

THE DAY I GOT MY "WHATEVER" BACK

Have you ever had a teenager (or an adult acting like one) say to you with a sort of sneer, "Whatever!?" In case you didn't already know, this is not really an expression of respect. It's right up there with, "Yeah, well..." or "And I'm supposed to care?" I banned the word from use in our home when my kids were of the "Whatever" age. But that's not the kind of "whatever" that I lost and then later recovered. There's another "whatever" of which I speak.

It's not exactly a particular "day" to which I refer when I got this "whatever" back. It was more of a gradual retrieval than an all-at-once maneuver. In fact I lost it my "whatever" a lot quicker than I found it again. I lost it when grief and pain came suddenly. Until then my life was, by comparison to the billions of people in the world who live on less than \$2 a day, fairly easy. I was a healthy baby-boomer, had a beautiful wife for over three decades, two amazing adult children, a respected position as a pastor in a California beach town, and a nice house in an upscale community. It could be said that I was cruisin'! And then within a three-month period I lost all of it (except my kids, thank God!). It was during that time that I also lost my "whatever."

I didn't know that had I lost it until I was having a conversation with the Lord, when I must've switched into auto-pilot for a moment, and I began to recite what I'd been saying to the Lord for over 35 years: "I'll do whatever you want me to." But the sentence didn't come out. I stopped it from escaping, and my perfunctory prayer got truncated. I said, "I'll do what..." and then, as I recall, I almost put my hand over my mouth like a dam in front of a river. I realized that I wasn't willing to make this grandiose promise anymore. I remember saying something like:

"Wait. That's not true. I'm not going to say that. I used to say I'd do whatever – I've said it hundreds, maybe thousands of times over the years, and I meant it every time (as far as I can recall) – but not today. I used to pray the "Whatever Prayer" to you, but it turns out that you didn't have my back. I've always been willing to do whatever you wanted me to, but it seems to me that you didn't make the same commitment to me. It appears that while I was willing to do whatever it took to do the things that I thought were important to you, you weren't willing to do for me whatever it took to keep me from losing the things that were important to me. For now, I'm just letting you know that I'm not willing to do "whatever" anymore. At least for now, "whatever" is not part of my prayer vocabulary, and from now on I'm going to be more careful about the promises I make to you."

Like I said, my "whatever" eventually returned, but it did so more incrementally than it left. I can't really point to a particular day in which I found it again, sitting like a newspaper on my doorstep. It didn't return in a "day," but it took an accumulation of many days, and a process for me to recapture it. (Are you as tired of that word, "process" as I am?) They say, "Time heals all wounds," but I don't believe it. I know a lot of people whose wounds have gotten *more infected* over time. They didn't heal, but rather got worse as time elapsed. *Time* doesn't heal, *God* does; and he often (not always) takes time to do his healing. But I wonder if the time that it takes is sometimes a mercy; otherwise we might die of the trauma of some of his therapeutic methods. His methods can be painful (sort of like a cross!). There are times when I've given God access to my wounds, willing to let him use his stiff wire brush to clean them out! Sometimes he *hurts* me first (which is different from *harming* me), and through the hurt he *heals* me.

I think the core issue of my lost “whatever” was really a loss of trust. I simply didn’t trust God like I had before. He’d let me down (at least from my vantage point at the time) and I wasn’t willing to expose myself unreservedly to him again. “*Whatever you want, Lord*” was not going to proceed out of my mouth again until at least we got some things straightened out between us.

Over time, many thanks to the God who is willing to suffer long with me, I noticed that my “whatever” began to make a comeback. My losses weren’t exactly reversed, I was starting to learn to live joyfully in spite of them, and my “truster” was beginning to heal. I could tell I was rehabbing when I heard myself pray the “Whatever Prayer” once in a while without balking or stuttering. In the beginning each prayer had a shelf life and a limited scope. They went something like, “Lord, I’ll do whatever you want me to at this event...” – or – “I’ll say whatever you want me to in that conversation with that particular person...” I was cautiously inserting my toe in the water before jumping in. I wasn’t ready to run up any banners or sign any long-term contracts; but I was making headway back to more of an all-encompassing recovery of the “whatever mentality.” Though I can’t recall the day or the method by which I progressed from one stage to another toward a healthier attitude of trust, it dawned on me one day that I was nearing the kind of abandoned confidence in God to which I had been accustomed in the past. Eventually the shelf life increased and the scope of my “Whatever” broadened, until one day I realized I had gotten it back entirely, possibly with an even greater conviction than before.

I’M SUPPOSED TO DO WHATEVER...

These passages seem pretty clear about God’s “*whatever*” approach...

Jeremiah 1:7 But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.”

“Whatever” he commands is what he expects, and to my excuses for anything less he offers nothing but irresistible rebuttals. “*I’m too young, too old, too weak, too...*” He doesn’t seem to care. Whatever!

Philippians 1:27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.

Paul wrote this was from a jail cell in Rome. He thought he might be released someday, but he couldn’t be sure. I like that he had the same ambiguity that I live with. He didn’t know what was going to happen and preferred to go to heaven sooner rather than later, but guessed he’d be released this time. Be that as it may, he wanted the Philippians to live like Christians. “*Whatever happens*” do the right thing, regardless of the circumstances – live like Christians!

Philippians 4:11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

“Contentment” – what a concept! How do we achieve it? When it’s selective about its circumstances is it fitting to call it “Christian Contentment”? Is it really the kind of contentment to which God challenges us when we possess it only when things are peachy? If we should be content in “*whatever the circumstances,*” and this contentment can be “*learned,*” then how in the world can we learn this except by going through all kinds of circumstances – good and bad? Any NFL quarterback will tell that he learned how to take a hit, not by watching film in the locker room, but by getting hit!

Titus 3:1 Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good...

How do I get “ready” for “whatever is good” since the word itself implies that it might be something other than what I planned or have assessed as “good”? Because I don’t know the future, the “whatever” might not be something I could possibly anticipate. I’ve missed lots and lots of divine appointments (opportunities concocted by God to glorify himself) by not being ready for them. I guess the best way is to try to just be ready at any moment for “whatever” he presents to me at the time. And by the way, if my life is already so full and so scripted by my own busyness, I’m less likely to be ready for whatever good thing that he might send my way at whatever time.

WHATEVER I DO...

OK, so I’m supposed to do **whatever** God prescribes. But more than that, the following passages say to me that **whatever** I’m doing I should be doing it with certain priorities in mind. Check these out...

Proverbs 16:3 Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.

So, while I’m trying to do whatever God wants me to do, I should – in the doing – offer it back to him as something he can get behind. I read somewhere that this word, “Commit” has a root meaning of “to roll onto...” In other words, I’m to roll all that I do over onto the Lord, put it all onto his capable shoulders, and let him carry it. When I do this I’m not nearly as stressed about *whatever*...

Ecclesiastes 9:10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.

Like Forrest Gump’s mother always said, “Life is like a box of chocolates...” and sometimes you just get whatever you get. You reach into the box and come up with one thing or another, and make the best of it by doing your best with it!

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

As a “Whatever Person” I try to engage only in activities that may facilitate his deserved glory being reflected back to him. When I’m involved in something (in thought, attitude or deed) that would most likely detract or distract from his glory, I often sense the Spirit’s conviction and am encouraged to change my course to one more apt to glorify him.

Colossians 3:17 Whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.

As an ambassador of Jesus, *whatever* I say or do must be in alignment with the personality of the One Whom I represent and emerge from a grateful heart.

Colossians 3:23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.

In their context, these are words for workers. As an employee I must keep in mind that the Big Boss is always watching and anticipating that I will do my best to reflect his ways in all my work. I’m always “punched in,” as they say. I can’t afford to compartmentalize my life into times when I’m working for God and when I’m “off the clock.”

James 2:12 So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free.

There's an assessment coming. We'll all be reviewed for *whatever* we've said and done here. And while this prospect can be frightening, there's a potentially liberating component to it. Knowing that God will evaluate my life inspires me to constantly reach to him for the power to pass the ultimate test. In the short run, as well as in the long, "whatever" I do – the way I act and speak and even think – matters.

WHATEVER HE DOES

So, what about *him*? Does *God* have the right to his own "whatevers" with us? Can he do *whatever* he wants whenever he wants to? If I decide to follow him *wherever* he goes, to do *whatever* he says, *whenever* he wants; what does this mean about how I think about his character? Is he always right or good or wise, or is he somehow otherwise? If my "truster" is working properly and my eye is fixed on him, what do I see? What kind of God is he and what does he have the right to do with those who trust him?

Judges 10:14 The Israelites said to the LORD, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now."

My experience is that one of God's favorite ways of steering us back to the land of "whatever" is to wait until we need rescuing. Especially then are we more apt to concede that what he thinks is best, is probably *actually best*! I love the perspective here – "*Whatever you think is best is fine, but just so you know, Lord, we're really hoping for immediate mercy!*"

Jeremiah 26:14 As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right.

Whatever God thinks is right and good must be right and good – right? I don't belong to myself, so why would I think I had the exclusive right to decide what's right for me? It might sound pretty naïve, but being owned by Another is, to me, a great relief. That I'm not the one in charge takes the pressure off me. It really does simplify life for me when I choose to do whatever the Lord wants. It cuts down on the overwhelming number of choices. I'm not saying that I have no responsibility to think for myself, but, when making decisions, I try to remember to let him screen my opinions before acting on them.

2 Samuel 15:25-26 "I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him."

I guess King David had lived long enough to come to the conclusion that God, being the standard of whatever is *good*, gets to decide not only what is *good*, but how he's going to do the *good* and when. David was "ready" for whatever God sent his way. I'm trying to be ready too.

GPS – "The God Positioning System"

God's system of directing us doesn't work very much like Google Maps or the GPS device in your car or smart phone. (My friend calls hers "Garmin" after the brand name on the front, so we'll use that from now on as we talk about the satellite-operated system. And since hers has a woman's voice, we'll refer to Garmin as a *she*. OK?)

You tell Garmin where you want to go and she tells you how to get there in the most direct way possible. But with the *God Positioning System* – as long as you haven't lost your "whatever" – rather than try to program him to get you where *you* want to go and how *you* want to get there; I advise you to begin with the premise that you're not the one in charge. You're the led and he's the Leader.

You can tell Garmin where you want to go, but for "*Whatever Christians*" God reserves the right to demand his own preferred destinations for each of us. He's not the least bit programmable, and doesn't operate like a satellite-driven device. With him in charge, you'll do best to start your trip with a couple of questions: "*Where do you want me today, Lord? What can I do which could bring you some glory? Whatever you want, Lord – I'm in!*"

I think of his guidance in terms of *a Place, a Path, and a Pace*. He chooses the place (the destination), the path (our route to the destination, which is usually more circuitous than we'd like), and the pace of the journey (the rate at which we should travel on the path toward the place).

As far as the *place* is concerned, I'm not necessarily referring to a geographical location (although he does sometimes lead us to specific locales). I'm speaking more of a goal or purpose of some sort that he wants us to aim at. Maybe it's a quality of character that he wants us to work on, a career path to begin, a place of service to pursue, or a task to set out to accomplish. It could be something small like making a decision between classes to take in college or something big like choosing a marriage partner. Either way, the *God Positioning System* often prompts us to head a certain direction, and if we're true "Whatever Followers" of Jesus – we go!

He seems to care as much about the *path* and the *pace* as he does the *place* he wants us to go – if not more. What he's doing *in and around us* while on the way to *the place* are important to him. I've seen over and over that when I "arrive" at *the place* to which he led me that it's not as memorable as the trip itself. He's just as interested in the race as he is in the finish line. We've all heard the sayings about *enjoying the journey... Stop and smell the flowers* and so on...

Though Garmin will get you there in the least amount of time, God sometimes takes the long way. He has his reasons (which our reason can't usually fathom), but if he was in a hurry, he probably wouldn't have told us over and over to "wait" for him!

Garmin tells us how long our journey will be and the best route to take for the trip. But *God's* system doesn't usually provide an ETA or any sort of exact route that would get us there with the least amount of effort and in the least amount time. He doesn't seem to be as interested to lay it all out for us as we are in having it so.

There are times when I've anticipated a route and ETA, but found the journey much more circuitous than I'd envisioned. The path he led me to travel actually turned out to be much less direct and more arduous than I had imagined.

Speaking of "circuitous," in the 23rd Psalm where David wrote, "*he leads me in paths of righteousness*" it's sometimes translated "*circles of righteousness*." In a trip to Israel I noticed that one could see circular paths winding up to the tops of many of the hills and mountains. Our guide told us that these are the paths that shepherds have for centuries led their sheep up the steep prominences of the land. Then we began to discuss how our Good Shepherd similarly avoids wearying us by driving us directly up to the top, but oftentimes more gently leads us on a more manageable, circuitous – which seems circular – route to our (his) destination. I guess he'd rather not rush us to the terminus, but takes his

time to entice us to his purposes. I'll try to remember this next time I feel like I'm going in "circles"!

A lot of times his way seems to be more of a moment-by-moment sort of thing. My first car was a VW bug that had a 6-volt battery. In order to get the headlights to glow at full strength the engine had to be running at full R.P.M.s! I had to rev the engine in order to get the beam to reach more than about 10 feet in front of the car (even on high beams) and the horn to blow at more than a muffled squeak! God has most often led me in this way – sort of inch-by-inch! His non-Garmin approach makes me slow down in order to enjoy the scenery and avoid collisions.

With Garmin I plug in my intended destination, but with the *God Positioning System* my part is to just plug in the "Whatever," try to live responsibly, and see how the day (week, month, year, decade) unfolds. Other times he prescribes the ultimate destination and then sort of leaves the route to me. He gives me clues about what sort of choices that I might make that'll make the trip the most achievable and enjoyable, but he trusts me to live responsibly and make wise (biblically informed) choices along the way.

What happens then if after I've done all I know to do to pray and obey; and still the journey is strenuous and the destination unpleasant? Though my default reflex is to second-guess the accuracy of my original perception of his guidance (maybe I read the screen wrong). Sometimes I even question his wisdom or good intentions for me (maybe he's wrong or doesn't care about me after all...). At the end of the day I have to remember that he never guaranteed that I would like where or how he leads me. He didn't promise "easy." In fact, he warned us that it wouldn't be, but urged us to go nevertheless – and endure. "*Whatever, Lord!*"

At his beck and call...

If you know me, you're aware that I like acrostics and acronyms (I've never quite understood the difference between the two). For example, I've used **ABC** for years to summarize how a person might come to a saving relationship with Jesus (**A**dmit, **B**elieve, **C**ommit). But I have devised another **ABC** for the one who has already come to believe in Jesus. It's sort of a second story **ABC** for someone who wants to know how to proceed in his or her friendship with God and be a "Whatever Christian" – **A**t his **B**eck and **C**all.

Since I got my "whatever" back – I'm **at his beck and call**. I'll try to do what he calls me to do, and it shouldn't take more than his "*beck*" to get my attention. ("*Beck*" is an old English word, the shortened form of *beckon*, which means a subtle gesture or mute signal like a nod or a slight motion of the hand.) I hope to live in such a way that he needs but to nod or look my way to get my attention and direct me to do whatever he has in mind.