

INTRODUCTION

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

—Proverbs 13:12

Let's face it: everyone holds hopes for all kinds of things. Regrettably, lots of our hopeful expectations are unmet, or are permanently shattered. Often we become severely hurt due to our disappointments—with ourselves, others, organizations, or God. Persistent resentments over unfulfilled ambitions can emotionally cripple you and me, robbing us of life's joys.

If you are reading this book, you've probably suffered your share of broken dreams. If so, please know it's never too late to rebuild your hopes—or find new ones!

The Bible teaches, "*Desire realized is sweet to the soul.*"¹ Yet potential disappointments lurk everywhere. The job we'd hoped for doesn't materialize; friends we counted on let us down; the romantic relationship we longed for collapses.

EVERYBODY SUFFERS DISAPPOINTMENTS

Like so many others, I've experienced plenty of disappointments—some caused by myself, some caused by insensitive people, and others caused by harmful incidents.

Although I've been through some tough times, I am exceedingly grateful that God has blessed me with his totally undeserved favor. I have an awesome wife of more than fifty-two years, two remarkable sons and their wives, five energetic grandchildren, some loyal, supportive friends, and my service and therapy dog, Thunder.

With God's help and lots of hard work, I've been fortunate to experience some successes in life: personal, athletic, academic, and professional.

Note: If you'd like to find out more details of my story, please see the About the Author section at the back of this book or visit my website at drjimstout.com.

Along with my achievements, I've also writhed with plenty of disappointments. I've suffered through countless ruined hopes—due to broken promises from others; church stresses; severe verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse by relatives; betrayals by family, friends, and colleagues; health issues; financial troubles; and other emotional upheavals.

Some of my never-ending list of smothered hopes include times when:

- As a child and teenager, I expected God to cover

my back and protect me from cruel emotional and verbal abuse, as well as years of sexual abuse by my relatives.

- I naively hoped the churches I served would appreciate my skills, caring, and sacrificial time use. I also idealistically believed that they would keep their promises on my salary and housing allowances.
- I trustingly counted on my insurance company to honor my policy and cover my hospital and medication expenses.

Although outwardly I seemed to take mistreatments well, I often imploded with inward rage at the lies or betrayals from others. Frequently, my anger often churned into resentment and bitterness.

Resentment is the number one trigger for all sorts of grave, sometimes lethal, upsets: depression, mania, panic attacks, alcohol, drug abuse, and other addictive behaviors. It probably destroys more people than anything else.

I was aware of the Bible's warning about resentment's dangers: "*See to it . . . that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble.*"²

Regrettably, for a long time, Luke's words from the book of Acts fit me too well: "*I see that you are full of bitterness.*"³

Finally, in the midst of my hidden resentments and countless letdowns, I spiraled downward into a scary emotional meltdown. My inability to flex from failed hopes cost me six months of psychiatric hospitalization from November 1988 to April 1989.

Now, having gone through more than thirty years of trial and error learning, I am able to survive, even thrive, through dashed hopes. My “new normal” in dealing with expectations for myself and others is to remain flexible in my hopes and apply various recovery strategies.

After decades of hurts caused by evaporated dreams, I’ve finally faced up to the reality that I’ll never be able to totally delete some of my painful memories. I realize that due to my past smothered hopes, I will always be emotionally vulnerable to disappointments, broken promises, and outright betrayals.

The good news is that things that used to immobilize me for months now affects me for only a day or two. Rather than marinating in resentment, anxiety, and depression, I apply a recovery strategy. Instead of losing weeks due to unhappiness, I now absorb unmet expectations like a punch in the gut and move on.

Due to old disappointments, I’m ultra-aware of my vulnerability to being hurt. I’ve learned how critical it is to take quick recovery action when I’ve suffered a shattered expectation of any kind. Because of this self-knowledge, I take proactive steps when I’m upset by a broken anticipation.

HOPEFUL EXPECTATIONS THAT DIDN’T PAN OUT

Most of us have high hopes for people, situations, organizations, companies, pets, and other things. We want our heartfelt wishes to pan out to our liking. When our desires

are thwarted, we tend to get frustrated, discouraged, angry, bitter, or fearful.

Alice, a friendly, middle-aged woman, hopes to make and keep trustworthy friends. Yet recently her private confidences were breeched by some of her closest friends.

For nearly twenty-five years she'd enjoyed close, trusting relationships with four other women in her church. They'd celebrated each other's birthdays, laughed, cried, studied the Bible, prayed, shopped, and vacationed together.

Her friends promised never to tell anyone about her private information. However, last month after sharing some sensitive secrets with her "friends," Alice discovered her classified information had become common knowledge in her church.

Tragically, she found her expectation of confidentiality had been totally violated by her "trustworthy" friends.

As a result of this betrayal, Alice left her church. She grew cynical of all "religious" people, never again met with those church friends, and stopped going to that church, as well as all others.

Like Alice, we all carry hopes for other people, for ourselves, for life in general, and for God. Sadly, broken expectations can lead to serious problems if not dealt with effectively.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Socrates is credited with saying, "The unexamined life is not worth living." At times, excessive introspection can be

confusing, even harmful. Yet self-examination can also reap constructive rewards.

Perhaps the following questions can give you a fresh look at your hopes, expectations, and dreams:

Do I have unmet expectations for myself?

- Have I set the bar of expectations for myself too low—or too high?
- Am I confident that I'll always keep my word and never violate someone's hush-hush information?
- Do I believe I will achieve most of my goals?
- Do I believe that in my life I should experience fairness, fulfillment, fun—and involve minimal suffering?

Do I have unmet hopes for other people?

- Do I hope my parents will understand and be there for me?
- Do I hope my spouse will listen to, empathize, or affirm me?
- Do I hope my children will get good grades and steer clear of drug or alcohol abuse?
- Do I hope my friends will encourage me and show care?
- Do I hope my neighbors will offer help when I need it?
- Do I hope my church leaders and fellow members will be supportive of my struggles?
- Do I hope my medical professionals (doctors,

dentists, pharmacists, nurses, and therapists) will be caring and get good results for me?

- Do I hope my store clerks and sales people will be well-mannered and helpful to me?

Do I have high hopes for touchy situations?

- Do I hope my purchased item can be readily returned with no resistance?
- Do I hope my electronic item will be repaired quickly, at no cost to me?
- Do I hope my cancelled membership will be refunded promptly, with no disagreement?
- Do I hope my insurance, phone, and TV cable companies will pay attention to my concern and be courteous, cooperative, and effective?

Do I have unmet expectations of God?

- Do I trust that God will come to my rescue when bad things happen to me?
- Do I really feel like God forgives me and genuinely loves me—in spite of my flaws?
- Do I believe God actually has confidence in me and that he wants to use my skills and experiences to make a difference in the world?

People cherish hopeful expectations for things they depend on enjoying. Unfortunately, countless individuals are badly disappointed when their hoped-for plans collapse.

However, it's never too late to re-shape an old hope—or acquire a new one! Here are twenty-four *suggested* guidelines to apply to your situation. These guides to revising your crumpled hopes—or creating new ones—may seem overwhelming or even impossible to implement. However, please don't freeze up and do nothing. You don't have to use all of the twenty-four.

As a suggestion, try reading through the guidelines in the *Table of Contents*. Then choose the ones you are drawn to.

Some recommendations may not work for you. Obviously, there's no single right way to find relief from the consequences of broken dreams. Therefore, to find healing, everyone must find his or her own path through shattered expectations.

As you read the pages ahead, please apply the saying of *Alcoholics Anonymous*: "Take what works and leave the rest."

ACCEPT THE REALITY OF YOUR LOST
HOPES

*We must let go of the life we have planned, so as to accept the
one that is waiting for us.*

—Joseph Campbell

Sooner or later, coming to terms with an irreversible loss is essential. It helps to start by evaluating your deficit with the cold, hard facts of your situation. Look at the reality of “what actually *is*,” apart from your aspirations. Are you rationalizing your hopes? Discuss your wished-for situation with wise friends. Ask them if your hope is truly realistic. Be open to hearing their feedback.

The unpleasant fact is that some circumstances and people will *never* change. As much as you hope, pray, manipulate, or plead, it is sobering to accept that an amputated limb will never grow back, a job will not return, a lover will not respond with like affections.

Are you worn out from your attempts to rescue your vaporized hope? You may have tried everything you knew to restore your ravaged expectancy, again and again, yet with no positive results.

Einstein was familiar with fruitless attempts to fix a broken situation. He is often quoted defining insanity as, “Doing the same thing over and over, each time expecting different results.”

If you are trying your best to accept the pain of a vanished dream, perhaps you might pray something like this:

Lord, please give me the courage to give up my compulsion to change people and situations to fit *my* expectations. Help me to see that it is *I* who needs to be changed, not others.

In my case, I had to release what *was*, so that I could come to grips with what *is now*. I believe this attitude switch has strengthened me to pursue what *will be*.

Following my second set of two total knee replacement surgeries, I had to comprehend that some of my sports expectations were wiped out—probably forever. My hopes for continuing my favorite sports were history. No more jogging or running. No more playing racquetball and handball. No more regular bicycling—my knees wouldn’t bend enough. No more trudging through heavy woods on hunts for deer or wild boars. No more wading in streams on fishing trips.

I mourned these losses as terrible, often absorbed with feeling sorry for myself, resentment, and depressive dips.

The heart-wrenching reality was that my fun-filled sports and exercise routines were simply *gone*—forever. I had to give up those dreams, and trust God to show me *alternative* hopes that I would find acceptable.

For a while, I was afraid to let go of what was enjoyable in order to try something new. There was a sense of security in the familiar. I had to learn new ways to cope with my missed wishes. In essence, I needed to accept my losses and move on.

Finally, after processing my new, unwanted reality, I modified my hoped-for prospects. I turned to new exercises like walking on level ground and in the swimming pool, recumbent bicycling, flat-land hunting, and lake fishing.

Although I'm a recovering bulimic and not an alcoholic, I occasionally attend AA and other 12-step meetings for the support and recovery tips I receive. I've found that the common AA meeting themes of recovery tips for pain, resentment, and fear apply to many life issues beyond alcohol addiction.

The "big book," *Alcoholics Anonymous*, helped me to understand that when I was disturbed, it was because I found some person, place, thing, or situation was unacceptable to me. I had to face the fact that there would be no serenity for me until I *accepted* that circumstances were exactly the way they were supposed to be at that moment.

Finally, I really understood that until I accepted life completely on its terms along with its ruined hopes, I couldn't be happy. I needed to focus not so much on what

needed to be changed in the world but on what needed to be changed in my attitudes.

Acceptance was the key for me. In time, I finally realized that I didn't have to like my losses, but I did need to acknowledge their *reality*. What a life-changing difference it has made in my outlook on disappointments.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

- Have you really come to terms with your demolished hopes?
- What new hope(s) can you find?