

## You Can Turn Things Around

We're in a series of messages focusing on the fact that, with God, it's not too late. It's never too late to make a new start; never too late to change your life; never too late to do the right thing.

Many times in life it's easy to become depressed or have a sense of hopelessness or even despair. There are times when we feel alone, far from help; far from God. Life can be difficult and it's not just some symptom of modern life; these are genuine feelings people have had for thousands of years. The writer of Psalm 143:6-7 said, *"I lift my hands to you in prayer. I thirst for you as parched land thirsts for rain. Come quickly, Lord, and answer me, for my depression deepens. Don't turn away from me..."* Psalm 88:3-4 says, *"...my life is full of troubles, and death draws near. I am as good as dead, like a strong man with no strength left."* When you feel down or depressed, you're not alone in what you feel.

So what do you do when you're the need for some hope? A lot of us just wait for circumstances to change... But what if they don't? There has to be more than just some sort of lift-me-up-by-my-own-bootstraps attitude or pie-in-the-sky optimism to find genuine hope in the face of discouragement.

So what do you do? Where do you find the strength you need? I know a lot of people who are good at feeling hopeful when circumstances are good. I haven't met many who are great at hope when circumstances aren't so good. How can you be filled with hope when it feels like God's love isn't there any more; when it feels like you don't have the energy; like no one cares about you; like your life is caving in; when you don't know how long you can last.

Today we're going to talk together about what do you do when you don't know what to do. When you don't know what to do next. We're going to cover five things and I encourage you to write these down. If you don't feel like you need hope right now, let me tell you: You're going to need it eventually. There's going to be a situation in your life where you're going to need this. We all face circumstances that we can't handle on our own power. And even if **YOU** don't need this right away, there are people you love and care about who may.

What are the five things to do when you don't know what to do? How do you find hope no matter what the circumstance?

The first thing you can do when you need hope and don't know what to do is, **1. You Begin with the Future.** Don't build your life on the foundation of the past. That's over and done with. Good or bad, it's gone. You don't even build your life on right now because that's not going to last. You build your life on God's future – eternity– which will last forever.

We all need something to build on. If you're going to build something significant in life, something that lasts, you've got to build it on something good and strong. The only thing that's going to last is God's plan for your future in eternity.

That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with having other goals. You should have other goals. You should have goals about work and family and community. But if you see those as the ultimate you're going to be deeply disappointed. You may finally achieve that great thing you've been aiming at and discover that it's not enough. The thing is, it's not supposed to be enough. Because God has made us for something greater than anything we can accomplish in this world. And if you discover that your accomplishment IS enough for you, that's a problem too, because it means you're setting your goals far too low. God made us for things greater than we can imagine.

. Because we are a people who focus on the future we can find strength for the difficulties and problems of life. 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 says, *"For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever."*

This whole idea disturbs or frightens some people. They say: "So heavenly minded they're no earthly good." I haven't met very many people like that. Maybe one or two so focused they didn't seem to care about anyone on earth. I'm not sure they're truly spiritually focused because that's the sort of spirituality Jesus was criticized in the Pharisees. But the vast majority of heavenly minded people are deeply caring and compassionate for people and want to make a difference.

I **HAVE** met a **LOT** of people who were so enmeshed in the worries of this world they don't have time for anyone else. They're so earthly minded they're no good for heaven **OR** earth. Make the future your focus.

For all of us, but especially for those who are feeling hopeless, how can you do that? The way you do it is by doing it all the time. Every hour remind yourself, "This world isn't all there is. I've got something to hope in. This isn't all there is. I've got something to hope in."

Now, when you're feeling hopeless, you probably won't want to do this. Even when you're feeling OK, it will feel weird the first few times you do it. But I want to encourage you to try. Just take a few seconds every hour to say over and over, "This world isn't all there is. I've got something to hope in."

Do that hourly and over time God will move your focus off what you're going through right now. God may not change the circumstances at all, but you'll be able to change your focus regardless of circumstances and begin to feel new hope.

Then the next thing to do is **2. You Resolve to Live with Patience.** What?! I wasn't looking for patience! I want hope and I want it now! If you're in the middle of a problem hearing, "be patient" sounds like a meaningless pat on the back and hearing, "There, there, it'll be fine." But patience has power to make a difference in our lives.

Romans 5:3-5 says, "*We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment.*" God takes the problems in our lives and takes them through a process that leads to hope. Our priority is to solve the problem. God's priority is for us to grow through the problem. Because God knows that the problems that you have, might last days, months, years, maybe even the rest of your life. But compared to the eternity God has for us, that's a short time. God knows you'll outlast your problems by far, so God's more interested in your growth. Our problems are raw material God uses to build hope and give us something that will last.

We all tend to trust in things that aren't going to last. One thing our problems can teach us is "I can't trust that. I've got to find something better to trust in." God doesn't test us to grade us, but to grow us. But growth isn't guaranteed. I know plenty of people who've gone through any number of problems and had no growth in their lives. It takes patience, which is why you want to make patience a priority.

If you think about it, it's not our circumstances that keep us from hope. There are people with the best of circumstances with no hope at all and people with the worst of circumstances whose lives overflow with hope. So it's not about circumstances. It's your attitude during the circumstances.

I won't kid you - having patience in the midst of problems is hard. You've got to live with those problems everyday of your life and they tend to wear you down. So how do you face problems and stay patient? Don't face your problems or try to be patient alone. God never meant for you to do that alone. Galatians 6:2 says, "*Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.*" Christ's command was to love one another. You share each other's troubles and problems. God didn't mean for you to face it alone.

We've talked a lot about small groups that meet on a weekly basis in each other's homes or in the church and talk together about what's going on in their lives and read God's word together and get some hope for their lives. In your group you share your problems and pray for strength and patience. Pray that the problem get solved of course, but as long as it lasts, ask God to give patience. Don't face these thing alone. We're not built to face it alone. We're made to share our problems with others and encourage one another.

Just in case you think that this is some new-fangled idea that you don't really need, let me remind you that our whole tradition, our whole denomination, our whole branch of Christianity started with a small group and originally to be part of one of our churches at all, you were REQUIRED to be part of a small group and to attend it every week. This isn't something new – this is foundational stuff. And it's been since we began to lose that small group focus in the U.S. that our churches began to plateau and then decline rather than experience the constant growth that was normal when small groups were the universal rule.

Then the third thing, **3. You Base Your Hope on God's Love.** Make God's love your strength and support. The crazy thing is when we face tough times we have a tendency to grab at self-destructive things. We go after some quick fix we think might help us feel better. People try drugs, drink, lust, food, anger, self-pity, entertainment - all kinds of things that don't help and can actually take us down faster and further.

Even good things just aren't enough to bring hope into life. Your job isn't enough. I personally know people who thought that a steel company was their main source of strength and support – that it would always be there for them. Well, now they're working at Wal-mart when they should be retired. The company is gone and so is the pension they were promised. I know a lot of people who make their husband or wife their main source of strength and support.

And that's not fair to your spouse. You should love your husband or wife deeply. They should give you strength and encouragement. But to make them your main source of strength and support is asking a human being to do what no human being can do. Only God's love lasts through any and everything and is there every moment no matter what. Don't ask a person to do what only God can do. Make God's love your strength and support.

Psalms 121:1-2 says, *"I look up to the mountains—does my help come from there? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."* My help comes from God, who cares about me; cares about my life; cares what I'm going through. God wants to give me strength in this circumstance. My help comes from God.

How can you face the problems of this world and the problems of your life with hope? Lamentations 3:21-23 says, *"...I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning."* I have hope when I think about God's love. I have hope when I think about God's mercy. Because he's a God of love and hope and mercy that never end.

You drive into a gas station. What would you hope to find there at a gas station? Gas. You go into a donut shop, what do you expect to find? Donuts. You go to the God of hope, mercy and love, what are you going to find? Not fear, not guilt, not condemnation. You'll find hope, mercy and love.

So if this love, mercy and hope are fresh every morning, here's a practical thing to do. Before you get out of bed in the morning – remind yourself God's love is your source of strength and support. Who knows what will happen during that day. Remind yourself, "God, no matter what happens today, You love me." There's power in just reminding yourself of that every morning.

The fourth thing to do when you need hope to cope is, **4. You Keep Your Cool Through Prayer.** When most of us feel hopeless our most likely action is hold it in and not talk to anyone. We obsess, or throw ourselves into work or some project and wish the feeling would go away or we sit in front of the TV and click through 150 channels looking for something to distract us or play games or something else on the internet. What do you do? Do you talk with anyone? Who do you talk to when you feel hopeless?

We talked about the fact that communicating with other people, letting other people in on it, is an important, Biblical practice. But even that isn't enough. Yes, talk to other people, but also talk to God about it. Feelings of anxiety, hopelessness and discouragement tend to build up and if you hold onto them, eventually you'll either blow up or cave in. So talk to other people about it. But also talk to God about it. Talk to God regularly and honestly.

In Psalm 17:1 the Psalmist says, *"O Lord, hear my plea for justice. Listen to my cry for help. Pay attention to my prayer, for it comes from honest lips."* He's praying an honest prayer. It's a cry coming from his heart. Too often we pray these dry, empty, religious prayers. We pray like we've heard other people pray. It feels formal and phony. Because it is. God is looking for honest prayers. God already knows what you're thinking anyway. If you can't talk to God honestly, who can you talk honestly to? You enjoy praying a lot more and get a lot more out of it if you talk to God honestly.

You want to hear an honest prayer? Listen to Psalm 143:7 *"Come quickly, Lord, and answer me, for my depression deepens. Don't turn away from me, or I will die."* Another translation of that is, *"Hurry with Your answer, God. I'm nearly at the end of my rope. Don't turn away. Don't ignore me."* Why can't we just pray honest prayers like that?

God is ready to listen to your honest prayer. The God who made everything and is almighty and all-powerful, can listen to every prayer of the billions of people on this planet and give personal attention and care. You're not bothering God with your prayer or taking God's attention away from someone else's need. So talk to God honestly.

When you talk to God honestly you're able to hear an honest answer. Do you hear that answer audibly? Most people never have. You may hear through a thought God brings to mind or a Bible verse or a person. If you pray dishonest prayers or fake it, you're not going to hear honest answers because you're not listening for them. But if you honestly tell God how you're feeling, you're going to be able to hear some honest answers.

What do you do about this in a practical way? Take some time every day, a few minutes to talk to God honestly. Find some space to talk to God about the opportunities, the relationships, the problems of the day. But when you do this let me just tell you, you won't always get what you ask for. God is much too wise to give us everything we ask for. You'll sometimes get much more than you ask for. Some of you are familiar with this Soldier's Prayer from American history.

I asked God for strength that I might achieve, I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked God for health that I might do greater things, I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy, I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men, I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life, I was given life that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for, but everything that I'd hoped for.  
Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men most richly blessed.

The final thing to do is, **5. You Make God's Purpose Your Priority.** The truth of the matter is all of our plans, as human beings, are little plans. All of them. You may be thinking, "Not mine! I've got big plans." And compared to someone else in this room, you may have huge plans. But compared God's plans, all plans are little plans.

And unlike most of our little plans, God's plans are in accord with God's purpose and God's purpose has first priority in the universe. Proverbs 19:21 says, *"You can make many plans, but the Lord's purpose will prevail."* You can count on that. So plan based on what you can count on.

When we're hopeless we grasp at any plan that seems good enough. When you're hopeless you'll chase after just about any plan because you're hurting and trying to find some hope. People will grab at all kinds of crazy ideas because you're trying to find some hope. That's why schemes they sell about finances and such sell so well. That's why many people fall for these internet phishing schemes.

Don't follow crazy plans. Make God's purpose your plan. Instead of just doing whatever comes to your mind, get on board with what God is doing in the world. Follow the example of Solomon in the Old Testament. Solomon's dad was King David. God had told David, "I'll give you the plans and then your son is going to build the temple." When it came time to build God's temple, here's what Solomon said in 1 Kings 5:5, *"I am planning to build a Temple to honor the name of the Lord my God, just as he had instructed my father, David. For the Lord told him, 'Your son, whom I will place on your throne, will build the Temple to honor my name.'" Notice that the Lord instructed them in the Lord's plan. That's where it started. Then, Solomon says because of that now, "I am planning."*

That's the only correct and effective order. Pretty simple. God plans according to God's purpose and then I plan. Don't get these reversed. I make a plan then I look for some way to fit it in with God's plan. That doesn't work well. And don't leave out the "you planning" part of it. We don't get to sit back and watch God or other people do it. God wants you to be part of the plan.

Where do you find God's plan that leads to hope? First, from the Scriptures. Romans 15:4 says, *"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."* Notice "endurance" and "encouragement." Most of us like encouragement more than endurance. I certainly would rather be encouraged than have to endure! The thing is, though, it takes both. It takes both encouragement and endurance and God's word gives us both.

Dale Carnegie once said "Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all." It's not easy to keep on going, so God gives us the encouragement and endurance that we need.

It's easy for some to think "It's too late for me to do much for God's plan; I can't do much to accomplish God's purpose. At my age, I just can't be doing those things. There's no time any more in my life. There's time to love God but there's no real time for the rest of it." Oliver Wendell Holmes said this about age. He said, "To be seventy years young is far more hopeful than to be forty years old." God has incredible plans for your life. It is never too late. You have no idea what God wants to do with the rest of your life.

All of us, whatever age, should read God's word as a part of our everyday life. Spend five or ten minutes each day. You should do that. But there's also something important about getting together like this. Being together and hearing and sharing about God's word. There is strength in that. You feel the support and fellowship of other people who also want to keep onboard with God's plan. When we worship it is a reminder together that God has a bigger plan.

Hope is more than just feeling better about life. You may feel better today and feel worse tomorrow. Hope is a whole new way of looking at life that enables you to be patient with things you can't change, have faith to act on the things you can change, and always be on board with God's purpose.

The ultimate moment of hope in this world is when Jesus Christ came into this world, lived life for you, gave His life for you and was resurrected again for you.

As we've talked about these five things it is my prayer that you'll do the practical things we've talked about this next week. They're just very simple things. But through these simple things God will our hearts with a new measure of hope. Let's pray!