



*Priscilla Hochhalter*

As I write this, my sister is vacationing with her family, including grandbaby Hope. One night I called her cell phone and asked, “What are you doing?” As she helped wrangle people and luggage into the hotel, she replied frantically, “I’m holding Hope!”

Holding Hope! What a profound concept. Of the three lasting virtues listed in 1 Corinthians 13:13 (faith, hope, and love), hope seems to get the least attention, and yet we need it so much. Hope is all about the future—a bright future—designed by our loving God. If we lived each day “holding hope,” I’m sure we’d have less pain and more joy.

But how can we do so when all seems lost? This week we’ll explore questions about hope and how to hold it in our hearts. Oh, by the way, the photo shows me with Gregory, my niece’s cat.

*BIBLE READING: 2 Kings 4:25-28, 32-37*

In 2 Kings 4 we meet a Shunammite woman who has some wealth (v. 8) which she uses to bless the man of God, Elisha, without expecting payback. When Elisha asks how he can help her in return, she refuses to ask for anything—so he promises her a son! Imagine her joy when the promise comes true, and then her heartbreak when the child dies (vv. 13-20). Having found Elisha, the woman cries in agony, “Did I ask you for a son? Didn’t I tell you, ‘Don’t raise my hopes?’”

Haven’t we all been there? We dare not raise our hopes, lest they be shattered. Yet this woman’s hopes are rewarded wondrously: through Elisha, God resurrects her child.

Doctors may debate this account. Ancient peoples lacked scientific tools to verify death, so was the boy totally dead? I believe he was, but even if not, he was unresponsive and assumed dead. So the Shunammite’s son was headed for burial, and that would have quenched any remaining life had God not revived him.

This story shows us that God loves to fulfill the hopes of believers—especially believers who are generous, unselfish, and grateful—in wildly miraculous ways. Like the Shunammite, are we living generously and gratefully? Are we “holding hope” for powerful outpourings of God’s grace? She dared to hope, and God exceeded her highest dreams.

*SONG: There Is Power in the Blood*

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, help me dare to live generously and to hope for great things like the Shunammite. One miracle I dare to hope for right now is: [be specific!].*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Job 6:8-13*

Like the Shunammite, Job loses his children to death. But unlike her, Job never sees the original ones resurrected, though he has more children later. Job also loses his health and wealth, and his wife and friends make things worse. Job's pain is so unbearable that he begs God to kill him and reminds God he's not made of stone (vv. 9, 12). This is his way of asking God, "Why?" But God never tells him.

Maybe you've felt pain like Job's. Maybe your hope has been uprooted violently (Job 19:10) or eroded slowly (Job 14:19). Maybe you, like Job, have longed for death. Yet during Job's blackest night, he declares: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope [trust] in him" (Job 13:15).

What?! Why would anybody place hope in an almighty God who allows pain? The answer is that we know him. We know his purposes are good. And we know he is our only hope. My church sings a song from Job 1:21: "You give and take away...Blessed be the name of the Lord, blessed be your name." Even when God takes away, we praise him.

So why is Job's story in the Bible? Is it there to condemn us when we lack Job's faith? No, I think it's there to encourage us. Job experienced gut-wrenching doubt and suicidal despair, yet Scripture considers him godly, showing that doubt and despair are no barrier to God's redemption. And that is exactly why God is worthy of our hope.

*SONG: Blessed Be Your Name (Matt Redman)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, my deepest pain right now is [name it]. Please bear it with me. Remind me of your mercies and help me to keep "holding hope" in you.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 25:15-21*

In Psalm 25, David tells God, “My hope is in you all day long;” he recalls God’s mercy and love and seeks God’s guidance and forgiveness (vv. 5-12). Then, as seen in today’s verses, David affirms that he is clinging to hope in the Lord and asks deliverance from his enemies.

Sometimes we forget David’s problems with enemies, enemies like Saul. David had received a prophecy that one day he’d be king of Israel (1 Samuel 16:1-13); but Saul, who was already king, was jealous and sought to kill David. So David lived on the run, often outside, for about ten years.

Ten years is a long time to sleep in rocks and caves with one eye open while the king devotes his vast resources to seeking your life. Often David must have felt overwhelmed by exhaustion and discouragement. If God loved him and had promised him the throne, why did he have to live like a wild dog for a whole decade? As he got older, did David wonder, “What if I misunderstood? What if God forgot? What if my time is past?” Did he experience the feeling that “hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Proverbs 13:12)?

David finally received the kingship. But when he was writing many of his psalms, he couldn’t be sure he would. So he kept “holding hope” in God. Even without visible proof that his hopes would be fulfilled, David trusted not in the throne, but in God.

*SONG: My Hope Is in You, Lord*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I believe you have promised me [name a promise you believe is from God]. Help me cling to hope in your promises and, even more, in you.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Jeremiah 13:15-17*

The people of Judah were in denial. Sin had made them weak and vulnerable to invasion, but they wouldn't admit it. They listened instead to lying prophets who said, "There is only blessing—no sin, and no need to repent."

By contrast, the prophet Jeremiah spoke truth and was persecuted for it. He warned the people to repent, lest the light they hoped for became darkness. Jeremiah is called the "weeping prophet" because he wept over sin and the resulting exile to Babylon he saw coming. Yet he foresaw that after seventy years the people would come home—God had plans to give them "hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

The exile to Babylon was a form of discipline. But "in [discipline] there is hope" (Proverbs 19:18). How can we keep "holding hope" in discipline? Well, if we don't resist, discipline brings repentance and healing which gives hope. Proverbs 3:12 and Hebrews 12:6 say God chastens or disciplines those he loves—another sign of hope.

If you are under God's discipline (and we often are, in some area), don't fight it. If you do, the discipline may escalate until you get the lesson. But if you repent and obey, the lesson won't last forever and you may never have to repeat it again. God's discipline is for your benefit, and you will shine brighter on the other side.

*SONG: Praise You in This Storm*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, your discipline in the area of [name an area, if there is one] is for my repentance and healing. Help me to receive discipline with hope.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Romans 5:1-5*

Scripture says suffering yields perseverance, which yields character, which yields hope. So suffering leads to hope.

Yikes! Suffering? That's about as unpopular as discipline (though discipline often is due to faults or sins and suffering often isn't). Couldn't God make an easier way? Nope—even Jesus, though sinless, was “made perfect” and “learned obedience” by suffering (Hebrews 2:10; 5:8-9).

A wise friend once affirmed to me that God does indeed use suffering to help us grow. I was in pain at the time, and I snapped, “Well, that's a fine way to treat his children.” Patiently she replied, “Actually, it is. If there were a better way to lead us into a deeper, more abundant life, God would use it. But there isn't. Suffering is the way.” I've felt pain and suffering, and I hate it. But if we submit to it, suffering does produce character—and hope.

So how can we keep “holding hope” in suffering? Well, Romans 5:5 promises our hopes won't be dashed because we can rely on God's love and God's Holy Spirit, even when he allows suffering as an essential part of our life's path. As the song “Day by Day” says, God gives us each day what he deems best. Or as the great theologian Mick Jagger put it, “You can't always get what you want—but if you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need.”

*SONG: Day by Day*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, we need suffering, much as we hate it. Help me to embrace it in the area of [name an area, if there is one] so hope can grow.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Colossians 1:21-27*

OK, so hope is good and much needed. But did you know that hope, the lowliest of the three lasting virtues in 1 Corinthians 13:13 (faith, hope, and love), is a source of the other two? Colossians 1:5 says that faith and love “spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven.” So hope comes first, generating faith and even love, the greatest virtue of all.

Hebrews 11 affirms the surprising idea that faith is rooted in hope. “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for...” (v. 1). It then lists dozens of people who hoped in God. Some received visible answers on earth (vv. 32-35), while others died still hoping (vv. 13, 39).

But how can God’s people keep “holding hope” when they suffer without cause (like Job, and Jesus) or when they die with hope still unrealized (like some in Hebrews 11, and Jesus)? How can they have hope and faith in invisible things that haven’t happened yet? Isn’t that hoping in nothing?

No, it is hoping in everything! Our hope is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” He already lives in and through us, and one day we will know his full glory. So we must fix our eyes on him who endured the cross “for the joy set before him,” and never lose heart. Such endurance will produce a harvest of blessing (Hebrews 12:2-11; Galatians 6:9).

Jesus himself is our hope.

*SONG: Joy Unspeakable and Full of Glory*

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: God, the idea that faith and love spring from hope in itself gives hope. Remind us that the risen Christ is our hope. Teach us to let hope grow.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Ephesians 1:18-23*

We've studied those who hoped for life, death, kingship, and promises never fulfilled in their lifetime. We've seen that hope comes through discipline and suffering and leads to faith and love. We've been reminded of our hope in Christ's resurrection and been encouraged to keep "holding hope." So where is God when hope seems lost?

God is right here. We hope in a God unseen who allows suffering undeserved for promises yet unfulfilled. Crazy? Yes! We have a crazy hope, secured in heaven for us. Crazy because Christ lives in us. Crazy because he rescues us from sin and death. Crazy because we are citizens of heaven, looking forward to the glory yet to come.

A blind friend of mine has this kind of crazy hope. She says, beaming with joy, that on earth she cannot see, but in the heavenlies she already has received full healing; it just isn't manifested on earth yet! She's right—the bright heavenly realm is the real one while this temporary earth is just a dim shadow of it (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). One day the earthly shadow will fade, leaving only the already perfect heavenly reality.

This, then, is our crazy hope: Christ is in us. First John 4:4 says: "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (KJV). Christ has conquered every enemy, and this is the basis of our hope—both in this life and in the life to come.

*SONG: Greater Is He That Is in Me*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: If possible, pray Romans 15:13 with a friend: "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. Amen."*

—Priscilla Hochhalter