

One Step Closer

HOW A LIFE-ALTERING ACCIDENT LED ME
TO EVERYTHING I ALMOST MISSED

COMPANION GUIDE



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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- This companion guide is meant to be used in conjunction with *One Step Closer: How a Life-Altering Accident Led Me to Everything I Almost Missed*
- Read a chapter of *One Step Closer*, then read the corresponding companion guide section
- This guide can be used individually or in a group study



Whether you are about to read **One Step Closer** for the first time or you decided to check out this guide after finishing the book, I am pumped about your decision to squeeze as much as you can out of your reading experience.

My goal in writing a book was not just to tell my story. Who wants to read that? (Besides my wife and mother, of course.) Rather, I wanted to communicate to others the powerful life lessons I've learned through my experiences battling quadriplegia, most notably that **hope is possible no matter the circumstances**.

I want to challenge the status quo on what constitutes a good life, as well as challenge you to take inventory of where you are placing your ultimate hopes and dreams. By doing this, I believe we can craft a purposeful life that allows us to experience joy no matter our circumstances, best relate to one another in community, and leave an impact on this earth that far surpasses our final breath.

I hope this short guide serves as a valuable companion to your reading experience.



Chapter 1

A TYPICAL DAY



"What had started as a typical day on campus earlier that morning had become a drastically different situation. I was now officially battling for my life."

"Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring."

Proverbs 27:1

"Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'"

James 4:13-15

- How often do you consider the fact that the life you know can change in an instant?

- How does it make you feel to consider this possibility?

- Read Proverbs 27:1, James 4:13-15. What is your takeaway from these passages?

Chapter 2

FLAT ON MY BACK



"Nerves were high. Nothing could be done aside from waiting and earnestly praying until some swelling had subsided, and it would be safe to evaluate my spine."

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 4:6-7

- Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which you had no choice but to rely fully on prayer?

- How does the concept of not having control over the outcome of a situation make you feel?

- Read Philippians 4:6-7. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 3

TO FAIL TO PLAN IS TO PLAN TO FAIL



"Success would be defined by the net worth attached to my name. I left no stone unturned, meticulously mapping out each year of my life, ultimately to culminate in a comfortable retirement that would allow me to enjoy the fruits of my hard work."

**"In their hearts humans plan their course,
but the Lord establishes their steps."**

Proverbs 16:9

- What experiences in your childhood can you point to that played a role in shaping a specific belief you hold today?

- How do you respond when your plans are thwarted?

- Read Proverbs 16:9. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 4

FIGHTING REALITY



“Even allowing my mind to start to process the extent of my injuries disturbed me. I contemplated the simplest aspects of life that would no longer be possible if what was being said actually turned out to be true. Walking up the steps. Typing on a computer. Shaking hands. Working out. Showering. Getting dressed. Playing catch. Driving a car. As the gravity of the situation weighed on me, I felt overwhelmed and scared of what the future could entail—or what it now might not entail.”

- How would you react if told by doctors that you would never use your arms and legs again?

- Has there been a time in your life you operated in denial, unwilling to face the realities of a present difficulty?

Chapter 5

MOTIVATED BY DOUBTERS



“The negative prognosis would simply be the fuel to the fire that was my motivation.”

- How do you respond to bad news, negative comments, or people who doubt you? Does it motivate or discourage you?

- What is a situation you had great hope for, only to find yourself incredibly disappointed when it failed to play out in the way you envisioned?

Chapter 6

THE NEW NORMAL



“My entire identity had been wrapped up in my intellect. If others assumed it had taken a colossal hit, who would I even be?”

“The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

1 Samuel 16:7

- Which of your strengths or skills are you most inclined to put your identity in?

- How much stock do you place in how others perceive you? What actions do you take to ensure you are being viewed in a specific light?

- Read 1 Samuel 16:7. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 7

I CAN'T DO THIS ON MY OWN



“An unsettling feeling came over me as I realized the day that was unfolding was a stark contrast from the dream scenario I had been envisioning. I had figured my life on campus would resume seamlessly. But my experience today felt lightyears away from running around campus as a man on a mission the previous November.”

“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

Isaiah 43:19

- In which area of your life do you currently feel the most out-of-control?

- Is there a time in your life (past or present) that your circumstances changed but you still tried desperately to hold onto the past?

- Read Isaiah 43:19. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 8

SEEKING THE HEALER



"I felt as if God was gently challenging my intentions. Did I want a relationship with him because of his ability to heal me or simply because of who he is, regardless of my circumstances? I was beginning to understand that my desire for a relationship with him should never be conditional. I wanted to remain intentional about seeking the Healer rather than just the healing because I was beginning to see that everything Jesus offers far outweighs the chance of walking again. I still desperately wanted and believed more than ever for the healing, but I also began to realize that God is first and foremost concerned with the condition of my heart."

"Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

2 Corinthians 1:9

- What do you believe about God? Describe your personal spiritual journey.

- Take an honest look inward. Do you find yourself more frequently seeking God himself, or simply the gifts he provides?

- Read 2 Corinthians 1:9. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Further Reading: *Want to dive deeper spiritually? Find my annual Bible reading plan at www.RyanSAtkins.com/Bible*

Chapter 9

THE BATTLEFIELD OF MY MIND



“Well-meaning, genuinely curious people would ask, “What have you been up to?” Although an innocent question, it never failed to make me cringe and immediately produced anxiety. I wanted to be able to pull out the figurative report card, showcase the symbolic résumé, or display my latest portfolio of work projects. It got to the point where I became so worried about a visitor firing off one of these questions that I would inquire endlessly about their life, concerned that the attention would inevitably be turned on me if I did not successfully keep them talking about themselves. Amidst my physical state, there remained a deep longing to prove to the world that I was still ‘somebody.’”

**“How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?”**

Psalm 13:2

- What is your biggest insecurity? How does this play out in your relationships or interactions with others?

- Do you struggle with comparison?

- Read Psalm 13:2. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 10

SEARCHING FOR SIGNIFICANCE



"Looking at my arms and legs lying motionless day after day made me realize one of two possibilities must be true. Either my life was now completely meaningless, or there was a much deeper purpose to it than the direction I had been heading."

"The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them."

Psalm 135:15-18

- Who or what do you most frequently find yourself turning to for validation or satisfaction?

- Consider the examples of Tom Brady and Aaron Rodgers. Is there a time in your life you got something you wanted but still felt empty or dissatisfied?

- Read Psalm 135:15-18. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 11

MY LIFE STILL MATTERS



"A sense of satisfaction and accomplishment rushed over me as I soaked up what felt like the first victory in quite a while. During the conversation, I hadn't worried a bit about what my college friends were doing. I was no longer fixated on being surrounded by older women, no longer concerned with my physical limitations. I was elated to finally be able to give back, rather than sapping energy from everyone who tended to my physical needs. I craved the opportunity to tap into this invigorating feeling once again."

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

James 1:2-4

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

2 Corinthians 12:9

- Take some time to evaluate Viktor Frankl's findings about experiencing a meaningful life. Do you have a project you are working toward that requires unique skills or abilities and helps others? Take stock of your community. Does it feel safe? Are you able to be vulnerable with others?

- If you are currently in a challenging season, can you identify at least one positive or redemptive thing that has come out of it? If not, think back to a past hardship you've faced. It is often easier to see the redemptive aspects of suffering once you're on the other side.

- Read James 1: 2-4, 2 Corinthians 12:9. What is your takeaway from these passages?

Chapter 12

A GLIMPSE OF HEALING



"Even though I felt like my time was being spent in a worthwhile manner, I wondered if others would ever give their stamp of approval. I feared being ostracized for choosing a route that felt so countercultural. In the midst of feeling radically changed on the inside, with a new vigor for God and life, I still battled internal accusations that I was accomplishing nothing. Over and over, I had to remind myself of the words of the apostle Paul: if I was only trying to please people, I could not be a servant of Christ. Words like these continued to remind me how trivial the opinions of others were as I vowed to push through the resistance and venture down the path of whatever journey God had in store for me."

"Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"

Matthew 19:26

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations..."

Ephesians 3:20-21

- Have you ever had an experience where others questioned your choices or decisions? How did you respond?

- Do you believe God can do the impossible? Do your prayers reflect that belief?

- Read Matthew 19:26, Ephesians 3:20-21. What is your takeaway from these passages?

Chapter 13

AN UNCONVENTIONAL ROMANCE



"In the days afterward, I went from the concept of dating not even being on my radar to incessantly contemplating a relationship with Stephanie. But I could not stop thinking about the obvious: how could I possibly fulfill the role of boyfriend in my compromised condition?"

"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity."

Proverbs 17:17

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:2-3

- Has an opportunity come your way that you hesitated to take because of your own insecurities?

- What would you say constitutes a “good” relationship (romantic or otherwise)? What are the top attributes of a quality relationship in your mind?

- Read Proverbs 17:17, Ephesians 4:2-3. What is your takeaway from these passages?

Chapter 14

IS LIFE STILL WORTH LIVING?



“What if we began to recognize there is a far greater purpose beyond our small little worlds? This is exactly what Jesus modeled over and over again throughout his life. He experienced betrayal and abandonment by friends, was regularly mocked, and was ultimately tortured, beaten, and murdered on a cross. Yet he endured it all for the greater good that was being accomplished. How was he able to endure? By taking the long view. The book of Hebrews points to his focus being on the joy set before him in eternity.”

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Hebrews 12:1-2

- What metrics do you use to determine quality of life?

- The Bible tells us in no uncertain terms that hardship awaits those who follow Jesus. But God also welcomes our prayers for blessing and healing. How do you live in the tension of these two truths? Is one of these easier for you to believe than the other? How does that belief play out in your life?

- Read Hebrews 12:1-2. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 15

A STEP FORWARD



“While I remained confident in God’s ability to restore my physical body, it was impossible to ignore the fact that time was continuing to pass without many functional changes. As I considered my dad’s words, I realized there were certain areas where I’d been passively waiting for my circumstances to change instead of grabbing the reins of my life and pushing my way through.”

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Isaiah 55:8-9

- Is there a time in your life that you did not feel “on track” with where you had expected to be by that point?

- What is an aggressive move you can make today to set yourself up for a better future?

- Read Isaiah 55:8-9. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 16

MORE THAN COINCIDENCE ... ?



"Was this series of seemingly correlated events a confirmation, or were we simply headed down a long rabbit trail leading us wildly off course? There was no way to know for sure, but ultimately, we decided to step out in faith and believe for what God appeared to be showing us."

"Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good..."

1 Thessalonians 5:20-21

- Have you ever sensed that God was speaking to you or giving you direction that seemed confusing?

- Did you act on it? Why or why not?

- Read 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 17

IDENTITY CRISIS



“To say that my spinal-cord injury brought on my performance anxiety would be to ignore my past. Striving for the approval of others through performance had long been an issue. This torturous mindset of believing I needed to perform to be respected, approved of, and loved had eaten at my inner being day after day for much of my life. Dealing with the ins-and-outs of paralysis simply brought it front and center.”

**“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

Romans 5:8

**“I care very little if I am judged by you or by any
human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself.
My conscience is clear, but that does not make me
innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.”**

1 Corinthians 4:3-4

- Do you struggle with believing you have to perform in order to be loved and accepted? How does this belief play out in your relationships with others? With God?

- Read Romans 5:8, 1 Corinthians 4:3-4. What is your takeaway from these passages?

Further Reading: *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* by Timothy Keller

Chapter 18

FLAT ON MY BACK (AGAIN)



"I was left wondering how much longer healing could possibly take and if I would go crazy before it came about—and dreading the next day of the same routine. The lack of sleep began to cause difficulty in connecting with others, as I'd start zoning out mid-conversation, my eyes drifting shut on the person in front of me . . . I never thought anything could rival the horrors of the four-month stay in the hospital after my accident, but now I felt I was being tested worse than ever before."

"Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Romans 5:3-5

- What has been the most difficult season of your life? In what ways did the trial affect your view of God, your relationships with others, your work, etc.?

- What motivates you to persevere through a difficult season?

- Read Romans 5:3-5. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 19

SEVEN YEARS



“Despite our confusion, Stephanie and I believed that whatever God was doing with this story was vastly bigger than just the two of us. Rather than dwelling on the disappointment, we knew it would be wise to focus on why we got married in the first place. We discussed how choosing marriage was a glimpse into God’s unconditional love. Our marriage is not only a contract but a covenant before God that we will stick together no matter what life throws at us. Though we had not expected such a curveball on day one, we intended to focus on our ultimate goal of leveraging our union as a tool for God’s mission rather than merely for our own happiness.”

- At what point in your life have you felt most foolish? How did you respond?

- What do you view as the purpose of marriage?

Further Reading: *You and Me Forever: Marriage in Light of Eternity* by Francis and Lisa Chan

Chapter 20

COMING TO TERMS WITH REALITY



"My whole perspective was stuck. I could not figure out how to possibly adapt and move forward after this massive upheaval. Whereas most of my time for the past few years had been spent speaking and writing about what I felt God had been teaching me, after the day of the absent miracle, I completely lost the motivation to do so . . . Instead, I found myself simply trying to pass the time with mindless entertainment."

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame."

Psalm 22:1-5

- What was the biggest disappointment you have ever faced? How did you respond?

- What do you find yourself most likely to turn to in order to numb or distract yourself from pain or disappointment? (Work, money, sex, food, technology, etc.)

- Read Psalm 22:1-5. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 21

LOSING MY MIND



"One moment I would express feelings of self-loathing and remorse, in the same strangled voice as earlier, speaking about being unable to measure up and the utter uselessness of my life. On the heels of the negativities I was sputtering, I would immediately follow it up in my normal voice by quoting various Bible passages that specifically combated the negative things I had just vocalized. To those in the room, it appeared I was verbally battling with some invisible entity."

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Ephesians 6:12

"Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

1 Peter 5:8

- Have you ever had an experience that cannot be explained by science or logic? If so, what happened and how did it make you feel?

- What are your beliefs regarding angels and demons?

- Read Ephesians 6:12, 1 Peter 5:8. What is your takeaway from these passages?

Chapter 22

PICKING UP THE PIECES



"Human beings are simply not meant to live in isolation without any sense of purpose or meaningful work. We desperately need connection with others. We need a reason to get up in the morning—our physical well-being literally depends on it. For years, I'd had very little of either, and my body had simply responded accordingly."

"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."

Romans 4:18-21

- What is something you are hopeful for that you are not guaranteed to receive in this life? What steps can you take to find the balance of holding out hope, while also finding contentment right where you are?

- How would you define a miracle? Do you believe you have ever experienced one?

- Read Romans 4:18-21. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 23

REDEFINING SUCCESS



“The easy route would be to dwell on perceptions of my own inadequacy. In the past, I would have beat myself up, unable to shake the feeling of not measuring up. The challenging choice? Allowing myself to press into what was really going on in my mind—to let myself feel it, and then to figure out how to move forward in a healthy way by calling to mind the truth.”

“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

“Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

Galatians 1:10

- Is there a lie or accusation you regularly find yourself struggling with even though you know the truth? What is one tangible step you can take to remind yourself of the truth the next time this thought resurfaces?

- What do you determine as the metric for success?

- Read Galatians 1:10, 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. What is your takeaway from these passages?

Further Reading: *Go Small: Because God Doesn't Care About Your Status, Size, or Success* by Craig Gross

Chapter 24

EMBRACING AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE



"Ironically, I have found the best way to make the most of the moment is, in fact, by looking ahead. But not in the way that I used to. Instead, when I fix my mind on the end of the story, I am actually more intentional about how I live today. When I trust that all my deepest longings are one day going to be fulfilled for eternity, it frees me up to live at peace in the moment, no matter the present circumstances."

"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

2 Corinthians 4:18

- How often do you think about life after death? What are your feelings or beliefs about the concept of eternity?

- In terms of the desert metaphor, what are the things in your own life that most frequently “block your view” of eternity?

- Read 2 Corinthians 4:18. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Chapter 25

ONE STEP CLOSER



“Maybe that’s why we have to endure hardship during this short life. To make sure we don’t get too comfortable. To make sure we don’t mistake this earth for our true home. Now is the time for us to truly adopt a sense of urgency. Our time is short, and there is a world in front of us full of dire need. What would it look like to strip off the temporal and focus on the eternal?”

“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

Revelation 21:1-4

CHAPTER 25: ONE STEP CLOSER

- At the end of your life, three things will matter: God, his Word, and people. Take stock of your life. How can you invest accordingly in each of the following areas?

-Spiritual:

-Relational:

-Vocational:

-Hobbies:

-Finances:

- Read Revelation 21:1-4. What is your takeaway from this passage?

Further Reading:

Revelation 22

All Things New: Heaven, Earth, and the Restoration of Everything You Love by John Eldredge

Ryan S. Atkins was on top of the world as a college student with a full-ride scholarship, promising career track, and ambitious plans to take hold of his own future. On the brink of cashing in on all the promises of the American Dream, Ryan became paralyzed below the neck in a car accident.

The days ahead were consumed with a whirlwind of intense physical therapy and a dramatic departure from the life he knew and loved. Battling through doubt, insecurity, and bouts of depression, he eventually emerged from the rubble with a message of profound faith and hope.



Ryan has learned that physical limitations tell only a fraction of the story. His mission is to learn what it means to live with purpose, and he is passionate about encouraging others to do the same.

Ryan regularly opens up to an active and growing community via his blog, FlatOnMyBack.com. Launched in 2013 to share insights and physical progress with family and friends, it quickly expanded to speaking engagements at churches, schools, and other venues. Ryan has been featured in numerous media outlets included USA Today, LittleThings.com, and University of Cincinnati magazine.

In addition to speaking and writing, Ryan has developed and led a mentorship program for high school boys focused on authentic masculinity and spiritual awakening. He is an avid reader, college basketball junkie, and lover of all spicy foods. His second grade crush, Stephanie, eventually became his wife. They married in 2016 and reside in Cincinnati, Ohio.



Connect with Ryan on Instagram

