



To:



FROM:





THE CASE FOR

Hope

LEE STROBEL



ZONDERVAN
The Case for Hope
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ISBN: 978-0-310-46085-5 (Softcover)
ISBN: 978-0-310-33957-1 (Hardcover)

Special thanks to Mark Mittelberg for his invaluable contribution to creating this book.

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Cover design by Jeff and Lisa Franke, Art Lab Studios
Cover photo by Vladimir Piskunov, Getty Images

Printed in China

22 23 24 25 26 27 /GRI / 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CHAPTER ONE

Finding Hope in a Hopeless World

These three remain: faith, hope and love.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:13

FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE. ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE THESE are three indispensable and eternally enduring commodities, ones we ultimately can't live without.

Love, said Jesus, is the driving principle behind God's greatest commands. We must love God first, with everything we've got. And we must love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:34–40). It's no surprise that these are God's central values: the Bible tells us that at his very core "God *is* love" (1 John 4:8, 16, emphasis mine).

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Faith, biblically defined, is trust in God and in the payment he made for our sins when Jesus died on the cross. The apostle Paul said, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith” (Ephesians 2:8). Grace is a blessing we have not earned—in this case the gift of salvation that Jesus purchased for us—but faith is the means of receiving that gift.

And *hope*—the subject of this book—is the sense of expectancy and optimism that God wants to instill in all of us who love him and have faith in him. It’s an overriding confidence he gives, reminding us that, even in the midst of our greatest problems, God is still with us—and he is greater than any challenge we might face.

Hope is the inextinguishable flicker God ignites in our souls to keep us believing in the prevailing power of his light even when we are surrounded by utter darkness. It’s the unswerving belief that better days are ahead, probably in this world and most certainly in the next. It’s the quiet resolve he hardwires into our spirit that clings to the seemingly impossible truth that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” and that, in the grand scheme of things, “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:28, 37).

It was the apostle Paul—that unsinkable carrier of

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divine hope—who proclaimed, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

That, my friend, is a great reason for our hope, a truth that we need to let soak into our very being, because we live in a culture that seems bent on spreading, with evangelistic zeal, its relentless message of complete hopelessness.

Maybe that message has been getting the best of you. Perhaps your future feels uncertain, or a sense of guilt from your past weighs you down. Problems never seem far away.

“In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus warned. “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

We must, with God’s help, learn to cling to that rare and wonderful thing called hope. Otherwise, we’re destined for despair.

A CASE STUDY IN HOPELESSNESS

Major Harold Kushner was a prisoner of the Viet Cong for more than five years. Kushner describes one of his fellow

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American prisoners, a tough twenty-four-year-old Marine who had made a deal with their captors. The Marine agreed to cooperate with the enemy, and in return the commander of the prison camp promised he would let him go.

The young Marine did whatever was asked of him. He became a model prisoner, and he even became the leader of the camp's thought-reform group. But before long it became clear to him that the camp commander had lied to him and that the Viet Cong had no intention of actually releasing him.

This is how Major Kushner described what happened next to the Marine: "When the full realization of this took hold, he became a zombie. He refused to do all the work, and he rejected all offers of food and encouragement. He simply lay on his cot, sucking his thumb. In a matter of weeks, he was dead."¹

The cause of this prisoner's death might be summarized in one word: *hopelessness*.

There's little doubt that hopelessness can kill. In World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, many prisoners died from a condition doctors nicknamed "give-up-itis." The prisoners faced grim conditions and had no apparent prospect of freedom, and some of them became demoralized and deeply mired in despair. After a while they

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turned apathetic. They refused to eat or drink. They spent their time staring blankly into space. Drained of hope, these prisoners gradually wasted away and died.

The human spirit needs hope to survive and thrive. Said Dr. Arnold Hutschnecker, “Since my early years as a physician, I learned that taking away hope is, to most people, like pronouncing a death sentence. Their already hard-pressed will to live can become paralyzed, and they may give up and die.”²

The Bible set forth the essential nature of hope almost three thousand years ago, when King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 13:12: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.”

Pollster George Gallup observed, “People in many nations appear to be searching with a new intensity for spiritual moorings. One of the key factors prompting this search is a need for hope in these troubled times.”³

It’s not surprising that if God created us with a craving for hope, he would also serve as our ultimate Source of hope. Romans 15:13 refers to him as “the God of hope.” In fact, the Bible is a book brimming with hope. All told, there are ninety-seven uses of the word *hope* in the Old Testament and another eighty-three in the New Testament. The theme of hope is woven throughout Scripture.

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God offers a hope so powerful that it can transform a person's life and rewrite a person's future. But it's not the kind of hope we usually think of when we use that word. In fact, we use the term all the time to mean different things. Much of what we call "hope" falls into three categories: *wishful thinking*, *blind optimism*, and *hopeful dreams*.

WISHFUL THINKING

Wishful thinking is when we try to change reality with our thoughts, attempting to hope things into or out of existence. It's when we blow out the candles on our birthday cake and say to ourselves, "I hope I stay healthy for another year." It's when we pick up the *Wall Street Journal* and say, "I hope my stocks have gone up again." Or it's when we turn on the TV and say, "I hope our team beats the visiting team!"

Wishful thinking is an almost superstitious feeling that maybe, somehow, some way, our sincere desires will help things go the direction we want them to, even though we really don't have any power to make them happen.

Sometimes we engage in wishful thinking so much that we begin to convince ourselves that something's true even though it isn't. For example, years ago Leslie was

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pregnant with our first child, and I really wanted to have a boy. So I kept thinking about the baby being a boy. I even picked out boy's names. My desire for a boy was so strong that I became increasingly convinced we would soon have our son.

Finally the delivery day came. No kidding! I was there in the room, and the doctor delivered this beautiful baby girl. He held her up, I looked at her for the first time, and I exuberantly exclaimed: "It's a boy!"

Looking at me like I was a sex-education dropout, the doctor said, "Guess again!"

I had convinced myself that the baby was going to be a boy, but obviously that belief did nothing to affect the outcome. Of course we soon found out how great it was to have a girl like Alison, so then the second time around we were wishing for another daughter. Once again our wishes had no influence, and we soon had our second child, a wonderful little boy named Kyle.

The lesson? Wishful thinking doesn't change reality.

BLIND OPTIMISM

Another hopeful attitude is blind optimism. It's good to have a positive outlook, but some optimists are prone to

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seeing everything through rose-colored glasses. They paper over their problems as if those problems don't exist; they avert their eyes from the ugly aspects of the world; they act as if, for them, everything will be fine *all* the time.

There's a story about the parents of two young sons. One boy was a terrible pessimist, the other, an incessant optimist. The parents were worried because each son's personality was quite extreme. So at Christmastime the father said to his wife, "We need to do something drastic to break these boys out of their molds."

The parents filled up the pessimist's room with dozens and dozens of brand-new toys, and they filled up the optimist's room from floor to ceiling with horse manure, hoping this would help moderate their sons' attitudes.

Christmas morning finally came. The children were in their rooms for a couple of hours, and then the pessimist finally came out. The father asked him, "Did you play with your new toys?"

The pessimist moaned, "Nah, I didn't take them out of their packages. I was afraid that if I touched them, they'd just break, and then I'd be disappointed."

Then the optimist came bounding out of his room that had been filled with horse manure, and he was all smiles. His dad asked, "Why are you so happy?"

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“I just know that if I keep digging long enough,” replied the boy, “I’m going to find that pony!”

Do you know people like that? Optimists who are convinced everything’s always great, who gloss over problems in their lives? Their positive attitude might seem admirable, but, again, it doesn’t change reality.

HOPEFUL DREAMS

Then there are hopeful dreams. These are the lofty goals that we choose for ourselves and set out to achieve. In other words, we don’t just wish for a new car; we begin saving for one. We don’t just wish we could become a better golfer; we take lessons and spend time on the practice tee. We don’t just wish for a good marriage; we work at improving communication with our spouse.

Now, that’s all fine, and taking steps toward achievement can be very helpful. But the problem is that our hopeful dreams are restricted by our limitations. I could fantasize, for example, about becoming the next big NBA star, and I could even begin perfecting my free throw. But that wouldn’t change the fact that my vertical leap has to be measured in millimeters! There’s no way I’m ever going to get recruited by the Los Angeles Lakers. There are

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simply too many limitations—my age, physique, talent, and health—to make that a realistic possibility.

Also, our dreams often fall victim to other factors that are beyond our control. For instance, most corporate workers hope for lifelong job security and eventual retirement, but that doesn't stop companies from firing employees during economic downturns. Often the fulfillment of our hopeful dreams is at the mercy of others. Dwell on them as we might, our earnest belief in our dreams does not guarantee they will ever become a reality.

BIBLICAL HOPE

Now let me contrast wishful thinking, blind optimism, and hopeful dreams with biblical hope, which is the kind of hope described throughout Scripture. You see, for most people, hope is something they *do*, but the Bible talks about hope as something we can *have*.

Biblical hope is the confident expectation that God is willing and able to fulfill the promises he has made to those who trust in him. The Bible refers to this as “living hope,” and it is directly linked to the work of Christ on our behalf. The apostle Peter wrote this: “In [God’s] great

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mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3–4).

As we’ll explore in the next chapter, Jesus demonstrated through his resurrection that he really is God and that he truly does possess the power to fulfill his promises to us.

Promises that he’ll change our life.

Promises that he’ll guide us.

Promises that he’ll cause good to emerge from our personal problems.

Promises that he’ll grant us eternal life.

The resurrection is an actual, physical event in history that sealed Jesus’ identity as God Incarnate, who loves us and is committed to helping us.

Hebrews 6:19 says, “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” Now, I hate being on boats, so I don’t like to use boating illustrations. I usually have to wear a seasick patch just to talk about the subject, but an anchor really is a great analogy. That’s because our hope is only as good as whatever we anchor it to.

In and of itself, hope doesn’t have the power to change reality. We hope for this, we hope for that, and we might

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feel better for awhile. We might fool ourselves into thinking that everything will be okay.

But the only way hope has any impact is when we anchor it to the One who has real power. And not only does he have power, but he also has the strong desire to help. Anchoring our hope to Christ means we live with a confident expectation that he will therefore fulfill his promises to us.

Since I began following Christ, I've increasingly experienced that kind of hope. In fact, I want to discuss two important areas where I've drawn hope from him. I'm confident these areas will be encouraging to you as well.

ABSOLVED OF OUR PAST

First, there's hope because I've been absolved of my past. The Bible says in Lamentations 3:21–23, “This I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning.”

In other words, we can live with hope because even though we fail God, fail our families, and fail ourselves, God’s compassion is a renewable resource. It’s fresh and available every day, and he’s willing to offer us a new start.

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I was thinking about this while I was watching the comedy *City Slickers*. Do you remember that film? It's about three guys from New York City who were in various stages of midlife crisis, so they decided to break out of their familiar settings and head out West on an adventure vacation that included riding horses on a cattle drive. This gave them lots of time to talk about their lives.

One of the guys was named Phil, and his life was a wreck. He was in a dead-end job at his father-in-law's grocery store, and he was facing a divorce. In one scene, he and his buddies were in a tent when Phil broke down and began crying.

"I'm at a dead end!" he sobbed. "I'm almost forty years old. I've wasted my life!"

One of his friends tried to console him. "But now you've got a chance to start over," he said. "Remember when we were kids and we'd be playing ball and the ball would get stuck up in the tree or something? We'd yell, 'Do-over!' Look, Phil, your life is a do-over. You've got a clean slate!"

But Phil wasn't so sure. "I've got no place to live. I'm going to get wiped out in the divorce because I've committed adultery, so I may never even see my kids again. I'm alone!" he said. "How's that slate look now?"

As I watched that scene, I thought, *How is a guy like*

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Phil ever going to really be able to start over? And the answer is only through the kind of do-over he can get from God. After all, God is in the do-over business! He's the one who offers us a new birth (John 3:3), who proclaims "the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17), and who finally declares, "I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:5).

We can wish we'd never committed the wrongs that we've committed. We can attempt to cover them up as if they never really happened. We can try to deal with them on our own. But Jesus would tell us, "I can erase your sins so you can truly start over. I can forgive you, and I can help you heal and find hope again."

Some people need a do-over from God because guilt has squeezed the hope out of their lives. This is what had happened to a woman who wrote a letter to our church. Several years earlier she had been living with a man, and she got pregnant. Even though she wanted the baby very much, her boyfriend persuaded her to have an abortion. Then, later, he abandoned her.

The woman wrote, "For years I was miserable. I was ashamed of myself for not being strong enough to stand up for myself or my baby."

Do you see how guilt tries to convince us that our

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failures disqualify us from ever starting over? Guilt robs us of hope.

Remorse haunted this young woman for years. Finally, in desperation, she turned to Christ and, in effect, asked for a do-over, for a fresh start from God. He not only forgave her and wiped her slate clean, but he has healed her emotions as well.

Now that God's forgiveness has renewed her hope, it's like the darkness has been lifted and a new day has dawned. This is what she wrote before she was baptized as a follower of Jesus: "I can't thank God enough for all the grace I received from him." She later declared through her baptism that this God who had given her a new beginning is the God she wants to follow and serve forever.

How about you? Is it time to ask God for a do-over in your life? If you're lugging around a backpack filled with guilt over mistakes you've made, a marriage that went bad, kids you've let down, or promises to God that you've broken, don't keep carrying your past—whatever it is—into your future.

The question is not "Will God grant you a do-over?" The Bible promises, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). God is anxious to give you

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a do-over; the question is whether you're willing to reach out and ask for one.

Or maybe you can relate to Phil's character in *City Slickers* because you're realizing that, like him, you've been wasting your life. You've pursued your own hopes and dreams long enough to accumulate a bunch of stuff that, in the end, has failed to satisfy your soul.

A successful executive sat across from me at lunch and told me how empty he felt despite all he had achieved in his business. There's nothing wrong with what he had accomplished, but he said to me, "I've been a casual Christian all my life, and I'm sick to death of it." He almost spit out the words. "It's a boring and frustrating life, and I want to stop, but I don't know what to do."

I'll tell you what I told him: it's not too late for a do-over. To say to God, "I don't want to squander my one and only life any longer. Let me start over, and this time I'll keep my compass pointed in your direction. I want to experience the adventure of being your follower. I want to feel the exhilaration of having a mission in life that really matters. I want my life to add up to something more than just a bunch of material things."

God is the God of do-overs, and that should give us great hope. We really *can* be absolved of our past.

HOPE FOR OUR FUTURE

Second, we can have hope because we can be assured of our future.

Sometimes I think back to the days when I was convinced there was no God. I would lie awake at night and think about the ultimate hopelessness of life. I believed that when we die, that's it. *Lights out*. There's nothing more.

That's a terrifying thought, isn't it? About one out of four Americans thinks that death is the end of their human existence,⁴ and that idea breeds hopelessness—a hopelessness so dark that many can't face it, so they revert to false forms of hope. They engage in wishful thinking: “Maybe when I die, I'll be reincarnated or something.” Or they leap into blind optimism: “I just won't think about it. By the time I get around to dying, they'll have a cure for whatever I've got.” Others pursue hopeful dreams by saying, “I'll watch my carbs, run the treadmill, cut my weight, and lengthen my lifespan.”

Those defense mechanisms may make people feel better, but they don't change the reality that death still plays a perfect game: *one out of one ends up dead*. And death has an annoying habit of being completely unpredictable.

I was talking about the inevitability of death with a

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computer salesman named Jeff Miller, who attended our church. He told me about a fateful flight he had taken from Denver to Chicago. About forty minutes before they were to land at O'Hare International Airport, there was a muffled explosion, and the plane swung to the side so violently that the book Jeff was reading flew out of his hands. As it turned out, the engine in the tail had exploded, and the plane's steering was severely crippled.

As the plane made the approach for an emergency landing in Sioux City, Iowa, it became clear that the situation was desperate. Jeff told me that some of the people around him began trembling and crying from fear. Others put on an air of optimism and kept telling themselves there was nothing to worry about. But Jeff, who had been a Christian for several years, spent the time praying a simple prayer that was anchored in hope.

He said, "Thank you, Lord, that you're mine and I'm yours. God, I want to live, but I know if I don't, I'll be with you, and you'll care for my family." Jeff had a confident expectation that God would fulfill his promises to him.

You may have seen the video of that plane when it scraped awkwardly onto the runway, broke apart, cartwheeled, and exploded into orange flames. Jeff braced himself for a violent death, but it never came. His piece of

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the fuselage tumbled into a cornfield, where it came to a stop, upside down. Jeff hung there, suspended in his seat, with not a mark on him.

I asked Jeff, “What was it like when everyone knew the plane was going down? I mean, people don’t usually survive airplane crashes. Was there a feeling of being in a hopeless situation?”

He said, “Lee, I’ll tell you the truth. It *was* scary, but at the same time I felt like I was full of hope. I mean, there was hope if I lived, and there was the hope that if I died, I’d be with Christ. It’s like it says in Psalm 118:6: ‘What can anybody do to you if your hope is in the Lord?’”

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How we face death tells us a lot about how we’ll face life. The Bible says that because followers of Christ have the hope of eternity, they can live their lives with boldness and strength.

When you have the confident expectation that God will live up to his promises, it changes the way you think about death. I know it has for me.

When I was a fairly new Christian, I remember watching television one day, and they were featuring a world-class

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figure skater named Nancy Kerrigan of Boston. While she was skating, the camera showed her mother at the side of the rink with her nose pressed up against a large television set. Nancy's mom had been struck virtually blind when she was thirty-one years old, so she needed to get right up to the big screen to see anything.

The interviewer asked her what she was able to make out. She said, "Well, I can see some shapes and movement when she jumps." And then she broke down and started to cry. Between sobs, she said, "But I can't see her face! *I can't see my daughter's face!*"

Her words grabbed me. They helped me understand something I'd been feeling, because Mrs. Kerrigan's experience with her daughter was a little like my relationship with Christ. I've been able to sense his comfort in my life; I've experienced his presence; I've felt him guiding me and loving me. *But I can't see his face.*

Yet I have the confident expectation that one day I'll stand before him, and at that moment I'll finally be able to look straight into his eyes. That's not something to fear for those who know him; it's something to anticipate with excitement. God has taken me from a state of hopelessness about death to having real hope.

Let me encourage you to pray a prayer as you continue

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reading this book. Say to God, “I want to know for certain, with your help, that I’ve been absolved of my past, and I want to be confident, through Christ, that I’ve been assured of my future.”

My prayer is that, moving ahead, you’ll base your hope not on wishful thinking or any of the other counterfeit versions, but on the One who has the power to truly change your life and assure your eternity.

SACRIFICIAL HOPE

Earlier in this chapter I told a story about a prisoner of war that illustrated how hopelessness can drain life from us. Now I want to end with another POW story, one that illustrates the hope we can have in Christ.

My friend, author and speaker Cliffe Knechtle, recounts the story of a group of Allied soldiers who were being held prisoner by the Japanese army during World War II. Each day, they were taken into a field to do hard labor. One day, at the end of their long shift, the guards counted the number of shovels and discovered that one was missing. They lined up the prisoners and said, “Who stole the shovel?”

Nobody stepped forward to confess. They again

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demanded an answer, and nobody responded. With that, the commander shouted, “All die! All die!” The guards cocked their rifles and aimed at the prisoners’ heads.

At that moment, all hope appeared lost. The men braced themselves for the bullets.

But before the triggers were pulled, a Scottish soldier stepped forward and said, “I stole the shovel.” Instantly, the guards turned their guns on him and shot him dead.

The other soldiers carried his body and the remaining tools back to the prison camp. When they arrived there, the Japanese guards counted the shovels once more, and do you know what they discovered? *There was no shovel missing.* They had miscounted.

The innocent Scottish soldier had sacrificed his life so that his comrades could live.

That story serves as a rough metaphor for what Jesus Christ has done for us. The Bible says we’re all in a hopeless situation. We’ve all violated God’s laws in one way or another, and because of our sins, we deserve a severe penalty. That penalty is spiritual death, which is separation from God for all of eternity in a place of utter hopelessness.

That’s the predicament we face, and no amount of wishful thinking, blind optimism, or hopeful dreaming can change it.

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But because of his great love for you, Jesus Christ stepped forward to willingly take your death penalty so that you could be absolved of your past and assured of your future. And, frankly, the only reason we can have hope is because Jesus is saying, “All you need to do is trust in me and accept my payment on your behalf.”

The all-important question is this: *What will your response be?*

As I close this chapter, let me point you to the hope-filled message of Ephesians 1:18–19:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

