

PESTERED THOUGHTS ARTICLE

GOD IS NOT DONE WITH YOU YET

*Last Words from a
Dear Friend Still Ring True*

RANDALL EVANS

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Sometimes the fall isn't the end of the story.

BY RANDALL EVANS

OCTOBER 18, 2014

THE BUCK WITH MY NAME ON IT

October 18, 2014, was opening day of Kentucky's muzzleloader season.

I was pastoring a church in Western Kentucky at the time, but I had taken the weekend off to go deer hunting. Lindsey Champion, one of our church elders, had agreed to preach in my place the next morning.

I loved muzzleloader weekend. It was a welcome break from the stresses of ministry. And it was one of those fall afternoons hunters wait all year for. Clear blue sky. Cool air. A favorite stand. And somewhere in the woods, I was convinced, was a buck with my name on it.

I hadn't been sitting there long when I saw him.

A nice buck was working his way toward me.

Immediately, my heart started pounding.

If you've never hunted, it is difficult to explain what happens when the deer you've been waiting for suddenly appears. All the patience that got you into the woods somehow disappears at exactly the moment you need it most.

He kept coming.

Breathe, Randall. Just breathe.

I raised my muzzleloader and steadied my aim.

BOOM.

Smoke rolled out in front of me.

I had missed.

To my surprise, the buck didn't bolt. He barely seemed bothered by the loud noise. Instead of running away, he kept coming. And that presented a problem. A muzzleloader is not exactly known for its rapid-fire capability.

I hurried to reload while trying to keep one eye on the deer. Looking back, I should have slowed down. The buck wasn't running away. He didn't even know I was there. But I had buck fever.

And I knew something he didn't.

I had brought exactly two loads with me.

One was gone.

THIS WAS IT. NO PRESSURE.

This time I concentrated harder. I steadied myself, found the buck in my sights and squeezed the trigger.

BOOM.

Another cloud of smoke.

Another miss.

Apparently, the buck had nothing to worry about.

I sat there for a moment with an unloaded muzzleloader and a racing heart, watching him move farther away. Later I realized I had badly misjudged the distance. There was nothing left to do. I was out of ammunition, so I decided to climb down, walk back to the camp house, reload and regroup.

I didn't know it at the time, but that decision nearly cost me my life.

ONE STEP - TWELVE FEET

The stand was a tower stand, with the platform roughly twelve feet above the ground.

I started down the ladder and placed my foot on the first step. It was really more of a half-step, and it was slick as it could be.

My foot slipped.

I had no warning.

No chance to think through what to do.

One second I was climbing out of a deer stand.

The next, I was falling.

TWELVE FEET ISN'T VERY FAR WHEN YOU MEASURE IT FROM THE GROUND UP.

IT IS A VERY LONG WAY WHEN YOU ARE TRAVELING THE OTHER DIRECTION.

People sometimes say frightening moments happen in slow motion. I understand what they mean. The fall itself probably lasted little more than a second, but somewhere between that stand and the ground, I had time for one very clear thought:

This could be it.

Then I hit.

For a moment, I just lay there.

I'm sure that deer was still in the field, but I didn't care about that anymore.

My first realization was remarkably simple.

I'm alive.

My second question was whether everything still worked.

I moved my fingers.

Then my toes.

Everything moved.

I reached for the phone in my pocket and called my brother. He immediately headed toward me. By the time he arrived, I had managed to get to my feet-which, as he quickly informed me, was not particularly smart.

He was probably right.

I probably should have gone to the emergency room.

I didn't.

I would love to tell you there was some courageous reason for that decision, but mostly I was a stubborn man who had survived a twelve-foot fall and apparently decided that qualified me to practice medicine.

For the next several days, my body reminded me what had happened. I was sore, bruised and battered.

BRUISED BUT NOT BROKEN.

My muzzleloader wasn't so fortunate. Its stock had broken in the fall. I had gone into those woods hoping to come home with a deer. Instead, I came home grateful simply to have come home.

For the next week, I thought I understood just how quickly an ordinary day could change.

I DIDN'T.

EIGHT DAYS AFTER THE FALL

The following Sunday, October 26, 2014, I was refreshed and ready to return.

I was excited.

We had a church hayride, and fellowship called the Fall Fling planned for that afternoon, and the weather was gorgeous. It was one of those fall days with moderate temperatures and nothing but sunshine ahead.

I even told the church from the pulpit that morning:

“Today is going to be a great day.”

I had no way of knowing just how quickly that bright, sunshiny day was about to change.

SEVEN SIMPLE WORDS

My sermon that morning was titled Four Things We Acknowledge Every Time We Pray.

After the service, as was my custom, I stood in the back and shook hands with the congregation as they left. I enjoyed doing that.

Lindsey Champion came through and shook my hand. He told me he needed the sermon that day.

Then his wife, Joy, came through. Joy had heard me tell the church that morning about falling from the deer stand the previous weekend.

“You could have easily died from the fall you took,” she told me.

Then she patted me, looked me in the eyes, and said:

“God is not done with you yet.”

Seven words.

At that moment, I had no idea how important they would become.

MOMENTS LATER

Everyone eventually cleared out from the morning service. At the time, we met for morning worship, broke for lunch, and then gathered again for an early afternoon service. I went to El Bracero, a local Mexican restaurant, for lunch.

When I arrived back at the church building for the afternoon service, there was a commotion outside. I walked out to see what was happening. One of our members told me something I will never forget.

“Lindsey and Joy are dead.”

How could that be?

I had just talked to them.

I had just seen them.

They had walked out of our church building alive and well.

And now I was being told they were gone.

I was devastated.

There would be no afternoon service. There would be no hayrides. There would be no Fall Fling.

**IN A MATTER OF MOMENTS, ALL OUR PLANS HAD BECOME
MEANINGLESS.**

Everything had changed. That morning I had stood before our church and said, “Today is going to be a great day.” Instead, it had become one of the darkest days our church ever experienced.

We simply never know how quickly an ordinary day can change.

AT THE CHAMPION HOME

I didn't know exactly what had happened, but I knew where I needed to go.

I told one of our elders what I had heard so he could tell the church and left immediately for the Champions' home. When I arrived, police tape surrounded the property. Law enforcement officers were everywhere. It was confirmed: what I had heard was true.

Lindsey and Joy were dead.

Their daughter, Emily, who had been visiting from out of town, was dead too.

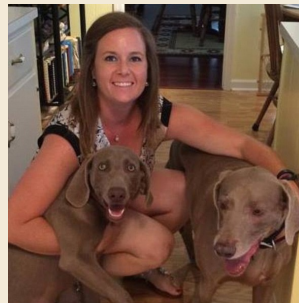
There was such heaviness and sorrow at the scene. Family members were arriving devastated by the news. Friends and members of the community also gathered across from the Champion home, which was surrounded by police tape.

Several pastors and members of other churches in the community prayed with me that day, all of us holding hands. I will always be thankful to them for that.

THE PEOPLE WE LOST



LINDSEY & JOY CHAMPION



EMILY CHAMPION

The Champions were deeply loved by our church family and by our entire community.

Lindsey was one of our elders. He had worked for Farm Credit Services. He was kind and easygoing and had a fantastic sense of humor. He had so much common sense. He was such a good man.

Joy was a fourth-grade schoolteacher who also taught Bible class for the youth at our church. Because of her work in the schools and community, she was known by almost everyone. She had a reputation for being a firm but loving teacher.

Lindsey and Joy were simply good, kind, loving, hard-working people who were respected throughout our community.

Emily was their daughter. She was educated and accomplished in her career as a veterinarian specializing in equine care. She was an amazing young woman who loved animals and had dedicated her life to caring for them.

She was in the prime of her life.

She had run a half marathon the day before she was murdered.

In the days that followed, our church family did what church families do.

We gathered.

We prayed.

We cried.

We tried to make sense of something that didn't make sense.

I stood before our church the following Sunday and tried to find words for something that seemed impossible to put into words.

We leaned on the words of Psalm 46:

“God is our refuge and strength.”

Later that day, we gathered at the Trigg County High School gym to say goodbye. One of Emily's dear friends remembered her and gave a fitting tribute to her amazing life.

I was asked to eulogize my dear friends Lindsey and Joy.

It was easy to find good things to say about them, but incredibly difficult to say them because of the hurt and sorrow I was experiencing.

That day, I shared with the audience the last words Joy Champion ever spoke to me:

“God is not done with you yet.”

For the first time, those seven words carried a weight they hadn't carried when Joy spoke them to me just a week earlier. I challenged those assembled that day that if they were within the sound of my voice-if they were still here and still had breath in their lungs-

God was not done with them yet either.

FORGIVENESS IN A COURTROOM

Life eventually carried on for all of us, although a huge hole was left by the people we loved and lost.

Ryan Champion eventually pleaded guilty to the charges against him in an agreement that took the death penalty off the table. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

I was present in court for the proceedings, including the family impact statements.

Lindsey's brother, Lauren Champion, gave a powerful statement of forgiveness. He told the courtroom that Jesus called him to forgive Ryan.

“I truly believe with all my heart that that is what my late brother-your late father-and Jesus wants me to do. And that's to forgive you, Ryan.”

It was a poignant moment.

Ryan Champion will spend the rest of his natural life behind bars for what he did.

But no verdict and no sentence could ever bring Lindsey, Joy, and Emily back.

WHAT I KNOW NOW

TWELVE YEARS LATER

It has been twelve years since the murders.

I still miss my friends.

I still think about them.

And I have thought many times about the last words Joy ever said to me.

“God is not done with you yet.”

What I could not have known in 2014 was how many times I would need those words myself. Since then, I have had some amazing days. But those years have also brought struggle, disappointment, loss, failure, and some very dark days.

Some came through poor choices of my own. Others came through the loss and disappointment we all face. Through it all, I was never done with God.

But there were times when I wondered if He was done with me.

There were times when I wondered if I had fallen too far.

There were times when I wondered if there was anything meaningful left for me to do.

And somewhere in those moments, I heard the words of a fourth-grade schoolteacher standing in the back of a little church building in Western Kentucky:

God is not done with you yet.

She was right.

He wasn't done with me then.

And He isn't done with me now.

BACK IN TIME TO 2014. BACK TO THE STAND.

I fell from the deer stand in October and lost my dear friends just eight days later. I had always used hunting as a way to settle my mind and steady myself. The woods have a way of giving you time to think and make peace with the world.

I needed a whole lot of peace.

Things had been chaotic in my life and ministry and at the time our church and community were still in mourning. November came and Kentucky's whitetail gun season was in full swing.

There were plenty of other places I could have hunted.

But I went back to that stand.

THE SAME STAND.

I wish I could tell you I climbed that ladder without thinking about what had happened there.

I didn't.

Twelve feet looks different after you've fallen twelve feet. But I climbed it anyway. That evening, a buck came within range.

This time, I didn't miss.

I still have the photograph from that night. For years, I looked at it and saw a nice buck and remembered a successful hunt.

I see something different when I look at it now.

I SEE A MAN WHO WENT BACK.

Back to the woods.

Back up the ladder.

Back into the very place where only weeks earlier I had wondered, even if only for a moment, whether my life was about to end.

I didn't know it then, but that wouldn't be the last time I would have to get back up.

Years later, I would fall again.

Not from a deer stand.

Some of those falls would come through circumstances beyond my control.

Others would come through failures and choices that were entirely my own.

And some would cost me dearly.

There have been times when I wondered whether I had fallen too far to ever climb again.

But I'm climbing.

I'm rebuilding what I damaged. I'm trying each day to live with integrity. I'm trying to use whatever days God gives me to serve people again. Maybe that's why the photograph means so much more to me today than it did in 2014.

I don't just see a man holding a deer.

I SEE A MAN WHO WENT BACK.

And that's what I'm doing again.

I'm going back.

I'm getting back up.

MAYBE YOU'VE FALLEN TOO

Maybe yours wasn't twelve feet from a deer stand.

Maybe nobody else even saw it happen.

Maybe it was a failure.

A divorce.

A loss.

A decision you wish you could take back.

Maybe life simply knocked you down.

Or maybe, like some of my falls, you know that some of the damage was caused by choices of your own.

Maybe you're standing at the bottom of your own ladder wondering whether you have it in you to climb again.

I can't promise you the climb will be easy.

But I can tell you this:

FALLING DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THE END OF YOUR STORY.

No matter where you have been or what you have done, God can forgive you.

He can still use you.

He can even use the broken places in your life to help someone else who is struggling.

There is another step to take.

Another person to love.

Another wrong to make right.

Another opportunity to forgive or be forgiven.

Another chance to get back up.

I know because I'm climbing too.

And if you are still here-if there is still breath in your lungs-I want to leave you with the seven words Joy Champion left with me all those years ago:

GOD IS NOT DONE WITH YOU YET.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randall Evans - Pester the Pastor

Randall Evans is the creator of Pester the Pastor, a faith-based ministry built around a simple idea: sometimes you just need a pastor.

The photograph above was taken on November 9, 2014, after Randall returned to the same stand he had fallen from only weeks earlier. For him, it now represents more than a successful hunt. It is a reminder that sometimes getting back up is part of the story.

*I went back.
I kept going.*

GOD IS NOT DONE WITH YOU YET.

And that is still my story.

FAITH-BASED COUNSEL. CONTENT. COMMUNITY.
SOMETIMES YOU JUST NEED A PASTOR.

