

Hope as an Anchor of Our Souls

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I would like to share one personal observation: I have been associated with seven different universities over the course of my career. In my experience, there is nothing even remotely similar at any of those other institutions to what we are doing here today. It is remarkable what we do here each Tuesday morning. We share our testimonies and we share our experiences, and I am grateful for what I have learned from all of you as I have attended devotionals over the last twenty-two years.

What I add today to that library of devotional wisdom is not new. I am acutely aware that I am merely revisiting truths that have been taught by many others with different words, by different means, and through different personal experiences.

The seed for my thoughts today was planted more than a year ago as a successful family reunion came to an end. Even though our children are all grown, as their parents we feel some misplaced obligation to be on the last flight out and to see them all off safely. This usually gives my wife and me some extra time to visit more adult attractions while waiting for a later flight. Our preference seems to be for art museums.

On this occasion we chose a museum not too far from the airport, in which one of the

traveling exhibits happened to be of sixteenth-century engravings. My general lack of enthusiasm or appreciation, probably brought on by equal measures of ignorance and fatigue, was tempered by the observation of a theme throughout many of the engravings. Series after series of engravings depicted the seven virtues and the seven deadly sins. Almost all contained precisely the same compositional elements derived from scripture.

And here is the seed that was planted: a representation of hope in many of the engravings. There were commonalities in all of these portrayals of hope: There was always a young woman looking longingly toward heaven, perhaps envisioning a brighter future in this life or in the next. There was always the symbolism of the anchor, which is referred to in scripture in numerous places, but none so directly as in Hebrews 6:19: “Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast.”

I have always been curious about hope and how we obtain it. It is something we all desire. In scripture it is always sandwiched between faith and charity. What is this hope, how does it act as an anchor of our souls, and how do we

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obtain this hope that we all seem to so desire? I will endeavor to address, if not answer, some of those questions today.

I wish to dismiss rather quickly two worldly notions regarding both hope and anchors. Hope in the scriptural sense is not wishing. We use the word *hope* far too often in that shallow context and thereby confuse ourselves into believing that hope is a transitory state that can be achieved in times of duress through mere desire or anxious longing. This is not the hope that is “both sure and steadfast.”

Just as hope is not the same as wishing, neither are anchors dead weight meant to slow us down or impede our progress. The proper use of an anchor is paramount to safety on the water. Having hoisted a few anchors myself, I can fully appreciate that one of the young ladies in an engraving depicting hope, although still gazing into heaven—perhaps waiting for that elusive answer to that last final exam question—had chosen to use the anchor for support rather than to hold it forever.

A Story About Anchors

In October 2000 my wife and I and two of our three children were living in Christchurch, New Zealand. BYU had provided us with a generous development leave, and we had made our home in a quaint bungalow—*quaint* meaning old, cold, drafty, and damp—adjacent to the University of Canterbury, where I was working with a colleague who was to become a good friend.

We had been there for a little more than three months when one of New Zealand’s fabled storms came roaring out of the northeast. It smashed into our little neighborhood, flooding the local schools and uprooting trees and sidewalks. We had been so charmed by the garden-like nature of Christchurch that we were distraught over the wreckage around our home. As an aside, those of you who are familiar with Christchurch know that in recent years the city has suffered several major earthquakes, whose

aftermath has unfortunately eclipsed our experienced disaster by orders of magnitude.

During our October storm, however, the most devastating effects were wrought on Lyttelton Harbour, just to the southeast of Christchurch. The marina at Lyttelton was almost completely destroyed, with millions of dollars in damage done to boats and infrastructure.

As we followed the news reports and developments, I was most intrigued by the stories of the vessels that had survived the storm and how their owners had effected that survival. As the storm developed, these experienced men and women were intently watching the barometer, and when it began to drop precipitously, they rushed to their boats and headed out to sea. This was entirely counterintuitive to someone of my limited experience. I would have thought that my boat would be safest in a picturesque harbor, tucked in a deepwater inlet in the hollow of an ancient volcano behind a sizable rock jetty. But not so.

The boats that had left the harbor were among the few vessels that successfully weathered the storm. They went to sea and dropped an anchor—not just any anchor but a storm, or sea, anchor. These anchors are clearly not a new invention, although the materials and technology of them have improved over time. Storm anchors are basically underwater kites or parachutes.

There are multiple purposes for this type of anchor. Even in a substantial storm, the anchor prevents the vessel from being significantly moved from its initial position. A boat that gets turned sideways in high seas is apt to capsize and founder. This anchor allows the vessel to maintain stable orientation relative to prevailing winds and predominant waves. The differential movement between the tethered vessel and the underlying waves yields a more responsive rudder, allowing the ship to navigate changes in the oncoming waves. Finally, the anchor prevents a vessel caught on a large wave from sliding headlong down and crashing into the next wave.

I am sure it is apparent where my metaphor is taking us. Real hope, based on eternal principles and spiritual experiences, is an anchor to our souls, intended to have and capable of having precisely the same effects as a sea anchor. In the storms that will descend on our seemingly safe harbor of home, family, church, and career, real hope grants us stability, affirms our orientation, and allows us to steer through troubled waters with measured progress.

So where can I procure one of these anchors against the storms of life? I would really like to give them as Christmas presents to my children and grandchildren. Sadly, they cannot be purchased in the way that the world purchases goods and services. Instead I will share my favorite scripture with my children and grandchildren and with all of you.

Paul's Spiritual Learning Cycle

In Romans 5:3–4, Paul described the process by which we gain that hope that is real and eternal:

And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;

And patience, experience; and experience, hope.

The first thing we notice is that this is just a normal learning cycle. I have seen this cycle in my children, in myself, and in most of my students here at BYU. The greatest learning opportunities come in the chaos and confusion of a failed experiment, in a clash of ideas, and in moments of doubt. They come in recognizing that we do not know all things, that our preconceived notions are perhaps incorrect, and that the acquisition of knowledge is not simply a matter of memorizing facts and figures.

In my learning cycles, personally, patience is always the hardest part. Patience is the long, hard slog through data. It is experiencing misguided assumptions and repeated failures. It is the careful attention to nuance and detail. It is a matter of great and continual effort.

And we repeat this cycle over and over and over again, adding to our knowledge, understanding, and confidence. Confidence, by the way, is merely the worldly version of hope.

But Paul was not speaking of worldly or secular knowledge here. He was speaking in a spiritual sense, which is clearly taught in the foundation that he laid for verses 3 and 4, which I have not yet shared with you. In verses 1 and 2 he gave us a clear understanding of the critical element that makes this learning cycle not just a worldly endeavor but a spiritual one:

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:

By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;

And patience, experience; and experience, hope.

Paul, speaking spiritually, affirmed that my hope, real hope—that anchor of my soul, both sure and steadfast—is only to be found when it has its genesis in my faith in the Savior.

Paul also told me something that I did not necessarily want to hear: that the storms in this life are a necessary part of our progression. They represent a progression in our spiritual knowledge and understanding that is just as sure as our acquisition of academic knowledge. The cycle is the same. Why should we think that it would require any less effort? Why do some—or many in our day—propose that if God were real, if Christ had been His Son, and if the Restoration was all that important, then all of this would be self-evident, rendered to our full vision without effort on our part?

That is not how it works—in any aspect of our lives. When confronted with tribulation and trials, we rely upon our faith to keep us in the path facing the right direction. We then call upon the Lord for assistance and succor. We wait patiently for the hand of the Lord to

be revealed. We recognize that promises have been kept and that we have been sustained, even when that sustenance comes in a form or at a time that is remarkably different from that which we have envisioned, requested, or expected.

As we traverse round after round of this spiritual learning cycle, we gain experience in the application of our faith, experience in waiting on the Lord, experience in being obedient, experience in understanding His ways, experience in being blessed, experience in feeling the quiet whisperings of the Spirit, and experience in feeling our Savior's love for us and for all of God's children. With each experience we fashion new anchors of hope that we plant firmly around us.

These spiritual anchors have amazing properties that sea anchors do not. They are additive and they can be numerous, and as long as we remember them, they are permanent. They are deployed one by one over a lifetime. They grant stability, direction, safety, and hope—real hope for the future, not only in this life but in the life to come.

Weathering the Storm

We all know people—individuals or families—who seem immovable in the face of overwhelming tragedy. They have suffered much, usually with a quiet dignity that belies the tumultuous storms of emotion, disappointment, fear, and grief that may rage beneath the surface. They are amazing. They have been through this spiritual learning cycle over and over again. These are people who have forged anchors of hope from the materials of experience, testimony, covenants, and service.

I have often wondered about my personal capacity to weather significant storms. My eternal companion and I have managed to face together most of what life has thrown at us with some degree of grace and persistence—the poverty of being married and in graduate school, the failed job search, the employment that ended prematurely, the family car that

caught fire and burned to the ground, chronic health issues, and a miscarriage. I saw these as difficulties common to all mankind and their solutions as equally common.

My mother-in-law was always of a different mind. She claimed that I was the luckiest person in the world because it seemed that all of our trials evaporated over time. Her perspective caught my attention, and I began to be more cognizant of the process by which resolution arrived. I began to see the hand of the Lord in so many aspects of our development as a couple and as a family. I became acutely aware of Paul's cycle of spiritual learning. Still, in the back of my mind I was waiting for the real storm to arrive and wondered if my anchors were sufficient.

On July 14, 2010, a grandson was added to our family. Jonah was born with Treacher Collins syndrome, caused by a mutation in a single gene that variably affects late-stage craniofacial development. As we learned more about Jonah's condition and the surgeries that would be required to restore some of his underdeveloped capacities, I thought that maybe this was the real storm.

Despite the difficulties he faced, Jonah turned into a brilliant, bright star in our lives. A bone conduction hearing aid allowed him to hear until the time that a surgery could repair his outer ears. He was bright and generous and kind. Jonah relished all those challenges that face every other child his age, mainly those of trying to reach the highest of heights.

When Jonah was fourteen months old he passed unexpectedly from this life—not from any complication from the surgeries he had faced or from his general condition but by a random series of events that are commonly avoided by every toddler almost every day of his or her life. He inhaled a fruit snack that, despite all valiant and professional effort, could not be cleared from his airway.

In the moments after I received the call from my wife that Jonah had died, I sensed the coming storm—the rapid drop in the barometer and

the desperate need to head to sea. It was, however, not my anchors that were to be tested but those of my daughter and her good husband. For my wife and me as parents, this trial was almost harder to bear because we were no longer at the tiller; we were not directly engaged in the struggle.

Jonah's life and our experiences with Jonah were special and sacred, but they were not unique. I fully recognize that there are some in this room today and some who are listening whose diverse histories of tribulation have required them to patiently lean on the Lord, to learn by bittersweet experience, and to have hope in eternal promises. Many of these histories enrich our lives when they are shared. Many remain lovingly and carefully conserved deep in our hearts.

My daughter chose to process her incredible grief by writing. She wrote honestly, very publicly, and prolifically for more than a year about her grief, sorrows, triumphs, and hope. It is no coincidence that we began the devotional today with the hymn "Lord, I Would Follow Thee" (*Hymns*, 2002, no. 220). This has become one of my favorite hymns and the most difficult one for me to sing all the way through because my daughter adopted a line from the second verse as the title of her blog: *In the Quiet Heart Is Hidden*.

I quote, with her permission, a good portion of her first entry because it so poignantly illustrates the elements of Paul's learning cycle: faith, tribulation, patience, experience, and hope. I trust that you will see each of these elements in her narrative.

"A Month Without Jonah"

A month ago I was just like you—going about my life, busy schedules, plans, trying to be a good wife, mother, sister, daughter. I loved being a mom but occasionally felt overwhelmed by the constant job of motherhood. In a moment my life, my relationships, my purpose, my job changed.

The moment I knew Jonah was leaving this earth was the moment I felt my faith and everything I

believed in being ripped away from me. I questioned everything. I have wept every day since he died and wish I could hold him again. As I have cried and prayed and sought answers, I have found some truth and so much comfort. I am not yet at the point where I am grateful for this trial, although I believe that can happen, but I'm grateful for what I have learned.

Prayer Works

I was with Jonah when he died. I watched him choke and struggle and slip away from me. That memory is so vivid that I feel it happening again when I close my eyes at night. I see it, I feel it, and it causes a rush of adrenaline to flood my body. It has been horrifying, and each night I know this memory is coming. But each night I pray to God to comfort me, to give me peace, and the peace comes, like a warm blanket wrapped around me, and I sleep. I prayed that God would help me let go of that memory, and I felt impressed to write it all down, every detail, in my journal. I did that yesterday, and last night I laid in bed without my heart and mind racing, at peace. . . .

Miracles

I believe that life is full of trials, and none of us will escape hardship or death. I also believe that God is a God of miracles. Almost instantly I was able to see small miracles in the experience of losing Jonah, but I found myself saying, "God, that is not the miracle I wanted." The miracle I wanted was for Jonah to be restored to health, to live. On the surface it seems like such a miracle would have done more for our faith than this experience of trying to make sense of his death and grieving.

Over the past month as I have studied the scriptures and have thought about this, I have found many examples of people who saw angels or incredible signs from heaven only to doubt them later. I can relate to that. After Jonah's funeral there was a beautiful rainbow that arched over our home. It instantly felt like a sign to me, almost perfectly biblical. A sign of peace and promise, but I felt myself doubt it as well. Perhaps the rainbow was a coincidence, simply a natural occurrence. I wanted another sign to back that sign up.

I can see how relying on signs and miracles becomes an addictive game. On the other hand, the slow and steady work of praying for answers and comfort is a refiner's fire. As I have worked at grieving and understanding, I have felt a steady strength that I cannot deny. I cannot say it is a coincidence. I can only say that it is the love of my Heavenly Father, that He sends me comfort and helps me get out of bed each day. I don't understand why this happened, but I know that God loves me and is sending me small miracles each day. Sometimes believing is seeing. [Julia Harker Hall, "A Month Without Jonah," *In the Quiet Heart Is Hidden: Simple Reflections on Love, Loss, and Living an Unexpected Life*, 29 October 2011, inthequietheartishidden.blogspot.com/2011_10_01_archive.html]

Hope and the Love of God

I am most grateful that my children have made the necessary efforts to forge anchors of their own—anchors made through years of experience with the Atonement and our Savior's love. My daughter's expressions of desperation and comfort, grief and hope, are universal. They are mirrored perfectly in Paul's exhortation to the Romans. The individual circumstances will change, but we will all experience this spiritual learning cycle over and over again so that we might know the good from evil and experience joy and sorrow, sickness and health—all that we might seek solace in the Atonement offered by our Savior and Redeemer. Our tribulations come in various forms: death, chronic pain, financial hardship, infidelity, divorce, prodigal children, or addiction. The sources are innumerable.

But it is precisely the universality of our experiences that allowed Paul to foresee the consequences of our faithful and spiritual acquisition of hope. These consequences are found in a subsequent verse that I have likewise withheld:

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:

By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;

And patience, experience; and experience, hope:

And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. [Romans 5:1–5]

With our anchors of hope duly deployed, we are prepared to more carefully listen to the promptings of the Spirit. We are prepared through our humble understanding of the Atonement and God's love to offer a reflection of that love to all around us. This is charity—that through our words, actions, and service, the love of God is shed abroad as we proclaim our unashamed testament to the reality of His being, to our Father's love for each of His children, and to His promise of redemption and eternal life. The Holy Ghost then bears witness to the truthfulness of that unashamed testament.

In following this pattern, a new property of spiritual anchors begins to emerge. Each of us begins to share our anchors—mine become yours and yours become mine. And all are strengthened together against the oncoming storm. Inspired prophets, seers, and revelators have urged us to this end from the beginning and still do to this day.

Paul's words were perfectly summarized by Nephi: "Press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men" (2 Nephi 31:20). Paul simply and eloquently instructed us in the process by which faith, hope, and charity are linked inexorably to our eternal progression and well-being.

May we each embrace the storms in our lives, having faith in our experience with that one Anchor, sure and steadfast, even Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer. This is my prayer, in His holy name, amen.