

FIRST < AND > GOAL

JAKE BYRNE
with H. MICHAEL



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*"Success isn't owned.
It's leased,
and rent is due every day."*

J.J. WATT

Introduction

God Arms Me with Strength

It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights. He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You make your saving help my shield, and your right hand sustains me; your help has made me great. You provide a broad path for my feet, so that my ankles do not give way. I pursued my enemies and overtook them... You armed me with strength for battle; you humbled my adversaries before me. You made my enemies turn their backs in flight, and I destroyed my foes (Psalm 18:32-40).

I received these verses from Psalm 18 in a text from my mom before one of my NFL games. The words grabbed me and put into perspective what God will do and what I need to do.

The start of a game is the calm before the storm, a time for players to prepare their minds and bodies for what is to come and embrace what we, as professionals, have trained for so long to do.

In some ways a game is like a battle. I need feet like a deer and a broad path so my ankles do not give way. I face enemies who want to destroy me, but it's God who arms me with strength for football and in life.

For all of us, life can sometimes seem like a series of battles. As an athlete with an autoimmune disease, I've faced many adversaries on the field and in life; from getting diagnosed with type 1 diabetes while chasing my goal of playing high school football to getting cut from NFL teams not once but several times.

In my freshman year in college, I was challenged with juggling academics, diabetes, and a demanding football schedule. I've embraced my plans and set big goals, but I've faced failures along the way too.

No one gets an easy pass in life. We all meet struggles while pursuing our dreams. Sometimes our knees shake when facing giants, and sometimes our feet get knocked out from under us.

Those are defining moments.

But as the psalmist reminds us, it's God who arms us and keeps our way secure. When knocked down, we must not sit and cower. God equips us with the confidence. There is peace in knowing that no matter how hard we fall, God reaches out His hand, like a teammate in a game, and pulls us back onto our feet. We make plans, but sometimes He rewrites those plans and shows us new ways to achieve our goals.

I'm surprised anyone would offer me a contract to write a book. I'm also surprised, as many of my friends will be, that my book is a devotional filled with Scripture. There's so much about religion I still don't know, but the simple fact is that deep down my faith is real, and I trust in God above all things.

First and Goal: What Football Taught Me About Never Giving Up is an A-to-Z football terminology devotional. I hope you will be encouraged through short anecdotes from my childhood, my struggles as a type 1 diabetic, and my journey in the NFL. Even if you know nothing about football, you may enjoy picking up basic terminology about the game. I pray you find comfort and strength in the Scriptures and realize that you are never alone in whatever goals you are striving to achieve.

Life is short. Now is the time to accomplish that goal you hold in your heart. With God, nothing is impossible.

Audible

When the quarterback changes the play at the line of scrimmage, based on the defensive formation, he calls an audible, which is a better-suited play.

Beginning my freshman year in high school, through hard work, dedication, and by the grace of God I'd earned a starting spot as an offensive tackle on our football team. Standing at 6 feet 5 and weighing in as a 240-pound 14-year-old, I was one of the team's biggest players. With early interest from college scouts, I ran full steam ahead, thinking I had life all figured out.

By the time the season had ended, I'd dropped 40 pounds and suffered from constant fatigue. The drastic weight loss confused me, my parents, and the coaches. I ate like a ravenous wolf and worked out constantly, hoping to gain weight. Instead, I shed pounds like a German shepherd sheds fur.

An unseen offense had launched a full-scale attack against my body. First, relentless hunger and weight loss. Then, the thirst. I guzzled gallons of Gatorade and water. My constant bathroom breaks annoyed my teachers and had me worried.

At the doctor's office I expected a prescription for a bladder infection. Instead, I got rocked by the hardest hit I'd ever taken: a diagnosis of type 1 diabetes.

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Diabetes meant a major lifestyle change. My endocrinologist assured me I could still play football—but only if I did everything by the book. I had to call my own audible. This disease forced me onto my own personal line of scrimmage, where I had to come up with a

new game plan and change my mind-set. Controlling my blood sugar meant huge dietary adjustments. I had to act as my own pancreas, injecting proper amounts of insulin each time I consumed carbs in order to maintain healthy sugar levels.

Support from family, friends, and coaches carried me through difficult moments, along with a peaceful reassurance that God cared about my plans, hopes, and dreams. Have you been there? Believed you had your game plan all figured out, only to take a hit from an unexpected challenge? Have faith and listen to the audible God is calling. Trust that He has plans for you—good plans for a future and greater plans than you can ever imagine.

Automatic First Down

Certain penalties grant the team an automatic first down no matter the down or distance of the play. After the penalty, yardage is determined and players start with a new set of downs.

Just before suiting up for a high school home game, I remembered my mom's advice. She always reminded me to pray for protection as I put on my pads, laced up my shoes, and pulled on my helmet. I lowered my head in prayer.

Later on the field, I was targeted to receive the ball on a pass route. Expecting to be the hero, I reached for the ball, but a linebacker with a different plan took my legs out from under me. My moment of glory disappeared in an instant. The hit forced my body into a complete flip. Another hit came from the strong safety running at full speed.

Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:13-17).

Lying on the ground and realizing with relief that I was still in one piece, I thanked God for His protection. I struggled to my feet and the crowd cheered. The refs signaled and then penalized the defense. We received an automatic first down, and I went on to score a touchdown on the next drive.

If not for God's protection and my equipment, I might have ended up with serious injuries that could have taken me out of the game I love.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul tells us to put on the full armor of God to avoid the schemes of the devil, who desires to take us out of the game of life.

Truth and the breastplate of righteousness—being right with God—strengthen us in all our endeavors. We need the shoes of preparation on any of life's fields, along with the shield of faith—like football pads—to protect against the enemy's attacks. The helmet of salvation, like a football helmet, also keeps us safe.

Praying each day and putting on the full armor of God will help us gain an automatic first down—a deeper connection in God's zone—and a sure win on any playing field.

Balanced Line

A balanced line consists of five linemen. The center is positioned in the middle with a guard and tackle on either side. A tight end can be added to either side, making that side of the line the strong side.

I was two years old when I saved my sister's life. (I'm not sure if I actually remember the incident or just the story that was told to me.) Baby Betsy, seated in her rolling activity walker, was headed straight for the open basement door. I rushed toward her, grabbed the back of the walker, and screamed for my mom. I'd reached her just as the walker, balanced on the edge of the top step, threatened to crash down to a cement floor.

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13).

A balanced line is just as important in life as it is in football. You need to keep a balanced life, but sometimes you need added strength—someone who cares—much like adding a tight end to make your strong side.

Grabbing hold of Betsy's walker, and using my toddler strength to hold her in balance, kept her from crashing down the stairs. But since then, my sister has often been the strong side for me, keeping me in balance. As kids, whenever the story was told about my saving her, she would claim she saved me by teaching me how to pretend.

Most of our growing-up years were spent in the boonies, and being only 18 months apart, we were best friends. Betsy and I would play for hours with her Barbies and my G.I. Joe. (I refused to play with Ken, but Joe may have served Barbie tea beside her pink pool a time or two.)

"Pretend this, Jake," she would say. Always the pragmatic, serious big brother, I needed Betsy's sassy-but-easygoing personality to balance

me. As teenagers and beyond, her feminine perspective helped me in my relationships, and my masculine viewpoint helped her (when she would listen to me).

You probably won't be called to actually lay down your life for someone, but pulling each other out of a bad spot by being the strong end, or just stepping up to serve another, makes for a balanced life. And being balanced keeps us steady on the path toward our goals.

Ball Carrier

Any player who has possession of the ball. While usually a running back, wide receiver, or quarterback, this term can include any player who happens to end up with the football in his hands.

There is no cure.” The doctor set down his pen and folded his hands. It took a moment for his words to register, for me to understand that no pill or diet could fix me. My throat tightened. I rested my head in my hands. Fourteen years old and stuck with type 1 diabetes. Life as I knew it was over.

But that moment of hopelessness didn't last long. Being a stubborn teenager worked in my favor. I said a prayer, asking God for help. By the time I got into the car, I had decided I was not going to let diabetes rule me. I couldn't get rid of the disease, but with God's help I could control it and still be a ball carrier—in football and with this disease.

Counting carbs, constantly checking my blood sugar, and injecting insulin proved to be a hard adjustment but a necessary part of my new normal. I chose to take responsibility for my health and not look back. Emotions that didn't gain me positive yards became obstacles to my goal.

Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Plowing through life, you're bound to run into obstructions. Some of life's trials result from mistakes and missteps, and some from poor choices. I know about that too, because I've made my share of blunders and had to face the consequences.

Other times, the unexpected lands in your hands like a wayward ball and the “trouble” coming at you is like a 250-pound linebacker blitzing straight off the edge.

As the ball carrier of whatever passes life throws your way—good or bad, no matter the origin—don't give up. Turn to God, keep your hand to the plow, and work hard. Jesus promises to carry us through anything and even turn trouble into good. His love will always lift us back onto our feet, but we have to do our part—carry the ball, look forward, and plow through life toward the goal line.

Blindsided

A player is blindsided when he takes an unexpected hit that surprises him.

On the Houston Texans' roster, after playing for nine weeks and getting reps in each game, I breathed easier, feeling a sense of job security in the NFL. Then I got the flu. I missed one midweek practice to go to the hospital. That cost me my spot on the roster. A healthier tight end on the practice squad was activated, and I was released to clear waivers. (Clear waivers means other teams have the option to sign a cut player to their 53-man roster. If no one takes the player, other teams can offer a spot on their practice squad.)

So, while the rest of my teammates flew to Indianapolis to play the Colts, I sat in my apartment, blindsided and uncertain about my future in the NFL.

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? (Psalm 56:3-4).

Just as I could not control getting the flu, I couldn't do anything to change my current situation after being cut from the regular season roster. I chose to trust God and give the situation to Him. Then I thanked God, sank onto my couch, and relaxed with the latest Madden Football video game, playing the Colts versus Texans. Able to choose myself as the player, I threw the ball to my virtual self every play, catching 20 balls for nearly 400 yards, and getting 6 touchdowns.

A career game!

Singlehanded, I won the game for the Texans. I leaped to my feet and yelled, "Merica!" out my patio door. Minutes after that the phone rang. An offer came from the Kansas City Chiefs.

The Bible tells us to trust in God and not be afraid. Fear can paralyze us when we land in unexpected circumstances. If this happens to you, take a step back and look at the situation. Is there anything you can do to change it? If not, trust in God and then let go. Relax with a video game, go for a walk, or maybe yell out an empowering phrase. But ultimately, trust that an answer will come. It may not happen as quickly as it did for me, but God answers prayers. And with God, there's nothing to fear.