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HOPE
IN TIMES
OF FEAR

*The Resurrection and
the Meaning of Easter*

INTRODUCTION



In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . . and so your faith and hope are in God.

—1 PETER 1:3,21

A New Age of Anxiety

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and its aftermath, the Western world had been experiencing a growing crisis of hope.

For at least two centuries Western cultures had been animated by a powerful hope that history was progressive, that the human race was moving inevitably toward creating a world of greater and greater safety, prosperity, and freedom. In short, there was a strong belief that overall every generation of human beings would experience a better world than the previous generation. This is one of the legacies of the European Enlightenment, whose many figures predicted that human reason, ingenuity, and science, once freed from superstitions of the past, would inevitably bring in a better future.¹

But then came the twentieth century. In 1947 W. H. Auden wrote his book-length poem *The Age of Anxiety*. The poem is about four persons in a bar in Manhattan talking about their lives and about life. It won the Pulitzer Prize but is seldom read. What grabbed attention was its title, which seemed to capture the cultural moment. In less than four decades the world had passed through two world wars, a pandemic, and the Great De-

pression and, at the time, it was heading into decades of a nuclear-armed Cold War between the West and communist nations.

Yet when the Cold War ended in 1989, the older belief in inevitable human progress seemed to revive. Some even declared “the end of history,” meaning that the lethal struggles between the great ideologies—fascism, communism, and Western-style democracy—were finally over. The fears of warfare that could bring about worldwide conflagration were diminished. International capitalism, fueled by globalization, went into high gear and many economies seemed to be thriving. The Age of Anxiety was over; the earlier optimism of the Enlightenment was rekindling. The number of people who said that children today will grow up to be better off than their parents’ generation went up to over 50 percent of the population.²

One leading thinker who has provided an empirical basis for this optimism is Steven Pinker of Harvard University. His books *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* and *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* assemble data to argue that across the world there is decreasing violence, warfare, and poverty, as well as lengthening life spans and improving health care.³

Pinker confines himself to empirical measures of comfort and safety, but Yuval Noah Harari makes stronger claims. In his 2017 bestseller *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* he argues that in ancient times human beings turned to God or to gods only because they did not have control over the world in which they lived. But we have that control now.

At the dawn of the third millennium, humanity wakes up to an amazing realization. Most people rarely think about it, but in the last few decades we have managed to rein in famine, plague and war. Of course, these problems have not been completely solved, but they have been transformed from incomprehensible and uncontrollable forces of nature into manageable challenges. We don’t need to pray to any god or saint to rescue us from them. We know quite well what needs to be done in order to prevent famine, plague and war—and we usually succeed in doing it.⁴

The title of the book *Homo Deus* conveys its basic conclusion. It is not merely that we no longer need God. Humanity now *is* God. We are our own hope for the future, our own God. We can have not just hope but confidence in a bright future because we have all the resources within ourselves to bring it about.

The Loss of Hope

Pinker and Harari, despite having many followers, are not capturing the spirit of the age as did Auden. By the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century the numbers of people believing in a better life for their children began to decline again.⁵ Pessimism about the future for our children and society has only deepened over the past fifteen or twenty years, as a variety of polls and surveys show.⁶

There are many reasons. Some point to a polarization and fragmentation in society that goes far beyond the usual political partisanship. There is a growing tribalism that reveals a culture in which there is a vacated center, a loss of any shared idea of common public good. There is a profound loss of social trust that appears to be undermining all the institutions that have held our society together.

There is another category of threats to our future that come not from a lack of scientific and technological progress but, ironically, as the result of it. For example, pandemics may be impossible to contain because of our mobility through air travel and because of the globalization of our economies, all due to modern technology. Our polarization and loss of trust in what to believe is now acknowledged to be, to a great degree, fueled by social media. Then there is the threat of climate change and the never-ending possibility of international terrorism, both heightened by scientific advances. The very things that were supposed to save us from terrible perils have created new ones.

Andrew Sullivan points to another category of reasons for the increasing sense of anxiety and hopelessness characterizing our age. Sullivan

professes to be a great admirer of Pinker, and in a review of his book *Enlightenment Now*, he finds no fault in any of its empirical conclusions. But Sullivan then adds: “[Pinker] doesn’t have a way of explaining why, for example, there is so much profound discontent, depression, drug abuse, despair, addiction, and loneliness in the most advanced liberal societies.” He notes: “As we have slowly and surely attained more progress, we have lost something that undergirds all of it: meaning, cohesion, and a different, deeper kind of happiness than the satiation of all our earthly needs.”⁷

Yuval Harari believes that people turned to God for hope in the past because of an inability to understand or control the natural environment. But religion addressed something much deeper than that. The human dilemma from time immemorial has not only been about how to control nature “out there” but—the far more difficult challenge—how to control nature “in here,” that is, the many enigmas and problems of human nature itself. We hunger for meaning and purpose. We find that things that we thought would bring us satisfaction do not. We are shocked at the evil things other human beings—and we ourselves—are capable of doing. What can we do about *us*? As Sullivan indicates, controlling external nature is not enough, and there is plenty of evidence in a year of the COVID-19 pandemic that we are far from having done even that.

Pinker and Harari believe that leaving religion behind is an important part of human progress. But the prominent philosopher Jürgen Habermas over the last twenty years has taken a different position. He recognizes the limits of secular reason for providing moral absolutes and motivations to sacrifice one’s selfish interests for the good of others. Habermas, though not a Christian, believes that religion can provide a basis for the sacredness of all human life and a motivation for sacrificial love in human relationships. These are things mere science cannot give us.⁸ The greatest threat to our hope for a better world is not the natural environment but the various evils that continually spring from the human heart. Science cannot eradicate human evil—in fact it can give it more tools to use for its own ends. And by “evil” we don’t mean only the horrendous eruptions such as the

Jewish holocaust. We mean the ordinary cruelties of self-interest in business, racial bias, arrogance and pride, dishonesty and corruption, and the innumerable daily acts of selfishness that pull society downward.

The Hope of the Resurrection

One of the reasons for the remarkable rise of Christianity in its earliest centuries was that it offered resources for hope in the face of the numerous urban pandemics that were devastating the Roman world. Kyle Harper, a historian who has written on ancient pandemics, was interviewed and asked about how Christianity kept thriving and growing in the bleakness of those times. He said:

For [Christians], it was a positive program. This life was always meant to be transitory, and just part of a larger story. What was important to the Christians was to orient one's life towards the larger story, the cosmic story, the story of eternity. They did live in this world, experience pain, and loved others. But the Christians of that time were called to see the story of this life as just one of the stories in which they lived. The hidden map was this larger picture.⁹

The Christian "hidden map" went far beyond ordinary religious consolations. For example, other religions spoke of the uncertain possibility of a better hereafter if our moral performance was sufficient. The Christian hope exceeded such quavering wishful thinking in every way. The biblical word *elpida*, translated as the weaker English word *hope*, means profound certainty. Christians view even the hardest circumstances as part of a history guided by God at every turn toward not merely some kind of afterlife but toward the resurrection of our bodies and souls into new, remade heavens and earth.

And all this hope centers on one explosive event—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is what Christianity offers a world that has lost hope.

The Christians to whom Peter wrote had already “suffered grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:6) and were now in the midst of a “fiery ordeal” (1 Peter 4:1). But Peter reminds them of this: “He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. . . . so your faith and hope are in God” (1 Peter 1:3,21). The fact of the resurrection means we have a hope for the future not based on scientific advance or social progress but on God himself (1 Peter 1:21). And this is not simply an intellectual belief but, as Peter says, it is a “living hope,” a vital part of the new spiritual life that comes into Christians by the Holy Spirit through what the New Testament calls “the new birth.” Faith in the resurrection implants that hope into the root of our souls. It becomes such a part of who we are that we can face anything.

But what *is* this faith in the resurrection that can become a living hope, burning within us like a warming and energizing fire? And how do we get it?

Knowing the Resurrection

The first step is to believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ really happened. The resurrection is of little use as a mere symbol. And as we will see, belief in the resurrection was as difficult for people in Jesus’s day as it is for us. Ancient and modern worldviews alike believe that resurrections from the dead simply can’t happen. The evidence for Jesus’s resurrection was formidable. It answered people’s intellectual objections then and still can do so today.

However, accepting the bare fact of the resurrection does not automatically make it a living hope for us. We must understand not only that it happened but also, just as important, what it means. Many of us will have trouble thinking of any time that we heard an extensive treatment of the

resurrection from the pulpit outside of Easter Sunday. In mainline Protestant pulpits the resurrection is usually seen as a general concept, a symbol that somehow good will triumph over evil. And when the resurrection is preached in evangelical church pulpits, the sermon often consists of a lengthy argument that it really happened. Yet it is one thing to know about the resurrection, and it is another thing, as Paul says, “to *know the power* of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10), to know it personally and experientially. Surprisingly, the church has not given us much guidance in that.

In my own church tradition, Presbyterian and Reformed, classic systematic theologies give far more attention to Jesus’s death on the cross than to this resurrection. Charles Hodge, the Princeton theologian, spends 127 pages on the cross and only four on the resurrection. Other theological treatments are similar.¹⁰ Sam Allberry writes that many Christians, while believing in the resurrection and rehearsing that belief every Easter Sunday, “then effectively stick it back in a drawer for the rest of the year” because they are “at a loss to know what to do with it.”¹¹ Verses like Romans 4:25—“he . . . was raised for our justification”—show us that it is not just the death of Jesus but also his resurrection that saves us. Yet when most Christians give a “gospel” presentation to explain how we can be saved, they talk exclusively about the cross and make the resurrection an afterthought or leave it out altogether.

The Good Invasion

The resurrection is not a stupendous magic trick but an invasion. And the event that saved us—the movement from cross to resurrection—now remakes the lives of Christians from the inside out, by the power of the Spirit.

The cross and the resurrection together—and only together—bring the future new creation, the omnipotent power through which God renews and heals the entire world, *into our present*. When Christ paid the debt of sin on the cross, the veil in the temple was ripped from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). That veil represented the separation of humanity from the

holy presence of God. That presence had once made the earth a paradise and now, because of the death of Christ, that presence *can* come to us, and because of the resurrection of Christ, it *does* come to us. The risen Christ sends us the Holy Spirit, and both Christ and the Spirit are the “firstfruits” (Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:20–23), the “earnest” (Ephesians 1:13–14; 2 Corinthians 1:22,23, 5:5 KJV), a first installment, a down payment on the future triumph over death and of a new, remade material world. This renewing power from the future is only here partially, but it is actual and substantial—and has entered the present world.

The “incomparably great power” with which God raised Jesus from the dead is in us now (Romans 8:23; Ephesians 1:19–20). So we are to live in the “light” of the future “new creation” (Romans 13:11–13; Galatians 6:15; cf. 1 Corinthians 6:1–2). That is, we are to participate in that future resurrection life in the way we live now. If Jesus was raised from the dead, it changes everything: how we conduct relationships, our attitudes toward wealth and power, how we work in our vocations, our understanding and practice of sexuality, race relations, and justice.

Also, the cross and the resurrection together—and only together—give us the basic shape or pattern by which Christians now “live in light of the new creation.” The cross and resurrection is the Great Reversal. Christ saves us through weakness, by giving up power and succumbing to a seeming defeat. But he triumphs—not despite the weakness and loss of power but *because of it* and *through it*. The Great Reversal becomes “a dynamic” that “opens out onto a rhythm of life, an ethic, and a way of looking at and living in the world” and every aspect of life.¹² By living this principle, death and resurrection, we renew human life here—only partially, but substantially. The “already but not yet” presence of the new creation avoids both naivete and cynicism, both utopianism and defeatism.

An Outline of the Book

This is the basic thesis of the book—that the resurrection, the Great Reversal, brings us both the power and the pattern for living life now connected to God’s future new creation.

To unfold this theme, I will begin in chapter 1 by looking at the resurrection as a historical fact. It is of course much more than that, but it is not less. Modern skepticism about the supernatural makes it difficult for people to believe in the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. But without the miracle of the resurrection our infallible confidence in a future triumph over evil and death vanishes. Then, in the following four chapters I will explore how the resurrection as the Great Reversal is the key for understanding the plot-line of the entire Bible, as well as the operating principle for the life of a Christian. In the sixth and seventh chapters I will examine how personal resurrection faith begins by looking at five famous case studies: Mary, John, Thomas, Peter, and Paul. In the final five chapters I will look at specific areas of life and explore how the resurrection gives us unique resources for living faithfully and distinctively in each one.

Perhaps the most ordinary, daily benefit of the resurrection is this. To follow not a dead, revered teacher but rather a risen Lord is to have him actually *with* us. In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says he “stands at the door and knocks” and that if “anyone hears my voice and opens the door,” he will come in and eat with them “and they with me.” It is commonly thought that this is an invitation to nonbelievers to “open their hearts to Jesus,” but in the context of Revelation 3 Jesus is speaking to the church, to Christians. To eat with someone was and is to have fellowship with them. Jesus is saying to believers that there is a potential for rich, intimate communion with him, for knowing him and knowing his love, that is generally untapped.

Because of the resurrection, he is not a deceased writer we know only through his books. He is alive and he is calling to us. “Here I am!” he says to you (Revelation 3:20). Open up and love him and listen to him. Those who do so will “awaken from despair and put away the imaginations of darkness.”¹³