

John Townsend Offers Hope for the Hurting

"Where Is God?" How many of us have asked this when going  through trying situations. John Townsend, psychologist, author and speaker, offers answers in his new book, Where Is God? Finding His Presence, Purpose, and Power in Difficult Times.

"God has not left you twisting in the wind, nor is He playing hide-and-seek," Townsend says. "He wants to be present with you and powerful for you in your circumstances. He may bring a miracle. He may create a new path. And He may walk with you through a loss. But however your hard time plays out, He is here. He is for you and with you, no matter your struggle."

Townsend offers stories, real-life examples and practical applications to help readers renew their courage, faith and hope. Following is an excerpt from Where Is God? (Click [here](#) to purchase this book.)

A Hope More Than Wishing

You and I need hope in God. Hope is one of the most powerful agents we have available to us in times like these. It can be simply defined as *the anticipation of a future good that we do not now experience*. Hope helps us hold on and not give in to despair, even if we don't see the positive evidence we desire to see.

Hope motivates, inspires and focuses us in our work and efforts. Hope keeps a parent consulting with doctor after doctor, searching for the specialist who can help her child. Hope moves a businessman to make phone call after phone call, to network exhaustively to find a new position after a layoff. Hope influences a single person to stay in circulation, even after relationship disappointments and heartbreak. Hope

motivates a person who has lost his mate to continue his daily routine and his close friendships. The value of hope can't be overestimated. With hope, we endure the now in anticipation of a better future. My desire in writing this book is that if you come away with only one thing from reading it, it would be an increased sense of hope. There are few insurmountable obstacles for people who have a deep hope that is real and substantive. In that sense, the answers to the where-is-God question are designed ultimately to provide hope.

Hope That Does Not Help

Not all hope is good for us or can really sustain us. Just like empty calories will leave you hungry a few minutes after eating, there are kinds of hope that don't deliver what they promise. Here are some of the kinds of unhelpful hope you'll encounter in life.

False Hope

Hope is so important when we're facing difficult trials that sometimes we grasp for a hope that isn't real just to have something positive to hold on to. We will hear someone assure us that things are going to be OK, even if they have no basis for saying that other than wanting us to feel better, and we do feel some relief. At least that reassurance pulled us out of our funk and despair for a while. But this is false hope, and it functions somewhat like an antidepressant. It lifts us up and even energizes us; however, when it proves to be false, it can leave us worse off than we were before. Desperate wishing can inadvertently put words based on our wishes in God's mouth, but these promises are not real and can leave us with a genuine sense of disappointment in God.

For example, a friend of mine, who was facing a terminal illness, was told by a Christian that she would be healed. That person said she had heard from God about my friend, and it was going to happen. Her family, of course, gained hope and encouragement, and life became better for a while. There are

times when I have seen recovery like this happen, a true medical miracle. But, sadly, I have seen more cases in which, over time, sickness has taken the lives of my friends. The disappointment, confusion, and, worst of all, the doubt in God's love that would remain in the family members' minds was devastating. They sometimes felt set up by God, or, at best, that they were crashing after their well-meaning friend's "sugar high" of false hope.

Sometimes the energy people gain from false hope will help them find an unexpected solution to a problem. For example, a man who loses his position at work may believe that he is destined to work in the same industry he was in. That may not be God's plan for him, but he works very hard at networking, connecting and being assertive in his efforts. He doesn't land in the same sector, but all his energy did lead him to something in another area that was good. So there is a sometimes-positive end to false hope. However, I think it's much better to get the energy from true hope and not have to suffer the disappointment and questioning that comes afterward.

Psychologically, there is another type of problem hope called *defensive hope*. It is emotional in nature and sometimes leads to believing in false hope. With defensive hope, a person wants something to be true so badly and so deeply that she bypasses the evidence and reality and looks only toward the positive. It is a denial of what is based on need and desire. You see this often in people who have an addict in their lives. The addict uses, goes crazy, causes all sorts of damage, then promises never to use again. The family, not wanting to live in the nightmare again, believes the promises. And when the addict drops out of counseling and his recovery program, saying he doesn't need it and he's strong enough now, the family believes him. And when he uses again and crashes, promising afterward that he'll never do it again for sure, the family believes him.

This hope is defensive because the family is defending itself against what is true, which is that the addict is not in the program and, therefore, has very little chance of staying clean and sober. Conversely, true hope believes in what is real. If the addict were saying, "I hate what I am doing to myself and to my family so much that I'm willing to go to treatment until they say I'm done," that would give them real hope for his recovery. Though he is still using, I would have hope for that person because I see a seed of hunger and need and honesty inside him. But if he is clean for a few weeks with no treatment and looks OK, I don't ever have much hope. Like false hope, defensive hope is based on our wishes for things to be better with no foundation in reality.

Hopelessness

Hopelessness is the state in which we feel there are no good options, no good future and nothing positive to anticipate. Tomorrow seems as if it will be no better than today, and so do all the other tomorrows, day after day after day. Hopelessness can cause severe life problems. It can lead to helplessness, giving up, acting out, despair and losing one's faith in God. The absence of hope in your life can cause your heart to weaken and become sick: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a dream fulfilled is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12, NLT). It is a hard state of being.

I have experienced hopelessness in my life as probably everyone has. After I graduated from college, I moved about 1,500 miles away from my home and began working at a children's home. I was a 23-year-old cottage parent for seven teenage boys. Needless to say, it was a very difficult situation for both me and the boys. There was constant chaos, impulsivity, violence and confusion. There are some people who did great work in this role, but I was not one of them. I just didn't have the maturity or life skills to mentor these boys. I hope today that those boys have recovered from my working with them! So I lasted about a year and a half, and I finally

quit the job because I simply couldn't continue. I had no job, no income, no prospects, and I was living several states away from my family and friends. It was one of the worst periods in my life, a real time of hopelessness. In fact, I became depressed, and it took a while for that to be resolved.

Having said that, I would still take the discomfort of hopelessness over false hope or defensive hope. I know that may sound strange. Why would anyone choose the negative over the positive? But it is true. I say that because hopelessness has a value. Hopelessness in what is not real helps lead us to reality, and *reality always leads to God*. Reality is what is true; it is what is. When people say "It is what it is," I resonate with that. God created reality. If something is real, even if it is painful, God is there. And I have seen so many people over the years who, having been let down by their false hope and their defensive hope, finally gave up and entered into the right kind of hopelessness. That is, the hopelessness that gives up on what is not real and what is not truly from God. We need to feel hopeless about things like our self-effort, our control over the universe, and our ability to do it all on our own. We need to feel hopeless about things like hoping against hope that things will magically turn out OK, or that thinking positive is all we need: "The king is not saved by a mighty army; a warrior is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a false hope for victory; nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength" (Ps. 33:16-17, NASB).

This sort of hopelessness helps us clean the slate and look for the One who provides real and substantive hope.

Hope That Works

So what should you hope for in tough times? Well, I wish I could say that this book will show you how God will make your negative situation disappear instantly or in a short amount of time. It would be great to present some secrets and keys here that will guarantee financial stability, the right job,

medical and emotional health, and restored relationships. In reality, those solutions do happen in some situations. I have experienced them in my own life and those of many others. And I hope this book will help you do your part to help them happen. Tough times can and do get better!

However, some situations do not go away, no matter what we do or however hard we pray. We don't get the guarantee, and it is unsettling and disturbing. But that is where we learn of a deeper sort of hope than simply that the problem will disappear. We learn to hope in God and in His character, that is, who He is inside Himself. We hope in the love that moves Him to be for us and in His power that strengthens us and changes our circumstances. Hope in God is never about simply finding some way to get Him to make things better, though I always pray that for myself and those I love. God has a much larger view of our lives from His vantage point. It is a view of what we need that is based on His intimate knowledge of us.

He loves you and wants to help you, but He will do it His way and in His time. God's best for you can mean a lot of things. The payoff may be today, or it may be at another time through another avenue you haven't thought of but that He provides. It may be that He creates a life full of meaning and purpose for you. It may be something He is doing internally in your soul and character. Or it may be something that you won't find out about on this side of the grave. Hope in God always, ultimately, needs to be the assured hope that *God's love will move Him to do what is best for you.*

You may think that this description of hope is too broad: *What if what is best for me is something I am afraid of? What if it's that I won't get the job that I need? Or that the marriage won't last? Or my surgery won't be successful? Can't God get more specific than that so I can feel some hope?* That concern is understandable. We all have our needs, fears, desires, and dreams that we feel strongly about, and they aren't insignificant. They need to be paid attention to. There

are several sources of hope than can stand you in good stead during your struggle.

The Promises of God

The Bible is full of promises from God to His people. One of their purposes is to provide real and sustaining hope for us during our darkness. God's character is reflected in His promises to us. They are commitments He makes to us so that we will know He is actively working for our best: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord. 'They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope'" (Jer. 29:11, NLT).

Narratives in the Bible

We see over and over again stories of people's lives in which God helps, rescues, changes and transforms them. These are the underdog stories, the ones we can identify with when we are in hard times. The little guy wins: The nation of Israel is set free from slavery. David defeats Goliath. Jesus heals the demoniac. The stories give us hooks to hold on to. We see that God is active and reaching down to help His people whom He loves. He isn't sitting on His throne, waiting for the universe to wind down. He is engaged.

When I am in a difficult situation, I sometimes go to whatever I am reading in my Bible that day and ask God: "Please give me a promise or a story that will give me hope. I need it today." And time and time again, it happens.

Stories From Yesterday and Today

I am a big believer in stories of hope from people today and in history as well. In terms of today, when the media takes the slant of "If it bleeds, it leads," we need some good news that is also true news. Real-life examples of people whose lives God has stepped into and done good things in can bring a great deal of hope. They help give us a reality check by bringing God, hard times, and our situations up close and personal. In these stories, we find people with whom we can

identify because they have been there, just where we are.

There is a famous psychological experiment that measured the ability of rats to keep afloat in a fish tank full of water. There were two tanks with several rats in each. In one tank the scientists measured how long it took for rats to give up and start sinking. In the other, a scientist, at frequent intervals, reached her hand in the tank and rescued one or another of the rats from sinking. The other paddling rats observed their companions being rescued. But in the first tank, no one saw any rescue. The result of the experiment was that the rats left in the rescue tank lasted longer than those in the other. They had real hope. Seeing their buddies get help gave them more power to continue. And when we see and hear stories of people who have struggled and whom God has helped, we can tread water longer. And instead of sinking, we can swim.

Specific Promises From God

I believe God specifically conveys promises of hope to people at particular times, which are for our hope. While we need to validate them through the doctrines of Scripture and through the wisdom of good people, these specific assurances can help us persevere in hardship. I have a friend who was in a bad financial fix with her adult daughter. Her daughter was a single mom, and, through financial hardship, lost her car. She couldn't get to work. My friend didn't have the means to get her daughter a car. She was worried about her daughter and her grandkids. She was praying about this situation and heard a voice say, "Candace is going to give your daughter a car." And within 24 hours, her friend Candace had called to offer her daughter a car. Now, my friend is not prone to wild thinking. She is a very down-to-earth businesswoman. But she heard a voice. I pressed her on this and asked, "You mean a voice like you are thinking something in your head and it seems like someone's voice?" She said, "No, I mean a voice outside my head but with nobody in the room." That event gave her hope

and, in fact, gave hope to all she told about it, including myself.

Heaven Can Wait Sometimes

There is a type of hopeful thinking that, in the service of heaven, negates the good things of today. These teachings are meant to provide hope in the future, but they are out of balance. The thinking is that life is terrible here, so we may as well suffer through it because heaven will be great and worth all the pain or that we should just be miserable and tolerate all the trouble and hang on for the sweet by and by. I think that is a really inferior way to get through a lifetime and one that the Bible doesn't support. Certainly heaven will be incredible. It will be a place where everything is restored, and there will be no more hard times, pain or suffering. More than that, it is where our ultimate home is, for this world is not our home: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20, NIV). We are citizens of a future place we can hardly dream of. And certainly it will be much greater in quality than life here on Earth. Today's life does not compare.

But that doesn't mean we should have no expectations or desire for a great life here. That is just crazy thinking and, psychologically, it contributes to a passive and disconnected experience in life. Instead, you can truly have a life very much worth living. Your years here on the planet can be full of good things. Things such as an intimate relationship with God, deep and sustaining relationships with safe people, a mission and vision that is fulfilling for you and contributes to God's purposes for the world, and a life that is satisfying, rich, and full: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10, NASB).

Obviously, this doesn't mean that a great life is a pain-free

life. It is a life in which the pain is intertwined with joy and good things but not overwhelmed by them. It is a life that is not defined by the struggles you experience but one that makes sense of the struggles and goes beyond them into your relationships, your mission and your purpose. You were not destined to have your struggle as your identity.

You probably have been through the exercise of figuring out what you want etched on your gravestone. It can be a helpful way to find perspective on your purpose in life. What you don't want it to say is that your struggle controlled your very life, that it formed your entire identity and the meaning of your existence: "She was very ill." "He was laid off." "She never got married." "They were in a bad car accident." You want that stone to have different words: "He loved his family." "She was a great leader." "He followed God's ways." "She made a difference." Please don't misunderstand these thoughts. I am not at all making light of difficult times; they can be devastating. Your situation may be terribly desperate or terribly sad. And you need a great deal of help, support, comfort and resources to get through this. However, you were intended to be defined by who God made you to be and where you went with that, not by the hardships you'll face.

To purchase *Where Is God?*, [click here](#).