

How to Fight With Faith When Doctors Give You a Death Sentence

In the middle of the night on Aug. 1, 2000, my wife, Anna, woke me up with her gasps for air. With her head down and arms locked against the mattress, her breaths came fast and shallow.

Since she was barely able to walk, I tried to help her while fumbling to maneuver our newborn son into his car seat. Finally, I loaded them into our van and headed for a nearby hospital.

As I drove, I frantically prayed for God to touch Anna. When we reached the hospital, nurses met us with a wheelchair and rushed her back to an exam room.

The day before, doctors had released Anna from a different hospital after a difficult childbirth. The latter months of her pregnancy had dragged; I thought the baby was a month overdue. Doctors insisted on sticking with the original delivery date.

Our son emerged a healthy 10 pounds-plus and so active that he pulled loose the wires nurses had attached to him in his incubator. The obstetrician exclaimed, "We should enroll this boy in kindergarten!"

Enter the Arena

Anna's situation was dire, with all available ER staffers attending to her. The doctors were alarmed; Anna's lungs were nearly full of fluid, the reason for her labored breathing.

The attending physician ordered a nuclear test—one using radioactive substances for a diagnosis—to look for blood

clots. Fortunately, they didn't find any in the lungs or elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the diuretics kicked in, causing her to expel liters of water. Soon, Anna breathed normally again. For a brief moment, so did I.

Thinking this ordeal was over, I asked if she could be released. But that wasn't possible. Doctors had to determine the underlying cause of her fluid buildup.

After an echocardiogram and what seemed like an eternity, her doctor gave us the results: congestive heart failure. Her ejection fraction (EF) on the left ventricle was only 30%, or half of what it should be.

I asked the doctor what that meant. By way of analogy, her heart was too damaged for her to mow the grass and too weak to keep any fluid off her body.

Adding to our concern, Anna's mother (only 52, she would die three years later) was in the final stages of the disease. Eventually, the doctors concluded that Anna's heart failure was hereditary.

The consensus: Anna might live for only five more years. While her cardiologist immediately started treatments, he offered little hope the heart would repair itself or improve.

Amid this devastating news, I felt a load settle over my shoulders. My cherished, 29-year-old wife was dying. I faced the distressing prospect of raising our six children as a single father.

Fight in the Night

Every believer's faith in God will be tested. It's not a matter of if, but when. Some falsely teach that if we have enough faith, we will prosper financially and live in perfect health.

Don't believe it. Don't let anyone talk you out of preparing to fight the good fight of faith. Train before the fight begins. One of my greatest tests came the night of my wife's crisis. It was mortal combat.

One Bible passage that helped me is Christ's parable in Matthew 5, about the 10 virgins preparing to meet a bridegroom. Many view the story as end times in nature, but it has much wider application.

To quote a relevant part: "Five of them were wise and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps, but took no oil with them. But the wise took jars of oil with their lamps" (Matt. 25:2-4).

The idea is that a long, dark night is coming, unexpectedly. Each person needs enough oil to last until Jesus—the Bridegroom—comes. When He comes, they need to be found faithful. He will come for most people when they die and for the rest at His return.

Either way, He is coming. Are we ready?

The five foolish virgins failed to prepare. When it became apparent they needed oil, they asked to borrow some. But this is impossible. No person can borrow someone else's Christian experience.

The oil level represents our devotional life (spiritual training) with the Lord. People who fail to prepare have little or no oil; they will not survive a long, dark night.

If I might apply it this way, our oil level represents the benefit of eating God's Word, drinking of His Spirit, walking in the Spirit and exercising our spiritual senses.

When God Is Silent

The oldest book known to humankind is Job. It introduces us to a man who loved God and did everything possible to ensure his

family loved God, too. Just as we should do today, Job was training to win.

Satan, our archenemy, sought to prove to God that nobody serves Him without some kind of compensation. Satan told God that Job would curse Him to His face if He took away the “hedge,” a metaphor for the many blessings in Job’s life (see Job 1:6-11).

While I’m not claiming to be equal to Job, Satan’s strategies generally follow the same ancient patterns. Before this, my wife and I had faithfully served God. We were blessed with children, a home and decent jobs, and active in various ministries. Yet we experienced what it means for God to lift the hedge.

God remained silent until the end of Job’s test. Unlike Paul, who was warned of afflictions awaiting him (Acts 20:17-23), Job didn’t have a prophet to warn of impending disaster. He didn’t know that Satan had gone before God’s throne to accuse His followers of fraudulent faith.

Since Job didn’t have a Bible, he didn’t know that Satan is walking around like a roaring lion trying to devour people (1 Pet. 5:8). On the other hand, we have Bibles that instruct us about trials. We know Satan’s strategy, and we know God’s faithfulness.

Desperate for a Word

Moments after hearing my wife’s diagnosis, I headed to the hospital’s chapel, fitted with stained glass and rows of padded chairs. Beautiful royal chairs adorned the platform and pulpit. I could imagine such bright colors in heaven.

I knew this place because I had been here seven years earlier with a group of young, enthusiastic, Pentecostal prayer warriors. We interceded for a 53-three-year-old church member who had suffered a massive heart attack.

At our impromptu prayer meeting, we prayed as if our lives depended on God answering. We were so loud the receptionist called security. A guard asked us to stop, but finally agreed to just close the doors.

God met with us that day and gave us specific directions. "Praying for direction" is an ancient biblical practice; for example, the Old Testament kings were expected to "inquire of the Lord" (1 Chr. 10:14).

This was the reality this prayer group believed and lived in. And we saw our friend get healed. The cardiac surgeon installed a defibrillator, but the last I heard it had never activated.

Alone With God

With déjà vu running through my mind and Anna's life hanging in the balance, I walked into the chapel. It was so still I could have heard a whisper from the back of the room.

Unlike that previous, boisterous session, I didn't get loud, nor did I feel much. Security guards didn't come. After walking around, I sat down on the back row and choked out a simple prayer: "Lord, what would You have me to do?"

When God moves us to pray, time seems to fly by as if you had stepped onto a rapidly moving conveyor belt. When your heart is thumping so hard you can barely think, prayer is the kind of grueling work that wears you out.

Despite my emotional paralysis, I sensed the gentle hand of God carrying me along. I can't tell how long I was there, but God brought specific instructions to my heart.

"Fast daily until lunch until I tell you to stop," I sensed the Spirit saying. Sound easy? Not in the midst of countless breakfast invitations and early-morning business meetings.

Afterward, I stood up and walked out of the chapel.

I was living “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Not the written Word in this case, but the divine direction God impressed on my heart. I believed what God told me and responded in faith. I didn’t eat breakfast for six months, not did I tell anyone what I was doing.

I wish I could tell you that God healed Anna during that time. But for the next eight years, we lived with the fear (for lack of a better word) that she would die.

Once, medics rushed her to the hospital with her heart racing at more than 200 beats per minute. Another time, her EF fell to 20% and doctors debated whether or not to place her on a heart transplant list.

It was a daily battle. We constantly needed fresh oil for our lamps to see through to the next step. All of my Christian life I had trained for this test; little did I know how long it would last.

Studies have shown that the 10-year survival rate for people with congestive heart failure is around 15%. As of 2019, Anna’s EF has improved to about 40% and she is healthier now than at 29. She doesn’t need diuretics for fluid retention, which is very unusual.

I should mention that countless others were praying along with us. To God alone be the glory. It is more than a coincidence that Anna and I watched our son, born the day before her diagnosis, walk the stage for high school graduation in 2018.

Just as there were occasions in the Bible when individuals or whole nations were facing life-or-death circumstances and needed to hear from God, we will all face similar situations and will need to hear His voice too.

I tremble to think what life would be like now if medical science had accurately predicted Anna’s fate. Had God not intervened, a wife, mother, sister, daughter, grandmother and

friend would have died long ago.

My youngest son would strain to remember his mother's sweet voice and smiling face. At his graduation, her seat would have been empty. The necessity of hearing from God is real to me. It's a matter of life or death.

What about you?

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