

Christian Hope

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	3
To the Leader	4
Session 1. The Difficulty of Hope	5
Session 2. Thy Kingdom Come: The Reign of God.....	9
Session 3. Resurrection of the Body and Life Eternal.....	13
Session 4. Christ’s Return and the Last Judgment.....	17
Session 5. The New Creation	21
Session 6. Living Hope in Church and World.....	25

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Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

The Difficulty of Hope

Scripture

Job 7:1–3

Main Idea

Christian hope confronts present-day injustice and tragedy by focusing on God’s past, present, and future activity to redeem all of creation.

Teaching Points

The session invites participants to consider:

1. The challenge of maintaining hope in the present age.
2. Why a popular version of hope, depicted in the Left Behind series (hope as escape from reality), is problematic for Reformed Christians.
3. Some guiding Reformed principles that help us articulate our hope today.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant’s books

Christ candle and lighter

Newsprint and markers

Bare wall or bulletin board and tape or pushpins to create a Wall of Hope

Poster or other image of Left Behind

Photo or drawing of a crystal ball

Road map

Paper, scissors, and pens, pencils, or markers

Hymnal with the hymn “Live into Hope”

Leader Prep

Prepare for leading each session by reading the participant's book and highlighting important points.

For Gather, set the Christ candle (a white pillar candle) on a table in the center of your meeting space. Enlist participants to take turns lighting the candle and reading the opening Scripture.

For Head, familiarize yourself with the introduction to Session 1 and the sections "Hope in a Context of Despair?" and "Hope as an Escape from Reality" (participant's book, pp. 6–7). Do an Internet search for "Left Behind" and print out an image from the book series or movies (or bring one of the books, if available). Place several sheets of newsprint so they are clearly visible to all. Have markers handy.

For Heart, familiarize yourself with the section "A Reformed Perspective on Hope" (participant's book, pp. 8–9). Have newsprint and markers available. Think about the first Question for Reflection (participant's book, p. 10) so you can help others engage with the question if needed.

For Hands, look around for images or Bible verses that reflect Christian hope, and be prepared to share your ideas.

For Depart, arrange to have an accompanist and/or choir member lead in singing "Live into Hope" by Jane Parker Huber.

Spiritual Practice

Throughout the week, focus on one situation (personally, in your community, or in another part of the world) that seems beyond hope. Pray for it daily. Reflect on how this attention in prayer makes a difference in how you address that situation.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Invite participants to introduce themselves and to share a word, phrase, or image that comes to mind when they hear the word *hope*.
- Light the Christ candle.
- Read Job 7:1–3. Tell participants that Job's lament indicates how difficult it can be to hope, especially in times of suffering.
- Pray together the prayer at the beginning of Session 1 (participant's book, p. 6).

Head

- On a sheet of newsprint, write “Challenges to hope.” Refer participants to the introduction to Session 1 and the section “Hope in a Context of Despair?” (participant’s book, pp. 5–7). Ask: *What are some challenges to hope today?* List these on the newsprint, identifying each as “Personal” (in our own lives), “Corporate” (in political or communal affairs), or “Cosmic” (affecting the state of our planet).
- On another sheet of newsprint, write “Hope is NOT . . .” Ask participants what they think about the author’s statement that “hope is not to be confused with optimism” (participant’s book, p. 5). Write “Optimism” on the newsprint. Ask: *Would optimism or wishful thinking be enough to help us confront the challenges listed earlier? Why or why not?*
- Display a poster or other image from the Left Behind series. Ask if any participants have read one of the books in the series or seen one of the movies. Or perhaps they are familiar with a similar book, such as *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey. Allow a few minutes for them to share their reactions to these popular scenarios of the future. Ask: *What definition of hope is presented in these books and films?* Write “Escape from reality” on the newsprint. Ask: *How might this version of hope be seen as an escape from reality?*
- Ask for volunteers to read aloud the paragraphs about “apocalyptic” and “dispensationalist” (participant’s book, p. 8). Display the road map and picture of a crystal ball, noting that these images reflect the hope offered by dispensationalist theology. Ask: *What are the shortcomings of this kind of hope?*

Heart

- Look together at the section “A Reformed Perspective on Hope” (participant’s book, pp. 7–8). Invite participants to summarize in their own words the four characteristics of Reformed hope described by the author. Ask: *How does this kind of hope differ from the Left Behind version?* For example: a vision of the future based on God’s actions in the past; cautious about making concrete predictions; based on the broad and varied witness of Scripture; focused on God’s redemption of the whole world.

- Invite participants to spend a few minutes reflecting on the first Question for Reflection (participant's book, p. 10): *Do you understand yourself to be a hopeful person? Why or why not? What sustains or works against hope in your life?*
- Ask participants to divide into groups of two or three to share as much as they feel comfortable discussing.

Hands

- Remind participants that Christian hope isn't simply about events in the far-off future; it concerns life today and how we live it.
- Have participants return to their small groups. Invite each person to think of a situation that seems hopeless and share that with the group. Then have the groups discuss how Reformed theology might provide a more hopeful perspective on the situation. Ask: *How does Christian hope empower us to address this reality?*
- Distribute Bibles, paper, scissors, and pens, pencils, or markers. Invite the groups to brainstorm ideas for an image of hope, or a biblical phrase or passage that is faithful to the vision of hope in Reformed theology (in contrast to the road map or crystal ball). Have them share their ideas with the entire group and post their words or images (if completed) on the Wall of Hope. Or they may bring a sign of hope (found or created) to one of the next sessions.

Depart

- Extinguish the Christ candle.
- Remind participants to look for signs of Christian hope to add to the Wall of Hope.
- Sing one or more verses of "Live into Hope."
- Pray a closing prayer.

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Session 3. Resurrection of the Body and Life Eternal.....	17
Session 4. Christ's Return and the Last Judgment.....	23
Session 5. The New Creation	29
Session 6. Living Hope in Church and World.....	35
Suggestion for Further Reading.....	41

The Difficulty of Hope

Scripture

Job 7:1–3 Job’s lament indicates how difficult it can be to hope, especially in times of suffering.

Prayer

Holy God, there is much in life that seems beyond hope. Each of us has a story of personal grief: the death of a loved one or dashed dreams that once sustained us. Our communities are riddled with poverty, racism, and injustice. Our world is torn by violence and war. Yet, you call us to be a people of hope. Teach us the ways of your hope, to work against the threats to life and for the life you give to the world. Amen.

Introduction

It is difficult to hope these days. Even a casual glance at the world, our nation, and our communities reveals much that appears beyond hope. Ethnic and religious rivalries fester and erupt in war; temperatures and sea levels rise across the globe; political leaders seem more concerned with re-election than addressing the problems facing the nation. We witness violence and poverty across town, across the globe, and sometimes across the street. The grim realities of twenty-first-century life press upon us: they can evoke resignation (“That’s just the way it is”) or hopelessness (“Things will never get better”). In the face of these realities, hope can seem at first like starry-eyed optimism that ignores the present.

What is hope? This series of lessons explores some basic themes of Christian hope, especially as articulated in the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition. For the Christian church, hope is not to be confused with optimism. It is not the vapid smile of those who turn their heads to present-day injustice and focus only on the happy things of life. Neither is it the smug confidence that all will turn out well in the end and that we should simply wait for better days to come.

Rather, hope, for Christians, is grounded in the God who gives life to the world without ceasing, who shows us God's solidarity with life and all who suffer in Jesus Christ, and who empowers us for renewed life in the Spirit. This God refuses to give up on creation and wills all things to their fulfillment in God's very life, where God will be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28). This is a stubborn hope, a realistic hope, a hope that seeks God's justice and *shalom* while it remains attentive to situations that seem beyond hope in our time. Nonetheless, embodying that hope is difficult. This first session of our study focuses on three things: (1) the challenge of maintaining hope in the present age; (2) a description of a popular version of hope that is problematic for Reformed Christians; and (3) some guiding Reformed principles that help us articulate our hope today.

Hope in a Context of Despair?

Perhaps you are a person who inclines in a hopeful direction. Perhaps you are a hard-nosed realist who focuses on grim realities that your more hopeful acquaintances overlook.

Or perhaps your outlook on life is somewhere in between: you are both disturbed by the manifold injustices of our day and yet refuse to give up hope. Regardless of your natural inclination, however, there is much in our experience that works against hope. Any Christian understanding of hope has to grapple with the realities of life that appear hopeless, realities that affect us personally, corporately (socially), and cosmically (ecologically).

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Our personal lives present challenges to hope. The relationships that enrich life—in friendship, marriage, and family—are exceedingly fragile. They nourish and sustain us, but they can also deplete us. Marriages cultivated over decades can end in bitter divorce; friends can know the experience of betrayal; family relationships can become so twisted that they are severed. Even when relationships flourish, we are aware of their fragility and that they will not last forever. Stephanie Paulsell writes of the day of her wedding: "Suddenly, what we were about to embark upon seemed like one long goodbye."¹ Even the best relationships end in death. In our day, moreover, death

1. Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 162.

often comes prematurely: to infants before they learn language, to children who will not see adulthood, to partners and friends who had little time together. Regardless of one's view of life after death, death represents loss, a loss that cannot be replaced by anything else.

It is also difficult to hope amid current political and communal affairs. In so many instances, we are people bent on others' misery. Religious rivalries seem to be increasing in our time, with the clash between Islamic fundamentalism and Western secularism being most prominent. In our heralded age of globalization, which supposedly brings increased prosperity to all, millions are left behind in abject poverty. As I write these words, Bangladeshis are dealing with the aftermath of a building collapse that killed over eleven hundred people in a clothing factory, the second large-scale industrial catastrophe to befall that nation in a year. Though Western corporations claim no responsibility for the disaster, cheap clothes purchased in Europe and North America are made in facilities such as this with brutal and dangerous working conditions. Are our corporate, political, and economic arrangements beyond hope?

Finally, the planet itself is increasingly threatened. Entire species are vanishing from the earth as we wander through yet another global heat wave. The ten warmest years on record have occurred in the last fifteen years. Deserts creep outward; rain forests disappear; polar ice caps are melting. By nearly every account, it is a grim time for planet Earth.

Hope as an Escape from Reality

In the face of such problems, it is not surprising that some churches turn to visions of hope that seek escape from a world we can do nothing about and long for the next life. The most prominent articulation of this vision of hope is found in the astonishingly popular *Left Behind* series, which numbers among the best-selling books of all time. The series depicts the fate of the righteous and unrighteous during events that mark the end of the world. A "rapture" of a faithful Christian remnant reunites with Jesus in the air and leaves behind earthly clothing (and dental fillings!). Individual nation states succumb to a shadowy global government bent on establishing itself in Jerusalem. The only resolution to this dismal state of affairs is a final battle between divine powers and the forces of evil. The promised victory of God culminates in the destruction of the world as we know it and the re-creation of

paradise for the faithful. Ultimately, this version of hope encourages Christians to give up working for justice and peace in this world and simply prepare for the next world.

This brand of hope is highly *apocalyptic*. It considers the present state of the world to be miserable (and generally getting worse); it senses signs of the end of time in present events; it generally abandons attempts to improve the state of the world's affairs (since things are going to hell in a handbasket rather quickly); and it affirms God's rescue of the righteous from the forces of evil in a triumphant final accounting.

The theology of Left Behind is also *dispensationalist*. Dispensationalism, at least in its current form, is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Christian church. It claims that human history is divided into "dispensations" that mark God's covenant with humanity, human unfaithfulness, and the rise and fall of earthly powers. Most contemporary dispensationalists claim that we currently live in the sixth of seven dispensations, which will end with tribulation, a final cosmic battle, and a thousand-year reign of Christ. The road map to the future, in other words, is already printed and abundantly clear.

In the end, this kind of theology claims to know a lot about the future. It is highly speculative and takes the symbols and metaphors of the Christian Scriptures to be concrete predictions for the future. For these reasons and others, Reformed theology is often suspicious of the future vision that apocalyptic dispensationalists present.

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A Reformed Perspective on Hope

What characterizes a Reformed outline of hope?

First, our understanding of what God *will do* is rooted in what God *has already done*. As the late theologian Shirley Guthrie has written: "Christians *remember* the future."² We avoid speculation about the future by looking to the past. God, in Jesus Christ, has already showed us God's fullness; the fulfillment of all things in Christ will not depart radically from what God has already done in

2. Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 385.

Jesus Christ for the world. One of the first questions we should pose to any vision of the future is whether it corresponds to how God has revealed God's self in the past and present. Is the vision of Christ's second coming different from the One who taught, healed with compassion, and offered his life for the world? Does the vision of the future glorify violence in a way that the ministry of Jesus does not? Does the vision of the Last Judgment correspond with God's love and desire for all humanity to live in fullness?

Second, a Reformed articulation of hope is *wary of claiming too much*. John Calvin (1509–1564) lived at a time when many of his fellow Reformers were predicting the end of the world. In response to this panic, Calvin was markedly restrained. He wrote a commentary on every book of the New Testament except for Revelation. This does not mean we should ignore the final book of the Bible, but that we should be cautious about interpreting it, and understand that it is a narrative filled with metaphors meant to sustain hope rather than a crystal ball filled with concrete predictions.

*As Christians ponder the future,
they do not simply pray for
themselves but for the whole world,
that the world might live into the
fullness of God's promises.*

Third, Reformed theology recognizes the *many voices* of hope in Scripture and not just one. Reformed Christians turn to the Bible first for their understanding of hope, because Scripture is God's Word for us, because it reveals the living Word of Jesus Christ. When we turn to Scripture, we do not only find apocalyptic visions of hope. There is also the hope of the Hebrew prophets, who envision the establishment of God's justice and peace *in this world*. There is also the realism of Ecclesiastes that dispels idle, wishful thinking. There is Paul, who ponders the delay of Christ's return. And Jesus. Jesus indicates that the future has already come in him.

Finally, a Reformed understanding of hope focuses not narrowly on oneself (What is going to happen to me?), but focuses on God who redeems creation. Reformed theology consistently stresses God's covenant with creation. The world belongs not to us but to God, as God's beloved. Creation is not a way station into the next world but the place God wills to redeem. As Christians ponder the future, they do not simply pray for themselves but for the whole world, that the world might live into the fullness of God's promises.

Spiritual Practice

Throughout the week, focus on one situation (personally, in your community, or in another part of the world) that seems beyond hope. Pray for it daily. Reflect on how this attention in prayer makes a difference in how you address that situation.

Questions for Reflection

Do you understand yourself to be a hopeful person? Why or why not? What sustains or works against hope in your life?

Should Reformed/Presbyterian Christians be skeptical of the dispensationalist vision of hope described in this session? Why or why not?

Is hope different from optimism? Explain, in your own words, how hope and optimism relate to one another.