

HOPE

... the Best of Things

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Hope . . . the Best of Things

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Preface

If you have picked up this booklet, it's safe to say you are interested in hope—understanding it, finding it, and resting in it. Ours is a world in terrible turmoil. People are angry; cynicism and despair are on the rise, and the nightly news reminds us we are only one terrorist plot away from another national nightmare. Oh, how we need to grasp the soul-settling hope found in the pages of God's Word—not only grasp it, but allow the hope of God to fill and overflow our hearts, transforming us into people who are confident and at peace with themselves, their God, and their circumstances.

You may not realize it, and it may seem odd, but the sufferings that are scratching at your door are the very windows through which God wants to shine his brightest rays of hope. He wants to illumine your heart with his peace, power, and perspective.

That is why I have written this special booklet, *Hope . . . the Best of Things*. For more than forty years, I have lived in a wheelchair as a spinal cord-injured quadriplegic, and believe me, I would never have made it this far were it not for the heaven-sent hope found only in Christ, the Blessed Hope. It is my prayer that the stories I share on the following pages, as well as the insights about suffering and the goodness of God, will draw you closer to him. May this little book be your guide toward a fresh, new perspective on your hardships and heartaches. I ask only that you read with prayerful expectancy as to the hope and help God desires to shine upon you this day!

Joni Eareckson Tada

HOPE IS HARD TO COME BY

Sometimes hope is hard to come by. Like the other week when I visited my friend Gracie Sutherland in the hospital. Gracie has been volunteering at our Joni and Friends' Family Retreats for many years, and despite her age of sixty-one, she's always been energetic and active with the disabled children at our camps. All that changed a month ago when she broke her neck in a tragic accident. Gracie has always been happy and buoyant, but when I wheeled into the intensive care unit to visit her, I did not even recognize the woman lying in the hospital bed. With tubes running in and out of her, a ventilator shoved down her throat, and Crutchfield tongs screwed into her skull, Gracie looked completely helpless. She couldn't even breathe on her own. All she could do was open and close her eyes.

I sat there by Gracie's hospital bed. I read Scriptures to her. I sang to her: "Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side." I leaned as far forward as I could and whispered, "Oh, Gracie, Gracie, remember. Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things. And no good thing ever dies." She blinked at that point, and I knew she recognized the phrase. It's a line from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*.

The Shawshank Redemption is a story about two men—Andy Dufrane, who is unjustly convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, and his friend Red. After many hard years in prison, Andy opens up a path of promise for himself and for Red. One day in the prison yard, he instructs Red that if he is ever freed from

Shawshank, he should go to a certain town and find a certain tree in a certain cornfield, to push aside the rocks to uncover a little tin can, and to use the money in the can to make it across the border to a little Mexican fishing village. Not long after this conversation, Andy escapes from prison and Red is paroled. Red, dutiful friend that he is, finds the cornfield, the tree, the rocks, the tin can, the money—and a letter, in which Andy has written, “Red, never forget. Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things. And no good thing ever dies.” At that moment, Red realizes he has two choices: “Get busy livin’ or get busy dyin’.”

Sadly, right now, it appears as though my friend Gracie is busy dying. She is stuck at UCLA waiting for surgery on her neck, and an infection in her body is running rampant. The doctors are trying to get her white blood cell count down, but it doesn’t look promising. Now when visitors come in to see her, she shuts her eyes against them. *Oh, Gracie, hold onto hope. It’s a good thing, maybe the best of things.*

The Breaking Point

But hope is hard to come by. I should know. I remember the time when I was once busy dying. It wasn’t long after I had broken my neck in a diving accident that I spent one particularly hopeless week in the hospital. I had endured long surgeries to shave down the bony prominences on my back, and it was a long recovery. I had lost a great deal of weight. And for almost three weeks I was forced to lie facedown on what’s called a Stryker frame—a long, flat canvas sandwich where they put you faceup for three hours and then strap another piece of canvas on you and flip you facedown to lie there for another three hours.

Trapped facedown, staring at the floor hour after hour, my thoughts grew dark and hopeless. All I could think was, “Great, God. Way to go. I’m a brand-new Christian. This is the way you

treat your new Christians? I'm young in the faith. I prayed for a closer walk with you. If this is your idea of an answer to prayer, I am never going to trust you with another prayer again. I can't believe that I have to lie facedown and do nothing but count the tiles on the floor on this stupid torture rack. I hate my existence." I asked the hospital staff to turn out the lights, close the blinds, close the door, and if anybody came in—visitor, parent, nurse—I just grunted. I justified it all. I rationalized that God shouldn't mind that I would be bitter—after all, I was paralyzed. And I didn't care how much joy was set before me. This was one cross I was not going to bear without a battle.

My thoughts got darker because no longer was my bitterness a tiny trickle. It had become a raging torrent, and in the middle of the night I would imagine God holding my sin up before my face and saying lovingly but firmly, "Joni, what are you going to do about this? What are you going to do about this attitude? It is wrong. This sin is wrong. Get rid of it." But I, hurting and stubborn, preferred my sins. I preferred my peevish, snide, small-minded, mean-spirited comments, grunting at people when they walked in or out, and letting food drool out of my mouth. Those were sins that I had made my own.

You know what it's like when you make sin your own. You housebreak it. You domesticate it. You shield it from the Spirit's scrutiny. I did not want to let go of the sick, strange comfort of my own misery.

So God gave me some help. About one week into that three-week stint of lying facedown, staring at the floor, waiting for my back to heal, I got hit with a bad case of the flu. And suddenly, not being able to move was peanuts compared to not being able to breathe. I was claustrophobic. I was suffering. I was gasping for breath. I could not move. All was hopeless. All was gone. I was falling backward, head over heels, down for the count, decimated.

And I broke. I thought, "I can't do this. I can't live this way.

I would rather die than face this.” Little did I realize that I was echoing the sentiments of the apostle Paul, who in 2 Corinthians 1:8 talks of being “so utterly burdened beyond [his] strength that [he] despaired of life itself.” Indeed, he even had in his heart the sentence of death. “O God, I don’t have the strength to face this. I would rather die. Help me.” That was my prayer. That was my anguish.

God Can Raise Us Out of Hopelessness

That week a friend came to see me in the hospital while I was still facedown counting the tiles. She put a Bible on a little stool in front of me and stuck my mouth stick in my mouth so that I could flip its pages, and my friend told me to turn to Psalm 18. There I read: “In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. Then the earth reeled and rocked. . . . Smoke went up from his nostrils. . . . He bowed the heavens and came down. . . . He sent from on high, he took me. . . . He rescued me”—and here’s the best part—“because he delighted in me” (vv. 6–19).

I had prayed for God to help me. But little did I realize that God was parting heaven and earth, striking bolts of lightning, and thundering the foundations of the planet to reach down and rescue me because he delighted in me. He showed me in 2 Corinthians 1:9 that all this had happened so that I would “rely not on [myself] but on God who raises the dead.” And that’s all God was looking for. He wanted me to reckon myself dead—dead to sin—because if God can raise the dead, you’d better believe he could raise me out of my hopelessness. He would take it from there. And he has been doing the same for nearly four decades.