

REALISTIC HOPE IN PESSIMISTIC TIMES



by Jan
Johnson

Mike and Gina were disappointed. They'd planned to buy their "dream house" but their loan fell through. They continued to search and found another home, but it was nothing like their first choice. They decided to make the best of it and see what happened.

Shortly after they moved in, they discovered several advantages this "rebound home" had over their first choice. With the financial decline, the other house would have lost a lot of its worth and the payments would have been too steep. They were grateful their original plan did not work out. Mike and Gina were able to change their attitude quickly because they didn't let their expectations ignore the fact that God can bring good from anything.

This steadiness of purpose is difficult to attain. Instead, it's easier to choose either bleak despair

God promises to walk with us through the dark valleys, not to eliminate them.

("Nothing works for me") or blind optimism ("I know everything will work out"). Often, we shift back and forth between the two.

But how do we move away from riding that seesaw of despair and

idealism to maintaining an outlook that sees beyond our day-to-day circumstances and our roller-coaster emotions? How do we move from living in the house of fear to the house of faith? Here are some ways to begin.

Expect problems to occur. Accepting, and even expecting, life to be full of challenges keeps us from

sliding into despair when trouble strikes. Often, it's the sting of the surprise that stuns us. Peter warned the early Christians, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). When we're

surprised by problems, it intensifies our pain. We're caught off guard by good friends who reject us, marriages that fail and trusted leaders who lose their tempers. But a nonstop, problem-free life isn't

what God promises; God promises to walk with us through the dark valleys, not to eliminate them.

Consider the merits of change. We find change threatening. Even positive changes, such as marriage or purchasing a new home, increase stress. The life of Ruth (whose life was so dramatic that a Bible book is named for her) would have

...how do we move away from riding that seesaw of despair and idealism to maintaining an outlook that sees beyond our day-to-day circumstances and our roller-coaster emotions?

scored high on any stress test. After her husband died, she followed her Hebrew mother-in-law to faraway Judah. Before the move, Ruth seemed to weigh the positive and negative aspects of leaving her home and decided she'd be better off with Naomi's companionship and ideals: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Because of her openness to change, Ruth adjusted relatively well to life in Judah and ended up winning the admiration of Boaz, who later became her husband (Ruth 2:2-3; 3:1-18).

Considering the positive and

negative aspects of a specific change can give us the fresh perspective we need to continue. What is the upside of the supposed wrong decision? Why might the supposed good decision not be so great after all? We might even see how the change might be good and open opportunities we would otherwise miss.

Adopt a spirit of determination. From a dirty prison cell, the jailed scholar Paul summarized his approach to life: “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him [Christ] who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:12, 13). Paul’s determination to preach the Christian faith to the Roman world was not dampened by the fact that he was chained to a Roman guard. Other people may have thought that his work was on hold while he was in jail, but he seemed to conclude that he was simply preaching to a new audience, Roman soldiers.

Feed on positive thoughts. Another astounding mindset of Paul was to focus his thoughts on what was wise and good and lovely. Again, from his prison cell, he encouraged the Philippians to fill their minds by meditating “on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.” (Philippians 4:8, *The Message*).

Paul wasn’t proposing an unrealistic, *don’t-worry-be-happy* approach. In the same letter he mentioned problems caused by a dispute between two people (Philippians 4:2). He acknowledged problems and suggested solutions, but he advised us to *choose* to focus on the very best things around us.

To maintain a positive focus, I keep what a friend calls my “foot-warmer” file. It includes congratu-



Mike and Gina were able to change their attitude quickly because they didn’t let their expectations ignore the fact that God can bring good from anything.

latory cards, thank you notes and words of encouragement that celebrate how God can work through an ordinary person like me. They warm my spirit just as thick socks warm my feet on a cold night. For example, one of my “footwarmers” is the impressive business card of a young man who I taught in Sunday school many years ago. Then he was a shy, disinterested high school student on the fringes of gang activity. All those encouraging words, pats on the back and sluggish conversations over the years eventually paid off. When I need to focus on positive aspects of my ministry, I look at this card.

Stay open to the unknown factor. Circumstances around us may cause us to make comments such as, “That friend ignored me,” or “I just need to change jobs.” But later we discover that our friend didn’t even see us and that our overbearing boss is being replaced. There’s so much we don’t know. Even when we think we know, God might be working behind the scenes.

It’s the narrow gate that leads to life (Matthew 7:13).

Depending on God runs counter to our culture that trains us to manage time, form goals and map out strategies. While organizing our lives is good, we can keep our minds open so that God “leads me in the paths of righteousness” (Psalm 23:3, NKJV). God will not necessarily tell us the destination, but he will invite us to follow along and usually help us to see the next step.

Armed with this shrewd realism and hopeful optimism, we will neither ignore our problems nor become consumed by them. We might decide they were just what we needed to move forward. □

Jan Johnson is a speaker and author of Enjoying the Presence of God and Living a Purpose-Full Life. Visit her website at www.janjohnson.org.

Considering the positive and negative aspects of a specific change...we might even see



how the change might be good and open opportunities we would otherwise miss.