

WORDS FROM BIGTOP

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WELLS IN THE WILDERNESS

Where Hope Actually Comes From

"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."

ROMANS 15:13 (NIV)

Somebody asked me this week the kind of question that doesn't have a tidy answer, and I haven't been able to put it down since: *where does hope actually come from?* Not "how do you stay positive." Not "look on the bright side." The real question underneath it — how does a person who's been hit again, and then again, and then again, keep finding hope instead of just finding numbness?

I've been living that question this past year, and I want to be honest about it instead of tidy.

Sixteen years ago I climbed a mountain and I built it wrong. I was king of the hill, my head swelled, and I reached for things I hadn't earned. It came crashing down, and I knew — even in the wreckage — that I was the one to blame. I fought hard to fix what was broken. It still ended in divorce, and in raising five kids mostly on my own. That mountain fell because I climbed it wrong. I own that.

This past year was a completely different mountain, and it matters to me that I don't blur the two together. I was on top again — but not because I'd built anything myself this time. It was grace, plain and simple. I got to work alongside leaders who poured into me and into the people around us. I watched the lights come on in students, in a whole community of people learning to pass wisdom and knowledge back and forth, learning to love each other in ways only God can produce. It wasn't my kingdom. It was His, and I just got to stand in it for a while.

And then it came crashing down anyway. The family I'd helped build got ripped away from me — not because I overreached this time, but just because that's

sometimes what happens on a mountain, even one God built. If I'm honest, the easy Christian answer — "just have faith" — has never once been enough on its own to explain how a person keeps getting back up from that kind of loss. There's something underneath that answer. I want to dig for it today.

Hope Isn't the Absence of Tragedy — It's What Grows Inside It

Here's the part we usually get backwards. We think hope is what you have *before* the hard season, and once tragedy hits, hope is the thing you lost. But Scripture describes it almost exactly the opposite way:

"Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

ROMANS 5:3-5

Read that order again. Suffering doesn't cancel hope. Suffering is the ground hope gets planted in. Paul isn't saying tragedy is good — he's saying tragedy, wrestled with honestly and not avoided, eventually produces something in a person that lighter seasons never could. Hope isn't a mood you manufacture. It's a muscle that gets built one hard season at a time, the same way perseverance and character do.

That's the well. It doesn't spring up in the easy field. It springs up in the place that's been dug out by pain.

A Story: The Pit, the Prison, and the Two Years He Was Forgotten

If you want to watch that well fill up in real time, read Joseph.

He's seventeen, his father's favorite, wearing a coat his brothers hate him for. And it goes sideways fast. His own brothers throw him into a pit and talk about killing him before deciding to sell him into slavery instead. That's tragedy number one, and he's still a teenager.

He lands in Egypt, works his way into a position of trust in Potiphar's house — and then Potiphar's wife falsely accuses him of assault, and he's thrown into prison for a crime he never committed. Tragedy number two, and this one isn't even his fault. He did everything right and it cost him anyway.

While he's in that prison, he meets Pharaoh's cupbearer, interprets his dream correctly, and asks for one thing: *remember me when it goes well for you*. And then Genesis tells us, in one of the most quietly devastating lines in the whole Bible:

"The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him."
GENESIS 40:23

Two more years pass in that verse. Two years of a man doing everything right, asking for one small mercy, and getting silence instead. If there was ever a candidate for giving up on hope entirely, it's a forgotten man in an Egyptian prison who'd already survived a pit and a false accusation before he turned thirty.

And then — no fanfare, no explanation of how he held on all that time — Genesis 41 opens with Pharaoh having a dream nobody can interpret, and somebody *finally* remembers the man in the prison. Within one day, Joseph goes from forgotten prisoner to the second most powerful man in Egypt.

Years after that, his brothers — the same ones who threw him in the pit — come to him starving during a famine, with no idea who they're kneeling in front of. When Joseph finally reveals himself, he doesn't hand them a lecture. He hands them the whole theology of where hope had come from for him, all along:

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."
GENESIS 50:20

That's not a man who got lucky at the end and decided to be gracious about it. That's a man who'd apparently believed that sentence — or something close to it — through the pit, through the false accusation, through two silent years in a cell, long before he had any proof it was true. He even named his own son *Manasseh*,

meaning "God has made me forget my hardship" — right in the middle of his rise, marking the exact spot where the well finally broke the surface.

Hope Doesn't Wait for the Story to Resolve

Here's what gets me about Joseph's story every time: nobody told him, in the pit, that Egypt was coming. Nobody told him, in that cell, that two years wasn't the end of the sentence, it was the middle. He didn't have the outline. He was living it one unexplained tragedy at a time, the same way we do.

Which means whatever hope he had wasn't built on knowing how it would end. It was built on something steadier than the plot. That's the difference between hope and optimism. Optimism says *it's probably going to work out*. Hope says *God is still God, whether it works out on my timeline or not* — and that's a very different foundation to stand on when tragedy number three shows up before tragedy number two has even finished healing.

"The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

PSALM 34:18

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

PSALM 23:4

Notice — again — what these verses don't promise. They don't promise the valley gets shorter. They promise you don't walk it alone. That's where the well is actually located: not past the hurt, but in it, if you're willing to dig.

Naomi's Bitterness, and the Grandson She Didn't See Coming

Joseph isn't the only one. Naomi loses her husband and both of her sons in a foreign land and tells the women of Bethlehem, "Don't call me Naomi... call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter" (Ruth 1:20). That's not a woman putting on a brave face. That's raw, honest grief with God's name attached to the blame.

And yet the same book that opens with that bitterness closes with Naomi holding her grandson in her arms, the women of the town telling her he'll renew her life and sustain her in her old age (Ruth 4:14-15). Hope didn't ask Naomi to pretend the grief wasn't real. It just kept showing up in her story after she stopped expecting it to.

What the Wreckage Uncovered

Here's the part of Joseph's story I keep coming back to this year in particular: the wreckage wasn't wasted. God didn't just eventually get him out of the pit and the prison — He used the years inside them to build something in Joseph that the mountaintop never would have. And that's been true for me too, even though I wouldn't have signed up for it.

While that family I'd built was being ripped away, God started opening my eyes to things I'd let go quiet for years — my health, my weight, all of it slipping while I was busy pouring into everyone else. I've got a partner now who cares enough about me to say something when I'm about to eat the thing I shouldn't, even when I don't want to hear it in the moment. I've found my way back to actually wanting to move my body, to physical stimulation instead of just going through the motions. And I've started writing again — not for a sermon, not for anybody else's edification, but for my own grain. My own release. My own rejoicing. Loving the Word of God because it feeds me, not because it needs to produce something for someone else first.

God gave me time. God gave me peace. God gave me rest. None of those three things showed up because the mountain stayed standing. They showed up after it fell.

That's Joseph's pattern exactly, just with a different name on it. He didn't get handed Egypt as a consolation prize for the pit. The pit and the prison were where the character got built that made him fit to run Egypt in the first place. I'm not there yet — I don't know what my "Egypt" looks like on the other side of this — but I know the digging isn't wasted. It's the same well.

Where the Well Actually Springs From

So — where does hope come from, for someone who's had tragedy after tragedy? Not from the tragedies stopping. Not from a positive attitude you talk yourself

into. It comes from the same place Paul points to in Romans 15: it's poured in. God is called "the God of hope" specifically because hope isn't something you generate from inside an empty tank. It's something He fills you with, in the trusting, before the joy and peace even show up on their own.

That's why Habakkuk could look at empty vines and empty stalls and still write, "yet I will rejoice in the Lord" (Habakkuk 3:17-18). That's why Jeremiah could sit in the literal ashes of Jerusalem and still write the words that started this whole devotional a few weeks back — "his compassions fail not. They are new every morning" (Lamentations 3:22-23). The well doesn't spring up because the wreckage is small. It springs up because mercy was never rationed according to how bad the wreckage got.

A PRAYER FOR THE WELL TO RISE

Lord, You are the God of hope — not the God of good circumstances, not the God of easy seasons, but the God who pours hope into people standing in wreckage they didn't choose. For the ones of us who've had tragedy stacked on tragedy, who are tired of being told to just have faith, remind us that hope was never supposed to come from our own reserves. Thank You that You don't treat every fallen mountain the same — that You see the difference between the ones we built wrong ourselves and the ones that fell around us while we stood faithfully in them. Spring up, O well — in the pit, in the prison, in the two forgotten years, in the empty vines, in whatever wreckage we're standing in today. Teach us Joseph's kind of hope — the kind that doesn't need to see the whole story before it trusts the Author. Teach us Naomi's kind of honesty — that grief and hope can share the same sentence. Thank You for the time, the peace, and the rest that only show up after the mountain falls. And where we are convinced the silence means You've forgotten us, remind us that the remembering is already on its way, even when we can't see the timeline. Amen.

Sit With It

1. Have you ever had two different mountains fall in your life — one you built wrong yourself, and one that fell around you while you were faithfully standing in it? Can you tell the difference between them, or have you been blurring them together?
2. Where in your story do you feel like the "forgotten two years" — the season where you did what was right and it seemed to cost you instead of help you?
3. What's the difference, in your own life, between the hope you've tried to manufacture and the hope that's actually been poured into you in hard seasons?
4. Joseph couldn't see Egypt from inside the pit. What's a "pit" season in your past where, looking back now, you can finally see what you couldn't see then?
5. Naomi named her own bitterness honestly before she ever got her hope back. Is there a grief you've been trying to skip past instead of naming?
6. What has your own wreckage uncovered — a part of your health, your relationships, or your walk with God that you'd let go quiet without even noticing?
7. Where is a well trying to spring up in your life right now — in a place of hurt, pain, or discomfort — that you haven't stopped to notice yet?

— *BigTop*