



Message Transcript

Finding Hope in Hard Times

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How many of you, again, need a little bit of hope today? So I've entitled this hope for hard times. I just came by today basically to help you get your hopes up and keep them up for whatever it is that you may need that hope for. For some of you, that's no problem because you're in a good place. But others of you are walking through a hard time that makes no sense to you. We all encounter our hard times at one time or another. That's why we all need hope.

Hope is one of the most indispensable qualities of a healthy and vibrant life. It's been called the oxygen of the soul. Someone has well said we can live 40 days without food, 3 days without water, 8 minutes without oxygen, but only 1 second without hope. We need hope. When we have hope, we sleep better; we feel better; we live better. And when we're fueled by hope, we have more satisfying relationships; we're more productive; we're more successful; we're more peaceful; we're more helpful to others; we're more healthy physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We need hope. In fact, raising the hope level in your life can change everything for you.

If you feel hopeless about something, can I tell you that just a 10% increase can change things because once you get that hope in you, it leads to more. The good news today is that regardless of your background, regardless of your past mistakes, regardless of your personal makeup or life history, regardless of the problems you face, you can choose hope today. Now that's right. Hope is a choice. What I'm telling you, it's not like it's just going to fall out of the sky and conk you on the head one day. Great. I got a little bit of hope now. It's not just the possession of those lucky few who were seemingly born with a hope gene that the rest of us didn't get. Don't you just hate

those people? They just are hopeful all the time. No. You can choose hope. You can cultivate and raise its level in your life. How many of you know that God has called you into partnership? So when he promises you something, you come into a place where you receive rather than just kind of waiting around for it to happen.

So I want you to look at this incredible promise. It's one of my favorite verses in the New Testament, Romans 15:13 says, "May the God of hope..." Stop there. That's his name. The God of hope. I like to remind believers he's not the God of nope or the God of rope. Here, go hang yourself. Or the God of mope. Or the God of dope. He's the God of hope. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace," now here's our part, "as you trust in him," look at this, "so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Man, that is a verse. This is saying that not only is God the source of hope in our lives, but he has made provision for each one of us to be an overflowing with hope type of person. That's what he wants us to be.

Ask yourself, am I overflowing with hope today right here as I sit at BRAVE church? Am I overflowing with hope? And if not, embrace this prayer and this promise as God's will for you. You maybe want to tell the person next to you. It might be the right time to do that. Just look at them and say there really is hope for you. You don't have to do that if somebody's going to slug you if you do that. So we're clear as to what biblical hope is, it's more than just wishful thinking, like I hope the Broncos win the Super Bowl this year. Last time I was here, you were trying to steal my quarterback from Green Bay. Glad you got a pretty good one. You guys are going to be all right.

But biblical hope refers to a rock solid confidence and expectation I can have that god will be true to his character and promises, no matter how difficult the situation I may be facing. Therefore, because I know he is with me and because I know he is for me and because I know he is working all things together for my good, I don't have to give way to despair. We're not just, yes, he is the God of eternal hope. But guys, he's the God of temporal hope. How many of you know that when you gave your life to Jesus, eternity began then? You have that eternal hope living inside of you right now because he has things he wants you to accomplish and he wants you to be overflowing with hope, even when it feels like, well, I don't get why I'm walking through what I'm walking through right now. Well, let's get your hopes up.

So many times, we can be like the man who a number years ago returned from war to find his whole village destroyed, his house in ashes. He found among the charred embers where his house had once stood some small bones, which he knew had to be the bones of his small son who had undoubtedly perished in the fire. And so carefully picking up those charred small bones, he placed them in a small box and carried those bones with him for the rest of his life. His life forever defined from that point on by the misfortune of his past.

However, many years later there came a knock on the door by someone who claimed to be his son, and what this father didn't know is that the people who had ravaged the village many years before had kidnapped his young son and his son, once freed, had spent many years trying to get back to the village and trying to find his father. Now, here they were, face to face. The father, however, couldn't bring himself

to believe anything other than what his little box of bones had reminded him of for years. His son was dead, lost in a fire years before. He had the bones to prove it. And therefore he concluded the man at his door couldn't be his son. Consequently, he turned him away and refused a relationship with the very son he had grieved for years all because he had become mired in hopelessness and despair.

So let me ask you, are you carrying around a box of despair today? I normally bring a box. I didn't. But my wife had her little tin of Altoids. But that's good enough because this is what you hear when the enemy wants to remind you, "Oh, by the way, you remember you're carrying around that box of bones. There's no hope for you." And he rattles that to make you lock back in on all the misfortune of your past.

Guys, when we experience a loss, when a dream gets crushed, when we suffer setbacks and disappointments, or when we face unwelcome changes or transitions in life, and we start feeling like life has passed us by, or we tell our ourselves things like, "Well, it was so much better in the past than it's going to be in the future," we can develop mental and emotional strongholds of despair and hopelessness like a box we carry around and listen to. That not only binds us to our past, but also blinds us to our current realities of God's work in our lives as well as the exciting expectation he wants us to have concerning our future.

While I was working on this message, I was having to preach it to myself once again. You see, I transitioned, as I said, out of my senior pastor role this past March 27th, after 38 years of church leadership. My wife and I have been on a sabbatical

since then just traveling the country. I thought it was interesting. I was up in the hotel last night when I got in from Montana yesterday. I thought, "Hey, the last time I was here to preach was in January, and it was while I was in that very hotel. I sat down and mapped out what we wanted to do for the nine months of our sabbatical." And we've just been living that thing out. So that part has been fun. We've been in Florida for a couple months, been in Montana, Colorado Springs. We're heading to Maine, Iowa, back out to Phoenix. I'm driving all of that, by the way, going to need a new car when I'm done.

So we're traveling the country for the rest of the year, reflecting on what we sense God has for our next chapter. But can I also tell you some grieving over what we've left behind and wondering how the years went by so quickly? Some mornings when I've woken up, I've felt like somebody has stolen my battery pack and very, very first, Monday morning, after walking off the stage on Sunday, we were headed to a pastor's retreat in Atlanta. We woke up in Paducah, Kentucky, and I looked over at my wife as we were headed down the road, and I said, "I feel like something's been amputated."

So I know what it is to kind of want to hang on, see to what I had. But I also know what it is to have made a conscious choice on those hardest mornings to reach for hope and to stir it up in my life. I've been reminded of a passage God gave me a few years ago at a similar juncture. I'll never forget it. We were dropping off my daughter at college, and my son had gotten married and my oldest daughter had gotten married, and I still have a younger son, but we were facing the empty nest. With

every one of them leaving the house, you'd just be reminded of what you've lost. Oh, man, I wish I could go back and do those years again. And this is what I'm feeling that morning as I picked up my Bible.

I was reading a rather obscure passage in the book of 1 Chronicles 7. Any of you got 1 Chronicles 7 memorized? I always say if you don't know where that's at, it's in your clean pages. All right. Just look for the clean pages. God spoke to me from an intriguing insight into Ephraim's life. You go to 1 Chronicles 7, and it's just who begat who begat who begat who, this guy was the son of son of son of son of, and we just kind of blow through that stuff, but he stopped me at Ephraim. In this passage, he gives us the genealogies of Jacob's sons, the 12 tribes, and while Joseph wasn't a tribe himself, his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh represented him in terms of the division of the land. So Ephraim and Manasseh were tribes of Israel. Joseph got two.

In this particular passage, 1 Chronicles 7:21 tells us that two of Ephraim's sons, Ezer and Ilead were apparently cattle rustlers. They would've done real well out here. I was in Colorado Springs for two-and-a-half weeks of July, and my good friend I was with just resigned as CEO of the Pro Rodeo. So we got in a little bit of rodeo action. But when I think of these two, Ezer and Ilead, they apparently were cattle rustlers, and they got into something of a scrape or a shootout with some men of Gath one day and were killed in the scuffle. Verse 22, 1 Chronicles 7, says, "Their father Ephraim mourned for them many days." You can imagine. Any parent would mourn many days if they suffered that kind of loss and you would find it easy to carry around a box of

hopelessness. "I can't have my sons back."

The next verse tells us that later on, he made love to his wife and she became pregnant and gave birth to another son. Now watch this. 1 Chronicles 7:23 says, "He named him Bariah." Any of you ever named your son Bariah? I don't know that's at the top of the list. But please don't. And it'll always, if you'd look in your Bible, have like a little A or a B whatever the little letter is, and you're to drop down and read the notes down below. It will say Bariah sounds like the Hebrew word for misfortune. He named him Bariah, because there had been misfortune in his family. So you get the picture. He suffers a huge loss and as a result, he emerges with an emotional stronghold of despair in his soul forever carrying around a box of bones to remind him of what he's lost.

How do I know? Because when God blesses him again, instead of walking in the excitement and the hope of a fresh blessing and a new future, that's what he should have named him: fresh blessing. New future. If he's looking the right way, right? No, he names his son something that would serve only to bind him to his past loss and despair every time he said his name. Can you imagine, "Hey, Misfortune. Time to get up. School bus is coming." "Hey, Misfortune, can you go get the paper?" Could you imagine naming your son misfortune?

Guys, rehearsing your misfortune over and over again is a sure way to lock yourself into a life of despair. What God said to me as I was reading this passage that day is Cal, I've given you the naming rights for every event that happens in your life.

You can either look forward in hope, or you can look backward in despair. I believe that's his word for some of you today. God gives you the naming rights concerning every unfortunate circumstance that has come or will come into your life. You can choose a label that binds you to hope, or you can choose a label that binds you to despair. In every situation, you can choose to see the Bariah or the Messiah.

Amen. Woo!

So, I want to help you choose hope today. I want to help you become the overflowing with hope kind of person that God wants you to be. And to be that kind of person, there are choices you have to make as you partner with God.

So, let's look at four hope-igniting choices that will help us cooperate with the Holy Spirit. I'm an acrostic guy. I like to use acrostics all the time. So this spells hope today. H-O-P-E. For those of you who are the note takers, okay? I'm understanding we were having a little trouble with the notes and stuff. So hopefully they're coming up behind me. If not, just grab as much of it as you can, but here's choice number one. Here's your H for hope: Hold on to faith tenaciously. You'll find everywhere that hope and faith are inseparable. God even says here, "May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace as you trust." It's the very same word. As you exercise faith in him.

How many of you discovered that faith doesn't run on autopilot? That's why the Bible says you have to stir it up. You have to feed it. You have to renew it. You have to keep it strong and vibrant. You have to be tenacious about it. See, your faith is getting stirred up just because you chose to come to church today. Some of you got out of

bed today and you said, "I don't want to go." I know what that's like. I told my wife, "Oh, I don't want to go. Give me two good reasons why I need to go to church." She said, "Well, number one, everybody's waiting on you. Number two, because you're the pastor."

But I've had times where I walked in in despair and I walked out with hope. Why? Because I put myself in an environment where my faith could be stirred up, and because my faith was stirred up, all of a sudden I'm filled with hope. Hold onto faith tenaciously and stir it up. You want to overflow with hope? You work at overflowing with faith because they are inseparably linked. The essence of faith is hopeful expectation based on God's faithfulness, Hebrews 11:1. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for." Hope comes before faith. You've got a God of hope. And when you put your trust in him... Now I've got hope flowing through my faith.

So you can have faith knowing that God is faithful. You know that he will keep his promises. You know that he will work out everything for your good, and even though it doesn't look that way right now, your faith isn't based on what you can see. It's based in the substance of what you hope for, a substance that arises from your relationship with God who will be faithful, who will be with you, who is for you no matter what, and so you walk in the positive expectation that he will bless you and work out as good purposes in your life no matter what you're going through.

Zechariah 9, in verse 12, God refers to as people as prisoners of hope. That's what he calls them. I love that imagery because there's nothing to be hopeful about in their surroundings at the time he calls them that. But God says, "Because of my

covenant with you, I want you to be a prisoner of hope." Now think about that. When you're a prisoner of something, it's like you're chained to it. You can't get away from it. Ephraim decided to be a prisoner of despair.

Some of you may be prisoners of worry or fear today. Some of you may be prisoners of doubt or discouragement. But you can break those chains today and become a prisoner of hope. How? By getting your eyes off of your circumstances and choosing faith in our God of hope. It doesn't matter how bleak your circumstances are or how long you've had to fight off despair. Just greet each day with fresh faith and the expectation of blessing in your life. Look in the mirror and declare, "Thank you, Lord. Today's going to be a day of blessing in my life," and then bind the lies that you're listening to. "I bind that lie. That is not coming from the God of hope."

Few years ago, I read a story about a guy named Mel Fisher. I think we have a picture of him, if we can bring it up. He was a treasure hunter down in the Florida Keys. You can actually go online and read quite a bit about this remarkable man. Every day for 16 years, Mel would send out his divers to search for two Spanish ships that sank during a hurricane on September 6, 1622, near Key West Florida. Every day for 16 years, they would stir up hope and repeat their motto every day for 16 years. Before they would go out to search again, they would say, "Today's the day." And that hope would fuel their search for another day. "Today's the day."

He and his family lived on a leaky houseboat. For years, he suffered heartache and lost. I think he lost one of his kids on that boat. Just searching for this treasure,

and yet inspired by a dream in his heart, he refused to quit in spite of critics. He had to go through like 100 court battles to keep on going, and then even when they did find it, they had to go all the way to the Supreme Court to decide who gets it, the United States government or the people that found it.

But on July 20th, 1985, Mel and his team discovered a \$450 million mother load of treasure. I looked it up. That's like 1.1 billion today. Including over 40 tons of silver and gold coins and artifacts. For 16 years, he held onto his dream against all odds. For 16 years, he made himself a prisoner of hope by declaring, "Today's the day." And guys that was in search of earthly treasure. I ask myself how much more should we, who know the God of hope and who boast of heavenly treasure, walk in faith as prisoners of hope declaring, "Today's the day. Today's the day that my situation is going to turn around. Today's the day God's going to work his purposes in my life. Today's the day he's going to empower me for what he's called me to do. Today's the day he's promised to be my provider. Today, I'm going to stir up my faith in him and walk as a prisoner of hope rather than as a prisoner of despair."

Can I just add here that sometimes it can be difficult to keep your faith strong by yourself. Satan will seek to isolate you so that he can defeat you. See, choosing faith also means choosing an environment of friends who will help to build you up when you are feeling weak. You got to know who those people are in your life. I need those people in my life who just about the time I'm ready to pick up my box and start shaking, "Put that down. It's not who you are, and that's not who our God is." See, God puts you in a faith community like this because you're not always going to be strong on your

own. You need others around you to help stoke your faith when you're feeling weak. But that's choice number one. If you're going to be an overflowing with hope person, hold on to faith tenaciously, and by that, stir it up, stir it up, stir it up every day.

It might just be good for me to hear it. Come on. We're the treasure hunters. We're going out to find the treasure that God has for us. I want to hear you, BRAVE, at the top of your lungs. Say today, "Today's the day!"

Today's the day!

You got it. Hold on to faith tenaciously. Here's your O. Choice number two is operate in optimism continually. And I take that optimism as it's a, "May the God of hope, fill you with all joy and peace." Listen, if you got joy and peace in your life, you're an optimistic person. Faith is inherently optimistic, is it not? It's expectation of what God's going to do. And I've got joy while I'm waiting on him to act. And I got peace while I'm waiting. I'm operating in optimism because I know God is going to do something. If you're filled with faith, you're going to operate in optimism.

Don't drag around a cynical negative attitude about everything and then try and convince everybody about how deep your faith is. Positive, hopeful, optimistic outlook is the natural byproduct of faith. Did you hear me? A positive, hopeful, optimistic outlook is the natural byproduct of faith. But it's also a learned response to life's setbacks just as pessimism is a learned response.

I love the story of the two boys whose mom noticed such a difference in disposition early on in their lives. These twins, she'd go, "Why are they so different?"

One seemed to be happy no matter what. It didn't matter how much bad was going on around, this guy'd just choose... He just excited and happy and expectant. And the other was just the opposite. Seemed no matter what good happened his life, he found something to complain about. Discontented all the time. So she took them to a child and psychologist to have them test them to see whether maybe there was something wrong, particularly with the one, "Am I doing something wrong with him or whatever?" This psychologist put them in these rooms to kind of test the impact of environment upon them.

So this pessimistic, moody twin was put in a room full of toys. I'm telling you any toy a kid could dream of was in that room. Put him in that room, going to come back and check on him in a half hour, see how he's doing. Took that happy go lucky, always excited other twin and stuck him in a room full of horse manure up to his knees. We're going to make it tough on him and see if that may change his attitude a little bit because he's in a tough environment.

Half hour later, child psychologist goes back to the room with the little sour boy is sitting in the middle of the toys and couldn't believe it when he opened the door and this guy is crying... The psychologist says, "You are sitting in a room full of toys, every child's heart's desire. And can you tell me what you have found to be unhappy about?" Little guy says, "I wanted a red fire truck and there's no red fire truck in here." Guys, have you met people like that? It doesn't matter how good it is. They find the one thing to be unhappy about. It's like not even God can make them feel good. All right.

Well, the psychologist leaves that room and goes, "Boy, I can't wait to see

what's going on down here." Goes down to that room. And when he opens the door, that guy is in there digging through that manure like he was playing in a sandbox, whistling and singing and excited as he's throwing it all around. The psychologist says, "I've never seen anything like this. How could you possibly be happy in a room full of horse manure?" Little guy said, "Well, I just figured with all this manure, there has to be a pony in here somewhere and I'm going to find it."

Guys, listen to me. You're walking with a God who has told you that you will find ponies if you'll keep digging and not give up. Those are the ponies of his promises. And one of the ways you operate in optimism is to renounce that box of despair that you've been dragging around and to instead fill your heart and mind with the promises of God. Keep them with you; memorize them; speak them out. Bible says in 2 Corinthians 4:13, I believe that's one of the most powerful principles that a lot of the church doesn't know. Look at it. 2 Corinthians 4:13. It is written, "I believed, therefore I have spoken." Now Paul says, "with that same spirit of faith, we also believe, and therefore speak." Question is what are you speaking? Because if you'll listen to your words, it'll give you a great clue as to what you're believing.

So you want to be speaking what God has said. Your very words will tell you whether you are operating in optimism and hope or whether you have given way to pessimism and despair. Guys, for reasons I can't scientifically or even theologically explain, how I expect things to be greatly influences how they become. Through the prophet Joel in the Old Testament. God called his people to prepare for battle, telling them, "Let the weak say, 'I am strong.'" I think we sung a little chorus like that. That's

the essence of operating an optimism. Another old chorus we used to sing says, "I'm trading my sorrows. I'm trading my pain. I'm laying them down for the joy of the Lord." See, we're making a decision at that point to lay down our box and to pick up his promises.

Yes. I know things look bleak right now, but I'm trusting in the God of hope, and I'm standing on his promises. I know he is with me. I know he's for me. I know he's working for my good, so I expect a positive outcome to this negative situation. Therefore, I'm going to start declaring it in my life. Guys, I'm not talking about denial here. It's okay to say I got a bad report at the doctor's office this week. Just don't stop there. "I got a bad report. But I know there's a healer in the house." Boy, we heard a report about that today. So I'm trusting my God hope with this situation. "I lost my job this week." Just don't stop there. "I lost my job, but I know God is my provider. And so I'm trusting him to reveal the next chapter to me." I cannot explain it, but I've witnessed the reality over and over again. People who expect the best generally see it come to pass. While people who expect the worst, the worst generally see it come to pass.

So drop your box and get a hold of some fresh promises from God and begin declaring them in life. It'll help you to operate in optimism. So hold on to faith tenaciously. Operate in optimism constantly.

Choice number three, here's the P to our hope: Practice praise continually. Psalm 34:1 says, "I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth." Guys, can I tell you something? A spirit of despair cannot survive in a grateful,

praise-filled heart. I have discovered that over and over and over again on those days where it seems like I've... Somebody went, I think it was Chuck Colson that told me one time, and this set me free, guys. He asked, "Do you wake up every morning just feeling like your faith is on fire?" He said, "Holy cow, sometimes I'm an atheist until I've had my seventh cup of coffee." You know what he's saying? We got to stir it up. Faith doesn't run on autopilot. There've been many, many mornings when I come to meet with God that... Listen, before I leave that place of prayer, I had better put my praise on. I have just felt stuff lift off. Like, holy cow, I was in a battle and didn't know it. This was not just me emotionally not feeling good. It was like a spiritual attack coming against me.

It is praise that'll drive the enemy away. It's what Jonah found out when he was in the belly of the whale. Do you know that while he was still in that whale, he began to thank and praise God? See, before the situation was worked out, before he knew what God was going to do. Chapter 2 of Jonah is his prayer of thanksgiving. And in verse 9, he says, "But I with a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you." And why is it a sacrifice? Because he's still in the belly of the whale. It wasn't long before his song of praise made that whale sick and caused him to say, "I got to get this guy out of here. He's causing me some stomach pain."

Listen, you praise the Lord in the midst of whatever trouble you're going through, and you'll put the enemy on the run. Some of you feel like you're in the belly of that whale today. Your circumstances have gotten you down. But the word of God says in Hebrews 10:23, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess." And we profess

that yes with our mouth as we take up the promise of God. We profess that even as we sing and praise God. I'm holding unswervingly to the hope that I have.

I think I shared this five years ago when I did a message here on prayer. It's one of the great miracles that God showed me early in my life. I don't know why it was, but 8, 9, 10 as I began to read the Bible stories, I just had this deep sense that that's our God. He does that kind of stuff. You'd hear people say, "Yeah, well, he did that back then, but I don't..." No, no, no. This is our God.

I'm a sophomore at Bible college. It's Christmas time. And one afternoon, as I approached the lunch table, I saw my dad with his head down in his arms, kind of like this. I'd never seen my dad that way. It just looked like he was despondent and in despair. I said, "Dad, what's the matter?" He said, "Well, I've got a \$300 fuel bill." Now that \$300 fuel bill, calculate 1979. Add in the fact that we had 10 kids. Add in the fact that my dad made a meager income. Add in the fact that it's Christmas and we tend to buy gifts for everybody. "I got a \$300 fuel bill that I don't know how I'm going to pay." It's got his head down on the table.

I'd been reading a lot of books on great men of faith while I was at the Bible college and asking God to make me like one of them and everything in me at that moment wanted to say, "Dad, let's pray about it. Let's turn it over to God and see what he does about it." But I didn't say that because I didn't want to sound super spiritual and because I didn't want to get my hopes up that God... I just said a little prayer. But I had no idea God's going to heal his back. But I don't want to look stupid either. So I don't want to get my hopes up that we wanted God to do something and nothing

happens.

But I want to tell you when lunch was over, I went up to my bedroom. Dad went back to work. I went up to my bedroom because I was feeling badly for my dad and I got down on my knees and I prayed for him. I said, "Lord, dad just never has had anything to spare with all of his kids. It's always been so hard for him. God, I know you're the provider. I'm reading the books. I know what you can do as we put our faith in you. And I'm asking you, will you provide for this fuel bill in some way that we will know that your hand was in it?"

I'll never forget his coming up the walk that day at five o'clock and through the door with a surprise Christmas bonus check that the boss had given to all the employees that day. Any one care to guess how much my dad's bonus check was for?

300.

Come on.

300!

There you go. And you can praise God for that even now. Some of you are waiting on yours. Praise God for what he does. I came by here to say to someone at BRAVE today, I know it may be noon, but get your head up off the table. Five o'clock is coming. I know it may be noon and your head's down and you don't know how God's going to do it. And it seems so long and you're losing heart. I want to say you better get your praise on because five o'clock is coming. Someone needs to own that today at BRAVE church. It's noon, but five o'clock is coming and it'll change everything. And

when it does, you're going to say, "Oh, God, I'm so thankful that I didn't just fall away in despair, but I kept singing through my tears and I kept stirring up my faith because I knew you were going to come through."

Guys, anyone can sing once they've been delivered. But those who know they're God can sing knowing that no matter how bleak it may look right now, deliverance is on the way. Why? Because we're walking with a God of hope.

Amen.

So you praise him continually. Let me give you the E quickly. Choice number four is exercise endurance confidently. How many of you know that endurance is part of what God does for you? There's a reason why he doesn't just give you everything the split second you ask for it. Endurance must finish its work so that you can be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Just keep doing good and moving forward in the direction of your dreams no matter what setbacks occur, confident that God will fulfill his purposes in your life. Look at this verse, Hebrews 10:36 says, "You need to persevere." It's the same word, endure, whatever the different translations will use. Perseverance, endurance, whatever. It's the same word. "You need to endure." Why? "So that when you have done the will of God..." God's saying you just keep doing the will of God right now. I don't care how tough the circumstances are. Keep doing the will of God. Because when you have done the will of God, look at this. This is what he wants you to be confident about. "You will receive what he promised." Embrace endurance confidently

knowing that as you endure, you will see God fulfill his best and his promises in your life.

Hope is what gives you the power to endure, to stay in there until that job comes, until that prayer is answered until that situation turns around, until that dream is fulfilled and to do it in a spirit of joy and peace as you trust in him. Guys, no matter what difficulties you encounter, just keep advancing in the direction of your dreams. No matter what life throws at you, just shake it off and step up.

You heard that story? It's one of my favorites, of a farmer who had an old mule that fell into an old abandoned well one day that was about 50 feet deep. Since the well was no good and the mule was old and there wasn't any way to get him out, the farmer just decided to kill two birds with one stone. He thought, "I wanted to fill up that well for a long time. And since I'm going to have to bury old Caesar someday anyway, why go to the trouble to dig a new hole? He's already in the hole. So I might as well just bury him and fill up the well in the process." So he called some neighbors to come help him fill up that well. As they begin to throw the dirt into that well, that old mule, Caesar, decided he didn't want to be buried prematurely.

So each time he felt shovel loads of dirt coming in on his back, if you look down that hole, here's old Caesar. And then he would stomp it down and just step up. Shake it off. Stomp it down and step up. He just kept doing that hour after hour as they're shoveling in more dirt and more dirt and more dirt. After several hours of shoveling the farmer and his buddies were surprised to see old Caesar's ears appear at the top of the well. With a bit more shoveling, the mule just kind of stepped over the top of the

well and walked to freedom.

See, they'd come to bury old Caesar, but they raised him instead. That's because Caesar knew what to do with the dirt that was threatening to bury him. Likewise, when life treats you unfairly, when you go through adverse circumstances and disappointments, exercise endurance confidently. Just shake it off. Some of you just need to do that right now. Just shake it off and step up, and eventually you'll find that God used the very thing that came to defeat you, God used to promote you.

Amen.

Even if you're older and feel like your best days are behind you, don't allow anyone to bury you prematurely. Just continue to overflow with hope because I will say it this way: As long as you've got a pulse, you've got a purpose.

Four choices that can enable you to overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Hang on to faith tenaciously, stir it up every day. Operate in optimism constantly. Lord, fill me with your joy and your peace and with that expectation today. Practice praise continually because I know my God of hope is at work. And then exercise endurance confidently, knowing that the God of hope will bring about the fulfillment of his promise.

Guys, as I wrap it up now, I want you to recognize that this is all predicated upon that little phrase right there in the middle. "May the God of hope fill you as you trust in him." That's a word for believers, to say, you know what? It comes back to trust for me. But you know what? It's also a word for some of you who are maybe investigating

the claims of Christ and you haven't yet trusted him. Listen, you're living with false hope in your life. I don't care what it is you've put your hope in. If you're not trusting the God of hope, you're living with false hope, and you need to trust him.

Jeff wanted me to share this story with you so badly. A couple of weeks ago, I got together with Jeff for breakfast and I was sharing this story. He said, "Cal, you've got to tell it." And this is for those of you who are still not sure. If you're not sure that you've put your faith and trust in Jesus and that you've got that eternal hope because you're walking with a God of hope.

I thought this would be my last funeral. It turns out that I had another funeral before I left. But in February, a man in our community or a small town near us died and his granddaughter was talking to the mom. This dad had nothing to do with God all his life. The mom was saying, "You think we should have a pastor for our funeral?" The granddaughter said, "You need to call Pastor Cal." She would come and sit with Susan and I in the front row at Northwoods Church. She was the only one in the family that had faith in Jesus. "Call Cal," and this mother whose dad has just died called me and basically said, "Now, you know what? He wasn't a man of faith. He didn't know God. So I don't really want a whole lot of that God talk," essentially is what she told me. Well, she didn't know if I'm going to do a funeral, you're going to get a little bit of God talk.

I want to tell you, God, he gave me this story through a man in my church named Lloyd who happened to be like best friends with the guy who died. His name was Steve. They met way back in junior high when they were both new to the community

and got on the bus one day and sat together. And that cemented a relationship. They went off to college, and Lloyd found faith in Jesus Christ. Steve was just drinking as hard as he could all through his life, trying to get over a father wound, I found out later.

Here's Steve on his hospital bed. Three days, it turned out, from when he passed. Lloyd goes up to his room. They share together for a bit. Lloyd turns to leave and then stops and says, "You know, Steve, I can't leave here without asking you one more time. Are you ready to put your faith and trust in Jesus?" He's on his deathbed and he raised his hand, "Nope. Don't talk to me about it." It's how it been all his life. Every time Lloyd tried... Their friendship survived. But man, every time Lloyd tried to share about your need for relationship with Jesus, "Don't talk to me about it."

Day or two later, Steve went into almost that coma where he's no longer responsive, but the nurses are saying, "We know he's hearing us because he'll nod or he'll do some things to let us know." Lloyd decided, "I better go back up one more time." Can you imagine this? His prayers... "God of hope. I just want my friend Steve to have the same eternal hope that I have." Walks over to the bed, takes Steve's hand, says, "Steve, if you can hear me, will you squeeze my hand?" Squeeze. "Steve, you're up against the finish line, and even now God will receive you if you'll put your faith and trust in Jesus. Would you like to do that? If so, squeeze my hand and I'll pray for you." Squeeze. He leads him in the sinner's prayer, "Oh, God, forgive my sin. Come into my life. I put my faith and trust in Jesus. I want to know that I've got eternal life when I die." Prays this prayer with him." Says, Steve, if you prayed that prayer and you put

your faith in Jesus today, will you squeeze my hand?" Squeeze.

I shared that at the funeral that day and said this: "I don't know where any of you are with Jesus Christ, whether you've ever made that decision. But I can tell you this. You can see Steve again if you, too, will put your hand in the hand of the one who died for you and squeeze real hard and hang on."

I want to ask you to stand for prayer right now. We're going to sing a few more songs, but I want this prayer to go in two different directions right now. Your heads bowed. Let's this be a holy moment with God. I want first of all to say, really to pray for those of you who would say, "Cal, I'm not sure that were this my last day on planet Earth, that I know that I'd have an eternity with a God of hope." He wants you to know that you can know before you go. By faith right now, I will lead you in a prayer whereby you're essentially saying, "Lord Jesus, today, I'm taking hold of your hand and I'm squeezing real hard." You might want to just do that where you are as a sign of your faith. "I'm squeezing real hard." Just pray this prayer.

Say, "Lord Jesus Christ, I believe that you are the son of God. I believe you are the one who came to this world for my sin, that you died on a cross to pay the penalty for my sin, and you rose again to give me life over the grave because you are a living God today. So I put my faith and my trust in you. I want to walk with the God of hope from this day forward. I need your hope in my life. So today, I place my hand in yours and I squeeze real hard. Help me to hang on to you from this day forward."

Friends, if you prayed that today and maybe that is your first time ever to come

into the family of God, there'll be some other staff leaders and prayer people down here. We'd love for you to come down and let somebody know so they can celebrate with you. That's the greatest. That is the greatest decision you ever make in this life because it's the one decision that takes care of your eternity.

I want to pray for those of you who brought that box of bones in here today. I want you right now to just admit, "God I've been living under a cloud of despair. I've been living under a cloud of depression and hopelessness. I've been living just despondent in my life. I'm not overflowing with hope like I know you want me to be. I acknowledge that today." Now, I want you to say this, "God, I repent of cooperating with hopelessness in my life." And guys, if you're a follower of Jesus, you have the authority to bind the lies. I want you to say, "Lord, what is the lie I've been believing? You can name it. That my situation will never turn around. It'll never work out. It's never going to get better. All of those things. I take that lie right now. I bind it and I submit it to the God of hope and in place I put truth today.

"God, I thank you that you are with me. I thank you that you're the one who has all power to turn things around. I thank you Lord,, that no matter how long, you are for me, you are working for my good. I take those truths today, those promises. I'm going to begin to speak them out."

Now I'm telling you right now, some of you are going to lose that spirit of despair. I speak right now to any spirit of despair with assignment against God's people in this place, any spirit of hopelessness, any spirit of depression that's saying just end it all because there's no hope. I command you now to leave that one who has put their faith

and trust in God. I bind you and I command you to leave.

Now, you invite into that place, just you make the invitation. "Father, would you fill me with your joy and peace so that I overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit?" Amen.

Amen.

Come on. Give him praise in this place today. Thank you, Lord.