

Animal Magnetism

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It's 3AM.* It's been a rough week for many reasons I won't bore you with, but normally when I'm scheduled to speak as I am this week, life takes a gloomy turn.

This week the darkness descended Monday. The nightmares returned. Just as they usually do.

I don't mean boogie man under the bed type (after all, he's afraid of Chuck Norris), I mean the most terrifying thing you can imagine. Every person has their own personal torment. I'm no different.

Every dream ends the same way — I scream in terror, instantly wake up, and wonder if I'm asleep or not.

If you've ever woken up suddenly and for 3–5 seconds can't tell if you're asleep or awake — or even where you are — that's what happens. I don't know what dreams mean (maybe nothing), but sleeping is something I don't look forward to anymore.

It's unnerving.

To combat this, I sleep with nightlights. When suddenly awoken, the soft glow helps prove in those few seconds it was all a dream, and I'm really in my bed.

That's one (of several) reasons I don't like to travel much (the social skills of a grapefruit — after sitting on your counter for a month — is another). As an elder, I'm supposed to attend pastor's conferences, men's retreats, and other trips.

I'd rather not.

It doesn't look good to say, hey guys, mind if I plug in my Scooby-Doo nightlight? Oh yes, and if I wake up screaming, don't worry, it's not the first time.

It's not very manly.

By the way, if you study nightmares and night terrors, most (virtually *all*) the research involves young

children. Most say they'll grow out of it by teens or early 20's.

That doesn't work for me, it didn't *start* until I was well in my thirties; over the decades I've learned the pattern, and discovered for many reasons they're not a normal situation.

Like the disciples on the lake who saw many storms before, but something came up so terrifying those seasoned salty fisherman feared for their lives.

And there the Lord was, asleep.

Don't you care Lord, we're drowning over here, they yelled. I'm in terror! Don't you get it? Don't you care? You're asleep. Do something!

How many of you live in situations like that?

This morning, laying in bed not sleeping at 3AM, sometimes it's better to get up and start writing. Of course, by 8 o'clock (in the morning, not night) I'm ready for a nap. But if He's going to speak, the least I can do is write it down.

I'm used to it, and that's just the way it is. Service for God is tough. I say it enough, I have to live it as well.

Everyone has their thorn in the flesh. Everyone has their Kryptonite. Everyone has their nightmare. Everyone. There are *no* exceptions — not Paul, not Superman, not me, not you.

I'm teaching through Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zechariah. The Jews were free to return to the Holy City, but only about 3% actually did.

3%. That's not very many.

Perhaps because when you choose to serve the Lord, you must be ready for opposition. Nightmares. Terror. Battles. Fear. Ezra saw it. Nehemiah as well.

* I actually wrote this at three o'clock on Saturday morning after the horse incident you'll read later. Normally the revision process changes times and dates out of the present tense, because you're probably *not* reading this in the middle of the night when I wrote it. In this case I've left much of it raw the way it was written, because, well, I couldn't really revise it much.

The Jews began to build the temple, but quit. It's too hard, we're under stress, so we'll give in and quit. Their nightmare wouldn't go away, at least as long as they remained dedicated to building the temple.

Quit, and you can sleep well.

In Bible study we miss a few things. Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah, and Haggai all lived about the same time, and all tried to motivate the Jews to get through the nightmare, and finish the job.

We miss it can take more than one reminder to stay in the game, as each of those guys poked and prodded the Jews to finish the job.

Back to my week. Monday was a total loss, it has to get better? No, it really doesn't.

My dog isn't doing well. And he's *my* dog. As a 16-year old, he's quite advanced in years, and his body is slowly shutting down.

I have a tough time watching it. Sin and decay due to Satan's trick is the cause. He's taking my dog, the sick bastard.

Friday morning I was crabby. He's having difficulty walking, and gets lost in the backyard, so he never ventures far from his house.

Did I mention I'm teaching Sunday?

By Friday night I needed something different. I met a new friend. Maggie — yes *that* Maggie, the one on the cover. Oh yes, her leg is all better now, and the cast no longer hinders her.

Lindsey shared her special horse, and riding her (even for an idiot whose idea of success is not falling off) you can tell this horse is something special.

I actually rode solo a bit, and as Maggie meandered to the other end of the arena (and away from everyone so I wouldn't look too silly) I was talking to her about my dog. She was quite easy going, as if saying you poor buffoon, I get it, don't worry.

Just like the Jews, sometimes it takes multiple people and multiple events to startle you back to where you know you need to be. Coach Zechariah, coach Daniel, and coach John, meet coach Maggie.

The time went fast.

A few hours later, it's 3 AM Saturday morning and the click-click-click of the keyboard reminds me I'm back to my stubborn self. You want to terrorize? Bring. It. On.

I'll never quit, I'll never give in, I'll never stop. Throw anything you want. This is what I do, it's what I'm good at, and (hopefully) helps others. I don't have a Lexus though (or a pony, though Lindsey has plans to change that).

Bring it on? Well, he did — my dog passed on Tuesday. I'm still crabby, but stubborn. Did I mention I'm teaching next Sunday as well?

Listening to the radio, a guy came on and read Romans 8:28 — “we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Being the great man of faith I am, I thought God, why did you create such a mess? This world stinks. It's not fair.

Finally, the still small voice whispered “This isn't what I intended.” My dog wasn't intended to suffer that way. That's not (nor ever was) God's plan. We messed it up.

So continue on in Romans, “What then shall we say to these things?” That's what I want to know. Sure, I hear the promise, I've read the book. But it's application I wrestle with. Fortunately Paul gives the answer.

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

I teach and write, that's what I do. I don't know too many people who write in the middle of the night, but due to certain . . . um . . . *issues* . . . I occasionally do my best work in the dark (and dark does *not* mean nighttime).

Jesus said take my yoke upon you, my burden is light. Yes, service for God is tough. Yep, you'll have hard times. I guarantee it, and more importantly, so did Jesus.

But it's never a bummer. You may not get a Lexus, an ice cream, or a pony. You may watch your dog die, be sick with cancer, and suffer most of your life.

That's the truth, and anybody telling you otherwise is lying — God is not a genie granting three wishes (and my first wish is for my dog back).

You see, a yoke is designed for one thing — to transfer power. Power you need to get the job done. Power you need to stay in the game. Power you need to hang in the firefight.

He's behind you, guiding your hands, providing the safety and power (dunamis) required.

I've learned rather quickly the reigns of a horse require only a few subtle moves to turn the animal. We should learn to be as responsive and turn when the Lord speaks. Sadly, it usually takes getting hit with a clue-by-four to get the message (or skywriting, but you get the idea).

Life is hard. You might require multiple efforts to snap back on track. But never quit, never give in, never surrender. Everyone has their Kryptonite. Everyone has tough times. Everyone wants to give up. Everyone. Even super-saint Paul.

We think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. 2 Corinthians 1:8–9 NLT

Trouble? Check. Beyond ability? Check. Never live though it? Check. Yep, Paul, I've been there too. Of course, I'm not the only one.

Why are you doing this to us? You promised you would never, ever give me more than I can han-

dle, 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.

Lindsey Bowers Tatum, "Stay in the Game" foreword

Those disciples in the storm cowering in terror? The Lord wakes up, yawns a bit, says two words, and it's over. Two stinking words. How big is your God? Small enough for you to control, or large enough to handle anything?

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

2 Timothy 1:7

Tough times and sucky events are part of the warrior experience. Do you want to be milquetoast or Chuck Norris? It's always your choice. You can fight, or quit and be a casualty. But make no mistake, *no other choices exist.*

So in the early morning hours, the click-click-click of the keyboard echoes in the otherwise quiet darkness — save for the soft glow of my Scooby-Doo nightlight.

Because, this time, it really is 3 AM.

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