
**Kenny
Luck**

Fail-safe

**Living Secure
in God's
Acceptance**

I read everything Kenny Luck writes! Why? Because he knows the heart of men and writes to us in a straightforward manner. I read his words and think, *How does he know me so well?* In *Failsafe*, you will find yourself nodding along, and then you'll be challenged deeply to look past your need for approval or fear of failure to God's love as the ultimate failsafe. Read this and live with the security that your soul craves. I highly recommend.

DOUG FIELDS, speaker, pastor, author of *7 Ways to Be Her Hero*

QRF (Quick Reaction Force). No operation ever goes exactly as planned on the battlefield. Should things take a turn for the worse, a radio transmission to the QRF will get help on the way. In *Failsafe*, Kenny Luck explores how God's love is a man's ever-present QRF, providing us with cover fire, air support, armor, tactical proficiency, and intel that falls from heaven. God's special forces take ground and victory when the failsafe is in place.

CHAD WILLIAMS, former Navy SEAL, author of *SEAL of God*

If you want to understand what it really means to embrace God's acceptance and then be freed to love other people as a result, *Failsafe* is a game changer. I couldn't recommend this book more highly, and I'm grateful Kenny wrote it. Just be careful—there's a good chance it will convict you and push you out of your comfort zone. But isn't that what it takes to be the kind of man God wants you to be? I hope you're up for the challenge.

SEAN MCDOWELL, PHD, Biola University professor,
speaker, author

SEAL teams always have a Plan A, B, C, and D. Why? Because things rarely go as planned. *Failsafe* explores our backup plan as Christian men, that one special place that never fails and is always safe: the loving arms of God. As believers, when we stumble or fail, we are caught by God's unfailing security. It is also our base from which we pick ourselves up and move forward. Kenny Luck is the real deal, and he speaks out of a walk with God that carried him through many difficult moments. *Failsafe* is a must-read for every man who wishes to stay on mission.

MILAN YERKOVICH, author of *How We Love*, founder of Relationship 180

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Failsafe: Living Secure in God's Acceptance

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INTRODUCTION

The Inner Man

I TEACH A CLASS at my church for prospective members. It's what you might expect—an orientation to the history of our church, our present direction, our biblical views, and our vision for the future. People who attend the class have already taken a test-drive of our services and checked out our kids' programs. Most have prayed about becoming members, and their presence is a sign they're ready for that step. About midway through the class, we reach a section in the materials that speaks to the kind of faith community we're seeking to build. Some themes in this section, for example, include a "worshiping" community and a "joy-filled" community. And then we reach this theme: "*a masculine-friendly community.*" In most churches, men aren't a signature part of the vision for the community they're building, but this is a functional and practical distinctive of our church that receives a lot of staff time, attention, and investment.

This moment is a gut check for most people in the class.

I can see both the look and the temperature in the room change. The faces of most of the women contort in some way, eyebrows furrow, arms fold, and bodies shift in chairs. I understand where the discomfort comes from in a culture where people

don't see much to celebrate in men. Who could blame them? They see headline after headline of men acting in their own self-interests at the expense of others. Names might be popping into your mind right now from headlines on cable news. The common denominator? Men who have used their influence, position, or power to abuse others. Think sexual-abuse scandals. Think mass killings. Think human trafficking. Think domestic violence. Think fatherlessness. Think of all the chaos and dysfunction that flow from the choices grown men make out of boy-sized emotional maturity and character. It's head-scratching and confirms the fact that age, skill, high achievement, wealth, discipline, and unbroken successes have *nothing* to do with a man's *emotional* maturity. So when I announce to a roomful of potential members that our church is building a community of masculine-friendly Christ followers, it seems like an oxymoron to many. It's confusing and lacking in context.

Behind the discomfort, the obvious intrigue, the furrowed eyebrows, the folded arms, and the bodies shifting in seats is a simple thought: *Why would a church want to empower existing broken male culture?* But before numerous mental rabbit trails are taken, I quickly preempt the mystery with a cascade of answers, starting with this:

Our church believes that one of the greatest gifts we can give our community, our women, and our children is a spiritually healthy, relationally committed, and emotionally grown-up man.

The word choice here is specific and intentional. It resonates at a deep level with both men and women because everyone understands the very real consequences connected to a twelve-year-old twenty-year-old, a thirteen-year-old thirty-year-old, a

fourteen-year-old forty-year-old, and so on. Everyone knows that boy-sized emotional maturity and character in a man-sized body with man-sized commitments and responsibilities spells D-I-S-A-S-T-E-R. That's why the world hopes (just as our church does) that we as men will grow up and out of the boy on the inside into mature men who can say no to ourselves and our lesser impulses in order to say yes to loving God and others well. In other words, our church wants to make sure that our women and children have mature servant-leaders as husbands, fathers, friends, and neighbors. But more importantly, our church wants men to know that we don't buy the narrative peddled in culture that men are somehow the failed brand that can't be trusted with the important relationships, partnerships, and decisions of life.

We're saying to our people and our community that masculine strength is not just a good thing, but it's a great thing when equally strong emotional maturity, character, and compassion are guiding it. We want our women to know that we have their backs, and we understand the pain this broken male culture inflicts on women and children for generations. We want to create a space where men become healthy and strong in all the right ways, because being the right kind of man for others is one of God's most powerful and richest blessings.

Becoming that blessing is a war for the masculine soul.

Little Boys and Grown Men

I laugh about it *now*.

My fourth-grade class picture in elementary school tells the whole story—from the inside out. It's a classic shot. Four evenly packed rows of elementary-aged boys and girls across metal bleachers, our faces innocent and our countenances unspoiled by the self-consciousness of the social media age. Envision simple plaid

shirts, girls with pigtails, precious smiles, and perfectly still little spirits staring intently into the camera.

“Say cheese!” *Click.*

Today we snap six or seven pictures on a smartphone in five seconds, select the best one in the next ten seconds, and then text it to friends or post it to social media in the following thirty seconds. But in the 1970s, school photographers couldn't pre-inspect a photo. For perspective, the advent of mainstream digital cameras was two decades away. Instead, photographers had to wait until the film was professionally developed directly from negatives in a darkroom, and then dried and cut before seeing whether their vision was realized. A fast turnaround was *days*.

On this particular fall day, the photographer assigned to John Muir Elementary must have been weary, in a hurry, apathetic, or all of the above, because Miss Casey's fourth-grade class was a one-click-and-done deal. Our photographer didn't think to take a backup picture. But then again, most children were able to hold off poking one another and stand at attention for the time it took a single-lens reflex camera shutter to open and close, right? What could go wrong?

That class-picture experience faded quickly out of my memory, because there was no purpose in thinking about it again until the ever-exciting last week of school, when the Wildcat yearbook was passed out to the entire school. That was the week of the school year when we watched a lot of films, had a lot of class parties, and were handed a yearbook to reminisce over and sign.

With my yearbook in hand, I had only one mission: to find pictures of myself! Drawing mustaches and beards on my least favorite teachers' faces could wait for a lazy summer day.

I tore into my copy, scanning the pages, scrutinizing the pictures, and trying to spot myself playing prison ball, kickball, tetherball, or any other “ball.” I was disappointed to find only a

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few candid shots of myself in the fourth-grade section. The boring catharsis of looking at your yearbook at this age is the class picture, of course—no playground, no ball, no action shots there, right?

Wrong.

When I turned the page to Miss Casey's fourth-grade class, there was some action, and unfortunately, it would be forever memorialized in time. Four even rows of children? Check. Girls with pigtails? Check. Precious smiles? Check. Perfectly still children staring intently into the camera? *All but one.*

My head was turned sideways, perfectly perpendicular to the camera lens, and it was obvious I was trying to get the attention of the boy next to me, my open mouth three inches from his right ear. True to form, Mr. Diarrhea Mouth (as my third-grade teacher dubbed me in my report card the previous year) was behaving in an untimely and unwelcome way, ruining this otherwise pristine fourth-grade moment in time.

The adage "A picture is worth a thousand words" is painfully real to me looking at this image after all these years, but it's also very humanizing. Clearly, my behavior captured in this freeze-frame suggests a need to talk, a need to connect, a need to receive some kind of feedback, and a need to be acknowledged—needs that *outweigh* the need for manners or consideration of others. I was completely unaware of what my physical context was calling for because my anxious soul was seeking worth and attention—and risking future embarrassment to get some. My thought process, in hindsight, was simple:

- If people listen to me, they see and notice me.
- If they see and notice me, I am worth something.
- If I am worth something, I matter, and that calms my fears.
- If my fears are calmed and I have peace inside, I will feel more secure and comforted.

The problem with this kind of reasoning is when we become grown men with little-boy fears still lurking inside.

Worth Is Better Than a Thousand Pictures

This yearbook picture—unlike the billions of pictures we pose for and display in our social media feeds today—reveals the unvarnished truth about my *inner* formation as an adolescent and a young adult. In this picture, my insides were literally making their way outside and were *unconsciously* projected into my social matrix. That picture represents my hidden need to know something every human being seeks at a deep, fundamental level. You and I want to know . . .

- Am I worth someone's time and attention?
- Does anyone see and value me?
- Will someone accept, know, and appreciate me?

After two decades of working with men of all ages as a mental-health worker and pastor, I've found that my story is not uncommon. As the youngest of seven kids living in a chaotic home with an alcoholic parent, I could easily get lost in the shuffle of a large family ecosystem. I saw, sensed, and was immersed in constant conflict, but no one was able to help me filter what was happening—except my black Labrador. I would call Bub (the dog) to my room, instinctively petting and talking to him to distract and comfort myself in the midst of the yelling, name-calling, and door-slamming just outside my closed door. I would do this until the chaos stopped, and then I'd slowly pop my head out of my room, listening and looking for signs that all parties had returned to their respective corners. Thank God for my dog!

This was my normal.

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No one talked to me. Strangely, and yet like many children do, I thought something was wrong with me—that I wasn't worth talking to. I was losing the one thing that keeps human beings hopeful: the idea that I mattered. As a result, my peace was hijacked and replaced with anxiety over possibly being the “accidental” seventh child. Or worse, a mistake. Being five years removed from my closest sibling didn't help. It was as if I was there *but not there*, because everyone else was running out of the house, running away from the house, or locking the doors to their rooms.

Fast-forward twenty-five years to a session with a counselor who asked me to pick a word from a list that best described my growing-up years. As I scanned the sheet, I saw both negative and positive words, but I found my eyes gravitating toward only one word. I then started tapping that same word in silence with my index finger.

The word was *ignored*.

I went on to tell the counselor that from a very early age, I had nervous energy driven by what I felt I lacked—basic worth—and I was living out of that. Predictably and inexorably, I took all the traditional routes young men take to validate themselves and diminish the insecurity that accompanies that awful self-perception.

I became an expert at reading social situations and changing colors like a chameleon, morphing into whatever I thought was necessary to be accepted. I simply studied the playground, saw who was getting the attention and which behaviors got it, and then pulled off those behaviors better than the next guy. Sadly, that is what deprivation of the soul will create—a young man who will do whatever it takes to be tossed some crumbs of social intimacy. The fourth-grade snapshot of me talking during the class photo sat comfortably next to my senior-class hall-of-fame picture: “Kenny Luck—Life of the Party.” New picture of me,

mouth open, still seeking attention, building a reputation—and wearing a mask to hide my lack of self-worth.

I was growing into an insecure man.

Authentic versus Synthetic Worth

Like a heat-seeking air-to-air missile that flies directly toward the engine of an airborne target, the human soul is engineered to seek out, locate, and secure worth. God hard-wired us to be seen, known, and appreciated by *someone*. And if someone doesn't stop, take notice, and acknowledge us in a meaningful way, our souls won't be at peace. This gap in the soul will be a conscious or subconscious force in our lives. A force that fuels fear and insecurity within.

We are never quite at peace. We're restless. We're driven. We worry too much about what others think of us. We compete to be visible. We sabotage our own relationships. We fear rejection. We protect our image. We overinvest emotionally. We hate being alone. We crave approval but have a hard time accepting it. We like order and predictability. We like control. We *don't* like surprises. We define ourselves by what other people think. We posture, trying to act tough because we're truly afraid people will discover who we really are. We publicly smile while we privately struggle with besetting temptations and struggles. We label and judge others. We get jealous in relationships.

Why? We lack deep and lasting peace on the inside.

None of what I just mentioned is God's desire or plan. His plan and desire are that all men, women, and children receive lasting peace by discovering *authentic worth* in their souls.

The key word? *Authentic*.

When it comes to our souls and their organic need to feel worth, a single, powerful truth will help us begin a new, authentic,

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and God-empowered experience in our inner man: *Things outside us cannot resolve the dilemmas within us.*

No relationship. No improved circumstances. No “if only” scenario. No professional title, award, or achievement. No amount of money. No amount of social visibility. No risky or new thrill. No extended absence of adversity. No amount of power or control over others. No resolution of party politics. No cosmetic fix, new look, or wardrobe. No vanquishing of obstacles. No wonder drug. No family catharsis. No religious behavior. No loosening of moral boundaries. No change of scenery. No new technology or gadget. No getaway or vacation. Not even a new black Labrador puppy.

The logic is that somehow, by a mystical osmosis, the right outer structure of our lives will create an inner order for our souls. We are hoping and wishing and behaving as if it were so, but it's not! And still, millions of people are spending billions of hours and trillions of dollars hoping that this formula for their deprived souls will work. Fostering this hope and exploiting this deep need of our souls is a dark individual who desperately wants us to continue believing that a betterment or rearrangement of things outside us will heal the wounds or deficits of character within us.

Meet the king of fear and pride: Satan.

The master counterfeiter of all things God, he is in a sophisticated recruiting war with God for control of the human soul. But since he can't deliver permanent, authentic worth to the soul, he has custom-engineered a kaleidoscope of synthetic ways for men to feel temporary forms of acceptance. These soul-teasing pursuits and counterfeits anesthetize the pain connected to a lack of worth or prop up a pseudosignificance in us while never being able to actually fill the void. They're evil prescriptions packaged and sold as popular opinions and prevailing cultural norms around the globe. In fact, that is Satan's shibboleth: *it's just culture.* These

false fountains of earthly worth demand conformity and rob our best energies from our best days and God's highest intentions.

Our need for worth gets exploited, and we take the bait.

These ways of solving the soul problem are rooted in powerful "isms" or philosophies that, *if believed*, will lead to behaviors that distance a man from God. Think hedonism, materialism, and narcissism—finding worth in self-gratification, financial self-preservation, and self-importance. These were the same "isms" and expressions of identity and masculinity that Satan tempted Jesus with in the Gospels: placing his worth in these earthly things *over and above* his identity as the Son of God. Satan is keenly aware that the more we embrace them as our sources of worth, the more self-absorbed we become. As a consequence, our relationships with God and people will inevitably fragment, then atomize, and eventually dissolve.

Two words come to mind: *evil* and *effective*.

The prevalence and power of these "isms" and their multiplied expressions in broken male culture are so pervasive that, over the centuries, men have tried to blend these belief systems with faith in Christ. *It can't be done*. Not because I say it can't, but because Jesus himself did. He declared to his disciples, "You do not belong to the world."¹ This is a warning inside a declaration. We belong to him, and because of that, Jesus warns us not to blend eternal worth with forms of earthly worth. In the crudest analysis, Jesus is essentially saying, "*Don't let the culture pimp you, rip you off, or deceive you into trying to blend your worth from me with worth from the world.*" Why is Christ so emphatic?

These concepts of worth are synthetic and sponsored by the hater of your soul.

This high-pressure ecosystem of broken male culture is continuously spinning beliefs, behaviors, and identities toward us through every possible medium. More importantly, they are directed

intentionally toward the emptiness in our hearts that God alone can fill. As philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in *Pensées*, “[Man] tries in vain to fill [this emptiness] with everything around him. . . . [But] this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”² That is why they’re so powerful and deeply attractive to us, but they also fail to satisfy us deeply, because only God himself can fill that vacuum.

Synthetic, by definition, means something created to imitate the original. The call to this generation of Christ-following men is this: *Accept no imitations*. What all men seek and need is the deep, lasting, and transforming worth that comes from one source: God’s love. It’s that simple, but at the same time, this truest truth is powerfully attacked, opposed, muted, discredited, and polluted by an enemy who fears the power of our souls fully connecting to God’s love.

This is the journey of the inner man, the fight of the masculine soul.

Locking Down Your Inner Man

There is a hidden you that the Bible calls your “inner man.”³ It’s the you no one sees who . . .

- Is afraid of failing again
- Doesn’t want to let others down
- Wants to be appreciated uniquely
- Isn’t sure you have what it takes spiritually
- Is fighting sin alone
- Doubts God under adverse circumstances
- Struggles to tell the truth
- Compares yourself to others
- Fears what others think
- Often feels that God has deserted you

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- Wonders why God isn't giving you what you need
- Is overly protective of your image
- Lets circumstances define your worth
- Is anxious about the future all the time
- Is a perfectionist, believing that your failures are fatal and final
- Has trouble receiving God's forgiveness
- Relies on yourself apart from God to solve things
- _____ (fill in the blank)

The endgame of God is to pour out his love to this *inner man*—the one that you alone know. Why? Because the critical battles are fought within your spirit, and that's where you need God most. Helping you experience victory inside and enjoy the fullness of that process is the goal of this book. It's also the hater's worst nightmare.

Listen closely to this prayer over you, which comes straight from the Spirit of God:

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.⁴

Strengthened. Rooted. Grounded. Filled up. Fully empowered. This is a picture of emotional, psychological, and spiritual security invading, overwhelming, and transforming the soul of a man.

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The power of the gospel is the ability of God's love to transform the inner man—the real you—from the inside out. In the midst of your inner motives, fears, affections, concerns, and doubts, God's love is fully able to hold you upright in the changes and challenges, trials and temptations, successes and failures of life. It sustains us under pressure. It tells us who we are and who we are not. It tells us why we're alive. It tells us what to do in the moment. It tells us the truest truths about ourselves. It is soul piercing. It is pervasive. It heals the fractures. It binds our wounds. It sings over us.

The LORD your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing.⁵

God takes great delight in *you!* That's his mission. For some of us, that sounds so foreign. For others, we have heard it but not internalized it, so it's easy to let that truth blow past our hearts. As we journey forward into this truest truth, I will state and restate it until the walls of our hearts crumble and we become vulnerable. God's love for us is a *failsafe* when past traumas, unplanned circumstances, unhealthy self-perceptions, unwelcome rejections, and unmet expectations threaten the security of our souls. His love kicks in to save us from the slippery slopes of paralyzing anxiety, uncontrollable anger, and prolonged or systemic sadness. It is our backup when our own resources break down. God's never-failing love is *there* for us when life, our humanity, or both conspire to break us down and tempt us to give up.

You might be thinking, *But I know that already.*
Do you?

Hundreds of millions of men know in their heads that God loves them and has created them to serve him, but they fail to connect the reality of his personal love for them to the real emotions and events of their daily existence. In their minds (and perhaps in your mind), God's love is an abstract and distant spiritual truth that becomes relevant only in certain settings. This attitude and approach to God's love lead to blending the ways of culture with faith and pursuing solutions that fail to penetrate the soul. Predictably, expectations related to God go unmet, and men are left worried, disappointed, and confused about God and his love for them.

So what is happening?

God's love is in our heads, but it's not in our hearts. Most importantly, our lack of peace tells the story. Jesus says of such men, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."⁶

That is why God has placed this book in your hands. He wants to clear up your confusion and usher in a fresh encounter with him. You may be encouraged to know that God is moving in his men all over the world at this moment in history and is reshaping their hearts. A movement is being born that only men secure in his love can advance. He is transitioning his beloved sons from the anxiety, emptiness, and self-loathing of securing our worth in cultural ways to a new pattern of integrating his love into the fabric of our thinking and self-perceptions. Men by the millions are internalizing, receiving, and actively comprehending "the breadth and length and height and depth" of God's love, and they are coming to "know [that] love . . . which surpasses knowledge." Because of a gracious quickening of God's Spirit, the love of God is traveling like a raging river from the heads of men downward, cascading forcefully into the deep crevasses and cavities of their hearts and securing victory for them in their inner man.

The result? *Power.*

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Men healed and freed by God's love are fearless in the face of adversity and humble in the face of prosperity. *How does that work?* you ask. Because they know that God's loving purposes are being worked out in both sets of circumstances. Living in and under God's redemptive love is a mentality that sounds a lot like this:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.⁷

Did you hear it? By accessing God's love for them in the real-time battles of life, sons of the King conquer the very things that attack their worth, seek to rob their peace, and dilute their faith. They know they will always and forever be beloved sons, fully empowered and authorized family members who possess a love and inheritance that are unbreakable. Circumstances may assail their bodies, but they don't control their spirits or assign their worth. Their sovereign Creator has assigned their worth.

How do these men live? Instead of being conquered by their fears and insecurities, they defeat them inwardly. The personal, sacrificial initiative of God through Christ has overrun and taken back inner territories previously held by fear or pride. These men have internalized and activated their worth from God emotionally, cognitively, and psychologically through the Holy Spirit. They are *living* meaningfully in God's love and are *comforted* deeply, which significantly changes every aspect of their lives.

The love of Christ controls us.⁸

[Jesus said,] "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love."⁹

It's time for every man to make the transition. Are you ready?

Father in heaven,

I am ready for a deeper encounter with your love. I am ready for your love to take over how I view myself, my past, my present, and my future. I am ready to give you the fullest access to my inner man so that any fear—known or unknown—can be defeated and replaced by your powerful love for me. I am ready to work out in my everyday life the love you have poured into my heart through Christ. Leave no area of my life untouched by your love. I want to grasp every dimension of it so that every purpose you have for me will be fulfilled. Begin the process now, Father, of breaking down my defenses, my pride, and my fears so that the inner man—the real me—can receive your power. With all faith, hope, and eager anticipation, I pray. Amen.



GETTING SECURE





THE FIGHT IS OVER

I Am Fully Accepted

ANOTHER PARTY. A little buzzed. Alone.

I wondered what people would think if they could see what I was really thinking and feeling in this moment. I had just put on another Academy Award–winning performance as the “fun” guy telling jokes, gathering people around drinking games, and even shocking myself as to the lengths I would go to be visible and stand out.

“For what?” I lamented. This wasn’t working.

More to the point, it was all coming to a head—I could literally feel it in my body. I was empty and dead inside when everyone else around me thought I was so full and alive. I was winning the battle of images but losing the battle of life. For four solid years,

I'd been chasing "cool"—that elusive, ever-changing, temporary salve for the soul that men have been substituting for God's perfect and unconditional love for centuries. Every day was a fight to put myself "out there," to win acceptance by performing in every social, athletic, academic, and interpersonal setting, and at all times, to impress everyone and win their approval. But this particular night was the equivalent of driving into a cul-de-sac of the soul. My futile quest was timing out.

What was I doing wrong?

The fight to prove myself seemed to be hitting on all cylinders. The things I thought would satisfy my inner thirst, I already possessed. Money? Check. I had three jobs and wanted for nothing at the time. Path forward? Check. I was headed to one of the best universities in the world. Social capital? Check. I was very visible, and people generally liked me. (This was before social media came on the scene.) Girlfriend? Check. She was a wonderful gal. Religious? Check. I was a regular church attender and worked at it.

So why the void?

My expectation was that somewhere along this journey, there would be a catharsis, a moment of peace, where I'd sit on the summit, take a deep breath, and bask in the satisfaction that I had secured acceptance and meaning. But it hit me that night: the reality that people tire of clapping for you, their attention is fleeting, and they are naturally into themselves. This realization pushed the summit of acceptance further away when it seemed so close. Like me, the very people I was trying to impress were thinking about their own needs and issues and were competing for the same limited resources I was competing for out there in the cruel world.

When the applause fades, and you're confronted with the reality that you are no closer to the summit than when you started,

it leads to depression and gives birth to despair. It's what happens when hope-filled energy and expectations have been invested without the insight that you've been engaged in a lost cause from the very beginning. That reality can feel fatal and final.

Thankfully my despair turned to desperation.

As in most things, my motive for praying was to get God to “follow” and “like” me, too. It was part of my formula for getting to the summit of acceptance. So that summer night, like muscle memory, I started the words of my prayer as I had for years: “Our Father, who art in heaven . . .” And as I'd experienced for years, my head was disconnected from my heart as the words filed out of my mouth on autopilot. But then, surprising myself, I stopped praying.

Enter the desperation.

Like a balled-up fist exploding out of nowhere to knock someone to the ground, my heart cried out. The next sentence that burst forth from my mouth was not “hallowed be your name” but “Jesus, if you're real, I need to see you.”

In a do-or-die tone, this first salvo of my prayer exchange with God had been put out there. What now? Feeling exposed and vulnerable before God himself, I doubled down and followed with a second desperate blow aimed at his mysterious and eternal chest: “Jesus, I want to see you.” I repeated this multiple times as energetically, honestly, and intentionally as possible . . . until *it happened*. I secured the response I was looking for! Later on, I found this is what God promises to do when desperation and authenticity combine to project sincerity of heart.

“You will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD.¹

So what exactly happens when God comes into your bedroom? The short answer is that he brings his person, his presence, and his power to you. That's the normal process when you call out, and someone comes to the place where you are, right? Jesus came into the back room at the end of the hall—I felt his presence all around me and pervading my body from the inside out. I had asked to “see” him, and my heart was seeing him as clearly as if a physical body had been in front of me. More importantly, *he was seeing me as well*—my heart, my desperation, my desire for acceptance, every hope, every fear, every doubt, perfectly and all at once. The feeling of being fully seen was followed by a feeling of being fully accepted, without conditions. I was literally—physically and psychologically—sensing what I had been searching for my whole life: *to know I was okay*. I had reached the summit, but I didn't have to climb any more mountains, impress any more people, humiliate myself, or become anyone other than me for Jesus to fully accept me. I was being healed by a power encounter with the real and risen Christ. That single experience is as mysterious and personal as it gets. But Christ was straightforward.

He said, “*The fight is over for you, Kenny.*”

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted [the Gentiles] by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.²

The yoke I was unable to bear was gone. No more chasing.
Just as I am.
Accepted.

Permanence versus Performance

Being secure in the inner man means *permanently* resolving the acceptance issue.

Emphasis on the irreversible aspect of being fully accepted by God is essential. If God's acceptance is not eternal and absolutely guaranteed, then *we can lose it* the moment we do or don't do something. This is the crux of all our insecurities and fears: being uncertain about whether we are okay as men and human beings. Only an unequivocal declaration by someone who matters to us personally will put our souls at rest. That declaration, if believed, means no longer needing to make a name for ourselves, grab for false senses of power, or search for someone important to like us better than the next guy. We can stop comparing ourselves so much to others, being two-faced, and envying someone else's life. Forever acceptance puts an end to *all* of that.

Each of us needs the kind of moment Jesus experienced with his Father:

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."³

In this moment between God the Father and God the Son, we're given a model of what *every* man requires to live confidently versus insecurely: God's unconditional acceptance apart from

performance. This event in Jesus' life is recorded early in Matthew's Gospel *before* . . .

- one message was preached
- one leper was cleansed
- one person was healed
- one mouth was fed
- one storm was calmed
- one dead person was raised
- one woman was defended
- one child was blessed
- one foot was washed
- one nail was absorbed
- one drop of blood was spilled

God's declaration of acceptance wasn't conditional or based on what his Son did; it was because of *whose Son he was*: "This is my Son." It was possessive, personal, and not performance based. Jesus went on to do many amazing things, but his energy and motivation for doing them weren't because he felt compelled or obligated. He did those things *because* he possessed the eternal and permanent validation of his Father. This moment of unconditional acceptance wasn't necessary for the Godhead; Father, Son, and Spirit modeled it because *this experience is meant for us*, whether it's public like Jesus' experience or private like mine. Whether our moments are public or private, we must simply note God's acceptance and seek to apply it to our own journeys.

What God models for us is meant for us.

Permanent acceptance without performance is the failsafe of the soul that comes with receiving God's love through the person and work of Christ, in the belief that his work on our behalf was

perfect. When we accept this perfect act of love, we can stop performing for acceptance—permanently.

Jesus sensed it was time to begin his public ministry and presented himself to John for a baptism of repentance. Jesus' inner man was being drawn because God was laying on him an outer responsibility. He took the step God made available to him to act on, and God provided a public *and* personal moment for him.

In my own moment with God, I sensed something happening to me as well. Specifically, that culturally approved ways of securing worth, social status, and acceptance were leaving me less fulfilled, more empty, and at a loss to explain my dual existence (public and private) and lack of character in relationships. There was a growing body of internal and external evidence that I was stuck! So in response to what I was sensing, I took a step toward God the only way I knew how: by talking to him directly in prayer.

When you sense God's Spirit calling you into a moment, acting on it can be as simple as coming back to church, calling a trusted man of faith you respect, and being transparent about the struggle within. Whatever steps you take to address what's going on inside, you are setting up a faith moment God can use to reset you emotionally and spiritually through his love. Preceding your moment, you will sense through circumstances or the direct conviction of the Spirit of God that you are being called forward into an encounter with God's love.

When you take that bold, faith-filled step, the concerns you carry inside over your significance and worth are put to rest. The Bible declares that a "conquering" effect takes place: You no longer have to prove yourself to *anyone*.⁴ We see this clearly in Jesus. In fact, people noticed how secure he was in the Father's acceptance and said to him, "You aren't swayed by others, because you pay

no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.”⁵

I remember after my own encounter with God’s love that thoughts about how others perceived me were replaced with how God saw me. Practically, it appeared to others as a shift in my energies. I began putting less effort into earning social or professional capital and paying more attention to simple spiritual disciplines and serving God and others. It was also noticeable that I didn’t need to check in and seek approval for my behavior or the activities I was engaged in. Call it being comfortable in your own skin, walking tall, feeling confident, or having inner security.

In the end, the way we know we haven’t internalized and experienced God’s unconditional acceptance is that we continue to care more about what other people think of us instead of being settled inside because God has accepted us.

Being “settled” simply means that the only person whose opinion *ultimately* matters to us becomes the one who drives our thinking and behavior. Why? Because the ultimate verdict on the ultimate issue has been rendered. God’s man, like the Son of Man, is advancing God’s purposes in his character and conduct without giving a single thought to fear of people. Fighting for the approval of others is over, and *living out of* God’s acceptance and approval is moving forward.

Here is how believers are supposed to perceive themselves: When my son Ryan married my daughter-in-law, my relationship with her permanently changed. She became secure in her relationship with me and began to live in my permanent acceptance. I’m connected to her through my son. She loves Ryan, is committed to Ryan, and is one with Ryan. I love my son, and I love my daughter-in-law because of her connection to Ryan. His status with me is now her status with me: *fully accepted*. In a spiritual sense, she is “in” my son; she has accepted this acceptance and

lives in it as a first-family member. She has all the status, rights, access, and privileges of a member of our family without the fear of ever losing them. On the day she and Ryan married, she got a new name. Her identity permanently became “Luck” on her driver’s license and in my heart. I can’t stop loving her until I stop loving my son—which will never happen!

God’s acceptance of you won’t stop until he stops loving his own Son.

I won’t blame you if you read that sentence again—it’s *everything* when it comes to the journey toward inner security and emotional health that God has all of us on. Practically, this means you’re okay because God says you’re okay, even when you’re falling apart or feel unworthy. You are not “successful” as a man because you have your act together in front of other men; because of Jesus, you are accepted in spite of your failures or successes. Like me, you may have had a strong mental soaking in religion, which told you that God loves you because of what you do. That thinking needs to be consistently confronted, regularly replaced, and internally reinforced through repeated encounters with God’s words about you. That’s why this book is as much about spiritual battle as it is about spiritual growth. The mental minefield of self-perception must be retaken by marinating our hearts and minds in words that express the personal thoughts of God directly toward us. Of all the thoughts God thinks about us, the one he is hoping we’ll work hard to internalize is this: *All performance has been replaced with permanent acceptance in Christ.*

Why is this priority one?

The wrong basis of acceptance by God produces the wrong experience in God. God’s man will be forced to come back to this truth again and again on the journey toward inner security in Christ. Our fight for acceptance is over in God’s mind, but the war within us must be resolved, and that involves a battle.

Spiritual Viruses

Fear is the Ebola of spiritual viruses that harms our life in God.

To see the spiritual connection, you have to understand why virologists have labeled Ebola the world's most deadly virus. Its high lethality is connected to the strategy of taking down our built-in defenses once it's inside the body. Specifically, the Ebola virus targets and attacks *one critical aspect* of our body's biochemistry. Remember that.

Once inside the bloodstream, the virus targets a compound called interferon. Interferon, named for its role in “interfering” with the virus’ survival process, alerts the rest of the immune system to the presence of a foreign invader. Normally, interferon would deliver its warning message straight to the cell’s command center via a special “emergency access lane.”

Ebola is too smart for that old trick.

The virus hijacks the delivery process—preventing the immune system from organizing a coordinated attack—by attaching a bulky protein to the messenger. In its misshapen form, the messenger can’t enter the cell. The immune system remains unaware of the problem, and the virus gets free range to attack and destroy the rest of the body. . . . [By the time] the immune system begins responding to the crisis in turbo mode . . . it’s far too late. Rather than destroying the virus, our [immune] defenses simply rip our own bodies to shreds—from the inside out.⁶

The messenger can't enter the cell. The virus is free to attack.

Fear is the Ebola of spiritual viruses because it attacks and hijacks the failsafe of God's unconditional acceptance in our

lives, attaching lies to our faith in Christ. These lies block us from trusting in what God has already done, and they cause us to start trusting again in what we do or don't do. We move from permanent acceptance back to conditional performance. Fear is a tool of evil that separates our souls from resting in God's unconditional acceptance and cuts us off from the power his acceptance brings to our lives spiritually and emotionally. Believing the lies that fear attaches to our faith leads to a total breakdown of our emotional security, and those lies begin to eat our faith alive from the inside out. Similar to Ebola, fears within that are untouched by God's unconditional acceptance can be persistent, surviving for years, building up, and completely overtaking our vision of God, leading to destructive cycles of thinking and living. The inner spiritual and emotional security structures that God has given us have been compromised. Instead of living in the freedom of our full acceptance in Christ, we become free men who choose slavery.

If we don't resolve the acceptance issue once and for all . . .

We Live Fearfully

Fear of man will prove to be a snare,
but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.
Many seek an audience with a ruler,
but it is from the LORD that one gets justice.⁷

Did you see the compare-contrast in these verses? Instead of living in the safety and security of God's acceptance, we allow people's opinions and acceptance of us to become the controlling influences in our lives. Fear sucks us into a vortex of synthetic worth connected to our social status or position in front of others, and we start channeling our energy toward their approval. The

conditional acceptance of humans replaces God's unconditional acceptance and our real worth. We are no longer safe.

The permanence of God's acceptance loses to performing for people.

We Choose Foolishly

Many even among the leaders believed in [Jesus].

But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God.⁸

Fear and foolish choices go hand in hand. To be seen, acknowledged, and accepted, we do things we normally wouldn't do. We say no to our faith and say yes to the acceptance of our friends, colleagues, or communities. We keep quiet instead of speaking up. We risk less for Jesus out in the open and retreat more. We go along with the group and engage in behaviors that we know fail to show love for God or people. Then we rationalize or spiritualize our wrong behavior, hiding behind God's grace or exercising our "liberty" in Christ.

Justification replaces Jesus.

We Act Immaturely and Behave Competitively

A dispute also arose among [the disciples] as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like

the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.⁹

Fear of what others think and scarcity of attention cause men to compete for the limited commodity of visibility. Instead of resting secure in God's acceptance, we fear losing visibility. This fuels self-absorption, and we stop seeing people—their worth and their needs. It is head-scratching that men who had been walking with Jesus for three years (the disciples) fell into this trap of wanting personal visibility—when Jesus was standing right next to them! The created wanted to raise themselves above their Creator. The sheep dreamed of rising above the Shepherd. The clay entertained taking over from the Potter. Fear seized their hearts, and competition replaced connection among a group of Christ-following men!

Immaturity replaced maturity.

We Self-Destruct Relationally

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.¹⁰

Our relationship stories reflect our personal inner stories at any given moment. Human history testifies that when fear is the foundation of any relationship, love is eroded and evil wins. Fear makes us compete for power, control, and our “rights.” In the Garden of Eden, Satan's big plan to divide human beings from God and one another was simple: introduce fear into the relationship. Adam and

Eve were resting secure in God's love and acceptance until they were filled with the anxiety-producing thought that, somehow, *it wasn't enough*.

Some things never change. Satan knows that if he can make us feel anxious or cheated out of something, we'll make the same mistake Adam and Eve did. We'll stop believing what God says is true and start believing a lie.

Satan knows through experience that anxious people are bad at relationships. He knows we will protect ourselves and use the people we're supposed to be loving and serving to meet our perceived unmet needs. Other human beings become tools to make us feel less anxious, instead of people to build up, support, love, serve, and encourage. And when those same people feel used, whatever love they felt for us before will start turning to resentment. Over time, bitterness takes root, which will always manifest itself in divisive behaviors that destroy intimacy and trust.

Selfishness replaces serving one another.



The power of the gospel interrupts this domino effect. The exact opposite progression can be true if you believe, receive, accept, and internalize God's unconditional acceptance in Christ. Your supernatural failsafe will kick in and eliminate all of these security threats.

Instead, you will . . .

- live securely in his love and acceptance (versus insecurely);
- choose wisely out of that place of inner strength and security (versus foolishly);
- act maturely—being humbly confident in God's presence (versus immaturity);

- serve others in your relationships (versus behave selfishly);
and
- advance intimacy and closeness (versus self-destruct relationally).

Eliminate the Threat

One of the most dangerous creatures on earth is an unvalidated man.

That bold and ominous statement is rooted in a simple fact: To know that one *matters* is a fundamental driving force for life. That spiritual and human reality presents us with a Pandora's box of cultural options that speak to and partially satisfy that need. Upward mobility is built around this need to matter, and it sounds something like this: Success leads to significance. There is a ladder of success, and if you climb it, eventually you will make it, which means you officially matter. Success is a crude but effective cultural weapon for winning validation. Culturally, you may achieve acceptance, but love and intimacy are ultimately lacking. The theater of battle is now complete, the pieces are now set, and the high-stakes game is afoot for the inner man. The results will be projected outwardly in your conduct, which will have consequences for others. On one side of the battle line is God's love and acceptance. On the other side are the rip-off versions of ultimate meaning and significance. Men live on both sides of the battle, and anyone connected to them experiences the healthy or unhealthy consequences of their respective paths to significance. Unvalidated men attempting to feel better about themselves routinely make unwanted headlines, and for the plurality of men whose social status isn't worthy of a headline, their choices are often seen in statistics.

Think about it for just a second. #METOO. Mass shootings.

Domestic violence. Divorce. Sexual slavery. Marital infidelity. Political corruption. Gang activity. Porn. The plague of fatherlessness. The orphan epidemic. Not to mention all of the emotional abuse that goes on behind closed doors that never sees the light of day or appears in a news headline. These outward expressions of male fear and self-loathing are just the tip of the iceberg. Hermit kingdoms, good-old-boy networks, cronyism in politics, and a host of systemic injustices also flow from an insidious and often unconscious force within—a lack of personal and permanent validation in Christ.

A lack of meaningful validation in men naturally leads to a vulnerability that evil can take advantage of to advance its agenda on earth. It explains, in part, how the evil one is able to wield so much power. He does it by lying to men about their worth, where it is ultimately found, and how it can be fostered. Behind the broken male culture is a feeling deep inside that something is missing, and we have to prove to ourselves that we are “the man.” Ironically, the only thing we prove in all these instances of abuse, injustice, and acting out is that we are deeply afraid of never being valued and validated.

For these critical reasons, God wants all men to have a perfect and permanent failsafe against emotional insecurity and immaturity. He wants the security threat in *you* eliminated, especially if you claim an affiliation with Jesus Christ. It’s time to leave the shallow waters of broken, divided, and diluted masculinity and faith and step into the fear-killing experience of *sonship* in God through Christ. To be adopted by God, brought into the family of God, all by the Son of God, changes everything.

God wants us to internalize and activate his approval and our sonship in three specific ways *right now*.

1. See God's Heart for You as Your Father

For a man, the strongest acceptance on planet earth is found in sharing a mutual love and connection with his father. Not only have I seen this prove true after ministering to millions of men over the past twenty years, but I've seen it in my own life as well. God wants every man to have a father who sees him, loves and accepts him unconditionally, and validates him as a man. That is the singular and most meaningful way God wants to relate to you. He wants you to see his heart for you as your heavenly Father. Jesus Christ has declared this, the Bible affirms it, and men from all over the world are experiencing the transforming power of that emotional bond with God as their failsafe against fear. Let God make it simple for you to decide.

[God himself has] said,
“How gladly would I treat you like [sons] . . .
I thought you would call me ‘Father’
and not turn away from following me.”¹¹

Do not be like [unbelievers], for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven.”¹²

According to Jesus, every man, regardless of age, needs a dad. He's offering his.

2. Openly Receive God's Acceptance and Respond to Him

God has taken the initiative to offer you his full and unconditional acceptance, but it hinges on one thing: fully and openly receiving that acceptance! It's called the *principle of reciprocity*. This occurs when two individuals see the value in something,

reach a mutually beneficial agreement, and work together to make it happen.

When the Bible talks about God adopting us as sons into his family through Christ and allowing us to rise into first-family acceptance, a spiritual exchange occurs. This means that a two-way relational, emotional, and spiritual connection is established. More importantly, we recognize, appreciate, and above all, *openly receive his acceptance without reservation*. If you have a real reciprocal relationship with God, when he calls you his son, you will call him your Father in heaven, just as Jesus did. You will have the family resemblance. You will join the family of true sons. The Bible says that fear cannot compete with this connection, and this powerful Father-son bond ultimately defeats it.

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.¹³

3. Publicly Define Your Manhood by His Acceptance Alone

God’s acceptance is the only acceptance a man should ever consider when determining what to believe and how to behave as a man. We check in with our Father, we look to our Father’s face for approval, and we move forward only with his blessing.

His acceptance and love root all our decisions in him. His acceptance frees us to give love instead of being takers. His acceptance alone delivers disciplined consistency in all our choices, in all dimensions of our lives. Walking among men with an eye toward the Father’s approval is the Jesus way, the family way. This way of living defeats fear. No obstacle in front of us is bigger than our Father, who is behind us as a man.

[Jesus said,] “The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.”¹⁴

In all . . . things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.¹⁵

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.¹⁶

The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.¹⁷

Every man needs a moment that facilitates the reality of God’s ultimate acceptance. Like the moment when God modeled his acceptance at his Son’s baptism, men down through the ages have needed to hear and internalize God speaking these words to them: “This is my [son], whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”¹⁸

Unfortunately, most men have not received that needed blessing from another man in their lives, and even more have not realized that this missing piece in their souls drives much of their identity and energy. But God is waiting for all of us to enter into a moment of acceptance and blessing with him. He wants that experience of receiving his blessing to flow into us in powerful, emotional, and life-altering ways. It’s a moment of recognition as well as release. We recognize that God the Father made us to be loved by him. We recognize false forms of validation and replace them with ultimate validation in him. We recognize that through God’s caring presence in our lives, a monumental battle for our inner man has been won permanently. The act of recognition leads to a necessary release of lesser forms of acceptance and validation that promised meaning and significance but ultimately could not deliver them.

Sonship in God ends the search for significance.

It also marks the beginning of a new journey.

If your desire is sonship and God's full acceptance, his desire is to be your Father in every way and eliminate the threat fear poses in your life. Every person ever created not only seeks but needs that comfort and assurance of their worth to prevent them from living out of the lack of it emotionally. If it's your desire to resolve the acceptance issue permanently and activate the failsafe of God's acceptance, it's time to accept and affirm your sonship with God by applying the three things he requires.

Use this prayer to express, or perhaps affirm, your desire for active sonship with him.

Father in heaven,

I see your heart for me, and I'm grateful. Thank you for making a way through Christ to have your love and your Spirit in my life. I receive your love for me and accept my name as your son. I receive the Spirit of adoption into your family, and I receive the validation that comes with it. I receive your declaration of my identity in you and my inheritance in you eternally. Fill me with the Spirit of sonship for the world to see. I reject the fear of man and, from this moment forward, will let your love for me define me until I am with you in our home in heaven.

In Jesus' name, I accept, I affirm, and I declare my sonship in you. Amen.