

Christian Hope

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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

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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.

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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.