

A Hope and a Future

2. What do you Expect?

September 19-20, 2020

Back in the 1940's, the state of Maine needed more electric power. So a utility decided to build a dam on the Dead River for hydro-electric power. But Flagstaff Village was in the way. In 1946, a company representative went to each resident and said, "We're building a huge dam at the end of this valley, and water is going to back up and fill the whole area, including your house. We'll pay you for your property and you can live here for free until you have to move, but at some point, your town is going to be under water."

About a year after the utility company bought the property, a writer revisited what had been his family's home. Many of the residents hadn't yet moved away, but he saw a huge change in the town. What was once a charming neighborhood of tidy homes with fenced yards had become a dilapidated ghost town. Why repair a blown-down fence when it was going to be knocked over by a wave anyway? Why fix a window or a pothole? Why try to be neighborly if everyone was moving away? He wrote, "Where there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present."¹

What I do today depends on what I expect tomorrow. If I knew I would never lose weight, why would I pass up a cupcake today? Why would I take the risk to reach out to repair a friendship if I had already been told I would be rejected? Why would I scrape to make a payment on a loan I knew I could never pay off? Why try if there is no hope?

We need hope because hope creates our future. As we said last week in the Bible "hope" is not a wish – like I hope the Pirates win today. In the Bible hope is a confident expectation based on what God promises. That kind of hope influences how our future turns out. It's not always easy to hang on to hope in the middle of a pandemic. We don't know what the future looks like and the on-going pressures can wear us down emotionally.

This spiritual growth campaign is a deep dive into restoring our hope through Christ, through worship, small group and daily time with God. Last week I said that our hope grows when we see that God's power is greater than our problems. Today, we build on that truth. Our hope grows stronger when we ***expect that what GOD promises*** will happen.

In the OT, God spoke hope to his people. Hundreds of years before Jesus was born Babylon invaded Israel. They killed a lot of people, looted the land and destroyed the temple. Then they took most of the Jews back to Babylon as captives. Those exiles could have thought, "We sinned against God and now we're exiled. That's the end of

¹ *The Hope Quotient* by Ray Johnston. (p. 63). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

the dream of our own nation under God's rule." But it wasn't the end. God tells them in *Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you"—this is the LORD's declaration—"plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."*

A future and a hope are related. Hope is about how we look at the future. That is why God immediately goes on to tell them about their future. After God said he would give the people a hope and future in verse 11, in verses 12-14 God says:

¹² You will call to me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you"—this is the LORD's declaration—"and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and places where I banished you"—this is the LORD's declaration. "I will restore you to the place from which I deported you."

Wow – what an amazing future to promise an exile. They will find God, he will not be angry at them, he will be FOR them. God will restore their fortunes. They will return home to Israel from the countries where they'd been scattered. God wanted them to know what to expect in the future so that they would have hope as they endured the difficulties of living in a foreign land.

Does God have plans for you and me today too? What if Jeremiah 29:11 applies to us too? I'm here to tell you that it does. God says to us, "I am going to give you a hope and a future." I pray that you believe that today.

We change our future when we change our expectations to match God's promise.

Someone once said, "You don't get what you deserve in life, you get what you expect." Jesus seems to say the same thing.

Mark 11:22-25 "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. ²³ "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.

Expecting that what we say will happen releases the mountain-moving power of God. Jesus doesn't say, "Have faith in your determination and ability." He doesn't say "Have faith in positive thinking." He says have faith *IN GOD*. It is God's power that moves mountains. Our part is to expect he will do it. When we face mountains of illness, or anxiety, or financial uncertainty, we will have hope if we expect God's power to work.

In the book of Genesis we read about how God encouraged one of his people. Abram was 75 years old when the Lord spoke to him and promised him a son. In Genesis 12 the Lord said he was going to make Abram's descendants a great nation. That's an amazing promise to give a 75-year old. But after a year, Abram still didn't have a child. The next year, still no child. The year after that, no child. It went on for decades. Abram got discouraged. His hope for a son was vanishing for him.

Then in Genesis 15 God appeared to him again. Abram said, "I still don't have a child, so my servant is going to get my inheritance." That was practical thinking.

Genesis 15:4-5: Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." ⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

God gave Abram a visual picture to help him hang on to hope: look at the stars. Then 24 years later – when Abram was 99, God spoke to him again. This was almost 25 years after God promised him a son.

Genesis 17 2-6: ²Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers. ³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.

God changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means, "Father of many nations." It's amazing to get a new name from God, but it had to be awkward for a while. Whenever he met someone he'd have to say, "Hi, my name is Father of Many Nations."

"Wow," they'd say. "How many kids do you have?"

"None," he'd say.

Tough.

So why did God change Abram's name to Abraham? Because he wanted to change Abram's expectations. Being childless for so long Abram had gotten used to thinking of himself as childless. Unless something happened, he'd see himself that way forever. But God wanted Abraham to see himself as a father – the one who would fulfill the plan of God for his life. So now, every time Abraham said his own name he spoke God's promise. I don't know why God waited decades to give Abraham a child. But during the waiting, God was working – and he kept building Abraham's expectations so that he would not lose hope. God has a plan for your life. If you feel yourself losing hope, ask yourself, what am I imagining about my future? What am I expecting? We can expect good things, because God has promised to work in our lives.

Here's how to strengthen our hope and expectations:

Find a promise that fits our need.

Abraham needed an heir; a son to carry on his family name and heritage, someone to inherit his wealth. And God promised him that not only would he have a son, but that his descendants would become a great nation in the plan of God. Wow. We each have needs today, but we might think, "*No angel appeared to give me a promise...*" The good news is that we don't need an angel to appear to give us a promise from God. There are over 8,000 promises written in Scripture. They are there because God wants you to have access to them.

If you are facing a financial need, here's a promise.

Matthew 6:31-33 *So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³²For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Who could use more peace and less anxiety? Here's a promise.

Matthew 11:28-30 *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

Whatever your need, ask God and he will respond. Here's a promise.

Jeremiah 29:12 *Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.*

So find the promise that fits your need. Just Google God's promise for _____. Read the promise. Say it aloud to yourself. Pray it back to God. Post it where you can see it. Keep it in front of you so that you expect it to happen. God has a hope and a future for you! The big difference between a powerless wish and a biblical hope is that we expect God's promise to happen. I wrote about this in my book, *"Hear it, See it, Risk it."* When we expect something we can "see" it in our minds – we can envision it. God told Abraham: "Look at the stars..." He wanted Abraham to expect the promise so much that he could see it.

To sharpen our expectation, we must ask ourselves, "What will it look like when God's promise is being fulfilled in my life? What will I see, do, and feel?" We know that we are expecting something to happen when it affects our actions.

I love the old story about a town that was suffering a severe drought. The crops were dying and the situation was getting desperate. So the towns people asked the pastor to lead them in praying for rain. He agreed. That evening people showed up at the church, but they were surprised when the pastor said, "You can go home; We're not having the prayer meeting today." The people asked why. He told them, "You came to pray for rain, but I don't see a single umbrella here. You clearly don't expect God to answer." In other words, our expectations show up in our behavior. People take action when they expect God to move. Those who just wish, don't. To build our hope, find the promise from God, then prepare to take action.

To increase your expectation, set a goal and act on it.

Goals are about what will happen in the future. So to build your hope, set goals for what you will do to live into the promise of God. The angel told Abraham, "...by this time next year, you will have a son." If you are asking God for a new job, your goal might be to apply at five places in the next ten days. If you are seeking to beat loneliness, you could make it a goal to call three people this week or ask to be connected to a small group. If you want to improve your health, set a goal of walking 30 minutes per day. Don't be afraid of not meeting the goal – you know you definitely won't

if you don't set one. God will help you since you are pursuing his promise. Despair will say, "It won't make any difference... nothing will change." So build hope through setting a goal. Ask yourself, "What would I be doing if I knew that God's promise would be fulfilled?" When you do that you might be surprised at the good things that happen.

No one runs a marathon by accident. Everyone starts training with a goal in mind. Laura Mazur and Jessica Robertson each ran last year's Pittsburgh Marathon. Mazur was running her 12th marathon, while Robertson was running her first. They had never met before when they reached mile marker 14. Mazur wasn't running well that day and she desperately didn't want to finish last. She turned around and noticed Robertson was there as well. Robertson said that she was feeling defeated and upset with her performance. The two began chatting and decided to buddy up and run the rest of the race together. Mazur said she told Robertson, "I'll stay with you if you stay with me." And they did. They encouraged each other when they were tempted to give up. They were the last ones to finish the race, but they were cheered along by spectators along the way. "There was great crowd support," Mazur said. "You feel like royalty. You feel like a real athlete. It's super awesome to have people cheer you on." We made it to 26. I can do 0.2 [more]." Mazur said, "I just took her hand and said, 'Let's go!' They crossed the finish line hand in hand.

The book of Hebrews says we are being cheered on by a great cloud of witnesses that have gone on to heaven before us. You're going to make it. Never give up.