

Stay In The Game



... But You Still Don't Get A Pony

DARRIN YEAGER

Foreword by Lindsey Bowers Tatum

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Foreword

ASIDE FROM TRIPPING OVER TWO PRECIOUS barn kittens, the first thing you may notice as you enter my stable is a large print hanging on the wall — three horses in a full gallop, running as hard as they can. Their environment is not ideal. It is dry, the soil's hard, no water can be seen for miles. Barren. Unforgiving. Desolate.

Paul tells us in Hebrews to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Until eight months ago, my race had always been easy. Unknown to me, the terrain would quickly change as I did not realize my life would soon mirror the image on the wall — running wildly through desolate and unforgiving terrain.

Despite undesirable conditions, the horses depict strength, determination, and perseverance, qualities reminding me of my Morgan mare, Maggie — a horse steadfast in the midst of life's adversity. She has been my closest, most trusted friend running beside me, showing me an escape to an otherwise cruel world.

It all started November 21st, 2012. My husband and I lost our beloved dog of ten years. For some people it would have been “just a dog,” but for us, Happy was a member of the family. We were devastated. Little did we know, the turmoil and heartbreak was just beginning.

A month later while working in our stable, a pregnant mare kicked me six times. One kick included a blow to the back of my head, causing short term memory loss and information overload. When the physician came to run tests, he informed me if the horse were shod, the blow to my head would have been fatal.

That was a major turning point in my life, and I knew God was trying to get my attention. Housebound and bedbound left me constantly praying, seeking His will for my life He so graciously

spared. I was left hopeful for the future and thankful I was still here to be the wife and mother He called me to be.

As my hope grew, so did the turmoil. A week after my accident, my mother was pinned by a draft horse, tearing all the cartilage surrounding her ribs. She was housebound and bedbound, just as I was. The bad news escalated as the days progressed, and the new-found hope dwindled.

Eight days after my mother's accident, my cousin died of pancreatic cancer. Ten days later, my sister-in-law passed away very unexpectedly at the young age of 44.

The hope that began as a flame dwindled, and was finally snuffed out, replaced by bitterness and depression growing rampantly inside me. I began to withdraw. I didn't make time for friends. I just wanted to be left alone and wallow in self-pity. I didn't understand why a loving God would allow so much persecution to happen to a God-loving family. To cope, I turned to Maggie for comfort. She was the only one who seemed to get it, providing me with an escape and carrying me onward when I was ready to give up.

Unfortunately, Maggie could not prevent the news we received four short days after my sister-in-law died. The news of one of my most treasured family members informing me they had cancer hit like a ton of bricks, harder than any horse could kick. Hearing those words and being completely caught off guard filled me with emptiness, fear, and utter despair. I curled in a ball and sobbed like a baby, pushing away anyone trying to provide comfort. I begged God to make it all go away. I yelled at Him...

Why are you doing this to us? You promised you would never, ever give me more than I can handle, yet here I am Lord. I am broken, I am depressed, I want to die, God. Why didn't you just let me die when I had the chance? I can't do this anymore.

I continued in my fit of rage for quite some time. I ended my prayer asking "Why can't you just tell me, God? Why can't you just tell me how it's all going to end?" And for the first time in 34 years, God spoke loud and clear. He said, "Why can't you just trust me?"

The next day as I was on the back of my horse, I knew I was guilty of not putting 100% of my trust in a faithful, loving God. He was hurting with me. That evening, I made a commitment that I would trust Him fully, that I would lay it at His feet and allow my baggage to be used for His glory.

Over the next few months, three more family members passed away. My nephew was incarcerated, my kids' cat died, and my grandmother was in a near fatal car accident. The last tragedy took place on August 14th, as I went out with a friend early morning to turn horses out. She noticed Maggie bleeding severely, blood flowing with a vengeance, leaving behind her a trail stained in dark red. Somehow Maggie managed to cut her foot, severing the heel bulb and cutting through the coronet band, barely missing a major artery by mere centimeters. I was devastated.

Most equine enthusiasts know that leg or hoof issues are not something to ignore. I knew I wouldn't be able to ride for quite some time and didn't know what Maggie's future would hold. My heart sank. During the past eight months of constant depression, Maggie was my rock. She provided the relief I needed after every disappointment entering my life. When I rode, I felt free, I felt safe, I felt every little hurt and reminder of what was happening in my life slowly disappear.

The night after Maggie hurt herself, I prayed for a full recovery. I prayed that God would hurry up and heal her so she in a sense could heal me. That night I was awoken at 3:45 AM. I heard the words "remain in me." Like a broken record, it kept repeating, "remain in me, remain in me." I asked God what He was trying to tell me and it all became clear. He said Maggie was the one I had ran to, through every disappointment, through every tragedy over the last eight months, when I should have run to *Him*. He said He had to remove her for a while, so that He could be my priority. He wanted to be first, He wanted to hear my cries, He wanted to provide me with that escape, and that sense of comfort and peace no one else could.

Someone once told me that God gives His toughest battles to His strongest soldiers. Sometimes we don't want to be soldiers because we choose to only see the pain and suffering involved in battle. We want to give up, rather than fight the good fight. God sees our battles as potential for new life, as we are being renewed day by day. Our light and momentary troubles are achieving in us an eternal glory far outweighing any trial we will ever encounter.*

God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He equips us as He runs beside us, carrying us through our times of heartache. And with God (not a pony), we can run just like those horses illustrated on my stable's wall — with strength, determination, and most of all, perseverance.

Lindsey Bowers Tatum

SEPTEMBER 2013

* 2 Corinthians 4:16

Preface

I'M A BIT OCD. WHEN WORKING, I USE A CALCULATOR to determine *exactly* how much weight, how high, or how far a job requires. While performing some construction, the task required moving bricks, and down at the local store I discovered they weighed 38 pounds each. Doing the math (knowing the job required 72 bricks), resulted in a total weight of 2,736 pounds.

Using a half-ton truck, those bricks require 3.42 trips. Nuts. Getting to the store requires a thirty minute drive (one disadvantage to small-town living — supplies can be a way off), this will take all day! Well, a friend who completed similar construction told me he finished in one trip.

How, I asked, did you borrow some farmer's truck? Nope, he carried it all in an old Nissan truck, saying "those weight limits are just recommendations."* Somehow he made it home, and I've learned being so OCD[†] isn't always good — his practical experience trumped my slide-rule.

I've never forgotten that, and if he tells me yeah, it'll handle it, that's good enough for me — I'm all-in. I'll be scared like a turkey on Thanksgiving, but I'm still all-in. Over the years I've learned to trust his opinion on similar matters. I've learned the hard way when you have no clue what you're doing, find someone who does know and listen to them. What could this possibly have to do with anything, you might ask. A legitimate question.

I first met the Tatums with a group watching soccer, just after the birth of their first child. The quiet types (I can relate to that),

* Please, do not ignore manufacturers' recommendations. Those limits exist for a reason.

† I really have CDO, as someone told me it's the same as OCD, but with the letters in alphabetical order *as they should be*.

it's hard to have a deep conversation during a sporting event (with the social skills of a grapefruit, talking wasn't on my agenda anyway). They were associates of my trusted friend who somehow managed to avoid destroying his truck, and since I *did* know his character, the fact he associated with them was good enough for me. Character by proxy, you might say.

That was years ago, and it turns out he knew of what he spoke — the Tatum family is of highest character. Before anyone points out their flaws, that does not mean they don't make mistakes, as we all do. No, that simply means these are people you want living next door, the ones you can count on when your back is to the wall. They simply won't quit — no matter how much they want to.

Allow me to digress a bit, and you'll discover why Lindsey Tatum's horse appears on the cover. Every teacher or speaker has phrases or words associated with them. I frequently use the same phrases over and over (and over), trying to make sure nobody forgets them.

- At 3 AM you've got what you've got.
- You may not get a Lexus, an ice cream, *or a pony*.

One Sunday while teaching, a trouble-maker sitting in the front row (actually one of our elders) waited . . . waited . . . waited to pounce. Then it came when I said "God doesn't guarantee you a pony," and that guy in the front row lept up out of his chair, jumped up to the podium, and placed on it a small toy pony, saying "now you've got one, brother." Needless to say, the church roared.

I'm glad people remember those words, and I'll keep using them. Over and over. And over. Like Peter, I will not be negligent to remind you of these things, even though you already know them. If that's good enough for Peter, I think the rest of us should follow the example.

The pony idea came to mind while I pondered ideas for the book's cover. I thought of Lindsey Tatum, as she's what you might call a horse guru.* Personally, I try to stay away from things that are bigger, stronger, and can chase me down and kick me in the head, but I understand not everyone feels the same. As a caretaker of horses, she surely must have pictures I could use, so before I could think better of it, I messaged her about it and went off to work.

* That's like saying Dale Earnhardt drove a little.

Had a weird idea this morning. Looking for ideas for the cover for my next book and thought of using a horse or pony. Might you and the kids be interested? The title is “Stay in the Game, but you still don’t get a pony.”

I’d include Jamie, but I think he shares my aversion to being in the same city as a horse.

What I got back was not what I expected, to be sure. Not that she would turn me down, but quite a story exists *behind* the story.

Would love it!! I need to email you about something that happened last night when I have more time. God literally woke me up at 3:45 this morning.

3 AM? That grabbed my interest *fast* — I’m always talking about 3 AM — and coincidence is not a kosher word. She laid out a story I didn’t know half of. I’ve learned (the hard way) when strange things happen, it’s usually the Lord getting involved, hitting me in the head with a clue by four.

Many people go through tough times, and many think they’re all alone. Jamie and Lindsey have been through quite a bit in the last year, and their character and faith enabled them to make it through. You might be going through something right now, so remember, somebody has clawed over the same ground you have — you are never alone.

That’s her horse on the cover, with a bright pink cast. If you notice on the back cover, they’re walking in lockstep (coincidence is not a kosher word). The gimpy horse, with the caretaker leading the way. Does that remind you of something?*

The Tatum’s story illustrates my main message — stay in the game. Never quit, never give in, never surrender. After all, it’s not going to get easier, as I’m sure the Tatums will tell you.

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:7

And now, as Paul Harvey would say, you know *the rest of the story*.

* Hint: think of a sheep instead of a horse. Yeah, I knew you’d get it.

Chapter 7

Danger of Dull Hearing

LAST CHAPTER WE DISCUSSED UNBELIEF, the danger of missing God's promises simply because you don't believe them. This chapter Paul warns of dull hearing — just because you've heard everything he's said doesn't necessarily mean you're *applying* it. When 3AM rolls around, either you discover you can apply what you know (and fight like Chuck Norris), or the nightmare of reaching in your toolbox and finding nothing (ending up like the pig). No other possibility exists.

We call people who, at 3AM when crisis arrives, are unable to answer the bell *casualties*. Don't we all want to stay in the game despite adversity? Then we must listen to Paul — the guy who knows adversity.

Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.

Hebrews 4:1

Paul spends two chapters discussing unbelief, so it's a big deal. Unfortunately, too many Christians keep a pew warm week after month and learn ... nothing. And lest I bore you with repetition, when 3AM rolls around, do you want to answer the bell or be slaughtered like a pig? It's still your choice.

For those who might think these warnings only apply to slackers, and once you become spiritual these warnings won't apply, notice Paul includes himself in the warning as he says "let us" fear. No matter where you are in your Christian life, the warning of dull hearing applies.

In fact, mature Christians might be in *more* danger than younger ones. Oh yes, I've read Hebrews, I know what it says. Sure, I've been to church for dozens of years. Danger. It's then you've become hard of hearing. You'll *never* reach a point where you've learned it all. Never. Stay focused and alert.

You mean a Christian can miss the rest God provides? It appears so. How many right now aren't resting? Why not? Is it due to failure to believe what God said? Unbelief is the opposite of faith. What is faith?

*... means that persuasion is not the outcome of imagination but is based on fact, such as the reality of the resurrection of Christ, and as such it becomes the basis of realistic hope.**

Faith isn't blind trust. It's based on a realistic analysis of facts. Paul continues in chapter 11 to state "without faith it is impossible to please him," so whatever faith is, it's something we'd better figure out.

I frequently drive across a bridge. As I drive across, I have faith that bridge will carry me to the other side. As a mathematician and scientist, I understand structural calculations, the strength of concrete and steel, and principles of design. Thus, as I approach, I have a reasonable expectation that bridge will function as the engineers intended.

Yet I *never* examined the design for the bridge. I've never seen the stress calculations, nor tested the strength of the concrete. I have a reasonable expectation (Biblical faith) in that bridge, because of what I *do* know. It's not proof, however.

On the contrary, suppose I came to the bank of the river, and for some reason the bridge didn't exist. Foolishly driving off the embankment would be blind faith, as no expectation exists of somehow teleporting to the other side. I have faith in the bridges' engineering, while driving off the embankment is stupid.

We need to cast off unbelief and rely on faith. When you do, you'll discover the rest Paul speaks of. That does not mean an easy life with a Lexus, ice cream, and a pony, it means the ability to hang in a firefight because you know in whom you've trusted, and He is able to keep that which you trust to Him.

For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them; but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

Hebrews 4:2

* Zodhiates (1992b, page 1162)

Not everyone hearing the Gospel responds. You're free to accept or reject as you wish. Just hearing the Word does not profit, rather, the person responding to the Word — mixed with faith — prospers.

Recall the parable of the soils in Matthew 13. Some heard and grew, some ignored, some sprouted and were choked out. Different reactions, but notice the same seed fell on each soil. Nothing was wrong with the seed, rather different results come from different reactions.

If we want to be productive and fruitful, when tough times come two choices exist. Quit, or dig in. It's time to stay in the game — mixing faith with the Word enables you to do that. One of my favorite stories comes from the gospels as the disciples find themselves in a ship when a storm arises.

And when he was entered into a ship, his disciples followed him. And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, in-somuch that the ship was covered with the waves; but he was asleep. And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us; we perish. And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. But the men marveled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him!

Matthew 8:23–37

Ever feel like those disciples on the boat? Lord, it's a crisis, and you're asleep! Don't you care? Where are you? Were they ever in any danger? Of course not. Yet (here's the lesson), *did they act like it?* Negative. Are you in any danger? Remember, that does not mean an easy (or even long) life. You can be persecuted and killed, die a long and suffering death from cancer, but that does not mean God forgot you. Your eternal security remains secure, and that's the important part.

It's commonly taught Jesus' rebuke of their faith (or lack thereof) meant they didn't understand who Jesus was, and when they would arrive at a fuller understanding, problems like these would vanish. Not true, for the simple reason they woke Him up. They weren't concerned by anyone else sleeping, they woke up the one guy they knew could handle the situation.

What faith did they lack? Faith in His plan. In Mark 4:35 Jesus said let's go over to the other side. He did *not* say let's go out to the middle of the lake and drown. They knew who He was, but lacked faith — the reasonable expectation knowing who He is He had the ability to carry out what He said.

Fear leads to unbelief, doubt, and despair. The dark side are these. If you want to be successful, you must cast them off. Another example comes from Peter walking on water in Matthew 14.

And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away. And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray; and when the evening was come, he was there alone. But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves; for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spoke unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased.

Matthew 14:22-32

Faith or foam, it's your choice. Earlier they lacked faith in His plan — what He said, He meant. You must mix action with faith. Peter tried, and started to sink as he believed what he saw instead of what he knew. That wasn't the only time Peter needed to mix faith with action; Acts 12 explains faith as Peter finds himself in prison.

Peter therefore was kept in prison; but prayer was made without ceasing by the church unto God for him. And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and the keepers before the door kept the prison.

Acts 12:5-6

It's a bad situation. Hopeless. No chance of escape.

And, behold, an angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shone in the prison; and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind

on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. Acts 12:7-8

Peter had to act on what he knew and heard — it took faith for that. Peter had to change his faith to action. Failing that, he'd still find himself chained in prison. The chains of your hopeless situation are gone. Do you act like it? Many times we don't, but never forget faith does not mean you'll get a Lexus and a pony.

In verse 9, Peter didn't believe it, yet acted anyway. Sometimes you might not 100% believe what you've been told, but again, faith doesn't mean that. It means you have a reasonable expectation based on what you do know, and faith requires you to act on that, as Peter did.

If Peter hadn't acted on what he saw, he'd still be in prison. Sure, he could have engaged in a scholarly discussion about it: that's a good theological point (chains represent the spiritual battle in each of us), and maybe I see how that might work out. He could have gone round and round for hours in his head.

No, Peter GET UP! Get moving!

Later in the chapter, notice the response of those praying for Peter's release. They're deep in prayer when Peter arrives at the door free from prison. They send the servant girl away, saying stop bothering us, we're praying for Peter!

Lesson for the day: when you ask the creator of the universe to intervene, expect results. Maybe not what you want, maybe not when you want, maybe not how you want, but at some point you will see a response. Chuck Missler says never underestimate a person's ability to rationalize. In other words, failure to use what you *know* to be true. That's unbelief.

For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest; although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he spoke in a certain place of the seventh day in this way, And God did rest the seventh day from all his works.

Hebrews 4:3-4

Those who believe enter rest. But if you're one of those "modernizing" the Bible and deny it says what it says, rest will elude you. You're free to accept or reject any of what the Bible says, but people look silly claiming when God said xyz He actually meant abc. Or worse, certain parts (that only they or other scholars can determine) don't apply today.

Ask those so-called scholars who gets to decide what is—and is not—God’s Word. Why should we accept their method over others? Notice they deny parts they don’t like (that seems to be their criteria). Scholars constantly fight over what God really said, so are never at rest, only constantly arguing.

Why did God rest the seventh day? Was He tired? No, He rested because there was nothing left to do. Rest comes when you realize nothing remains to be done — He did it all. Rest also eludes those holding a Jesus+ view of salvation, the idea they must do something to get (or maintain) their salvation. Those people find themselves forever searching for rest, but never able to obtain it. In contrast, I’m not resting because life is easy, I’m resting because I know in whom I have trusted. There’s nothing left for me to do.

And in this place again, If they shall enter into my rest. Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief, Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, Today, after so long a time; as it is said, Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Hebrews 4:5–7

We return to the Jews’ example upon leaving Egypt. They failed to enter the rest simply because they didn’t believe it. Rest was always available to them, but they chose not to accept it. God won’t force you to enter rest (that’s kind of a contradiction anyway), you’re free to strain and struggle if you wish. After all, the Jews made exactly such a choice. Should we not learn from the past?

We can learn from an interesting concept in law known as the pardon. You might not know a pardon holds no power or usefulness if the person won’t accept it; two US Supreme Court cases affirm this legal concept.

*A pardon is a deed, to the validity of which delivery is essential, and delivery is not complete without acceptance. It may then be rejected by the person to whom it is tendered, and if it be rejected, we have discovered no power in a court to force it on him. . . . A pardon may be conditional, and the condition may be more objectionable than the punishment inflicted by the judgment.**

* United States v. Wilson — 32 U.S. 150 (1833), see also *Burdick v. United States* — 236 U.S. 79 (1915)

SCOTUS* held a conditional pardon — even if in a capital crime — may be rejected. After all, they may not like the conditions, and accepting a pardon implies guilt. The key point SCOTUS held — you can't be forced to accept something, *even if it's beneficial to you*. Legally, you can reject a pardon of a death sentence, and you can also reject God's offer of rest.

When should you cast aside unbelief? Today! The Lord makes many promises; people don't find them because they refuse to believe them. You'll see it when you believe it, not the other way around. Cast off unbelief now, and don't become hard-hearted as each day hardens the heart a bit more. Never forget Paul speaks to Christians, thus it's those the warning applies to.

Without faith, it is *impossible* to please God. The Jews failed the faith requirement, and thus wandered powerless. It was by their choice, however, they wandered powerless. If they accepted God's Word on faith, history would have been quite different.

For if Joshua had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.

Hebrews 4:8-9

A rest is available to you, but like the Jews, you must believe it exists. It's not a cessation of activity, but a restful spirit in times of crisis. It's faith in God's plan that no matter what transpires, His Word will occur. Not blind trust, but a reasonable belief based on facts and experience. At 3 AM you've got what you've got. We all have crises in life; some stumble, some prosper through, some thrive and inspire others. Those making it through discover rest by faith, those failing do not.

For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.

Hebrews 4:10

If you're trying by your own efforts, you'll never find much rest. It's all about Him.

Let us labor, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.

Hebrews 4:11

Labor? To rest? Yep. Simple ideas, yet incredibly hard to put in practice. You must work at resting. No, that's not an oxymoron, as rest (in the Biblical sense) doesn't mean lack of activity, it

* Supreme Court of the United States

reflects a state of mind and spirit. It doesn't mean easy street either. It means having the ability to stay in the game.

The vast majority of cars sold now come with automatic transmissions. For us old-timers, if you recall when you first tried to drive a manual transmission, it wasn't very restful, was it? But after you get the hang of it, you can sing with the radio and talk at the same time, because you're resting and you believe you can do it — no doubt exists. Of course, some people never rest — we call them clutch killers.

For the word of God is living, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight, but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

Hebrews 4:12–13

Frequently used for witnessing, it applies to Christians. If you think you're getting by with something, you're wrong. As you read your Bible, you'll come to sections proving a bit uncomfortable, sections you'd rather ignore. Perhaps that means it's time to reflect and consider your actions.

Unless, of course, you want to join the ranks of heretics who, when they arrive at a part of the Bible they don't like, ignore it or claim it's not for today (we group all those under the banner of liberal theology). You know, that part doesn't mean what it says, or it's not meant for today. This verse still applies to those people as well, as all things are open to God.

Paul speaks of thoughts and intents, *not* actions or results. Too often we're worried about results instead of intents. The end does not justify the means. In fact, you're not responsible for results at all — that's God's problem. You *are* responsible for your effort and intent. Remember the sermon on the mount. The whole idea centered around intent, not necessarily actions or results.

Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:14–16

The Greek word for boldly means to speak freely. In the military when you're called on the carpet and required to give an answer, a certain protocol exists — some things you simply don't say. So you request permission to speak freely and break that decorum. No such problem exists with God, He says you're always allowed to speak freely.

God says let your requests be made known to Him. But He doesn't say you'll get your way. He doesn't say you'll understand. He doesn't say you'll receive instant gratification. He doesn't promise a Lexus. Or a pony. Or ice cream. Only that He has your best in mind.

When we talk about faith, unbelief and such, we always assume if God is a good God, then when we're healed, start the new job, and life is good that means God is good. But when the test comes back terminal? When a nail punctures your tire, is your first thought "Praise the Lord"? Does His character change if we don't get our way? Of course not. Only our attitude. It matters not if you're healed or not, God's character will not change. He doesn't stop being good and loving because the answer to your request comes back negative.

Consider this; perhaps it's not the strong and prayerful receiving a positive response, rather the weak who can't handle adversity. Paul prayed three times for healing, and he received the response "My grace is sufficient for you." As a tower of faith, even in tough times, Paul could live with the trouble and not have it impact his faith.

Similar to the eating of meat in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8:7–9, notice it's not the one *refraining* from eating having stronger faith, it's the one who does eat, knowing no problem with it exists. We commonly get that backward, and see people holding a long list of rules, and think, my, look at them, they don't do all those things, how spiritual.

Paul flips common wisdom around — the one appearing weak by eating actually has stronger faith. I think a similar idea can happen with healing also. Not always, but it's something to think about. Some simply haven't grown to the point where they can maintain their faith in times of trials — God might choose them to heal. Why are some healed, and others not? Nobody knows, but what right does the clay have to speak back to the potter?

Content. That's the word. A state of heart in which you would be at peace if God gave you nothing more than he already has. Test yourself with this question: What if God's only gift to you were his grace to save you. Would you be content? You beg him

to save the life of your child. You plead with him to keep your business afloat. You implore him to remove the cancer from your body. What if his answer is, "My grace is enough." Would you be content?

*But there are those times when God, having given us his grace, hears our appeals and says, "My grace is sufficient for you." Is he being unfair?**

Romans 8:28 says "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." It does *not* say you'll understand. That's what we want, but don't always get. So we pray and request, and sometimes even beg. If God is God, then He knows more than you. We arrive at a philosophical question called the problem of evil. More simply, why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? We begin with ideas everyone can agree on.

1. God is good, all-knowing, and all-powerful.
2. Evil exists.

Everyone should agree on those; even the atheist denying God exists would agree on the characteristics of God, if He were to exist. Continuing on with the thought:

1. A perfectly good being would want to prevent all evils.
2. An omniscient being knows every way in which evils can come into existence.
3. An omnipotent being who knows every way in which an evil can come into existence has the power to prevent that evil from coming into existence.
4. A being who knows every way in which an evil can come into existence, who is able to prevent that evil from coming into existence, and who wants to do so, would prevent the existence of that evil.[†]

Since evil *does* exist, therefore, the philosopher proclaims, God can't exist. Not just *doesn't* exist as the atheist claims, but can't. It's impossible for such a being (whether the Christian God or some

* Lucado (2005, page 131)

† <http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-evi/> (accessed Aug 23, 2013)

other) to exist. You should be ready to give every man an answer. That doesn't mean being a philosopher, but each Christian should hold some basic knowledge to defend their faith. That also means handling tough questions like the problem of evil. After all, left unchallenged, this logical deduction means God can't exist.

Step number four causes the problem. For if an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God has some reason to allow evil to exist, the argument falls apart. What possible reason could a God of that nature have to allow evil to exist? In other words, why not create a cosmos where no one has the possibility to do evil? Why not create a utopia where we all live happily ever after?

Simply put, the only way to know why God would allow evil is if you were God yourself and had the same knowledge He had. Of course, if you *were* God, then trying to prove God doesn't exist is a bizarre proposition, is it not? The nature of God isn't at issue — by definition He is all-knowing and benevolent — rather, the atheist makes the mistake thinking he possesses the same knowledge and experience as God — an error attributed to hubris.

Another answer exists as well. Sure, God *could* create a cosmos where you had no choice but to follow Him and live in His presence, but if such a universe existed the (potential) atheist would be the first to shake their fist at God and proclaim "you gave me no choice — that's not fair!" And he'd be right — forced love represents a contradiction.

So God gives you a choice, you can do good or evil, accept Him or reject Him, live in heaven or not. It's all your choice. By allowing you to make that free will choice, it also means you have the capability to choose poorly, or do evil things. God respects your choice and does not force Himself on anyone. If you don't want Him, fine. If you do, fine. You're a free agent and can choose your own destiny. So yes, God *could* prevent you from doing evil, but then you'd be nothing more than a puppet. So God allows you to choose, knowing some will choose Him, others won't.

Additionally, one more error arises with the problem of evil, and that involves the nature of God. Being all-powerful does *not* provide the ability to do anything. Read that again, and be sure it sinks in — being all-powerful does *not* provide the ability to do anything. All-powerful God can't do at least three things. First, He can't learn. If you know everything, no possibility exists of learning. Second, He can't lie. It's against His nature. Third, He can't make you love Him. Love implies a voluntary choice, you can't be forced to love someone.

Finally, the eternal question — why do bad things happen to good people? The simple answer — there are no good people. All have fallen short. God doesn't grade on a curve, and being better than the next guy won't cut it. But, as Paul moves on he provides another answer.

Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. 2 Corinthians 1:4

Many times when someone else has gone through the same situation, you must be humble enough to say "I need help," which isn't always easy to do. Don't suffer alone, it's likely someone else has crawled through similar territory, no matter how dry and barren. Maybe there's really nothing you can do. All you can say is I've been there. I get it.

God isn't worried about you driving a Lexus, He's concerned about character — those words we don't like to talk about anymore: duty, honor, commitment, responsibility. We don't see much of those anymore, in fact, we're so used to politicians lying it hardly registers. But character matters. Sometimes you need something you can't get any other way. Since that's what God focuses on, a small temporary inconvenience pays for eternal fitness.

Lest you think that's crazy, it's Paul, not me:

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;

2 Corinthians 4:17

Paul and light affliction don't go hand in hand. They tried to kill him on more than one occasion. Every ship he sailed on went down. He had medical problems, legal problems, problems in the city, problems in the country, yet Paul finished his letter to Timothy with:

But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:5-7

What do you do in times of crisis? How do you stay in the game? Paul said come boldly to the throne, to find grace to help in time of need. That's it. No magic answers. I don't have special

words to make it go away, and nobody else does either. In the darkest times of life, you face two choices: quit or dig in. I've seen many people quit, and they don't fare well. Stay in the game. Never give in, never surrender.

One week during our Wednesday church service a tragic event occurred as a train struck and killed a person in the middle of our town (and only a few hundred yards from our building). As it turns out, video from the train revealed the person walked to the middle of the tracks, closed their eyes, and waited to be hit. Suicide by locomotive.

Depression and desperation perhaps caused this person to end their life. Everyone at some point feels alone and troubled (that's part of the human condition), yet not everyone feels the need to invoke a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Why? I certainly can't solve the world's problems (and won't even try), but I've learned over the years one simple truth: You are not alone.

Oh sure, it may (likely does) *feel* like that, but it's not true. Elijah certainly suffered from depression; after the high point of Mt. Carmel and defeating the prophets of Baal, what happens in the next chapter? The queen has it out for him, and he becomes depressed and pouts.

I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts. For the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.

1 Kings 19:10

What was his problem? He bought the lie he was all alone. Hiding, depressed, and feeling all alone, the Lord responds to Elijah "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal." To paraphrase God's response: You are not alone. Even the giant of the New Testament — the apostle Paul — struggled with problems, at one point proclaiming:

For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life.

2 Corinthians 1:8

Paul? Despaired of life? Burdened beyond measure? Beyond strength? Yep. You are not alone. Yes, sometimes it feels like it, but you're not. If you have feelings of hopelessness and despair,

do one more thing before giving up: reach out (in person) to a friend, counselor, pastor, or someone else you trust. Sure, you think it won't work, sure you might believe it's a waste of your time, definitely they won't understand what you're going through. Do it anyway.

After all, if you're right, will tomorrow differ from today? That same black cloud still looms overhead waiting for you — you've lost nothing. Yet if you're wrong, tomorrow could be quite different from today. Reject permanent solutions to problems, no matter how difficult those problems are. *Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for me?**

So what do we do when the rubber meets the road?

- The test comes back positive — it's cancer. Aggressive. Inoperable. Terminal.
- The phone rings — your wife had a heart attack. She's gone.
- Alzheimer's slowly takes the ability to function away.
- The job paying the bills suddenly disappears.

What then? Sure, I realize I'm not alone. Sure, I understand I need to stay in the game. But how exactly am I supposed to do that? Think back to December 1944, during the battle of Bastogne. It's wintery cold — the coldest in decades. Hitler makes a final push, with a focus on Bastogne.

The Allies rush to defend it.

On December 22nd the Germans ask the surrounded Americans to "honorably surrender"; General McAuliffe responds with one word: **NUTS!** When pressed for a way to translate the one-word reply into German, the interpreter said it roughly means "Go to hell, and if you continue to attack we'll kill every %#! German entering the city."

Two days later, the General—on Christmas eve—pens a memo:

What's merry about all this, you ask? We're fighting — it's cold — we aren't home. ... We have stopped cold everything that has been thrown at us from the north, east, south and west ... The Germans actually did surround us, their radios blared our doom. Allied troops are counterattacking in force. We continue to hold Bastogne ...[†]

* Jeremiah 32:27

† <http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/Bastogne/bast-20.htm> (accessed Sep 14, 2013)

Perhaps it's been a tough week (or month, or decade). Broke. Sick. Cold. Doom. Despair. You're trying to hold on to the last piece of ground you've got, and you're tired of fighting. You are never alone, even as you sit silently in your foxhole.

The enemy sends a message demanding your total surrender — you can sit out the final years of the war in a prison camp, but relatively comfortable. Either that, the enemy says, or you'll be destroyed, your carcass strewn over the frozen tundra, if any large pieces remain.

NUTS!

Never give in. Never quit. Never surrender. Sure, service for God is tough, but you're not called to cigar-smoking in an easy chair, you're called to be a soldier. And that's tough — in any weather. Recall another lesson from Christmas past:

*These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.**

Cancer? Sickness? Poverty? Peril? All part of the life — you won't find retirement in the Bible. Daniel continued to be called, long after he “retired” from official service. You're *never* too young, too old, too sick, too broke — too anything. It's time to dig in, because the battle will be long, hard, and tiring. *Count on it.* God didn't say *easy*, he said *soldier*.

STAND UP! It's time to get off the couch, and get back in the game. Life isn't easy. Yes, the battle is hard. Yes, you'll take enemy fire. Yes, sometimes you'll be cold. Yes, others (even “Christians”) will criticize you. That's the way it is.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly ...†

* Thomas Paine, “The Crisis”

† “Citizenship in a Republic” Theodore Roosevelt April 23, 1910

You continue to serve until you draw your last breath. All the problems you face ... NUTS! Get help, learn, study, commit, and soldier on ... because it's 2:59 AM, you're not a superhero, and it's time to fight.

During WWII, Winston Churchill delivered many bold speeches to inspire the people. At that time the war wasn't going well, and frankly, it wasn't hard to conceive Germany gaining total control of Europe. Standing in their way lay a stubborn Brit.

*I would say to the House, as I said to those who've joined this government: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: victory. Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.**

Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, This was their finest hour.†

Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail.

We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our

* "Blood, Toil, Tears" House of Commons, May 13, 1940

† "Their Finest Hour" Parliament at Westminster, June 18, 1940

*Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.**

For the people living through WWII, only one option existed: victory. No quitting, no surrendering. Sadly that attitude has been lost, as many currently think it's too hard, I quit, somebody bail me out! Many Christians do the same thing. It's time to saddle up folks, because it's not going to get easier.

You probably know everything I wrote in the last pages, but do you believe it? Do you act like it? We *must* be wary of becoming dull of hearing, which leads to unbelief. When times are tough, where will you go? I've spent the better part of a decade trying to find alternatives. Atheism, evolution, eastern philosophy — none of them stand up, and I've taken the best shots from those groups claiming I'm wrong.

When the enemy arrives at 3 AM demanding your surrender, you've got what you've got. No bestseller books, no faith guru, no magic beans, no easy answers, nothing. You come boldly, to do that you must have faith, not in a genie granting wishes, a Lexus, and a pony (with ice cream), but a loving God who knows you and has your best future in mind.

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

Jeremiah 29:11

Whew! That's a tough section. But if you want to stay in the game it's time to fill up that toolbox and make sure you not only know what we've covered, but you apply it. Grab your lunch-box and hard-hat, and get to work.

Because at 3 AM, you've got what you've got.

... And it's 2:59 AM.

* "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" House of Commons, June 4, 1940



Everyone Needs A Bit Of Help Sometimes...

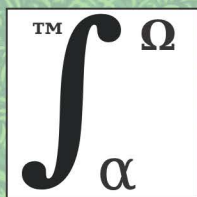
A terrible disease infects many Christians by believing life is easy and God grants everyone (with enough faith, that is) a Lexus, ice cream, and a pony. When life gets tough people hide the pain and frustration created by the paradox of what they think the Christian life should be—versus the reality they experience—by transforming into Tony the Tiger, where everything is grrrrreat! But everyone needs help sometimes.

A simple, but difficult, cure comes from a stiff shot of reality — God is not a genie granting wishes, life is hard, and you may not get a pony. If you're not resting, it's time to take a good look at the letter to the Hebrews, as Paul provides warning after warning about the minefield you must pass through. Paul motivates the troops to not abandon what they know to be true, and stay in the game, even when (not if) adversity strikes.

When tough times come, you'll look down in your toolbox and discover either many tools to fight with, or a mocking echo from the empty box, because at 3 AM you've got what you've got.

... And it's 2:59 AM.

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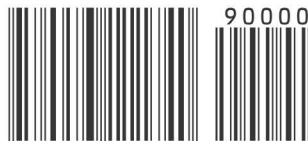


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