

EDITORIAL

Hope against Hope

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Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” (Rom 4:18 NIV)

We thought the road ahead was straight; now, we cannot see around the corner. The present worldwide health crisis has tipped many people into despair. When normal life and its hopes are removed, emptiness and futility are laid bare. Many have lost loved ones, more have lost or will lose their livelihood, and we have all lost our comforting personal networks. The rich skein of our lives has become a skeleton.

When our expectations are dashed, what do we do, and where do we turn? Miracle solutions are hoped for. Realities in and of themselves legitimate become iconically idolatrous. To ensure the much-needed return to normal, high hopes are pinned on “the science,” health services, masks and vaccines, political actors, and lockdowns. When idols do not deliver, hopes are soon shaken.

As Herman Selderhuis points in his comments on the pandemic in Holland, false hopes are tributary to unbelief. He concludes with hope for God’s people:

I started with unbelief, but I end with hope. The God who brought us down will in his grace lift us up. The God who brought us to a standstill in his grace will get us moving. The God who reigns over pandemics will bring his glorious plan to completion. Our hope is not in vaccines, nor in politics, nor in pastors or synods, but our hope is in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him has been given all power in heaven and on earth (cf. Matt 28:18). He has revealed to the Apostle John on Patmos that all the things he was shown will happen and have to happen (Rev 1:1). And

we see that they do happen as revealed. These are frightening signs but signs of hope. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, slain on the cross by the pandemic of our sins, raised from the dead by the vaccine of God's almighty power, we can have hope for the future of the church and for the future of our souls.

From a Christian perspective, hope is not the bedfellow of despair. Despair is resignation to an inescapable destiny. However, according to the New Testament, believers never find themselves in a hopeless situation, even when faced with persecution, death, or suffering. Hope may pass through the vale of anguish, as many psalms show, but it wins out. Thus, hope is often linked to forbearance and courage, which make something out of nothing, victory out of defeat.

Hope is present right from the start of the biblical story. It is hardwired into the human constitution by God's promise of life, by the eschatological perspective of the creation week, and by the fact that the human psyche, created in the image of God, is programmed with a memory of eternity. From the beginning, God's covenantal dealings with man have an eschatological perspective, as Geerhardus Vos argued in his article "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology."¹

When the rebellion of sin excludes from God's sanctuary, human life becomes enslavement leading to death. If Cain's anguish naturally draws man in the direction of despair (cf. Gen 4:13), Babel's ambitious self-promotion pushes to the opposite extreme (Gen 11:1–9). The anguish of purposeless existence and impending death counterbalance the illusions of the *supermensch*. Futility or unlimited progress: Both varnish over the problem of sin as slavery, alienation from the source of life.

Biblical hope overcomes despair through exodus and the promise of new beginnings. The exodus theme grounds the hope of God's people from Abraham onward. God brings his people out of slavery to belong to a new humanity. Abraham is called from the paganism of Ur and receives a promise for the whole world. The exodus from Egypt and the pilgrimage to God's sanctuary in the promised land is the fundamental model of the fulfillment of the hope of Abraham. Later, a further return from the judgment of Babylon fulfills biblical prophecy and gathers God's people together once again to await for the promised Messiah. Jesus's exodus at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31), announced at the time of his transfiguration, is accomplished in his death and resurrection. Those who believe in him are raised by faith to new life

¹ Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 234–67.

and follow him in his exodus to the new creation, from death to resurrection. The entire biblical narrative is the hope of liberation from the bondage of sin and the entry into the new creation.

Abraham's "hope against hope" is the hope that looks to God in the absence of human means when all seems to indicate the contrary in natural terms. Biblical hope overcomes despair because it breaks with the pagan fertility cycle of birth and death. God breaks the infernal cycle of eternal return and introduces new life where nothing is expected. There are three great moments in the history of salvation when God intervenes to bring life into the natural void: the birth of Isaac, the virgin birth, and the resurrection. God gives Sarah a son when age makes it impossible. She laughs about it and names him Isaac (Gen 17:19; 18:11–12). Later, Abraham is ready to sacrifice this son, because he believes God able to raise him from the dead (Gen 22 and Heb 11:19).

The Virgin Mary is a symbol of the hope of God's people who wait for salvation. In Luke 1:38, Mary recognizes that God redeems lost humanity and that salvation comes from God alone, not human agency: "Behold, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." God enters the emptiness of life with its fears, and according to the promise Jesus will save his people from their sins.

The empty tomb is the opposite of the earth fertility cycle of pagan religions loudly proclaimed today in pagan anthems such as Elton John's "The Circle of Life" in *The Lion King*. Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty on Resurrection Sunday because nothing is expected from the earth. But when she meets Jesus, she confesses him (John 20:28). The living person of Jesus who came back from the dead is the epicenter of Christian hope for life beyond death and new creation. He broke the power of canceled sin, the power of death, and the power of Satan. This is the foundation of the Apostle Paul's hope in 1 Corinthians 15. If the realities of life lead to despair, God intervenes to bring the new creation.

These three cases indicate that Christian hope speaks of eternity. It models hope in a hopeless world. We know intuitively that life is not an eternal circle and that death is not the end. The grace of God reprograms our existence, and his intervention creates new life in Christ. What the world needs today, as Professor Selderhuis pointedly says, is "Jesus, slain on the cross by the pandemic of our sins, raised from the dead by the vaccine of God's almighty power." Our world has no meaning without God's purposeful promise of newness through deliverance by the gospel.



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1662-1714

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