

THE COMPASS

**SHOCK TALK: Straight From Jesus' Mouth**

Part 4:

## You May Go Now

Doug Brendel

My wife Kristina and I got married in part because we wanted to make babies together. I liked the idea of her as a mom, she thought I would be a fun daddy. We prayed that she would get pregnant, but nope. So finally we began praying that God would give us a baby through adoption.

Kristina's sister in New Jersey connected us to a birthmother in her area. Pretty cool!

We were going to get a baby!

We made all the arrangements, she went into labor, we got the phone call, we flew to Newark — and while we were in the air, somewhere over the Midwest, she changed her mind.

Decided to keep the baby.

Named her Elizabeth.

We never saw her.

We trudged over to my sister-in-law's house.

There was nothing to do but turn around the next day and go home.

I was kind of numb.

You tell yourself you were foolish to believe it could happen.

You tell yourself it was a statistical long-shot anyway.

But that doesn't change the fact that you've lost a baby.

I'll never forget — standing in the shower that night, it suddenly hit me: my helplessness, my hurt; it all crashed in on me.

I started to sob. I wailed like crazy, standing there in the shower.

The pain of the loss was beyond expressing.

We learned later that baby Elizabeth and her mommy went to live with Elizabeth's grandma.

The grandma had been praying that her daughter would keep the baby.

So God answered her prayer, but not mine.

Why doesn't God answer all of our prayers?

And how *could* he, if two of us are praying for the opposite goal?

And how does he *decide* how he's going to answer prayer?

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A few years back I went through a passage of my life when everything I touched turned to "sick."

Seemed like every time I turned around, someone I loved was facing death.

I went to Temple, Texas, to the VA Hospital there, to visit my friend Pete.

He was a fun-loving, jolly Christian fellow.  
 Pete helped me get started in business when I was just starting out in life, and over the course of his life he helped dozens and dozens of people like me.  
 Pete was just a wonderfully generous person.

But he was diabetic, he had poor circulation, and one day, the doctors had to amputate his toes.

Pete's friends all began praying that the incision would heal, because with a diabetic, healing can be extremely slow, and if it's too slow, they have to amputate some more.

So we prayed: "God, please heal Pete.

He's served you faithfully, Lord.

He's a wonderful walking testimony of what you can do in a person's life.

Let the incision heal quickly and completely, Lord.

Let the antibiotics do all the necessary work.

Heal Pete, please!"

But a couple weeks later, they had to amputate again, and take another inch of his foot.  
 Why didn't God answer our prayers?

Then within a few days of my visit to see Pete in Texas, I was at Good Samaritan Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona, visiting my friend Helen.

She was 45 years old, beautiful and healthy and devoted to God.

Wife, lovely children, a pillar of her church.

Diagnosed with lung cancer, the kind you get from smoking 5 packs a day for 35 years — even though she had never touched tobacco in her life.

Inoperable.

Her family and friends began praying for her to be supernaturally healed.

But day after day, Helen's tests kept coming back worse and worse and worse.

Why didn't God answer the prayers of so many people and heal Helen?

And then I got a call from Denver, from one of my best friends from back in high school. Ben was involved in the theatre like me, a writer like me.

He used to live in Arizona like me; in fact, he lived in our home, he worked in my office.

He was calling to say he had AIDS — this was before most of the treatments they have for HIV nowadays — he was failing fast, and he just wanted to say good-bye.

I got on a plane and went up there to see Ben.

I prayed for him, but ... how realistic was that?

Why did God allow this to happen to Ben?

Why did God allow this to happen to *me*?

Why doesn't God answer my prayers?

People have been asking these kinds of questions for thousands of years.

Life is difficult — and sometimes it seems like God just lets it be that way.

Twenty centuries ago, when Jesus was living on earth as a man, there was a royal official in the city of Capernaum (**John 4:46-54**) whose son had gotten really sick. He was actually close to death.

Now the man had heard that this Jesus guy could heal people's diseases, but Jesus at the time was way down in the south of Palestine, in the region known as Judea. This official lived in Capernaum, which was way up north, in the region known as Galilee.

Fortunately, however, Jesus moved around a lot; and one day the official heard that Jesus had arrived back up in Galilee.

Word had it that he was over in the city of Cana — that's the place where he turned water into wine; we looked at that experience just in our most recent session together.

So the official hurried over to Cana — in fact, this was the town where Jesus had performed his very first miracle, turning the water into wine at that wedding.

This was a serious journey in those days, more than 15 miles — and this royal official really had little to go on.

But he was desperate.

As he hurried along the road from Capernaum to Cana, he could imagine Jesus coming back with him, arriving at his house, going into his son's bedroom.

He could imagine seeing his son jump up out of bed — totally healed.

So when he found Jesus, the historical account in the Scriptures says, he begged him to come to his house and heal his son.

But Jesus didn't give him the answer he was looking for.

Jesus at first gave him kind of a philosophical response, the kind of comment that made people crazy:

He did what he did so often: he demonstrated more interest in our faith than in our feelings.

**“Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never believe” (John 4:48).**

It's like he was saying, “Trust me — don't just be impressed by what I can do for you.”

But the royal official was stuck.

He was paralyzed. His life was at a standstill.

He couldn't do anything but plead for the life of his son.

If Jesus didn't come back down that road with him, and heal his son, he couldn't see any future for himself.

Until Jesus gave him the answer he was looking for, his life was on hold.

Just about every one of us has been there.

It feels like my life is on hold.

Until I get this problem solved, I can't go on.

Until God meets this need, I can't keep going.

Until God resolves this relationship conflict, I can't carry on.

Until God meets this financial need, I can't move forward.

Until God heals this physical ailment, I can't hang on.

Until God restores me to where I was before, I can't go on.

This royal official was totally fixated on the one paramount crisis of his life, so he came back with: **“Sir, come down before my child dies” (John 4:49).**

But do you know what Jesus said to him?

**“You may go.”**

Literally! Those are the words he used!

He said, **“You may go. Your son will live.”**

He was saying, your life isn't over.

Your life doesn't have to be on hold.

I am already at work in your situation.

I see the end from the beginning.

I am not limited by time and space.

I am already there, where you think you're asking me to go.

Even if you can't see me at work, even if you can't understand my work, even if you can't sense me at work, I am working in this situation.

Sure, this royal official's faith was great,

He could imagine Jesus working a miracle.

But Jesus was saying, I'm not bound by your imagination.

I don't have to answer your prayer in the way that you imagine I should answer it.

I'm not limited by your human vision.

God says to us in **Isaiah 55:8,9**, **“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.”**

Sometimes when the Bible talks about this, human language almost isn't strong enough to express how complete God's power to provide for us really is.

In the New King James Version, **Ephesians 3:20** talks about God as One **“who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above”** — the New International Version uses the phrase **“immeasurably more than”** — **“all that we ask or imagine”** — **“or think,”** according to the New King James.

Jesus was saying to the royal official, Your son will live, but to get you what you need, I don't have to go by the road you've mapped out for me.

I don't have to answer your prayer the way I answered someone else's prayer.

Sometimes I see how God moves in one person's life, and I say, I've got to see God move in my life the same way.

But God says, I'm going to move in your life in a different way.

One of the freakiest things to me — you probably won't consider this too weird, but I can remember before there was such a thing as PC's and the Internet, and I remember when they started creating programs that ran “in background.”

It was like the Twilight Zone!

You're sitting there doing some normal function on your keyboard and your computer screen, and all the sudden you hear the computer humming and clicking and making strange groaning sounds — like it's possessed or something.

Programs running in background are commonplace today, but at first, it was weird.

Today, programs run *seamlessly* in the background. You can't even detect that they're there. You have no idea that something is happening. In fact, you have to *trust* that they're running.

Which is exactly how God operates in our lives.

He doesn't hum or click or groan; he just does his work silently, imperceptibly.

God *can* work in plain view, but he doesn't only work in plain view.  
 He also works in the background of our lives.  
 In fact, I would say, he *mostly* works in the background of our lives.

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So Jesus told the royal official, You can go, your son will live — and what did the man do?

The Bible tells us **“The man took Jesus at his word and departed” (John 4:50).**

He headed back down the road to Capernaum.

Same road. Nothing had changed.

He had nothing to go on — except the words of Jesus.

I walk this road a lot.

Sometimes I just have to take him at his word, and trust him to be working in the background.

When we flew back from New Jersey, we flew back childless — exactly the same as we had flown out.

Didn't feel any fresh hope.

Didn't have any reason to.

Our situation was unchanged.

All we could do was trust God to be giving us his best for us. Working in the background of our lives.

The royal official took Jesus at his word, and departed.

How can I do that, in the next problem situation I face? How can you, in the situation you're facing right now?

How can you take Jesus at his word, and “depart” — in other words, get on with your life?

Maybe in your case, it will mean opening a newspaper or going online and looking at the classifieds — to see what's available in the way of a new job.

Maybe in your case, it will mean writing a letter to someone you haven't communicated with in a long time, to see if it's possible to begin the process of mending that broken relationship.

Maybe in your case, it will mean that you *keep* calling, even though you've called and called and called and they still haven't picked up the phone.

Maybe you're in a situation where you can't do anything different — any more than the royal official could.

All you can do differently is trust God to be at work.

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Sometimes, frankly, God doesn't work in my life in ways that make sense to me.

In a lot of situations, he works in the background exclusively — he never comes into the foreground and shows me what he's up to.

Trusting God means trusting that he really is working for my good — trusting that there really is a purpose for my pain — but a lot of the time, I don't see the purpose.

I just have to keep trusting.

My life goes on. My situation somehow morphs. I get out of this problem and into some

new problem. And I never can really look back and “see” how God took care of it all.

I’m like a teenage boy asking his dad for an Xbox 360.

He doesn’t know the dad is saving money like crazy to send him to an Ivy League school.

Or he knows his dad is saving for college but he doesn’t care.

The boy isn’t thinking about his education.

He thinks the Xbox will make him happy — that’s all.

I’m unhappy till I get the new toy — I’ll be happy after I get the new toy.

He sees the small thing as big. He doesn’t see the big thing at all.

He sees the unimportant thing as important. He doesn’t see the important thing at all.

So the dad says to the boy, “Not right now” — and the boy is crushed.

I’m the same way.

I’ll say, “God, will you please take away this pain?” — whatever it is I’m dealing with.

I can’t see that God is, in effect, saving up for my education. Withholding the new toy because he’s working on something more important.

Maybe he’s just preparing me, by way of this current pain, to love someone later who is going to face the same kind of pain.

So God says to me, “Not right now, Doug.”

His purposes are usually beyond my understanding.

He doesn’t think like I think.

He knows what will really be best for me — “big picture” best, not my own narrow little view of what’s best — and he acts accordingly.

I see the immediate crisis. He sees the end result of my life.

In fact — reality check time here — I would say that for the most part, God doesn’t take away my pain. Not in the way I envision he could or should.

For the most part, he doesn’t heal. Doesn’t fix. Not the way I imagine he could or should.

Instead, he’s working on a different agenda. He’s using my pain for some purpose that is ultimately good. Even a purpose that I may actually never see or understand!

So I cry out for help or healing, and God says, “You may go.”

Carry on. Keep moving.

I’m working. Good will come of it. You probably won’t understand it, but trust me.

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It may seem like God isn’t answering your prayer, but God always answers prayer.

**Sometimes God says YES.**

My friend Pete recovered from his surgery, and went on to live a full and happy and productive life, even without one foot.

**Sometimes God says NO.**

My friend Ben never rallied. He died of AIDS.

**Sometimes God says LATER.**

My friend Helen was sick for a few months, and then miraculously her tests started coming back perfect — she was supernaturally healed by the power of God.

**But no matter what else he says, God *always* says GROW.** He says “You may go now.”

The day I stood in that shower in New Jersey, crying my guts out over the loss of that baby, wailing at God because he had let that baby slip through our grasp — at that moment, unbeknownst to me, there was a homeless couple wandering across the country in a rickety truck.

The woman was about 7 months pregnant, a cocaine user; she’d already left two children behind in other places.

Winter was coming, so one week before Christmas, when the couple got to Phoenix, Arizona, where it was warm, they stopped.

They were living in their truck.

When her baby was about to be born, she made her way to St. Joseph’s hospital.

There, she delivered.

It was a boy.

The woman told the nurse on duty, “Be sure to find him a good Christian home.”

And she vanished.

That little boy turned out to be my son, Kristofer.

When I prayed to get baby Elizabeth, God was saying, “Doug, you don’t know what you’re praying for.

You need to grow.

You need to learn a few things more, before you can be a father.”

One night when he was still very small, Kristofer had a real sniffly cold; he’d had it for a while.

I was tucking him in, and he said, “Dad, I pray and I pray for God to take this cold away, but he doesn’t do it. Why doesn’t God answer my prayers?”

And I was able to say, “Kristofer, let me tell you a little story....”

Maybe we need to learn to pray differently.

Maybe instead of praying “God, give me” or “God, change this” or “God, fix this,” I need to learn to pray like this:

“God, use me however you see fit. God, do whatever’s best for me and for others. God, help me to trust your heart through all this.”