

## PREFACE

# A HIGHER HOPE

By Heidi Gaul

WHY IS HOPE important? What makes it a such a valuable component to our well-being?

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines hope as: “to desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment” and “to cherish a desire with anticipation; to want something to happen or be true.” That sounds a lot like simple optimism. Psychologists say that hope is not actually an emotion—that it is a way of thinking. We often say we “feel” hopeful, yet hope is not just wishing for positive outcomes, nor is it ignoring problems as if they’ll go away on their own. Hope involves the ability to find alternative ways to reach goals, despite facing significant challenges. It’s persevering to make things happen and the belief that success can be reached.

Hope is formidable. Trusting in and planning on positive results aids our mental health, with one added by-product being improved physical fitness. When we believe things will go well, they do—on every level. This simple change of attitude packs a punch!

When hope is combined with faith, the result becomes immeasurably greater. How often do we read a headline featuring an uplifting occurrence we'd deemed impossible, or listen as a pastor mentions a miracle made real? With God guiding our choices, "all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26, NIV).

Hope is a lifeline for faith, one God created to pull believers through tough times. "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3–4, NIV). How insightful for Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, to have named hope as the ultimate positive emotion for Christians to experience. Is there anything more freeing, more enduring?

### **A Promise of Hope**

*God. Promises. Hope.* Whether we take these words one by one or all together, without them our lives would be empty. Separately, they represent who we are in Christ. Together, they create the sacred intersection where power and grace meet faith. God promises hope. It really is that simple.

What compels God to gift us with promises? And why does He offer us so many of them—more than 7,000? Because He knows us. He is aware of the challenges we face and our fear of abandonment. He understands we need the unshakable hope only He can provide. Our resolve can waver under the weight of frustration, fear, pain, and grief. Even mundane, everyday disappointments sap our

enthusiasm. D. L. Moody put it well: “God never made a promise that was too good to be true.”

How can we maintain a sense of hope during times of trial? We can do it by keeping our focus on God, by putting our faith in His promises. He is the sole source of true hope, and we can find it between the Bible’s covers, revealed in stories of real people with real problems. The challenges they battled are similar to those we face today, whether emotional, physical, spiritual, or material. Likewise, the choices they made and the solutions they found provide reassurance of God’s unfailing devotion.

The day my doctor’s office notified me of a fast-growing cancerous tumor in my breast, Jesus set about transforming me, inside and out. At first, my emotions read like a winter weather report: stormy, wet, and unpredictable. But as the days of treatment and surgery moved toward weeks and months, a steadfast determination and acceptance of His will replaced my terror. I understood His plans for me were good and eternal (Jeremiah 29:11). The results of that challenge—an abiding faith and unflappable hope—signaled a permanent change in my point of view, one I’ve come to accept with humility and deep gratitude.

Often, during that difficult period, I reflected on the woman who reached for Jesus’s cloak as He walked along a crowded street (Matthew 9:20–22). Due to her constant bleeding, this woman was considered unclean. Her suffering had continued for years, whereas my situation transpired over months. Yet I related to her. People avoided contact with her. My cancer diagnosis made some people

uncomfortable and as a result, my circle of friends shrank. This woman and I shared the seeming senselessness of the situation, but we also shared the priceless hope we placed in Jesus. She didn't hesitate to reach out for His help. Nor did I. His healing touch encompassed more than my diseased breast—it addressed my fears and sorrows, my brokenness.

My life has taken on a greater purpose than I ever conceived possible. I won't know until I meet her in heaven, but I suspect He did the same for that unnamed woman of faith. He can do the same for all of us as we reach out to Him in hope.

Still, there are times when the world we inhabit can seem crazy, as if it were spinning out of control. How can things get so off-kilter? Wars, grief, illness, poverty—the agonizing list can appear long. At times, life's problems prove overwhelming, and leave us with little hope for the future. But when we search for something solid to hold onto, we find a rock to keep us steady in the shifting sands. We can live in joy and security through Jesus and the hope He provides. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."

After my husband suffered a serious fall resulting in a traumatic brain injury, my quiet, simple world didn't just spin crazily out of orbit. It flipped upside down. Doctor visits, physical and occupational therapy, juggling multiple medications, and exhaustion filled our time. The circumstances we found ourselves in were not what we'd planned—far from it. And yet, it was as if God took each

of us by the hand and walked us through the situation and past the pain, tears, and fears. He carried us beyond our loss to a slower lifestyle He'd chosen just for us, one where we'd be better suited to honor Him. We clung to the words of hope found in Psalm 23:4 (NIV): "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." In God, we found hope, our faith resting securely in His promises.

### **Hope Grounded in the Bible**

God reaches out to reassure us through the words of the Bible. The sacred books contained between its covers offer answers to any hardship we might encounter. Countless men and women coped with negative experiences as varied—and as relevant—as those we battle in our current times. We can learn from their authentic responses, both righteous and flawed.

We see fear and hatred overcome by courage, perseverance, and faith. Like a fountain of wisdom, we can drink in these godly traits and apply them to our own circumstances. Let's explore a couple of these characters.

It's easy to think of Bible characters like Joseph (Genesis 30:24–50:26). If ever a story of perpetual hope in the midst of adversity existed, it can be found in the chapters about this brave, humble man. He bore the jealousy and almost murderous betrayal of his brothers, just for being his father's favorite. How many of us have lingered on the wrong end of that seesaw longer than necessary? Whether concerning family, friends, or career, I've sometimes found

myself eyeing other's "coats of many colors." Then, when a rainbow jacket of my own becomes available, I discover the fit is off or that it is something I no longer desire.

Yet Joseph had hope. I wonder if he knew just what he hoped for, or if he simply hoped. He had so little, and yet after being rescued from the pit he'd been abandoned to, life seemed as if it might improve. Then while Joseph was serving in slavery, Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of rape. He was found guilty. Still, he trusted in God's promises and held on. During Joseph's resultant time spent in prison, his God-given ability to interpret dreams was made known to the Pharaoh. When Joseph's advice to put food aside for an upcoming famine was heeded, he was appointed to the highest position under the crown. Joseph married, had children, and reunited with his estranged family. His decades of trial finished in a testimony of love, forgiveness, and hope for the ages.

G. K. Chesterton said, "To love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means pardoning the unpardonable. Faith means believing in the unbelievable. Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless." These words describe Joseph's life well.

Mary, mother of Jesus, also comes to mind. This sweet girl, probably in her early teens, was engaged to be married to Joseph, a carpenter and a man of honor. At that point, her future seemed to be set out for her, until her life turned upside down. When the angel Gabriel spoke of God's plan for her to give birth to the Messiah, she surrendered to His will. Mary believed in the promises she heard. She knew she

would face trials, both in regard to her unwed pregnancy and the magnitude of being our Savior's mother. Despite all the struggles in her life, she held on to the eternal hope she found in her son, Jesus. A hope born of God. What can we glean from her willingness to obey and trust? Is it possible that hope comes not just from perseverance but also from forgiveness like Joseph's or obedience like Mary's?

Joseph and Mary are two of the Bible's key characters. But sometimes we see hope come in smaller, less recognizable packages. We read about Moses's mother, Jochebed. When Pharaoh commanded all infant sons to be cast into the river, she placed her baby in a basket and hid it in the reeds. What dared she hope for? His chances for survival seemed slim, yet God rescued her son through the love of the Pharaoh's own daughter. He even made it possible for Jochebed to wet-nurse baby Moses (Exodus 1:22–2:10).

### **Hope for Today**

Hope isn't always bound together with visions and miracles, nor is it exclusive to ancient times. But I do believe that like any aspect of God's love, it is often best revealed in stories. These Bible stories show the poignancy of being on both the receiving and the giving end as we embody the hands of God. And there are times when His touch of hope is profoundly sublime.

The collection you are about to read is made up of the writings of people you might meet at the grocery store, church, or work. The lives they lead are similar to many of

ours. These people saw God's touch in their circumstances and believed in a successful outcome for their situations, whether a tale of holding onto faith despite health or financial challenges or of clinging to God's promises through loneliness or confusion. This group of believers saw a spark of hope in the midst of their lives and generously shared it. I'm so glad they did.

I trust you'll see yourself and your circumstances mirrored in one or more of these stories. You'll be heartened as you read of God's deliverance from various problems and strengthened in the knowledge that we can depend on Him. He still performs miracles—we only need to watch for them. Norman Vincent Peale put it this way: "Become a possibilitarian. No matter how dark things seem to be or actually are, raise your sights and see possibilities—always see them, for they're always there." God keeps His promises. Every. Single. One.

Hope is raining down on all of us like confetti at a parade. It's forming drifts in the corners of our lives and building up underfoot. It's time to tuck away our umbrellas, lift our faces heavenward, stretch our arms wide, and turn our palms up to grasp for every bit of it. Let's celebrate as it gets caught in our hair, our circumstances, and our hearts.

The LORD will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in  
a sun-scorched land and will  
strengthen your frame. You will be  
like a well-watered garden, like a  
spring whose waters never fail.

Isaiah 58:11 (NIV)

## WHEN FLAMINGOS TAKE FLIGHT

By Lynne Hartke

“ARE WE SURE THIS IS the right way?” I asked my son, Nate, who was driving his wife, Rachel, their two young children, Madelyn and Micah, and me across an endless wasteland in the middle of the Atacama Desert in northern Chile. We had left the two-lane paved road several miles back and had not seen another car since we turned onto a dusty dirt road—unless we counted the discarded shells of rusted-out vehicles in what seemed a post-apocalyptic