

May 14, 2006
 The Absolute Indispensability of Hope
 Romans 15:1-13 / Hebrews 6:13-20 / Job 7:1-21

As you can tell from merely hearing this passage read, Job just keeps on spiraling further and further down emotionally—deeper and deeper into depression and hopelessness. In fact, some would say that what we find here in Chapter 7 is Job hitting rock bottom emotionally.

And the reason is simple: That by this time, he'd been suffering for a long time. If we read the "months of futility" in verse 3 correctly, then Job infers that by chapter 7, the days have turned into weeks and the weeks have turned into months, meaning it's been at least two months since all his possessions and children were taken from him, and boils broke out all over his body.

Not only that, he's been in so much pain he can hardly sleep. He has been assigned "nights of misery" (v. 3b)—"nights that drag on while he tosses back and forth till dawn" (v. 4), because no matter which way he lays down, he's laying on those open pussy sores.

And to add to that, on those rare occasions when he does actually drift off into sleep he is assaulted by frightening nightmares and terrifying visions—possibly hallucinations from the lack of sleep, and the sheer exhaustion of having to endure unrelenting pain day and night for at least two months (vv. 13-15).

And that's not all. By this time, says Job, the pussy infected boils have become "infested with worms," and his "skin is broken and festering" (v. 5)—without any indication whatsoever that things will get any better in the near future. In fact, Job sees no indication things will ever get any better:

"My days will come to an end without hope," he says in verse 6. "My eyes will never see happiness again," he laments in verse 7. "The eye that now sees me will see me no longer; you will look for me but I will be no more." (v. 8)

It's no wonder Job is depressed—he believes his illness will end in death, and that right up until that time (whenever that time may be) he will suffer relentlessly.

It's a clear indication that Job has lost all hope. And that is what I'd like to speak about today—the often neglected and abstract spiritual commodity we call HOPE. A spiritual commodity so instrumental and so absolutely indispensable to our existence, that when one loses it, they lose with it the desire to live (as Job confesses in verses 15-16).

That's how you can know when people are losing, or have lost all hope. They become lethargic, despairing, depressed, and suicidal, simply giving up emotionally. They adopt a cynical, indifferent, despairing, "whatever" attitude toward life.

Maybe that's why Paul, in I Corinth. 13:8, lists "hope" as one of the three most important of the gifts or graces that God gives:

"These three remain," says Paul, "faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love."

And listen: Just because Paul stresses the supremacy of love over the other two graces or spiritual commodities, does not mean that hope, being second, or worse yet third on the list, is just a so-so gift. One that's nice, but not all that necessary.

That's not Paul's point at all! Love is the "greatest" of the three merely because it alone will survive our earthly existence. The word "greatest" there ("*meizon*" in the Greek) refers NOT to the inherent or superior value of agape love over faith and hope, but to the fact that love will continue into eternity whereas the others will not.

We will not need faith nor hope in heaven, for we will be in God's immediate presence, and see Christ face to face, and know as we are fully known, experiencing the fullness of His love and the fulfillment of all His promises in an unhindered fashion.

Yet in this life, BOTH faith and hope are as absolutely instrumental to the living of the Christian life as agape. And that is especially true for hope, because without it, as we see in the case of Job, one loses the will to go on — even if they do retain a degree of both faith and love.

Job had faith in God (he never totally loses that). The majority of his dialogue is wrestlings with God interspersed with prayer. And he also had love (as we have and will see), but as this text makes plain, he had lost all hope, and with it the desire to live.

The loss of HOPE makes him so despairing, depressed, spiritually lethargic, and cynical that he just wants to die. And I stress that because I want you to know how important HOPE is; how absolutely crucial and indispensable it is to Christian faith and life.

So, in light of all that let's consider what HOPE is; how can we recapture or cultivate it in our lives; and why is it that God allows us to lose our hold on it on occasion.

So **FIRST**, let's consider what hope is. And as we do, we will discover that the primary aspect of hope is that it has to do with how we perceive the FUTURE. In the New Testament we have two primary words for hope—*elpis*, and *elpizo*—and they both have to do with expecting, yearning for, or desiring intensely something we don't yet possess. *Elpizo* (or hope) says one Greek scholar, "is the desire to receive something good, combined with the earnest conviction or expectation that we will receive it."

For instance, the Bible tells us that at the end of this present age Christ WILL return. It's a promise. It hasn't happened yet, but because God tells us it will happen, and has assured us by His promise that it will, Paul can call it, "the blessed HOPE of His glorious appearing."

Likewise, speaking of the Christian's hope of receiving at His return, an immortal, imperishable, resurrected body (as Scripture promises), Paul can say in Romans 8:23-24: "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly

as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he has. But if we hope for what we do not have, we wait patiently for it."

In that sense, HOPE has to do with things we've been promised, but don't yet have or possess. Which means hope is always FUTURE ORIENTED. It always has to do with one's perception of what the FUTURE holds — and in specific, hope has to do with one's conviction that the future holds GOOD THINGS in store for them (regardless of what the present is like for them).

Faith often lays hold of things in the present, but hope is what enables us to persevere or wait patiently until we lay hold of promised things in the future. In fact, according to Paul, it is HOPE that feeds our ability to endure, or persevere under difficult circumstances as we wait.

Thus Paul can write to the Thessalonian believers in I Thess. 1:3 that he is thankful for their “work produced by faith; labor prompted by love; and endurance inspired by hope....” It is hope that gave them the ability to press on, and hang in there against great odds and endure the opposition of ungodly people.

You see, there are basically three ways people face the future:

1st) Some people face the future with FEAR.

Because the future deals with the unknown, and for the most part, the unknowable (humanly speaking), it is sometimes faced with fear, and trepidation—things that stem from the conviction that the future holds bad things, negative things, or painful things in store or more painful things in store.

That’s what happened after 9/11. This cloud of gloom fell over the entire country, for an extended period of time, because for a few weeks fear dispelled hope, and people could only perceive a future filled with more horrible things—more attacks, poisoned water systems, dirty bombs, economic collapse, jihad, hatred and distrust. You could feel the loss of hope in the air.

Then **2^{ndly})** Some face the future with ANXIETY.

Where fear expects the bad, or is convinced that bad or painful things lie in store for them in the future, anxiety comes from being unsure, or uncertain what will happen. This is where most people are at. They don’t know what the future holds, and that uncertainty—the thought that it could go either way—leads to a subtle underlying stress, anxiety, cautiousness, or nervousness.

Then **Last)** Some face the future with HOPE.

And hope is the inner conviction that things will be ok. That the future holds good things in store (even if it happens to include painful and distressing things as well). Hope is the inner conviction (based on faith in God’s promises) that even if things seem bleak, and even if bad things happen, it can’t prevent God from bringing good even out of those bad circumstances (as He has promised for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes).

And **LISTEN**: I’m not simply talking about being an optimist rather than a pessimist! Hope is something much more profound than mere optimism. Optimism is often nothing more than the attitude of a person for whom little or nothing has ever gone wrong—people riding the emotional wave of their previous good fortune.

But not so with hope. Hope is much deeper than that. It's more durable than mere optimism spawned by past good fortune—AND MUCH MORE NECESSARY—which is why its loss is so severely felt in the lives of people.

Even pessimists can live productive lives. They actually receive strength from their pessimism! It gives them the will to fight on! They're energetic pessimists whose bleak outlook of the future actually motivates them because it's often mingled with hope! But not so with the person who has lost all hope. The loss of hope paralyzes people.

And Satan knows it. Better than anyone else (even moreso than many Christians), Satan knows how absolutely indispensable hope is to the believers relationship with God, walk of faith, and general outlook on life. Which is why one of his most potent weapons against vibrant, contagious, earnest Christians is try and eat away at their hope. Because if he can do that, he can turn them into lethargic, despairing, emotionally paralyzed, ineffective Christians.

Thus, not all at once, but almost imperceptibly—little, by little, by little, over an extended period of time—he gradually eats away at their hope until they begin to ask themselves: "Will things ever change?"

And those thoughts often grow a bit more despairing until they begin thinking:
"Maybe God has no intention of doing what He promised."

And as the trial drags on with no change in their circumstances (and no evidence of change in the foreseeable future), they become like the despairing, hopeless Job who essentially says: "Things will never be any different for me. I'll die without ever seeing another day of happiness."

And it's not just despairing under difficult or painful circumstances. Sometimes its difficult or painful habits, vices or personality flaws. Thus they will say of themselves, and to themselves:
"I'm a lost cause. I'll never change. I'll never be any different. I guess I'll just have to resign myself to being like this for the rest of my life."

I remember well, at one point in my life, talking to another Christian brother about growth in sanctification, and we both found ourselves asking: "Is it really that we've changed, or is it simply that our circumstances have changed and become less stressful, so that we think we've changed when in fact, if our life situation gets worse again, we'd find ourselves reacting just like we did before."

Ever wrestled with that? Thinking you've made progress in some area, only to find yourself falling back into the same old unhealthy ways of reacting or responding when stressful or difficult times return? And doesn't it diminish your hope that you'll ever REALLY change or truly be different?

You see, when some besetting sin, or wrong way of responding, or some painful situation doesn't go away, doubts can begin to creep in and erode our faith, and that erosion of faith poisons the roots of our hope, often leaving us spiritually lethargic and tempted to throw in the towel, or in the worst case scenario, finding ourselves, like Job, wanting to die (which is the ultimate expression of despair and hopelessness).

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point: How we sustain hope, or nurture hope, once we realize we're losing it, or like Job, have lost it totally. And the primary way hope is nurtured in us is by God's PROMISES. We must go to God's Word and meditate upon, or allow His promises to feed our faith and hope.

Psalm 119:40 says: ***"Remember Your word to Your servant (that is, remember O Lord, what You said to me, or promised me in Your Word), for it has given me hope."*** He even goes on to say it is his comfort in affliction. Five other times in the same psalm, he goes on to say: "I have put my **hope** in Your word." "I have put my **hope** in Your word." "My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my **hope** in your Word."

That's where he grounds his **hope**—in God's Word! It's the soil from which hope grows!

Likewise, Paul says this in Romans 15:4:

"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance, and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope."

Which means my HOPE must rest on GOD'S PROMISES and not on my PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCE—the mistake so many, many Christians make and thus lose hope!

How, then, can hope be nurtured and strengthened after disappointment, and trial, and prolonged suffering, and the assaults of the Evil One have begun to erode it, or eradicate it? And the answer? By going back to the God's Word, and the Promises He gives us in His Word.

Because according to the writers of Scripture, His Word and His promises not only give birth to HOPE, they also nurture and strengthen HOPE. It was God's PROMISE spoken to Abraham that caused hope to be birthed in him—a man who because he was 85 years old, had given up all

hope of ever having a son—that is, until God told him he would! It was God’s promise that caused him, as Paul says in Romans 4:18: “Against all hope, in hope to believe, and so become the father of many nations.”

You see, as with Abraham (who received the promise of God at 85 YEARS OLD!) our circumstances can often scream at us: *“It’s useless. It’ll never happen. You may as well give up. Things will never change. It’s a lost cause. You’re a lost cause! You’ll never amount to anything. Throw in the towel. It’s not worth it. God’s won’t help you! He helps other people, and does miracles for other people, but He won’t do it for you.”*

And when we begin to believe such things our hope begins to evaporate, and with it our desire to stick it out, or our ability to persevere—which Paul says is inspired by HOPE!

Or take the Apostle Paul in Acts 23. He goes to Jerusalem and a riot breaks out. People we are told get so angry they want to kill him. He’s arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin where he shares and again bedlam breaks out, and again people want to kill him. So he’s put under arrest and in that lonely place the Lord himself comes and gives him a PROMISE: “Take courage. As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so also you must testify about me in Rome.”

Then on the last part of that journey (Acts 27) he’s on a ship to Rome, and they are engulfed by a violent storm—with a wind of hurricane force. The storm lasted for many days tossing and battering the ship until it seemed like it would split apart. And in verse 20 we are told, “When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.”

Yet what does God do? Punish them for not having enough faith? NO! He sends an angel to Paul who gives him a promise and tells him: “Do not be afraid, You must stand trial before Caesar and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.” And upon hearing that promise, Paul, who had “lost all hope of being saved,” boldly stands up and tells everyone on the boat that they will make it!

WHY? Because that’s what divine promises do! That’s what they are meant to do—inspire hope and renew faith and keep us from giving up!

And it’s not just God’s Word, or His promises that inspire hope. The **THIRD** thing we see is that God nurtures hope in us by His SPIRIT. In our passage from Romans 15, Paul initially tells us in verse 4 that we receive hope from the “encouragement of the Scriptures,” but he goes on in verse 13 to tell us that the Holy Spirit nurtures hope in us. He says, “May the God of hope fill you with

all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

So what do we see? We see that joy and peace are nurtured in us by trusting in God, and the purpose of that trusting in God is that we may "overflow with hope" (it's a causal phrase—we trust in God "so that" we may overflow with hope). **HOW?** By the power of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit works to produce hope in us by His power, as we put our trust in the God of hope.

Which means we must exercise faith. We must fight to believe. We must seek to trust God even against great odds. Like Abraham who "against all hope, in hope believed," we must struggle to believe! Because at times it's not easy!

On certain occasions (as with Job) it's downright difficult to believe—especially for people who have been buffeted again and again, or had to watch their dreams die, or seen one thing after another go wrong, or actually gone forward in faith only to run into one difficulty after another.

Which brings us to our **LAST** point. Why, we must ask, does God allow us to go through extended periods of hopelessness and despair? And the answer? Because it drives us to Him as nothing else can.

By nature we as human beings do not seek God. Paul tells us that in Romans 3:11, where he says of unregenerate humanity, "No one seeks God." And he's right, of course! People often seek things from God, but no one initially seeks God merely for the sake of having God. It just doesn't happen, says Paul. By nature we seek God for what He can give us, or do for us. And in some ways that would always continue to be true of us as long as things were going our way.

So many people I've spoken with, even Christian people, have said, "I know it's wrong, but it seems the only times I earnestly seek God is when I'm in trouble, or when I need help." Which means they aren't really seeking God, as much as they are simply seeking to get something from Him.

And what changes that? It is often severe times of trial and despair. Carol Mayhall in her insightful little book "Help Lord, My Whole Life Hurts," writes this after going through an extended period of trial and despair:

"Until this time in my life I had been coming to God for something; for His peace, His love, His power, His gifts, His grace – and I saw that He was wanting a more mature relationship with me. Now He was asking me to come to Him for Himself. He wanted me

to come to Him because I loved Him, and wanted Him, and wanted to be with Him, and not because I wanted something from Him."

One man even put it this way in a prayer he wrote emphasizing a similar point:

"O my Lord! If I worship you from fear of hell, burn me in hell; and if I worship you from hope of Paradise, exclude me from it; but if I worship you for your own sake, then with old not from me your eternal beauty."

You see, God wants us to want Him, and not just what we can get from Him—which is our natural tendency. And for a change that drastic to take place, God must often resort to the use of drastic measures—like despair, and hopelessness.

That's why Teresa of Avilla could pray: "Give me trials, Lord. Give me persecutions!" WHY? Because she knew that God matures us in our faith by allowing trials, and difficulty, and despair, and even hopelessness to come into our lives for a season. As John Piper has correctly stated: "The only sure way to maturity is through suffering."

He uses such things to help us move beyond the immature stage of only wanting Him for what He can give us, to the stage of wanting Him because we want HIM!

So take heart—there's a reason for it all! And take measures, as well, to restore your hope—by trusting in Him, and in His promises; fighting to believe, and hoping against hope, until, like Job, you break through to the other side.