into our faith, preaching feel-good messages of self-improvement, becoming more committed to tweetable sound bites than we are to the uncompromising words of Jesus? Do many of our lives just look like a slightly vanilla version of those who don’t know the world-changing hope we claim to have living within us?

I’m not suggesting we return to some wholesale rejection of everything in the world, retreating to the desert and a purer pursuit of faith (though that has certainly worked at times in the past), but I am asking this: Would you say you’re living in such a way that if God didn’t exist (and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were untrue), your life would make no sense?

If you aren’t, would you like to discover what you might be

missing? (Disclaimer: Often I feel like I'm not and need reminding, so if you find yourself in this camp, you're welcome here.)

There is the most indescribably beautiful reality—more real than mere physical things—called the Kingdom of God. It is all around us. Sometimes you just need to develop a new way of seeing to perceive it. I'm aware that to some of you this may sound a bit cryptic, and to others, what we've been through may make us cynical, but the Kingdom of God really is a thing! In fact, it was one of Jesus' favorite things to talk about: the rule and reign of God breaking in and manifesting on earth. It's what happens in us and through us as we lean into the power and participation of God in his creation. It's the little-by-little inbreaking of God's *shalom*—nothing broken, nothing missing—into the wounds of this world. It's the restoring of sullied images into the likeness of Jesus. It's the transcending-through-redeeming of what-once-caused-pain into something-that-now-brings-joy. It's the victory God promises and will eventually bring forth.

What is the effect of the Kingdom of God on us? It is “to align our loves and longings with his—to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where he is all in all.”⁴ This different perspective for looking at the world recognizes that *who* you are is primary to what you do, which in turn leads to a repentance that is less about being sorry for things you have done wrong and more about being sorry you are the kind of person who would do such things. In this way, the Kingdom invites us into a life of deepening, instinctive internal virtue rather than surface-level rule following. It is often slow, is sometimes painful, is always liberating, and promises to make us thoroughly (un)successful.

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It was when I recognized in myself a deep desire to be more like Jesus and do things more like he did that I began a journey to unpick the sub-Kingdom habits I'd picked up. I'd become, as José Humphreys puts it, "fatigued by a gospel story too narrow for a complex and ever-changing world."⁵ This had developed into what looked like normal life in a liberal Western society and sometimes like a part of church that reflects—and is so often a product of—this society. Some of the joy and struggle of this journey of unlearning is what resulted in this (un)book.

Manenberg

I live and spend most of my life in a community that shouldn't exist. Manenberg is situated 12.5 miles east of Cape Town's city center and was built to house those categorized as "non-white." The homes of people of color were demolished by the white supremacist government, and their inhabitants transported like livestock to newly built townships. Manenberg is one such community and stands as an obelisk of apartheid, a concrete reminder that structural racism is one of humanity's gravest injustices. And so, unsurprisingly, being a white British guy living in Manenberg can be complex, because people who looked like me started this whole sad story. And despite many of my neighbors displaying a remarkable resilience in the face of grinding social issues, there is a lot of pain—pain that is both current and historic, personal and systemic. Even a good day in Manenberg can quickly descend into chaos.⁶

Along with some of our closest friends, my wife, Sarah, and I are part of leading a small, slowly growing church community in Manenberg called Tree of Life.⁷ Currently we have two residential

ministries, one for men seeking help leaving gangs and drugs behind, the other for addicted or abused women and their young children. Since I first moved to Manenberg in 2010 at age twenty-four, the statistics on drug-related crime have gotten steadily worse year after year. It can often feel as though we're part of a well-meaning but ultimately futile attempt at doing something to bring lasting change to hurting people. So far we have only been moderately effective in seeing change in others, but the whole experience has been hugely effective in changing us.

There's nothing like being part of a relatively small group of people struggling to effect lasting change—in a community known for its violence, poverty, and addiction; in a city characterized by spatial division; in the world's most unequal country—to feel as though you're not really succeeding at much, not really getting anywhere, haven't got much to show for your efforts. In this sense, the life we live is simultaneously the worst thing and the best thing for me: It triggers my comparison-driven feelings of failure with a fierce intensity; and so I have ample opportunity to work through them and see them transformed into something redemptive, something that points to the Kingdom of God.

My life is pretty banal a lot of the time and, along with moments of triumph and celebration, is peppered with minidefeats on a daily basis. Despite following the call of God to Manenberg, I can still feel decidedly powerless over my appetites; if you were to compare my time on social media versus time spent praying, it wouldn't begin to match up with what I'd tell you I value more. Sometimes, if I'm asked to speak somewhere, the person introducing me will say something along the lines of "This is Pete, and he and Sarah are the reeeecal deeeecal; they have given up everything to radically follow Jesus." Then, in the same week, someone in

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Manenberg might say, “What, Pete? The rich white guy who drives a nice car and lives in the quiet part of Manenberg?” I try to be present to both of these perspectives but defined by neither. You see, if I believe just one view as the truth, I’ll feel like a failure: The “reeeeal deeeecal” narrative makes me feel I’m failing in getting the church to see that following Jesus with our whole life is not radical at all; but if I internalize the “rich white guy” narrative, I’ll feel like a failure for living in a poor community and having too much stuff. My point is, I do not write this book as someone who has got life “sorted,” living from revelation to revelation, but as someone who wants more of God’s revelation—God’s perspective—on who he says I am.

So Now What?

Feeling like you’re a failure can be pretty exhausting. But, despite this, feeling compelled to present an outwardly successful, fully God-trusting public persona? That’s even more so. I’ve tried both. Neither works. Maybe you can relate.

Thankfully there is a better way—but it’s a narrow way. And so I’m starting to realize that, far from deconstructing faith, we need to learn how to transform it, taking what has been formed in us, seeking the Holy Spirit’s help in *reforming* it, and watching the process of sanctification *transform* it into something God can use to help us help others. It is this that enables our greatest wounds to become our most valuable contribution in the world.

Hence my writing this book.

I’ve discovered a different, creative syncretism, one that has successfully brought me life and joy. I’ve begun to see the walls between religious, political, and ideological categories as artificial

and often a little silly. Though we've too often been taught to be suspicious of other parts of the church, I've begun to embrace a faith that combines aspects of varying traditions. It's nothing particularly "out there" or revolutionary; quite the opposite, in fact—just a fairly conventionally minded embrace of the rich orthodoxies and traditions enshrined in the word *Christianity*.

For example: the silent reflection of the Quakers, the prayerfulness of the Moravians, the hunger for miracles of the charismatics, the unity of the Catholics, the simplicity of life of the Amish, the devotion to Scripture of the Reformed evangelicals, the peace-making of the Mennonites, the revivalism of the Pentecostals, the liturgy of the Anglicans, the questioning of the deconstructionists, the commitment to the poor of the liberation theologians, the music of the Vineyard and Taizé movements, the strategy of the early Methodists, the stability of the Benedictines, and the spiritual disciplines of the Ignatians.

God's nature is to create, and we partner with God when we offer creative ideas and share imaginative thoughts, not when we shut down or pull apart what currently exists. Condemning the church is an easy pastime, and there are plenty who spend a lot of time doing it, but things built on a negative tend not to generate hope. And so I have tried to ask not "What is wrong?" (thereby trying to avoid shutting others down), rather more "What is missing?" (thereby enabling the possibility for creative potential). I have tried to convey some of what I believe God aches for so that we might understand better our role on earth and grasp the vision he has set before us.

It's easier for Christians to go along with how the world currently is than to imagine a different reality, and so we can be tempted to opt for convenience over faithfulness. But if we trade

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the heart of Jesus' Kingdom with the values of the world, we will begin to forget that there is so much more of the Kingdom of God for us to enjoy and for the world to encounter. I sincerely believe that if followers of Jesus catch his vision of true success, we will begin to see the church come exponentially more alive—and so might just see the world around us begin to show more signs of the Kingdom Jesus preached about.

You could define *success* as correctly directing your love and energy to what is primary and of most importance. While it's easy to become “captivated by rival visions of flourishing”⁸ that much of today's culture tries to sell us, “God has created us for himself and our hearts are designed to find their end in him.” And yet, despite professing faith in Jesus, many of us still spend our days “craving rival gods, frenetically pursuing rival kingdoms.”⁹ This is because there is no reorienting of our true selves and our longings without resistance from our shadow selves: “It is crucial for us to recognize that our ultimate loves, longings, desires, and cravings are *learned*.”¹⁰ I hope that the following chapters will assist you in (un)learning the disordered desires of the world, to make you more successful in living the life God has for you.

This is not “self-help”; it is “Jesus, help!” And the success that Jesus modeled and taught can tend to look pretty unsuccessful in the world's eyes—it did get him killed, after all. It doesn't take a genius to see that the reality Jesus taught about is almost unrecognizable to, and increasingly ignored by, the world in which we currently live. Yet as you'll see, my loving motivation for what follows is this: I truly believe we were made to pursue lifestyles that exhibit both the supernatural power and the participatory suffering of Jesus—the most (un)successful person who ever lived.¹¹



**FOLLOWING GOD'S CALLING
OVER GOOD IDEAS**
How God Wants to Waste Your Life

Deeper than our wanderlust and desire for adventure is the desire to find our way back home. Ultimately, we want the adventure only so that we can savor it and tell it around the fireplace at home.


RONALD ROLHEISER

I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

I always told him, "I trust to you. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me." And he always did.

HARRIET TUBMAN



WHO AM I? *Where's my life going? What is my unique contribution to the world?*

The experience of being a living, breathing thing is full of potential. Life can be a stunning adventure, a collage of evocative moments one on top of another, forming the layers of our very existence. It can consist of enthralling dreams being stitched together into a patchwork of profound accomplishments-in-the-making. But on the other hand, *boy*, can it be difficult.

Weighty decisions, crushing setbacks, unexpected tragedies, moral dilemmas, humiliating betrayals, health scares, unrequited love, trapped wind.¹ Added to that, we now live in a world that seems to be preoccupied with *doing over being*. Somehow the question *What do you do?* has become the defining metric by which we are measured by others we have just met. As Jesus followers, we know we need another metric by which to measure “what we do,” but is the Kingdom of God really the only perspective we in

the church are looking through when it comes to redefining what “successfully” following our calling means?

Where and Who?

Before we can work out what our calling is, we have to look at the lens we are viewing this question through and the context in which we find ourselves. One of the greatest unforeseen gifts my wife and I are discovering in cultivating a multicultural church in a marginalized community is the effect that geography and community have on how we view a whole lot of things, from social issues and theological questions to church models and—you guessed it—calling and purpose. We are learning that “our imaginations and longings are not impervious to our environments.”² This means that if our churches are full of “people like us,” we can be formed by a particularly narrow perspective, which can too often be internalized as “Christian.” As the authors of *Friendship at the Margins* remind us, “Friendships that cross divisions of class, education, race, gender, ethnicity, age, and ability are crucial for reconciliation and for the life of the church.”³

Before we wrestle with the topic of purpose, we must ask ourselves, *How does where I live and who I'm in community with shape how I view the world?* Our opinions and views are not as objective as we think. I'm often reminded of a cartoon strip a friend sent me of a rhino wearing a beret, painting landscape watercolors. There are four frames of this friendly-looking rhino, but whether he's in vineyards or mountains, beaches or cities, all his paintings have the same feature: Smack-bang in the middle, obscuring nearly everything else, is a huge, gray horn. It's hard to see past this or view it as anything but a distraction. But for our artistic rhino, his

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horn is the first thing he sees every time he looks at something. We can critique it and say it shouldn't be there, but it's his reality 100 percent of the time. How we see the world and our place in it is less about what we are looking *at* and more about what we are looking *with* and where we are looking *from*.

The perspectives we are coming from, based on culture, upbringing, experience of trauma, faith, or ethnic identity, may be so different from someone else's that it can be hard to find common ground. The problem is that we tend to view our cultural upbringing as normative, so we don't even see it; we can be unaware of the monoracial, monotheological, monocultural bubble we so often swim around in. We may have opinions on big societal issues—but do we have friendships that span them? We may think we know how God is guiding us—but do we have diverse voices speaking into our discernment?

Without a framing narrative of faith in Jesus, we will turn to other things to find direction. Where mainstream culture seems to value flimsy platitudes (“If it feels right, do it.” “With enough hard work you can achieve anything.” “You deserve to be happy.”), God's calling is rock solid. There's a profound distinction between being led by our convictions and driven by our favorite Insta quote. While our feelings are real, they are a poor barometer to gauge what is good or true.

Calling is necessarily supernatural. It is the purpose of the God of the universe, communicated via some transcerebral means to each of his human children on our journey of giving our lives to the propagating of his love, beauty, truth, and goodness throughout the world.

It's not that you *can't* make things happen in your own strength—many people spend their entire lives doing just that,

some seemingly very successfully—but if God hasn't called you to that to which you're giving your life, you may be disobeying the one whose plans for you are inestimably better than your own. Disobedience to God can only end in heartache. This is absolutely not because he wants to punish you, nor because he's angry with you, but because you'll have given yourself to something less than his absolute best for you. And his best for you is what you were made for, is what makes your spirit leap and your soul come alive and causes not just your own flourishing but that of those around you. Whether you know him or not, whether you believe me or not, whatever your worldview or cultural perspective, God brought you into being and has a calling on your life. He has planned in advance good works for you to do. Life—in this body, on this earth, at this time—is a journey of discovering what these good works are, learning to delight in them, and then, well, doing them.

The thing is, it won't necessarily make logical sense.

It Comes with a Cost

A friend once shared a story at a large church meeting. The previous week he had felt prompted by God to give his car away to someone in need of one. Since this would leave him carless, it would be an act of incredible generosity and obedience. Nevertheless, he did it. We all cheered. But the story wasn't over: a few days later, completely out of the blue, he was given an even better car by someone else. We cheered even louder. My friend was telling the story to show the goodness of God toward us as we faithfully obey him.

Immediately after the clapping died down, another friend stood up to reflect on this story: "I just wish God hadn't given you another car!" The mood deflated. His point was that there's a real

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danger in telling testimonies where sacrificial obedience is rewarded with blessing, because the temptation for listeners then becomes to “obediently” give things away to hold out for better things in return. This isn’t generosity at all but manipulation wrapped up in materialism. My friend who shared his story of obedience and provision wasn’t doing this, but it would have been easy to make a religious formula out of it. How many of us would give our car to someone if we knew that by doing so we would receive an upgrade? Probably most of us. How many would give a car away just because we had a feeling God was asking us to, without any expectation of anything in return? I imagine far fewer. But which of the two scenarios would we offer as the more “successful” testimony?

There’s a world of difference between only doing things that make logical sense or that come with obvious benefits and walking the narrow road of obedience to God’s voice. In seeking to attract people to faith, a theology of “cheap grace” has sought to make the narrow path of the Kingdom into a superhighway. Cheap grace seeks to make the way of discipleship easy. It dangles earthly rewards in front of us as motivation. It promises reward without cost. It hides our light under a Christian-looking lampshade emblazoned with platitudes: “God won’t give me what I can’t handle.” “When he closes a door, he opens a window.”

If we live for cheap rewards, we become shortsighted. If we make formulas out of God’s generosity, we become entitled. If we cry “Hosanna!” convinced that Jesus will give us what we want on our terms, we may well find ourselves shouting “Crucify!” a week later because our needs haven’t been met the way we wanted. It seems such an obvious point to make, but let me say it anyway: Success should not be measured by the “blessings” or applause we receive but by the closeness of our walk of faith to the blesser.

What Is Our Motivation?

When we find ourselves more obsessed with the blessings than the blesser, it is highly likely we are being at least a little motivated by a sense of *Geltungsbedürfnis*.

What—you don't know what *Geltungsbedürfnis* means? It's a brilliant German word meaning "the need to be recognized as valuable and worthwhile in the eyes of others." Being praised for doing something others admire feels good. That feel-good factor can be much more of a motivator than we might admit: The praise of others can give us a strong sense of validation, and we can kid ourselves into thinking we really do have the answers to other people's issues. We can start to lose God in the very thing we long to do successfully for him.

The physician and public intellectual Hans Rosling reflected, "Almost every activist I have ever met, whether deliberately or, more likely, unknowingly, exaggerates the problem to which they have dedicated themselves."⁴ I suppose we do this to implicitly validate ourselves. If you can frame the issue or cause you've chosen as *the* defining one of a generation (whether that's ending human trafficking, raising environmental awareness, or funding donkey sanctuaries), and if you can brand it well, then you're on to something. Often the vision makes sense. It's a good thing to do. It seems to gain traction and looks successful. It's a worthy endeavor, offering "scalable innovation," "win-wins," and "replicable models." It seems to create employment out of nothing, receives coveted awards, and accesses high-profile funding and celebrity endorsement as it "brings solutions to today's most intractable issues." Add in the slick social media that creates a kind of peer-pressure noise that generates FOMO for those not actively involved in it,

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and you can find yourself with an organization or ministry that gains traction and looks successful. The problem is, if the founding motivation is one of Geltungsbedürfnis rather than doing what God has called us to do, it will never be enough.

In language reminiscent of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Henri Nouwen references the Prodigal Son's quest for fulfillment:

As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, I will remain “hooked” to the world—trying, failing, and trying again. It is a world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of [our] heart . . . leaving us to face an endless series of disillusionments while our sense of self remains unfulfilled.⁵

In stark contrast to this, the love God extends to us and the wholeness that comes from being obedient to him provide the true approval we all long for. But sometimes that calling looks a little less flashy than the slick social-media portrayal.

But How Much Does It Cost?

In complete contrast to well-marketed Geltungsbedürfnis campaigns, your God-given calling need not have anything to do with your networks, degrees, talents, or education. In fact, following God's calling may cost you all that. You see, God reserves the right to waste any of your worldly accolades and qualifications, however hard you worked for them and however proud of them you are. I wonder if he delights in this; whether there's an intrinsic

beauty in his sovereign “waste” of our worldly labels. Not that he’s deliberately facetious or particularly against your long years of studying medicine (or whatever equivalent). But it might just be that he prefers to use the very thing you like to think qualifies you for success in life as something to give back to him in surrender, in exchange for his best for you. Could it be he might derive as much—or more—pleasure from seeing you wrestling deep down in your bones and eventually offering your years of professional credentials in an expression of yielding to his leading as he would from turning you into a doctor?

Please don’t misunderstand me. Qualifications are good. Education is a huge privilege (and so easily taken for granted). It’s just that God doesn’t call the qualified—he qualifies the called. I first heard this phrase from a Congolese friend standing at the front of a wonky, faith-filled wooden structure in war-torn Goma, preaching to a congregation of uneducated widows who were praying up a storm. Very few of them would have had professional qualifications or even a high-school education. In the eyes of the world, they weren’t qualified for much. But the Kingdom of God is a completely different reality. These women, in interceding for towns and villages across the eastern region of the DRC and in sharing story after story of God transforming their lives and the lives of those around them, had dedicated themselves to a cause and emphatically displayed the power of pursuing their God-given calling.

John Wimber, who modeled obedience to God despite huge opposition, said:

The economy of God’s kingdom is quite simple; every new step in the kingdom will cost us everything we have

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gained to date. Every time we cross a new threshold it costs us everything we now have. Every new step may cost us all the reputation and security we have accumulated up to that point. It costs us our life. A disciple is always ready to take the next step.⁶

His words are basically a modern rendering of the apostle Paul's resolute conviction in Philippians 3, stating that anything he had ever gained in his past he considered rubbish compared to what he now had in Jesus, "for whose sake I have lost all things" (Philippians 3:8). While we may want to imagine a certain wistfulness in Paul's tone, remembering the convenience of the old days when he benefited from the abuse of religious power without being called to account for his actions, his subsequent words show no sense of regret at losing what he once had: "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14). Although Paul did at times leverage his Pharisaic past to curry favor with those he was telling about Jesus, the majority of his ministry flew in the face of his past training, accolades, and reputation.

It doesn't take a particularly in-depth study of the Bible to find evidence of the seemingly illogical and sometimes completely baffling call of God on an individual, group, or nation. Whether it's Abraham following the call of God to an unknown country, the Israelites walking through the Red Sea en route to the Promised Land, Gideon reducing his army by 99 percent from 32,000 to 300 to defeat the Midianites, or simply the peculiar combination of personalities and backgrounds from which Jesus chose his disciples—none would have been an easy job for the marketers.

Among his disciples Jesus chose uneducated fishermen, a highly educated tax collector working for the Roman Empire (whom we might call “far right” today), and a zealot intent on overthrowing the empire (basically a revolutionary or anarchist—whom we might call “far left” today). He also chose Judas, who was a manipulator and thief. Hardly the most strategic or logical choices!

And I wonder if this is one of the hallmarks of recognizing the calling of God on your life, as opposed to simply being driven by the excitement of a reasonable proposition or an exciting idea: that there is an innate cost to God's call.

Only One Guarantee

The first chapter of the book of Jeremiah is an interesting one to reflect on as we consider the cost of following our calling, and how God makes that calling known to us. In verse 5 we read the word of the Lord to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” That's the kind of prophetic word many of us would love—affirmation that we've been set apart by God to travel to cities and nations and give them dramatic words of destiny (probably receiving multiple airline upgrades, such is the favor of God on us).

However, Jeremiah is not into it: “Sovereign LORD, . . . I do not know how to speak; I am too young” (Jeremiah 1:6). His initial response is not “Right, let me set up a financial givers newsletter and launch a ministry website and get #SetApart trending.” He's petrified by what God has told him, and there's not a hint of Geltungsbedürfnis-narcissism. Instead, there's a reverent fear. He recognizes his weakness and protests against his commissioning.

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But, pivotally, he keeps listening.

And as he continues to focus on the voice of God, he gets a slap and a hug all at once. God essentially says: “Grow up, Jeremiah; you’re about to learn that obedience to me is the only thing of value. I really don’t care how insecure you are. Stop looking at what people will say or do. Just remember I’m right there with you.”

At this point, Jeremiah’s prayer-time-turned-life-changing-commissioning ramps up a level. God gives him visions and starts speaking to him through symbols that confirm the prophetic word. Jeremiah sees a picture in his mind’s eye of an almond tree. Bit random? Well, actually, no. The Hebrew word meaning “almond” is *shaked*, which comes from the root *shakad*, meaning “watchful.” God is saying he’s going to hold Jeremiah to account to fulfill his prophetic purpose: “I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled” (Jeremiah 1:12). Next, Jeremiah sees a vision of a boiling pot, tilting from the north. This is just everyday imagery with no obvious connection to what has gone before, but again Jeremiah hears the meaning behind it. God explains, “From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land” (Jeremiah 1:14).

So God’s eyes are on Jeremiah, watching to see that he delivers a prophetic word to his people, who have turned from true worship to “burning incense to other gods” (Jeremiah 1:16). Jeremiah’s first commission is to speak out against the idolatry of Jerusalem and warn them that foreign kings with invasion on their minds are about to attack. And no, the people he’s speaking to will not receive this well—he is to “stand against the whole land” and is told “they will fight against you” (Jeremiah 1:18-19). Pretty punchy stuff that few would relish and most would probably want to avoid or be done with pretty swiftly.

Jeremiah wasn’t just obedient to God—he was obedient for the

long haul. We go on to read that his prophetic ministry spanned roughly four decades. He didn't move on when things became less exciting, when he heard of a new move of God somewhere else, or when he was misunderstood, didn't receive enough affirmation, or didn't see visible fruit. Nor did he shrink back or dilute his message. Once, after Jeremiah had been unjustly thrown in jail, the king sent for him to ask if God was speaking. Without flinching, Jeremiah told him straight up, "Yes, . . . you will be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 37:17). I don't know about you, but if I was stuck in jail and I got an audience with the one person who could set me free, I'd basically tell him whatever he wanted to hear. But Jeremiah doesn't flatter for his own sake—a hallmark of his life was faithfulness to calling God's people to repent of their idolatry and live lives of heart-motivated social justice and ethical reform. He did this over and over again, even likening the house of Israel's idolatry to the sex life of a lusty she-camel that couldn't be restrained in mating season (how about that for a niche prophecy?).

His wasn't a ministry of baseless, surface-level ear tickling. There were no casual promises of prosperity and comfort or—a cliché in certain charismatic circles today—that they were "on the cusp of breakthrough." Instead, he called out those declaring peace in the nation when actually it was completely divided against itself: "Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). I'll leave you to make the connections with present-day realities. When false prophets were doling out feel-good prophecies, Jeremiah stood his ground and called God's people to commit to a long life in exile:

"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters.

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. . . Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

JEREMIAH 29: 5 - 7

We often forget that these words were written to a people who had been forced into exile, who were asking deep theological questions about the goodness of God while struggling to deal with their anger and violent fantasies at the complete *lack* of breakthrough in their prayer lives. (See, for example, Psalm 137, which was written during this time of exile and includes, among other things, promises of revenge and violent imagery of killing Babylonian children by smashing them against rocks. Some undealt-with anger there.)

Jeremiah didn't give them false hope along the lines that they should pray harder and make some positive declarations. He gave them guidelines for how to flourish in a place they had never even wanted to be. This involved fueling their prophetic imagination for what a life of shalom could look like at the apex of despair. Sound epic? Well, really it's very ordinary.

It involved making home; toiling the earth, cultivating beauty, and producing food; celebrating love and marriage, bringing up the next generation of family to know the ways of God. And, pivotally, it consisted in not losing heart in the face of the many unanswered questions and feelings of disorientation and abandonment while humbly praying for the prosperity of the administration for which they did not vote but under which they now existed.

Throughout this incredibly costly and potentially quite anxiety-inducing call on Jeremiah's life, God made two main guarantees. First, that Jeremiah would definitely be strongly and maybe

violently opposed. And second, that God would be with him. This is not the promise of worldly success and human acclaim. This is a promise that says it will lead you, whatever the cost, into an even deeper sense of God's presence and that he will affirm over you once again, "I am with you and will rescue you" (Jeremiah 1:19). What if that's the only #SetApart life that truly matters? If you only had those two guarantees, would you obey?

On Whose Timescale?

Whatever is going on around you, nothing you do for the Lord is ever in vain (see 1 Corinthians 15:58). But if you're in it for visible breakthroughs on *your* timescale, you'll probably end up giving up. As Jackie Pullinger so brilliantly points out, "The problem is, we are expecting to reap the harvest we have sown—where most of the time we reap a harvest someone else has sown."⁷ What if the harvest you reap were to have nothing to do with what *you* sowed but is the direct result of the obedience of someone you will never know this side of heaven? Who knows if they saw any visible harvest to their labor? Who knows if they secretly battled with depression or discouragement for not seeing even a fraction of what you are seeing God do?

Have you ever scrolled through social media, seen the testimonies of others, and become bitter that they've seen *results* already and you haven't? It's a peculiar kind of entitlement to expect the entirety of God's promises to be fulfilled in one's own life—talk about putting yourself at the center of things. It's always right to pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to transform people, communities, and nations, but we should be able to hold this in tension with the fact that "showing everyone visible fruit does not

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make you successful. What makes you successful is doing the will of God.”⁸ If instead of frantically pushing for success the way and when we want it we can come to a place of saying, “I need never see anything happen, because I know I’m doing what I’ve been asked to do,” then we’re free from the scourge of success on any other terms but God’s. And if God wills something, there is nothing we can do to stop it.

Rating Jesus

I wonder whether one of the main issues with the question *What do you do?* is the subtle question lying underneath it: *Does what you do position me above or below you?* If we’re really honest, our old friend comparison is already at play before we ask this fateful question. The truth is, we’ve become so used to rating others that it’s become second nature. You’ve just gotten out of and closed the door of your Uber, and your phone beeps asking you to rate your driver. Or minutes after you check out of your Airbnb, your email pings, and it’s a request for a rating and review of your host. Whatever apps you use, wherever you are in the world, we have become fixated with attributing a numerical value to others’ worth. All these ratings accumulate into data, and data can too often signify how “successful” we are in our culture today.

Naturally, there are many professions that rely on quantifying things to measure success: disaster relief workers counting the number of people fed or housed; fund managers calculating financial return on clients’ investments; soccer head coaches analyzing pass completion rates of two rival players; teachers marking pupils’ exams. I’m not debating that numbers are important in many professions. I just wonder if the numbers don’t always tell us much

about levels of human flourishing or lives lived well. For example, how might it change the way you view success when many disaster survivors are fed and housed but turning to addictions because of suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder? Would you agree that success looks like high numbers when the hedge fund makes investments in companies polluting the planet in pursuit of short-term financial profit? Is it a successful coaching decision to buy the player who has the higher pass completion rate but who ends up benched due to their negative effect on morale in the locker room? How proud a parent would you be witnessing your child's success in exams if to get there they sacrificed their emotional well-being?

There's something inside us that points to what lies deeper than data. I once asked online friends for their definition of *success*, and though I got answers ranging from the God-centered ("fulfilling God's will," "well done, good and faithful servant") to the me-centered ("happiness," "being the best you," "three loving children"), the majority pointed to a state of *being* rather than the result of *doing*. The quantifiable stats our world loves can't quite capture that. I mean, what would the data make of Jesus?

Jesus chose just twelve people to disciple. They let him down in Gethsemane, one set him up to be crucified, another denied even knowing him, and they abandoned him right when he needed them. If judged on the success of his death on a cross, how did he do? Multitudes rejected him, and today billions continue to turn down his offer of forgiveness and eternal life. One star? But if we look at Jesus through the only metric that matters—obedience to God—the facts tell a different story. He dealt with his sorrow and the anticipation of pain and rejection and allowed the authorities to crucify him unjustly. He yielded entirely to the Father's will. The resulting response from humanity is in one sense irrelevant.

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Whether everyone received this forgiveness or no one did, Jesus paid the highest price to bring forth the greatest potential for new life. Then he rose from the dead, he promised the disciples the Holy Spirit, and Pentecost came. His followers now preach fearlessly, heal the sick, cultivate subversive community, pioneer racial reconciliation and the redistribution of wealth, pray till walls shake, and carry a movement that has changed the world. Five stars?

Data can't capture everything, but it *can* be used to tell a story—we just need to make sure we're concentrating on the right story. I wonder if some of the problem we have in holding obedience to God's calling in higher esteem than success in the world's eyes is that we forget that followers of Jesus aren't simply to live for the moment but are a *storied* people. Success nowadays is seen as starting something new or being "self-made," and it often focuses on the here and now. But what if that's a myth peddled by the unstoried individualism that prevails in the mainstream West? What if, biblically speaking, success is about joining in with the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us in fulfilling God's plans to redeem the earth and make all things new? Obedience has been around for a long time or, as Eugene Peterson puts it, "obedience has a history."⁹ He explains that in the same way we wouldn't trust the data and results of a poll that interviewed just one person, we shouldn't trust our own solitary experience of God in isolation from the witness of history.

If we want to grow in the discipline of obedience to the voice of God, we need to cultivate a biblical memory by studying Scripture. As Peterson says, "With a biblical memory we have two thousand years of experience from which to make the off-the-cuff responses that are required each day in the life of faith." Not even the most crazed narcissist would have a problem conceding that one person's life is a minuscule speck in the grand narrative of the cosmos,

which means that “if we are going to live adequately and maturely as the people of God, we need more data to work from than our own experience can give us.”¹⁰

So let's look at some *storied data*. Hebrews 11 is a good place to start. To have faith is to have “confidence in what we hope for” (verse 1). Hope is the fuel of obedience. We read that God told Abraham to leave home for a land he didn't know. Abraham “obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going” (verse 8). A hero of the faith, he gave up the security and comfort of the known to follow the voice of God into the unknown. Right? So we are told by most preachers: “Be like Abraham! He made his new home in a foreign land in obedience to what God had said and in faith that God's promises are true.”

But if we examine a little more of the data by reading the Genesis story, we also see that Abraham was part-time obedient man of faith and part-time adulterous pimp. I have to be honest: there are so many details in Abraham's story I don't understand, including the cultural customs of the time regarding marriage and relationships (about which commentators have differing views). But there do seem to be clear headlines to the story of his life with obvious connotations for us now.

Abraham is presented as a man who is happy enough to trust God's overall plan for his life but finds it almost impossible to show this trust through obeying God in times of specific challenge. As time went by, some of God's promises seemed less and less likely—such as having a child when you're ninety-nine and your wife is ninety—so we shouldn't be too harsh on him. But despite his desire to honor God's promises, Abraham tended to make his own plans in moments of weakness—including sleeping with his concubine

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Hagar to conceive an heir of his own devices and prostituting his wife, Sarah, twice (once to Pharaoh and then to Abimelech).¹¹

His story can encourage and inspire us precisely because he is presented as an epitome of the human predicament—a mix of visionary and manipulator, faith filled and yet controlling, courageous and careless, intuitive but also culturally conditioned. There’s no black and white here, and neither, probably, is there in your life. We’re—each of us—a beguiling mix of contradictory virtues and vices, neither the summation of our best features nor purely the product of our worst. And if that’s even a tiny part of the message of the story of Abraham, then it comes as a great relief. The key is to ask, “Who am I *becoming*?”

Rating Yourself

My wife, Sarah, and I often encounter the question *What is your success rate?* It’s a reasonable question but one that frustrates us enormously. We sometimes feel like asking back, “We’ll tell you our success rate if you first tell us what your success rate is in raising your children.” When associated with bringing up offspring, success seems like an absurd metric to use. Something innate in us recognizes that it’s almost offensive to think about parenting in such a way. The fact is that we could answer the success-rate question in many different ways, from (forgive me) souls-saved-to-money-spent ratio to the percentage of the sixty or so young men who have come to live with us who make a verbal and conscious commitment to follow Jesus. Worldly success in this scenario is meaningless, because this “success doesn’t make sense of a self-giving love that is offered even to those who betray, deny, abandon, and doubt us. But . . . faithfulness in loving our

friends—whether or not we see immediate results—does yield a harvest of fruit.”¹²

We need to reframe the question in light of the story of Jesus and those who have followed him through the ages: Success in this instance is less about what you do and more about who you are becoming. Less about numerical results and more about your obedience to God. Only one metric matters. What if your unique contribution to the world is not primarily your talent, training, or temperament? What if your unique contribution to the world—the most successful thing you could ever do—is first and foremost your yieldedness to God's voice?

Wrestling with these questions takes time. If you're following nice ideas devoid of the ultimate end to which God has oriented your heart, don't be surprised if you feel restless most of the time. Remember what St. Augustine said of God: “You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹³ Your heart is not some sentimentalized notion, nor some quantifiable type, but the centrality “of your most fundamental longings—a visceral, subconscious *orientation* to the world.”¹⁴ In seeking to discover your orientation to the world, don't be surprised if you find you're fidgeting for God's best: “To be human, we could say, is to desire the kingdom . . . and long for a social vision of what we think society should look like.”¹⁵ So embrace the fidgeting, lean into the restlessness you may be experiencing, scratch with a holy curiosity, for you were made to desire what God desires, and before long, you'll find that obedience to God's calling is so much better than simply good ideas.



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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is your context? Who are you surrounded by? How might this be shaping the way you look at the topic of calling and purpose?
2. How do you define a “successful” person, business, or church? How might the things you’re drawn to expose the desires or fragility of your heart when it comes to success?
3. Have you heard stories of people giving up something for God and getting something better? How does this encourage you? Do you think it can alter your motivation?
4. How does the idea of not seeing the fruits of your labor in your lifetime make you feel?
5. What has been stirring in your heart as you’ve read this chapter? Is there something you feel you need to repent of or pray for? What might be the most obedient next step?