

When You've Been Guttled – Dan Hitz

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We all have them. Times when we've been emotionally gutted. And they hurt. They hurt a lot. It may be through the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, a betrayal. The pain goes much deeper than the event. There's the loss of hopes, dreams, and goals for the future. Someone... or something... very precious to us... is gone. Our very foundation has crumbled. Or at least... what we thought was our foundation.

In the middle of our pain, the sin and hiding places of the past start glistening a little bit more. Sometimes a lot more. Don't run back to the false comforts of your past life. In the middle of the pain it's easy to feel like the disciples who got offended at Jesus because He was sleeping in the boat in the middle of the storm. Doesn't He care? Why doesn't He do something? He's the one who told me to get into this boat in the first place. Wasn't I doing His will? Am I in this thing all by myself? In the middle of the pain it can be pretty difficult to hear the truth. No. You're not alone. Jesus is still right there with you. Jesus is still very much involved in what you're going through. He isn't sleeping in the boat in the middle of the storm because He doesn't care. Jesus is sleeping because He has 100% confidence in the Father to get you through the storm and lead you to the shore. It may not feel like it. Things aren't happening the way you figured they were going to happen. But you aren't going to drown. If you hold onto Jesus in the middle of the storm... the one you don't really understand right now... the one you may actually be ticked off at right now... He is there. He is good. He will lead you through the storm.

Maybe a small part of my own journey can help you. There was a time when I went through a huge ministerial disappointment. Initially, it looked like years of hopes and dreams were being fulfilled. The Lord opened the door for a big endeavor that would take a lot of time, effort and sacrifice. It required a season of changing focus and putting a lot of energy into a joint project at the expense of some responsibilities with family and my regular ministry. My wife and I were prayerfully on the same page. In our minds it would be worth these sacrifices because we thought that through this calling, so many more ministerial doors would be opened in the future. After all, it really was Jesus who told us to "get into the boat". To be real, we knew there would be a lot of challenges with this project, but we figured Jesus would calm the storms and get us through to the other side of the lake without the boat taking on a lot of water.

Well. The waves came. Big ones. The boat took on a lot of water. As the project rolled on, we began to come up against some heavy opposition. The enemy truly got out some heavy artillery for this one. Bombs were going off. Some of them right in the middle of my heart. I had some challenges with the project leader. While I initially thought we were on the same page, it quickly became clear that we were not. The opposition was coming from a source that I least expected. And it continued to grow worse.

Unlike the disciples, I have to admit that Jesus was very much awake in the middle of the boat. Also unlike the disciples, Jesus did not calm the storm. He "allowed" the storm to continue. Although there were times when I didn't think I could continue with what He was asking me to do, He didn't allow me to drown. He kept me afloat. He spoke words of truth. He empowered me to endure the storm.

Enduring the storm didn't mean that I came out unscathed. There were wounds. Deep ones. Although we did accomplish many of the ministerial goals of the project, there were other goals that did not get accomplished because of the brokenness of the team. Mine included. What could have been a fantastic experience, turned out to be just okay. And the ministerial hopes, dreams, and goals for the future that I thought would be secured through this project? They seemed to be heaped up in a charred pile of rubble right smack dab in the center of my heart.

I was disillusioned. I had a lot of charred debris to work through with Jesus. And I let Him know that. One day the Lord spoke to me and said, "Dan, you have to grieve the tearing of your hopes and dreams." He got

my attention. Although I had been grieving... sort of... I hadn't recognized it as such. I didn't realize my legitimate need to do some holy grieving. Holy grieving is much more efficient than resentful complaining. I responded, "Lord, I feel like there's been an amputation. I'm feeling a lot of phantom pain here." He intimately spoke back, "Dan, are you willing to grieve the tearing with no guarantee that I will fill up that void in your heart? Are you willing to surrender to me with absolutely no guarantee that I will grow back the limb? Are you willing to surrender to me with absolutely no guarantee that I will even heal the phantom pain? But with a full guarantee that I will be fully with you during this process?" God was asking me to be honest. It felt like I had one leg. I considered my options. I could try to make a fake prosthesis. I could try to make some sort of wooden crutch to hobble around on. What would that get me in the end? God's presence is far more important than some fake limb. Or even a real one. I surrendered. I told Him that since I only had one leg, I'd need Him to pick me up and set me where He wants me to be. I need the grace to stay wherever that is until He comes and picks me up and sets me someplace else.

I could breathe again. But grieving – and healing – is a process. I don't know how many times I cried in my heart, "Lord, this surely didn't turn out the way I figured it would". During one of the seasons when I was being particularly whiny, the Lord spoke to me and said, "I'm sure things didn't turn out like Moses planned when he tried to help his fellow Israelites by killing the Egyptian and then spent the next 40 years tending his father-in-law's sheep in the middle of a desert. And I'm sure things didn't turn out the way David figured they would when he was anointed king by Samuel and then spent years in the wilderness running from Saul." God had my attention.

Then the Lord began to unpack the life of Joseph. Surely things didn't turn out like Joseph planned after he got done telling his brothers that they would all end up bowing down to him someday. We can see their response when he came back another day and let them know that mom and dad were going to be bowing down to him too. They threw him down a dry well. Forget mom and dad bowing down to their own son, where were they to protect Joseph when he was thrown into that well?

You can read about the brothers throwing Joseph into a well in Genesis 37, verse 24. Verse 25 says a lot. The brothers cared so little about the harm they were causing Joseph, that they sat down and ate lunch in the very next verse. What little hope Joseph may have had as his brothers were lifting him out of that well was surely smashed as they promptly sold him to slave traders. Surely, this was not part of Joseph's hopes, dreams, and goals for the future. The brothers didn't seem to care.

I've often wondered about the inner dialogue and struggles that Joseph was having during his early years in Egypt. The Bible really doesn't say, but since Chapter 39 tells how the Lord was with Joseph and caused everything he did to prosper, we can assume that Joseph didn't let his heart grow bitter towards the Lord. He faithfully served Potiphar, the captain of the guard, until Potiphar's wife lied about Joseph trying to assault her and he was thrown into prison. Evidently, he didn't get bitter in prison either as the warden ended up putting Joseph in charge and made him "responsible for all that was done there" (Genesis 39:22 NIV).

Even though things didn't play out the way Joseph figured they would, he was able to keep his heart open to the Lord and the Lord continued to show him favor. He ended up being second in command to Pharaoh and saving the lives of many people during the famine as the head of Egypt's food distribution program. He was 17 years old the day his brothers threw him into a well, and about 40 when he was reunited with his father in Egypt. Things surely didn't turn out the way he thought they would when he was the snarky 17 year old who thought it was a good idea to tell his brothers that they would be bowing down to him someday. However, Joseph persevered by keeping his heart open to the Lord and trusting in His grace when he was wronged, abused, and overwhelmed. Most likely, he would have never imagined that the Lord would ever use him in the way that He did. All of us will have our own set of dry wells, Potiphar's houses, and prisons to walk through. It is inevitable. But if we can keep our hearts open to the Lord when our own hopes, dreams and goals for the future are crushed; our lives will have so much more eternal benefit than we could ever imagine. God is good. And He loves us dearly.