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## Rejoicing in Hope

By Ron Allen

Primo Levi, the Italian Jew who survived Auschwitz, says in one of his books that “hope was not a quality to be desired in the death camps.” He also says that he would have flung himself upon the electric wires on the camp perimeter if it were not for his “senseless, crazy, residue of hope.” This begs a question: Would Primo Levi have survived Auschwitz without that residual hope?

In the movie, ‘Matrix Reloaded,’ a character says that “hope is the quintessential human delusion, yet the source of humans’ greatest strength.” Alexander Pope, the poet, wrote: “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.” There seems to be some truth in that observation. But is hoping always a good thing on account of *being* hope? After all, hope’s sheer ubiquity implies that all is not as we would like it be, or as we think it ought to be. We do keep looking for things to get better than they now are.

Yet, if existence was everything we wanted it to be; if our living was so agreeable and well-fitted to all our expectations—where would hope fit? It would be like lungs to a fish, feathers to a donkey. **Hope springing eternal in the human breast is intelligible only in an environment that is frequently harsh, unpleasant, hurtful, disappointing, unjust, difficult and exhausting.**

In his letter to the disciples in Rome, Paul comes to speak of hope. He links hope with suffering: “*And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so but we rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope*” (Romans 5:2&3).

Rejoice in our sufferings!?! It seems an offensive thing to say. Imagine *that* being well received by people in Syria, or Gaza. But Paul is not a disturbed person who finds satisfaction in pain. His language is realistic. The biblical worldview does not peddle the falsehood that believers are exempt from suffering. Paul is speaking of a hope so well-grounded, it can yield a positive seasoning of the hard, grievous, hurtful and wearying road over which all mankind must travel.



Later in the same chapter (5), Paul says that this hope “*does not disappoint; it does not make ashamed.*” So saying, he infers the existence of other hopes which *do* leave people in shame; false hopes. We now consider some that are widely held.

The first can be called the “Gambler’s Hope.” A young man/woman, feeling exuberant and bullet-proof, launches into the world, gets a taste of ‘what’s out there’ and decides to bet that life is going to be exhilarating, exciting and pleasurable. This youth takes a chance on life and hopes it will turn out okay. He gets involved in extreme sports—base-jumping, giant wave surfing, fast cars, and fast bikes. She plunges into extreme social experiences—binge drinking, as much casual sex as she can find. Where’s it going to end? She doesn’t know. He hopes it will be alright.

Is it alright? Before he is twenty-five years old, he is a confirmed alcoholic. By the time she is twenty-five she has contracted venereal disease twice; has lost her youthful beauty, and now suffers from depression. The gambler’s hope is dashed. He has made a mess of himself and consigned their loved-ones to years of heartbreaking care.

Here’s another widely entertained hope. It’s the hope of the ‘decent.’ An individual forms a view that if he works hard, does right by his neighbors, pays his taxes, doesn’t drink to excess, avoids drugs, doesn’t cheat on his wife and becomes a Rotarian—he will have a good life. He will be seen as a success. This is his hope.

How does it work for him? Pretty well, at least for a while.

His children are in college. He is doing well as a financial consultant at the bank. His wife is flourishing in her teaching position. Then it all goes pear-shaped. One of his boys is expelled from college for doing drugs. An economic recession brings about his retrenchment from work. This is a devastating blow. Even though his wife is still working, their income does not cover the mortgage payments. She has to work overtime and this makes her tired

*Continued on Next Page*

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and irritable. Their lender forecloses and they have to move out of their home. He is still jobless. Things in the family are tense. He yells at his wife, she leaves and takes the two youngest children with her. He is relieved of his official duties at Rotary.

He can't figure it out. "I'm decent, hard-working. Why did this happen to me? This was not supposed to happen." Like Job in the Bible, he 'maintains his integrity' demanding that the universe reward him because he is, after all, an upright person. If this had happened to 'some people' he knows it would have made sense. But "not to me; why me?" The decent man's hope has let him down. He is marooned by his hope.

Another individual lives in hope of 'achievement.' Some hope to have made their first million dollars by the time they are thirty. But not everyone thinks of achievement in material categories. Some look for achievement in politics, or in the public service. A girl hopes to achieve as a neurosurgeon. A boy hopes to achieve as an actor, a writer, a musician.

You could say that all these hopes are legitimate—and you would be right. But it is plain to see that for every person who does so achieve, there are a hundred who never have their hope realized. They do not cope well with the non-fulfillment of their hopes. Some keep on hoping until their working life is over; until at last, reality bites. Then they say to themselves: What have I achieved? Nothing. I am a loser, a no-hoper. These are poorly served by their hope. If hope were the engine that drove them forward through the years, what virtue in such hope if it was ultimately untenable?

Here's one more example of hope: The hope not to mess-up, not to commit a blunder that will spoil your chances at work, in business, at university. This is the hope to be vigilant enough, disciplined enough to avoid mistakes. It is practiced by both secular and religious fundamentalists. In either case, the hope to not fail is so virulent that people seek protection from the fatal mistake through rigid attention to safe etiquettes, protocols, and codes of conduct. These are forms of insurance against shame, loss of cachet, or hope of eternal life. It is hope fraught with peril. Examples of it not working are everywhere to be found.

Scripture speaks of a "hope that does not disappoint" (Romans 5:5). Unlike the aforementioned hopes, it has a different foundation. It is founded in God. Specifically, the love God revealed in Jesus Christ. The extraordinary nature of God's love lies in its gratuitousness. In a complete sense it was/is unwarranted, uncalled-for. This is what Paul is

indicating when he says things like this:

*"When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8).*



Pastor Ron Allen

If God lavished love on us when there was nothing in us deserving of such treatment, we can be sure that a future exists for us that will be very good indeed. Paul's logic is 'a fortiori.' If one thing is true as an undeniable fact, then something else is even more likely to be true because it can be had with far less difficulty.

Therefore: *"Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him. For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life. Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Romans 5:9-11).*

On its own, the phrase, "rejoicing in suffering," is ridiculous and insulting. But it is introduced in the context of an out-of-this-world kind of love which has touched down in the history of this world.

If such love exists, if there is love like this for me, for us, then all our trials have a different complexion. Their impact is not final. They will not have the last laugh. Instead, we are borne on a tide of love which has laid claim to us—not when we were at our best or most successful. Rather, when we were in our weakest, most depleted, disgraceful condition. The cross means this is already true, already a fact.

An airliner is shot out of the sky over Ukraine. Two hundred and ninety-eight souls plummet to their deaths. Among the dead is a grandfather, bringing his three children home to Australia from Holland. Their photographs appear in newspapers and the father makes a statement: *"We are living through a hell of hell. But there is no hate in the world that can eclipse the love that we have for our children; the love we have in our family."*

This is the kind of thing Paul is thinking of when he talks about rejoicing in sufferings. **Not wallowing in pain. Rather, knowing that in spite of the worst that the world can do to** →

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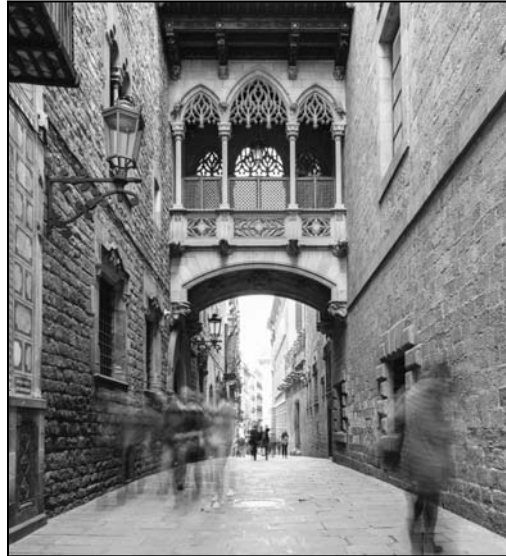
# Balcony or Street

By David Brown

Christian's belief in the kingdom of God as something yet to come, gives them a particular responsibility to ask questions about the direction in which human society is moving and evolving. But they ask questions hopefully, for they recognize the presence within history of God's Spirit, guiding towards the fulfilment of God's purpose.

In a book published during the dark days of the 1939-1945 war, John Mackay, president of Princeton University, contrasted two types of theologians: those of the balcony, and those of the road.

Those of the balcony work out their theology at a distance from ordinary everyday life, observing its movement and its actors like people in Spain who sit on their upstairs balconies in the evenings and watch life go by on the street below. The theology that they produce is often of fine quality, by standards of academic scholarship, but



it is remote from ordinary life, authoritarian and cold.

In contrast, the theologians of the road are those who share fully in the hustle and bustle of the streets, who give themselves to the dust, the sweat and the tediousness of travel, and who work out their answers as they walk along in company with others, sharing their burdens.

Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, was a theologian like that: he worked out his theology in the company of his friends and neighbors, and he called his disciples to come and follow him along the road of life. The first name given to the church by people outside its membership was 'the people of the road.'

It is there on the road of everyday life, that questions are asked which really matter, and relevant answers are discovered for them.

-David Brown: GOD'S TOMORROW, pp. 26, 27.

**you, there is a reality greater and stronger than evil. There is a higher truth than hate.** There is love. And love will triumph. For the Christian that love is the love of Christ, and those who hope in it will not be disappointed.

Thomas More was England's Chancellor and close confidant of Henry the 8th. Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, was unable to bear him a son, so he took a mistress—Anne Boleyn. He wanted the church to annul his marriage to Catherine. Ultimately, he contrived to get his way by having himself appointed head of the Church of England. His Chancellor would not acknowledge Henry as head of the church, so the King imprisoned him in the Tower of London from whence he was ultimately taken and beheaded in 1535. Thomas More's daughter, Meg visited him often in his cell. She pleaded with him to accede to the King's demand and save his life. But he refused on the ground that he could not so betray Christ to please the King. Meg argued with him. "It's not your fault that the state is bad, so why make yourself a hero by suffering for it?"

"Meg," said Thomas. *"If we lived in a state where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us good, and greed would make us saintly. And we would live—whether like animals or angels—in a happy land that needs no heroes. But since in fact we see that avarice anger, envy, pride, sloth, lust and stupidity profit more than humility, chastity, fortitude, justice and thought, and we have to make a choice to be human at all, when then we must stand fast, even at the risk of being heroes."*

Thomas did not want to lose his head, but he went to the executioner's block without the customary terror and despair of the condemned. His was not a devil-may-care, live fast-die young and have a good-looking corpse, kind of hope. It does not even compare with the maniacal bravado of a suicide

bomber. Accounts of More's death bear witness to a man possessed of extraordinary human sensitivity, calm and compassion.

*The executioner asked him for forgiveness and Thomas took time to speak a few words of encouragement to him. Then he asked the axe man to wait a few minutes while he moved his beard to one side—because he said 'his beard had not committed treason. This he suffered with much cheerfulness.*

Thomas More died in a hope informed by the idea that he was justified by Christ, reconciled to God by his death, and loved by God eternally. He was confident that such a love would not abandon him even in his death.

There is a hope that excels that which thinks to justify its existence through achievement. There is a higher hope than that which merely hopes not to fail. Hope in God through his Son Jesus is better than picking one's way gingerly through life to insure against offending the established order.

Fortified by hope in Christ we do not have to hide behind carefully selected civil conventions and easily met religious benchmarks, just to avoid so-called failure.

Hope that does not disappoint will not drown in self-pity when the world does not reward decency the way it was expected to do. Hope in Jesus transforms hard times by infusing them with meaning—*suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character, more hope.*

**The love of God means the future is ours. We are free to fail; often and spectacularly. We can live with our failures because God has already faced them and dealt with them. And we can attempt things, dare things in God's service that on any other hope we would not risk. And we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.**


## Hope In The Living God

By Stephen Neill

It is only through Jesus Christ that clear and confident hope has entered into the world. In one tremendous sentence, he has told us all that we need to know: *“He is not God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to him” (Luke 20:38)*. God is spoken of as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These were men to whom the word of God came. He had brought them into a living relationship to himself. Can that relationship be brought to an end just because a man dies? No, says Jesus; God lives forever, and those who put their trust in him, live also in his life. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not just men who lived a long time ago and heard the voice of God and died. They are still alive and God is still their God.



It is most important to note that Jesus has changed the form of the question. Job had asked, “Can a man live again?” We may believe the answer is no. Jesus puts it in quite a different way. Can a man who has trusted in the Living God really die? Once again, the answer is “No.” **There is no question of man being naturally immortal, or of his having an immortal soul, which cannot be touched by death. It is simply a question of his relationship to God. Will God give to a man that which man does not naturally have in himself? Will he give him the gift of eternal life? To this, the answer of Jesus is “Yes.”**

-Stephen Neill: WHAT IS MAN? pp. 72, 73. 

## No Hope In Princes

By Albert Nolan

For a Christian there is hope. There is always hope. In the words of Paul, we hope against hope—that is to say, we remain hopeful even when there appears to be no signs of hope at all. Why? It is because our hope is not based upon signs. Our hope is based upon God and God alone. Or, at least we try to do so.

What does it mean to put all ones hope and trust in God? In the first place, to quote from Psalm 146, it means that we do not put our trust in princes.

*“Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help... Happy are those... whose hope is in the Lord their God (146:3, 5).*

We cannot rely on the promises of princes: political princes or industrial princes or even princes of the church. Having good leaders is obviously helpful, but ultimately we cannot base our hope for the future upon human leaders of any kind. Nor can we put all our hope and confidence in human institutions of any kind: political parties, churches, governments or electricity suppliers. They can all flounder and fail.

Nor can we base our hope for the future on any kind of ideology: the ideologies of socialism or the free market or even democracy. To put all one’s hope and trust in God means that, while we might value and appreciate the contribution of the princes and institutions and ideologies, in the end we simply do not treat them as the absolute and unshakeable basis of our hopes for the future. Just how unreliable all these things are is precisely what we are beginning to discover today.

-Albert Nolan: HOPE IN AN AGE OF DESPAIR. pp. 6, 7. 



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