

Article: Hope against Hope

Hope is in short supply today, and with this limited commodity have come despair, fear, and deep loneliness — even among Christians. We generally look around for signs that things are improving, thinking this is what gives us hope. So we search for markers — economic, cultural, medical, and perhaps even polls — to tell us that things are better than they seem or better than we can see right now. One of the things surveys look for is how many people have a positive attitude towards the future. I guess if you are in the ruling government of the day and running for re-election, this matters. But is this what Christian hope is? Is our hope as fragile as the shifting sands of our up-and-down world?

We do not pin our hope on improving realities or signs of a better or even happier life. We do not judge hope by such markers. For Christian hope rests on what cannot be seen, what cannot even be known — except by faith. We do not have crystal balls or special sight. We have only the Word and promise of God. But that is enough, more than enough, to sustain hope when all around us things are falling apart. It is all Christians have ever had.

In the coliseum, facing lions, under the persecution of mighty Caesars, without the protection of law, and with the prospect of martyrdom near, Christians endured in hope. They trusted in what their hands could not hold and their eyes could not see. They believed God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth, of a future without tears or sorrow, of white robes that sin could no longer stain, and of a life without any hint of death. It was enough. They endured.

In the emptying cities and amid the stench of death, Christians met the threat of the plague. They had no cure or vaccine, but they had the presence of God and the hope of a better life to come. They endured the struggles, burying the many dead and living in the shadow of their own death. But hope did not disappoint them. They lived in the present, trusting in God's promise of a future beyond imagination. It was enough. They endured. In the terror of wars supposed to end all wars, fighting against tyranny and fascism and watching their brothers fall, Christians endured in hope of a real peace engineered not by diplomacy in meeting rooms or bigger and better weapons, but by a cross planted where nothing lived except hope. They set out to do battle, expecting death to be near and life to be hard, but hope accompanied them. They came with hidden wounds and missing limbs, yet they built families and homes, businesses and communities, and walked in hope where despair once lived. It was enough. They endured.

Now we face the media's barking voices, which only want to report what they think we want to hear. You hardly, if ever, hear a good news story. There is a housing shortage, mortgage rates are rising, and the threat of terrorism is always near. Now, to top it all off, we are being told that fuel prices will rise sharply, and there could even be a shortage due to the war in the Middle East (better stock up on toilet paper!!). Of course, the knock-on effect is that everything will go up in cost. If the cost of living has been biting hard, it will be even harder. People are becoming more fearful of life.

Some of us Christians have even allowed fear and despair to steal our hearts and control our minds, refusing to hope until progress is evident and life is made more comfortable. That is not our hope. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Shall we remember that as we sit in our homes behind locked doors? Shall we put our faith to work, or give our faith a day off and leave hope to the world and those who promise all the answers?

Christian hope is different from the hope the world dares. It is not logical, reasonable, rational, or measured. Our hope lies in the shape of a cross, which has become the tree of life for all who believe, and in a hope you cannot see but which will not disappoint you. The time has come for us to turn off the news, step away from the screens, pick up the Word, and feast upon the Lord's Table. There, God plants, tends, and brings to fruition the precious tree called hope. That is why we need to return to the place called home, where God is present in His Word and feeds us at the Table of our Lord. The longer we stay away from this norm, the more difficult it will be to escape. Hope was enough for Christians in all the troubles and trials of the world in the past. Is it enough for you and for me now?

Hope is not weak or shallow or faint. It is strong and deep and mighty. Abraham surveyed the sand on the shore and the stars in the sky and saw a mighty legacy of faith. Israel saw a mighty army in pursuit, a wall of water on both sides, and a land flowing with milk and honey. A virgin saw God in a promise and the Son of God in her womb and redemption for a whole world. What do you see?