

“Life’s Missing Ingredients, Part 4--Optimism”

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dupree is sent to prison for a crime he did not commit. His wife was murdered and he was blamed. He lost everything. He was given a life sentence and in that situation he could have given in to despair or pessimism, but even there, he found a ray of hope. Take a look. **[VIDEO: *The Shawshank Redemption*, 90 seconds]**

So what circumstance are you living in where you need some optimism? And how are you doing with that? Because for many of us, this is one of life’s missing ingredients. And maybe this one is missing for you or someone you know. So here’s the test.

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.” Some people are wired to be optimistic. They’re the half-full people all the time. For other people, pessimism comes more naturally. They see a single cloud in a big, blue sky and we go, “It’s going to rain.” Any little thought comes into your mind, and you bring it to the worse case scenario. They’re the half-empty type.

Whatever type you are, you might need a healthy dose of optimism because optimism is fuel for the fire of life. Viktor Frankl was a Nazi concentration camp survivor and later wrote a book called *Man’s Search for Meaning*. One thing he noticed during those horrific years in the camp was that there was no way you could tell who would survive just by looking at them. You might assume that the strong and healthy would be the ones to make it through the torture, the slave labor, the near starvation. But just as many weak-looking people made it as strong-looking. Frankl found that those that were most likely to survive were the ones who had something yet to do in their lives. In the midst of the despair they had a sense of optimism. They were the ones who had dreams to fulfill and a purpose to live out, people to visit and relationships to build. The common thread for those who were survivors was that they had things yet to do in their lives. That optimism pulled them into the future with hope.

But it sure does seem like the reasons for pessimism get a lot more press and attention than reasons for optimism. Just read a magazine, watch TV, read the paper. I think there are some dark clouds on the horizon that are driving many people toward pessimism. Dark clouds like terrorism and the economy. So many people still needing good jobs. Then there’s the world AIDS epidemic and poverty. The racism issues in our world. There’s more. But the point is, when you look at a list like this 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 abject despair. And that’s not even touching on the personal issues of depression, broken hearts and broken relationships that can lead to pessimism and despair.

But when you’re pessimistic, gloomy, grim you neutralize your potential to make a difference. You neutralize your God-given abilities. Pessimism—if you take it all the way down to it bottom—puts you in a position where you don’t want to be. But it’s hard to claw your way out of that, isn’t it, in a world like this? 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 that will serve you well for the rest of your life.

But first let’s look at the context. This occurs in the Old Testament where King David falls in love with a married woman named Bathsheba. He has an adulterous affair with her, she becomes pregnant by David, and David orchestrates the murder of her husband, Uriah. Bathsheba later gives birth to that child. It all looks pretty good for these two until the prophet Nathan shows up and says, “Bad news, David. Heaven has decreed, because of your murder of Bathsheba’s husband, because of the adulterous relationship with the child’s mom, the child will become ill and eventually die. You brought this on the child, David. Heaven has decreed it. You did this.” Shortly afterwards, the child gets seriously ill. The doctors are helpless. So what happens? What does David do? David does an amazing thing. Rather than going down the cycle of despair, like everybody would expect him to do, listen to what the Scriptures tell us that he does in 2 Samuel, chapter 12. It says these words: **[SLIDE...] “But David fasted and prayed and pleaded before God for the life of his son.”**

The Bible says that he lay facedown on the palace floor for seven days and seven nights, David's prayer is recorded in 2 Samuel 12:22. Here's what David's prayer was for seven days and seven nights. **[SLIDE...]** **"Who knows? God might be gracious to me and let the child live" (2 Samuel 12:22, NIV).**

David prays this optimistic prayer even after heaven has decreed that his child would surely die. David holds onto hope. "Who knows? Heaven might hear this prayer and rescind its decree. God might change his mind." "Who knows? God might be gracious to me and let the child live." But that didn't happen. News comes to David from one of his aides, "He's gone, David. Your child has died." So David gets up, washes himself, eats some food and he says, "I'll go to be with this child someday, but it's done now. I understand the consequences of my actions."

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 childhood. My last go-round was last fall, but I have no intention, as God and you are my witnesses, of spending one unnecessary hour in that pit of despair. Because when I'm there, I am no good to God, 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 in that position. And it's my full intention to live in a different place, to live with a glass that's half full. And this verse, **"Who knows? God might be gracious"** can be a source of strength in the face of difficulties, and pessimism.

You see, you and I are going to face various challenges and troubled circumstances--times when we'll feel like throwing in the towel. But these words can grip your spirit and give you and I the power to say, "No!" Before you throw in the towel, before you give up, "Who knows? God might be gracious. Maybe he'll open a door, answer a prayer, make a provision. Who knows?" But you've got to stay on the who-knows side. You've got to stay on the optimistic side of this equation, because the alternative is unthinkable. It's no way to live. 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 simple shepherd boy. He was a boy whose job was to tend his father'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 **[PICTURE: Grizzly Bear]** comes out of nowhere and threatens the sheep that David was supposed to defend. Others shepherds see a lethal predator like a bear, and they go, "See you! 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. As he sees the bear charging, he's got to decide what he's going to do. Maybe he's thinking something like this: "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 come and give me supernatural strength, I might be able to defend the sheep against the attack of this bear. I might be able to." 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 the strength necessary 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'm in big trouble!" He decides, "I think 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, I gave our great God room and opportunity to express his greatness in and through my life. Whatever God chooses to do is up to him, but I will have given him room to do a miracle."

So David puts himself between the rushing 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. It paid for David to be an optimist. That day, he was an unapologetic, half-full guy with reason to be filled with joy. God had manifested his greatness. The sheep were all safe. David's faith was built up. David goes, "Cool! I like this."

But that's not the only time it happened. The Bible mentions other instances. David is out in the same field, and he's protecting the sheep again, and this time, a lion **[PICTURE: a roaring lion]** comes out of nowhere. That lion's got a hankering for a lamb, or seven or eight of them. David just has a second or two to decide what he's going to do about the onrushing lion. "Should I step in the path of the lion like I did the bear? Will God give me supernatural power to defend the defenseless sheep against the onrushing lion?" So he goes, "Well, who knows? God might be gracious again."

So he puts himself between the attacking lion and the defenseless sheep, and God comes through a second time and gives him supernatural power to neutralize the lion. And later on that night—and this part, I'm just imagining. Later on that night, he's sitting out on the quiet hillside. The sheep are safe. The stars are out. And I can imagine David going, "This works for me. I'm liking this. I wonder what God really 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? Who knows what God might do through me if I put myself out there in faith and see?'"

A short time after that David's dad asks him to take food supplies to his brothers who are off fighting a battle with the Philistines. He does what he's asked. But when he gets to the battlefield nobody is fighting! No one is fighting because the Philistines had a Ripley's-Believe-It-Or-Not-sized bruiser standing out in front of the army trash-talking the whole Israelite army. He's trash-talking the Israelite soldiers, probably trash-talking their mothers. Especially he's trash-talking the God of the Israelites. His name is Goliath and just taunting the Israelites for the weakness of their God who can't find anyone to come out and fight with him!

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

David's brothers take him aside and tell him the facts of life: "David whoever tries to take on this tank is going to die, and then Goliath is going to hurt them real bad after that." David goes, "Hmm. Well, who knows? God might be gracious through me. Who knows? It worked with the bear. It worked with the lion. Who knows? It might happen again." So David volunteers. No one can talk him out of it. He refuses to wear the king's armor. He just kneels by a creek bed to find 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 bed, choosing rock number four or rock number five, I bet he's going, "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 in the name of God, 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 collapses, and the army behind David starts cheering. And now they're all fired up and grab their weapons, 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.

David eventually becomes king of Israel. 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 might, 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, it just gets going better and better. His faith keeps building and building. He's on a roll. The outcome is positive every time until the day that I described to you at the beginning of this message.

The day after the murder of Uriah and the adultery with Bathsheba and the birth of the little child—until that day when Nathan came in and said, "Your son is going to die." 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 the other, so I’m going to pray the only prayer I really know how to pray at this stage in my life. Who knows? God might be gracious. Who knows? Even in this situation where I deserve this punishment. Heaven has decreed it. It’s all been said and done according to Nathan. There is only reason for pessimism. Who knows? Even in this situation, God might be gracious and let my child live.”

For seven days and seven nights, he just repeats it. “Who knows? God might be gracious.” “Who knows? God might be gracious.” And he gets to the end and the child dies. **This time, it’s justice instead of grace.** When he gets the tragic news, David gets up. He washes himself. He gets some food. The very next thing he does is recorded in 2 Samuel 12. It says, [SLIDE...] **“And then David went into the house of the Lord and worshiped him” (2 Samuel 12:20).**

Get this, he doesn’t go into the house of the Lord and say, “Why did you do this?!” David didn’t go in and cry, “Foul!” or question the wisdom or character of God. He went into the house of the Lord and, while we don’t know exactly what he said, 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, in this moment, I never wanted to obligate you to any course of action. Really. My mantra was never 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 only about reminding myself how great and powerful and gracious a God you are. My mantra was to keep me from being a glass-is-half-empty guy. My mantra was to keep me from being a pessimist who falls into a pit of despair and lives there, dark and brooding, and no good to anybody. The mantra just helped me in all the difficult circumstances of my life to believe that there is a hope, and there’s a God who might open a door when they all look closed.

I can imagine David saying, “So Father, if you don’t mind, I’m going to stick with my mantra. Next time I’m up against a hard situation, when circumstances look grim, when everyone else around me is folding their cards, predicting worse-case scenarios and turning tail and running, if it’s all the same to you God, even in the most difficult of circumstances, back to a bear, to a lion, to a giant and yes, to the coffin of a son. I’ll remember all of it. And I will say, in whatever circumstance that threatens me in the future. Who knows? God might be gracious.”

Is it any wonder why David was called a man after God’s own heart? What faith, what hope, what optimism—solidly faith-based. That’s David’s story about optimism in the face of tragedy. But I want you to also hear from one of our own. Her name is Stephanie Osborne and this is her story of optimism. [VIDEO: **Stephanie Osborne**]

What a story! 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. But you have to give God room to do a miracle. Give him room to do a miracle!

I need to hear this in my struggle with depression. And I join many of you in your battles, when you’re facing difficulties and hardships. Sometimes, we win those battles and sometimes we loose, but God is always faithful. So we don’t stop fighting against the darkness and we do not give in to pessimism. Not in our world, and not in our personal lives. We give God plenty of room to do miracles.

Because who knows? This might be the day when things begin to change in the world. This might be the day when the door of opportunity opens. Who knows, this might be the service where God is gracious. This might be the service where some people who are far from God find him. 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. God, I’m coming to you.”

So this is real stuff to me. I need this mantra in my life, and I know how desperately some of you do. Quite a few of you are unemployed and have no idea where the next employment door is going to open. And you don’t even feel like going to the next interview or sending out one more resume. You’re going, “The heck with it! I’m down here and I’m done. OK.”

But listen, the alternative to optimism is something you don’t want to pursue. It wrecks you. Give God room for a miracle, get out and put out some resumes and go to some interviews, and when you’re driving there, you’ve got to be saying, “Who knows? God might be gracious today and lead me to the right job. Who

knows? It might happen. I'll keep worshiping him even if don't get what I want, like David did, but today might be the day."

Some of you are in medical situations or in marriage situations or have family or extended-family situations that only look dark. Friends, if you let the darkness overwhelm you, and you wind up down here, it's going to be ugly permanently. And I challenge you, grab a hold of David's mantra. Give God room for a miracle. Walk around, whatever your circumstances, and say, "Who knows? God might be gracious today. Who knows? God might be gracious in this situation, in this hardship or this relationship, in this time of need. Who knows? God might be gracious."

You'll live with the attitude that the glass is half full. You'll live with a bounce in your step. You'll live with a sense of anticipation of what God might do. It's the only way to fly, right?

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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