

“Prayer for the Journey: Faith Anchors”

Hebrews 6:19¹

It was a very pleasant afternoon to be arriving in Jamaica. The USS CONE (DD-866) was pulling into Montego Bay for some R & R between training at Guantanamo Bay and gunnery practice at the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, and I was looking forward to some time away from the sweltering engineering spaces.

For reasons I no longer remember, we were required to “anchor out” rather than tying up at one of the piers. I wasn’t on watch, so I went up to the bridge to watch the anchoring procedure, which we didn’t do very often.

The Officer of the Deck had a difficult time setting the anchor. While it’s actually the weight of the anchor chain that does most of the work in holding a vessel at anchor—seven times as much chain is let out as the depth of the water—the anchor itself has to dig into the sand in order to fix the position of the chain. We did finally come to anchor, and we had some fine adventures after that. We’re going to circle around this “anchor” idea this morning rather as a ship swings around its anchor.

Several years ago I went to a small pastors’ retreat led by Dr. Mahan Siler. Mahan began the retreat with a question I’ve not been able to escape since, and with which we’re beginning each of our Prayer Triplet sessions. The question is this: “**What is clearer to you now** than when we were last together?”

As is nearly always the case, both the title and the focus for this sermon were fixed many weeks ago; but as is also frequently the case, God guided that assignment based at least in part on what this week would hold for our family. And there *are* some things that are clearer now.

In this week, we’ve learned that our daughter, Anna, probably suffers from Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, or EDS, a degenerative genetic disorder that affects the body’s connective tissue. While a definitive diagnosis has yet to be made, the tentative diagnosis goes a long way toward “connecting the dots” of the many physical difficulties with which Anna has struggled for a number of years.

Happily, there is a center for the treatment of genetic disorders of connective tissue at Johns Hopkins downtown, and we ask for your prayer that she will be able to be seen there soon. And there is another reason why we ask for your prayer. There are apparently six types of EDS, five of which are fairly benign, all things considered; but the sixth type nearly always ends with sudden and early death. Please pray with us that this will not prove to be Anna’s situation.

As our family has moved through this week, while it is true that we have no firm diagnosis against which to measure, we have each tried to begin to come to terms with this worst-case possibility. Late on Friday night, Anna wrote these words as she began her blog: “This will be a short (probably, anyway) series of my thoughts as I find myself faced with new opportunities to teach my children to grow in Grace. Every once in a while I run into a fork in the road, where I must choose how I will live, and how I want my children to see me live.” EDS forms the backdrop for that statement.

I may put Anna’s blog in my *Laptop* this week, so I’m not going to go over it this morning. Anna went on to mention several parental statements that have resonated in her spirit over the years, most of which have to do with life lessons great and small. The first thing she mentioned

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on February 24, 2013.

was my frequent warning when she was learning to drive that “the roadways are the most slippery when it first starts to rain.”

While there are reasons for that situation on asphalt and concrete roadways, it has been helpful for me to be reminded of that statement as my heart has navigated these days. Life has indeed begun to rain on us this week, and it was a good reminder that we need to be careful how we set our course as the rain begins.

John Claypool was a well-known pastor whose young daughter became desperately ill as a child, and eventually died. In his best-selling account of that journey,² John wrote that rather than trying to impress his congregation with high-sounding theological reflections, he was going to try to share what was helping and sustaining *him*. That’s my goal this morning, too.

So what holds *you* together when life begins to fall apart? What faith anchors work for you when soul storms come? Do you **really believe** that what you believe is **really true**?

While I’m going to pray unashamedly that Anna’s illness has a hopeful and benign outcome, the Bible does not tell us that it is God’s purpose that Christians be spared “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”³ that are often part of human life. While for those who are friends of Jesus, every illness is indeed healed, it simply is not God’s purpose that every physical illness be healed in this life. Many times our healing comes through resurrection. Examples of this are many in the Bible itself and they are without number in the two millennia of Christian history since.

God receives glory far more often, not from miraculous healing, but from the way in which we Christians die. Do you remember the story the daughter of missionaries to the Congo told Pastor Leith Anderson? It went like this:

“As a little girl, I participated in a daylong rally to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the coming of missionaries to the Congo. At the close of a long day of speeches and music, an old, old man stood before the crowd and insisted on speaking. He said, ‘I will die soon, and there is something very important that I alone know, and I don’t want to take it to my grave.’

“‘Long ago, when the missionaries arrived,’ he said, ‘my people thought them strange and their message dubious. The tribal leaders decided to test the missionaries by slowly poisoning them to death. Over a period of months and years, missionaries and their children died one by one. **It was as we watched how they died that we decided we wanted to live as Christians.**’⁴

That story has been repeated times without number, so much so that we sometimes say that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Physical illness is not martyrdom, and I don’t mean to make that comparison; but God receives glory in our lives far more often through giving us the strength to face what life brings than in removing what life brings.

I’m sure you remember that Paul himself suffered terrible physical pain. “*Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me,*” he wrote. “*But [God] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, **for my power is made perfect in weakness***” (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).⁵

Have you ever found yourself carried against your will into circumstances from which you could not escape? Has your life ever been assaulted by accident, disease, or other trauma?

² John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living and Growing through Grief*, reprinted 2004.

³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3/1.

⁴ Leith Anderson, “Mystery Martyrs,” in *Men of Integrity* (January/February 2004).

⁵ See also 2 Timothy 4:20. Paul had on occasion the ability to heal the sick and to even raise the dead . . . but he did not heal Trophimus.

Has your life ever had chapters filled with pain, grief, and despair? The truth of the matter is that every one of us is coming out of such a time, we're in such a time now, or we're heading into one, whether we know it or not. This morning I want to suggest four soul anchors that may help you in that storm even as they are helping me

First, **BE HONEST WITH GOD** about how you feel about your situation. God already knows about it; God can deal with how you feel; and you'll be in better shape after the conversation.

Do you remember what Naomi said after her husband and both of her sons died? *"Don't call me Naomi" [which means "pleasant"], she told them. "Call me Mara [which means "bitter"], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter"* (Ruth 1:20).

When Job's life was catapulted into disaster, disease, and grief, he said, *"My face is red with weeping, dark shadows ring my eyes . . . my spirit is broken, my days are cut short, the grave awaits me"* (Job 16:16, 17:1). David wrote, *"I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. . . . I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God"* (Psalm 6:6, 69:3). And Jesus Himself cried out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mark 15:34).

It's okay to be honest with God, and we *need* to be. That's our essential starting point; but the second thing we need to remember to do is to **TRUST THAT GOD IS AT WORK**. On July 24, 2002, coal miners at the Quecreek Mine in Somerset County, Pennsylvania accidentally dug into an abandoned and poorly documented mine, flooding their own mine with about fifty million gallons of water. Nine men were trapped in an air pocket 240 feet down. Rescue workers began to drill a shaft down through nearly twenty stories of rock, but despair grew when the bit broke only a third of the way down.

It took eighteen hours to replace the bit, but eventually all nine men were rescued. After the fact, it became apparent that the eighteen-hour delay actually saved the men's lives, because during all that time, water was being pumped out of the mine. Had the bit broken through into the air chamber prior to the water level being lowered, the men would have drowned.⁶ Things are not always what they appear to be. God was at work.

Pastor Alan Redpath put it well when he wrote, "There is nothing—no circumstance, no trouble, no testing—that can ever touch me until, first of all, it has gone past God and past Christ, right through to me. If it has come that far, it has come with a purpose, which I may not understand at the moment; but if I refuse to become panicky, if I lift up my eyes to Him and accept it as being allowed by the throne of God for some purpose of blessing, I can rest in the joy of Who my Lord is."⁷ Even through his own suffering, Paul told us to *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). God is at work.

First, be honest. Second, trust God. Third, **PUT IT ALL ON THE TABLE**. Do you remember what Ruth said to Naomi? *But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried"* (Ruth 1:16-17a).

When Ruth made that famous commitment to Naomi, she had no idea what she was getting into. There was no guarantee that things would turn out as they did. It looked as though Ruth was giving up the possibility of having a family of her own in order to care for her mother-

⁶ *New York Times*, July 28, 2002; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quecreek_Mine_Rescue

⁷ www.preachingtoday.com

in-law. **She was making a complete and unconditional commitment to an unseen and uncertain future.** We have to do that, too.

There is a prayer that has helped me stay steady in many such moments. The prayer was written by Thomas Merton, a well-known Catholic priest, and it's sometimes called "The Prayer of Desolation." Would you read it with me?

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
 I do not see the road ahead of me.
 I cannot know for certain where it will end.
 Nor do I really know myself,
 And the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean
 That I am actually doing so.
 But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
 And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
 I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
 And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road
 Though I may know nothing about it.
 Therefore will I trust you always
 Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
 I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
 And you will never leave me to face my perils alone.⁸

When times get tough, Be honest. Trust God. Put it all on the table. And finally, **BE READY AHEAD OF TIME.** The best preparation for those times when life falls apart is made in the quiet moments that come before the time of trouble.

Morris Ashcraft was a naval aviator during World War II. He wrote that in those days, before radar was very sophisticated or widely available, fighter aircraft flew in formations of twelve planes. The planes flew with their wingtips overlapping, so that in those times when the formation entered a cloud bank, pilots would be quickly able to tell that they were drifting toward each other.

It was pretty unnerving to be unable to see the sixteen-foot propellers that sliced the opaque clouds only a few feet away, but "the secret," he wrote, "was to have the airplane on course and steady before entering the clouds. Then, when visibility was lost, we kept everything just like it was. No climbing, turning, or diving. No changes! Straight ahead! The undisciplined pilot was tempted to bolt, but that would have led to certain disaster. The safest course was to go right on doing what you had been doing.

"Many times on my journey with God I have not been able to see the way clearly" he wrote later. "I was related to others, and we were on the way. We had set our course on the basis of convincing evidence when the skies were clear, but then the troubles came. Remembering the lesson of flying in formation, I tried to continue on course with those other lives and futures that were so closely related to my own. It takes more concentration and discipline and faith to go straight on in times of doubt, but it is a lot more dangerous to change course.

"In the light of what we know about God and the journey, then, let's be on our way. We know there will be doubts and clouds ahead; other pilgrims have told us so. Let's set our course together and be sure to stay in the right relationship to one another. Then, when clouds obscure the way, let's go right on. We'll all come through together. **I'll see you on the other side!**"⁹

⁸ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1976), p. 83.

⁹ Morris Ashcraft, *The Will of God* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980), pp. 142-144.

My friend, if you're feeling like Naomi this morning, if you feel as though your life is ruined and over, I have good news for you. As Vance Havner put it, "God uses broken things: broken soil to produce a crop; broken clouds to give rain; broken grain to give bread; broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume. It is Peter, weeping bitterly, who returns to greater power than ever."¹⁰ There's a reason for the fragility of our lives. As Paul reminded us, "*We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us*" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

When life's storms come and fear threatens to overwhelm our faith, we lash ourselves to the anchors of God's faithfulness and we press on under God's grace and with God's strength toward our heavenly and eternal Home. "***We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure***" (Hebrews 6:19).

In that statement, the writer of Hebrews was talking about Jesus, Who told us that He Himself is our Way, our Truth, and our Life (John 14:6). If Jesus is our Way, we can never be lost. If Jesus is our Truth, we can never be deceived. And if Jesus is our Life, then not even death is able to conquer us!

So there it is. Be honest. Trust God. Put it all on the table. Be ready ahead of time. The time is coming when God will wipe every tear from our eyes, when there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain, and that time is nearer now than when we first believed (Revelation 21:4; Romans 13:11).

¹⁰ Vance Havner, *Leadership*, vol. 4, no. 1.