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The coming God: pursuing a theology of hope

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE COMING GOD: PURSUING A THEOLOGY OF HOPE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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ABSTRACT

I believe that many followers of Christ are confused about the nature of biblical hope and, as a result, do not know what it means to live with hope when faced with personal disappointment or cultural resistance. The hope which fueled the early disciples of Jesus has either faded or has been replaced with a modern day superficial form of optimism. The author of 1 Peter 3:15 states, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” But, for scores of Christians, the “reason for hope” has become questionable and many believers have settled for a life of apathy, cynicism, and despair. I am convinced that in order for the kingdom of God to continue to expand, the people of God must reach a fuller understanding of the Source from which their hope comes as well as how to live within that new found hope.

Other alternative solutions to the problem of despair have permeated the culture at large. Some Christians have fallen into the cultural snare of optimistic or wishful thinking. Optimistic-driven churches have sprouted all over the world, yet despite their apparent success, the message within these churches was not the original message of the Early Church. Hope is not optimism. A second perspective, which also includes Christian voices, suggests that hope can be found in the progressive ideal of humanity. The notion of progress holds that if people continue to work towards the common good, pursue knowledge, and become educated, then humanity will move towards a utopia filled with hope. However, if the path to progress is rooted solely on human achievement, God’s role and sovereignty is dismissed and true hope is short-lived. And finally, another camp
suggests that the best solution to the problem of despair is simply to escape earthly reality all together. The pious escapist believes that the world is a wicked place and the primary hope of the Christian is that he or she can have the assurance of an other-worldly heaven. Each of these three views, the optimist, the progressive, and the escapist, fail at making adequate sense of earthly pain, tragedy, and persecution. Furthermore, these philosophies do not present God as an active Deity who is calling His creation to be participants with Him in His redemptive mission within the present world.

It is my claim that in order for followers of Christ to experience and participate in God’s redemptive mission in the world God’s people must have biblical hope. Biblical hope is not optimism, human progress, or earthly escapism, rather this supernatural hope is a way of living in the world based on the conviction that God keeps His promises. Disciples of Jesus are people who, in spite of suffering, hold fast to their vision of a coming kingdom that extends beyond their present trials.

The artifact portion of this dissertation is a non-fiction, trade-sized book, which will explore the hope found throughout the history of the people of God and thus provide a path for followers of Christ in the 21st century to rediscover their “reason for hope.” This book will be written in popular style and aimed at a Christian adult audience.
SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM

Optimism among Christ’s followers is rampant, but to be blissful in the midst of pain or to avoid bad news all together seems to stem from shallow spirituality. Scriptures cannot be found which address the problem of human pain or suffering by denying its existence or by merely focusing on positive thoughts. It is true that Christianity is rooted in the hope found on the other side of the cross, but the cross, itself, can never be denied. When crosses and struggles come, as they do in every life, one’s daily existence can become so wrought with heartache and trouble that from a human vantage point, one can feel like it would be better to not go on at all. Life experience demonstrates that there is no easy path to a promising future. The question remains: how is anyone to make sense out of tragedy, depression, economic hardship, broken relationships, and the like? What good is hope in the face of a life battered over and over again by despair? Fortunately, throughout the story of God, many people can be found who provide a model for choosing not to settle for a life of cynicism and despair. Instead, these faith-filled saints moved forward and put their hope in God’s encompassing plan of redemption, indisputably believing that God’s future entered into their present misery and that somehow they were participants with Him in bringing about heaven to earth. They were certain that God’s grand story must be further reaching than the sum of their present situation of suffering.

Within this project, the topic of biblical hope in a culture filled with resistance will be pursued. Many people in the world have stories of pain and grief, depression and despair, rejection and sorrow. Some saints survived well; some did not. Simply put, I
want to discover why some church fathers and mothers were able to come through struggle, pain, and hardship full of heart and certain of soul. Moreover, the detachment between the theoretical concept of hope and the experiential reality of hope will be closely examined. It is my desire that through this work, disciples of Jesus will find personal guidance in developing a hope-centered theological perspective, aspire to hold fast to God’s promises, and respond with an action-oriented lifestyle of hope.

A Personal Journey

In many ways, the Doctorate in Ministry program at George Fox Evangelical Seminary and this project have been a lifeline for me over the past few years. When I first joined the SFS7 cohort in 2008 I was searching for something—little did I know I was searching for my own sense of hope. After twelve years of ministry experience, the mission of the church had left me baffled, confused, and hopelessly wanting. Even after planting a new church community, I struggled to make sense out of the future promises of God and my own experiential reality. I was not experiencing the abundant life which Jesus had taught and modeled and didn’t know why. When being honest with myself, I was filled with despair, cynicism, anger, confusion, bitterness, jealousy, depression, and was about ready to abandon my call to ministry. This period was very discouraging, but it was also a time of immense personal growth.

Early in the Doctorate in Ministry program, Dr. Leonard Sweet proposed the question, based from the context of 1 Peter 3:15, “What is your reason for hope?” The question caught me off guard because I did not have an answer. Furthermore, I was
confused and bewildered about the meaning of Christian hope. I decided to go on a hope-search.

After much exploration, theological formation, and personal reflection, I have discovered my reason for hope. Subsequently, this project is a reflection of my spiritual formation path taken while I transitioned from despair to hope. Over the past few years, I have discovered a theological perspective which reconciles the human experience of pain, tragedy, and persecution with God’s future promises and the mission of the church. Furthermore, I have also gained a new passion for ministry and a desire to help others discover their reason for hope.
SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The problems surrounding earthly pain and despair have perplexed humanity since the beginning of time. Throughout the ages, philosophers, theologians, and sociologists have presented many perspectives while attempting to offer solutions to humanity’s dilemmas. In a sense, every major spiritual revelation or religion known to humankind, is, in fact, based on the bedrock of hope. Hinduism sees life as the gathering of graces which eventually will lead to the eternal dissolution of each person into the energy of God. Buddhism teaches the path to Enlightenment, to the end of suffering. Islam awaits the transformation from the physical burdens of life to the spiritual freedom which comes with submission to God. Judaism lives in the life-giving law of God and awaits the messiah who will turn an unjust world into the eternal glory of God. Christianity teaches that the Jewish Messiah arrived in the person of Jesus Christ and that hope can be found in the mysterious integration through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Although, the vision of Christian hope is different from other major world religions, embedded within each major religion is a spirituality of hope which imbues its followers with the power to believe in life, to cope with life, to live life, whatever the burdens which come with daily realities.¹

In an attempt to discover some sense of hope, many proclaimed believers have moved away from Christian hope and have either adopted a cynical life or a superficial means of despair management. The following three solutions all contain partial truths but

¹Chittister, Joan. *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), x.
are lacking in an adequate response with which to reconcile the future nature of God and human disappointment.

1. The people of God are pessimistic and need to become more optimistic in their worldview and proclamation. God’s people have always been called to dwell on the good and lovely. Nevertheless, hope is not optimism, naiveté, or wishful thinking. Biblical hope is a mode of living and acting in the world based on God’s future promises. The overly simplistic optimistic method of living does not reconcile or embrace pain, tragedy, and persecution; it actually avoids and withdraws from dealing with those experiential realities.

Throughout history, philosophers and theologians have described hope as an action-oriented virtue. By definition, a virtue transcends environmental concerns and circumstantial struggles. Optimism is not a bad thing in and of itself; however, the weakness of optimism is that it is based on the ebbs and flows of sentiments. The theory of optimism works when the systems of the world are reasonably predictable, but when a person experiences unpredictable and uncertain circumstances, optimism becomes fragile. In contrast, hope begins where optimism reaches its end. Hope stirs when the seemingly secure systems of the world collapse. Hope thrives in a world where human logic fails and people are unable to control their circumstances and outcomes. This is why, throughout history, the people of God were able to endure exile and persecution. Hope is what catalyzed the Psalmist to write these lyrics in the

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2See Philippians 4:8. In this verse, the apostle Paul encourages the church in Philippi to think on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, and excellent, thus demonstrating that followers of Christ are not meant to be pessimistic.
middle of Babylonian exile, “I wither away like grass. But you, O LORD, sit enthroned forever.” Simply put, the difference between optimism and hope is this: optimism is rooted in humanity’s capacities while biblical hope is entrenched in God’s nature. Hope is a theological concept and it is a state of life, but it should also be considered a gift coming from God’s self-giving character.

In a unique manner, a God-given, virtue-oriented hope has the power to enable an individual to risk even life itself for the greater good of others. This sense of living for the greater good is demonstrated in the story of Stephen, the first martyr of the early church. During Stephen’s stoning, he prayed with confidence, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Stephen, similar to the majority of martyrs, did not embrace such persecution with an optimistic spirit, but he was supernaturally enabled to endure such trials, even death, because he was willing to live beyond himself.

Moreover, as exemplified in Stephen’s courageous proclamation found in Acts 7:2-53, Stephen discovered that his perseverance through trials and tribulations would promote God’s greater good, that being, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as Christ was enabled to take a stand for the hopeless, the people of

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3Psalm 102:11-12. The lament brings out the depth of despair and the question of personal existence. Over against the psalmist’s condition is the Lord, whom he addresses with an emphatic “But you.” The psalmist is reduced to little more than a fleeting existence, a withering piece of grass. On the side of human despair, the Lord’s fame remains from generation to generation. It is unaffected by the adversities of individuals or even of groups of people who come against God’s reign. As long as God’s rule lasts, His fame will be told and retold.

4Chittister, Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope, ix.

5Acts 7:59.
God have also been enabled to remain faithful to God in the midst of despair. Hoping is therefore not simply wishing; hope is an action. In acting, as exemplified in the story of Stephen, a person can also pray and praise the One who is the giver of all hope. In prayer, the people of God can express their gratitude for what has already been given and maintain a receptive openness to what is beyond all imagination and control. Prayer is not wishful thinking, nor is it positive thinking. Prayer is the arena where hope can manifest itself and mobilize believers to persevere.

Being more optimistic is not the entire answer for Christians. This study advocates another point of view which places hope beyond the dichotomy of pessimism and optimism. Christian hope is centered on the reality that God is coming from the future and stepping into humanity’s present experience. For this reason, hope is not merely wishing for something more or better; it is a conduct of life. Simply put, hope is a mode of living, acting, and praying in the world.

2. The people of God are not advancing toward an idyllic earthly future; therefore, they need to embrace the progressive idealism found within modern culture. Christian hope, when properly defined, is hope “against” all the false hopes of the world. One of the counterfeit hopes of the world is the concept of progressivism. Even though the progressive movement uses the word “hope” to describe much of its philosophy, it is important to recognize that biblical hope stands apart from the hope of the progressive ideology. In both

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its Marxist and capitalist expressions, modernity assumed that the redemptive quality of God was inherently the same as progress for humanity. But biblical faith does not regard divine providence as a synonym for historical progress.

The notion of progressivism attempts to function with a form of optimism derived from human achievement. In contrast, biblical hope comes from outside of human ingenuity. For the Christian, the Easter-event is the primary example of hope coming from a non-human orientation. The death of Jesus left the most fervent disciples without hope, silenced, and afraid. Yet the resurrection works as the antithesis of the cross and it is a clear demonstration of God’s power coming from beyond human initiative.

Early followers of Christ looked back with joy on the Easter-event, but their joy did not stem from a sense of progress. If anything, early Christ followers were pushed to the outskirts of society both socially and economically. The idea that the progressive project would continue to grow and develop, producing unlimited human improvement, and march towards a utopia, goes back to the Renaissance age and was catalyzed by the eighteenth

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9See Mark 16:8.

10Mulholland, Robert. *Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1980), 236. Since, for John, the Roman Empire was the historical incarnation of Fallen Babylon, it would follow that the emperor was the incarnation of the Beast of Revelation. In Revelation chapter 13, the vision pictures the Beast’s enforced economic conformity. In later Imperial reigns, buying and selling in the Roman marketplaces was prohibited to those who did not provide a certificate of emperor worship. Faithful Christ followers would not bow down in worship to Caesar; therefore, they were banned from social and economic environments. Without the possibility of buying and selling, the whole fabric of individual and social life comes unraveled. If individuals are prohibited or refuse to buy and sell, they become outcasts, unable to participate in the life of the society.
century European Enlightenment era.\textsuperscript{11} Nonetheless, the Renaissance dream of utopia is in fact a parody of the Christian vision.\textsuperscript{12} The kingdom of God is not equivalent to progress and technological mastery; and humans cannot be morally perfected or made whole through education and hard work. Yet, historically, many Christian thinkers were strongly influenced by progressive thought. Many Christians embraced what was referred to as the Social Gospel; which attempted to put the promises of the Christian message into practice throughout society and political policies. As a result, an enormous amount of charitable work was done, but the underpinning of biblical hope continues to deteriorate and has since been replaced by a God-less form of optimism.

The foundational problem of the progressive ideology is that it cannot deal with the problem of evil effectively.\textsuperscript{13} The progressive project cannot develop a strategy which addresses the severe problems of an evil world. Hence, the reason why the evolutionary optimism of the past two hundred years has still remained powerless over war, crime, the Holocaust, child pornography, sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS, and the like. Politicians still want to pretend that progress is “on the way,” and they argue that their policies will help the majority of the world avoid human misery. However, the gap or problem in

\textsuperscript{11}Wright, \textit{Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church}, 82.

\textsuperscript{12}History has proven that the world is filled with many parodies of the Christian vision; however, one could assert that the human desire and attempt to create a utopia is an expression of humanity’s desire to return to Eden and regain what was lost in the fall of humankind. Perhaps the belief in progress is another human attempt to regain Eden; the life that God told humanity is no longer fully attainable.

\textsuperscript{13}Wright, \textit{Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church}, 84. Wright notes that the myth of progress cannot deal with the problem of evil. Wright asserts that it is not just an intellectual problem, but it is also a very practical problem. Progress has not been able to develop a strategy which actually addresses the severe problems of the world.
the progressive’s thought process is the assumption that as humanity progresses in technology and education, humanity is also progressing in morality, which is not true. The real solution to the problem of evil must also resolve the problem of immorality. Upon a quick observation of the culture at large, one can sense that progress has not produced a greater morality, if anything; progress has created the opposite: more avenues for greed, materialism, power, and oppression.

The progressive ideal fails because it will never solve the problem of evil; and because it underestimates the nature and power of evil itself thus avoiding the theology of the cross. Only in the Christian story and through Christian hope does humanity find answers to the moral problem of evil. Even though the general notions of progress and Christian hope sometimes run on the same track, in the end, the myth of progress comes from a different origin and veers off in a different direction—a direction which is not congruent with a biblical theology of hope.14

3. The people of God will not fully experience God’s promises of abundance on earth and the hope of the Christian can primarily be found in the afterlife or upon the second coming of Christ. Many Christians have avoided the cultural lures of optimism and have rightfully noticed the fallacy within the myth of progress, but some believers have moved towards the presumption that the world is a wicked place and Christians would do better to escape it all together. This view is referred to as the “escapist ideology.” Within the

14 Ibid., 86.
escapist’s worldview, the world is not working towards a holistic mindset, instead it is actually decaying. And the hope of the Christian is to depart the earthly experience all together.

Even though most escapists would not describe themselves in the following terms, the escapist has adopted a commonly refuted notion of Gnosticism. In his book *Surprised by Hope*, N.T. Wright notes,

The Gnostics believed that the material world was an inferior and dark place, evil in its very existence, but within the world there could be found a certain people who were meant for something better. These “children of light” were like fallen stars and tiny particles of light could be found within their distorted material body. Once a believer realized who they were, through knowledge (Greek gnosis), a person could enter into a spiritual world where the material world would no longer count. The Gnostic myth often suggests that the way out of earthly disorder is to return to the primeval state before the creation of the world.\textsuperscript{15}

In this sense, Gnostic thought essentially ends up bypassing the fall of humanity and does not appropriately deal with the problem of evil. The problem with Gnosticism and escapism is that these philosophies do not embrace a restorative theology found within the overarching biblical narrative and within Jesus’ conceptual teaching of the kingdom-of-God-on-earth.\textsuperscript{16}

Many hymns, prayers, and Christian writings have wandered off unthinkingly in the direction of Gnosticism. The “just passing through” spirituality and the belief that “the earth is not my home” has innocently encouraged a Gnostic attitude. In Gnosticism, the created world is viewed as irrelevant, dark, and evil. As a result, a pervasive assumption has been made

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 89.

in Western Christianity that the purpose of being a Christian is primarily to “go to heaven when you die.” Many biblical passages, such as Romans 8:18-25 or Revelation 21-22, strongly refute the escapist ideology; however, these passages and others are often brushed off or avoided all together within escapist circles.

Over and against the escapist mentality, the central Christian affirmation is that what the creator God has done in Jesus, supremely in his resurrection, is what he intends to do for the entire world. The hope of the Christian is not found in an ideology which thinks, “I cannot wait to get out of here.” But it is found in the belief that, in Jesus’ resurrection, God was ushering in His kingdom and initiating a restoration movement through those who believed and followed the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus Christ.

In early Christian thought, the resurrection, not glorification, was viewed as the beginning point for their restoration theology. In 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, Paul emphatically makes the claim for an earthly restorative spirituality when

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17 In this passage, the entire creation longs to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. The restoration of material nature is a condition similar to the restoration of humanity’s spiritual nature. The Apostle Paul here teaches, not the annihilation of this visible world, but its transformation. Paul is concerned with the creation only as it relates to humanity. It is interesting to consider how gracious God would be to retain for believers the habitat they have long been accustomed to, only so changed and beautified as to harmonize with their own glorified state. Essentially, Paul is making a parallel between the saints and the material creation. In at least two respects their situation is the same—groaning and eagerly awaiting the new age. However, the key to understanding the concept of “awaiting” is one of transformation, not isolation.

18 Mulholland, Robert. Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1980), 318-335. Mulholland notes that it is important to recognize that the “Holy City” is “coming down” out of heaven and entering earth. The “coming” nature is also presenting a continuous action rather than an accomplished fact. In speaking of the historical church in the midst of persecution, this image of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven is highly motivating and transformational. For present hearers, the New Jerusalem was not seen as a future event, but as a present reality “continually coming down” from God. The New Jerusalem is the radical alternative to the fallen Babylon and the central theme of the Holy City is hope.
he states, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has
gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself
through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was
reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against
them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are
therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal
through us.”19 For Paul and the early Christ followers, Gnostic thought or an
escapist ideology was clearly unacceptable and an outright dismissal of the
implications of Jesus’ resurrection.

In this section I have demonstrated that there are three major alternative
perspectives to the problem of despair; however, each alternative presented
continues to lack an adequate response which reconciles the future nature of
God and human pain, tragedy, and persecution. These alternative perspectives
appear to be prevalent within the current Christian culture but, in the end,
these viewpoints fail to adhere to a biblical ideology of hope, fail to make
sense of evil, and fall short of mobilizing people towards responsible-hope.

19 2 Cor. 5:17-20. These verses demonstrate that reconciliation is the divine act by which, on the
basis of the death of Christ, God's holy displeasure against a sinful humanity was appeased, the distance
between God and man was removed, and man was restored to proper relations with God.
SECTION 3: THE THESIS

Although the commonly held assumptions and perspectives to the problem of despair have some worth, I do not believe they adhere to a biblical theology of hope nor do they properly catalyze the people of God to experience and participate in the redemptive mission of God. I propose that the people of God, despite facing cultural resistances, must internalize and embody a biblically coherent form of hope to the world. I will demonstrate that the theology of the people of God, in both the Old and New Testament, centered around the theme of hope and, as a result, God’s people throughout history were able to live beyond hardship, tragedy, and persecution.

Introduction

Hope has a job to do. Hope is the sense of possibility, which spawns and sustains existence. In life, an individual has two options; one can choose to live in despair or choose to live filled with hope. The path of hope is not an option for those who believe and follow the way of God, in fact, hope is the bedrock for the stream of faith. However, it is not enough for an individual to simply be infused with hope, as the Christian tradition emphasizes, but one must also practice, project, and proclaim hope to the world.20 The author of 1 Peter 3:15 states, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Simply put, for

20 Marshall, Ellen. Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom: Toward a Responsible Theology of Hope (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), xiii.
disciples of Jesus, the reason for hope must be realized and evident to the surrounding world.

Many people in the 21st century world are bewildered and mistaken about the nature of hope. Within the majority of the culture at large, hope has become synonymous with optimism and wishful thinking. Similar to how the word “love” can be used to describe devotion to a partner in one breath and then in the next breath describe a passion for food, the word “hope” has also lost its distinctive theological roots and context for shaping meaning in life. Hope is not optimism, positive thinking, or naiveté. Hope is a theological virtue which has the ability to transcend circumstances, situations, and time. By its nature, hope is theological because it orients a person toward a responsibility of others and God’s redemptive presence in the world. Hope has a job to do because God has called His people to be morally responsible and to be active participants in His redemptive mission in the world.21

Responsible-hope implies a trustful and confident movement toward the future. Hope is trustful because it relies on an external source for the help which is needed. Hope is confident, despite facing resistances, because it anticipates a fuller dimension of life.22 Even though finding the words to communicate one’s hope can be difficult, hope is the movement away from despair, apathy, and cynicism. In a sense, hope is defiant and is convinced that the future will be better than the present situation of suffering and struggle. For the people of God, God is the external source who provides trust and confidence, and God is also the author who promises that the future will be better for

21Ibid., xiv. In her work, Marshall, proposes that hope generates and sustains moral agency. In other words, humans are morally responsible to practice hope.

those who believe in Him and His redemptive mission in the world. But, for multiple reasons, hope in God is dwindling. As a result of a weakened confidence in the Triune nature and “Be-ing” of God, many people have adopted the culturally acceptable disposition of optimism.\textsuperscript{23}

It is clear that there is no easy path to a promising future; however, the can-do-spirit of optimism falls short of a genuine transformative experience because it is fixated in personal arrogance. Contrary to the arrogance of optimism, genuine hope is rooted in powerlessness. If a person believes they are in control of the situation or circumstance, there is neither the need nor the ability to continue growing or persevering. Powerless-hope can be relentlessly persistent, but it involves an honest examination of the world and a complete audit of its life-giving and death-dealing potential.\textsuperscript{24} Contrary to optimism, powerless-hope does not pretend that pain, tragedy, or persecution does not exist. Powerless-hope acknowledges life’s limitations and incompletions, yet it points towards God, who is coming from the future into humanity’s present. As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his book \textit{Saved in Hope}, powerless-hope is a gift from God and in the same way that salvation cannot be obtained by human effort, hope cannot be obtained by human effort either.\textsuperscript{25} The apostle Paul makes this point clear when he stated to the church in

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\textsuperscript{24}Marshall, \textit{Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom: Toward a Responsible Theology of Hope}, xiv. Through the life-audit process, responsible-hope identifies possibilities that range from a radical, positive change to the shear survival of disappointment. And these possibilities, the objects of hope, need constant evaluation and adjustment in light of new information, present experiential realities, connection to the larger good, and implications for others. \\
\textsuperscript{25}Benedict XVI, Pope. \textit{Saved in Hope} (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 7. \\
\end{tabular}
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Rome, “In hope we were saved.” In essence, Paul was trying to communicate the reality that before those in the church were saved they were without hope and without God in the world. For the people of God, the challenge of living out the Christian life is in the “acceptance” of the gift of grace and the gift of hope. Only when hope is understood as a gracious gift from God can one begin to understand the dichotomy between the promises of a coming-God and one’s experiential reality of an incomplete, corrupt, and broken world.

The Problem of Hope

More often than not, within the story of God, God’s people are described as crying out for help, even when there seems to be no answer in sight. For case in point, Habakkuk, the Hebrew prophet, cries out, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?” In the midst of Habakkuk’s agony, he rightfully questions God’s goodness, faithfulness, and plan of salvation. As the story of Habakkuk

See Ephesians 2:12. Of course Paul knew the believers in the Church of Rome had had a religion, but their gods had proved to be questionable, and no hope emerged from their contradictory myths. In the same vein, Paul also says to the church in Thessalonica, “You must not grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Here too we see as a distinguishing mark of Christians is that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live in the present as well. Pope Benedict XVI also notes in his book, Saved by Hope, that Christianity was not only “good news”—the communication of a hitherto unknown. It could be said that the Christian message is not only “informative” but also “performative.” To come to know the true God means coming to experience true life transformation.

Habakkuk 1:2-3 (NRSV).
continues, Habakkuk describes the all too common tension within humanity. On one hand, God has made a promise to His people that He will provide and bless their life, but on the other hand, the human experience is one of pain, agony, and despair. In a profound manner, Habakkuk models a person willing to remain hope-filled even while his experience of God’s blessing and transformative peace is not present. Habakkuk exclaims, “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.” In short, the problem of hope is found not in the ideology but in the experience. Within the human experience of hope, the plaguing question surfaces, “How can I expect the goodness of God to prevail when my experience is anything but good?”

Even though Habakkuk models for God’s people a person willing to live within the tension of despair, expecting God to come through, the human eye still struggles to equate a good God with a world filled with famine, economic collapse, abuse, neglect, illness, murder, and many other injustices. Most humans are baffled by how it is possible

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29Throughout Scripture, questioning God’s faithfulness is not equivalent to acting faithlessly. Questioning God is part of the process of dealing with powerless-hope. In Habakkuk’s situation, he questions God because his answer was not what he expected. God will answer, as He promises, but sometimes He will use a Godless nation to chastise the nation of Israel. Simply put, Habakkuk’s hope is ultimately in the nature of God.

30Marshall, Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom: Toward a Responsible Theology of Hope, 2.

31Habakkuk 3:17-18 (NRSV).

32Israel’s prosperity was dependent on the nation’s obedience to the covenant and on the Lord’s consequent blessing (Lev. 26:3-5). Such prosperity was forfeited by disobedience to the covenant, which caused the Lord’s discipline through natural and military disasters. In the context of Habakkuk, the prophet, Habakkuk, acknowledges his nation’s failings and the overarching economic disaster was viewed as a judgment by God. Despite Habakkuk’s acknowledgement of God’s judgment, he also demonstrates great faith in verse 16 and presents “God” as the savior. It is important to see that Judaism describes God as both the judge and the savior.
for a person to live through despair-filled circumstances and still rely on God’s unseen promises where apparently, in the end, God’s good purposes will triumph.

In an attempt to grapple with the tension of the human experience, one must explore the concept of being morally responsible to hope. When an individual comprehends their moral obligation to stand fast in the face of violence, hardship, injustice, and pain, the principle of responsible-hope can begin to reorient their lifestyle and psyche. The question for the people of God is not whether to hope, but how to do so responsibly.

Within a worldview where hope is adhered to as a moral responsibility, one of the implications is that a person is capable of seeing beyond their desires, their situation, and the confines of a negative circumstance. As a person proceeds to transcend their context, they are not standing in denial of their circumstances but, rather, they are placing their situation in the context of a larger event. And when a person begins to intertwine their faith and life, the individual will be mysteriously enabled to embrace despairing circumstances and live beyond their situation with responsible-hope. This transcendent experience is precisely what the author of Hebrews was describing when he stated, “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.”

For the Christian, hope is not stationary; hope is persevering and marching towards God’s future promises.

33See Hebrews 10:35-36. The early Christ followers had a confidence which was based firmly on Christ's saving work, not their own. What they had endured for Christ's sake entitled them to a reward. The phrase, “Do not throw away your confidence” is essentially communicating, “Do not throw away Christ’s work.” Furthermore, the description of “receiving the promise” is also a safeguard against any salvation by works. God’s good gift is secured, though not merited, by their ability to continue to the end.
Even though hope should be considered a way of life for those who find themselves situated in God’s story, there are many who are skeptical of the Christian tendency to accelerate toward assurances in times of tragedy. In her book *Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom*, Marshall notes that the primary reason for this skepticism is because faith claims which are divorced from historical realities tend to produce supernaturalism, asceticism, other-worldly imaginings, and indifference towards the needs of people. In addition, some critics of Christianity also view broad-sweeping faith claims as a utopian dream or a version of pseudo-hope, thus trivializing the real losses and limits of life. In truth, neither the unrealistic other-worldly gaze nor the negative view of acknowledging life’s limits will suffice. What is needed is a view of hope which cultivates a sense of possibility without glossing over the realities. The term “responsible-hope,” attempts to provide a viewpoint which holds together God’s future nature and deals appropriately with life’s disappointments. Furthermore, obtaining responsible-hope provides a necessary alternative to the superficial form of optimism which is so prevalent within the modern day culture.

The Future Nature of Hope

Throughout the story of God, hope is clearly one of the major themes for God’s people. In a sense, every page of Scripture is laced with an underlying desire that God will fulfill His promises. Christian theology embarks on a journey to connect the

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34 Marshall, 12.
contingent history of God with the future redemption of God. In an attempt to bridge the
two realms of God, typically, one will speak of God with respect to concrete past events;
however, past events do not entirely illuminate hope’s theological pursuit. New
Testament theology, in view of the Christ event, essentially speaks of God
eschatologically. The goal of Christian theology is not merely to develop a historical
treatise, nor is it a stationary form of systematic theology; rather it should be understood
as a pursuit of recognizing the consummation or final reality of all creation.

Eschatology immediately invokes a dialogue between time and eternity, because
dimensions of the past, present, and future interweave. Though God is the creator of the
time-structured universe, God is not in time nor is time in God. God cannot be measured
by, or subjected to a “before” or “after.” God is infinitely and eternally “now.” As Kelly
emphasizes, at every moment of time, God is the One who is, who was, and who is to
come, which suggests that there are two dimensions of creation’s relationship with the
eternal God.36 The first looks to humanity’s historical place in time. The second looks to
God approaching humanity in physical space and time.37 Though God is essentially
outside of time, the gracious nature of God provides creation with the gift of time;
therefore, allowing God to be historically realized.

Current theologians, such as Moltmann and Pannenberg, have advocated that
human reality is most truly evident only in relation to a future-orientation of God’s
nature. As Moltmann emphasizes in his work, the primary mode of God’s being should
be understood from within a future orientation; hence, his expression “the coming-

36See Revelation 1:4-8. In this section, John describes Jesus as the Alpha and Omega. Jesus is the
divine beginning and end—as seen from beyond time.

God.” The mode of God’s being should not be considered “behind humans,” “in humans,” or even “beyond humans.” The mode of God’s being should be considered, “ahead of humans.” For the place where God’s existence and unity with creation merge is “in front of humanity.” In essence, God is constantly wooing humanity and coming towards humanity at the same time. God is the God of the coming kingdom, which, when understood properly, has the power to transform an individual’s earthly experiential reality.

From a human perspective, God can be viewed as acting in the past and continuing to act in the present; however, to understand creation, the incarnation, the resurrection, the Spirit-life, and Christian hope properly, one must primarily view God as the eternal “Be-ing” coming towards humanity from the future. Only in view of God’s future nature can one truly understand that Christ’s work has implications for humans today. The objective for understanding the end of history or the consummation of all things is not so that a person can better grasp their future residence or even understand God’s systematic processes better, but it is the key to understanding one’s present reality and current condition of humanity.

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39 Ibid., 10. When God’s future nature is heightened, God’s history and present action is not belittled. The emphasis of God’s future nature simply supports God’s willingness to give humans the gift of history and presence.

40 Kelly, 51.

41 Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology* (Madison, NY: Herder and Herder, 1970), 7. The eschatology of Paul as well as the book of Revelation and all of primitive Christian thought is moved by the question whether God is God and when he would become fully God. The question for the people of God is, “Who rules the world?” For the early Christ followers, Jesus was viewed as the “fullness” of God’s redemptive rule.
As Moltmann rightly notes in his book *The Future of Hope*, Christian theology begins with the eschatological problem, introduced by Jesus’ proclamation of the coming kingdom and the appearances of the risen one.\(^42\) To put it another way, Christian theology begins in the end. Theology as eschatology understands humans and the world in view of the future which is embedded within the coming nature of God or the self-revealing God. St. Anselm famously described theology as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). In seeking to explore the mysterious future nature of God it is appropriate to re-express Anselm’s adage as “hope seeking understanding” (*spes quaerens intellectum*).\(^43\) Furthermore, Paul, in the New Testament, is quite clear on the fact that hope must remain unseen. In Romans 8:24-25 Paul writes, “For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” In a similar manner, the author of 1 John states, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”\(^44\) For Paul and other New Testament writers, Christian hope must remain hidden to a certain degree. To expect too much light from hope contradicts its very nature. It is one thing for Christian hope to rejoice in the risen Christ and to anticipate an ultimate fulfillment of the divine intention for God to redeem all things. However, it is another matter to attempt to fill in life’s blanks with definitive clarity. For the New Testament writers, hope in Christ meant a willingness to potentially


\(^{43}\)Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 56.

\(^{44}\)1 John 3:2.
live a disenchanted and difficult life, intent on the ways of God rather than obtaining intellectual or religious assurance. Simply put, the entire biblical narrative serves as a reminder that the ways of God were never designed to fit into human calculation.

It is within the paradoxical expression of the contingent history of God and the coming of God where hope can be realized. For reasons left unexplained, humanity is expected to live between the painful earthly realities and a restorative vision of God’s eternal plan. The people of God must yield their selfish desires and expectations to the incalculable dimensions of the Spirit. In this way, God enables humans to look beyond the past (guilt and pain), transition the present (death and insufficiency), and create a future mode of operations where past and present despair-filled circumstances can evolve into new possibilities. The God of the Exodus and the Resurrection is a coming-God with a coming-kingdom and, therefore, a God full of hope.

In his book *In the End—the Beginning*, Moltmann states that a divine promise is the promise of a future which God is going to bring about.\(^45\) It is imperative to understand that when God makes a promise, God cannot fail to bring it about, because God would contradict His very nature. God’s whole being is faithfulness and, because of this reality, humans can fully trust in God’s plan and mission in the world.\(^46\) Throughout the biblical narrative, God is consistently found presenting promises to those who would prove themselves faithful in their covenantal relationship with Him. For instance, Genesis chapter twelve tells the story of God calling Abram to leave his country and his people and go to a foreign land which God will eventually reveal to him. Shortly after God’s


\(^{46}\)See Romans 3:3.
initial call, God makes Abram a personal promise stating that He is going to make Abram into a great nation, bless him, make his name great and be a blessing to the world.⁴⁷

In addition to God presenting people with a personal promise, God also uses events to point beyond themselves and towards God’s eternal promises. For example, the miracle of the Red Sea demonstrated that God, at all costs, was going to follow through with His promise to protect His people after their release from Egyptian captivity. Promise-events provide an experience for people to witness and testify to the fact that God came from the future into humanity’s present. In the same way that every conception and birth are a confirmation of God’s blessing passed on from generation to generation, every promise fulfilled strengthens and confirms the great hope for the possibility of victory in life.

As God enters into humanity’s present reality and fulfills his promises, the people of God become privileged to oversee a history filled with stories which attest to the redemptive mission of God in the world. The Old and New Testaments are essentially a collection of God’s fulfilled promises. Case in point, the Exodus event provided a historical and contextual framework for God’s people to identify with their existence and divine purpose. In the Exodus event God’s relationship with His people emerged out of Egyptian bondage, a despair-filled circumstance, and then entered into a new epoch filled with many possibilities. For the Israelites, the Exodus-event quickly became a tradition which was connected to the covenantal relationship of God, and for all the following generations, the Exodus was Israel’s primary identification marker. Each Israelite, from generation to generation, was to view their life as though they had left Egypt

⁴⁷See Genesis 12:2-3.
themselves. The hope of future generations was determined by their willingness to understand their being in light of God’s redemptive history and accept the possibility that God may choose to fulfill His promises in their life. In a sense, when an individual sees the future as history, they are pushed by the past, yet pulled into God’s future—a future filled with promise.

In addition to understanding God’s future in light of history, another key distinction in the development of a theology of hope comes from the Old Testament prophetic role. It is essential to understand that the role of the Old Testament prophet was not to extrapolate a future from the past or present, but it was intended to usher in the future of God into humanity’s present reality. This nuance is crucial in understanding the function of eschatology in theology.

In a similar manner, the majority of Pauline New Testament theology is derived from the vantage point of looking from the future into the present; therefore, ushering in the kingdom of God. For instance, in Philippians 3:20-21, Paul states, “And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” Additionally, in the book of Revelation, John is caught up in a heavenly vision, yet he speaks to the present condition of the first century church. These texts and many others suggest that the direction of the biblical narrative points from the future into the present and, in this way, God can rightfully be described as a coming-God.

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48 Refer to Moltmann, Jurgen. The Future of Hope, 16.
49 Ibid., 14.
50 See Revelation 1:1-5.
The Catastrophe in the Bible

In order to fully understand eschatology as God’s history, one must also deal with the dilemma of biblical and personal experiences of catastrophe. In his book *In the End—the Beginning*, Moltmann insightfully emphasizes the notion that one of the reoccurring themes of Scripture is catastrophe but, ironically, every biblical catastrophe is also linked to a new beginning.\(^{51}\) It is important to recognize that the characters involved in the catastrophe did not always understand the orchestration of the new beginning from within their suffering—as exemplified in the story of Job. Nevertheless, God is prepared to use every disaster for his eternal purposes. As Paul emphatically proclaimed, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”\(^{52}\) Apparently, God does not view catastrophe as an end-all—God views it as a beginning-for-all. In the midst of despair-filled circumstances it is imperative to hear God saying, “In every end lays a new beginning—can you see yours?”

Suffering is a central fact of life, yet many people ignore it for as long as possible. However, sooner or later, the reality surfaces that the world is not an entirely good place and that realization can cause people to wonder whether the God who created the world is entirely good. Contrary to optimism, biblical hope calls one to place their trust in God even in the midst of suffering and hardship. It was C.S. Lewis who made the well-known

\(^{51}\)Moltmann, *The Future of Hope*, 31. In addition, Psalm 39:2 says, “I am dumb and must eat up my suffering within myself” (Luther’s rendering). Moltmann states, “Regardless of circumstances, a theology of hope is vital because, in the end, the pain of hurt is better than the dullness of despair.”

\(^{52}\)Romans 8:28.
remark, “Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Pain, at its most basic level, serves a vital purpose; it drives humanity to avoid danger and seek relief. Humans could wish for a life without pain, but that might not necessarily be a good thing. As the author of Hebrews points out, “Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, rather it is painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” God, like a good parent, is far less concerned about whether His children are happy or miserable than He is with whether they are growing and maturing.

In a unique way, from within the darkest moments of despair, humanity can relate with Jesus and find comfort in knowing that even God realized that He had to experience catastrophe before He could bring about a new beginning. In his humanity, Jesus realized the crushing feeling of suffering, abandonment, and despair; however, in his deity, Jesus understood that God had a plan and his job was to simply be obedient to his Father’s will—trusting that his heavenly Father was going to bring about a new beginning. In a profound and literal manner, Jesus models for humanity the ability to “live again,” and

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54 Romans 5:3-5 says, “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” Also, Hebrews 2:10 asserts, “In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”

55 Hebrews 12:10-11.
help humans understand that the pain of birth is better than dealing with the dulling death-grip of despair.⁵⁶

From the story of the epic flood to the first century church experience, catastrophe is the context. In a sense, every human is a product of despair, but despair is not God’s promise—God’s promise is a rainbow of hope. In his book In the End—the Beginning, Moltmann elaborates and provides a thorough analysis of the ancient flood literature. Moltmann notes, “For mainland dwellers, floods were always a symbol of the chaos that ruled before the earth was created.”⁵⁷ Hence, the biblical commencement statement, “The earth was without form and void and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters.”⁵⁸ It is imperative to ascertain that the original creation which brings new life was a world which was created out of a flood-like environment—a catastrophe. Later in the biblical narrative, God produces another flood, described in chapters six to nine of Genesis, as if to say, people who choose to live out of their fallen nature will eventually be caught in an undertow which will take them back to pre-creation chaotic conditions. Make no mistake about it though; God desperately wants His creation to move forward toward His eternal purposes, not backwards.

When humanity opted for pre-creation conditions, God grieved for his creation but felt as if His only option was to destroy the world.⁵⁹ God looked at the earth and saw the calamitous effects of destructive lifestyles and despair-filled living, and God’s reaction to this perversion of His earthly creatures was destruction. God’s “very good”

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⁵⁶Moltmann, In the End – the Beginning: The Life of Hope, 35.
⁵⁷Ibid., 36.
⁵⁸See Genesis 1:2.
⁵⁹See Genesis 6:7.
creation had turned quite repulsive. The effect of the Noahic story is to show that the flood was a reversal of God's good work of creation. Furthermore, the story also demonstrates that humanity was ultimately the causal-agent of the catastrophe, not God. Some may object to the notion that God’s response to violence was with violence, but the destruction of the world is not the totality of the story. The focal point of the story falls onto God’s willingness to save Noah and his family. God would rather see the hope of one family than the inevitable self-destruction of the rest of His creation. In the end, God remains faithful to His creation, even when His children do everything to ruin themselves and the world. Beginning with a leaf plucked by the dove, everything that existed after the flood was considered grace. In this way, throughout the ages, God continues to provide new beginnings for His people and realigns the course of humanity with an eventual renewal of all things.

The Eventual Renewal

If the future renewal of all things is God’s primary goal for history, then God should be viewed as a God who reinvents His terms of renewal given the situation and circumstances of humanity. In the Noahic example, God promised not to reflood the world, but this does not mean that God’s final form of renewal will remain under the Noahic covenant. God determines His means, even though the promise of renewal is the

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60 In Genesis, chapter 1, God is shown as the one who prepared the good land for humanity. In the account of the Flood, on the other hand, God is shown as the one who takes this good land from humanity when they act corruptly and do not walk in His way. The central themes introduced in these opening verses are God's judgment of humanity’s wickedness and his gracious salvation of the righteous.

61 Moltmann, In the End – the Beginning: The Life of Hope, 41.
same. As the world moved through history, another catastrophe birthed a new beginning. Once again, God’s desired outlook for humanity was not happening under His covenantal relationship with Israel—God’s chosen missional tribe. Therefore, God rebirthed His plan for relational engagement and salvation. As a result, Jesus, the Messianic Savior, was born.

In a unique manner, Jesus’ movement was also born out of catastrophic means, namely the calamity of the crucifixion. When understood properly, the Golgotha-catastrophe is the birth of Jesus’ primary message, “The kingdom of God is near; repent.”\(^{62}\) God does not wait any longer; God came from the future to meet His creation in their present condition.\(^{63}\) However, God does not come in the form of serenity; God reveals himself in the form of a catastrophe and, unexpectedly, Jesus’ earthly end became his true beginning. Jesus’ public death was followed by his Easter appearances and with these appearances the new beginning of God’s salvific plan was inaugurated. Consequently, the Easter-event was not considered a past event by Jesus’ disciples; it was considered as an event in the past which still had yet another future ahead of it.

In a unique way, the resurrection of Jesus allowed the disciples to proclaim the risen Lord and embrace God’s sovereignty in the midst of chaos and confusion. In the post-Golgotha narratives, the disciples are seen turning from disappointment to hope. When the crucified hope of the disciples was reawakened, they found themselves embracing a God who did in fact come from the future with a plan of hope. Ironically, the

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\(^{62}\) See Mark 1:15.

\(^{63}\) Moltmann, *In the End – the Beginning: The Life of Hope*, 45.
disciples began to refer to themselves as “new creations,” and referring to Christ as “the first born of all creation.” In a sense, for the people of God, Jesus’ resurrection meant that God’s sovereign plan for the renewal of the world had begun and creation was beginning to move towards a final consummation of all things, that being, the final reign of God in the New Jerusalem.

In his book *Surprised by Hope*, N.T. Wright presents the church with an eschatological view which attempts to provide reason, context, and meaning for the final renewal of humanity. Wright begins his work by asking the church two pivotal questions: (1) What is the church waiting for? And (2) What is the church going to do in the meantime? The first question, “What is the church waiting for?” is fundamentally about the ultimate future hope attested to by the gospel of Jesus Christ: the hope for salvation, resurrection, and eternal life. The second question, “What is the church going to do about it in the meantime?” is primarily about humanity’s present and earthly experience of hope. For most of the world, even the Christianized world, the future hope in which

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64 See 2 Corinthians 5:17.

65 See Colossians 1:15.

66 As noted in Moltmann, Jurgen. *In the End – the Beginning: The Life of Hope*, 48. Also see Mulholland, Robert. *Revelation: Holy living in an Unholy World*, 326. Revelation 21:1-22:9 speaks of a Holy City, the New Jerusalem, which is the antithesis of the Fallen Babylon (those who are antichrist). John’s vision reveals that the Holy City is a realm of healing and life (22:1-2). It is significant to note that the Holy City is “coming down” out of heaven on to earth—a continuous action rather than an accomplished fact. Furthermore, if one takes a map of the Mediterranean area and draws a square or cube of 1,400 miles to the scale of the map, then place the center of the square on Patmos (where John is writing from), the western edge of the square extends to Rome, the eastern edge to Jerusalem, and the northern and southern edges approximate the boundary of the Roman Empire in the first century. At the time of John’s revelation, whether it took place in the 60s or 90s, all the Christian communities known to exist were located within those boundaries. The vision is revealing that the New Jerusalem, Jesus’ temple, is in the midst of the Roman Empire and in the midst of resistance. The New Jerusalem is not simply a “future” hope. Christian existence in the world is already citizenship in the New Jerusalem.

Christ’s followers speak of is quite arcane and many people do not expect Christians to have much to say about hope within the present world. In an attempt to address the misguided assumptions of the current populous, Wright provides an alternative view—a view which embraces historical and contextual realities, emerges out of a biblical framework, and attempts to provide hope to a despair-filled world.

One of the most common misconceptions of Christians today is that they are a group of people who are simply committed to a belief in “life after death.” For the non-Christian, it seems as if the primary focus of the Christian is what happens in “the afterlife,” that being, the attainment of eternity with God in an other-worldly place called heaven. For centuries, pastors, song writers, and theologians have shaped the language and liturgies within the church, and without a doubt, life after death has emerged as a central theme. For the typical observer, the message of the church has been quite clear; “Believe in Jesus and you will have eternal life with God in heaven.” In general, the emphasis of the church has been focused on the assurance of heaven instead of the insurance within earth and, as a result, the theme of afterlife has become a central way of defining the norms within the Christian community. It is appropriate to postulate that what a person thinks about death, and life beyond it, is the key in assessing everything else in the world with certainty. Yet, what is the historical orthodox view of life after death?

In comparison, both eschatologists, Wright and Moltmann, end with similar conclusions, but each scholar takes a different approach. In contrast to Moltmann’s subjective approach to developing the future nature of God, Wright attempts to challenge the assumptions of a post-Enlightenment modern theology while presenting
contemporary theologians with a historically respectful view of heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church. One could say that Wright and Moltmann are two sides of the same coin. When read simultaneously, both theologians have provided the church with an invaluable perspective on the hope which Christ followers speak of.

As a good historian, Wright begins his research by looking at the facts while noting that it is quite shocking to realize that the Bible does not talk very much about “going to heaven when you die,” nor does it mention much about entering a postmortem hell either.\(^{68}\) In fact, if a person living in the 21st century were able to ask Jesus what his view of heaven or hell was, the answer might come as quite a shock. Undoubtedly, the post-Dante world has been shaped by many mental images of both heaven and hell. But what if Dante’s other-worldly images were undeveloped and historically misguided?

In order to present a historically accurate and biblical view of the afterlife, Wright begins his work by probing two examples of Jesus’ view of life after death from within a first century Jewish context. First, Wright notes that many people have assumed that Jesus’ “kingdom of heaven” statements found within the Gospel of Matthew describe the environment where believers will go after death. However, Wright points out that Jesus’ “kingdom” statements are not a reference to a postmortem destiny, but they are a description of God’s sovereign rule entering earth.\(^{69}\) Contrary to popular thought, Matthew was not describing a dualistic perspective, as in, Jesus’ “kingdom of heaven” would be an “other-worldly” realm yet to come. Throughout the Synoptic gospels, the phrase “the kingdom of heaven” is used interchangeably and synonymously with the

\(^{68}\) Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 18.

\(^{69}\) Ibid.
phrase “the kingdom of God.” The primary reason for the “kingdom of heaven” usage is because Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience and out of respect for the Jewish tradition he was cautious about using and mishandling the name of “God,” so, instead, he inserts the word “heaven” for “God.” Therefore, in the New Testament context, the meaning of the “kingdom of God” and “the kingdom of heaven” would be one and the same. Often, for the modern day reader, whenever the word “heaven” is utilized there is a dualistic other-worldly image which may naturally arise. Yet, neither Jesus, nor Matthew, would have intended for the term “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” to mean anything but God’s sovereign reign unfolding on earth.70

A second evidence of Jesus’ earthly view of heaven can be found within the Lord’s Prayer. In Matthew 6:10 Jesus prays, “May your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”71 For Jesus, the primary focus of his disciples was supposed to be on a heavenly experience on earth, not on an “other-worldly” arrival. Yet, for many present-day believers, an earthly view of heaven is not the message received in the church, heard at funerals, or presented within traditional hymns. Regretfully, much of the church’s theology throughout history moved towards a future emphasis and, as a result, many people have misunderstood the meaning behind Jesus’ central proclamation of God’s coming kingdom. For Wright, there are two primary fears of misreading Jesus and mishandling the first century context of the New Testament: (1) Jesus’ followers, the church, will miss the transformational realization that the resurrection of Jesus was the starting point for God’s kingdom and new creation within the present world. And (2) The

70 Ibid.
71 See Mathew 6:10.
church was meant to be God’s primary tool in bringing forth and witnessing to God’s new creation. In order to address these two fears, Wright assesses the early Christian hope within its historical context.

For the early Christ followers, the reality of new hope was founded upon the concept of the resurrection of Jesus Christ; the Easter-event was clearly the starting point for any discussion on Christian hope. Wright also asserts that people within the first century were not inattentive to the laws of nature. The ancient and first century worlds were adamant that dead people did not rise again, nor did the Jews believe that anyone had done, or would do so, before the general resurrection. If this was true, what did the ancient world believe about life beyond the grave and how was the resurrection of Jesus interpreted?

Within the first century world, the word *resurrection* was never used synonymously with life after death. Typically, the word resurrection was used to describe an event which would occur sometime after death, yet it was not a reference to the state people went to immediately after death. Resurrection referred specifically to something which happened to the body. Most people knew about ghosts, spirits, and visions, and many of those people believed in such things. But, there was a clear distinction between the spirit world and a resurrection. Resurrection meant bodies. So, when the first century world said that Jesus had resurrected or had been resurrected from the dead, they were saying that something happened to Jesus’ physical body.

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72 Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 34.

73 Ibid., 36.
The book of Acts demonstrates that the resurrection was not interpreted simply as Jesus’ soul arriving in eternal bliss and it was certainly not meant to describe Jesus becoming divine—as was common in Roman Imperial post-mortem worship.74 Within the Jewish world, most people believed in an eventual or general resurrection. The eventual resurrection was described as the “the last day”—the day, after death, when God would judge all of His people and would remake the world. For New Testament support of this first century Jewish ideology, Wright highlights the statements of Martha before Lazarus was raised from the dead. Martha stated, “I know he (Lazarus) will rise again in the resurrection of the last day.”75 Martha was assuming that Jesus was referring to Lazarus’ eventual resurrection; however, Jesus had other intentions—earthly intentions. Martha’s exclamation would be a good representation of the typical Jewish thought surrounding the concept of resurrection and would support the argument that most first century Jews did believe in an eventual and general resurrection of creation.

Jesus certainly reinforced the traditional Jewish mindset, but he also added a new component. The new concept Jesus added was the reality that “his” resurrection was to take place three days after his death and before the general resurrection. When Jesus spoke of “the resurrection” he spoke of it as a future event when all the righteous would be raised and the world would appear to be different and perfected. However, when Jesus spoke of “his resurrection” he was referring to a pre-general resurrection event in which he would be the first to rise from the dead. The concept of Jesus being the first to be raised from the dead was often met with much perplexity. The Sadducees, a Jewish sect,

74 Ibid., 36.
75 See John 11:24.
often challenged Jesus on the point of resurrection because, in their viewpoint, they did not believe in a resurrection in the slightest. Jesus’ disciples were also quite confused after the transfiguration when Jesus told them to keep quiet about the event “until the son of man was raised from the dead.” Interestingly enough, Mark 9:10 reports that the disciples discussed what “rising from the dead” might mean in secret and with much bewilderment.

Historically speaking, it is important to understand the Jewish view of the resurrection since this view is strikingly different from what has emerged after the Enlightenment era. For Wright, in order to discover the hope of the early Christ followers, the foundational historical question to consider must be, “What did Jesus’ disciples actually think was happening in Jesus’ death and resurrection?” In Wright’s analysis of the post-crucifixion narratives, the disciples are perplexed and even filled with despair after Jesus’ death. The disciples did not respond to Jesus’ crucifixion with joy because, at that point, they thought everything they had been working towards had come to a halt. Even more, Jesus’ disciples certainly did not think that Jesus would return from the dead in a few days. Within the post-Golgotha narratives, the disciples were extremely skeptical and shocked that anyone would maintain the belief that Jesus had risen from the dead. Simply put, Jesus’ bodily resurrection was not expected by his disciples. Nevertheless, the early Christian’s hope was firmly centered on the resurrection of Jesus and he was understood to be the first to rise from the dead.

As strange as it sounds to the 21st century Christian, Wright notes that the early followers of Jesus did not believe in a simplistic view of life after death and virtually no

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76 Wright, Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church, 40.
one ever spoke of “going to heaven when they died.” Wright supports his claim with two key points: first, when Jesus spoke of a postmortem destination he seemed to be speaking about a temporary stage leading towards the eventual resurrection of the body. For instance, when Jesus was on the cross he invited one of the criminals next to him to enter into “paradise” with him. In Jewish thought, paradise was not the final destination after one’s death, but it indicated the place where God’s people would rest prior to the general resurrection. Secondly, when Jesus declared that there were many dwelling places in his Father’s house, the word used for “dwelling places” is the Greek word *mone* which denotes a temporary lodging for a traveler. Wright stresses that the early Christians held a two-step belief about the future: first, death and whatever lies immediately beyond; and secondly, a new bodily existence in a newly remade world.

First century Jews prior to Easter never expected the resurrection to be anything other than a large event which would happen to all God’s people and, in this event, God’s kingdom would finally be fulfilled on earth as it was in heaven. To be clear, in Jewish thought, there is no suggestion that one person would rise from the dead before the general resurrection. Hence, the reason why the Jewish populous was highly resistant to Jesus’ message. In Jewish thought, resurrection did not mean going to heaven or escaping death but, rather, coming to bodily life again following a very real bodily death. For the first century Christian, the resurrection of Jesus was not considered “the end,” and Christians started to realize that their future hope called them to transform the present world with their time, talents, and treasure. Christians actually believed that “salvation”

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77 Ibid., 41.

78 Ibid., 41.
had come in Jesus, the Messiah, and this reality made all the difference in their earthly life.

The Easter-event was without a doubt the central proclamation of the early Christ followers. Wright notes that despite thousands of Easter hymns and millions of Easter sermons, the resurrection narratives in the gospels do not say anything like, “Jesus was raised, and therefore we shall go to heaven when we die.”\(^79\) From Wright’s and Moltmann’s perspective, Easter has a very this-worldly and present-age meaning. In the Easter-event, Jesus was raised, so he was the Messiah; therefore, he was the world’s true Lord, God’s new creation had begun and Jesus’ followers have a role to play in the development of the new creation.

From Wright’s vantage point, a bodily resurrection of Jesus is necessary in order to reconcile the historical appearances of Jesus in his new body, plus, it is also the foundation for the early Christian message. Without the resurrection or with a non-bodily resurrection, the Christian message carries little weight. The resurrection of Jesus was the primary evidence that Christianity is not just one faith option but it can actually be set apart from other religions. Even with Wright’s insistence for a bodily resurrection, he is careful to define what people in the first century would interpret as a “resurrection.”

Resurrection in the first century meant someone physically died and became physically alive again. Resurrection was not a description of a person simply surviving or entering a spiritual realm but it was a public phenomenon.\(^80\)

\(^79\)Ibid., 56.
\(^80\)Ibid., 66.
Beneath Wright’s arguments for the historical Easter there is an underlying indication that if Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, in the physical sense, then the entire Christian message is futile and any argument for Christian mission is rather unstable. For the message of Christianity to be reasonable, it is vital to understand that the resurrection was the defining event of the new creation and the Lord of the new creation was Jesus Christ. The resurrection changed everything and hope became a reality for those who believe in God.

Within all four gospels, the post-resurrection narratives clearly demonstrate that the reality of the resurrection of Jesus provided his disciples with a renewed sense of hope. Death was defeated and a new creation, a new kingdom, was being birthed through Jesus’ followers. The early Christians looked back on the Easter-event with great joy, but they also looked forward to an event yet to come, where what began at Easter would finally be completed. It is important to note that for the early Christ followers this future hope, as in an “other-worldly” heavenly experience, was not the primary focus of their faith. Yet there was a clear understanding that Jesus would come again and at that time the general resurrection of all the saints would occur and God’s new heaven and new earth would miraculously be installed and completed.\(^8^1\)

The central Christian affirmation says that what the creator God did in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what God intends to do for the whole world. The early Christ followers did not believe in human progress nor did they believe in the despair of the escapist. The early Christian belief system contained three basic components. First, God’s creation was an act of God’s love and it was very good. Secondly, the nature of

\(^8^1\)Ibid., 79.
evil is real, powerful, and a force to be reckoned with. And thirdly, God had a plan for the redemption of the entire world.\textsuperscript{82}

For Wright, biblical redemption does not mean forgetting what was already created and starting anew. Redemption means the renewal of something which was once good.\textsuperscript{83} The coming of Jesus, in the story of humanity, was the moment all creation was anxiously awaiting. Humans were originally made to be God’s stewards over creation and, in Jesus, God was re-creating the world and calling His followers to once again become the rulers over the “new creation.”

One of Paul’s most important images for describing the new creation is the concept of citizenship-in-heaven. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul asserts, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”\textsuperscript{84} Within the declaration of a new heavenly citizenship, Paul is certainly not advocating for an escapist mentality. Layered within Roman Imperial imagery, Paul presents the early followers of Christ with a redefined resurrection theology which emphasizes the fact that the church is being called to live out God’s future on earth.\textsuperscript{85} And since Jesus was resurrected, those who will “join in” Jesus’ death and resurrection, symbolized in baptism, will be changed into a

\textsuperscript{82}Ibid., 95.

\textsuperscript{83}Ibid., 96.

\textsuperscript{84}See Philippians 3:20-21.

“new creation” on earth. Furthermore, Paul exclaims that those who proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior will one day receive a transformed and glorious body like that of Jesus’ resurrected body.

For Paul and the first Christians, the tense of life was future oriented, but it was not an escapist ideology; it was a present-day transfigured mindset. In Philippians chapter three, Paul does not present heaven as a place believers attain once they die, but is attempting to describe heaven coming to earth. In his book *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn notes that the majority of modern Christian teaching may lead to the conclusion of how-to-get-to-heaven, yet the teachings of the Early Church were primarily centered on how-to-get-heaven-to-earth. The Early Church took their Lord seriously when he prayed, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” God’s intent, revealed to humanity through Jesus’ resurrection, was not for humans to flee to some other heavenly realm, but to first experience heaven on earth and then be raised to new life, on earth, just as Jesus had been raised to new life, on earth.

As the newly discovered resurrection theology emerges within the first century context, another difficult question also surfaces—“What really happened within Jesus’ ascension?” The ascension of Jesus has baffled theologians throughout history and very few scholars have paid much attention to it; however, Wright attempts to provide a well thought out historical analysis and perspective. Wright notes that there are typically two responses to the ascension. The first response considers the resurrection and the

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86 See 2 Corinthians 5:17.
87 Refer to Alcorn, Randy. *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 10.
88 See Matthew 6:10.
ascension as the same event merely described in different ways. The creative description of Jesus rocketing up into the heavenly sky is merely a symbolic way of describing Jesus as divine. On the other hand, a second way of responding to the ascension would be to view it as a literal event where Jesus evaporated out of space and time, entered the heavenly realms, and was seated at the right hand of God.\(^{89}\) If the literalism of the ascension is dismissed, then inadvertently, the literalism of the second coming should also be dismissed because the two concepts are directly connected within a dualistic mentality. As the logic follows: If Jesus did not truly rise from the dead, Jesus did not in fact ascend into the heavens, and Jesus will not in reality return to earth. With this in mind, the question becomes, how is one to view the ascension of Jesus if he or she adheres to a bodily resurrection of Jesus?

In response to the standard viewpoints of the ascension, Wright provides an alternative view which is neither symbolic nor literal. Wright attempts to describe a non-dualistic view which he defines as a “relational view.” The relational view holds that heaven and earth are not two different locations within the same continuum of space and matter. Heaven and earth are two dimensions of God’s good creation. Heaven relates to earth in a manner which allows one who is in heaven to be present simultaneously anywhere and everywhere on earth. Therefore, the ascension means that Jesus is available and accessible without people having to travel to a particular location on earth in order to find him.\(^{90}\) An image to describe this might be, heaven is the control center for earth and, in the ascension, Jesus moved into the control tower. Hence, Jesus’ sending statement to

\(^{89}\)Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 110.

\(^{90}\)Ibid., 111.
his disciples in Matthew 28:18, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” The profound application of the ascension is the realization that Jesus is not only in charge of a remote heavenly realm, but he is also in charge of the present earth. Jesus truly is Lord of the new creation. “To embrace the ascension is to heave a sigh of relief, to give up the struggle to be God,” states Wright.\(^91\) As a result of the ascension, despair is not a viable option for the people of God, for if despair were to flourish, Jesus’ Lordship would not be considered good, right, and just. This explains why the early Christ followers were able to maintain their belief in the risen Jesus even while they experienced resistance and death threats from the Roman authorities. The early Christ followers were able to maintain their faith precisely because they lived with the profound sense that heaven had entered earth, Jesus was in the control tower, and the Roman authorities ultimately had no power over God’s reign. For Christians, even if their lives were difficult, they knew that heaven had already occurred and, upon Jesus’ return, they too would reign with Jesus in a glorious resurrected body.

The return of Jesus or the second coming is the other side of the ascension. Within the New Testament, Wright notes that there is no concept which would lead readers to imagine that “Jesus has been raised to heaven and we pray that we may be raised there too.” To the contrary, the New Testament insists that Jesus has gone “into” heaven, he will come back, and he will complete his rule on earth.\(^92\) Consequently, what shall we say about the second coming? And how does the relational view of the ascension impact one’s understanding of Jesus’ return and subsequent hope?

\(^{91}\)Ibid., 114.

\(^{92}\)Ibid., 117.
Wright acknowledges the sudden emergence of the “left behind” theology which rose to fame as a result of many 20th century Dispensationalist theologians and authors who developed and popularized the concept. Wright challenges the “end times obsession” proclaiming it to be a distorted dualistic theology. Wright also asserts that the so-called end times speculation has only added to the escapist’s belief that the present world is doomed and that in Jesus’ return Christians will be snatched up and taken to heaven to be with God forever while the rest of the world suffers in agony. In Wright’s volume *The New Testament and the People of God*, he argues that though the early Christians did indeed expect Jesus’ return, they were not bothered by it not happening within their generation. Albeit, at one point, the Apostle Paul was required to rebuke the church in Thessalonica because many believers assumed that if Jesus was coming again then they were not responsible for anything on earth—including work. Wright notes that the majority of early Christ followers were operating out of a uniquely Jewish framework. The early Christ followers inherited a belief that was not about the end of the world but about a dramatic change within the present world order. The question for the early Christ followers was not, “Do you know if you will go to heaven when you die?” but rather, “Would you like to experience heaven on earth?” The second coming was interpreted as the moment when God’s created order would be entirely redeemed and creation would revert back to God’s pre-fallen relationship. Just as the ascension was not a literal vertical take-off, Jesus’ second coming will not be a literal temporary landing. The second coming will be God gloriously entering into the Holy City which he has already initiated through those who worship and believe in his Son, Jesus Christ.

93Ibid., 122.
The people of God live precisely between the ascension and the return. In the meantime, God’s people are joined to Jesus Christ by the Spirit and, while God’s people wait, they are commanded to remain in faith, hope, and love.\textsuperscript{94} Far too often Christians slide away from the transformational realization of “living in between.” What would happen if Jesus’ followers were to take seriously the belief that Jesus Christ is already Lord of the world and that one day every knee will bow to him? For Wright, the answer is freedom. The good news of Jesus transforms humans from mourning loss to celebrating life; from the weight of despair to the joy of new hope; from the downward spiral of apathy to meaning and purpose. And when humanity encounters the living God, through Jesus, forgiveness is found not to be the end-all, but the beginning-of-all. The good news of Jesus is redemption in action and it is already in the process of recreating the entire universe.\textsuperscript{95} In the end, confessing Jesus as Lord frees the human soul from the let down of positive thinking, from the naïveté of political progressivism, and from the inevitable struggles in the world at large.

\textsuperscript{94}Ibid., 143.

\textsuperscript{95}Friesen, Dwight. \textit{Thy Kingdom Connected} (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 141.
In Jesus, the future hope has come into the present reality for those who trust in God’s eternal purposes. This future hope was central to the New Testament authors. Multiple times within the Pauline literature, Paul was quick to assert the reality that the present life was a mere shadow of the future self. The future resurrection was the believer’s ultimate hope, not just because the future would be glorious, but because belief in the future resurrection had the power to transform their present despair-filled experience of life. Everything hinged on this hope.

If God’s future was in fact rushing into the present, then the early Christ followers had every reason to continue denying the worship of another Lord—Caesar. They also had every reason to begin living out and implementing the kingdom constructs which Jesus longed to see come to fruition. The question of what happens after death was not the major question which centuries of theological tradition have supposed. The New Testament, true to its Old Testament roots, was centered on God’s eternal purpose of rescue and re-creation for the entire world. The question for God’s people, therefore, ought to be, “How will God’s new creation come and how will humans contribute to the renewal of God’s creation?” Throughout his work, Wright emphatically states that earth, the renewed earth, will be the place where God’s reign will take place. Furthermore, the future hope acknowledged by those who believe in Jesus leads directly to a present hope which is the basis for all Christian missions. To hope for a better future in this world for

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96Examples include 2 Corinthians 5:2 and1 Corinthians 13:12-13.
the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the lonely, the depressed, the slaves, the hungry, the homeless, and the like, is central, essential, and vital to experiencing Jesus’ abundant life.

Implementing hope is precisely what Jesus modeled for his disciples. One could say that the entire point of what Jesus was doing, in his present earthly existence, was to demonstrate what God had promised to do in the future for the entire world. The future resurrection meant, “Get on with the work, now!” In the same way that Jesus practiced hope; followers of Christ also have the opportunity to demonstrate what God can and will do in the future. Salvation, missions, evangelism, and healing all stem from God’s future hope and, the people of God, the church, have the glorious opportunity to experience and spread hope to a world which is desperate to obtain it.

For Christ followers, the reason for hope is that since Jesus died, rose again, and promised to return, those who trust in Jesus will also be brought back to life and will experience God’s complete renewal of creation. In the meantime, Christ followers have the glorious privilege of participating in God’s redeeming act.\(^{97}\) And as the kingdom of God begins to be fleshed out in front of the world, citizens of heaven can live with the great anticipation that those who are still missing from God’s kingdom have an opportunity to be drawn into God’s eternal purposes through the person of Jesus Christ.

Hope is not a pie-in-the-sky pursuit, nor is it unattainable in this life, but it is eschatological. There is no retreat, escape, or withdrawal from hope. As 2 Peter 3:13-14 states, “But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a

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\(^{97}\) York, Tripp. *Living on Hope While Living in Babylon: The Christian Anarchists of the 20th Century* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009). 2. Jesus said, “They [speaking of his disciples] are not of the world, even as I am not of this world” (John 17:14). However, Jesus was not advocating for his disciples to pursue escape; Jesus was advocating for his disciples to live in the present world as if they were already in heaven with Jesus on the throne. For Jesus, heaven was meant to be experienced on earth; this is the great hope for those who believe in Jesus.
new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”

God has initiated a promise, followers of Christ are looking forward to a new heaven, a new earth, and a new home. And this new future should catalyze the people of God to model appropriate morality and mission at the present even if the individual is required to wait patiently for the fullness of hope within the general resurrection. The author of Hebrews mentions that there were some faithful believers who were, “Commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.” Often, God requires His people to wait and endure for a promise that extends past one’s lifetime.

Throughout the majority of Israel’s history, the people of God were found waiting on God. It is peculiar why Jeremiah 29:11 is often quoted as a comforting verse implying that God has a purpose and a plan for the faithful. Upon a careful reading of the context, one will discover that this “purpose and plan” would come to the people of God after seventy years of waiting. Jeremiah 29:10 states, “This is what the LORD says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.’” With this in mind, what were the people of God doing for seventy years? The answer is quite shocking; they were waiting, anticipating, and living with the hope that God’s promise would eventually be fulfilled. In his sermon *The Right to Hope*, Paul Tillich notes the Apostle Paul’s observation found in Romans 8:24-25, where he says, “For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” Tillich describes the Apostle Paul’s comments in this way, “If

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one is waiting, they have not, but in some way they have, and this having gives them the power to wait patiently.”

In the same way that God’s people were expected to wait for seventy years, the experience of waiting should also be expected for modern day Christians. Christians do not wait solely for the kingdom of God which Christ implemented, but they also wait for the parousia of Christ himself. The believer’s new life is hidden in Christ, which is to say, the future of Christ. Furthermore, if Christians hope for the future of God, then they will not only be required to wait for it, but they will be required to “look” for it. Simply put, hope is active anticipation which leads to virtuous living.

The History of Hope

Throughout history, God’s people experienced many hardships and, during those challenging times, the virtue of hope was often emphasized. In a sense, the entire Christian message was shaped from within a context of persecution and martyrdom. Jesus’ lordship challenged all other ultimate claims on their lives such as wealth, status, power, and the State of Rome. Within the first three centuries, confessing Jesus Christ as Lord was considered a threat to the overarching agenda of the Roman Empire and, as a result, many early Christians died because of their witness to Jesus. In the Roman Empire, refusing to sacrifice to the Emperor or his gods was tantamount to refusing to swear an oath of allegiance to one’s country. And since faithful Christians were unable to


100Moltmann, The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology, 46.
proclaim the Emperor as another lord, the Roman authorities considered the noncompliant Christians to be a threat to Rome’s quest for empirical dominance.

Although Christians were persecuted from the 30s onward, the reign of Nero in the 60s was marked particularly by violent actions against Christians in Rome, which included the martyrdom of two key leaders in the church—Peter and Paul. In the midst of such persecution it was important that Christians not be led astray by false prophets proclaiming a false hope. The New Testament consistently urges followers of Christ to not be discouraged from proclaiming the good news of Jesus in the midst of cultural resistance. Not every Christian remained obedient until death but, for those who did, their faithfulness was honored and martyrdom became recognized as a great privilege. In a unique manner, the early Christian martyrs laid the foundation for future generations to wholeheartedly commit to Christ’s Lordship while continuing in Christian hope despite facing cultural resistances.

Martyrdom of Christ followers should not come as a surprise; even Christ, the world’s Savior, faced persecution and was executed. By 500 C.E., the cross, an

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102 See Acts 7:56. The Bible places a high level of honor on the faithful believers who paid the ultimate price for their witness. For example, Stephen was granted a glorious vision of heaven before he died, and in this vision, he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father as though waiting for Stephen. As further evidence that martyrs were held in high regard in God’s sight, the apostle John saw in his vision of the millennium those martyred for their faith reigning with Christ for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4). Also, 1 Peter 4:14-16 states, “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.” Likewise, in Matthew 5:11, Jesus asserted, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” The biblical analysis is clear that God honors those who remain faithful to Christ even in death; however, nowhere is anyone counseled to pursue martyrdom. In fact, in Matthew 10:23, Jesus tells his disciples to flee from persecution.

instrument of execution, became the primary symbol of the faith because it reminded believers of Jesus’ exemplar sacrifice.\textsuperscript{104} The New Testament writers also emphasized the connection between being a disciple and being persecuted. The author of 1 Peter 4:12-13 notes, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”\textsuperscript{105} For first century believers, it became clear that persecution and suffering were to be expected, challenging the disciples to be full of hope in the midst of cultural resistance.\textsuperscript{106} To be clear, the Bible does not command believers to pursue persecution or death, but it does state, because of a counter cultural commitment to Christ, the world may respond with hatred and evil. The early martyrs and their stories provided strength and courage for other Christ followers during the New Testament age and continue even now. Their faith in Christ brings current disciples of Jesus back into perspective.\textsuperscript{107} The early martyrs chose to accept death rather than renounce their faith because they believed something

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\footnoteref{104} Sittser, \textit{Water from a Deep Well}, 29.
\footnoteref{105} Suffering is not to be regarded as something foreign to the Christian experience but, rather, as a refining test. Earlier in the book, the author of 1 Peter already mentioned the necessity of faith being refined through suffering and testing (1:6-7). Here the idea of \textit{refining} is found in the word “painful” which occurs in the Greek OT in the metaphor of the refining of metals. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18); and John writes, “Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you” (1John 3:13). In the light of Jesus’ experience and teaching, his followers should expect troubles, but troubles should only encourage them.
\footnoteref{107} Ibid., 47. Sittser notes that Christians still die for their faith, now more than ever. Missiologist David B. Barrett estimates that 160,000 Christians were martyred in the year 2000 alone. They died that year for essentially the same reason they died in 155 C.E., when Polycarp was martyred. Early Christians believed that if Jesus is Lord and the only Savior, then he accepts no rivals, no person or religion or ideology or empire. Not that all true Christians have to or will be martyrs. But martyrdom should be considered not a choice but a calling and a gift.
\end{footnotes}
was more valuable than the long and happy life which they desired, for “whatever gain” they had they “counted as a loss for the sake of Christ.”108

During the peak of the first century persecution, many exemplar martyrdom stories emerged. There were certainly those who weakened in their last moments and abandoned the faith but, as a result of the ones who were faithful to Christ, Christianity began to expand and disciples were strengthened. Overtime, church leaders discovered that it would be important for believers to maintain a proper understanding of martyrdom. It was important for believers to understand that martyrdom was not something that one chooses, but something for which one was chosen by God. Those who were so chosen would be strengthened by Christ and, for that reason, they would be able to stand firm in the face of persecution. Their firmness in their faith was not of their own doing, but of God.109

One inspiring martyrdom account can be found in the story of Ignatius (30-107 C.E.). Ignatius was around seventy years old at the time of his death and is now considered one of the post-apostolic fathers. Like all Christian martyrs, Ignatius’ treason to the State of Rome was that he had been unwilling to bow down and worship Caesar as Lord. Because of his disloyalty to Rome and his commitment to obey Christ, Ignatius was sentenced to the death-claws of the coliseum lions. On the way to his execution, Ignatius wrote these words to his churches, “Now I begin to be a disciple, I care for nothing of visible or invisible things so that I may but win Christ. Come fire and cross and grappling with wild beasts, the rending of my bones and body. Only let it be mine to

108 A reference to Philippians 3:8 (NASB).
attain Jesus Christ.”

Ignatius knew well his reason for hope and inspired many others to stand firm during times of cultural resistance.

In addition to the theological foundation of hope provided by the early Christian martyrs, expressions of Christian hope continued to develop and evolve through the theologians of the Early Church. Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 C.E.) both realigned the church during different epochs with a significant perspective on the topic of responsible-hope. Saint Augustine built his framework of hope on the principle of inner virtue. Augustine asserted that Christians must orient their current life towards their future union with God. In his Confessions, Augustine exclaimed, “How can I call on you to come if you (God) are already in me? Or where you come from so as to be in me? Can I move outside heaven and earth so that my God may come to me from there? For God has said, ‘I fill heaven and earth’ (Jer. 23:24).”

Humanity’s union with God and God’s all-powerful immutability over all His creatures caused Augustine to question how humans relate with God. Augustine inquired, “Can we in any way rise to Him? Does He in any way come down to us?” The answer to

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10Forbush, William. Foxe’s Book of Martyrs (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 49-50. Forbush notes, “A unique dynamic of Ignatius’ story is that he knew nothing about the wealth and power later bishops would enjoy. In his era, a bishop was more likely to be the leader of a single congregation rather than the head of a well organized hierarchy. Thoroughly devoted to Christ, Ignatius was a part of that great generation who taught and built the church, buried the apostles, collected their writings, stood before the beast and fought off heretics.” The examples of the martyrs serve as a modern day challenge and encouragement for Christ followers who live in a culture filled with resistance.

11Augustine. The Confessions of St. Augustine. Translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Penguin, 1963), 4. Augustine declared that he would have no existence if God was not in him. Much of the Confessions are a description of Augustine reconciling his innate evils and God’s perfected glory in him. One of Augustine’s most insightful questions derived from his inner search for God’s good in him was this statement, “Who will grant me that you come to my heart and intoxicate it, so that I forget my evils and embrace my one and only good, yourself?” For Augustine, the path to expressing his inner hope was derived from a deep sense of God’s mercy and cleansing from sin. God’s people, the hope-bearers of the world, must first acknowledge the sin of despair and embrace God’s forgiveness before hope can be fully practiced and projected to the world.
both of those questions, for Augustine, was yes. To Augustine, it was clear that ever since
the prologue of the Gospel of John, the concept of *logos* has been at the very center of the
Christian faith. Reason and love were not severed in the fall since both are embodied in
the person of Jesus Christ. The person of Jesus and his embodied love is accessible to
human reason, even if it is imperfectly manifested.112 For Augustine, his personal
challenge of fully accepting God’s virtue of hope was blinded by his less than perfect
past and present experience with God. The struggle to experience God was not so much
one of God’s presence or absence as it was in humanity’s awareness of God.113 In other
words, God is always present, but humans are not always aware of the presence of God.
The challenge of living in hope for Augustine and for current disciples of Jesus is to hold
the posture similar to that of a child who has fallen on the ground and is waiting for his
mother to pick him up and hold him close.

Furthermore, Augustine hypothesized that there were certain God-ordained inner
virtues which humanity was expected to experience on earth. For Augustine, and the
Apostle Paul, those virtues were faith, hope, and love.114 Augustine argued, if the
foundation of human life was grounded on faith, hope, and love, then humanity can in
fact experience God’s preeminent joy on earth.

112Elshtein, Jean. *Sovereignty* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 3. It is to this complexity of
notions, and the vision of God’s power, justice, love, and mercy, which Christian thinkers attached the
notion of “good news” despite all the miseries of the world. For continued analysis of how God’s
sovereignty is connected with a coming-God see pages 1-75.

113Rolheiser, Ronald. *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (New York:
Crossroad Publishers, 2004), 22. In Matthew 5:8 Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see
God.” Awareness of God is tied to a certain state of mind and heart, namely purity. Classical spiritual
writers have always identified purity of heart with contemplation and union with God. The struggle to
purify consciousness through contemplation so as to better experience God is the struggle for a fuller
awareness.

1141 Cor. 13:3.
Thomas Aquinas, who followed in Augustine’s footsteps, distinguished hope from the other intellectual and moral virtues. Aquinas qualified hope as one of the three theological virtues and acknowledged that hope must be considered divine because it was an extension from God. In his book *Treatise of the Virtues*, Aquinas declared that hope perfects the human appetite in a more noble way than any of the moral virtues do. As a result of Aquinas’s work, four characteristics of hope emerge which advocate for the disposition of responsible-hope. First, Aquinas acknowledged that hope is the antithesis of fear. Instead of anticipating evil, a person who believes in God’s way is willing to anticipate a perceived good, as a channel of God’s grace. Secondly, an individual must be willing to anticipate the future. Future anticipation distinguishes hope from joy, because joy is an expression of an already possessed present good. Thirdly, the object of hope is difficult to obtain. It was for this reason that Aquinas expressed the virtue of hope as a “contending” emotion. Aquinas acknowledged that fully obtaining hope is a constant struggle, but in his fourth characteristic, hope is described as attainable. Many people have found truth in Aquinas’ characteristics of hope and, within a culture of uncertainty, living with the assurance that hope can be obtained in life is comforting.


Hope will always be hemmed in with the mystery of Christ, but it must also be pragmatic as well as realistic. The living hope found in the character of those who are patiently enduring earthly suffering, pain, and persecution offers the world a form of hope which can be both realized and attained. The fleeting spirit of optimism disintegrates in the face of the faithful who hope in all things and endure in all things regardless of the circumstance and against all cultural resistances. Biblical hope is certainly not a pie-in-the-sky outlook on the world; living in the world with the conviction that God will fulfill God’s promises is entirely possible and life-changing.

Contrary to many world religions and spiritual teachings, the biblical narrative offers a very sparse account of what God’s future will become. Optimism attempts to paint a precise picture of the way a person’s world should be, but biblical hope does not present such a naiveté. Although Christian hope may rely on biblical imagery and experiential storytelling to encourage the suffering and persecuted, God’s form of hope looks beyond any clear and definite description of the last things and draws attention to the person of Christ. For the Early Church, it was important to continually look back and remember the work of the sacrificial Lamb (Rev. 5:6-12), but it was also imperative to look forward and pray, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). For the first disciples of Jesus, it was enough to say that “the end” was Christ himself.

Christ, the mysterious eschatological end, can be likened to the mysterious beginning of creation. Humankind may not have any hard evidence as to how creation

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117 See 1 Corinthians 13:7.
was birthed, but not many people would be willing to argue that creation did not occur by some means. Creation most certainly did transpire, but the details were left formless and void. In a similar manner, humanity does not have any hard evidence as to how creation will end but, ironically, the majority of humanity expects that current life will continue in eternity in some form or another. For the people of God, the details of how and when the final act will unfold are unnecessary—what is necessary is the coming union with Christ and one’s personal character and conduct while living on earth. When God’s people live with the conviction that God will fulfill His promise of restoring the world, then disciples of Jesus can wait patiently for the final act of God. During their waiting, the life-giving Spirit of God exists to inspire the people of God to live with an unending love and a bottomless compassion for the world at large. God’s children can certainly choose not to enter the realm of sacrificial love through relentless care for others, unyielding forgiveness, and persistent help for the hopeless, but they will miss the preview of God’s final act and fail to see what is the power of the future.

In a profound manner, biblical hope poses the question; if God’s story is under construction and an eternal union with God has already been established, why not start living in that reality right now? For disciples of Jesus, biblical hope does not rest in a particular detailed account of the last things. Biblical hope rests in the assurance that, in Jesus, God has already initiated the restoration process for the New Earth and, because of that reality, disciples of Jesus have the opportunity to become disciples of hope.

Disciples of hope are resolutely persuaded that the river of eternal life has already begun to flow, and it is crucial for the world to see the ripples of God’s love and fulfilled promises. As followers of Christ spring up in care for one another, concern for those in
need, mercy for the undeserving, and justice for the oppressed, the unbelieving world has an opportunity to see God in action—to see Hope in action. Albeit, systemic manifestations of despair, such as poverty, and cultural depression will always challenge the people of hope, but the deeper questions of life still deserve a proper response. Is humanity’s search for meaning, truth, purpose, and victory merely a senseless pursuit? Or, do those longings convince humans that God, in His infinite wisdom, has devised an eschatological reality for the entire world to enter into, participate with, and ultimately fulfill every person’s longing for meaning, truth, purpose, and victory? To the later question, biblical hope responds with an emphatic—yes!

In order for hope to be the path to ultimate fulfillment, it must be initiated and sustained by a life-changing energy coming from the future of God. The difficulty with progressivism is that it depends on human ingenuity and human strength to uphold the movement. When faced with the reality of human sin, personal struggle, and the sheer weight of the world’s systemic evil forces, over time, any well-meaning person could lose heart and buckle under the pressure. What is needed is a gift from God. Biblical hope, similar to optimism, may well-up like a spring within, but the difference between the two ideologies is that the people of hope are convinced that God is the source of the life-giving water. The Apostle Paul put it this way, “And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”¹¹⁸ In this sense, contrary to modern day optimism, biblical hope claims no ownership, arrogance, or authority over the hopeless, but all life-giving opportunity is viewed as a gift from God and sustained by God—the gracious giver of life and hope.

¹¹⁸See Romans 5:5.
Much like salvific grace, understanding hope as a gift makes all the difference. With this gift, the weight of personal disappointment, human struggle, and persecution can be lifted. Moreover, Christian struggle can even be celebrated. Paul emphatically encouraged the church in Rome by stating, “We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” When hope is accepted as a gift from God, a person is truly able to live in a world where “the end” is God’s self-giving love and relationship. Salvation and earthly hope have already been planted in history through the incarnation, death, resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ. Jesus is already the first and the last. The autobiography of God has been written. With this thought in mind, Paul asserted, “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.” Hope lives at the intersection of two crossbeams; the vertical beam is the gift of God from above and the horizontal beam is humanity’s spiritual searching from below. Hope can be realized only when the people of God allow their spiritual search to be intersected with the Spirit’s power. The good news of hope is, therefore, mobilized by the Spirit and draws people to the end, that being, Christ.

Just as God’s salvific and unconditional love is not forced upon humanity, the same could be said about God’s gift of hope. In order for an individual to be mobilized by

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119 See Romans 5:3-4.

120 Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope: Theology in Global Perspective*, 206.

121 Ibid.

122 Romans 8:11.
the hope-giving Spirit, one must surrender to the eternal purposes of God. In surrender, hope differentiates itself from the progressive ideology by not falling victim to the attractions of the false gods of the world, such as pride, greed, and lust for power. Such idols fly under the radar of optimistic and progressive ideologies and, as a result, good works can quickly become a self-promoting and self-gratifying tool for individuals, corporations, or governments. However, biblical hope takes a different path—one of humility. In hope, every idol is called into question, good works are accomplished in the name of Jesus, and God receives all the appropriate glory, honor, and praise. To take credit for ushering in hope to the world would be similar to taking credit for one’s salvation. For followers of Jesus, the way of surrender and humility before God allows the spotlight to be projected back onto Christ.

After a person receives God’s gracious gift of hope, they must learn to live and breathe hopefulness. Due to changing circumstances and situations, hope is not a onetime vaccination. Again, similar to God’s salvific grace, once hope has been received, one must continue to “work out” their hope in fear and trembling.¹²³ God has given His children new capacities to understand, new values to express, a new self to discover, and a new perspective on history and the future. Simply put, hope must become a continual conversion.

A hope-conversion leads to the unconditional adoration of the God of hope, and the work of the Spirit draws God’s people out of themselves and into a self-surrender which will go beyond the limited perspectives of optimism, progressivism, and escapism. The center of the hope-conversion is always on Christ. Just as Jesus still carried the

¹²³ A subtle reference to the salvific images found within Philippians 2:12.
wounds of his crucifixion after his resurrection, so it is with the people of hope; the scars of struggle will always remain intact, but followers of Christ know that they have a job to do. As the Apostle Paul described to the Philippians, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” Even though believers are not of this world, they are still in it (John 17:11), and though they desire to depart and be with Christ for eternity, which is far better, it is still necessary that followers of Christ demonstrate to the world that God’s promises can and will come to fruition. Paul was unwilling to accept a doctrine of escapism simply because he saw the work that still needed to be completed on earth and he saw his role to play.

The conversion of hope is certainly personal; however, it was not meant to be a private affair. Hope was designed to be expressed in corporate and communal dimensions and sharing hope is precisely the reason for the community of believers—the church. Hope not only imagines future possibilities, but it imagines with. Hope cannot passively live off the community of hope, but for it and within it, as it challenges the depression, oppression, and despair of every age. In a world filled with immeasurable despair, pain, and persecution, an isolated hope will quickly uproot. Yet, like the

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125 Refer to Lynch, William. Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 23. Lynch notes that the culture at large is so habituated to conceiving of the imagination as a private act of the human spirit that many people now find it almost impossible to conceive of a common act of imagining with. The post-resurrection experience of Pentecost is a great biblical example of the imagination of hoping “with” others. In short, people develop hope in each other.

126 Kelly, Eschatology and Hope, 211.
interlocking root system of the Redwood trees, a shared network of hope will stand the storms of personal struggle and societal despair. The ecclesial community, which is a reflection of God’s Trinitarian presence, has a job to do in the world. Without hesitation, the church must continue to cultivate an environment of communal hope which calls the world beyond despair, optimism, and escapism.

In his book *God has a Dream*, Desmond Tutu describes a new vision for a hope-centered church. For God’s people, it is certainly normal to sense that a vision of active-hope might seem futile against the magnitude of suffering and injustice. And to make matters even more difficult, for centuries the church has not necessarily provided a positive track record for being a voice of hope in the world. Nevertheless, Tutu argues that the church must return as the voice and vehicle of hope for a world which desperately needs its wisdom. Tutu, Desmond. *God has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday Books, 2005), 15.


Throughout the Scriptures, God clearly uses and calls individuals to mobilize His mission and eternal purposes. To put it another way, God’s plan to heal the world involves God’s people. Undoubtedly, tragedy, suffering, and evil is abundant, but in God’s infinite wisdom He chose the church, the body of Christ, to be the primary method for bringing about restoration in the fallen world. In his book *Fields of the Fatherless*, Tom Davis wisely notes, “Everything good which exists in the world was initiated by
someone.” And it is true, hope is vital to every person’s survival, especially when the odds are completely against them. God thought humans were worth the risk because of their capacity and ability to be the primary distributors of hope. For this reason, the church must not live negligent and desire to escape from this world. The church needs to realize that God has invited His people to engage in the restoration movement. Jesus initiated the kingdom of heaven, the church was given the authority to continue developing it and, one day, in God’s timing, God will accomplish what He promised.

Once the church realizes that the mission of God is to confess hope in action, the possibilities of a new earth can and will emerge. For centuries, the Christian movement has been operating on the assumption that the world must be drawn to Christ. Albeit, in part, the world does need to be drawn to Christ, but what the world also needs is to see Christ in action, to see love in action, and to feel the refreshing waves of hope. Only a new and active hope can transition a world bent towards idealistic progress and a fallacious optimistic attitude. As Brueggemann stresses, the church must realize that Christian faith can never be satisfied with a theology of hope which is purely attitudinal, abstract, or doctrinal. To put it another way, hope must have legs, hope must be on the move.

As hope moves, it also has the potential to inspire a moral alteration within society. Hope allies itself with the hopeless, the broken, the forgotten, and the marginalized. The people of hope have no desire to allow anyone to be degraded to a

130 Tutu, *God has a Dream*, 18.
132 Ibid., 19.
subhuman existence through greed, power, or exploitation.\textsuperscript{133} Hope looks for the hopeless and prays, “Lord, may your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”\textsuperscript{134}

It is important to note that biblical hope is not an expression of the Social Gospel movement which permeated the American culture during the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. The Social Gospel movement attempted to apply Christian ethics and morals to societal problems, such as, social justice, inequality, liquor, crime, racial tensions, slums, bad hygiene, child labor, weak labor unions, poor schools, and the danger of war. The Social Gospel ideology differentiated itself from earlier Christian reform movements by prioritizing social salvation over individual salvation.\textsuperscript{135} Albeit, the motives of the Social Gospel ideology were good natured, the movement quickly morphed into a crusade for the silo of justice. William King notes that it took the crash of 1929 to destroy the illusion of social Christianity and to convince the public that it was incompetent on its own terms and unable to guarantee stability.\textsuperscript{136} The problem with the Social Gospel movement was that it did not attempt to explain the Christian message which produced the churches and pastors who served as the microphones for the movement. In a sense, the movement used the church as a platform to bring about societal change, but did not necessarily embrace the deeper message of the platform.

In the early 1900s, advocates of the Social Gospel movement such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Shailer Mathews proclaimed that a socially transformative

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{133}Kelly, \textit{Eschatology and Hope}, 212.
\item \textsuperscript{134}A reference to The Lord’s Prayer found in Matthew 6:10.
\item \textsuperscript{136}King, William. \textit{The Emergence of Social Gospel Radicalism: The Methodist Case}. (Source: Church History, 50 no 4 D 1981), 437.
\end{itemize}
Christianity could become the soul of a world-embracing movement for democracy and progress. Today, the original dream of a “cooperative commonwealth” has become world-weary. Federal and state prisons are stuffed beyond capacity, large areas of major cities are devastated seemingly beyond repair, American income and wealth is severely maldistributed, the political system has been corrupted by the power of organized economic interests, economic insecurity and unemployment are rampant, and the ravages of racial hatred and social injustice tear at the remaining fabric of society. All of this leads one to ask the question, “Is this how the Christian century was supposed to turn out?”

In later years, government and secularists initiated programs and founded organizations in an attempt to meet specific social needs apart from the church. The government and organizations certainly have a role to play in society, but it is pertinent to realize that biblical hope is not solely about accomplishing significant feats of justice. Biblical hope is also about communicating the reason for why Christians live with an unshakable and active-hope. Because of the Social Gospel movement, many optimistic-driven Christians have fallen into the temptation of focusing more on the causes-of-Christ instead of on the Christ-of-the-causes. And, as a result, the spiritually transformative message which produces morality has become compromised. In short, Christianity would be wise to surrender optimism and embrace hope, maintain faith without confusing it with a particular ideology, and continue to work for justice.

At the end of the day, the greatest gift of the church is an invitation for people everywhere to experience peace with God, through Jesus Christ, and find comfort in God’s kingdom reign. The inspiration for continued moral change is simply the

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conviction that the world has already been changed. Living contrary to that change would
simply be imprudence. In the resurrection of Jesus, the world received a new icon—no
longer does the world look like a graveyard, but it has been tilled into a beautiful garden.
And because of this new found reality, God’s people have the opportunity to cultivate
and develop God’s generous work. Many people may attempt to dismiss the generosity of
the hopeful as irrational, impractical, and divorced from the real world; however, hope is
not attempting to bolster an optimistic attitude. Viewed from another angle, hope has not
recovered from the shock of the cross and the surprise of the resurrection. Every moment
in life can be likened to Mary’s experience, three days after Jesus was buried, when Mary
shockingly discovered that the supposed gardener was Jesus.138 As the hope-birthing
Spirit of God opens up pathways for more surprises, the people of God must continue to
insist that no one should be left out of God’s redemptive mission in the world. A hope-
shaped heart lives with the conviction that “God our Savior wants everyone to be saved
and to understand the truth.”139

If God wants all people to understand the truth, then the people of God must never
think that escaping this world is an acceptable alternative. Hope is like a whittler who
looks at the raw and undeveloped world and begins to scrape away. Hope means not
being defeated by the gnarly knots of failures, and it shows its endurance by finishing the
job. Even though disappointment and discouragement are bound to happen in life, God’s
people, have been granted the privilege of joining together in suffering while modeling
responsible-hope to the world. As Zdenek Bednar, a survivor of Nazism described in his

138See John 20:15.
139See 1 Timothy 2:3-4 (NLT).
memoir, “We are survivors, we remember the forces that have shaped us, the chisel of the
eternal sculptor who achieved the ultimate in the cross on the hill of Golgotha, and who
still, ever so tirelessly, is chiseling, until the world will be as He perceived it and intended
it to be.”\textsuperscript{140}

Conclusion

The effects of despair can be paralyzing and the enormity of suffering can cause
the people of God to think of their efforts as futile.\textsuperscript{141} But radical hope is compelled to
lock eyes with suffering and anticipate a final and perfected union with God. Humanity is
undoubtedly faced with the problem that evil and despair remain within the world, yet
hope is still attainable. God is transfiguring the world and the primary agents of change
are his people—the church. Followers of Christ have no choice but to face suffering,
pain, and persecution. Hope, in every sense of the word, is a choice; both to receive it and
to provide it for others. God longs for His people to band together with purpose and
conviction to see that evil and injustice does not prevail in this world. One day, God will
complete His kingdom but, until then, God’s people have the privilege of experiencing a
God who is coming from the future with new possibilities of hope. In this way, God has
enabled His people to discover their moral obligation, to be filled with hope, and to
become hope-bearers in the world. Perhaps God’s people will once again emerge with
hope—even within a culture filled with resistance.

\textsuperscript{140}Bednar, Zdenek. \textit{Where is My Home?—A Theology of Hope as the Outcome of Despair} (Allison

SECTION 4: THE PROJECT

My final project will be a popular book written for Christian adults who want to discover a hope-centered theological perspective and who desire to live based on the conviction that God keeps His promises. This piece will not scrutinize the above thesis, but will serve as a practical pathway for people to discover their reason for hope. The interface of the book project will be experiential, participatory, image-based, and connective. The overarching goal of the book will be to guide people towards a biblical perspective on hope, help people find their reason for hope, and assist people in their pursuit of practicing a lifestyle of hope.

There are many other forms of communication which I could utilize for my final project, but I have chosen the format of a book for three reasons: First, because I am developing a hope-centered theological framework, much attention will need to be given to describe the history and context of the hope-filled biblical narratives. Secondly, I am also convinced that movement towards a theology of hope will be a journey for people and they will need time and space to process their new insights, dialogue with others on their fresh discoveries, and seriously reflect on their reason for hope. And thirdly, writing has become a passion of mine and the craft of writing a book presents me with a significant challenge—one in which I would like to engage in. For these reasons, I believe that a written format will provide me with the best means for the presentation of my final project.
SECTION 5: PROJECT SPECIFICATIONS

Description

I am proposing a popular book for adults centered on the question, “What is your reason for hope?” The purpose of the book will be to infuse people with a renewed sense of hope in Christ and instill a new desire to continually live out God’s way in a culture filled with resistance. This book will be designed to encourage the people of God to always be ready to share their reason for hope (1 Peter 3:15). For many, the “reason for hope” is unknown. I am convinced that one of the greatest temptations for every follower of Christ is to give up their hope. Tragically, the hope which fueled the early disciples of Jesus has either weakened or faded out all together. But what would happen in the world if God’s people where once again infused with the conviction that God keeps His promises? And how might the world respond after watching disciples of Jesus embrace every challenging circumstance with an unshakable hope? Through biblical imagery and story weaving, this book is an invitation for the people of God to redefine their hope in God and rediscover how to recognize new life in one’s soul the next time the clouds of despair envelop their heart.

Audience

This book will be designed to connect with a broad spectrum of ages, faith backgrounds, and spiritual maturity levels. However, the primary audience of this book
will be Christian adults, age 21 and up, who desire to live out God’s promises more fully. My secondary audience will be those who have experienced hopelessness in life and are looking to find an everlasting source of hope.

Goals and Strategies

- I will complete my book proposal by September 1, 2010.
- I will begin locating and working with an editor and agent by Feb. 1, 2011.
- I will begin developing a website and video trailer for the book by March 1, 2011. The website will be designed to created dialogue and provide a place for people to publicly share their “reason for hope.”
- I will begin sending my book proposal to potential publishing agencies by April 1, 2011. If no publishers are interested, even after the completion of the book, I will self publish through Createspace publishing company (Createspace is Amazon’s self-publishing company).
- I will complete my book by March 1, 2011.
- I will graduate April 30, 2011.
- After graduation, I would like to release my book in September of 2011. If my book project needs more time to develop additional components, such as, materials for a church wide spiritual growth initiative, I would like to wait to release the book until Jan. 1, 2012. The church wide spiritual growth initiative would contain a six week Small Group Discussion Guide; a 30 day church wide spiritual growth initiative kit entitled “30 Days to a Hope-filled Church” which
will include, five message transcripts, five service outlines, graphic designs and logos, training videos, promotional videos, five weeks of children’s ministry curriculum, and five weeks of student ministries curriculum.

Scope and Content: (Book Proposal)

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**SYNOPSIS**

*The Sound of Hope* explores the ancient theological virtue of hope and presents readers with a fresh perspective on the topics of hope and despair. Through biblical imagery and metaphorical story-weaving, Ed offers an invitation for followers of Christ everywhere to rediscover the meaning of hope, clarify their reason for hope, and learn how to experience a lifestyle of active hope. In the end, readers will be inspired by the faith of the first century believers, encouraged to persevere through struggle and resistance, and inspired to live with the deep conviction that God will fulfill His promises.

**OVERVIEW**

One of the greatest temptations for followers of Christ is to give up their hope. Tragically, the hope which fueled the early disciples of Jesus is rarely tapped into by contemporary Christians and, as a result, the concept of hope has either weakened or faded out all together. Simply put, hope is in need of a face-lift.
Followers of Jesus are essentially followers of hope. Christians may not be the only people who use the word hope in their vocabulary, but Christian hope is very different from other visions of hope in the world.

God’s people have always looked toward the future and have consistently believed in the reality that God was up-to-something good. Even while the early Christians faced intense periods of struggle and persecution, they still did not lose their hope. They believed that in Jesus, God was doing something entirely new—something that the world had never seen before. And these faithful disciples began to redefine their hope in light of that good news.

In the first century, because of the intense social and political pressure to give up on the way of Jesus, the disciples of Jesus needed to be crystal clear about their reason for hope. One New Testament writer felt the urgency of hope and quickly counseled his disciples to always be ready to explain their hope in Christ if someone were to ask them about it (1 Peter 3:15). In other words, hope should always be on the tip of our tongues.

The Sound of Hope is an invitation for disciples of Jesus to answer the question, “What is your reason for hope?” At the end of the journey, readers will have a clearer understanding of what hope is, where hope comes from, and how to be able to stand with an unshakeable-hope the next time struggle and resistance comes their way.

Hope is not optional, in fact, it’s central to survival. Every story must end with hope and every person must recognize new life in their soul the next time the clouds of despair envelop their heart.

What is your reason for hope?

PURPOSE

To help disciples of Jesus:
- Discover a biblical perspective of hope.
- Learn to listen for God’s hope.
- Find their reason for hope.
- Move towards a lifestyle of active hope.

PROMOTION AND MARKETING

Over the past several years the theme of hope has permeated and gripped the culture at large. It is not a far stretch to say that the 2008 presidential election was won on the mantra of “hope.” The 21st century catastrophes, such as, India’s tsunami, Haiti’s earthquake, Chile’s trapped miners, and the like, have cultivated a worldwide discourse about hopelessness. And people all over the planet have experienced the shockwaves of an economic collapse and, as a result, have been challenged by the progressive ideals and
the materialistic optimism which has been laced into the culture over the past several centuries.

Undoubtedly, hope is on people’s minds and there is a growing hunger to discover what it means. Yet, despite the ardent desire to obtain hope, there are very few voices that have helped define hope—especially within Christian circles.

Christians seem more confused than ever about the subject of hope. Some have adopted a superficial form of optimism. Some have followed suite with attempting to rely on the myth of progress. And some have assumed an escapist mentality and have lost the desire to make an impact on the world around them.

Nevertheless, God’s vision of hope is not optimism, naïveté, wishful thinking, progress, or escape. In a sense, God’s hope is against all the false hopes of the world. God’s hope is not easy; it takes a lot of practice, but in order for the kingdom of God to continue outward expansion, followers of Jesus, both young and old, must regain clarity about the nature of biblical hope.

Recently, many Christian authors have incorporated a message of hope within their writings, but few have attempted to define hope and explore the type of hope which was found within the Early Church. What is needed in the movement of Christianity is a book which explores the very core of one’s being and redefines one’s motivation for living in light of God’s saving hope.

_The Sound of Hope_ offers a solution to the barrenness of optimism, progressivism, and escapism. People everywhere are certainly looking for purpose, meaning, and passion in life, but what if the world is really craving hope?

_The Sound of Hope_ has the potential to be marketed throughout many avenues, such as, magazines, e-zines, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, word of mouth, and the like. In addition, _The Sound of Hope_ would be a significant asset to any church leader or hope-proclaimer, and it could serve as a church wide resource to help gain collective clarity about God’s redemptive purposes in the world through the local church.

**Competition:**

- _Living Hope_, David H. Jensen, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010. Jensen offers a plausible explanation as to why Christians live in hope. The book uses fictional characters and plots to unpack weighty theological topics, such as, eschatology, the kingdom of God, the resurrection of the body, and Christ’s promised return.

- _Scarred by Struggle—Transformed by Hope_, Joan Chittister, Eerdmans Publishing, 2005. Chittister, a Catholic Benedictine nun who once dreamed of being a fiction writer, takes a major disappointment from her life and transforms it into a series of absorbing universal lessons in this book that is both contemplative and
expository. Chittister uses the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with God to further illustrate the struggle that she says is part of every life, pointing out how such encounters can lead to growth and new direction.

- **Saved in Hope: Spi Salvia**, Pope Benedict XVI, Ignatius Press, 2008. This book takes its title from St. Paul, who wrote, "In hope we have been saved". Pope Benedict explains that love and hope are closely related in the spiritual life. Love of God involves hope or trust in God. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man.” The primary theme throughout the book is that hope enables God’s people to look to the next life, but it also inspires and purifies our actions in this life. Pope Benedict considers modern philosophies and the challenges of faith today in light of the virtue of hope.

**Uniqueness:**

*The Sound of Hope* redefines hope in light of the story God, the biblical narrative, and the early Christ followers. Much attention will be given to the historical context within the book of Revelation and the first century Christian context.

Through biblical imagery, relevant metaphors, and story weaving, readers will discover the answers to the following questions:

- What if God’s hope isn’t optimistic?
- What if God’s hope isn’t progress?
- What if God’s hope isn’t an escape?
- Where does hope come from?
- How do humans become trapped in despair?
- Where is God in the midst of despair?
- How can we move from disappointment to hope?
- How does heaven interact with hope?
- What does it mean to be a citizen of heaven?
- Why does God make us wait for His promises?
- What is the mission of the church?
- What does practicing hope look like?
- What is *my* reason for hope?

**Endorsements:**

- Len Sweet (author/speaker)
- Ron Martoia (author/speaker)
- Sarah Cunningham (author/speaker)
• Wayne Schmidt (Vice President of Wesley Seminary)
• Mark Gorvette (President of Bethany Bible College)
• Chris Conrad (Regional Catalyst of the Wesleyan Church)
• Robert Mulholland (Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary)
• Tom Davis (author/speaker)
• David McDonald (author/pastor)
• Josh Buck (speaker/pastor)

Book Format:

• As a person journeys through the book, there will be the sense that they are going deeper and deeper into God’s hope-filled vision for humanity; therefore, the chapters will be creatively redefined as levels.
• At the end of the book there will be several real life stories of hope presented.
• Each chapter will end with discussion questions which can be used individually or within a group setting.

Chapter Outline:

• Introduction: Walkie Talkies
  o The introduction declares that followers of Christ are essentially followers of hope. Christian hope is different from other visions of hope within the world. The hope of the Christian is wrapped up in the person of Jesus and God’s redemptive movement in the world. Amongst God’s people, the concept of hope is unclear and every disciple of Jesus must discover what their reason for hope is, in order for the kingdom of God to continue to expand.

• 1. Swimming Pools: What are we diving into?
  o This chapter claims that the world is looking for hope and God’s people were meant to be the hope-splashers of the world. This chapter will also set the stage for the book of Revelation as a guide towards finding God’s hope. John, the author or Revelation, was a hope-hearer, and his imagery and words should call every follower of Christ to ask the question, “Can I hear the sound of hope?” Hearing the sound of hope becomes an important image along the journey towards a hope-filled life.

• 2. Pajama Jeans: How is hope different from optimism?
  o As a result of a cultural movement away from God and His purposes, the world has attempted to manufacture many other versions of hope. One such version is optimism. Culturally speaking, optimism has become synonymous with the word hope, but God’s hope is not optimism. God’s
people have always looked towards the good and the lovely, but optimism falls short of God’s vision of hope precisely because optimism is rooted in humanity’s capacity not in God’s character. This chapter explores the emptiness of optimism and reframes God’s hope as an entirely new life path.

- **3. Poles Apart: How is hope different from progress?**
  - If there was ever a myth, it would be the myth of progress. The progressive movement has certainly done a lot of good in the world; however, by itself, human progress is just another pseudo version of hope. The human project fails because it cannot effectively deal with the problems of evil and human suffering. God’s hope and human progress may ride on the same track for a while but, in the end, God’s hope comes from a different origin and arrives in a very different location. In this chapter, much attention will be brought to the first century Christian context within the Roman Empire and the reader will begin to see how the hope of the Early Church is much different than the world’s version of hope.

- **4. Picking Up: How is hope different from escapism?**
  - Many Christians have avoided the cultural lures of optimism and have rightfully noticed the problems within the myth of progress, but some have moved towards a worldview which assumes that the world is a wicked place. They suppose that the hope of the Christian is that they will be allowed to escape the rotting world—preferably sooner rather than later. In this chapter, the reader will conclude that it is necessary for believers to remain in the world and begin ushering in hope to the world. God’s hope is not only something to be obtained at a future date—hope should be experienced and practiced while a believer is still in their earthly shoes.

- **5. Flaming Tractors: Where does hope come from?**
  - God’s hope is a lot like a surprise; it hits you when you least expect it and it isn’t something that you can conjure up yourself. Similar to how salvation is a gift from God—so is hope. Hope is a choice and an individual must receive God’s offer of hope. God’s hope is like riding a wave; as the wave forms it begins to suck a person backwards all the while it is curling and launching them forward. In a similar way, God’s gift of hope is rooted in the past, able to transform the present, but is also willing to launch us forward again and again with new energy from God.

- **6. Reverse Migration: How did we get here?**
  - Sometimes God’s people take a wrong turn and end up in the realm of disappointment. At this point in the book, much attention will be given to despair—the antithesis of hope. The reader will discover that hardship, suffering, and persecution is inevitable, but those challenges and negative things can also become the seedbed of hope. Like the story of Jesus, hope
is born out of the darkness of death. And when a person becomes certain of their hope in Christ, there is not only the possibility of hope, but the reality of hope. This chapter will help the reader realize that people of hope may experience resistance at every turn, but resistance is what makes hope attractive.

7. **Mucky Feet: Where is God in the midst of our despair?**
   - Often, when a person falls into the pit of despair it feels a lot like being stuck in the mud. And it’s in those moments that people genuinely wonder where God is in the midst of their despairing circumstances. In this chapter, the reader will discover that God is always with them, and God is always ready to turn a catastrophe into a new beginning. By the end of the chapter, the reader will also see how Jesus experienced despair, but his supposed end was really just a new beginning. And God can do the same for every person who trusts in His good purposes.

8. **Cul-de-sacs: How can we move from disappointment to hope?**
   - Despair and disappointment are kind of like cul-de-sacs; round and round they go but only backwards they flow. However, hope is like the faint path at the end of the cul-de-sac which eventually opens up to a world of new possibilities. Disciples of Jesus have transitioned from head down to head up and they see the new world that God is longing to create. This chapter will also help disciples understand the deep meaning behind Jesus’ resurrection and will stir the reader with the desire to pitch in and start helping to build up God’s holy city—the New Jerusalem.

9. **Crashing Meteors: How does heaven interact with hope?**
   - For centuries, many sermons and hymns have led believers to conclude that their ultimate hope is when they arrive in heaven. Although the future state of heaven is a reality, disciples of Jesus must come to understand what Jesus meant when he taught his disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This chapter will help the reader understand the earthly implications of a future heaven.

10. **Transplanted Shrubs: What does heaven citizenship mean?**
    - Throughout the New Testament, the Apostle Paul uses the phrase “citizen of heaven” to describe his fellow believers. This chapter will deal extensively with the context of the Roman world and what it meant to be a citizen of Rome. The imagery of heavenly citizenship should call every follower of Christ to attention and begin to see how living with one foot in the future heaven and one foot on earth can help a believer endure hardship, suffering, and persecution. Part of the challenge of experiencing the fullness of hope is the reality that God doesn’t always fulfill His promises in the timeline that believers might prefer. God often requires His followers to endure hardships and wait patiently. Just like humans need to understand the dynamics of waiting for things to mature in life,
disciples also need to understand the way God works through the process of waiting. God will come through with His promise of a hope and future, but God is more concerned with the development of a person’s inner character. In this chapter, the reader will discover that as they wait on the Lord, they must live with responsible-hope.

- **12. Roller Skating: What is the mission of the church?**
  - Hope has a job to do. As the message of Revelation becomes clearer, disciples of hope also need to see how the church is to be the work-camps for the construction of God’s holy city. God’s primary vehicle for transporting hope into the world is through His people, the body of Christ. Living out this great hope cannot be done alone—struggle and hope must happen together. In this chapter, the reader will come to realize the purpose of the church and begin to see how the church is the carrier of hope to the world.

- **Conclusion: Living Fenceposts: What is my reason for hope?**
  - Hopefully, the concept of God’s hope is clear in the reader’s mind, and they can begin to express their *reason for hope*. The reader will also be challenged to begin spreading their hope to those around them. Through a website interface, readers will be able to write down their reason for hope and share it with the world.

**Intended Readers:**

**Primary Audience:**

- The call for hope is for every follower of Christ to discover and practice. *The Sound of Hope* has the potential to resonate with a broad spectrum of ages, faith backgrounds, and spiritual maturity levels. However, the primary audience of this book will be Christian adults, age 21 and up, who desire to live out God’s promises more fully.

**Secondary Audience:**

- The secondary audience will be those who have experienced hopelessness in life and are looking to find an everlasting source of hope. While philosophical and theoretical perspectives of hope are discussed, the application of hope is not far off. The personal stories and discussion questions will help guide people towards *their reason for hope*.

**Manuscript:**

- The entire manuscript is available for review.
The book’s word count is approximately 34,000 words.

**Author Bio:**

Ed Love is currently the Narrative Pastor of Epic Church, located in Portland, MI, where he serves as the catalyst for mission development and missionary deployment. Ed completed his Masters of Divinity at Asbury Seminary and obtained his Doctorate in Ministry at George Fox Evangelical Seminary. Ed is the husband of Emily and the proud father of three kids; Jennah, Josiah, and Micah. Ed enjoys many outdoor activities, playing basketball, tinkering on his 1971 Chevelle, and spending time with his family.

A few years ago Ed was asked the question, “What is your reason for hope?” And after a few moments of reflection, Ed was caught off guard and was bewildered by the question. Even though Ed had been a teacher of the faith for many years, the meaning of Christian hope seemed vague, confusing, and he wasn’t even sure if he had it. Upon further reflection, Ed decided to go on a hope-search and *The Sound of Hope* is the byproduct of his discoveries along the way.

The topic of hope is not light and fluffy. Most of the books on the topic of hope are either shallow or they are theologically weighty. In *The Sound of Hope*, Ed has attempted to generate a book which navigates a middle-of-the-road perspective. Through fresh metaphors, stories, and historical analysis, *The Sound of Hope* will serve as a catalyst for believers to understand their Christian hope.

**Publishing Credits:**


**Future Projects:**

- In addition to *The Sound of Hope* book, much thought has been given to the development of an accompanying leader’s guide, study guide, and a DVD teaching curriculum useful for small groups or a church wide spiritual growth initiative.

- The working title for a future book project is *Fakebook: Finding Your True Face*. In this book, Ed will explore the trappings of the false self and bring insight into finding one’s true self in Christ. As Meister Eckhart once said, “God is at home. It is we who have gone for a walk.”
Budget

- Createspace/Amazon Marketing Pro-Plan $40.00
- Graphic design work $200.00
- Website design $500.00
- Video trailer $300.00
- Professional editor $1,200.00
- Miscellaneous $300.00
  - Total: $2,540.00

Promotion

- I will begin developing my relational networks from Sept. 2010-March 2011.
- I will begin design a video trailer for the book and a video author biography by April 2011.
- I will complete and release the promotional website by June 2011.
- I will develop my list of advertising options by April 2011. Advertising options may included: Facebook, blogs, church leadership magazines, websites, et cetera.
- I will design and distribute a sample chapter for free (online and in print) and on the back page it will have the link where a person can purchase the full book at a discounted price.
- I will begin building a base of people (listed in the book and on the website) who have read and would offer praise for the book.
• I will begin developing a list of places and forums where I can speak and draw attention to the book.

• I will begin developing an email list of people who I can send e-newsletters to about the release date, special discounts, or additional information. I will also change my email URL to reflect my book title and direct people to the website.

• I will look into radio publicity in my area or nationally.

Standards of Publication

• Length: 200 pages
• Target price range: $12-14

Action Plan and Timeline

• Reading and research: Currently--December 2010
• Rough organizational flow chart: July 2010
• First review and critique with Advisor: September 2010
• Detailed chapter outline finalized: September 2010
• Rough draft finalized: November 2010
• Second review and critique with Advisor: December 2010
• Editorial process: February 2011
• Final project completed: March 2011
This Doctor of Ministry project is the fruit of an extended personal journey in my own life. When I first began working with the topic of despair and hope I had no idea where life would take me. As it turned out, hope was not just a pleasant topic to write about; it became a personal inquiry. In my studies, I began to discover that hope was all my faith ancestors talked about and the theme of hope is saturated all throughout the biblical narrative. After much reflection, I discovered that I did not properly understand the hope which motivated the early Christ followers to persevere in their faith even while they were living in a culture filled with resistance.

After a period of experiencing great hardship and despair, I was able to acknowledge the resistances in my own life and begin adjusting my insufficient theological framework. When I was honest with myself, my hope was rooted in materialism, optimism and progressivism. As a result, I was not experiencing God’s redemptive life. When I now reflect on the question, “What is your reason for hope?” I can respond with grace and confidence. For I have found my reason for hope. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly trust in Jesus’ name. And when my world falls apart and my light turns to dark, when the clouds gather around and the storms overwhelm, when my heart breaks in half and my strength cannot last, when I’m lost in this land and I cannot see God’s plan—I’ll stand. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand—all other ground is sinking sand.
I am convinced that for the rest of my days, I will look back on my time in the Doctor in Ministry program and praise God that I was able to discover my reason for hope. I hope that for the rest my life, regardless of my circumstances, I will be able live with a responsible theology of Christian hope and serve as an inspiration to others to solidify their reason for hope. Thank you to Leonard Sweet, Loren Kerns, Cliff Berger, Carol Hutchinson, Hope Lyda, and all the faculty of George Fox Evangelical Seminary.
WORKS CITED


The Sound of Hope

Living in the Promises of God

Ed Love
The Sound of Hope

Living in the Promises of God
The Sound of Hope: What Others Are Saying
“But make sure in your hearts that Christ is Lord. Always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you about the hope that you have.”

1 Peter 3:15
To my wonderful wife, Emily, who continues to believe in me.

To my mentor, Dr. Lenard Sweet, who taught me how to hear God’s Word in surround sound.

To my doctorate professors and advisors at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, who taught me the discipline of industrious writing.

To my life editor, Barry, who keeps me grounded in the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

To my children, Jennah, Josiah, and Micah, who teach me about God every day.

To my church community, who encourages me to take risks and dream.

To my network of church planters (Chris C., Phil S., Jason H., Jim B., Jim N., Rob L., Steve C., Troy E., Adam L., Christy L., Jon A., Chad M., Brian A., Aaron S.), who continue to believe that Jesus is the hope of the world.

To my Gramps, who modeled biblical hope as he took care of my Nanny through each stage of Alzheimers.
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Walkie Talkies

When I was kid, I had a pair of black and orange Walkie Talkies. My brother and I quickly discovered that these Walkie Talkies could help us in our mischievous antics around the house. If one of us kept an eye on Mom, then the other could get away with just about anything. (And we did).

One day, as we were plotting our next scheme, I began hearing an unfamiliar voice over the speaker. I immediately called my brother over and we listened intently to the voice, wondering who it could be on the other end.

After a few moments of eavesdropping we came to the conclusion that we were somehow picking up a police frequency! This was one of the coolest moments of my childhood and the memory has never left my mind.

Throughout life we will undoubtedly come across many different frequencies. And every now and then we will come across a frequency which will change us so deeply that it becomes engrained in our minds forever.

Along my life journey, I have discovered that hope is one of those unforgettable frequencies that has the power to transform a person’s past, present, and future.

Because we were made to hope.
A hope-filled being believes that life is worth living. However, finding hope isn’t always easy. In our pursuit of hope we are sure to encounter resistance along the way, since the destructive powers of despair are always lurking in the shadows.

Hopelessness is certainly an internal and personal struggle, but we must also realize that the effects of despair are very much external and relational.

When faced with the death-grip of despair, we can either settle or set-out. Settlers choose to cut their losses and usually end up wishing upon the stars. But those who choose to set-out find themselves moving away from the ruckus and towards redemption. Set-outers come to believe that hope isn’t optional—but that it is actually central to survival.

But what is our great hope? And how are we to continue living when everything has fallen apart, when the system doesn’t bend in our favor, when people have forsaken us, when our dreams have been crushed, or when we have missed out on something because of our orientation toward God?

It doesn’t take long to realize that hope is the ultimate paradox of life. Yet if there was ever a time when God’s people needed clarity about hope—it is now.

Followers of Jesus are followers of Hope. We are certainly not the only people who use the H-word in our vocabulary (politicians love it), but our hope should be radically different from the visions of hope found in the world.

God’s people have always looked toward the future and have consistently believed in the reality that God was up-to-something good. In a sense, hope seems to be all our faith-ancestors talked about.
Even while the early Christians faced severe periods of struggle and persecution, they still continued to live with a deep assurance that God would follow through with His promises. The early Christians believed that, in Jesus, God was doing something entirely new—something that the world had never seen before—and that was very good news.

Ironically, history tells us that the movement of Jesus actually grew during a time of tremendous turmoil. It’s no wonder why hope became central to Christian discussion.

With the immense social and political pressure to turn from the way of Jesus, early church leaders realized that every disciple of Jesus needed to be clear about their reason for hope or else they might be tempted to give up on the faith.

“You must always be ready to explain your hope in Christ if someone were to ask you about it,” declared the author of 1 Peter 3:15. In other words, our reason for hope should always be central in our hearts and on the tip of our tongues.

If truth be told, most people are quite skeptical of Christianity (including believers). And along with this skeptical outlook, people really are wondering why they should put their hope in God even when it seems like following God’s ways will have no advantage for them.

There is no doubt that humanity is searching for a sense of purpose, meaning, and passion in life. However, I can’t help but wonder if what people are really looking for is a hope which transcends all understanding.

Maybe the reason the Early Church actually spread like wildfire in the midst of persecution was precisely because the people of God knew well the meaning of hope. I can imagine that when the God-seekers of
the first century peered into the Christian communities they saw something very rare—people with an eternal hope.

I’m not sure what people see when they look into the 21st century church, but I’m pretty sure they still haven’t found what they’ve been looking for. It makes me wonder if the people of God are confused about their reason for hope. Or, maybe the church has lost confidence in God’s promises all together.

Whatever may have happened, we must reclaim the world with God’s vision of hope.

This book is an invitation for disciples of Jesus everywhere to answer the question, “What is my reason for hope?” At the end of the journey, it is my desire that you will know Hope intimately and be able to stand with an unshakeable confidence in God the next time struggle and resistance come your way.

I love the ending of the movie The Shawshank Redemption. Character Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) had escaped from prison and buried a letter and some cash by an old oak tree with the expectation that one day his close friend Red (Morgan Freeman) would find it and come visit him. Andy wrote,

Dear Red,
If you are reading this, you’ve gotten out. And if you’ve come this far, maybe you are willing to come a little further. You remember the name of the town don’t you? I could use a good man to help get my project on wheels. I’ll keep an eye out for you and the chess board ready. Remember Red, hope is a good thing. Maybe the best of things and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you and finds you well.
Your friend,
Andy
If you are reading this book, you’ve gotten out of the despair-filled prison. And if you’ve come this far, maybe you are willing to come a little further. You remember the name of the holy city don’t you? God could use you to help get His project on wheels. I’ll keep an eye out for you. Remember, hope is a good thing. Maybe the best of things and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping this book finds you and finds you well.

Your friend,
Ed

Can you hear the sound of hope?
Swimming Pools

What are we diving into?

“My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly trust in Jesus’ Name.”
(Edward Mote, 1834 C.E.)

“Let us hold unswervingly to the
hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful.”
(Hebrews 10:23)

In the summertime, if you were to visit just about any body of water, it is likely that you would see people boating, swimming, or soaking up the rays. For some reason, humans are strangely attracted to water.

This past summer, my wife and I thought it was time for our kids to upgrade from their bath tub to a real swimming pool. So we decided to go all out and buy our kids a twelve footer. After I filled it up, I tossed my kids in and introduced them to “the cannonball” (which doesn’t go over so well in two feet of water, by the way). We were having a blast, but then something interesting happened.

After a few minutes of splashing around, I began to have that feeling like someone was watching us. And sure enough, looking over I noticed
some eyes peering through the backyard bushes and another set of eyes peeking through the neighbor’s wooden fence. I could tell that they wanted to check out our new pool, so I called them out of their hiding places and invited them over.

In a way, God’s hope is a lot like a swimming pool.

When we hear somebody splashing in hope, even when their situation seems rather hope-less, there is something incredibly attractive about their lives. And we can’t help but turn our heads and investigate the scene.

Throughout the story of God there are many examples of people who model what splashing in hope looks like. One example was the author of the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

Most historians assume that John, one of Jesus’ closest disciples, was the visionary behind the revelatory script. And this makes sense, because for three years, John would have walked and talked with the great Rabbi of hope.

Throughout his writings, John does not draw much attention to himself, probably because he would prefer to remain in the shadow of the cross. But there is no doubt that John was an expert in hopeology and he had a very important vision to convey.

As we progress on our journey toward hope and enter into the realm of the first century Christ followers, John’s Revelation will serve as one of our primary guides.

Often, Revelation gets written off as an intriguing book, but one that does not make much sense while appearing to be irrelevant to everyday life. But, the truth is, the message of Revelation was strategically designed to help disciples of Jesus hear the sound of living hope.
The book of Revelation serves a vital purpose in the biblical narrative and it would be a shame to go through life without hearing its intended message. Not hearing the message of Revelation would be like going through life never having had the chance to hear Beethoven’s classic Ode to Joy or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

So, throughout this book, we will drop in and out of the historical context of John’s Revelation and tune into the faith of those in the first century church.

Ears

My wife, Emily, has incredible ears. She happens to be a phenomenal singer, so I think hearing is part of her gifting. She instantly knows when a singer is flat or sharp or pitchy and needs to be voted off a show.

Over the years her ability to hear the sounds of music have grown and matured, but she would tell you—it’s taken a lot of hard work and discipline.

The reality is—our ears need training.

Some musical geniuses like Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven could play by ear. They could hear something once and play it back note for note. But for the vast majority of musicians, they have to practice, practice, practice.

And it’s the same for those who want a hope-filled life. Those who want to eventually be able to play-hop-by-ear also need to know that it is going to take a lot of practice.

Practicing hope means that there will be flubs and failures, but thankfully, for those of us who have difficulty hearing the sounds of
hope, a few geniuses of hope took the time to write God’s music down so that we could learn to play it too.

It is important to understand that John was a hope-genius and, when he wrote the book of Revelation, he wasn’t attempting to orchestrate a grand symphony of the end times. There are certainly some “end-of-days” implications, but John’s hope-filled solo was originally intended to bring encouragement to God’s people in their present condition. And that means Revelation is very relevant for our lives today.

**Droplets**

John’s story is unique. Even though he was exiled by the Roman authorities and sent away to expire on the island of Patmos, John plunged into the grand swimming pool of God, wrote the book of Revelation, and splashed every follower of Christ with droplets of hope.

Loaded with first century cultural images and metaphors, John writes with the expectation that his hearers, who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, would know that he had heard and seen what God was up to in the land. John wanted everyone to clean out their ears and wipe the sand out of their eyes so that they too could wake up to the sound of waves crashing with hope.

In the first century, life wasn’t particularly easy for followers of Jesus.

The Roman culture was very tolerant of other religions, but there was one thing about the Christian sect that rubbed the Roman authorities the wrong way. The early Christians would not bow down and worship Caesar, the Roman Emperor, because Caesar was considered to be another lord and god. The Roman authorities assumed that the Christians were disloyal to the State of Rome and a potential threat to their cause. Consequently, the Roman authorities began making it very difficult for Christ followers to remain connected.
It’s no wonder why the leaders of the church had to continually ask the question, “What is your reason for hope?” Because if the early Christians did not have a good reason for continuing to deny the worship of a false god then it was highly probable that they would eventually step away from the movement of God.

You see, true hope is rebellious; it’s about not giving in to the easier way.

**Oceans**

In the city of Algarrobo, along the southern coast of Chile, lies the world’s largest swimming pool. If you like swimming laps in pools, you’d be lucky to make it down and back in this one. The pool is more than 1,000 yards long, covers 20 acres, has a 115 foot deep end, and holds 66 million gallons of water (just for perspective, an Olympic size pool only measures 50 yards in length).

Yet, even though this pool is quite remarkable attracting thousands of people to the San Alfonso del Mar resort, there is an expense to having such a luxury. The pool took five years to build, cost nearly one billion dollars, and the annual maintenance is estimated to be two billion dollars.¹

Giant swimming pools don’t come without a cost.

And hope doesn’t come without a cost either.

John knew there was a cost, but he also saw something amazing happening within Jesus’ death and resurrection. I have to believe that when John started writing his revelation of Jesus Christ, he was unable to put down his quill. Because, once you hear and see the hope of God,
you can’t get it out of your mind and you want everyone to experience it as well.

I find it somewhat humorous that about 50 yards from the edge of the world’s largest pool is another body of water which circles the entire globe—it’s a tad deeper, and it’s free.

Sadly, when it comes to experiencing God’s hope, it is entirely possible for people to walk right by God’s hope-filled ocean and miss it all together.

But John didn’t want any one in the first century church to miss out on the ocean of hope, so he wrote to seven specific leaders in seven specific churches located within the province of Asia (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea).  

I know that for those of us in the 21st century, understanding the vision of Revelation is no easy task. Some people get very confused by the nature and genre of John’s apocalyptic narrative.

As Revelation is processed, I think it is helpful to know that the driving agenda behind John’s vision was not to predict the future. For the original hearers, all of the images, symbols, and metaphors used throughout Revelation would have stuck out like red letters and the first hearers would have known exactly what those word pictures meant.

Apocalyptic literature, like Revelation, was very common within the first century, but these visionary works were typically designed to speak truth into the reader’s present-day circumstances. The apocalyptic vision of Revelation may have future implications, but we must realize that the goal of the vision was actually designed to take believers deeper and deeper into the heart of who Jesus was, is, and is to come.
Similar to how the great rivers of the world flow into the depths of the ocean, Revelation is carrying us out into the marvelous depths of Jesus. And hopefully, in the end, followers of Christ will see for themselves the glory, beauty, and vastness of God and His redemptive movement in the world.

**Mine**

Along the journey toward discovering our hope, we need to begin to define what hope is and, maybe even more importantly, what hope is not. Remember, the question of 1 Peter 3:15 is not, “What is hope?” The question is, “What is *my* hope?”

Even though the word *hope* is used excessively within our cultural vocabulary, I can’t help but notice that the early Christ followers might be working with a different definition than most of our modern day assumptions.

Overtime, words tend to morph and take on new meanings. For example, think about the word *love*. In ancient Greek terminology, *love* had different words which described the different levels of commitment and passion. The word *philia* described a basic friendship. The word *eros* described a sensual and romantic relationship. And the word *agape* described the deepest affection for another person. But in recent days, the English speaking world has morphed all of the various levels of love into one word—*agaphilros*—which is quite honestly a nonsensical word.

Nowadays, the word *love*, which once had girth and meaning, has transformed into something much weaker. I find it odd that we can say to our lover, “I-love-you-babe,” and in the next breathe we can use the same word while hollering, “I-love-cheesy-potatoes!”

Does this mean that our passion for our spouse is equivalent to our passion for cheesy potatoes? Do any of you women have a problem
with this? (And judging by the tone of voice, it might seem like some people actually love their cheesy potatoes more than their spouses!)

In the same way that the word *love* has lost its meaning, the word *hope* has also gotten jumbled up.

*Hope* has now become synonymous with words like optimism, wishful thinking, and anticipation. People use the word *hope* in describing their desire for a certain football team to win, or to express their aspiration for getting something that they want like a promotion, a new house, a relationship, or even a ticket into heaven.

But what if hope doesn’t have anything to do with materialistic optimism, wishful thinking, or the desire to escape into the afterlife?
1. Who in your life would you consider to be a hope-splasher? And why?

2. What did you think about the idea of practicing hope?

3. How is faith in Christ challenging these days?

4. In what ways does biblical hope seem costly and risky?

5. On a continuum from 1-10, how hope-filled would you say you are?
Pajama Jeans

How is hope different from optimism?

“Hope is faith holding out its hand in the dark.”
(George Iles)

“The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.”
(1 Timothy 5:5)

It seems like everything these days has an imposter—even blue jeans.

I saw an infomercial the other day for some women’s jeans which were made to feel like pajamas. The advertising was pretty compelling—I almost wanted to buy a pair (for my wife, of course). The ad showcased several women walking around in the public square confident in their external appeal and pleased that nobody knew how comfortable they really were. These imitation jeans even featured a “smooth-butt-lifting-design”—how innovative is that! But, even with all of their convincing reasons to buy these pajama-like jeans, I suspect that they will never fully replace a good fitting pair of blue jeans.

And the same is true when it comes to God’s form of hope. Followers of Christ must be aware of the phony visions of hope in our day and age. When it comes to God’s hope, one can usually find it going
the opposite direction of the culture. God’s vision of hope happens to be defiant; unlike the compliant forms of optimism which are blazing their way through our society today.

You see, hope isn’t about keeping our heads up; it’s about keeping our heads back.

**Ephesus**

If you’ve visited a chiropractor recently, it’s likely that you’ve heard about FHP (Forward Head Posture). FHP is the gradual and forward decline of the vertebrae within the neck. Because of excessive computer use and hand held devises, FHP is becoming a very common problem. For every inch your head moves forward, it gains 10 pounds in weight. The muscles in your upper back and neck have to work that much harder to keep the chin up.

What’s the solution to FHP you ask? Lay down on a couch or table, let your head fall back towards the ground, and stay that way as often as you can and for as long as you can.

What is the solution to despair you ask? Lay down, look back, and stay that way as often as you can and for as long as you can.

Optimism says look forward, but hope says look backwards. Of course we can’t remain on the couch our entire lives—we’ll eventually need to get up and move through life. But if we want Jesus and if we want hope, we have to continually look back at the beginning of it all. In Revelation 1:8, John describes Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end. The order is important: look back, look forward, and then look back again.

The church of Ephesus was the first church that John wrote to in the book of Revelation, and apparently, Ephesus had a form of spiritual FHP.
John, of course writing for Jesus, penned these words, “You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent (or go back) and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place.”

In a sense, the audacious church in Ephesus was trying to add more letters to the alphabet instead of starting back over with the Alpha-A. Jesus knew that Ephesus’ aggressive faithfulness was beginning to deteriorate their soul. And once a person’s soul goes—it’s only a matter of time before a person is taken out of God’s mission all together. Nobody likes to hear that they have FHP or hear that their soul is depreciating. But Jesus, the concerned chiropractor, declared that it was time to develop some new habits in life.

You see, God’s hope does not call us to “up-the-ante” or “suck-it-up” or even “buckle-down.” God’s hope requires us to stop, drop, and roll down a new path.

The problem with optimism is that it doesn’t recreate a new life; it simply says, “Keep plugging along, it’ll get better next time and if it’s not that time it’ll be the next time and if it’s not that time it’ll be the next time...” And on and on optimism goes—where it stops nobody knows. It’s no wonder why our culture is still grasping for happiness after all these years of being on the optimism-drug. What our world needs is an optimism-vaccination.

Don’t get me wrong; thinking good thoughts can be a good thing—God’s people are supposed to dwell on the good and the lovely. Even Jesus’ enjoyment of life aroused so much suspicion that people thought he was a glutton and a drunkard! Enjoying life is a good thing; in fact, it is a very spiritual thing.
But optimism is not synonymous with God’s form of hope. The difference is that optimism runs on the ups and downs of emotions, while hope is rooted in a person’s character. Optimism relies on the shelter of human logic, while hope thrives when the seemingly secure systems of the world collapse.

Hope means that faith in God isn’t based on the circumstances or situations a person might find themselves in.

In other words, hope begins where optimism reaches the end-of-the-rope.

Laodicea

Another church in which John wrote to was the church in Laodicea. Laodicea was obviously an optimistic-centered church and, in Jesus’ mind, they were at the end-of-the-rope.

Revelation 3:15-16 says, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other! So because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit (or vomit) you out of my mouth!” You have to love the graphic details John uses to express Jesus’ dissatisfaction with the Laodiceans.

The city of Laodicea tells the church’s story. Laodicea was a center of trade and business within the Roman world. Because of the location, Laodicea became a major banking center. The area was also famous for its clothing industry, especially their luxurious woolen cloths and rugs made from a unique breed of black sheep. In addition to its wealth and industry, Laodicea was home to a famous medical school. This school was known in particular for an ointment which helped cure certain eye diseases.
As a result of the materialistic affluence within the city at large, some of the culture’s optimistic spirit was beginning to creep into the church atmosphere. And Jesus knew that an optimistic-centered church would be unlikely to stand the test of hardship and persecution.

So Jesus says, “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.”

Notice the cultural reference points within Jesus’ rebuking. Jesus is essentially saying, “You think your life is going great, but it’s really about to unravel. You think your clothing lines are cutting edge, but you are really naked. You think your stocks and bonds are making life grand, but you’re really poor. If you want to be rich, trade with me. If you want clothing, try my purified white suit on for size. If you want to see the world the way I intended it to be, then put on my eye salve which will heal you from the inside out.”

This rebuking might sound a little harsh coming from the gentle-sheep-holding-Jesus, but it is a rebuke out of love and concern. Like Jesus mentioned—sometimes you have to discipline the ones you love most.

Jesus knew that Laodicea’s optimistic spirit would not sustain them; especially when life presented them with a few challenges or when the Roman authorities would demand that they worship Caesar. Jesus knew that they needed a faith which was much deeper than the superficial form of optimism found within the city, so he graphically depicted what the church made him want to do.

The optimistic-driven church makes Jesus want to vomit.
It’s kind of humorous to imagine, but the city of Laodicea had a vomiting problem. The city had no water supply of its own except for what could be transported from a river about two miles away. And for everyday cleansing purposes, water was piped in from the hot springs which were about six miles away.

By the time either water source arrived in Laodicea it was “lukewarm.” Neither source of water could be used for drinking. However, the medical school in Laodicea developed an interesting practice of healing people from the inside out by directing their patients to drink the unsanitary lukewarm water and then vomit it back out.  

The image of Jesus vomiting the church out of his mouth should call every Christ follower to attention.

Because of their optimistic attitude, Jesus knew that the church of Laodicea would be the type of people who would follow him when things were going good in their lives, but when persecution, suffering, or hardships began to occur, the odds are that they would likely check out.

From Jesus’ perspective, the optimistic church of Laodicea was just like their water—useless. Throughout the history of the church, there have been countless churches who believed that they could be the greatest community in the world by being identical with the world. But God wants something more from the church.

A Laodicean-type church doesn’t do much to offer the world with a refreshingly cool drink of God’s love, grace, and forgiveness. And on the other side of the faucet, a Laodicean-type church doesn’t burn hot with a passion for the victims of despair, poverty, and injustice.
So what happens when the apparent materialistic blessings of God disappear from our lives? Or, what happens when the rulers and power brokers of our age creep in and steal our earthly treasures?

Jesus wants to know what kind of person we will be and what kind of faith we will have if all we have is lost.

In Matthew 10:10 Jesus sends his disciples out to spread the kingdom of God, giving them a few guidelines. Strangely, one of Jesus’ primary guidelines was to not take anything with them—no bags for the journey, no extra shirts, no sandals, no walking sticks—nothing.

It’s likely that the reason for Jesus’ extreme strategy is because he knew that if his disciples had anything to lean on—any false securities—they might not discover what true reliance upon their Heavenly Father felt like.

Furthermore, Jesus wanted to make sure that his disciples weren’t settling for a materialistic optimism.

**Martyrs**

It would be nice to think that people haven’t had to die for their faith in Christ, but it is simply not true. During the first century, there were thousands of people killed simply because they would not bow down and worship Caesar. And even nowadays, martyrdom is still occurring all across the globe. A recent study estimated that 159,000 Christians worldwide are martyred for their faith every year.¹⁵

I say that **it would be nice to think that people haven’t had to die for their faith in Christ**, because then I wouldn’t be required to ask myself the question, “What if God called me to be a martyr?” I’ve always wondered if I’d be a good one.
One inspiring martyrdom account can be found in the story of Ignatius (107 C.E.). Ignatius was around seventy years old at the time of his death. And like most Christian martyrs, Ignatius’ treason to the State of Rome was that he had been unwilling to bow down and worship Caesar as lord. Because of his disloyalty to Rome and his commitment to obey Christ, Ignatius was sentenced to the death-claws of the coliseum lions.

On the way to his execution, Ignatius wrote these words to his churches, “Now I begin to be a disciple, I care for nothing of visible or invisible things so that I may but win Christ. Come fire and cross and grapplingings with wild beasts, the rending of my bones and body. Only let it be mine to attain Jesus Christ.” Ignatius knew well his reason for hope and inspired many others to stand firm during times of cultural resistance.

Ignatius’ example and others like it, tell me that these faithful martyrs had something more than optimism. An optimistic and upbeat attitude doesn’t survive in the face of challenge and death.

In the end, optimism always buckles under pressure.
Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between keeping your head up and keeping your head back? Or, in other words, how does looking back to Jesus increase your sense of hope?

2. What does it look like to roll down a new hope-filled path in life?

3. Similar to Laodicea, in what ways has the modern church moved towards a superficial form of optimism?

4. How are materialism and optimism interconnected?

5. What are some examples of modern day false securities?

6. What kind of person/disciple of Jesus would you be if you lost everything?
Poles Apart

How is hope different from progress?

“It’s not just room and board. Their real hope is Jesus. They need to be loved.”
(Jim Corbett)

“But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.”
(Psalm 39:7)

“Everything is amazing right now, but nobody is happy.”

That was a line from a Conan O’Brien interview with comedian Louis C.K.

It wasn’t that long ago when humanity was without electricity, phones, indoor plumbing, cars, planes, television, internet, Facebook, toothpaste, et cetera. Humans are incredibly innovative and are always moving forward. I can imagine that within the next 50 years we won’t even be able to recognize our earth; that is, if we are still living on it.

Even though humans have come a long way since the days of discovering fire, hammers, and wheels, there is no denying the fact that evil, suffering, and injustice in the world has grown and is still on the rise. Politicians would like for us to believe that their policies are
creating a better world for our children. But, as we advance in technology and education are we really better off?

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 1980 there were under 500,000 people incarcerated in America. In 2008, the BJS reported that over 7.3 million people were on probation, in prison, or on parole at year-end. (That’s 1 out of every 31 adults). America has now been dubbed the “Incarceration Nation.” On the bright side, if America were ever to lose its super power status to another nation, then it still might be able to lead the world in something.

Simply put, if there was ever a myth—it would be the myth of progress.

Now, Christians should never project a bleak picture of the world and we definitely don’t want to say that nothing good has happened in America—it certainly has. But disciples of Jesus need to understand that cultural progress alone is not God’s vision of hope. Although, progress and hope can sometimes look the same, at the end of the day, progress and hope are poles apart.

The difference between progress and hope is that progress is rooted in humanity’s capacity, while hope is rooted in God’s nature and being.

For the people of God, the resurrection of Jesus is the primary example of hope coming from the outside of humanity. The death of Jesus left the most fervent disciple depressed, afraid, and silenced. The cross was an unexpected taser to the back, but the empty tomb was like a surprising shock from a defibrillator. Nobody was expecting a return from the grave and no earthling had anything to do with it. The resurrection was God’s trump card for the world.

The early disciples looked back with joy on the Easter-event, but their joy did not stem from a sense of progress. If anything, the early Christ followers fell behind both socially and economically. Yet something else
was driving them—even when they were being oppressed by the evil principalities and powers of the world.

**Caesar**

Throughout the first century, the various Caesars made claims of divinity. The following inscription, from 9 B.C.E., shows how the first Caesar’s rule was described.

*The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordered the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the world of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere; the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning for the world of the gospel that has come to men through him.*

Isn’t that inscription strangely similar to the description of Jesus’ birth in Luke 2?

Even more, after the death of Julius Caesar (Augustus’ father) a comet or star appeared and was clearly visible for seven days straight. Many people began to hypothesize that the comet was the soul of Julius Caesar being deified and called among the other gods. After that appearance, Augustus (whose name meant the “exalted one”), gave a speech where he explained the god-like nature of his father and from that point forward people began referring to him as, “The son of a god.”

Before long, many cities throughout the Roman Empire began to honor the line of Caesar by erecting a temple and an altar in their names and people began worshipping the Emperors as gods. The Caesars ruled with absolute sovereignty and they did as they pleased.
Ironically, the Roman world was full of all kinds of pagan cults and religions but, for some reason, Christianity got under the skin of the Roman Emperors.

People of other religions were still willing to bow down and worship the image of Caesar, but not so with most Christians. In fact, these early Christians were labeled “atheists” because they would not bow down to the godhead of Caesar. As you can imagine, when Caesar tried to exert his authority over the early Christians, Caesar became known as a beast of a man.

Revelation 13 describes the authority that the line of beasts had over every tribe, language, and nation. John also notes that the beast even had authority over buying, selling, and trading.

In the first century, it became commonplace for the Caesars to stamp their images on to the coins of the Empire, symbolizing their reign over all social order. Nobody could escape the image of Caesar. At some points in history, the Caesars actually issued certificates to those who were submissive to Rome and had worshipped the image of Caesar. And in order to buy, sell, or trade in the marketplace, an individual was required to show their mark of approval.

In the logic of the Caesars, if the Christians were prohibited from engaging in the world’s economy, then they would eventually become outcasts hopefully weakening the movement. But, much to Rome’s surprise, the movement only became stronger.

Imagine walking into a Wal-Mart to buy some milk and the elderly man at the door doesn’t greet you with a smile, but instead he asks you for your certificate of Presidential worship? As a follower of Christ, you could not rightfully worship another god or President; therefore, you have no certificate and you got-no-milk.
Does being a Christian in the first century sound like something you’d want to be?

Fish

Most historians acknowledge that the Christian fish symbol emerged during the first century. Since it was dangerous to be known as a believer in Jesus, the Early Church came up with this secret scribble.

When a disciple of Jesus would cross paths with someone along the road or in the marketplace who was potentially a believer, the individual would draw the upper half of the fish symbol on the ground.

If the other person recognized the symbol, the stranger would add a second curved line and complete the fish image.

The fish symbol was a very simple shape to draw. It could be drawn quickly and erased just as fast if there was no sign of recognition on the part of the stranger. I’m not sure why someone decided to use them as bumper stickers, but during the first century the fish symbol had the power to buy a gallon of milk and save your life.

It’s hard to believe that the church even grew in such a hostile environment. The book of Acts reports that after Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned to death, the Lord’s hand was with the disciples and
a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Imagine that—the most effective evangelistic strategy of the first century was not a rock concert—but death.

I suspect most first century believers wouldn’t last very long in many our comfort-driven churches today. The early Christ followers were motivated by purpose and survival, not the warm and fuzzy. People didn’t join the Christian movement so that their lives could be better and their families happier; they joined the Christian movement because it was the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

The great hope of the early Christ followers wasn’t the thought that the world could get better through human ingenuity and progress—Rome was already doing that. Their great hope was that, in Jesus, God had initiated His kingdom reign on the earth. The early Christ followers actually believed Jesus when he prayed, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

There have been many people throughout history who believed that the human project would produce unlimited improvement and march the world into utopia. I certainly wouldn’t say that moving history forward through technology and education is a bad thing—I love the practicalities. However, if disciples of Jesus think that the dream of progress is equivalent to God’s kingdom on earth, then there will inevitably be confusion and disorientation when it comes to understanding God’s movement on earth.

History has proven over and over again that humans cannot be morally perfected or made whole through education, policies, and hard work. At the end of the day, the dilemma with the human utopia is that it cannot deal with the problems of evil and suffering effectively. This is why the evolutionary optimism of the past two hundred years has still remained
powerless before war, crime, the Holocaust, child pornography, rape, sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS, and the like.

I suspect politicians will continue to proclaim that hope is “on the way” and it’s likely that herds of people will always believe them, but I’m not convinced. The real solution to the world’s problems must also resolve the problem of immorality and evil.

Progress needs a cross.
Discussion Questions

1. How is progress and hope the same? And how is progress and hope different?

2. Does being a Christian in the first century sound like something you’d want to be? Why or why not?

3. Knowing that the early Christ followers weren’t advancing socially and economically, how does that reality adjust your 21st century faith?

4. Why did the movement of Christianity grow even in the midst of turmoil and persecution?

5. How does the cross-event solve the problem of immorality and evil?
Picking Up

How is hope different from escapism?

“Hope is not a dream.”
(Anonymous)

“I helped those who had lost hope, and they blessed me. And I caused the widows’ hearts to sing for joy.”
(Job 29:13)

When I was 12, I remember the youth ministry of our church showing a graphic video series demonstrating the end times. I think I still have nightmares from those videos. After watching the tribulation episodes I was convinced of three things: (1) I better accept Christ, quick. (2) This world is going to hell-in-a-hand-basket. And (3) I can’t wait to get to heaven.

Many Christians have avoided the cultural lures of optimism and have rightfully noticed the problems within the myth of progress. But with this, some have moved toward a worldview which assumes that the world is a wicked place. They suppose that the hope of the Christian is to escape this rotten world—preferably sooner rather than later.

In Bible College, my dorm mates and I would often stay up late talking about theology. The conversation would usually end up turning into a cyclical debate with everyone leaving frustrated. Most of these
conversations have left my memory, but there is one that still haunts me today.

As we began discussing the topic of eschatology (the study of the end-of-all-things), one of my dorm mates began describing how thrilled he was to “get out of this God-forsaken world.” I remember thinking, “Really... God-forsaken? That doesn’t seem right...” It was getting late so I didn’t strike up a debate at that time, but I left the conversation deeply troubled. In my mind, it didn’t make any sense for God to save me and then pull me up out of the world. At the time, I didn’t have a good answer for why God would want to keep me here on earth, but I knew there must be a reason and a purpose.

You know, I’ve never met a person who would say that they were an “escapist,” but I have met some people who have very little drive to do anything for God, the church, or the world.

Escapism is subtle.

Like usual, in his letter to the church in Philippi, the Apostle Paul set his people straight when he said, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”

Key words: necessary and remain.
Toys

In a way, my children are incredible escapists. Whenever I say, “Alright kids, it’s time to clean up!” Somehow, they mysteriously disappear.

Unlike my kids though, my wife is a secret servant. When we go over to friend’s houses, our kids apparently feel required to pull out every toy possible and string them out all around the house. Before we leave, my wife actually thinks about picking up all of toys for our friends. I’ll be honest, when she tells me to help pick up, I think to myself, when people come to my house they never pick up the toys—I do—so why are we picking up their toys? But, regardless of my selfish thinking, I end up doing what my wife says because I know she is right.

To desire to escape this world is like not picking up your toys after you’ve played with them.

Escapism says, “The mess of this world is not my responsibility.”

Hope says, “It is necessary that I stay here for you.”

If you’ve read parts of the New Testament, you know that a great deal of it was written to keep believers theologically grounded. The tendency for God’s people is sometimes to begin adopting other beliefs or accept new teachings which might look appealing on the surface.

In Revelation 2:6, we see that the leadership of Ephesus was first encouraged by Jesus because the leadership had corporately resisted the false teachers of the Nicolaitans. But apparently there were still a few people within the church who held to the Nicolaitan’s teachings and that reality disappointed Jesus.

The Nicolaitans would have been considered one subset of the Gnostic movement within the first century. Gnosticism was heresy at its best
and it was strongly contested by Jesus. The Gnostics believed that the material world was an inferior and dark place, evil in its very existence. But within the world there could be found a certain people who were meant for something better. These people were known as “children of light” because they were like fallen stars. Gnostics believed that tiny particles of light could be found within their distorted material body. And once a believer realized who they were, through knowledge (gnosis in Greek), a person could enter into a spiritual world where the material world would no longer count.  

Gnostics were escapist and that way of thinking just didn’t jive with Jesus.

Jesus didn’t save humanity so that people could obtain a get-out-of-hell-voucher. Jesus saved humanity so that people could bring heaven-to-earth.

Over the past few hundred years, Christian books and church songs have unknowingly drifted off in the direction of Gnosticism. The “just-passing-through” spirituality and the belief that “the-earth-is-not-my-home” has caused many believers to live with a “get-me-out-of-here” attitude instead of a “use-me-in-here” perspective. Tragically, many Christians and non-Christians alike now believe that the primary reason for being a Christian is so that a person can go to heaven when they die.

When I think about my faith journey, I may have accepted Christ when I was 13 because someone asked me, “Ed, if you were to die tonight, do you know where you would go?” But I began living in Christ because someone asked me, “Ed, if you were to live till tomorrow, what difference would you have made?”

You see, God’s hope begins right here and now.
Swings

The nowness of hope is why the resurrected-Jesus gave his disciples the authority and responsibility to continue the movement. And the nowness of hope is what drove the disciples to continue going into the world, baptizing people in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus had taught them.  

We must remember that when Jesus left his disciples he promised to always be with them until the very end of the age.  

I’ll admit, understanding Jesus’ earthly departure is not the easiest, but it is important to internalize because his heavenly ascension does affect our perspective on God’s hope.  

The gospel of Luke says, “Jesus blessed his disciples and then he was taken up into heaven.”  

I know the remarkable Jesus films of our day do not truly depict the meaning of the ascension; especially when we watch Jesus take off like a rocket up into the clouds. The cinematography is a little distracting to say the least. And a space bound Jesus is not really the picture that Luke wanted his readers to visualize.  

A few chapters earlier, in Luke 22, Jesus says of himself, “From now on, the Son of Man, will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.” So when Jesus mysteriously disappeared from earth, the disciples responded with praise to God. Not because Jesus survived the blast off, but because if Jesus really did move from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm, then that meant that Jesus was seated at the right hand of God.  

Furthermore, Jesus’ disappearance would have been interpreted as the beginning of God’s construction project. Jesus was now in the
architect’s seat and Jesus’ disciples were ready to get to work building up the kingdom of God on earth.

On that final day, when Jesus said to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go…” Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that they were now considered hope-in-the-flesh. And if the world was going to see God’s vision of hope, then they would see it through His people—the church.

Recently, our church community was doing some work for a trailer park in our town and as we labored a little boy covered with fake tattoos continued to peer over the hillside with awestruck eyes—just waiting and watching for the completion of his swing set. As I watched the little boy, I felt something that I formerly had never been able to describe. I felt the responsibility to hope.

And I felt it was necessary that I remain in this world. Because there are little boys covered in fake tattoos who are depending on me to embody God’s hope for them.
Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever desired to escape this world? Why or why not?

2. Why is it necessary for Christ followers to remain in the body?

3. Do you feel like the mess of the world is your responsibility?

4. If you were to live till tomorrow, what difference would you have made?

5. What did Jesus mean when he prayed, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven?”

6. When was the last time you saw someone embody hope?
Flaming Tractors

Where does our hope come from?

“The proconsul continued, ‘Swear, and I will let you go. Reproach Christ!’
Polycarp turned to the proconsul and boldly declared, ‘Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’”
(Polycarp of Smyrna, 70-155 C.E.)

“Remember your promise to me, for it is my only hope.”
(Psalm 119:49)

I never saw it coming.

Onetime after a church gathering someone came running up to me and said, “Ed, come outside, quick, we have a surprise for you!” I love surprises, so I dropped everything and ran outside. In front of me was a gigantic truck and, at first, I thought the truck was my prize, but as I heard the phrase “MOVE THAT TRUCK” shouted, I quickly realized that the real surprise was about to be revealed.

As everyone yelled, the truck moved away and there before me stood a 54 inch John Deere lawn tractor. Now, this wasn’t just any John Deere
tractor. Someone from our community owns a decal business and he came up with the brilliant idea of putting yellow flames along the sides. If a John Deere alone doesn’t make you feel like a man, then a John Deere with flames certainly will.

Like I said, I never saw it coming.

In the same way, God’s hope comes when we least expect it and it always comes in the form of a gift.

**Gifts**

I love getting gifts from my children and putting their little expressions of love up in my office. One of the gifts that they made me is a paper saw which reads, “You are the Best Daddy I Ever SAW.” My handcrafted pencil holder was made out of popsicle sticks, a toilet paper role, and it has a picture of my daughter on it with the tag line, “My Daddy Can Fix Anything.” There’s nothing better than receiving gifts from my kids (especially ones that build my self-esteem!).

But imagine with me. What if my son came up to me, gave me a gift, and I said, “Oh, buddy, thanks but no thanks. I don’t really need that. Go see if mommy wants it.” How crushed do you think he would be?

In the New Testament, one of the Greek words used for grace is the word *charis*. The word *charis* can also be translated as, “Thanks.” So when Paul is writing to the church in Corinth and he says, “Charis be to God for His indescribable gift!” What Paul is trying to communicate is that our salvation was not something that we can do for ourselves, but it was something that God gave to us and our response to God should simply be *charis*—*charis* a lot!

Now, here is one of the biggest insights into understanding God’s hope.
In the same way that salvation is a gift from God, hope is a gift as well. Just as God’s gift of salvation frees humanity from the burden of having to work for God’s approval, God’s gift of hope frees us from the burden of manufacturing our own sense of forward movement.

You see, God’s gift of hope is precisely what allows us to live beyond personal disappointment, human pain, and persecution. In Romans 5:3-4 Paul says, "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Wait. Did Paul just say to, “Rejoice in our sufferings...?” That’s interesting isn’t it?

When life falls apart, apparently we should be throwing a party! We shouldn’t drown out our sorrows; we should lift them up and celebrate them! If we can celebrate our struggles, then we have, without a doubt, received God’s gift of hope.

God’s vision of hope is certainly not naiveté; it fully recognizes that struggles and pain will come. But, disciples of Jesus have a different vantage point on life. Disciples of Jesus are caught up in-the-end (which is not to be confused with being caught up in futuristic depictions of the end-times).

Think about the movies that we watch for the second, third, or twentieth time. We already know the ending, so when we watch the movie again and again we actually focus our attention on the small details within the plot formation. And as we do this, we can begin to see things that we were absent-minded to during our first viewing.

In the same way, if we already know our life-ending, then we’ll be able to pay attention to our plot formation and we’ll begin to see the details of our life in a larger context. Seeing the bigger picture is what allows us
to live in the less-than-perfect world, as if God’s-perfect-world has already begun here on earth. And then, when challenges and hardships come along, we can come out of them like Christ came out of the grave. Victorious and full of hope.

Every disciple of Jesus must know their ending.

If we know our ending, then nothing can destroy our life, our relationship with God, or our sense of hope. Nothing.

Tenses

The other day I was talking to a friend of mine who recently became a follower of Christ. We began talking about Adam and Eve and why God even bothered to create humans if He knew that we were going to turn out the way we did.

As we absorbed the text of Genesis, we were quickly reminded of the creation of our own children. My friend went on to describe his fatherly love for his children and he began to realize that he would never want to force his kids to love him—because forced love isn’t real love. And then he went on to say, “That must be how God feels…” I said, “Bingo!”

So, think about this: just like God’s salvation and unconditional love isn’t forced on us, the same can be said about God’s gift of hope. When struggles and hardship come, the gift of hope is always available to us but never forced upon us. You see, we always have the option of denying God’s gifts—because forced hope isn’t real hope.

The third church that John wrote to in Revelation was the church of Pergamum. The city of Pergamum was packed with all kinds of religious temples dedicated to all kinds of gods and goddesses. It’s interesting to
note that in 29 C.E., Caesar Augustus actually dedicated a temple to himself and the goddess Roma.\(^{33}\)

Now, the Christians of Pergamum already witnessed the death of Antipas, one of their faithful leaders, who would not bow down and worship Caesar’s image.

So, in Revelation 2:13, Jesus says, “I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas.”

For the disciples in Pergamum, it was one thing after another. But they did not give in—even when faced with the most treacherous situations.

Though it was not discussed very often, much of the strength of the Early Church came from their multi-faceted understanding of a hope-filled salvation.

In a unique and strategic manner, the authors of the New Testament use all three tenses (past, present, and future) to communicate the realities of salvation. God has saved us—God is saving us—and God will save us.

In the same way, it’s important to understand hope within all three tenses as well. God has given us hope—God is giving us hope—and God will give us hope. Each tense helps us in different circumstances.

If we think that our hope was merely a onetime shot, then we’ll have a difficult time when we first encounter challenges. If we don’t believe that hope is still coming toward us, then we’ll have a difficult time dealing with the pain. And if we don’t think that there is a perfected future realm, then we will likely give up completely. All three tenses of hope are needed.
Waves

If you’ve ever swam in an ocean, it’s likely that you have been body surfing a time or two. And you probably know the feeling of being drawn backwards into a wave, only to be curled and launched forward.

In a similar way, God’s gift of hope functions much like riding a wave. God’s hope draws us back, reminding us of how God has worked in the past through His people. God’s blast from the past carries the power to change the present and brings confidence to move us forward into our future again and again with a new energy from God.

I never knew it (until I Googled it), but some people actually grow up to be professional body surfers. And there are entire websites dedicated to body surfing. Some of the body surfing tips for beginners include things like:

1. Watch other body surfers.
2. Don’t body surf alone.
3. Rest when you’re tired.
4. Know which waves to catch.
5. Study the waves and position yourself accordingly.
6. Ride the small waves.
7. Wear swimming fins.
8. Get proper training.
9. Turn your body to avoid wipe-out.

And probably the most important tip is this one:

10. Learn to surrender to the wave—you don’t control the wave, the wave controls you.
At the end of the day, body surfing is all about surrender.

And so is the way of Jesus.

If disciples of hope desire to move into the future, they must learn to surrender to God’s wave of hope. Because the moment we surrender, pain becomes praise.

In the moments before Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, Jesus modeled precisely what surrender looks like when he said, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

You see, in surrender, hope takes the form of powerlessness and humility—not strength and pride. To take credit for our hope is like trying to take credit for our salvation. Powerless-hope says, “I am what I am by the grace of God. I got through what I got through not because I believed in myself but because God believed in me. All praise goes to Him.”

Or as John put it in Revelation, “Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb praise and honor and glory and power, forever.’”

Similar to salvation, when a child of God experiences a hope-conversion, God gives His child a new capacity of understanding the challenges of life, new values to express to the world, and a new self to discover.
After a hope-conversion, healing is always on the horizons.

**Scars**

There’s no doubt about it—pain and scars will emerge throughout life. When we see them in the right light we discover that the pain no longer has a hold on us. Life-scars simply serve as a constant reminder that God is still healing the land and He wants to use us in that process.

Isn’t it interesting that even after Jesus was resurrected and given a new body, his I.D. was still the scars in his hands and in his side?

I love telling people about my scar stories—they never get old. My favorite story is when I was about 5 years old and I was sledding with my siblings. When I was growing up, we had the metal sleds, which I think are illegal now. But, we were pancake sledding (which is when you stack people on top of the sled), and I was supposed to go on top. As everyone piled up, the sled started to take off. As I took off running and tried to jump on top, I slid off and smacked my face on a rock which was poking through the ice. I had to receive a few stitches under my left eye, but that didn’t stop me from getting back out on the slopes.

My theory is: scars just give us character.

I could go on and on telling you about my many other scar stories. And not just the physical scars, but the emotional and psychological ones as well. I could share with you the scar of my wife’s multiple miscarriages. I could share with you the scar of my depression. And I could share with you the scar of losing friendships because of my faith. I have many scars and suspect you do too.

But scars aren’t all bad—sometimes they just remind us that we were born and we can be thankful that we are still alive.
**Birthing**

I remember the births of my children like they were yesterday. My wife wants to forget them, but I can remember every twist and tug, turn and push.

Leading up to the birth of our first child, my wife and I would spend a lot of time talking about what life would be like when our child entered the world. We kicked around names, prepared the room, and attended way too many baby showers.

But it was all “future-talk,” until that “one day” when my wife’s water broke. After maneuvering around a tractor trailer jackknifed on the highway, after getting lost on the way to the hospital because I decided to take some back roads, after a 30 hour labor, after the umbilical cord was unraveled from around our baby’s neck. After all this, my daughter’s future came rushing into our present.

In a similar way, hope comes from the womb of God and bursts onto the scene insisting on changing lives.

There is a birth story found within Revelation 12:1-7 which is pretty revealing. The description reads:

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations
with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. And there was war in heaven.

John sees two signs in heaven, one a woman and one a dragon; the first is associated with God’s realm and the second with the realm of evil. The woman was clothed with the sun, the moon, and a crown of 12 stars, all of which are images and descriptions of God’s nature and being. This is a picture of God giving birth to His Son.35

What is interesting about this birth is that in the moments before the delivery, the beastly dragon comes onto the scene with the hopes of devouring God’s newborn Son. If you remember Jesus’ birth story from the gospel of Matthew, you’ll recall that after Jesus was born, King Herod, the dragon-like ruler of the land, heard about another Savior being born. Upon hearing this, he issued an edict that all children under the age of two were to be destroyed. But, as the story goes, Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus, fled to Egypt by way of the desert.36

Now, just a reminder here, John is taking us deeper and deeper into the vision of who Jesus Christ was, is, and is to come. There is no doubt that in Revelation 12 John is describing the incarnation, God coming in-the-flesh. God’s Son entered the world; he was protected from the beast, but the spiritual battle for humanity climaxed.

The image of birthing was important in Revelation because John wanted to convince the church that Jesus had come from God’s future to change our present.

God isn’t stuck in the past. God is continually streaming toward us from the future.
Furthermore, the birthing image tunes us into the reality that the dragon, the evil one, exists to destroy the work of God. And notice, in 12:17, John mentions that since the dragon could do nothing against God, it then set its sights on the woman’s other offspring. Any guesses on who the other offspring are?

That’s right: you and me...

This is why:

- Bouncing back from personal disappointment matters.
- Defeating sin and temptation matters.
- Rising above persecution matters.
- Overcoming struggles matters.
- Healing from tragedy matters.
- Hope matters.
- Hope is coming.
- Healing is on the horizon.
- Not even death can hold us down.

As we read in 1 Peter 1:3-4, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you.”
Discussion Questions

1. If hope is a gift from God, what is our responsibility?

2. How does understanding hope as a gift from God free us from the burdens of personal disappointment, struggle, and pain?

3. Like Paul, can you say, “I rejoice in my sufferings?”

4. Describe the end of your story. How are disciples of Jesus caught-up-in-the-end, but unconcerned about the end times? And how does that reality change your present condition?

5. In what ways do we deny God’s gift of hope?

6. Why do we need to understand hope from within all three tenses (past, present, and future)?

7. How do your faith scars remind you of living hope?
Reverse Migration

How did we get here?

“Traditional consensus has leaned toward placing Matthew, the disciple of Jesus, in African Ethiopia, where he was pinned to the ground and beheaded while carrying out Jesus’ commission to reach the world.”
(Matthew, 70 C.E.)

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”
(John 8:31-32)

Have you ever seen a goose or a duck flying north when it’s the time of the season that they are supposed to be flying south?

Reverse migration is a phenomenon in all kinds of migratory birds. Although some large birds such as swans learn migration routes from their parents, in most species, the route is genetically programmed, and young birds can innately navigate to their wintering area. But, sometimes their inner programming can become discombobulated, and the young bird, in its first migration can end up 180° in the wrong direction.
Most of these lost birds perish in unsuitable wintering grounds, but there is some evidence that a few survive. Typically, the birds that make it end up spotting another bird who knew where they were going and they followed along.

Often, humanity is a lot like those young birds. For various reasons people do get off course and end up flying toward the most hellish environments. When this happens, most people realize where they have landed, but they genuinely wonder if it is possible to get to where they are supposed to be.

The important thing to know is that there is some evidence that a few people survive and there are some people who know the Way and can be followed.

No matter what has happened or will happen to us, we must be convinced that God’s hope is always possible to attain.

Being lost can either lead us to life or death.

In the end, it really is our choice.

**Cybele**

In Revelation, the fifth church that John wrote to was located in Sardis. The church in Sardis was experiencing the effects of reverse migration and Jesus had something to say about them. The city of Sardis possessed a large temple which had been identified with the local goddess, Cybele. Cybele was believed to have had the power to restore the dead to life.

It’s not a coincidence that Jesus uses Cybele’s reputation as a rebuking metaphor for the church in Sardis. In Revelation 3:1-2 Jesus says, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are
dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.”

You see, Jesus knows that dead people can’t hope; nor can they spread hope. And Jesus desperately wants his church to be a people who do not live within their former reputation. Jesus wants his church to come alive today!

The church in Sardis didn’t need another optimistic god—they had that. What they needed was a God who knows a thing or two about overcoming struggle.

Did you know that God struggles? Mostly with His children, I suspect, but in a very real way, God knows what it feels like to lose a loved one.

The other day, a friend of mine asked me, “What do you fear most in life?” I quickly responded, “The loss of one of my kids.” My heart breaks for anyone who has gone through that type of loss and I can’t imagine how that feels. But I do know that God does.

Because God lost His son.

And Jesus felt forsaken by his Father.

**Soil**

Like Sardis, I too have experienced the effects of reverse migration. During my time in reorientation, I desperately wanted to know how some people came through struggle full of heart and certain of soul. I knew that entire books of the Bible were dedicated to describing humans working out their pain before God. But I was clueless about how to become one of those stories.
Although, eventually I became convinced of this one reality: struggle is the seedbed of hope. As my story goes, I don’t think I knew what God’s hope was until I forced myself to push through the soil and find the light.

It’s like before we can be transplanted into the beautiful garden of God; we must first learn how to germinate in the soil of struggle.

Someone once said, “Life isn’t a journey; it’s a journey of journeys.” And I think they’re right. Life presents us with lesson after lesson, some of them obvious, some of them not. We learn as we go that dreams don’t always become reality. Plans can change. Tragedy happens. Promises can be broken. And our idols can disappoint us.

Struggle is inevitable.

“But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world,” wrote C.S. Lewis.

Pain simply forces us into action and pushes us out of our Godless routines.

Routines

Think about your morning routine for a moment.

My morning goes something like this: I get up, go into the bathroom, shave, start the shower, brush my teeth, take a shower, dry off (using the same towel pattern), get dressed, start my coffee, eat my bran, sit on the couch, watch the news, read my Bible, get my kids their cereal, kiss my wife, and drive off to work—same routine—day after day.

Humans are masters of routine I tell you.
But the worst thing that we can do after we experience pain is to slip into life’s hopeless routines. Sometimes we have to do things which intentionally get us out of our routines.

Sometimes, I prepare my coffee the night before. Sometimes, I don’t brush my teeth (I only use Listerine). Sometimes, I eat my kid’s cereal. Sometimes, I watch a different news channel. Sometimes, I drive a different way to work. Sometimes, I do God-things.

You see, if we don’t fight routine and if we don’t begin doing God-routines, it’s only a matter of time before our heart and soul become like Sardis’ and we end up getting to the point where we don’t want to see the next day. Or even worse, we no longer want to make any difference in the world.

Pain means we can’t give up; we must learn to grow up.

**Flux**

Kevin Arnold, from the Wonder Years, once said, “Growing up is never easy.” I beg to differ though. Growing up is easy; growing into who God wants us to be is the challenge.

We live in a world, much like the first century context, where everything in life is in flux.

Recently, I was officiating a wedding with a former Seminary professor of mine. As we were catching up and making small-talk we asked each other about our wives and how long we had been married. He proceeded to tell me that he had been married for 49 years. When he
told me this, my eyebrows lifted, my head nodded, and I said, “That is truly amazing!”

It was interesting though, after I had responded in that way, I thought to myself, why do we think staying married for 49 years is such an amazing feat in our culture? I mean, isn’t staying married the whole goal? It’s like we expect that people will not fulfill their marriage vows, leaving us utterly stunned when they do.

Never before has the society we live in been so uncertain about everything. Just watch the news and think about the topics of global warming, border security, political parties, social insecurity, marriage, morality, and even spirituality. There’s no doubt that the world has an acute case of uncertainitis.

Uncertainty makes the struggles of life all the more difficult making us wonder if there is anything that can be relied upon—even God.

The culture around the church in Sardis did not differ much from our modern day context. The city of Sardis was a powerful economic and political center within the Roman Empire, which made it a constant battleground between Rome and the powers of Persia. Ironically, Sardis was known for falling asleep at the fort. Multiple times, Persian powers attempted to capture Sardis while the city slept.\(^4\) No wonder, Jesus says to the church in Revelation 3:1, “Wake up!” But with all their pomp and prestige, there was a cost. A society of greed, power mongrels, and thievery began to create a culture of uncertainty.

Jesus knew about their unstable society. But he also knew that if the church was going to thrive, then the people had better get certain about a few things.

Because hope cannot blossom in the dream world of uncertainty.
With a hint of mockery, in Revelation 3:3-5 Jesus says, “But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and His angels.”

The image of “clothing” plays an important role in the overarching vision. In the Roman world, clothing revealed the status of a person.

And of course, for Jesus, being dressed in white is a symbol of purity and stability. For those who were certain about their faith and did not worship the goddess Cybele, Jesus considered them worthy to be written in God’s book of life.

Jesus’ disciples will always have options in front of them. They can either remain awake or they can soil their pants.

**Choices**

When I was growing up I was heavily involved in Cub Scouts and then later Boy Scouts. I was the king of knots, merit badges, and dodge ball. I eventually made it to Star status but the allures of football pulled me away from the troops and I chose to give up the Scouts.

If there was one thing that I regret about my life, besides the stress I put on my mom through my teenage years, it was not making it to the prestigious Eagle status. Even to this day, when Scouts come to my door asking for canned goods, I sit them down and tell them my story. And as they walk away I holler, “Never give up boys—Eagle all the way!”

But isn’t it true that life is essentially made up of a series of choices?

And isn’t it true that hope is made up of a series of choices as well?
In the book of Hebrews we read about an interesting group of people. Hebrews 11 is famous for containing the “Hall of Faith”—the people who went down in history as “The Greats.” The author makes sure to mention their names; Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Rahab (representing the ladies). The text says that these faithful people of God “Were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.”

And then we all applaud them.

But the author of Hebrews continues rattling off the names of some “other” people. These nameless people represent a certain “type” of person. The text says,

“These people trusted God and were tortured, preferring to die rather than turn from God and be free. They placed their hope in the resurrection of a better life. Some were mocked, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in dungeons. Some died by stoning, and some were sawed in half; others were killed with the sword. Some went about in skins of sheep and goats, hungry and oppressed and mistreated. They were too good for this world (I love that line). They wandered over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground. All of these people we have mentioned received God’s approval because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had far better things in mind.”

Now, I know the “named list” didn’t have it easy, but the “nameless list” should get the Medal of Honor. Can you imagine that type of lifestyle? And to think, each of them had a choice. All that the first century disciples would have had to do was bow down to the image of Caesar
and then they could live normal lives. But they didn’t. They couldn’t. Instead, they received a life of struggle and, apparently, that was okay because they knew God had something far better for them.

Doesn’t it astonish you to think that these faithful believers were not trying to find a way out of their ridiculous lives?

Sometimes the greatest adversity is not having adversity. Sometimes we need resistance.

**Slinky**

I love the Slinky.

The Slinky’s caterpillar-like motions down the steps are mesmerizing, but they only work because there is resistance. Most people look at resistance as a negative thing, but it can also be a very motivating factor.

When you think about it, the way of Jesus works (and works best) precisely because there is resistance. Without resistance, Christianity is just another nice religious option.

The problem that we have is that the culture we find ourselves in is a culture of least-resistance. If you don’t believe me, just stay up late and watch a few infomercials. Onetime, I actually bought an exercise program that claimed to shape your body in 10 minutes. I thought that surely I’d be able to keep up with a 10 minute regiment, but sadly, I could not.

Another time I purchased one of those electro-shock belts which are supposed to be able to provide you with a six pack while you sit in your lazy-boy and watch T.V. (That didn’t work either, by the way).
We live in a culture which is obsessed with trying to make people more comfortable. And that reality is probably never going to fade away.

I must admit though, I’m not convinced that the way of least-resistance is making us a better people, nor am I convinced that it is making us better disciples. Have we forgotten that the word “disciple” is the root word for “discipline?” By definition, disciples of Jesus are not only okay with being disciplined, but they actually want to be disciplined.

On one occasion when a large crowd was following Jesus, he turned to them and said, “If you want to be my disciple you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And you cannot be my disciple if you do not carry your own cross and follow me.”

Jesus wasn’t trying to collect a mess of Facebook fans. Jesus wanted followers who were committed to carrying their cross and willing to sacrifice their lives for the mission.

You see, a disciple of hope knows what it feels like to have a beam strapped to their back.

**Anti-Christ**

In the first century context, the church was surrounded by resistance on all sides. And the first people to read John’s Revelation knew well their source of resistance.

Throughout history, many people have attempted to define the archenemy of God (the Antichrist) as if he was a person to come in the future.
Recently, I was watching a television evangelist who actually alluded to the reality that the current President may be the Antichrist. The psychological rational was interesting, but it saddened me to think that so many people have missed the original Antichrist. Nobody in the first century was waiting for the Antichrist to arrive—he already had.

Throughout John’s vision, God’s realm (the nation of Israel) is compared and contrasted to Satan’s realm (the nation of Babylon). In the ancient Jewish context, Babylon was considered the archenemy of God’s people, because Babylon captured the people of God in 586-538 B.C.E. and forced them to live outside of their Promise Land. One could imagine that there were probably some hard-feelings leftover, especially after being held in exile for so many years.

So, for John, the Roman Empire was considered the symbolic representation of Babylon. That is why throughout Revelation we read things like this: “Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder as large as a great millstone. He threw it into the ocean and shouted, ‘Babylon, the great city, will be thrown down as violently as I have thrown away this stone, and she will disappear forever.’”

Now, what is highly illustrative about John’s parallel is that the mighty Empire of Babylon fell to King Cyrus the Great (of Persia) in 539 B.C.E. And shortly after Babylon’s fall, God’s people were released from captivity and were allowed to return to their “Holy City” (Jerusalem).

Throughout Revelation, John is trying to connect the dots for God’s people who knew their Jewish heritage well. Just as the mighty and oppressive forces of Babylon captured God’s people for a time, the Roman Empire was doing exactly the same thing in the first century. And just as the great nation of Babylon fell, so it would be with the Roman Empire.
One of the key messages within Revelation is that the mighty and oppressive forces of Rome will not prevail. And the Almighty God will eventually defeat any force that tries to wipe out the movement of God.

Now, let’s take this one step further.

If Rome was the embodiment of Babylon in the first century, then it makes perfect sense that the Emperor (or Caesar) was the personification of the Beast. In Revelation, the image of the Beast was not considered an isolated person. In a very real way, there have been and will continue to be many “Beasts.”

1 John 2:18 tips us off to the multi-beast reality when the author says, “You have heard that the antichrist is coming, and already many antichrists have appeared.”

In the biblical narrative, anyone who went against the reign of God and oppressed the people of God would have been considered anti-Christ. This is why the book of Revelation is timeless, speaking to the heart of every generation which faces cultural resistance. The message of Revelation is not an irrelevant future depiction; it’s a book that can speak directly into any and every age of struggle, hardship, and persecution.

**Nero**

Even though “the Beast” could be considered for the entire line of Caesars throughout the first century, John actually gets very specific with the “beastly” image.

In Revelation 13:1 John says that he saw a beast rising up out of the sea.

Keep in mind, throughout the ancient Jewish culture the “sea” was considered the realm of evil and a place of rebellion against God.47
John tells us that the beast had seven heads, ten horns, and ten crowns on its horns. And written on each head were names that blasphemed God. In 13:3 the text says, “I saw that one of the heads of the beast seemed wounded beyond recovery—but the fatal wound was healed! All the world marveled at this miracle and followed the beast in awe.”

It’s interesting to note that Caesar Nero, the sixth Caesar, received a deathblow to the head. Nero was a violent and depraved man; in fact, he murdered his mother and two of his wives. And believe it or not, Nero would actually haunt the streets at night as a common mugger. Even more, in a strange and twisted manner, Nero, who enjoyed architecture and buildings, had parts of the city of Rome burned so that he could rebuild it with his desired vision for the city.

After the burning incident, Nero needed a scapegoat, so he blamed the Christian sect. Nero had hundreds of Christians killed by wild beasts as entertainment in the Roman Coliseum and used their bodies as lamp posts to light the city. Later on, Nero attempted suicide by stabbing himself in the head. History tells us that a Praetorian Guard finished him off.

Soon, there was a widespread rumor that Nero would be resurrected to life. And after several years passed, another Caesar came onto the scene in 81-96 C.E. who looked and acted just like the original Nero; his name was Domitian. The world marveled at this miracle and followed the beast in awe. Most historians note that the persecution of Christians under Domitian was even more severe than under Nero.

Revelation 13:18 zooms in on the beast and reveals his name. The text reads, “This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666.” For anyone who knew Hebrew in the first century, this riddle would have been a no-brainer.
The first century world was consumed with a literary process known as gematria. Gematria was a game where the letters of some object or person were changed into their numerical value and then added together to give the “number” of the subject matter.\(^48\)

There are two translations for the number found in 13:18; one group of manuscripts has 666, the other 616. The name of Nero Caesar had two forms in the Roman Empire, the Greek form—Neron Caesar, and the Latin form—Nero Caesar. If both forms are transliterated into Hebrew letters, the value of Neron Caesar is 666, and the value of Nero Caesar is 616.\(^49\) Either way, the secret number of the beast was, none other than, Nero.

This information is incredibly important if we are to discover the deep hope of the first century martyrs. If believers in the first century did not think that, in Jesus, God had conquered every evil and injustice (including Nero), then there was no logical reason to continue their suffering.

But, if John really did see the Lamb of Revelation 14 standing on God’s mountain victorious over all evil, then their suffering, pain, and agony was worth it. God was doing something spectacular in the world and it had everything to do with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Disciples of hope must be convinced that, in Jesus, God began His triumphal reign over evil. And on that day, God’s people will not be required to suffer at all. Yet, in the meantime, as C.S. Lewis once said, “We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.”

Have you ever seen an egg fly?
**Discussion Questions**

1. Have you ever experienced the barrenness of reverse migration? If so, reflect on that period of time.

2. How do you think Jesus felt when he was being tortured and hung on the cross?

3. How have you experienced struggle to be the seedbed of hope?

4. What might hope-oriented routines look like in your life?

5. Describe how uncertainty can affect your sense of hope.

6. How do you choose God’s hope in painful situations?

7. How have you found resistance to actually be a good thing in your faith?

8. Are you convinced that, in Jesus, God began His triumphal reign over evil? And are you prepared to hatch?
Mucky Feet

Where is God in the midst of our despair?

“Mark was tied with ropes (hooks may have also been used) and dragged through the cobblestone streets of Alexandria until his body was ripped, wounded, and badly injured. After a night in prison, the same treatment was repeated until he died.”
(Mark, 64 C.E.)

“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.”
(Philippians 1:29)

The word *muddle* is a good synonym for despair. The root of muddle is the word “mud.” Apparently, the founders of *muddle* thought the image of mud was a good way to describe a state of physical or mental confusion. I would agree. When we fall into the rut of despair, it can sometimes feel like we are stuck in the mud. And it’s in those moments that we usually curse at God and wonder where He might be.

It’s interesting though that God is described as playing in the mud long before He even created humans.
On the second day of creation God called the waters under the sky to be gathered into one place which caused the ground appear. And what do you get when you mix water and ground? Mud, right? So, before God even created humans, God was making mud pies.

Genesis 2:7 says that, “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and then the man became a living being.”

Apparently, God enjoys making mud come to life.

Onetime, Brian, a good friend of mine called me and stated that he wanted to stop by my house because there was something that he needed to talk to me about. I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was pretty distraught so I told him to come over as soon as he could. When he finally arrived, he shared how some things had gone down at work and he was let go. His heart and soul had been crushed.

Since we’re both theologians of sorts, our conversation quickly moved toward a discussion about God and where He was at in the situation. It was only natural for Brian to wonder if God had left him or if he had left God. But neither of those options seemed to settle well in that particular circumstance.

As we prayed together and reflected some more, we felt God’s presence surrounding us and then we realized—God was right there with us—in the middle of the mud pit.

There is a verse in the book of Romans which can sometimes get quoted at a time and place that does not connect. But understanding the deep meaning within this verse can make all of the difference when tragedy strikes and when the healing process needs to begin.
The verse reads, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Shortly after I started following the way of Jesus, I began serving in a church as the eighth grade boys Sunday school teacher (the best ministry in the church as far as I’m concerned). And as I began teaching and leading those boys in the Way, I began to see that God was somewhat of a junkyard artist. All of my past, both the blessings and the sufferings, were being used by God to do something transformational in the lives of others.

It didn’t take long for me to realize that God always has a plan to make the ugly, beautiful.

**Purpose**

From the broader context of Romans 8 there is good reason to believe that Paul, the author, used traditional first century Stoic thought to help communicate the eternal purposes of God. Stoicism was a school of philosophy which attempted to reconcile the relationship between divine predestination and human freedom. One of the Stoic’s great conceptions was the *logos of God* (otherwise known as the mind-of-God). The Stoics believed that the world had been permeated with the *logos of God* and it was the *logos* that held everything together.

The Stoics went even further believing that the *logos* of God not only had an order for the universe, but also a plan and a purpose for every individual. The Stoic believed that nothing could happen to a human which did not come from God and which was not part of God’s plan for them. Even more, the Stoics taught that it was the duty of every human to practice the spiritual discipline of acceptance. If a person was willing to accept what life brought their way, then and only then, could they experience peace.
As Paul wrote Romans 8, he must have been thinking very Stoic-like. However, he does add another Spirit-filled dimension. Paul says, “All things work together for good, but only to those who love God.” Even though many people end up denying the existence of God because of tragedy, Paul seems to be saying quite the opposite. For Paul, pain and tragedy only make sense when there is a God who is in the pain and is willing to help a person turn the tragedy into something good. If a person loves, trusts, and is convinced that a concerned and loving God holds everything together, then it becomes entirely possible to accept everything that life sends their way.

It’s like going to the doctors. No one in their right mind would continue to go to a physician that they did not trust. When we go to a physician; we trust their judgment, we believe that they will diagnose us properly, and we have confidence that they will provide healing. And it’s the same with God.

When we move toward God in the midst of pain; we trust His judgment, we believe that He will understand our situation, and we have the confidence that He will provide healing.

God really can make all things good.

Catastrophe

On January 12, 2010 a catastrophic earthquake occurred in the impoverished nation of Haiti. The Haitian government reported that an estimated 230,000 people had died, 300,000 had been injured and 1,000,000 made homeless. They also estimated that 250,000 residences and 30,000 commercial buildings had collapsed or were severely damaged. 

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In the weeks following the quake, every major news station was in Haiti to report on the disastrous effects and the heroic salvation efforts. Shortly after the quake, a story emerged which I will never forget.

One reporter discovered a woman who was giving birth in a make-shift medical tent. And after the birth, the reporter, with tears in his eyes, said, “Isn’t that an incredible picture for the people of Haiti—even in the midst of catastrophe there can be new birth.”

When catastrophe happens, and it will, maybe we shouldn’t be asking the question, “Where is God?” Instead, maybe we should be asking, “Where is my new beginning?” In a unique way, from the beginning to the end, the context of the biblical narrative is full of catastrophe and new beginnings.

Have you ever noticed how similar the beginning of Genesis is to a birth?

Genesis 1:1 says that God miraculously created (or conceived) the heavens and the earth.

Genesis 1:2 says that the earth was formless, empty, dark, and water-like (or womb-like).

Genesis 1:3 says that there was light (the first thing a newborn sees).

God is into birthing new beginnings.

During the time period when God’s people were stuck in the Babylonian exile of 586-538 B.C.E., there were many song writers who wrote incredibly hopeful Psalms. For example, in Psalm 102:11-12, the Psalmist wrote these profound lyrics: “I wither away like grass, but you, O Lord, sit enthroned forever.”
Now, how can the Psalmist feel like a withering piece of grass and still believe that the Lord was ruling on His eternal throne? I mean, this Psalmist had every reason to question God’s existence and goodness, but he doesn’t—he embraces it.

It’s interesting to note that it was also during this time period that the Jewish people began anticipating the prophetic Scripture of Isaiah, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.”

Overtime, as the Jewish people were looking for this messianic child, a proverb began to circulate which stated, “In every child the messiah has the potential to be born.”

In their despair, God’s people were looking for a new birth.

And God did just that.

Joy

Can you imagine a world without children? Children may cause us to stock up on Advil, but they also bring us great joy.

If you want to light up a nursing home, simply take a group of children with you and walk around. Seeing a child reminds a seasoned soul, at least for a moment, of the sense of possibility. Without question, a child is the purest symbol of hope for a world which has given up. And for that reason alone, doesn’t it make perfect sense for God to release His hope into the world through a child?

I’m not sure what image comes to your mind when you picture a birth. I suspect women may have a different take on it than men. But I think it’s safe to say that birthing is a catastrophic experience. However, most
women would attest to the fact that the outcome of the birth was worth the pain.

Right after my third child entered the world, as the doctor was laying my boy into my wife’s arms, I remember watching her facial expressions instantly change from distress to delight.

And, in a similar way, disciples of hope must understand that the pain of a new birth is better than reveling in the dullness of despair.

**Lamb**

In Revelation 5:6, John says, “Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”

In Jewish thought, the coming messiah was symbolically described as a lamb. Around the 6th century B.C.E., the Jewish book of Isaiah was the first place where the Messiah was described as a “Lamb being led to slaughter.” And later, shortly before Jesus came onto the scene, John the Baptist echoes Isaiah and announces to the crowd, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

In 5:6, John is no doubt describing Jesus as the lamb.

Now, the startling aspect of John’s heavenly vision is that the Lamb is “standing as one having been slain.” One might think that John would see the Lamb, who is Jesus, fully restored and standing with resurrection power. But on the contrary, God allows John to see the sufferings of Jesus.

I have a feeling that one of the reasons for this detail is John’s way of keeping things in perspective for us.
I’m not sure if we really understand what happened emotionally to Jesus on that old rugged cross. I don’t think there is a greater heartache in this world than feeling abandoned or forsaken by an earthly father. Most psychologists and counselors are trained to begin with the question, “So tell me about your relationship with your father.” Because, most of the time, the father relationship explains their entire story.

And there’s Jesus, on the cross, and how does he feel? We read in Matthew that at about three o’clock, Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It was at that moment when Jesus felt the shear abandonment of his Father.

Some have said that the wound of abandonment from his Father must have hurt worse than the wounds from the whips. But Jesus wasn’t without a song deep in his soul.

**Singing**

In Revelation 5:6 John describes the Lamb as one who had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

There are several significant Jewish images at work within this description of Jesus. First, the number “seven,” which was taken from the seven days of creation, is a symbolic way of describing the fullness or completeness of God. Secondly, the “horn” in Jewish imagery is a symbol of “power.” And thirdly, throughout the Bible “eyes” are a symbolic way of describing God’s presence with His people in the world. 

For the early Christ followers, John’s description of the Lamb meant that even in the midst of affliction Jesus was and is the all-powerful fullness of God on earth.

Shortly after John sees the Lamb of God, he looks again and he hears, “The singing of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and the living beings and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!’” (Revelation 5:11-13).

Isn’t it interesting that the sight of despair invokes a song?

Even though historians cannot really prove it, there is good reason to believe that Jesus was singing on the cross. In Jewish teaching practices, Rabbis would often quote only the first line of a section of Scripture with the hopes that the rest of the Scripture would come to the minds of their disciples.

In Matthew 27:46 Jesus quoted only the first line from Psalm 22 when he said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” And, we do know that the Psalms were sung and there were certain memorable rhythms which accompanied the lyrics. So, it is likely that Jesus’ disciples didn’t just hear a distressed mumble from the cross, but they actually heard the beginning of a hope-filled song. Paradoxically, even though Psalm 22 begins with a voice of agony and pain, it ends with the triumphant lyrics, “God has done it!”

Over the past few years music therapy has become more popular and many universities now offer it as a degree program. Music therapy is used for all kinds of ailments. The experts claim that singing can
improve learning, build self-esteem, reduce stress, support physical exercise, and facilitate a host of other health-related activities. And I have no doubt that it’s true. Singing can be freeing (I think that’s why we sing in the shower). Singing makes us feel, at least for a moment, like a kid again.

And it is said that a singing child is a happy child.

Maybe it can also be said that a singing disciple is a hope-filled disciple.

The lyricist of the old hymn Blessed Assurance had it right when he crafted the chorus, “This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.”

In the midst of despair, disciples of hope know that God is right there beside them as they make a song out of every cross.
Discussion Questions

1. When despair strikes, is your default to assume that God is with you in your despair? Or, do you feel like God is very distant and the cause of your despair?

2. How have you seen God work like a “junkyard artist” in your life? In other words, how have you seen God work out all things for His good purposes?

3. How does John’s image of the slain Jesus keep things in perspective for you?

4. Can you picture Jesus singing on the cross?

5. Does the sight of despair invoke a song in you?

6. What is your hope-song these days? (Feel free to belt it out the next time you’re in the shower).
Cul-de-Sacs

How can we move from disappointment to hope?

“Eventually Peter was hauled out of the dungeon, taken to Nero’s Courts, and there crucified upside down because he did not consider himself worthy to be crucified with his head upward, like Christ.”
(Peter, 69 C.E.)

“At the end of the cul-de-sac there was a faint trail which trickled off into the woods. Being the adventurous kid that I was, I decided to go exploring. As I entered the woods I discovered an entirely new world. The faint trail eventually opened up to a full-blown four wheel path. And for about a mile, the path twisted and turned through a dried up...
creek bed and ultimately ended at the Joachim River. This uncharted territory was a dream come true. Camping, fishing, B-B guns, swimming, rope swings, and motorcycles were all new possibilities.

In a way, despair and disappointment are kind of like cul-de-sacs; round and round they go but only backwards they flow. However, hope is like the faint path at the end of the cul-de-sac which eventually opens up to a world of new possibilities.

**Resurrection**

Jesus’ resurrection was a lot like the faint path I found; it really was a surprise to everyone. The majority of first century Jewish people believed that there would be a general or final resurrection for every God-follower at the end of human history, but they were not expecting someone to lead the way—not even the Messiah.

Of course Jesus alluded to his death and resurrection throughout his teaching ministry, but apparently none of his disciples took him seriously. If they would have, the gospel writers wouldn’t have portrayed Jesus’ mother and disciples weeping at the foot of the cross. We would have seen them with a slight smirk on their faces whispering to one another, “This is going to be awesome—these people don’t even know what’s about to happen...”

But we don’t see the disciples’ hopeful in the least. In the disciple’s minds, Jesus’ death meant that the movement was over and their dreams were being crushed. Apparently Jesus wasn’t the Messiah and the oppressive powers of the world (Rome) were still going to rule their lives.

The gospel writers inform us that Jesus’ closest disciples were kind enough to prepare him a proper burial, just like they would for any good
friend. But nobody was expecting nor were they praying for Jesus’ body

to rise from the dead. Jesus was dead and that was final.

For two days the disciples sat in disbelief (a synonym for despair, by the way). But on the third day...

...death released its grip on Jesus.

Sunrise

In the book of Luke there is an extraordinary story about two of Jesus’
disciples finding the faint path of new possibilities. Their story went
something like this:

That same day two of them (Jesus’ disciples) were walking to the village
Emmaus, about seven miles out of Jerusalem. They were deep in
conversation, going over all these things that had happened. In the
middle of their talk and questions, Jesus came up and walked along with
them. But they were not able to recognize who he was. He asked,
“What’s this you’re discussing so intently as you walk along?”

They just stood there, long-faced, like they had just lost their best friend.
Then one of them, his name was Cleopas, said, “Are you the only one in
Jerusalem who hasn’t heard what’s happened during the last few days?”
He said, “What has happened?”

They said, “The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene. He was a
man of God, a prophet, dynamic in work and word, blessed by both God
and all the people. Then our high priests and leaders betrayed him, got
him sentenced to death, and crucified him. And we had our hopes up
that he was the One, the One about to deliver Israel. And it is now the
third day since it happened. But now some of our women have
completely confused us. Early this morning they were at the tomb and
couldn’t find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen
a vision of angels who said he was alive. Some of our friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn’t see Jesus.”

Then he said to them, “So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Why can’t you simply believe all that the prophets said? Don’t you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory?” Then he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him.

They came to the edge of the village where they were headed. He acted as if he were going on but they pressed him: “Stay and have supper with us. It’s nearly evening; the day is done.” So he went in with them. And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared.

Back and forth they talked. “Didn’t we feel on fire as he conversed with us on the road, as he opened up the Scriptures for us?” They didn’t waste a minute. They were up and on their way back to Jerusalem.

(Luke 24:12-33a The Message)

Luke’s story is fascinating.

Not only is it a beautiful depiction of two disciples experiencing the risen Jesus, but it is also a story of two disciples moving from head-down to head-up in life.

Within the road-to-Emmaus story there are two very specific symbolic images which Luke is trying to emphasize. And these two images have everything to do with understanding the depths of God’s hope.
In order to discover the first image, we need to know something about geography. Emmaus is seven miles west of Jerusalem—so the two disciples are walking “west.”

We also know from the storyline that the day is coming to an end—so they are walking into the glare of the “sunset” (which might explain why they did not recognize Jesus).

In the Old Testament, the image of walking toward the “sunrise” was a symbolic way of describing God’s people living in the promises of God. ⁶²

Throughout the Israelite’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, God specifically directed them to travel east toward the sunrise. ⁶³ And the leader of God’s people (Moses) was required to camp to the east of the tabernacle “toward the sunrise.” ⁶⁴ So, overtime, going east, into the sunrise, became a metaphorical way of communicating that hope is on the horizon and God’s promises would soon be fulfilled.

But the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were not going east into the sunrise. The disciples were going west into the sunset and away from Jerusalem.

“Jerusalem” is the second significant image within Luke’s storyline.

Jerusalem was considered the capital city of God’s people and it featured the Temple which was the Jewish center of worship and mission-organization. For Luke, “going away from Jerusalem” may have literally been the case, but this is also a unique way to describe the disciples going away from the center of God.

Immediately upon Jesus wrapping up his message, the disciple’s eyes were opened and within the hour they were on their way back to Jerusalem—going east—toward the center of God.
In the midst of their depression and despair, the two disciples saw the faint path of hope and they ran back to tell everyone about it.

**Seeing**

Most people take their sight for granted. I don’t know many people who wake up every day thanking God for the ability to see the world around them. But, sight is incredibly important—especially when it comes to Jesus.

Technically speaking, seeing is the ability to interpret information and surroundings from the effects of visible light reaching the eye.

So, when we talk about spiritual sight and seeing the resurrected Light of the world we must first take in the surroundings and interpret the information.

In the age of Jesus, people were not absent-minded toward the laws of nature. The ancient and first century worlds were adamant that dead people cannot be resurrected. Even the Jewish clan, who did believe in a general or final resurrection for all those who trusted and obeyed God, did not believe that anyone had truly risen from the dead or would do so before the final resurrection.

So, when Jesus was described as “rising from the dead” what would this have meant in the first century world? And what did those disciples see when Jesus appeared to them?

Keep in mind, resurrection was typically used to describe an event which would occur sometime after death, but it was not referring to the state which people went to immediately after death. Resurrection specifically referred to something which happened to the body.
Most people knew about ghosts, spirits, and visions, and many people believed in such things. But, there was a clear distinction between the spiritual world and a resurrection. Resurrection meant bodies.

Hence, when the first century world said that Jesus had resurrected or they had “seen Jesus raised from the dead,” they were saying that something happened to Jesus’ physical body. The resurrection was certainly spiritual, but it was nothing close to a myth.

Something happened to Jesus’ body that had never happened to another human before.

Now, Jesus never denied the Jewish perspective of the general or final resurrection, but he did add a new component. In Matthew 12:40, Jesus uses the analogy of Jonah to describe his resurrection: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

The disciples may not have understood Jesus initially, but after they saw Jesus in his risen form, it began to make perfect sense—Jesus had gone first.

To use a cliff diving metaphor, Jesus was the first to jump.

The firstness of Jesus meant that it was only a matter of time before every God-follower would be caught up in the second (or final) resurrection and allowed to join him in the heavenly realms.

The early disciples promptly began referring to Jesus as the firstborn-of-the-dead as they anticipated Jesus’ return to the top of the cliff for the second big jump (A.K.A.—the second coming).

The first jump of Jesus changed the disciple’s entire worldview—especially their perspective about earthly pain and suffering. Since Jesus
went first, the disciples were now equipped to endure every trial and tribulation which came their way.\textsuperscript{67}

This is why the early disciples began to develop new language for what was happening on earth. Christ followers started referring to themselves as “new creations.”\textsuperscript{68} And they began to proclaim that, in Jesus, the old nature was gone and the new had come!

In a very real way, disciples of hope believed that, not only their personal lives were being made new, but the entire world as well. And those who joined the movement began to discover that they had a role to play in the construction of God’s renewal project—the Holy City.

**Construction**

A few years ago, my nephew was preparing to live with my wife and me. My house isn’t very big, so I decided to build a room for him in my unfinished basement.

As I began working on the project, Josiah, my three year old, wanted to contribute. At the time, Josiah was a little young, so he wasn’t that much help, but I made him feel like he was doing something. Josiah would hold my screws, hand me tools, and pick up little odds and ends. Well, one day as I was installing the outlets in the walls, the moment I turned away, he decided to test the outlet with a screwdriver.

You can probably guess what happened. I will feel terrible about that moment forever—he got zapped pretty good.

It was remarkable though; after Josiah recovered from his shock he still wanted to help. Nothing was going to hold that boy back. It’s like he was convinced that he was needed and if he didn’t contribute then his cousin might not be able to move in.
Jesus was formerly a construction guy so he often used building images to communicate his heavenly Father’s way. Onetime Jesus said to a crowd, “The stone the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.”

In the first century, most buildings were made out of stone and a good 90° cornerstone would set a project into motion.

The “stone” Jesus was referring to was himself and the “builders” were the Jewish leaders. The issue wasn’t what God’s people were building—the issue was who they were building on. God had given the builders the perfect cornerstone but they had overlooked it. Therefore, God was required to accept new applications for kingdom builders.

But within God’s new kingdom project, everyone who applied and saw God’s special cornerstone got the job and was invited to chip in (even though God knew that some of us would inevitably stick a screw driver in a socket and get zapped).

The Early Church understood that one day Jesus would return and God’s construction project would be completed. So, every believer must pick up their tools and get to work. Ditching the kingdom work or escaping the world was simply unacceptable.

On one occasion, a group of lethargic people thought that they could just bum around until Jesus came back, but their lacksidasical lifestyle was met with a severe reprimand. The Apostle Paul emphatically proclaimed, “We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”

You see, God needs hope-workers.
Renewal

In Revelation 21 John’s vision moves from the defeat of Satan to the renewal of God. Satan may have damaged the world, but God wasn’t about to let humanity live in the rubble—God was going to rebuild a “new heaven and new earth.” And in this new heaven and new earth there would be no sea (or evil).

John says, “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”

Now, it is important to understand that John is not referring to a literal building or city, but is referring to the realm of God where evil is absent.

Notice the city is coming down out of heaven from God into the earth. John is trying to communicate to the church, the bride of Christ, that God is already in the process of continually coming down. One day, the project will be complete, but right now the important thing to know is that God is coming.

This realm and the presence of God is exactly what God’s people are supposed to be building up and living in. And it is certainly not something that they are waiting to experience one day in the future. In Revelation 21:14-17 John begins to describe the dimensions of this city. This is interesting because if John isn’t referring to a literal city, then why would he feel compelled to give his hearers the internal specs?
John says, “The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man’s measurement, which the angel was using.”

The wall of the city had 12 foundations which John tells us right away are the twelve apostles of Jesus. John goes on to mention that the city was laid out like a square. And we know that in the center of the Jewish Temple was a room called the Holy of Holies, which was also laid out like a square and was considered to be the place where God’s presence dwelled. In this section, John is describing a new type of temple—a temple of the Holy Spirit. Sound familiar?

Another feature to the cubic city was its size. John says that it measured 12,000 stadia in length (that would be 1,400 miles). Now, this is a fascinating image: if one were to take a map of the entire Roman Empire and place Patmos (where John is writing from) in the center and go out approximately 700 miles in any direction, they would come to the rough edge of the Roman Empire.

And keep in mind, within the first century, the church had not spread past Rome’s boundaries. So, all of the churches, including John’s select seven, would have been inside of this gigantic cubic city.

John’s vision is revealing that the New Jerusalem, which is coming down from God, is the bride of Christ (the church on earth). The people of God are now the epicenter of God’s presence and the newly founded clusters of churches are now the work camps for God’s missional endeavors!
So, here’s where God’s vision of hope comes into the picture.

If you were a persecuted Christian living in the first century, then the revelation of this New Jerusalem meant that pain and suffering for Christ was worth it because God was already in the process of making all things new. The church was not just an accessory to life; it was a lifeline and the primary means of unleashing the presence of God into the world.

The reason that the early disciples were able to endure hardship, persecution, and even death, was precisely because they believed that God’s kingdom project was “in the works.”

I have some friends who just finished building their house. They had bought their property, erected a barn, began working on their home, and for months they actually lived out of their barn while they labored. I was never able to understand how they lived that way, but I suspect that the only reason they were able to do so was because they had hope, that one day soon, they would find themselves living inside their dream home.

You see, when we know that God’s heavenly kingdom is already being built on earth and that God is already in the process of making our dream home, it really does make it possible to move from disappointment to hope.

One day God’s eternal project will be fully completed but, until then, we live content in the barn and work toward the completion.

May we never stop swinging our hammers.
**Discussion Questions**

1. What has the faint path of new possibilities looked like for you?

2. Can you relate to Jesus’ death and resurrection? If so, how?

3. If you were one of the two disciples Jesus was talking to on the road to Emmaus, what would you have shared when you came back to the rest of the disciples?

4. Do you feel like your life is moving east, toward the center of God? Why or why not?

5. Does Jesus’ first jump and second coming infuse you with hope? If so, how?

6. Do you picture yourself as one of God’s hope-builders in the world?

7. What are the challenges of “living in the barn” while you work on God’s construction project and wait for the completion of it?
Crashing Meteors

How does heaven interact with hope?

“Stephen must have seen the murder in their eyes. But he also saw something much better when he looked up. ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God,’ he declared. The mob dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. He didn’t expect to escape, so he asked God to receive his spirit.’”

(Stephen, 34 C.E.)

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

(Philippians 1:21)

In the desert of Arizona there is a fascinating crater which was formed by a meteorite some time ago. The crater is 4,000 feet in diameter and 570 feet deep. Just for perspective, approximately 14 football fields can fit within this crater.

Imagine being there when that meteor smacked into earth.

Well, if you were there, you probably wouldn’t be alive to remember it, but wouldn’t that have been a fascinating sight to see?
In a way, Jesus spoke about another form of space-matter crashing into earth and his disciples actually had the privilege of watching the impact.

Heaven was Jesus’ space-matter, but it was more like a matter-of-space.

**Location**

For Jesus, the latitude and longitude of heaven was vital for understanding the promises of God. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he began by defining their location. Jesus prayed, "Our Father who is in heaven, hollowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Contrary to popular pietism, the Lord’s Prayer wasn’t designed to be a neatly wrapped repetitive mantra. Within the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus was unpacking some of his most deeply held theological convictions, which included God’s hope for the world.

Within the first few lines of the Lord’s Prayer, we can sense that Jesus’ real desire was not to get us into heaven but to get heaven into us. Notice that Jesus didn’t pray anything like this: “Our Father who is in heaven, hollowed be your name, your kingdom came, now we can’t wait to get into heaven with you.” Jesus’ prayer had everything to do with the long anticipated kingdom of heaven on earth.

Now, I know trying to wrap our head around the concept of heaven is like trying to understand the opposite sex. We may never fully understand them but, if we want to make life work, then we at least need to try. And it’s the same with heaven. Grasping the idea of heaven is not easy and we may never fully comprehend it but, if we want to make sense out of God’s vision of hope, then we at least need to try. Because heaven has everything to do with our earthly experience of hope.
C.S. Lewis described the difference between the Christian life and heaven this way: “It is not as a copy is to an original, nor as a substitute is to the genuine article, but as the flower to the root, or the diamond to the coal.”

In other words, the believer’s destination point should simply be considered a continuation of what they already know and experience on earth but, at the same time, the future realm will be altogether different and altogether better.

Throughout Jesus’ teachings, he was adamant that the kingdom of heaven was quickly approaching. In fact, Jesus’ first sermon recorded in Matthew 4:15 was essentially, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near (or breaking in)!"

If someone were to post the question “What is heaven?” on their Facebook page, I suspect that there would be a smorgasbord of answers. Some people believe heaven to be a place up in the sky where good people float around on clouds. Some people think of an old fashioned family reunion where they become reunited with loved ones and enjoy homemade ice cream. And I’m sure others think of a tropical island filled with pure bliss.

It’s no surprise that the majority of the world believes in some sort of afterlife or post-mortem heavenly experience. The Bible says that, “God has set eternity in the hearts of His people.” And it’s true—don’t we all long for a hope after our earthly existence?

But is heaven simply the place believers go once they die? Or, in Jesus’ mind, did the hope of heaven actually have earthly implications?
Show

When I was going through grade school, I always looked forward to the days when we would have “show-and-tell.” I usually brought in some random object from nature like a turkey feather, a turtle shell, or a snake skin. But, no matter what it was, my classmates always showed an interest.

In a way, creating interest in others is exactly what Jesus wanted his disciples to do with the kingdom of heaven.

It’s important to know that, throughout the New Testament, the phrase “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” are used interchangeably. During the age of Jesus, the Jewish people preferred to not use the proper name of “God” in their everyday conversations because they did not want to misuse God’s name.

And since the gospel of Matthew was written primarily for the Jewish audience, Matthew favored the phrase “the kingdom of heaven.”

Now, the problem with many 21st century readers is that when they encounter the phrase “the kingdom of heaven” in the New Testament they instantly think of a perfected future realm that “good people will experience after death.” But, when Jesus spoke of the “kingdom of heaven” or the “kingdom of God,” he wasn’t referring to something that a person would enter into upon their death. Jesus was referring to a realm that people would live in while they were still on earth.

Remember, the Lord’s Prayer does not say anything like, “Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom came, your will was done, and now take us out of this earth so that we can join you in heaven.” No—the Lord’s Prayer says, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”
Even more, in Revelation 21 we see the Holy City descending out of heaven from God dressed as a beautiful bride with a voice saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”

You see, Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that God’s home, the realm of heaven, had entered into the earth and God’s people had the amazing opportunity of experiencing and living with God on earth.

The kingdom of heaven was meant to be the disciple’s ultimate show-and-tell.

**Back**

In order to truly understand God’s hope, through Jesus, we must realize that the early Christians held to a two-step belief about the future realm of God. The first step was death and whatever was immediately beyond. And the second step was an entirely new resurrected bodily existence in a completely new world where Jesus was the ruler over all.

The hope of the first century martyrs was not that they would be freed from a God-forsaken earth, but that God was still using their lives, even in death, to rebuild the soon-to-be new earth.

Disciples of Jesus knew that they would be back.

But, let’s be honest, the message of backness has not been the message of the church in recent years. Most Christians and non-Christians now assume that the goal of believing in Jesus is to get into an other-worldly heaven. In one sense, this reality is of course true, but disciples of hope need to understand what Jesus meant when he spoke of the future heaven.
On one occasion, Jesus did refer to heaven as paradise and, at first glance, it seems as though Jesus is hinting at “getting out of earth and into the future heaven.” However, what Jesus meant by “paradise” in the first century was radically different from what most people living in the 21st century would assume.

The story where Jesus references the phrase *paradise* might sound familiar. In Luke 23:43 we see Jesus on the cross and one of the thieves next to Jesus ends up believing in him. After this interaction, Jesus responds, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in *paradise.*”

Now, it is true that Jesus was using the word “paradise” to describe the thief’s next destination, but Jesus was not referring to an other-worldly heaven. And, just in case you were wondering, Jesus was not referring to miles of powder-white beaches, turquoise crystal seas, adventurous scuba diving, unlimited golf, and savory cuisine. Those images are certainly appealing, but Jesus’ concept of *paradise* was quite different.

In the first century era, *paradise* was not actually a synonym for an other-worldly heaven. It was, however, a reference to the realm where people go to after death and before the general or final resurrection of all God’s people. Some theologians have referred to this realm as the present heaven, which is different than the final heaven or what John refers to in Revelation as the new heaven and new earth.

The word *paradise* comes from the Persian word *pairidaeza*, meaning “a walled park” or “enclosed garden.” In Persia, *pairidaeza* was used to describe the great walled gardens of King Cyrus.

In addition, within the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) the word *paradise* was used to describe the Garden of Eden, found in the book of Genesis. Over the years, the Jewish tribe began using the word *paradise* as a description of God’s redemptive work and desire to restore the original Garden of Eden.
During the age of Jesus, the majority of Jewish people believed that all of God’s faithful people who had died were located in a temporary resting place (A.K.A.—paradise). And, when God was ready, all of God’s people, both dead and alive, would be resurrected to a new life in a new world where God reigned supreme and the forces of evil were no longer present.

So when Jesus, a Rabbi in the Jewish tradition, used the word *paradise* on the cross, he would not have been speaking about a place where all God’s followers would go to when they die. Jesus would have been speaking about the temporary resting place where he and the thief were going—until God resurrected the entire world and all of His faithful ones.

Another passage of Scripture, which is often misunderstood, can also help us in understanding this temporary resting place.

In John 14:2-4, Jesus said, “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Similar to the concept of *paradise*, the 21st century default is to think that when Jesus refers to *preparing a place for us*, he is referring to an other-worldly future realm where God’s people will be with Him forever. But, the word used for *dwelling places* in John 14 is the Greek word *mone*, which was a common first century image describing temporary lodging for a traveler. So, once again, we see Jesus referring to the temporary resting place prior to the general or final resurrection of all God’s people and the world.

When I was growing up, there was a popular song in Christian circles called “Big House.” It was a pretty catchy song. My youth ministry would
sing it at about every gathering and, though it’s hard to admit, we actually did motions during the song.

The chorus went something like this: “Come and go with me to my Father’s house. It’s a big big house with lots and lots of room. A big big table with lots and lots of food. A big big yard where we can play football. A big big house—it’s my Father’s house.”

Now, I must admit, this type of house sounds like the ultimate man-house and I’m all for it. But, when Jesus spoke of his Father’s house, the desirable man-house wasn’t exactly the picture that he was referring to.

It’s important to realize that the early disciple’s focus of heaven was not on the expectation of floating around on clouds, playing harps, eating lots of food, playing football, or even reuniting with loved ones. The focus for God’s people was on God and the eventual renewal of all the earth.

Even though our faith in God is certainly personal—the gift of heaven was never really about our needs being met. Heaven has always been about God making all things new. In other words, humans are not at the center of God’s story—God is. And that is a detail we must never forget.

**Details**

It’s kind of funny, in John 14, just after Jesus says, “You know where I’m going.” Thomas, one of Jesus’ disciples, shakes his head and says, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going; how can we know the way?”

Apparently, even Jesus’ disciples weren’t entirely sure about where Jesus actually was going, what the temporary lodging would look like, and how the new earth would shape up.
I’ll be the first to admit that there is not a lot of clarity when reading about the new heavens and new earth in the Bible. But, I suspect that the reason for the sketchy details is precisely because, if we knew all of the facts, we might begin taking our attention off of God’s earthly hope-project.

In response to Thomas’ question, “How can we know the way?” Jesus gave Thomas all of the heavenly information that he needed. Jesus replied, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

There are two details that a disciple of hope must have clarity in: (1) Jesus is the only way into God’s redemptive life. And (2) Jesus always promised to be with his disciples until the very end of the age.

With

As we have already discovered, Revelation 21-22 is a description of the new heaven and new earth. John described the New Jerusalem (the city of God) coming down out of heaven and entering earth. The body of Christ, the church, is the embodiment of God’s presence in the world. And until the second or final resurrection, God’s people must endure the hostility of the rebellious and evil ones in the world. But—make no mistake about it—God is already in the process of eliminating the world of evil and making all things new.

It’s interesting to note that within the city image of Revelation 21, we discover that there is no temple. Throughout the Old Testament era, God’s presence was always situated within the temple. But in God’s new realm, John says, “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb is its temple.”
Now, if Revelation 21 is a description of God’s work on earth before the second and final resurrection, then this description of there being no temple is important to internalize.

The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple.

And where does the temple reside?

In 1 Corinthians 6:19-10, the Apostle Paul said, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”

You see, the presence of the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are in the hearts of those who believe!

John is saying that heaven is on earth, God’s presence is not confined to any geographical area, God’s temple has legs, and the primary place that the world will hear the sounds of hope is through God’s people.
Discussion Questions

1. Is your primary view of heaven a place in the future or a present experiential reality? Or both?

2. How have relatively recent church teachings primarily promoted the future aspect of heaven? And how may have these presentations created problems for many people?

3. What does it look like for heaven to be the ultimate show-and-tell?

4. What did Jesus emphasize in his teachings on heaven?

5. Can you see how Jesus’ disciples were deeply impacted by watching heaven crash into earth? What other post-resurrection examples can you note where the disciples lived with a deep sense that God would fulfill all of His promises?

6. Even though all of the details of heaven may be unclear, are you convinced of the Way in? And are you okay with Jesus’ answer in John 14:6 being enough heavenly information?

7. What does it do to your faith when you accept the fact that the presence of the Almighty Lord God and the Lamb are both at work in you?
Transplanted Shrubs

What does heavenly citizenship mean?

“You can kill us, but cannot do us any real harm.”
(Justin Martyr, 100-165 C.E.)

“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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 who gives me strength.”
(Philippians 4:11-13)

Disciples of Jesus are kind of like transplanted shrubs. They have moved out of the old soil, but adjusting to the new soil may not be trouble-free.

Like transplanted shrubs, some disciples adjust quickly, some disciples experience a period of shock but survive, and some simply don’t make it.
God knew that the transplanting process would be quite the challenge, but He also knew that it was the only way to redefine the believer’s new existence.

In the Early Church, there were many people who ended up worshipping Caesar and giving up on the way of Jesus. It seems like much of the New Testament was written primarily to keep the sheep from straying away from the Shepherd. Living in-the-world, but not of-the-world, and not out-of-the-world was extremely complicated.

As a result of seeing disciples fade away from the faith, the Early Church leaders were forced to address the issue. And new language needed to be developed in order to help disciples stay committed to the cause of Hope.

**Citizenship**

In Philippians 3:20-21, the Apostle Paul uses a powerful image to encourage his fellow believers who were beginning to doubt the faith. Paul wrote, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

Now, in order to fully appreciate what Paul was hinting at with his citizens of heaven comment, we need to know a little bit about the process of Roman citizenship.

By the first century, Roman citizenship was commonplace and there were many cultural privileges accompanying a person who was heralded as a citizen of Rome. The State of Rome was always trying to spread its beliefs and practices, and one of the ways that Rome accomplished this was by resettling cities and populating them with thoroughly committed Romans.
In 30 B.C.E., Philippi became one of these repopulated cities and many of the new settlers were former Roman soldiers. These soldiers were rewarded with Rome’s “full-citizenship” and they were significant advocates for the gospel of Rome.

Rome’s colonies functioned a lot like “little Romes.” They wore Roman garb; Roman magistrates governed the land; they spoke in Latin; Roman justice was administered; Roman morals were observed; and Roman citizenship was a very distinct value within the culture.

In fact, citizenship to Rome would have been one of the primary identity markers in the culture. So, when Paul uses the image of citizenship for the church in Philippi, everyone would have understood the importance.

Just like the citizens of Rome, citizens of heaven were expected to remain committed, united, courageous, and invincible.

Paul never suggested that the Christian life would be easy, but he did imply that being a citizen of heaven would absolutely affect the disciple’s character and conduct.

**Character**

There are certainly a lot of differences between the first and 21st centuries. The most notable difference, however, is that the people of the first century were motivated by honor and shame, whereas, people of the 21st century are motivated by carrots and sticks.

Seneca, a first century Roman statesman and philosopher wrote: “The one firm conviction from which we move to the proof of other points is this: that which is honorable is held dear for no other reason than because it is honorable.”
In the first century, living according to principle and virtue was admirable and desired. I suspect this is the reason that much the New Testament rubs 21st century Americans the wrong way. Americans are looking for what feels good, but the New Testament writers were appealing to the overarching principles and virtues of the Christian life.

For example, in Philippians 1:27, the Apostle Paul says, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” In the first century context, a person’s conduct was directly connected to their character and a person’s character was directly connected to their governing virtues in life. So Paul’s appeal to be worthy of Christ would have been incredibly attractive and motivational.

For Paul and the early disciples, hope was not a theory or an idea; it was a core virtue of life. And virtues were considered non-negotiable.

**Waiting**

Most people aren’t fans of waiting. We wait in lines in order to purchase groceries, to be served at restaurants, to be attended to at a bank, to see a film, to get into an amusement park, and the like.

They say that the average person ends up waiting 62 minutes a day—that’s 3 years or 4.3% of a person’s life.

Waiting is simply an inevitable part of life.

And waiting is also an inevitable part of the faith too.

All throughout the biblical narrative, we see God’s people waiting on Him.

In the book of Jeremiah (a prophetic book written during the era of Babylonian captivity) there is a verse which is quoted quite often. The
popular verse is found in Jeremiah 29:11 and it reads, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Now, Jeremiah 29:11 is a lovely hope-filled verse, but the verse directly before it reveals something very interesting about the way God tends to work. Jeremiah 29:10 states, “This is what the LORD says: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place (the Promise Land).”

Isn’t that interesting? God will come for his people and give them a new future in seventy years! So what were God’s people supposed to do in the meantime?

That's right.

Wait.

Patiently.

Imagine hearing Jeremiah’s prophetic words for the first time—especially if you were already up-in-age. What would you have been thinking? What would be your motivation for life and God?

I know this sounds very un-American—but is it possible that God is more interested in a person’s character development then He is about their sense of earthly prosperity? Could waiting on God be more about a person’s spiritual formation during the wait rather than the product of the wait?

Disciples of hope would say, “Yes!”
“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope,” Paul says in Romans 5:3-4.

Jesus wants to know: what are the CHARACTERistics that drive our lives?

Salty

Most of the time, Jesus seemed to be very concerned about the character and quality of his disciples.

In Matthew 5:13 Jesus used a powerful image to communicate the urgency for his disciples to be people of character. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless."

In the ancient world, salt was used by everyone and was considered highly valuable. In fact, the Greeks referred to salt as "divine." So, when Jesus used salt as a metaphor to describe what his disciples are supposed to be like, he is proclaiming that they are needed and highly valuable.

Furthermore, within this salt image, Jesus was describing a very specific usage of salt. In Jesus’ day, most Palestinian ovens were built over a layer of tile. On top of the tile people would dump large amounts of salt and, as the oven would heat up, the scent of salt would soak into the food as it was cooked. This was a natural way to flavor food and it made everything taste better.
Eventually though, the salt would lose its saltiness. And when this happened, the salt was no longer useful, so people would scoop up the salt and toss it out into the dusty streets.

What Jesus was saying to his disciples through his salt metaphor was essentially: *my disciples stay useful.*

The worst thing that could happen to disciples of hope is losing their flavor and becoming useless to the world around them.

It's kind of humorous, but there was a practice within the Early Church when a repentant disciple wanted to return to the faith. The prodigal disciples were required to lie down in the doorway of the synagogue or church meeting space, and as people walked in (trampling over them) they would say the phrase, "I am the salt of the earth." This practice wasn't meant to demoralize the repentant disciple; the leadership of the church simply wanted the disciples to take their commitment to Christ seriously and stick-to-it.

**Sticky**

It seems like everybody is talking about the-sticky-factor these days. Since people tend to vote with their tweet—businesses, schools, and organizations are constantly trying to increase their level of commitment and make people stick to their vision and values.

The-sticky-factor certainly seemed to be on Jesus’ mind throughout the gospel narratives, but when Jesus thought of vision awareness and loyalty to his cause, he had a radically different vision in mind than most corporate visions today.
For some reason, God’s people have always been quick to build systems and structures around God. But, the truth of God is not propositional, methodical, or systematic—it’s relational.

Jesus’ relationality is found all throughout his teachings. It’s apparent that Jesus didn’t want his followers to stick to the regimens of a religious system, the vision of an organization, or even himself for that matter.

It’s interesting to note that Jesus, who was God-in-the-flesh, consistently diverted the attention and worship off of himself and onto God the Father. At first glance, this diversion might cause one to question Jesus’ divinity; however, Jesus’ God-pointing-finger was actually an affirmation of his connection to God’s Trinitarian presence.

Jesus was for all intents and purposes showing his followers how to stick to God alone.

It’s part of humanity’s fallen nature to place something in between the human and the divine, but God-the-Father wants to connect directly to His children. This is the reason that one of God’s Ten Commandments was, “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.”

On one occasion, Jesus explained to a woman, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

Even towards the end of Revelation, John states that when he had heard and seen God’s vision, he fell down at the feet of the angel (who is Jesus). And Jesus replied, “Don’t do that! I am a fellow servant with
you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!"^{94}

So, Jesus, true to his outlook during his earthly ministry, diverts the worship off of himself and onto God the Father, because he knew that his visible presence could quickly become an idol. The Almighty Lord God (who encompasses His Son and the Spirit) is the focus of worship.

And this is a good reminder for the 21\textsuperscript{st} century church, because God doesn’t want His followers sticking to a structure, a philosophy, a building, a pastor, a program, or even acts of justice. God wants His followers to stick to Him—and Him alone.

True God-worshippers don’t need \textit{any-thing} to worship.

But, if Christ followers don’t need anything to worship, then what is the purpose of the church?
Discussion Questions

1. Can you relate to the “transplanted shrub” imagery? If so, how?

2. Why is it difficult to live in-the-world; but not of-the-world; and not out-of-the-world?

3. What does it mean to live as a “citizen of heaven”?

4. Do you feel motivated in your relationship with God because you want to honor God with your life? Why or why not?

5. How is your conduct connected to your character?

6. What difference does it make to think that hope is a life-virtue instead of a theory or life philosophy?

7. How has God used times of “waiting” to transform the core of your being?

8. On a scale from 1-100, what is your sticky-factor to God and His mission in the world?
Roller Skating

What is the mission of the church?

“Finally, the proconsul read the decree: Speratus, Nartalus, Cittimus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda, and the rest have confessed to living by the Christian rule. Since they obstinately persist, after an opportunity to return to the Roman custom, it is decided to punish them with the sword. Speratus said, ‘We thank God.’ Nartalus echoed him.” (The group was executed on July 17, 180 C.E.)

“They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” (Revelation 12:11)

When I was growing up, back in the 80’s, the place to be on Friday night was Spinning Wheels roller skating rink. Spinning Wheels had everything that a kid needed to be a kid. There was food, friendship, conversation, action, and an occasional secret admirer.

Besides the couple’s skate, my favorite thing to do while skating was “snap-the-whip.” Snapping-the-whip is when four or five friends lock hands, begin skating, and then, as a turn approaches, they fling the person on the end forward at adrenaline-pumping speeds.
Even though roller skating had not yet been invented, *snapping-the-whip* was precisely what the authors of the New Testament wanted followers of Christ to do for one another.

In Hebrews 10:25 the author wrote, “So let's do it—full of belief, confident that we're presentable inside and out. Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. God always keeps his word. Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching.” (The Message)

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to notice that the twenty-first century church is on a rapid decline. Some church staticians estimate that about a million people are leaving the church each year in America. I suspect that most of the people who have left the church would not say that they have left Jesus; they have simply left the structure of a church community. There’s certainly no right or wrong way to connect with other Christ followers, but it’s important that we don’t try to snap-the-whip by ourselves.

You see, it takes a community to snap well.

**Focus**

In the Early Church there were many problems, both theologically and practically. There always seemed to be somebody falling off the beam. Many of their issues stemmed from the lack of clarity in their goals. The history of the church has proven that when there is not a clear focus point, it is inevitable that people will dwell on their feelings instead of their faith. And living on feelings usually ends up in frustration.

John was observant of this reality, so throughout Revelation, he placed the spotlight on the focal point. John knew that if the church was going to survive and make a difference in the world, then the people of God
needed to see what they were working toward and know what their role was in God’s holy city.

Keep in mind, the community of God’s people, the church, is the holy city, the dwelling place of God on earth. God’s holy city is not a future vision; it is a present reality coming down out of heaven and into earth.

In Revelation 21:23-24, John describes the happenings within the holy city in further detail; “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.”

The dynamic part of this part of the image is that the holy city, the church, does not merely receive light (from the sun) or reflect light (from the moon), but it is itself beaming with the light of the presence of God.

Jesus described this same reality to his disciples when he said, “You are the light of the world, a city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

If we miss this light-giving reality, we essentially will miss out on all of the implications within Jesus’ teachings. The lamp that radiates light throughout the city is the Lamb (Jesus) and the church is the light stand.

In the first chapter of Revelation, John tells us that he turned to see the voice that was speaking to him and when he turned he saw seven golden lamp stands. Here, John saw the radiance of both Jesus and the church!
So, if the church is the lamp stand, then there must be a distinctive purpose for it. The church is the community of people who are holding up and supporting the Light of the world.

Notice, in Revelation 21:24 the text says, “The nations will walk by the Light.” This aspect is also important to take in because it is a picture of God’s holy city “at work” within the midst of human history. Apparently, Jesus envisions other nations and rulers (even those who are in opposition to him) responding the Light of God.

John is exposing us to the reality that the holy city, the church, has an immense job to do in the world! And if this vision is going to be accomplished, then the people of God must come together, encourage one another, and organize the movement of God.

With this in mind, there seems to be three pivotal questions that Christ followers need to be asking: (1) Who are our arms locked with? (2) Who are we flinging forward? And (3) Who are we inviting over to snap-the-whip with?

Open

In recent days, the idea of community has gained a lot of attention in the church culture and beyond. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that the purpose of community is not merely to feel connected or to fulfill a void in our life. The purpose of community is to fling others forward into the thrilling hope-building mission of God in the world.

Every disciple of hope needs to fling and be flung.

As John continues his detailed sketch of the holy city in Revelation 21:25–27 he notes, “On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought
125

into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

The ever-opened city gates take us deeper into the vision of the church. Most, ancient walled-cities would shut their gates at night (for the same reason that most of us lock our doors at night)—it was defensive and protective. If a traveler approached the city after the gates were shut they could try to squeeze through a small door in the wall (which was referred to as the eye of the needle) or they could camp outside the gates and wait till the next day to enter the city.

The open gates of God’s holy city tell us that there is no “defensive posture” to the church and new people are always welcome. The holy city does not need to defend itself against the enemy, because God is in control.88

Even more, the vision of open gates reminds the church that it is a community of people who exist to see broken people, including those who persecute the church, enter into God’s presence and find healing and peace in the Lamb.

The open gates symbolize the healing arms of the church opening wide for all to enter.

Trees

The human body, in its infinite wisdom, has many self-healing systems which all work together as a team to heal it from the inside out. The digestive tract eliminates you-know-what. The kidneys eliminate contaminated waste. Skin eliminates sweat. The lungs and respiratory tract expel carbon dioxide and mucus. Lymph nodes do away with allergens, viruses, and bacteria. And the liver removes all the harmful toxins that come through and chemically transforms them so that one
of the other organs can excrete it. Most of the time, our beautifully
designed bodies cleanse and heal ourselves so efficiently that we often
do not even know it is working so hard.

The healing imagery within the human body may have been the reason
that the Apostle Paul’s primary metaphor for the church was the-body.
Healing the world is exactly what the body-of-Christ is supposed to be
up to.

In Revelation 21:1-2, John continues to describe the healing nature of
God’s holy city; “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of
life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb
down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river
stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit
every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the
nations.”

Within this imagery, John is taking his audience back to a well known
biblical image found in Ezekiel 47:1-12. In Ezekiel’s vision the river flows
from the temple into the Dead Sea. When it reaches the Dead Sea, the
deadness is transformed into life. On each side of the river are trees
whose monthly fruit is used for nourishment and whose leaves are used
for healing.

In John’s vision, however, the river itself becomes a river filled with the
Life of God, and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the
world. Since the river flows from the throne of God and the Lamb, it is
likely that the healing power of the trees is the work of the Holy Spirit
within God’s people.

John is envisioning the work of God’s people, which is sustained by the
Holy Spirit, providing healing for the entire world (which includes those
who are in opposition to God’s reign) and is moving people toward a
hope-filled life.
Transporting

I’ve always found it quite fascinating how the world’s transportation systems work. Every day, millions of products are being shipped all across the globe via trucks, trains, boats, and planes. And miraculously it all seems to work.

Most transportation companies have become quite excellent and efficient in their shipping skills. Think about the U.S. Postal service for example. I can postmark a letter from Michigan on Tuesday and it can arrive in California by Friday. I’m not sure how the entire postal service works, but I’m thankful that someone has figured it out.

Now, imagine if the people of God primarily viewed themselves as transporters-of-hope.

What if the church organized itself around the product of hope?

And what if the primary way that a disciple of Jesus experiences hope is by coming together to give hope?

Collective

Bear in mind, the goal of John’s revelatory vision was to encourage the church to persevere and trust in the promises of God, even when everything seemed like it was falling apart.

The importance of coming together was on John’s mind all throughout Revelation. In fact, John ends the book by saying, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen.” As if to say, the entire time he wasn’t just writing to an individual, but he was writing to the collective witness of the church. In other words, the vision of Revelation was for ALL God’s people (those who were dead, alive, and yet to be born).
Jesus was never meant to be for just an individual. Even Jesus described his relationship with his disciples in this way: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

By definition, a collection is two or more of the same items gathered together.

And a collection is precisely what God’s people were meant to be. It is important to realize that our connection with Jesus might be personal, but it was never meant to be private. Life with Jesus has always been a collective dream.

Within God’s vision of hope, everything happens together with Jesus.

Pain happens together.
Struggle happens together.
Persecution happens together.
Joy happens together.
Success happens together.
Heaven on earth happens together.

Everything happens better together.

As the great football coach Hayden Fry once remarked, “I wanted the players to feel like they were part of a family, to be conscious of that controlled togetherness as they made that slow entrance onto the field. It had a great psychological effect on the opposing team, too. They’d never seen anything like it!”

Imagine if the community of Hope was conscious of their controlled togetherness.

The world might say, “We’ve never seen anything like it!”
Discussion Questions

1. Who are you snapping-the-whip with?

2. Is the goal of your church community to distribute hope to the world? If not, how can you help the shipping process?

3. Are your healing arms open wide like the gates of God’s holy city?

4. Do you view yourself as an agent of healing in the world? If so, how?

5. What might happen in the world if God’s people viewed themselves as hope-shippers?

6. Why is community essential for hope-filled living?
The Sound of Hope: Conclusion

Living Fenceposts

What is my reason for hope?

“Cyprian wrote to nine Christians exiled to the mines in nearby Sigua: Let cruelty, either ignorant or malignant, hold you here in its bonds and chains as long as it will. From this Earth and from these sufferings you shall speedily come to the kingdom of heaven. The body is not cherished in the mines with couch and cushion, but it is cherished with the refreshment and solace of Christ.”

(Cyprian, 200-258 C.E.)

“We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

(1 Thessalonians 1:3)

In many rural pasture lands throughout South and Central America you will find a unique tree called Guazuma Ulmifolia. GU has many uses, but one of the primary ways locals use GU is for fence posts. However, GU is not an ordinary fencepost. GU’s distinctive feature is that it can regrow roots after it has been cut and it essentially becomes a living fencepost.
And in the same way that disciples of hope will inevitably be cut down by the world at some point and time in their faith, God has given us the opportunity to grow new roots and live with hope once again.

John and the early disciples were incredible examples of being living fence posts. They heard the sound of hope and they knew their reason for hope. And those realities made all the difference in their everyday lives.

John knew that hope had a job to do and part of hope’s job description was to stretch beyond themselves. Hope may be an individual experience, but in order for hope to persevere it must also be multiplied.

Knowing our reason for hope could essentially mean life or death for somebody else.

You see, disciples of Jesus have a responsibility to hope.

Our hope in Christ cannot be phony or pretend, but from time to time it can be borrowed.

Some days, we may find our hope to be dwindling and what we need to hear is a story about someone else living in the promises of God.

And other days, when we are bursting with hope, we need to sing out, “Lean on me!”

Remember, John first “heard” hope before he “saw” hope, and it’s the same for us. We must hear, we must see, and we must help others hear and see. That’s the reason the author of 1 Peter 3:15 was adamant that his hearers must always be ready to share their reason for hope to the world.
Blinking Cursor

I trust that this book has helped you discover the meaning of hope and moved you toward a lifestyle of active hope. But the ultimate purpose of this book was to help you better explain your reason for hope.

So, imagine if someone came up to you today and asked you the question, “What is your reason for hope?”

How would you respond?

If you go to www.the-sound-of-hope.com you will find a blinking cursor and a forum where you can share your reason for your hope in Christ with the world. Hopefully, this forum will allow others to hear the sound of Hope and be encouraged to continue living in the promises of God.

May you give your Hope away.
Against All Odds

Stories of Hope

Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.
(Psalm 25:5-6)

Isaac

Isaac happens to be my 13 year old nephew (mentioned in level 8) and he lived with my wife and me for a while. Isaac has a wonderful and loving mother who would do anything for him but, as his story goes, he never knew his father. Isaac began following Christ at an early age and was baptized in the “Looking Glass River” near our house when he was 12 years old. The following is the script of our interview:

Ed: Isaac, tell me about growing up without a father in your life.

Isaac: Well, I never really knew him, so it didn’t really bother me. I didn’t really know the difference actually until recently when I was at a friend’s house and I happened to notice that he was always doing stuff with his dad, you know.

Ed: Do you remember anything about your dad?

Isaac: No, I don’t remember anything. I thought about trying to find him last year, but then I didn’t. I think I saw him last when I was about two years old. I think he used to babysit me, because I remember the driveway, but a lot of people babysat me.
Ed: I can’t imagine growing up without a father. Tell me, why do you still put your hope in Christ even though you didn’t get blessed with a father?

Isaac: I don’t think about that emptiness really. I guess Christ has filled that hole. He’s closed the gap in my life.

Ed: That’s pretty insightful Isaac! Many kids in your situation are very angry at the world and God because of their fatherless situation. Why do you think you’re responding differently?

Isaac: I think, a lot of times, people are asking God to change their life instead of asking God to change them. People want their life to change, but for some reason they ask God for things like jobs, houses, and cars. They think that those things are going to make their life better but, instead, what they should be asking God for is to change them on the inside.

Ed: Like, asking God to make you more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, merciful, and filled with self-control (A.K.A.—the fruits of the Spirit)?

Isaac: Right. God is going to give you what you need on the inside every time and, in a way, that makes your life better.

Ed: It makes me wonder if people really want Jesus or if they want the “products” of Jesus. So, you recently went on a couple of mission trips and you’ve really been discovering that God wants to spread hope to others through your life. Describe that reality?

Isaac: Well, I did want to be a professional football player, I still might, but I really want to make a difference in the world and help people in need. It would be awesome to be a full-time missionary and go around the world, giving Christ’s wisdom to kids who don’t have fathers.
Ed: That’s awesome. Maybe you could be a spokesperson for the fatherless and then you could spend your time connecting up kids with dads. You’d be awesome at that... Listen, Isaac, I love you more than you know, and I believe that God is going to do great things through your life. I’m so proud of you bud.

Jesus is proud of Isaac.

Amy

Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:
Because of the LORD’s great love
we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
(Lamentations 3:21-23)

Amy is a mother to five, wife to one, and an amazing servant to all. If you were to observe Amy’s current life, you would think that she’s always had it together. But it was only a few years ago that Amy was experiencing the heart wrenching pain of reverse migration. The following is my interview script with Amy.

Ed: Amy, can you describe your experience of reverse migration?

Amy: I certainly did fly off course. During that time in my life I knew about the things of God, but I was actively rebelling from him. I found myself mixed up in drugs and alcohol. I was a thief. I cheated on my
husband. I went through with an abortion. I was in and out of the courts for DUI’s. But most of the time I was depressed and couldn’t get out of bed.

Ed: What sparked you to change your course?

Amy: Honestly, one day after dealing with a DUI, I saw my daughter and I had this overwhelming feeling for her because I didn’t want her to turn out the way I did. I also moved in with a couple named Bill and Marsha and they began bringing me to a church. It was in that little church where I accepted Christ and began my faith journey. I felt reborn. It took a long time to understand everything that I needed to change. I had a lot of failures along the way—but it happened—I became a new person.

Ed: That’s amazing Amy. Besides the couple that you were living with, did you experience the hands of hope from others in the church?

Amy: Oh yes. I think I tried doing the Christian journey on my own for awhile, but I quickly realized that I needed people. In a way, I wanted to be with the rest of the flock. I found a great church community and I plugged in wherever I could. When I was going through some hard times, the church body came around me and provided me an apartment, furniture, food, cloths, rides, and even a job. I had never been so blessed by people who didn’t even know me.

Ed: Amy, tell me something; many people end up returning back to their old ways. Why do think you haven’t?

Amy: I really think it is the community of people around me. And I think I have finally begun to trust in God’s promises. The evil one may tempt me with all kinds of false hopes and fake promises, but I know deep in my heart what is true.
Ed: You now live to serve other women who are experiencing the effects of reverse migration. Why do you care so much about them?

Amy: If I can help someone know that they are worth being saved and that God wants a relationship with them, then I think it is all worth it. It breaks my heart to know that someone doesn’t have hope in God.

Ed: This may sound like an odd question, but tell me; when you sing, “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand,” what does that mean to you?

Amy: It reminds me that Christ is the only one I can depend on to fulfill me. I have a wonderful husband, but sometimes I have to remind myself that not even he can satisfy my deepest needs—only Christ can.

And Christ is.
Mike

Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.
(Proverbs 13:12)

Mike is walking hope. Mike would tell you himself that he probably shouldn’t be alive, but these days, he is more alive than ever. I wrote Mike while he was in prison and we quickly formed a relationship that will last a lifetime. Here is the interview script with Mike:

Ed: Mike, a few years ago you found yourself in Jail—a seemingly hopeless situation. Tell me about your situation.

Mike: Well, I had landed in jail mostly because of the things I would do when I was drinking. It was a dark and hopeless time period. I remember being so depressed sometimes I didn’t even want to get out of bed to eat (which is the only exciting thing to do in prison). I had been in prison before, but I would say, my relationship with God became much more authentic while I was in there my second time around. I noticed that the first time in prison my prayers centered on asking God to change people and circumstances. But in my second time around, I realized that my problem was “me,” so I began asking God to change me.

Ed: That’s such a good point Mike—very few people actually see that reality. Tell me something; was it difficult to keep your hope in Christ while you were in such a despair-filled environment?

Mike: It was easy to accept the hope of Christ in prison because I was as low as I had ever been. But, honestly, as time went on it was the hope of Christ that kept me going. The thirst to know the ways of Christ urged me to read the Bible and pray.
Ed: When you got out of prison, was it more difficult to put your hope in Christ?

Mike: When I first got out it was easy to keep my hope in Christ, but as time rolled on, it became harder and harder. No work, living with parents, bill collectors, parole, the temptation of alcohol, all came together to offer me quite a challenging situation. I never really thought that God would “hook me up” with everything I wanted, but I did know deep down inside that God was going to redeem my past and use it for His good. At that time, I wouldn’t say I was optimistic, but I did have an assurance that true life was before me.

Ed: Your journey certainly has been difficult and you still face many challenges. So, when you go through tough times, why do you still trust in God’s promises?

Mike: It has been tough since my release, but I can’t deny that God is doing all the things that He promised. Things may not be happening as quickly as I would like them to and I am still dealing with the consequences of my past, but all I have to do is look back and see where I have been to see that hope lives in me. To even claim one shred of my hope as my doing would be to deny God.

Ed: If you don’t get “hooked up” with material stuff will you be frustrated in life?

Mike: I get frustrated at times when I look at our van, see our tattered furniture, or by the endless stream of debt collectors. But I mean, look around, we have a great place to live, I have a great wife, great kids, great job, and great church community. What more does a man need?

Ed: All so very true. So, you are now going back to school to get a substance abuse counseling degree and you are leading a recovery
ministry called 180. Tell me, do you feel like your hope in Christ has inspired you to take action?

Mike: I do believe God has called me to develop a real and relevant Christ-centered recovery ministry. My hope is hinged on the fact that God has done what He said He would do. He has healed up the wounds of the past. The scars remain, but they are now testaments to God’s faithfulness.

Ed: It truly is amazing what God is up to in your life. Was there a defining moment where you realized your deep sense of hope in God?

Mike: I’ll tell you where it was. I was attending an AA meeting in the basement of an old building. I’m not anti-AA, but as the speaker was going on and on about the same stuff he went on and on the week before, I looked around, inhaled some second hand smoke, and then thought to myself, “This can’t be it!” At that point, I knew that Christ offered me something a little more life-giving and now all I want to do with my life is help people see how they can experience new life in Him too.

Ed: Thank the Lord for second hand smoke, eh? (Smile) Mike, you are truly walking hope and I’m so excited for your future!

By the way, Mike is now married to Amy (the woman from the previous hope story).
Endnotes:

Level 1


2 See Mulholland, Robert. Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1980), 91-92. Mulholland notes that the Greek word for “angel” means “messenger,” and even though it was more frequently used both in Jewish and Roman-Hellenistic cultures to describe messengers sent from God or the gods, it could also be used for human messengers. In addition, John’s vision often compares and contrasts the Christian community with the Jewish synagogues (c.f. 2:9; 3:9), and in Jewish synagogues the person who represented the community before God was referred to as “the messenger of the congregation.” It is highly probable that the “angel” is the “messenger or overseer of the church.”

3 Ibid., 11-25. In this section, Mulholland offers many profound insights into how to interpret an apocalyptic vision.


Level 2


6 Revelation 2:3-5.

7 See Revelation 2:5.
See Philippians 4:8. In this verse, the Apostle Paul encourages the church in Philippi to think on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, and excellent. Followers of Christ should not be negative, critical, and narcissistic, but they should put off the aroma of Christ in all circumstances.

See Luke 7:34.

See Mulholland, Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World, 130.


Refer to Revelation 3:19.

See Mulholland, Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World, 131.

Ibid., 134.


Forbush, William. Foxe’s Book of Martyrs (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 49-50. Forbush notes, “A unique dynamic of Ignatius’ story is that he knew nothing about the wealth and power later bishops would enjoy. In his era, a bishop was more likely to be the leader of a single congregation rather than the head of a well organized hierarchy. Thoroughly devoted to Christ, Ignatius was a part of that great generation who taught and built the church, buried the apostles, collected their writings, stood before “the beast,” and fought off heretics.” The examples of the martyrs serve as a modern day challenge and encouragement for Christ followers who live in a culture filled with resistance.

Level 3


23 For an excellent historical treatment of the “mark” described in Revelation 13:16-17 see Mulholland, *Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World*, 236.

24 Refer to Acts 11:21.


26 Wright, Tom. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: Harper One Publishing, 2008), 84. Wright asserts that the problem of evil is not just an intellectual problem, but it is also a very practical problem. Progress has not been able to develop a strategy which specifically addresses the severe evils and problems of the world.

**Level 4**


31 Refer to Matthew 28:18-19.

32 2 Corinthians 9:15.


34 Mathew 26:39.

35 See Mulholland. *Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World*, 216. There is much scholarly debate over what each detail means within this part of John’s vision. The Psalmist speaks of God being covered in the sun (84:11). The Jewish Sabbath cycle was associated with the four phases of the moon. And the 12 stars could readily represent the twelve tribes of Israel, in which, God “came through” to deliver His Son.

36 Ibid., 219. In Jewish theology, the desert was seen as both a place of demons and as a resting place for God.

**Level 6**


39 For the image of seedbed of hope, I am indebted to Joan Chittister who wrote, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), xi.


42 Ibid., 119.


44 Hebrews 11:35b-40a (NLT).


46 See Revelation 18:21.

47 See Mulholland. *Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World*, 149-150. Mulholland notes that in ancient Jewish theology the “sea” is considered the realm of rebellion against God.

48 Ibid., 238.

49 Ibid., 238.

**Level 7**

50 See Genesis 1:9.

51 Romans 8:28.


Psalm 102:11-12. The lament brings out the depth of despair and the question of personal existence. Over against the psalmist's condition is the Lord, whom he addresses with an emphatic "But you." The psalmist is reduced to little more than a fleeting existence, a withering piece of grass. On the side of human despair, the Lord's fame remains from generation to generation. It is unaffected by the adversities of individuals or even of groups of people who come against God's reign. As long as God's rule lasts, His fame will be told and retold.


Isaiah 53:6-7.

John 1:29.

Matthew 27:46.


**Level 8**

Refer to Numbers 21:11.

Refer to Numbers 3:38.


See Colossians 1:18.

See 2 Corinthians 5:17.

See Matthew 21:42.

Hebrews 6:11-12.

See Revelation 21:1.


Refer to Ecclesiastes 3:11.

The US Religious Landscape Survey reported that seventy-four percent of those surveyed said they believed in heaven as a place where people who have led good lives are rewarded, while only around six in 10 believed in hell, where unrepentant evil-doers languish in eternal punishment.

See Revelation 21:3.


Wright. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 44.

John 14:5-6.


Refer to Matthew 28:20.
Revelation 21:22.

**Level 10**

82 De Ben. 4.16.2.

83 Exodus 20:4-5.

84 Revelation 22:8-9.

**Level 11**

85 Duin, Julia. Quitting Church: Why the Faithful are Fleeing and What to Do About It (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 13. Duin sites George Barna’s research on the percentage of people who become unchurched each year. Duin also notes that Americans are not disinterested in spiritual matters. They are simply not going to church to feed this interest.

86 Matthew 5:14-16.

87 Refer to Revelation 1:12.


89 Ibid., 333.

90 Revelation 22:21 (AKJV).

91 Matthew 18:20.