

RYAN S. ATKINS

The PATH_{TO} PERSEVERANCE

6 WAYS TO STAY STRONG
IN A DIFFICULT SEASON

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HOW HAVE YOU BEEN
HOLDING UP LATELY?

ODDS ARE, YOU ARE
CURRENTLY GOING
THROUGH SOMETHING
DIFFICULT...

You received a bad diagnosis. You were betrayed by a close friend or spouse. You lost your job. You are confused and concerned about the future. You're not sure if you have the energy to push through another day.

Everywhere we look we see physical suffering, vocational challenges, spiritual confusion, and emotional trauma.

We live in a world that is hurting deeply, yet we continue to try to mask our symptoms without ever addressing the root cause of our problems.

When we don't take action, we run the risk of spiraling much deeper.

As someone who went from feeling on top of the world to being paralyzed from the neck down after a freak car accident, I am passionate about helping people get through tough times.

In the years since my accident, I discovered SIX incredibly powerful yet simple actions that I have found to be crucial in order to persevere, no matter what you face.

I hope my findings can be helpful to you, whether you are in the midst of a season of great suffering or simply hoping to encourage others.



REMEMBER THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF HOPE

The spectrum of suffering is vast: Physical, financial, relational, mental, spiritual, etc. In each realm, we are discontent when we experience something contrary to what we assume should be the norm.

But should a pristine body, padded bank account, and a conflict free and carefree existence all of which can vanish in an instant really be where we place our ultimate hope?

Jesus offers us the hope of a renewed, resurrected body, a rich inheritance that will never spoil or fade, an everlasting dwelling place in his presence, and leadership as the perfect King in a kingdom that will never end.

No more tears. No more pain. Paradise for eternity.

Doesn't that sound so much better than even the greatest promises the world offers?

Let's anchor our hope there.



Reflection



What or who do you most often find yourself looking to for hope and security?



Read 1 Peter 1:3-4, 13; Revelation 21:1-4
What is your takeaway from these passages?



What is something tangible you could do to remind yourself to place your hope in the promises of God?

KEEP THE ENDGAME IN MIND

What we believe about eternity affects every aspect of our lives: marriage, parenting, work, finances, leisure—and suffering.

When we live in light of the fact that this broken world is only our temporary home, we are able to best leverage our time and keep our sanity when life doesn't make sense.

It can be easy to get frustrated in the moment. I often wonder, is this trial going to last forever? I have to remind myself that a given moment in a tough season is just a snapshot in the entirety of my life. Furthermore, this life is just a sliver in the lens of eternity.



Reflection



What percentage of your time is spent thinking of life on earth vs. life after death?



Read 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; 2 Corinthians 4:18
What is your takeaway from these passages?



What is one step you can take to remind yourself that your current burdens are TEMPORARY?

REMAIN BOTH HOPEFUL AND REALISTIC

Admiral James Stockdale, a Vietnam prisoner of war, spoke of how hope fueled his coping strategy: *"I never lost faith in the end of the story, I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life."*

My thought process has been similar. However, oftentimes I run into the temptation to paint an idyllic resolution scenario in my mind, complete with arbitrary deadlines, without taking into account the reality of present difficulties. This is a dangerous mindset that only leads to disappointment.

This same Vietnam POW who inspired me to never give up gave profound insight when he was asked about those who didn't make it out of Vietnam: *"Oh, that's easy, the optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."*

I encourage us all to take Stockdale's advice to heart:

"You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

Reflection



What is something you are hopeful about that you are not guaranteed to receive in this life?



Read Romans 4:18-21; Jeremiah 17:7-8
What is your takeaway from these passages?



What steps can you take to find the balance of holding out hope while also finding contentment right where you are?

HOLD FUTURE PLANS LOOSELY

As the ancient proverb goes:

“Man plans, God laughs”

I have found that I am most effectively able to navigate a challenging season or deal with difficult news when I am not tied to one specific outcome. For many years I believed I had written the perfect script for my life. Imagine my frustration when God wasn't reading His lines.

God reminds us in Isaiah 55:8-9,

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways”

This reality reminds me to ask myself if I am yielding to God's plan for my life, or if I'm simply shaking my fist at Him for not cooperating with my naïve, limited perspective. I want to stay aware that the story of my life is ultimately about what God is doing.



Reflection



When mapping out your future plans, how often do you consult with God about them?



Read Proverbs 27:1; James 4:13-16
What is your takeaway from these passages?



Review your calendar and ask God, “Is there anything that you would have me remove or add to this?” Record anything that you are sensing below.

FIND SOMETHING MEANINGFUL TO WORK ON

After reading psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* during the most difficult season of my life, I recognized a deep hole that I had previously been unaware of.

Frankl researched and wrote about his conclusions concerning basic human needs. Rather than merely seeking pleasure, Frankl theorizes humans have a deep need for three things in order to live meaningful lives:

1. Have a project to work on that requires unique skills and abilities, preferably a project that helps others.
2. Share your experiences within the context of safe, loving relationships.
3. Find a redemptive perspective to your suffering and challenges.

I have discovered that putting my time and effort behind something that matters and adds value to someone else's life is necessary for staying motivated and experiencing joy, no matter what my circumstances may be. This could look like serving, mentoring, writing, counseling, or even a job you find great meaning in.



Reflection



What are you currently working on that most interests you?



Read Genesis 1:28; Colossians 3:23-24

What is your takeaway from these passages?



Who is one person you can do something helpful for this week? What will you do for them?

FOCUS ON THE GOOD COMING OUT OF THE TRIAL

People don't always emerge from hardships "stronger" or "better." Oftentimes the pain of this world leaves us broken and bitter. Having a redemptive view of suffering is absolutely crucial in guarding against this. Dealing with one physical issue after another often leaves me feeling like a punching bag. I frequently find myself thinking,

“Can’t I catch a break?”

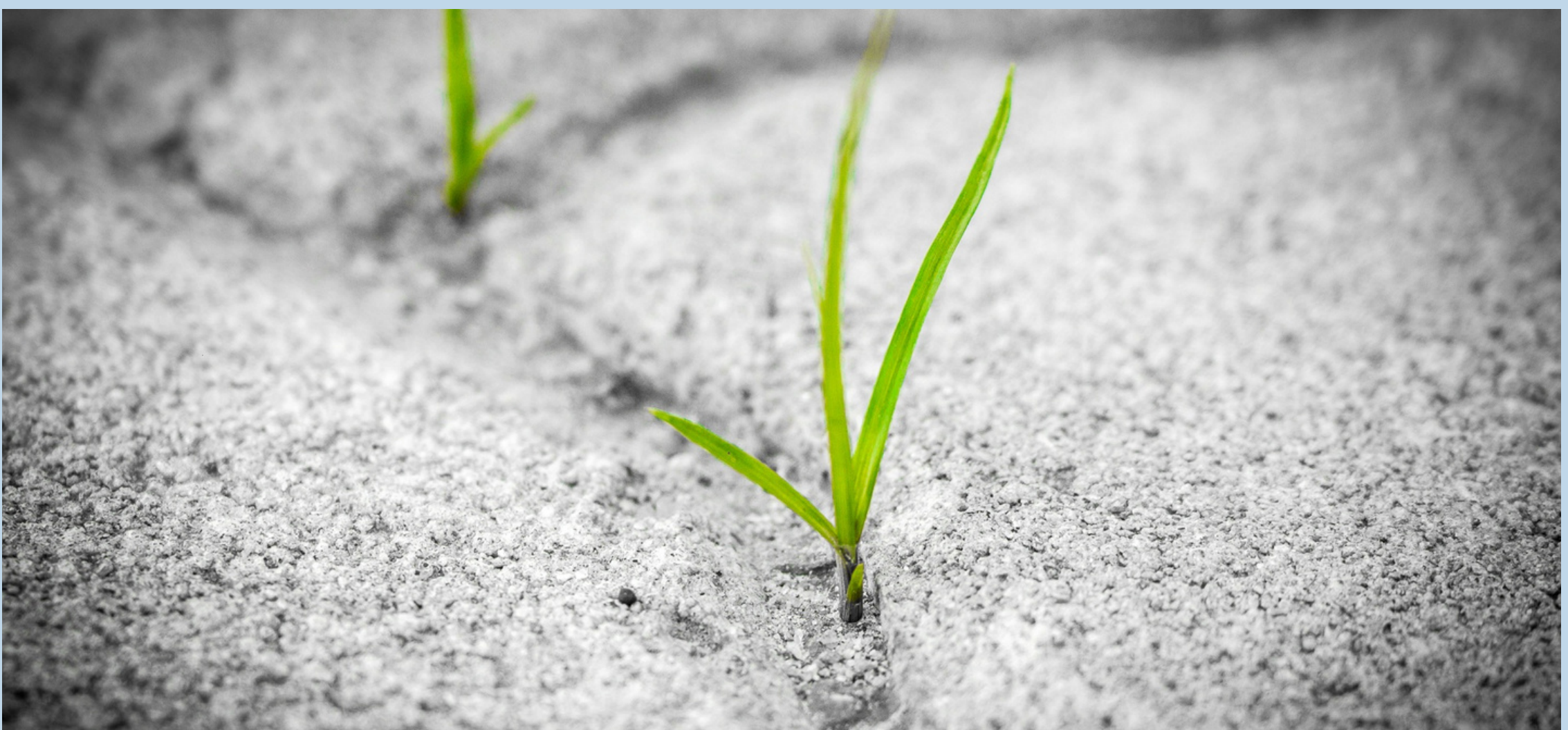
In the hardest moments when I'm pressing through bouts of pain and questioning where God is, calibrating my mind with the truths of the Bible proves to be powerful:

“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial...”

“Consider it pure joy when you encounter trials of various kinds.”

The book of James promises that, if we let them, these trials will develop perseverance and make us mature and complete. Throughout seemingly endless trials, I can trust God is developing perseverance in me that ultimately is for my good. Pausing to reflect on past trials can also be helpful. It is generally much easier in hindsight to find redemptive aspects to suffering.

Focusing on how God has redeemed situations in the past reminds me to trust Him and encourages me to press forward with faith, knowing the best is yet to come.



Reflection



What is one specific thing you can point to as “good” that has come from your past or present suffering?



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



What is one thing you can do today to ensure you stay aware of the benefits coming from your current trial?

Staying Strong in Your Difficult Time

When we put our hope in anything that is not sustainable on its own, we are setting ourselves up for disappointment. In his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller addresses this subject:

“Counterfeit gods if you fail them will never forgive you, and if you get them will never satisfy you... This is the only God that will: Jesus and his resurrection.”

Jesus implored his followers to build their lives on stable foundations. As a builder himself, he used the construction analogy of building a house on sturdy rock rather than sinking sand.



Keeping a healthy mindset when life is hardest is daunting. However, by implementing the following principles, you can begin to view your suffering through a healthy perspective:

1. Remember the **ULTIMATE** source of hope
2. Keep the **ENDGAME** in mind
3. Be both **HOPEFUL** and **REALISTIC**
4. Hold future plans **LOOSELY**
5. Find something **MEANINGFUL** to work on
6. Focus on the **GOOD** coming out of the trial

Incorporating these steps is not a magic fix. It is no guarantee to relieve us from pain and suffering.

Instead, these six strategies will make the pain less powerful, more bearable, and—most importantly—more meaningful.

About the Author

Ryan 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 S. Atkins

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



One Step Closer

How a Life-Altering Accident Led Me to Everything I Almost Missed

Ryan S. Atkins

IT ONLY TAKES A SECOND TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE

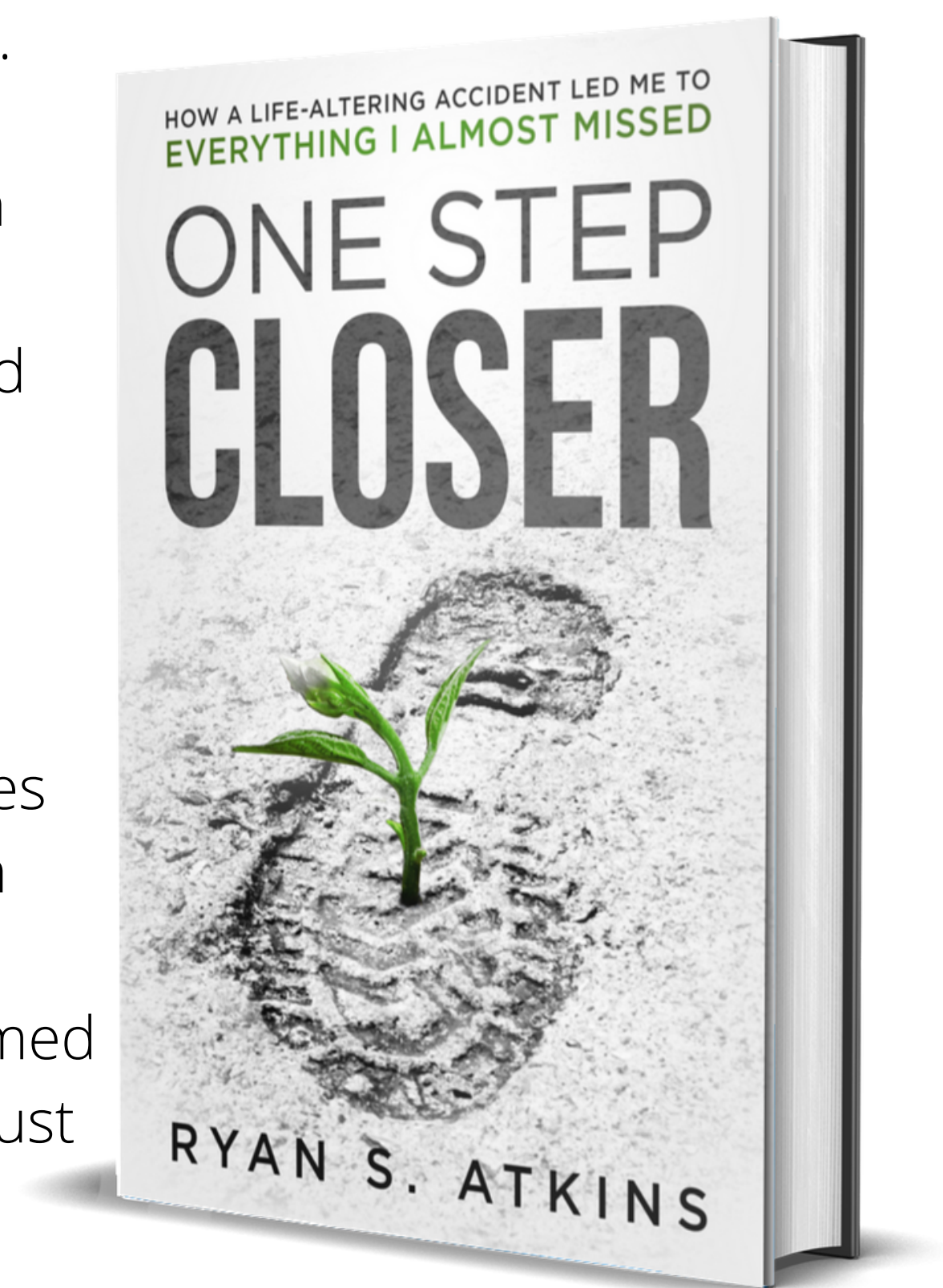
At age twenty-one, Ryan Atkins had everything going for him: a full-ride scholarship in a prestigious business program, a well-paying job, an opportunity to pitch a business plan to venture capitalists in New York City. He was living his dreams and preparing for a future of success.

But the day before leaving for New York, Ryan was in a life-altering car accident that robbed him of the use of his arms and legs. Paralyzed from the shoulders down, he found himself struggling to grasp just how drastically his life had changed.

In this unflinchingly honest account, Ryan takes you along his journey of coming to terms with his physical limitations, redefining success, falling in love, believing for a healing that seemed all but inevitable, and ultimately learning to trust the purpose in suffering.

If you have ever watched your dreams crumble before your eyes, endured prolonged pain and disappointment in your life, or wondered if there is more to life than what you are living . . .

**RYAN'S STORY MAY BE JUST WHAT YOU NEED TO DISCOVER
WHAT MATTERS MOST—IN THIS LIFE AND THE NEXT**



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