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## HIGH HOPES, NO HOPE--BUT GOD

Genesis 40:1-23

by

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Genesis Lesson 68

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We all struggle with disappointments in life. The most difficult disappointments to deal with are when you have prayed about something for a long time and it looks like finally God is going to answer. But then it doesn't happen and your hopes are dashed. At times like that, it's hard not to be disappointed with God. It's easy to feel like God is playing a cruel game with you. Why did He make it look like He was going to answer, only to dash your hopes? If it happens more than once, to protect yourself from further hurt you may stop praying and hoping at all.

Joseph could have been there in Genesis 40. When his brothers had sold him into slavery in Egypt, there was no hope on the horizon for Joseph. But, through his hard work and integrity, with God's hand on him, Joseph had risen to the top spot in Potiphar's house. Things were looking up. Then, for refusing to yield to Potiphar's wife's advances, Joseph was unfairly thrown into prison. His hopes were dashed. There, as God's hand on his life became evident, the jailer put Joseph in charge of the other prisoners. His hopes rose again and Joseph prayed that God would get him out of there.

We don't know how much time passed, but after a while, two new prisoners joined Joseph: Pharaoh's cupbearer and chief baker. These were important men in Pharaoh's court. The cupbearer was more than the man who tasted the wine before Pharaoh drank it, to make sure he didn't get poisoned. He was always with the king and was one of his advisors and confidants. The baker insured the quality of all food served at Pharaoh's table. These men had offended Pharaoh and ended up with Joseph in the dungeon.

Then one night, both men had a dream. By God's help Joseph interpreted their dreams. The cupbearer's dream meant that in

three days he would be restored to his position. The baker's dream meant that in three days he would be executed. Joseph appealed to the cupbearer, "When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison" (40:14, NIV). Three days later as Joseph's predictions came true, you can picture the cupbearer giving Joseph thumbs up as he headed out the prison door, saying, "Don't worry, friend! You'll be out in no time!" Joseph's hopes were the highest since he had been sold into slavery by his brothers. Finally, it looked like God was going to answer his prayers.

Maybe he folded up his bedroll and collected his few things as he thought about how great it would be to see the sunshine and feel its warmth on his back. He imagined running to his father's tent and feeling his embrace as they would weep in each other's arms, his ordeal over at last. But night came and there was no word from the jailer about his release. He unfolded his bedroll, thinking, "Maybe today was too busy. Tomorrow the cupbearer will mention my situation to Pharaoh." But the next day came and went with no word about Joseph's release. Perhaps Joseph asked the jailer, "Haven't you heard anything about my situation yet?" "No, nothing yet. Not a word." A week went by, then a month. Joseph's high hopes were dimmed and finally extinguished as he realized, "The cupbearer forgot me." Joseph went from high hopes to no hope--but God alone. This story teaches us how ...

God uses disappointments to bring His servants  
to the place where their only hope is in Him.

It's a painful process, but God must strip us of every human hope, even of the people whom God can use, until our hope is centered on Him alone. We've got to come to the place where we know experientially that God alone is to be trusted, that He alone is our hope of salvation. To do that, He uses disappointments, where we go from high hopes to no hope--but God Himself.

1. Disappointments begin when high hopes for answers to our problems are not met as we expect.

Most of us come to Christ with high hopes for answers to life's problems. The gospel promises a lot: Peace, joy, restored relationships, forgiveness for all our sins, emotional healing, meaning and purpose in life, and much more. We hear stories about other Christians and how God miraculously answers prayer. So we begin to pray that God would deal with the major problems in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones. It's not that God doesn't deliver, but rather that we assume (or are led by other Christians to think) that these things come quickly, miraculously, and painlessly.

No doubt Joseph prayed daily that God would get him out of prison. He had high hopes that God would answer that prayer. After all, it was based on the dreams he had when he was a teenager, which he knew were from God. So when these two men were put in the prison and had these dreams and Joseph interpreted them, his hopes soared. *This* was the way God would get him out of prison! Finally, an answer to his prayers! So he touchingly appeals to the cupbearer, saying, "Remember me ..." when you get out (40:14). Some think that Joseph was wrong to appeal to him in this way. But I see no reason to think that. Joseph probably saw this as the means of God's provision to his prayers. He had high hopes. That's not wrong, since we serve a God who does mighty things on our behalf. We should be people of hope. But, disappointments begin when our high hopes are not met in the way we expect.

2. Disappointments can move us either to despair or hope.

Our text does not indicate what happened in Joseph's heart as he waited in vain day after day. It just ends with the bleak words, "Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him" (40:23). Then notice the place in your Bible between that verse and the next. It's a white space, a chapter break. But that little break represents *two years* in Joseph's life, two years in a dungeon, two years out of his twenties, the prime of his life. That white space in your Bible represents the

maturing of Joseph, when he dealt with his disappointments and moved, not into despair, but into hope in God alone.

I say that because of the product we see coming out at the other end. We don't see a cynical, angry man, but rather a godly, mature man who is able to handle the heavy responsibilities thrust upon him. Psalm 105:19 says of this time that "the word of the Lord tested him." Those two silent years in the dungeon after his disappointment with the cupbearer were a time of learning to hope in God.

But probably there was a transition between Joseph's high hopes for release and his readjusted hope in God, a time when he had no hope. There almost always is that time of despair, however brief, during a trial. David felt it when he was running from King Saul. Even though God had promised him the throne, at a low point he said to himself, "Now I will perish one day by the hand of Saul" (1 Sam. 27:1). The apostle Paul, though a great man of faith, said of the trials he went through in Asia, that he was burdened excessively, beyond his strength, so that he "despaired even of life" (2 Cor. 1:8).

Even though Joseph, I think, was trusting in God, not in the cupbearer, he probably had to fight off feelings of despair. The man had let him down. Whenever you're disappointed by people, it's a short step to grow disappointed with God: "Lord, You could make him remember me! Please bring my situation to his attention so that I can get out of this prison." But two long, difficult years dragged by with no answer from God.

Disappointments like this almost always involve flaky people. This incident shows how vain it is to put your trust in people. The only consistent thing about people is that they will let you down. You can be sure that the cupbearer didn't forget in the sense of not thinking of Joseph. He forgot in the sense of not wanting to risk bringing up his past by mentioning Joseph to

Pharaoh. Joseph easily could have moved from disappointment with this flaky man into disappointment with God. But Joseph processed his disappointment so that it didn't lead to crippling despair, but rather to hope in God alone.

3. Hoping in God alone is the key to overcoming disappointment and despair.

The disappointments strip us of hope in ourselves and in others. The only thing left is to hope in God. Joseph, by faith, clung to God, who did prove Himself faithful in His time. You ask, "How do you know Joseph hoped in God? How can you tell when your hope is in God?" My experience has been that sometimes, even when to the best of your knowledge your hope is in God, He will test you to prove it. But there are three signs in Joseph's life that he was hoping in God, signs which can help us check ourselves.

- A. If your hope is in God, you will not be focused on self-pity, but on serving Him by serving others.

If we were in Joseph's situation, most of us would be so consumed with self-pity that we wouldn't give any thought to the needs of others. But Joseph was sensitive to the needs of these two prisoners. He observed the dejection on their faces the morning after they had their dreams and he was concerned enough to ask them about it (40:6, 7). If he had been self-absorbed, he would not have noticed.

You can also see Joseph's consideration for others in his plea to the cupbearer (40:14, 15). In defending his innocence, Joseph could have run down his brothers, Potiphar's wife, and Potiphar for the way they had mistreated him. But Joseph tactfully says that he was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews and that he had done nothing to deserve being thrown into prison. He wasn't

having a pity party, blaming everybody else for his trials, even though in this case everybody else really was to blame.

- B. If your hope is in God, you will have a positive, not a cynical, attitude.

I'm not talking about Norman Vincent Peale's "power of positive thinking," which is not biblical; but rather, about the joyful hope that comes from trusting in God and His promises. Joseph could have become a total cynic by this point in life. When these men mentioned their dreams, he could have sneered, "Yeah, I used to believe in dreams. Look where it got me!" But instead he had a positive, cheerful attitude, saying, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please" (40:9).

Having a positive attitude means that you focus on the things you *can* do in a situation, not on the things you cannot do. Joseph could have thought, "What's the use of telling these two characters the meaning of their dreams? That won't get me anyplace." But instead, he focused on what he could do for them, and did it cheerfully.

During this time in prison, as he did in Potiphar's house, Joseph was building a reputation through the little things he did. It wasn't a pleasant task to tell the baker that he would be executed in three days, but Joseph spoke the truth. It was no big thing, but it fit the overall pattern of integrity which marked his life. The cupbearer finally did tell Pharaoh Joseph's ability to interpret dreams and his integrity in telling it like it was, not only to him, but to the baker as well. The jailer also would have vouched for Joseph's personal character and cheerful spirit.

You can't control many of the things that happen to you, but you can control your attitude in response to the

things which happen to you. If your hope is in God, you will have a positive, cheerful attitude. That doesn't mean denying reality or overlooking problems. The Bible never does that. But we will have the kind of hopeful joy that the apostle Paul exudes in Philippians, in spite of his circumstances.

Adoniram Judson, the great pioneer missionary to Burma, had been thrown into a horrible prison run by the toughest Burmese prisoners. The torture was awful. He had almost no fruit to show for his years of hardship in Burma. He wasn't sure whether or not his years of translation work would be destroyed. In those conditions, suffering from fever and weakness, he received a letter from a friend who asked, "Judson, how's the outlook?" He replied, "The outlook is as bright as the promises of God." It always is. There's a third test to measure your hope by:

- C. If your hope is in God, you will be quick to include Him in dealing with problems.

As soon as these men mention their dreams, Joseph responds, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams." He wasn't being arrogant, but as Donald Grey Barnhouse puts it, his reply was rather "the simplicity of a child who knows just where his father is and how to reach him" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], 2:175). Joseph walked so closely with God that he automatically mentioned His name when these men told him their problem. And he had such trust in God that his answer assumed that God would reveal to him the meaning of the dreams.

If your hope is in God, He will be the first thing you think of in a crisis, not the last. So often, we try everything else and then finally say, "Well, we've tried everything else. Now all we can do is pray." Often you

can do more *after* you pray, but you should never do more *until* you pray. Calling on the Lord ought to be the first thing that comes to mind when a problem comes up. What a great way to witness to lost people, to tell them, " I know God and He has an answer to your problem. I'll pray for you."

#### CONCLUSION

There are five practical lessons here to remember:

*(1) God is always sovereign, even when it seems He has forgotten you.* It's obvious that God was sovereign in all these events, even down to the petty quarrels of a pagan king. He put these two men in the same prison as Joseph. He gave them their dreams. And even though it seemed like the timing was wrong, in that He "wasted" two years of Joseph's life, God gave Pharaoh his dream at precisely the right moment. As the master weaver, God was bringing all these strands together so that all was working according to His schedule. *Nothing* is outside of His sovereignty, even though it seems like it to us as we sit in a dungeon for two more years. Never doubt God's sovereignty. But, coupled with God's sovereignty, we also must remember:

*(2) God is never unfaithful or cruel, even when circumstances seem otherwise.* God's people down through history have gone through terrible trials. A skeptic might say that God is cruel to allow such things. But a skeptic doesn't have God's eternal plan in view. A skeptic doesn't understand how God lovingly disciplines His people to share His holiness. As the psalmist wrote, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. You are good and do good; teach me Your statutes" (Ps. 119:67-68).

In Psalms 42 & 43, the psalmist is taunted by his critics, "Where is your God?" He answers with that great refrain, "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance, and my God." When the enemy taunts us by saying,

"Look at your circumstances and you will see that your God is unfaithful or cruel," we need to say to our soul, "Hope in God." None who have hoped in Him have ever been disappointed. Don't doubt His goodness when He is lovingly purifying your faith through trials.

*(3) God's promises are true in His timing, not ours.* If Joseph had been released at this time, he never would have been appointed as second in the land to Pharaoh. God's way and timing were clearly best, although Joseph had to take that by faith until years later when he could look back on how God worked it all together for good. Like it or not, there are certain lessons, such as patience and endurance, which we cannot learn except through waiting on God.

I read of a young woman who dedicated herself to serving Christ in India. Through repeated tragedies, she was forced to remain in the United States to care for her disabled mother and then for her dying sister. After this she had to care for her sister's five children when their father suddenly died. Regretfully she set aside her plans, and for 15 years she devoted herself to meeting their needs. Three of those five children headed for service in India where 20 years before she had longed to serve. In God's time, His better plan made sense.

But we need to remember that sometimes we won't be able to discern God's timing until eternity. We're so quick to judge things by our temporal perspective rather than by His eternal perspective. As someone has said, "God judges things at the end of the age, not at the end of the meeting."

*(4) We are not responsible for others' behavior, but we are responsible for our own behavior and attitudes.* Joseph could have become very angry toward the cupbearer, and let his resentment burn into bitterness and revenge. Let's face it, he had good cause to be angry. The cupbearer wasn't willing to risk his neck enough to talk to Pharaoh about Joseph until it looked like it might gain him some advantage. But in spite of the flakiness of the cupbearer, Joseph had to deal with his own attitude. Later, when he was number two under

Pharaoh, he never sought revenge against the man, nor against his brothers.

People may have mistreated you and disappointed you because they were being selfish, uncaring jerks. You have a choice: You can grow bitter and angry, blaming them for your troubles. Or, you can trust in the sovereign God and rejoice in His grace toward you. They will give an account to God for how they sinned against you. But you will give an account for your attitude and behavior in response to their sin against you. When you walk in the Spirit, you will be loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, and kind (Gal. 5:22).

*(5) God's grace is always sufficient if we will receive it.* Joseph came through these trials stronger, not weaker, gentle, not bitter, because he hoped in God. Even though he was in prison, the Lord was with him. Even though the cupbearer forgot him, God never did. Joseph experienced what Paul and every other believer undergoing trials has experienced, that God's grace is sufficient for our need, if we will just receive it.

The 19th century British preacher, Charles Spurgeon, was riding home after a heavy day's work, feeling weary and depressed, when suddenly the verse flashed into his mind, "My grace is sufficient for you." He said, "I should think it is, Lord," and he burst out laughing. It seemed to make unbelief so absurd.

He said, "It was as if some little fish, being very thirsty, was troubled about drinking the river dry, and the river said, 'Drink away, little fish, my stream is sufficient for you.' Or, it seemed like a little mouse in the granaries of Egypt after seven years of plenty fearing it might die of famine, and Joseph might say, 'Cheer up, little mouse, my granaries are sufficient for you.' Or it was like a man up on a mountain saying to himself, 'I fear I shall exhaust all the oxygen in the atmosphere.' But the earth might say, 'Breathe away, O man, and fill your lungs; my atmosphere is sufficient for you.'" You can't exhaust the grace of God to meet your need in every trial.

Some of you are in the middle of some difficult disappointments. Maybe it's a marriage that's gone sour. It could be a child who has rebelled and turned against you. It may be the loss of a job, a serious health problem, a friend who has maligned you, or some other serious situation that hasn't turned out as you wanted it to. You had high hopes, but now you have no hope. Ah, but you do have hope! There is God! Hope in God, and you shall again praise Him, the help of your countenance, and your God.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you counsel a Christian who was disappointed with God? What steps should he take?
2. How would you answer a skeptic who said that hoping in God is just "pie in the sky when you die" wish fulfillment?
3. How can a believer who has a consistently negative, cynical attitude develop a proper joyful attitude?
4. How can a believer who has been through a terrible tragedy, such as the loss of his family, keep from doubting the sovereign goodness of God?

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