

## PEOPLE OF HOPE IN AN AGE OF DESPAIR: HOW ETERNITY AND HISTORY GROUND THE CHRISTIAN'S FUTURE

CHRISTOPHER J. GANSKI<sup>1</sup>

### I. THE AGE OF DESPAIR

We live in an age of increasing despair. This despite the fact that the world is a far safer place than it has ever been. This despite the fact that poverty rates around the world are at their lowest level in history. This despite the fact that life spans have increased and wealth has spread to more and more people. This despite the fact that our technologies have gotten more powerful and sophisticated. Yes, violence, disease, poverty, and inequality continue to exist, but within the larger perspective of history we have made incredible progress. And we continue to make progress. We have reason to hope. This at least is the argument for progress that Harvard professor Steven Pinker makes in his recent book, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*.<sup>2</sup> Pinker wrote his book to counter the mood of cultural despair around social progress. He argues that if we look at the bigger picture, never have we had so many reasons to be hopeful about the possibilities of human progress in history. Nevertheless, even though objectively speaking the world seems to be a far better place now than it was 100 years ago, for most people *it does not feel better*. We do not experience it as better. All the progress Pinker has named has yet to translate into an increase in broad social hope.

On September 5, 2019 the Joint Economic Committee of Congress published a report titled *Long Term Trends in Deaths of Despair*. The report tracks the dramatic rise since 1999 of “deaths by despair” which they define as deaths by suicide, drug and alcohol poisoning, and alcoholic liver disease and cirrhosis.

---

<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. Ganski is the Senior Pastor at City Reformed Church in Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

Mortality from deaths of despair far surpasses anything seen in America since the dawn of the 20th century . . . The recent increase has primarily been driven by an unprecedented epidemic of drug overdoses, but even excluding those deaths, the combined mortality rate from suicides and alcohol-related deaths is higher than at any point in more than 100 years . . . Rising unhappiness may have increased the *demand* for ways to numb or end despair, such that the cumulative effects show up years later in the form of higher death rates. But the proliferation of a uniquely addictive and deadly class of drugs has meant that the *supply* of despair relief has become more prevalent and more lethal.<sup>3</sup>

The increase in “deaths by despair” are not limited to pockets of poverty, violence, and inequality. They are distributed broadly across social classes. Pinker’s book makes a compelling case that the world is a better place by most measures, but he cannot make sense of the despair problem. And neither can our secular culture. That is because despair is not merely a material problem, an economic problem, a social problem, or a freedom problem. It is a meaning problem. Despair cannot be simply solved through social action, congressional committee, innovative policy making, or a stronger economy. At its heart, despair is a spiritual condition. It has to do with where we find ultimate meaning and purpose in life.

Hope is the opposite of despair. In what do we hope? What is the fundamental basis of our hope as a people? It would seem the American psyche is like a rickety old China cabinet filled with fragile teacups. Just the slightest vibration or tremor seems to rattle and break us to pieces. Why is that? The mass fragility of our culture and its susceptibility to despair reflects the fact that we have placed our hope in things which the apostle Peter would describe as perishable, subject to corruption, and of depreciating value.

We need a hope that is not fragile; a hope that can confront despair; a hope that is “imperishable, undefiled and unfading.” This kind of hope must be in something that is beyond this present world and time. The apostle Peter opens his first letter with a greeting of hope: “Blessed be our God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1:3).<sup>4</sup> Real hope is a living hope that finds its basis in the triune God.

Peter is writing to scattered Christian communities he describes as exiles. He addresses these exiles as a people of hope (a major theme throughout the letter) for an important reason: these Christians are struggling.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Joint Economic Committee of Congress, *Long Term Trends in Deaths of Despair*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2019/9/long-term-trends-in-deaths-of-despair>.

<sup>4</sup> All biblical quotations are from the ESV.

<sup>5</sup> For social-cultural background on 1 Peter see Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

They are in social and political exile. They do not have a land. They do not have political freedom and autonomy. They do not have social equality. Their life cannot be secured by wealth and cultural power. They are suffering and vulnerable. Some are persecuted. They are cultural minorities. And yet Peter reminds them that they *must not despair* or pity themselves because they are a people who have been born anew into a “living hope.” The church today is very susceptible to American cultural despair. There are many churches and Christians living in despair. This is in part because we have tied our hope and sense of meaning too closely to the American dream, identity, and destiny. Peter calls us to be a different kind of church in the world. He calls us to be a church in exile. And a church in exile is defined by a deep hope in God.

## II. EXILED, NOT DESPAIRING

What does it mean for the church in exile to be a people of hope? We must first answer the question, what does it mean to hope? Hope is a universal human experience. Every person, regardless of race, culture, or creed, hopes in something. Hope is desire aimed towards the future. Hope is the heart’s orientation to the future. It is our imagination of ourselves within a story whose unfolding is towards flourishing. There is great diversity in the different things in which we place our hope: a future career, falling in love, getting married, having children, a well-planned vacation, the eradication of injustice in the world. Regardless of what it is, no one can live without hope. This is an existential impossibility. Without hope we die. Hope is the necessary oxygen for the soul that gives us the desire to continue living. When life seems to offer no future that is worth living, despair sets in. To lose hope leads to death by despair.

Victor Frankel in his memoir *Man’s Search for Meaning* chronicles his life as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps of Birkenau and Auschwitz. Frankel’s profession before his imprisonment was as a psychotherapist. The organizing question of his memoir has to do with what permitted some prisoners to psychologically survive the concentration camp where others had failed. In his estimation, the capacity for hope was central. “The prisoner who had lost hope in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay.”<sup>6</sup> Frankel tells the story of a hopeful prisoner who shared a dream with him that they as prisoners would all be liberated on March 30, 1945. This hope gave him the will to survive. It was February 1945 at the time. When March 30 came and went without their liberation, the man who had the dream became delirious and lost consciousness. The next day he died of typhus. Frankel says, “The ultimate cause of my friend’s death was that the expected liberation did not come, and he was severely disappointed. His faith in the future and his will to live had become paralyzed and his body

---

<sup>6</sup> Victor Frankel, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon, 1959), 74.

fell victim to illness.”<sup>7</sup> He lost his footing as he grasped at mere illusion and fell to his death in despair.

Peter describes the Christian hope as a “living” hope. A “living” hope is contrasted to a “futile” or “dead” hope. A hope that is not living is a hope that fails us when we need it most, a hope that turns out to be an illusion. A living hope is “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Pet 1:4). Peter maintains that living hope must not be vulnerable to decay, corruption, defilement, or loss of value. The category of “inheritance” is helpful to understand this hope. Christian hope is not just a feeling or mood we have about things turning out for our good in the distant future. Christian hope is something we can grasp. Inheritance in Peter’s context evokes the imagery of land and material blessing, something tangible we can possess. In the OT, the Jewish hope for inheritance was tied directly to the promise of land to Israel. God promised Abraham and his descendants a land and said, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen 12:2). God came through on these promises, but, as it turned out, exile proved to Israel that the inheritance of land, progeny, reputation, and material blessing was subject to corruption, decay, and loss of value. In exile, the people had to learn a deeper hope: God himself was Israel’s true inheritance. Being God’s people in the land was the means by which they were meant to experience God as their inheritance. It took the experience of exile for the people to learn to hope in God alone, not just the material blessings he provided.

Frankel in his memoir shares another insight about surviving the death camp that relates to finding hope in situations when the material conditions of our life are dire and desperate. According to Frankel, during the darkest hours of our life, hope must be fueled by a vision of the beloved. He says,

I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss . . . [and that is through] the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when a man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring suffering in the right way—in an honorable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words “The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.”<sup>8</sup>

Frankel opens our eyes to see how hope is related to imagination. To hope is to see and envision, not just the future, but what we love most. Contemplating what we love gives us the will to survive. In hope we have capacity to see and behold a glory and love that is weightier than our suffering is heavy. The question is, Do we have a beloved in which we

---

<sup>7</sup> Frankel, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Frankel, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 38.

can become lost in perpetual contemplation? Who or what should be the beloved object of our imagination? The right answer, of course, is God. God is our beloved. God the one in whom we hope.

However, if we are honest, most of us do not tie our hope very deeply to God. Our hope is like Israel's, tied to this-worldly blessings and the earthly inheritances God provides. While these are good things and worthy objects of penultimate hope which provide real meaning—children, family, marriage, career, a household, community, citizenship, service to country, making a difference in the world—they cannot give us the fullest, deepest meaning for which we were created. Someday we will experience a kind of exile in relationship to all these things because they are perishable, corruptible, and fading.

Consider this: every relationship and love in our life will someday come to an end by death. Everyone you love will someday die if you don't die first. Every institution, movement, or community you hold dear and have given your life to—whether it be your marriage, your family, a career, our nation, a neighborhood—is subject to defilement, moral failure, and corruption. If you are lucky, your career and health will be good for many years, but these too begin to fade. Like a new car that you drive out of the dealer's lot begins to depreciate in value, so our bodies, careers, and accomplishments depreciate and fade in value over time. All the things we give ourselves to will eventually turn to dust. What is your hope after these things give out?

This is why the experience of exile is a gift. It helps us see that having merely this-worldly hope is not a living hope. It ends ultimately in futility and death. Life in exile allows us to find the deepest meaning and reason for hope in this world, which is God alone. As C. S. Lewis says, quoting one of the mystics, "He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only."<sup>9</sup> Do you believe this can be true?

### III. THE HOPE OF INHERITANCE IN GOD

How is hoping in God alone a tangible inheritance? How does this become real? Christian hope is not a vague belief in God or a sentimental thinking about life after death. It is quite concrete. Peter wants us to know that Christian hope is grounded in the facts, actions, and events of God the Trinity in history. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet 1:3). There are three dimensions of the basis of Christian hope in the context of 1 Peter.

#### A. THE MERCY OF GOD THE FATHER

The first is that Christian hope is grounded in the great mercy of God the Father. God becomes the beloved contemplation of our hope because we have become his beloved children. Christian hope is distinguished

---

<sup>9</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Harper Collins, 1949), 34.

from all other hopes in that it promises an inheritance we do not deserve. Most hopes we have are things we are working towards, things we fight for or believe we deserve or should possess as a right. Not so with Christian hope. You cannot earn this hope. Christian hope is grounded in an act of the Father's mercy in saving us. Christian hope understands that misery is our deserved inheritance because of our sin and rebellion against God. And yet, it is mercy that we have received. This is an especially precious basis for our hope when the things of which we despair the most are not the circumstances of our life, but our very selves. How do you hope when you have lost all hope in yourself? When you hate yourself? When you do not feel like you deserve any future? So many of the deaths by despair in America today reflect this kind of personal hopelessness. Biblical hope is not grounded in our own sense of worthiness, but in the great mercy of God as our Father.

Perhaps you feel like the prodigal son who threw away his inheritance and trashed his life. Perhaps you think you only deserve to be a hired hand that eats with the pigs. But the great mercy of the Father is this: he sees you coming home, he does not stand with his arms crossed at the threshold. No, he runs towards you, he wraps you with his royal robe, he slaughters a lamb and throws a party on your behalf. The Father delights in you. You are his beloved daughter, his beloved son. No matter how badly you screwed up your life, great mercy is your inheritance. What God the Father says to his own Son, Jesus, he says to you and me: "This is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased" (see Matt 3:17). Our hope is grounded in the fact that because of the Father's mercy we have become objects of God's beloved contemplation. He loves us beyond measure.

#### B. THE NEW BIRTH IN CHRIST THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

The second basis for Christian hope is being "born again." We can also call this the new birth. What does it mean? How is it related to hope? First consider what we receive at the time of our biological birth. Birth is all-encompassing and determinative. It sets the course of our life. At birth, without any input from ourselves, we are given a name, a sex, an ethnicity, DNA, a culture, a language, a nationality, a socio-economic status, and a family. When the Bible speaks of being born again or the new birth, it should evoke for us comprehensive transformation to a new life and identity. New birth is cosmic in magnitude. To be born again marks our entrance to *a whole new order of existence*. To experience the new birth is to undergo an inner transformation that fundamentally distinguishes and alters our life and identity from that which came before it. It touches the very foundations of our personality, everything about us. Even though we might not feel it or experience it fully, new birth means that through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit there is a new principle of life at work in us.

The Spirit is the power of new creation itself, and that Spirit dwells within us. The same divine power that will bring complete and total renovation of the cosmos has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy

Spirit. The same Creator Spirit that hovered over the “formless and void” depths, the same Spirit that was the breath of life in Adam, the same Spirit that surrounded the virgin womb of Mary—that Spirit has been poured out richly into our hearts for the sake of complete and total renovation and renewal of your life. Sometimes we despair in life that we can ever change as persons. And yet, we can hope that real change is possible because we have received new birth.

This is very important because it means that the basis of Christian hope is not just something in the distant future, but a present possession and possibility. Hope emanates from the very foundation of our life as indwelt by the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit is at work here and now in our hearts and lives. It is the hope of present possibility. We need not despair. As Paul reminds us, “Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). To be a people of hope is to understand that there is now in us, through the new birth, a power of renovation, the energy of cosmic renewal now at work in us that will one day remake all things. In Jesus Christ, the world’s future already dwells within us. It is the power of God’s loving presence.

### C. RESURRECTION HOPE

Finally, there is a third basis of hope, which anchors all the rest in real history. We have a “living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” This living hope is an orientation towards the future, but its ultimate basis is in the past. It is in the singular event of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. When all reason for hope seemed lost, when it seemed as if sin, injustice, death, corruption, and the curse would have the final word, Jesus triumphed. In the resurrection he was vindicated, and so was our hope for the full restoration of creation. His resurrection is the guarantee, the down payment, the advance proof that we will follow his lead. We will have a body like his. We will be raised from the dead and all of creation itself will experience new birth.

To hope is not a specific action, but a posture of our imagination and a moral orientation. Hope is an adjective that describes all our actions. We live in hope. To hope means our actions are grounded in the sure promise that Jesus will put all things right. His resurrection is like a pathway cleared through a dense and dangerous wilderness of corruption and death whose journey we will someday complete. Hope means all our experiences of suffering are not vain. Hope means our losses of love are not final and irrevocable. Hope means, however incomplete or frustrated our efforts at justice may be, they are not meaningless or lost. Hope is the emotional frontline of our soul against the politics of despair, cynicism, and corruption. Hope is the antidote to the thinking that says, “Well, this is just the way things are.”

## IV. CONCLUSION

*To hope is to not to live in the world as it is but as it will someday be.* It is to live in the world as it will one day be in Jesus Christ. And what it will be is a place where our bodies will be fully alive by means of the presence of divine love, and the whole creation will be filled with the righteousness, beauty, and glory of the Lord. This is what Paul means when he says that someday we will attain “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). Hope is an experience of freedom now because it is based upon a certain future. It means we walk into the future, not with fear and trepidation but with freedom and trust. This is what it means to be a people of hope.