

“Having spent 16 years as chaplain for a unit of 2200 men, and ministering to 95 men on their last day in the Death House, I am totally committed to the fact that this is an important ministry and that these are people. Rev. Anderson writes greatly of how important it is to see them as people and to understand the fact that restorative justice is possible. He still has to face the system.”

Rev. Carroll Pickett,
author of *Within These Walls*

God's
Feet

A R E I N M Y

Sandbox



FAITH CHRONICLES
OF A TEXAS
DEATH ROW
CHAPLAIN

Rick Anderson



TATE PUBLISHING & *Enterprises*

God's Feet are in My Sandbox

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This work is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollection of his experiences over a period of almost fifty years. Certain names, locations, and identifying characteristics have been changed in order to protect the innocent. Dialogue and events have been recreated from memory, and, in some cases, have been compressed to convey the substance of what was said or what occurred. Other persons and events have been omitted in order to maintain the integrity of the story.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the three women who have stood beside me through the storms of my life: Mom, Judy, and Kim.

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There are so many people whom I need to thank that it is nearly impossible to begin to name them all. God's grace has flowed through so many folks into my life that I continue to be in awe at the depth, breadth, height, and width of his love.

Firstly, I need to thank Mom for sticking with my brother and I through the hard times. She was a trooper and was always ready with a firm but loving hand to guide us along our way.

I don't know the name of the saint of God who placed the little Gideon New Testament in my hand when I was in the fifth grade, but to all of you in the Gideon organization, thank you.

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FOREWORD

I have cheated. I've watched this story (or much of it) happen, and I do not have to wonder, as you might, just how much can one person endure? Just what is an appropriate response to difficulty all around?

A number of years ago, Rick Anderson became joint associate pastor of our church, First United Methodist of Nacogdoches, Texas, and our world changed. Only a few months after his arrival, he began a marriage strengthening study course, and hearing Rick speak, my husband—a reticent church attendee at best—urged me to consider joining the class. We did, and neither our marriage nor our lives have been the same since.

We found Rick so humble, so personable, so sincere—and my shy husband began to open up, searching his faith and the group's guidance for Biblical truths about what God had in store for those who center that relationship around Him. At the time, it seemed that Rick had everything—a lovely wife, a newly adopted daughter, full-ordination in the church just around the corner. We didn't know of his struggles and certainly had no inkling of the difficulties that lay ahead. What we did know was that Rick was a man of faith and that his faith was in a powerful God who would make Rick more than a conqueror through Christ Jesus.

And so we did not have to wonder, as you may wonder—what can a good old boy from Alabama show me about the sophisticated and complex world around me? But by the time you finish this book, you will find that the answer to this question is “plenty.”

As you are drawn into this spiritual autobiography, you will not only read about the incredible struggles of a fellow human being, but you will hear the voice of Rick Anderson—witnessing, crying in the wilderness, praising God, and praying for guidance.

In many ways, Rick's story is a modern day reflection of the chaotic world in which we live, one where people change careers midstream, and one where children are brought into our lives by the miracles of in vitro technology—where the impossible becomes possible. Then flip that same struggle, the costs and the anguish, the desire and the fulfillment, and you'll travel with him to a country where female children are in abundance, a world where population control and gender preference leave countless little girls orphaned and longing. Rick lives in the post-modern world at the crossroads where these kinds of paradoxes challenge us to make sense of God's purpose and wonder whether he might not be throwing up his hands in the face of the perfect storm we humans have ushered in.

This book also reflects a world where those same radical and creative technologies are helpless against horrendous diseases—depression, heart and vascular problems, and Cancer—diseases which truly know no preference—neither saved nor fallen, educated nor illiterate, young nor old. Even while Rick answers the calling of God toward his Christian occupation, the cells are mutating, dividing and destroying his wife. He clings—as we all did—to the mother of his children, joint associate pastor, and the love of his life—but no amount of prayer or pleading, chemotherapy or experimental treatment can stop this assault. And yet Rick hangs on.

In yet another modern battle, Rick's ministry to death row prisoners becomes a fertile ground for the contemplation of one of our most important human debates—capital punishment. Rick's job and faith intercede to push him toward life-affirming, and essential ministry—and someone—something—pushes back with equal velocity. Just as surely as God has called Rick to the cells of these condemned men and their families, bureaucracy and posturing, call him away. Rick's integrity and his willingness to choose the higher calling are the characteristics of legends, and it is only by his insistent humility that this book escapes the label "epic." The story that

Rick shares with you is so much less about what he is able to do and so much more about what God does, sometimes with the help of a believer or two, but mostly despite the odds against the spread of faith in an environment depicted as rancorous and evil. You will be astounded by Rick Anderson's courage in becoming Chaplain to death row inmates and his willingness to tell of his own humanness in a story that made national headlines. But even more than headlines, Rick's stories bear witness that God's loving hand most certainly reaches to these condemned men who are almost always abandoned by those who could and should care for and love them.

By the end of this book, Rick may seem a bit larger than life. As a reader, you will hear him speak in superlatives, and though you do not know it, this breathless language he utters is his own authentic voice.

You will hear him exclaiming—at every turn—about the speed in which lives enter and exit our own. You will hear him gasping at the presence of God and the ways in which his Heavenly father organizes and structures his path so that even the most devastating of events becomes again and again the opportunity for him to see God's love and tenderness.

You will see the merry go round that Rick appears to have climbed on, over and over again, only to lose his footing and be thrown like some child's toy, careening in unpredictable trajectories toward unplanned destinations. But each time, he finds himself still in the playground, and faithfully, God's feet are planted in the sandbox, where he reaches for Rick, dusts him off, and pats him back into play.

What a blessing is in store for those who enter these pages—just in knowing that people like Rick Anderson live in our world, people who hear acutely and heed God's mighty and tender urgings.

Sue Whatley

JULY 30, 2010

PROLOGUE

He picks the strangest times to show up, to make himself known. God—he never ceases to amaze me. He waits for those special moments to make us aware of his presence. Take, for instance, just a few years ago ...

Three-year-old Caleb and I trudged out the backdoor of the parsonage, headed for his sandbox. He was barefoot with his jean shorts and a black Spiderman T-shirt on, holding a handful of Batman action figures. I dragged my flip-flops on the cement walkway, clad in cargo shorts and a blue T-shirt and holding one of the theological books that I was reading for a seminary class.

I paced to the carport and pulled the plastic cover off the sandbox. Caleb immediately jumped into the sand, dropping his action figures in a heap. He began to move the Joker and Scarecrow into position to conduct their sinister plan of pouncing on the unsuspecting Batman.

Meanwhile, in the world outside the sandbox, I reached for a folding cloth chair and dropped into it a few feet away, preparing to settle into my own world of study. Caleb immediately looked up at me.

“Come closer, Dad!” he chirped.

I closed the book after dog-earing the page, grunted, picked my rear up off the seat, and scooted the chair a foot or so closer to the sandbox, then settled back into the chair. I reopened the book and flipped to the dog-eared page.

“Come closer, Dad!” Caleb demanded from the sandbox.

“Okay! Just a minute,” I grunted and repeated my previous scooting episode, moving even closer and up to the edge of the sandbox. I settled back down in the chair again, knowing that I couldn’t get any closer to the sandbox without getting in.

Caleb looked up from Scarecrow's devious attack of Batman and urged me once again, "Come closer, Dad!"

I had no other option left but to remove my flip-flops, scoot the front legs of the chair up against the edge of the sandbox, and place my bare feet in the sand. The cool sand crunched as my feet settled.

"That's good!" replied Caleb, who began to push sand onto my feet, which had just become a part of his sandbox world. He was finally content that his dad had his feet in the middle of his sandbox, where the dramas that captivated him unfolded in all their glory.

A revelation slammed into my brain and heart like a runaway locomotive. *This is what I want my relationship with God to look like! I want God to be actively present in the midst of my life, my work, my play, and my relationships. I want him to be plugged into my little world so that he is intimately a part of all that I am and all that I do! I want God to have his feet in my sandbox!*

From that moment onward, I began to look for God's activity in my world—signs of the presence of his feet in my sandbox. What I realized astounded me, as his footprints became clearly visible to me in the living out of my life. I would need to know that his feet were planted in my world time and again. One thing that I can truly say is having God's feet in your sandbox is not for the faint of heart, I assure you! But it's the only way to live the life abundant that is only possible through a close faith walk with Jesus Christ.

You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.

Psalm 16:11



RADIANT BEAM

Help us, O God of our salvation! Help us for the honor of your name. Oh, save us and forgive our sins for the sake of your name.

Psalm 79:9

There is in the heart of every human a deep cavern that longs to be filled. Wars have been waged and distant voyages sailed in an attempt to satisfy that yearning within. It is that same profound longing which haunted me so long ago.

The echo in the cavity of my soul cried out in despair to be filled with some anonymous resource that could bring lasting peace to my troubled spirit. In the meanwhile, I hoisted another can of beer from the paper sack between my feet and popped the top. I shifted on the five-gallon bucket and looked out over the lily pads, dead snags, and tea-colored water of the beaver pond. I took a long swig from the can. The emptiness within my heart drowned out the screech of the red-tailed hawk that circled overhead in the steamy south Alabama sky.

A desperate thought danced through my mind like a prancing pony: “If you would just step out into the water, walk out over your head, and inhale, all of your troubles would be over.” I shuddered and took another long drink from the can, hoping to clear my mind. The suicidal thought flirted with my

brain again. I shuddered, stood from my perch beside the dam, grabbed the rest of my beer, and stomped back to the car.

I sat down behind the wheel of the '72 yellow Chevelle and placed the beer in the floorboard on the passenger side. I settled back in the seat, my T-shirt drenched with sweat. A heavy sigh escaped from my lungs. Here I was in 1979 as a twenty-one-year-old loser. My father had left when I was a kid, never to return. My mom had worked a minimum wage job all of her life in order to raise my older brother and me. She had tried her best to instill strong Christian values within us. I had rebelled against everything that she had tried to teach me somewhere along the way.

I had gotten involved in drug and alcohol abuse in high school and afterward. Now all of my friendships revolved around drinking and smoking dope. Alcohol had been my downfall when I went to college, as I only lasted two semesters before I flunked out.

Now I was back living at home with Mom and we fought constantly. She despised my hard partying lifestyle and my vulgar demeanor. I couldn't put three words together without having a curse word stuck somewhere in the middle. All of my hopes rested in my friendships with other drug and alcohol abusers, who were fun to be around, as long as the party lasted. When the party ended, so did their friendships.

To top it all off, my girlfriend that I thought I was in love with had just broken up with me. It was the blow that would kick me when I was already down. Now I had just contemplated suicide, and I was jarred. I knew deep down that something had to change for me or I was in big trouble. I didn't know which way to turn or whom I could talk with, but I knew that I had to do something to turn the trajectory of my life around.

The next morning was Saturday, and I waited for Mom to leave for the grocery store before I made my move. I stole into

my bedroom and began to plunder through my dresser drawers. In just a few moments, I grabbed the article that I hunted, stuck it in my back pocket, and headed for the backdoor of the large, white bungalow that was our home.

Mom pulled into the backyard beside my car and shifted into park. I stepped past the rear bumper of her '71 green and white Malibu and headed toward the driver's side of my Chev-elle. Mom popped out of her car and looked in my direction. "Where are you going? I'll have lunch ready in about thirty minutes. I'm frying some chicken livers!"

She knew that she had me with the fried chicken livers. I loved those things! Yet I had a much bigger situation to tend to today. "I'll be back later. Don't cook anything for me right now. I'll get something when I get back."

The look on her face told me that she knew it was serious if I was going to turn down her fried chicken livers. She whipped around and hurried toward the backdoor as I hopped into the car, yanked the item from my back pocket, and threw it into the glove box before I peeled out, headed for the beaver pond.

I raced down the county blacktop road and wondered, *What in the world am I going to do when I get to the pond?* I truly had no idea, but I knew that I had to try something different because what I had been doing wasn't working for me. I was nervous and scared.

It had been years since I had ventured inside a church. Mom used to make me go when I was a kid, but since I graduated from high school three years ago, I hadn't so much as stopped in a church parking lot. I had bragged to my drinking buddies that I would have a Jewish Miqra, Koran, and Bible in my house and I would be a "spiritual" person who acknowledged all faiths but followed none. So far, my bright idea had gotten me to the place where I had run out of my "spiritual" gas, with no filling station in sight.

I turned down the dirt road, accelerated, and drove the mile until the two-trail lane peeled off to the right. I took it and slowly drove the hundred yards to the end of the lane, right behind the beaver dam. I reached into the glove box, grabbed the red Gideon New Testament from inside, slammed the box shut, and stepped from the vehicle. My mind flashed back to Mrs. Garner's fifth-grade class, when two men brought in the Testaments and handed them out to us. I had forgotten about the New Testament for many years, yet I had kept it in my dresser drawer all that time.

I strode out into the sauna of a July morning in south Alabama. Perspiration began to bead on my skin as I made my way down the trail, through the gallberry thicket, toward the old railroad tram that now served as a levee. A poplar and sweet gum break lined the near side of the tram, and a warm breeze whispered through their leaves as I climbed up the bank to the top.

The five-gallon bucket sat in the same spot right where I had left it the day before. I positioned myself on it and looked out over the beaver dam as several locusts sang their lament of the heat. I grabbed the Gideon New Testament out of the back pocket of my jeans, then hesitated as it hit me like a harpoon that I had no idea where to start reading. I decided quickly to just thumb it open and start reading on the page where it fell open. It happened to be the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John, which tells the story of Jesus's friend Lazarus, who was the brother to Mary and Martha. Lazarus had died just four days prior to Jesus' arrival in their town of Bethany.

As I read the account, the undertow of the story pulled me into its grasp. I was captivated by the way that Jesus seemed to have a different agenda than everyone else. He appeared to have a different objective in mind that the others couldn't quite grasp. I read with rapt attention as he pronounced to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe

in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish" (John 11:25–26).

I felt the tectonic plates shift down deep in my soul. *Maybe there was something to Jesus! Maybe he is the Son of God,* I thought to myself. My eyes clouded as the quake inside me began to send shockwaves throughout my body. I continued to read, completely absorbed in the story.

When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell down at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, he was moved with indignation and was deeply troubled. "Where have you put him?" he asked them. They told him, "Lord, come and see." Then Jesus wept. The people who were standing nearby said, "See how much he loved him." But some said, "This man healed a blind man. Why couldn't he keep Lazarus from dying?" And again Jesus was deeply troubled. Then they came to the grave. It was a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance. "Roll the stone aside," Jesus told them. But Martha, the dead man's sister, said, "Lord, by now the smell will be terrible because he has been dead for four days." Jesus responded, "Didn't I tell you that you will see God's glory if you believe?" So they rolled the stone aside. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so they will believe you sent me." Then Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus came out, bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him go!

John 11:32–44

When I read what Jesus had done, the tremors inside me exposed the source of my deepest need. I knew in that instant that what I needed in my soul was a relationship with Jesus

Christ. I knew without a doubt that if anyone could help me, he could. Hot tears streamed down my cheeks as I cried out in agony, “Lord, I’m dead inside too! I need for you to raise me from the dead!”

In that instant, the peace of God flowed over me like healing oil poured out on a leprous soul. The empty cavern within me was suddenly and completely filled to overflowing with the saving grace of Almighty God. I now felt more alive than I had ever felt before! I reached down and touched the sand, scooping up a handful to feel how wonderful it felt slipping through my fingers. I knew in the marrow of my bones that Christ was there with me in the middle of the dirt of my life. He had just saved me from destruction at my own hands. I marveled at the murky water in the pond and was awestruck at how wonderful it felt to the touch. I gazed at the clouds in wonder at all that God had created.

For the very first time in my life, I knew that the awesome God who created the entire universe lived inside my heart. I knew him personally! He was my friend, and I was his child! What an amazing blessing to have your sins washed away by the blood of Christ and to experience such an awesome salvation .

So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Doing this, you will never stumble or fall away.

2 Peter 1:10

You would think that anyone who experienced such a dramatic conversion event as I did would be compelled to hold on tenaciously to Christ. That wasn’t me. I continued to rebel against God for many years and spent more time flat on my face than on my feet, spiritually. I faltered and failed, ran away from God, and plunged headlong into sinful behavior. All the while, he patiently waited for my return like the father of the prodigal son in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

Years later, in the summer of 1992, I made a commitment to go with a church group on a mission trip to Belize. My faith was very weak as I continued to wrestle with God's presence in my life, still dabbling in sinful behavior. At the end of that mission trip, I got drunk at a bar and fell, sprawling on the beach at Ambergris Caye. God had been working in my heart during the entire trip, and my response was to get plastered.

The next morning, in my shame, I watched the sun rise over the Caribbean. The mission team had communion in the sand before we went to the little airstrip for our plane ride back to the mainland. It was there that God stepped graciously through the sand, reached a loving hand out toward me, and touched my conflicted heart. A revolution dawned within me as God placed a touch of his love for others within me. I don't know how to explain it, but I yearned to reach out to others in the love of Christ. He had waded into the murky darkness of my self-centered heart and planted a mighty oak tree that began to spread roots deep within my soul. The fruit it bore was the fruit of unconditional love.

I would need a double dose of that love in the months that followed, as my marriage of eight years came to an abrupt end shortly after I returned from Belize. I was humbled and broken, which brought me once again before the throne of grace with my hand outstretched to reach for God's mercy and grace. I found a Father like I had never known who stood right beside me in my little sandbox. I yielded every aspect of my life to Christ and his will for me. It was hard work, as he continuously pointed out areas of my life that were out of harmony with his perfect will for me. I submitted and trusted in him alone to help show me the right way to walk through this life. I still slipped and fell occasionally, but not so often or for so long a period of time. I had determined to follow him with my all, and that is what I did to the best of my ability.

Friends and loved ones saw a change in me. It didn't happen all at once, but over a period of time, the change became more and more obvious as I poured myself into church involvement, Bible studies, choir, and mission work.

God blessed me with a loving wife named Judy who came alongside me. She had the same heart for God as I, and together, we made a good team. She had two children: Bobby, who was twelve years old, and Rachal, who was eight years old. We all moved into a rent house outside Huntsville, Texas where we picked up the pieces of our broken lives and moved forward with God's help. Judy and I grew and matured in our faith over the coming years. God proved faithful, and we followed him. We needed the strong arm of God to be with us in order to face the obstacles that came our way. It is a good thing that we couldn't see the future because Judy and I would have shrunk in fear had we known the mountains that we would have to climb. Yet and still, God had his toes in the sand right beside us every step of the way.

As for God, his way is perfect. All the LORD's promises prove true. He is a shield for all who look to him for protection.

Psalm 18:30