

What's it like to live without hope? What's it like to finally decide that your dreams are NOT POSSIBLE....so much so that you decide to live your life believing there is LITTLE HOPE.

The closest thing I could find of a person totally without hope comes from a book by Dr. David Jeremiah titled **The Power of Encouragement**. Dr. Jeremiah tells about an old Alfred Hitchcock show which featured the story of an evil woman jailed for committing a murder. The woman soon realizes that her only chance for escape is to befriend the old man who serves as the prison undertaker. He is the only inmate who is allowed outside the prison walls. **After much bribing and begging, the woman finally convinces the old man to help her escape.** He tells her that next time she hears the bell toll to announce a death in the prison, she should slip down to the prison mortuary and hide in the coffin with the dead body. He would take the coffin out the next morning and bury it in a shallow grave. When no one was looking, he would slip back out and dig up the woman and release her. **THE PERFECT ESCAPE.** Everything went as planned. On the night the woman heard the death bell, she slipped down to the mortuary and hid in the waiting coffin with the dead body. The coffin was transported outside the prison walls and buried. ***The woman waited hopefully, anxiously, but no one came to dig her up.*** Finally, she decided to light a match and look around her. **It was then she discovered that the dead body lying beneath her was that of the old undertaker.**

THIS IS THE PICTURE OF COMPLETE "HOPELESSNESS." My WARNING to you this day is that unless you are in a situation that is as hopeless as that woman's, **it's time to start looking at the positive side of life.** **It's time to look to Jesus.** Jesus is a hope giver. Jesus is a dream restorer. Jesus takes people who are hanging on with clinched teeth and is able to give them a new, fresh beginning.

Jesus was teaching in a synagogue one Sabbath day, and a woman was there who had been crippled for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up. The Bible says she was crippled "by a spirit."

That's an interesting phrase. **I've known lots of people who have been crippled by a spirit. Some of these people, too, are bent over and cannot straighten up.**

I've seen girls about 12-years-old develop poor posture because they tower over their classmates--especially the boys. These girls don't realize how beautiful they are with their long legs and long arms. All they know is that they feel "different." And when you are 12-years-old, the last thing you want to be is different. And so this beautiful girl starts hunching her shoulders. **She's crippled by a spirit of embarrassment.**

I've seen people bent over with a sense of responsibility. Not that their responsibilities are greater than anyone else's. What weighs them down is a sense of inability to meet those responsibilities. **The sad thing is that they are incapable.** But somewhere along the way they have been made to feel that they cannot do it! and they go around with the weight of the world on their shoulders. And you can see it in the way they walk--and the way they talk. **"How're you doing?" [with gloom] "Oh, I'm surviving."**

There are many healthy, intelligent, well-educated people who go through life feeling like losers. They've got it all compared to most of the people in the world, but they sabotage themselves time and time again because their attitude is so bad. **WHAT ABOUT YOU? Have you lost HOPE? Are you in a state of DESPAIR?**

Those of you who are football fans may remember a football game, years ago between Texas Christian University and the University of Oregon--The Horned Frogs and the Fighting Ducks. That's a colorful image, isn't it? The Horned Frogs were getting beat up at home by the Ducks. For one offensive player on the bench, it was too much. As a fleet-footed Duck streaked down the sideline late in the game toward another sure touchdown, the frustrated Frog leaped off the bench and tackled him. **It was a dumb move, a desperate move. When we have a spirit of inadequacy, when we have a senseless feeling of hopelessness and despair... WE DO DUMB THINGS.**

We sabotage ourselves at work, we sabotage ourselves in our relations with others and we sabotage the happiness that is our God-given right.

In our reading today we hear about a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years "by a spirit." THEN JESUS SAW HER. What an exhilarating thought: **JESUS SAW HER**. Here is the answer to our feelings of helplessness and despair—JESUS, TURN TO HIM!!!

Many people are bent over. Not physically, perhaps. But emotionally and spiritually. Some are bent over with a spirit of inadequacy and defeat. Others are bent over because they have experienced major trauma in their lives.

One morning Janice Anthony and her husband were on their way to work when they unexpectedly came upon a cow in the road. Janice swerved to miss the cow and ended up crashing into a telephone pole. Both she and her husband were injured. The next day, Janice returned to work at the day care center, but she was self-conscious of the bruises on her face. She worried that her appearance would upset the children. The first child at the day care center that day was a bubbly four-year-old named Elizabeth. Elizabeth ran to give Janice a hug, but stopped short when she saw Janice's face. Then, Elizabeth announced with wonder, *"Ms. Jan, you have a rainbow on your face!"* Where Janice had seen the ugliness of bruises, little Elizabeth had seen the beauty of a rainbow.

Some of us have a rainbow of hurt in our hearts. We live in fear of the future. Our health is uncertain. Our jobs are endangered. We are coping with family matters that are weighing us down more than people around us can possibly imagine. But here's the good news: Jesus knows! We have a friend who cares about our situation.

EVEN MORE IMPORTANT, JESUS HAS THE POWER TO LIFT BURDENS FROM OUR BACK. **Jesus can set us free.**

Author Max Lucado tells about his boyhood days of playing football out in the West Texas fields. The fields where Max and his friends played were full of grass burrs that stuck in their skin. Sometimes, after a big tackle, a player would have a leg or arm full of grass burrs. They stung horribly. The game came to a stop while the player pulled out each of the burrs. Some players wanted to keep on playing in spite of the burrs, but it was usually too painful. Lucado trusted no one but his father to pull out the burrs. So he would leave the game, go home, and get his father to pull out every last burr, then he would return to play. **Friends, there are burrs that only our Father can remove.** *Fortunately God will remove them if we trust ourselves to Him.*

Jesus knows our needs. And Jesus has the power to lift burdens from our back. Luke tells us that when Jesus saw this poor woman, he called her forward and said to her, *"Woman you are set free from your infirmity."* Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. **Jesus can give us what we need to cope with our difficult situations.**

Will Willimon tells of a small College Chapel in North Carolina that has one of the most unusual baptismal fonts in the world. **It is made from a huge stone which has been hollowed out for a font.** On that very stone, African slaves stood to be sold to the highest bidder. **Today, the stone serves Belmont Abbey as its baptismal font.** An inscription on the plaque tells all who enter those cleansing waters: *"On this stone men were sold into slavery. From this stone men are now baptized into freedom."*

By the power of Jesus Christ, you and I can move from slavery to freedom, from despair to victory.

He can lift our burdens and straighten our backs. AND HELP US "PAY IT FORWARD." What did the woman do? *"...Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God AND figuring out how she could share her Good News..."* VIDEO....

But there is one thing more we need to see: JESUS CALLS US TO LIFT ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS.

It is easy to see ourselves in this story as the woman whose back was straightened by Jesus.

BUT THERE IS ONE MORE THING WE NEED TO SEE IN THIS STORY... as Christ's body in the world, ***we are to be lifting the burdens of other people in the world.***

Some of you may remember an influential book written in the 1960s titled, **The Ugly American**. It is the story of an American engineer, Homer Atkins--a man with an ugly face--who was sent to Vietnam to build dams and roads for the military. But Homer refused to build the dams and roads until the government first solved some of the problems of their own people. At the suggestion of his wife, Homer designed a bicycle treadmill pump to get water up to the hillside paddies on which the people depended for food. For centuries this water had been carried laboriously by pails. **Homer's wife Emma was curious about the fact that every woman over sixty had a bent back.** Then she noticed that after the monsoon season the sweeping of debris from the streets was inevitably done by older people who used a broom with a short handle. Since wood for longer handles cost too much and was in short supply, Emma found a long-stalked reed and planted shoots from this reed by her door. She tended these reeds carefully. **One day when neighbors were in her house she cut a tall reed, bound coconut fronds to it and began to sweep with her back straight.** When the people questioned her concerning the reed, she told them where they might find them growing. Four years later, when Emma and Homer were back in Pittsburgh, they received a letter from the headman of the village thanking them. **The letter read: "In the village of Chang Dong today, the backs of our old people are straight and firm. No longer are their bodies painful and bent. You will be pleased to know that on the outskirts of the village we have constructed a small shrine in your memory . . .**

at the foot are these words: 'In memory of the woman who unbent the backs of our people.'"

Those words could be inscribed on the cross, for it is there that Christ has UNBENT MILLIONS OF BACKS---including that of the woman in our lesson for the day. YES, it started with the bent over women, **but it continues every day when you and I come to the cross with our worst sin, our worst worry, "we look up to our Lord"** and when we do we are given the chance through Jesus **to "Un-Bend" our backs and take on a more positive posture in life.** It is from this viewpoint...**WE CANNOT STOP!**

Like Homer and Emma, we need to DEDICATE OUR LIVES to ***"the straightening the back of others."***

Through words of encouragement and acts of compassion we, like our Master, should be those who UN-BEND THE BACKS OF THOSE AROUND US! SO THAT THEY TOO CAN "LOOK UP AT JESUS!" & FIND "HOPE."

Amen.