

## **“Life’s Missing Ingredients--Optimism”**

I hold in my hand the proverbial glass of water. And you look at it and you say, “This glass is half...” Some of you said, “empty,” and some of you said, “full.” Engineers are thinking, “The glass is clearly twice as large as it needs to be.” Conspiracy theorists are like, “Who drank the other half?” Partiers are like, “There’s room for ice and bourbon in there!” The scientist says, “The glass is not empty at all. It’s half-filled with water and half-filled with air, thus it is full!” In general, optimists are the half-full people—they tend to see the good in everything. Pessimists are the half-empty people—they tend to see the negative, the worst-case scenario.

Do not take this lightly! According to developmental molecular biologist and bestselling author *John Medina*, pessimism, negativism have long term effects. He writes, “All kinds of rotten things happen to you...Your immune system begins to go offline...your ability to mount a sustained and effective response against infectious diseases goes down. [Just] as importantly, your ability to fight certain cancers goes down and the ability for you to maintain cardiovascular health goes down. Put all those things together and it’s almost a guarantee to live a shorter life. The ability for you to stay optimistic produces a buffer against your probability of experiencing depression.” He says optimism reduces the stress hormone cortisol, and increases the production of dopamine which makes us happy, increases motivation, and is even responsible for increasing our levels of courage.

He’s describing clinically what we see biblically. Optimism, or hope, in biblical terms, is the outcome of faith. Especially in the face of the hard stuff—challenges, adversity, disaster. The Apostle Paul wrote this, **“We can rejoice when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character, produces hope. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us...” (Romans 5:3-5).**

Hope, optimism, is an outgrowth of our faith in the face of hard stuff, insurmountable stuff!! But it sure does seem like the reasons for pessimism get a lot more press and attention than reasons for optimism. And there’s plenty to be negative about right now, isn’t there?! I’m not even going to list them because you already know them by heart! And when you look at that list long enough, pretty soon, if you’re like me, you start feeling overwhelmed, and helpless, and powerless, and despairing. And if you’re not careful, you can start spinning this downward spiral that ends up in despair. And that is not what the God who created you wants for your life, or any life.

So, how do you maintain hope when pessimism gets all the good press? This is what I want to talk about today. I want to focus on a single verse in the Old Testament. One that I’m hoping you’ll take with you and become a mantra for the rest of your life.

But first let’s look at the context. King David is faced with the death of his infant son. Now David’s told that his son is going to die because David had orchestrated the death of another man. We understand today, as we look at Jesus, that God doesn’t work that way. But that’s how they thought back then. The bottom line is that David’s baby is dying, so what does he do? Rather than going down the cycle of despair, like everybody would expect, listen to what the Scriptures tell us that he does in 2 Samuel, chapter 12. It says these words: **“But David fasted and prayed and pleaded before God for the life of his son.”** Just like you or I would do. The Bible says that he lay face down on the palace floor for seven days and seven nights. Here’s what David’s prayer was for seven days and seven nights. **“Who knows? God might be gracious to me, and the child may live.” (2 Samuel 12:22).**

David prays this optimistic prayer. David holds onto hope. “Who knows? Heaven might hear this prayer and the child might be healed.” “Who knows?” But that didn’t happen. David gets the word, “He’s gone, David. Your child has died.” So, David gets up, washes himself, eats some food and says, “I’ll go to be with this child someday, but it’s done for now.”

Within this tragic story is a biblical foundation for faith-based optimism. And it’s important that we learn this because the alternative to optimism is unthinkable. And I know what I’m talking about; I have struggled with depression off and on since I was a kid. It’s been several years since I’ve been down that road, and I have no intention, of spending one unnecessary hour in that pit of despair. Because when I’m there, I am no good to God and I’m no good to my family and friends. I don’t like being with myself. The good that I can do in my life is neutralized when I’m there. And it’s my full intention to live in a different place, to live with a glass that’s half full, I want to be the most joyful and optimistic person in any given room. And this verse, **“Who knows? God might be gracious,”** can be a source of strength in the face of difficulties, and a flood of

pessimism and negativity. So let's work through this in a way that this can become real for you and me. Let's internalize this story and this mantra so that it will serve you well for the rest of your life.

The Bible says before David was a king, he was just a boy whose job was to look after his dad's sheep. Sometimes the sheep would be attacked by wild animals. We read in the Scriptures that David had to defend the flock against bears and lions. Picture it. A bear comes out of nowhere and threatens the sheep that David's supposed to defend. Other shepherds see a lethal predator like a bear, and they go, "See ya! Have all the sheep you want. I'm just going to extricate myself from this situation!"

But not David. He felt a duty to look after those sheep. He sees the bear charging and he's got to decide what he's going to do. Maybe he's thinking something like: "Well, let's see. I'm in big trouble if I stand between the bear and the sheep on my own strength. But, if the God I believe in were to give me supernatural strength, I might be able to defend the sheep against this hungry bear." And maybe that's the first time the phrase came into David's mind, "I believe God has supernatural power and strength. Who knows? God might be gracious and give me the strength I need to take care of this bear and defend the sheep."

So, for David it's decision time. He's got to be thinking, "Either the power of God will sweep over me and I'll be able to fight off the bear, or I'll be the appetizer before the mutton entree!" He decides, "I'm going to go for it. I'm going to be optimistic. I'm going to trust that God will be gracious. And if He's not, I'll know two things about myself. First, I defended the sheep, and that's what my dad sent me here to do. I was faithful to my task. And second, whatever God chooses to do is up to him, but I will have given God room to do a miracle."

So, David puts himself between the charging bear and the defenseless sheep. And the outcome? God poured out his power on David. And let me put it this way for you animal lovers: He neutralized the bear! The sheep are all safe. David's faith was built up. David goes, "Cool! I like this."

But it happens again. David's out in the same field, and he's protecting the sheep again, and this time, a lion comes out of nowhere. David only has a second or two to decide what he's going to do about the oncoming lion. "Should I step in the path of the lion like I did the bear? Will God give me supernatural power to defend the sheep?" So he goes, "Well, who knows? God might be gracious again." And God comes through a second time and gives him supernatural power to neutralize the lion.

And I can imagine, later on that night, David's sitting out on the quiet hillside. The sheep are safe. The stars are out. And I can imagine David replaying the day and thinking, "I wonder what God could do in and through my life if I relied on him even more often. I wonder, if I become really optimistic and walk around saying, 'Who knows what God might do through me if I put myself out there in faith and see?'"

Not long after that, David's dad asks him to take food supplies to his brothers who are off fighting a battle with the Philistines. When David gets to the battlefield nobody's fighting! Why? Because the Philistines had a 9-foot-tall bruiser named Goliath standing out in front of their army trash-talking. He's trash-talking the Israelite soldiers, probably trash-talking their mothers. He's especially trash-talking the God of the Israelites, who can't find anyone to come out and fight with him! Goliath has proposed a winner-take-all sort of thing.

So, David walks around and innocently asks, "Listen to what he's saying about our God! Why doesn't one of you big strong soldiers suit up and take him down? Who knows? God might be gracious and use one of you to knock Goliath down and out. Why doesn't someone go do it?"

David figures out pretty quick that they're all afraid—shaking in their shoes. David's like, "Hmm. Well, who knows? God might be gracious through me. Who knows? It worked with the bear. It worked with the lion. It might happen again." So David volunteers! Nobody can talk him out of it!

He's too small to wear any armor, or carry a big sword. He just kneels by a creek and picks up five smooth stones for the only weapon he plans to use, which is a slingshot. We can't know for sure, but when he's kneeling down by the creek, choosing rock number four or rock number five, I bet he's thinking, "I wonder if this is going to work this time?" Maybe he's wondering, "What if it doesn't work? What if I go out to face this giant who's trashing God—what's the worst that could happen? Even if it doesn't work out, I gave myself to the right cause." And then he goes, "Who knows? God might just be gracious, and he might help me somehow to overcome this behemoth."

And again, you know what happens here. He goes to the battlefield to meet Goliath. Goliath laughs at this kid with no armor and no sword coming out to do battle! Goliath throws a little trash-talk at David and at God. David doesn't pause. He runs toward Goliath, and he slings one stone. That stone takes off. It's laser-guided by God to the only exposed and vulnerable part of Goliath's body, which is his forehead. It sinks in

deep and Goliath drops, with a big thud in a cloud of dust. The army behind David starts cheering. And they start chasing the Philistines. They win a great battle that day. And later on, they turn David into the very first “rock” star. Get it?!

David eventually becomes a general. And as he leads he keeps his mantra going. He leads his troops into battle where the odds are overwhelming, but God has prompted him to go. And he says to himself, and he probably says to his commanders around him, “Hey, we’re going into battle and we’re outnumbered today, but I just want to tell you something. You don’t know, and I don’t know. Who knows? God might be gracious today and might just fill us with his power, and we might have the greatest victory in the history of Israel. But we’re not going to find out unless we go. Who knows? God might be gracious today.”

Battle after battle, circumstance after circumstance. His faith keeps building and building. The outcome is positive every time until the day that I talked about at the beginning of this message. That day, David had to choose what his response to a dying son was going to be. I think at that stage in his life, David just said, “I don’t even know how to do anything else, so I’m going to pray the same prayer I’ve prayed throughout my life. Who knows? God might be gracious. Who knows? Even in this situation where there’s only reason for pessimism. Who knows? God might be gracious and heal my baby.” For seven days and seven nights, he repeats for it. But his baby dies. When he gets the tragic news, David gets up. He cleans himself up. He gets some food. The very next thing he does is recorded in 2 Samuel 12. It says, “**And then David went into the house of the Lord and worshipped God.**” (2 Samuel 12:20).

We don’t know exactly what he said as he prayed, as he worshipped, but it had to have been something like, “God, my mantra all these years has been, ‘Who knows? You might be gracious.’ But I want you to know, I never wanted to obligate you to any course of action. My mantra was never meant to manipulate you into serving my agenda. I never thought of you as a lucky rabbit’s foot or a good-luck charm. My mantra was always about reminding *me* how great and powerful and gracious you are. The mantra just helped me in all the difficult circumstances of my life to believe that there is a hope, and there is a God who might open a door when they all look closed.”

I can imagine David saying, “Lord, I’m going to stick with my mantra. When circumstances look grim again, when everybody else is giving up, predicting worse-case scenarios and turning tail and running, even in the most difficult of circumstances, back to a bear, to a lion, to a giant and even to the coffin of a son. I will say, in whatever circumstance that threatens me in the future. Who knows? God might be gracious.”

Is it any wonder that David was called *a man after God’s own heart*? What hope, what optimism—solidly faith-based. That’s David’s story about optimism in the face of tragedy. But let me tell you about one of our own. His name is Rob Baldwin. Six and a half years ago, just before their son was born, Rob noticed a lump under his arm. He didn’t think much about it, but it grew and right after Zack was born he was diagnosed with cancer, melanoma, stage 3. They removed the tumor and lymph nodes in his arm and then they headed to M.D. Anderson in Houston. They didn’t have an appointment, or a referral, and their insurance said they wouldn’t pay, but they were determined, hopeful, optimistic. Who knows? God might open this door. That door did open and M.D. Anderson took him as a patient and began testing and treating him. It wasn’t long before they found that the cancer had spread to his lung. Stage 4 cancer. They took out all the lymph nodes on the right side of his body and began aggressively treating him. He was in ICU for 7 days on 5 high-dose chemo drugs. After 7 days there, he’d have to stay in a hotel for 2 weeks to recuperate. Then start again. He did 3 rounds of that and his body broke down. He had skin toxicity, and all his skin began to peel off, painfully. And he had lymphedema in his arm. All that had to be treated. In his next scan they found the cancer in his brain and was given less than 1% chance of survival. He had full brain radiation (15 treatments). 6 years later, the cancer is contained to a spot in his skull. His lung and brain have scarring, but no active cancer they can see.

I asked Rob and Kaitlyn how hope, optimism, and faith played a role in their journey. Rob’s prayer early on was, “Your will be done. If you can use this in any way to glorify you, live or die, I trust you.” Kaitlyn said that she’s very optimistic. She said, “I stay focused on what I can control. And I trust that whatever happens it’s going to be ok.” She said, “I lean on my prayer life.”

Rob’s on daily chemo pills now and there’s been no growth in the cancer in 2 years. He said, “Some days I forget I have it!” But he knows there’s no cure. They live life to the fullest and don’t worry about the little things. Rob’s on disability and that’s their only income, but they manage. They look for the blessings in everything. And they see how, whenever there’s been an obstacle, God has provided a way through it.

Who knows, in the face of your trials, your difficulties, even in the face of the consequences of your bad decisions, God might be gracious. In fact, God **will** be gracious, and tender, and loving, and forgiving, and true to you always. This is the promise of Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit. But you have to give God room to do a miracle. Give him room to do a miracle!

Because who knows? This might be the day when things begin to change in the world because of our faith-based optimism. This might be the day when the door of opportunity opens. Who knows, this might be the day when you say, "I'm tired of running from God, I'm tired of a life that puts distance between me and Him, I'm tired of wallowing in my sin. Jesus, I choose to follow you."

The alternative to optimism will wreck you, eat you alive. Give God room for a miracle, and then do your part. You've got to do your part, right?! Apply for a new job, call a marriage counselor, ask for help, work on your health. "Who knows? It might happen. I'll keep worshiping him even if I don't get what I want, like David did, but today might be the day." For lots of people, today in these crazy times, optimism, based in faith, is a missing ingredient. But it does not have to be.

Now, just so you can practice this, let's say it together. **"Who knows? God might be gracious."** Now, at about twice the level. "Who knows? God might be gracious." And then, one more time, but this time, we're going to personalize it and we're going to say, "Who knows, God might be gracious *to me*." And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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