

# why hope?

**In a world which seems to be spiralling more rapidly into chaos with every passing year, how can we pray with hope?**

**Baptist scholar Helen Paynter offers three biblical reasons**

*You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Matthew 24:6*

**I**t is not clear whether we really are seeing more international conflict, more ecclesial abuse scandals, and more cultural polarisation than existed in previous generations, or whether we simply have that perception because of the rolling news cycle on our media feeds.

But the fact remains that for many of us, it's hard to find reasons for hope at present.

A hundred years ago Robert Frost famously mused<sup>1</sup> that he didn't much care whether the world would end in fire or in ice, and the dilemma feels much the same today. Will it be the existential climate threat that gets us? Or will a new world war break out? Either will do it pretty effectively. And in the meantime, we continue to destroy one another in a million petty ways.

But the New Testament speaks a lot about hope. Hope seems to overflow from the hearts of the apostles as they pen their letters to the early church. And, let's face it, those disparate, harried, impoverished little churches, mainly peopled by slaves, had little reason to hope, in the human sense. But hope they did.

Once they had been '*without hope and without God in the world*' (Ephesians 2:12). But now, Paul is confidently able to pray a blessing over them, that '*the God of hope may fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*' (Romans 15:13).

Abound in hope. A nice trick if you can do it. What's the secret?

Let me offer three reasons to hope.

**We can hope because of the character of God.**

Many, many years ago, a man stood on a mountain, which was already quaking and smoking with the presence of God, and boldly asked "*Now show me your glory*" (Exodus 33:18). What Moses received was not a vision

1 [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44263/fire-and-ice](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44263/fire-and-ice)

of God in majesty, enthroned above the heavens, like Isaiah saw, but a revelation of God's name and his character. This was God's answer to his audacious request:

*Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty... (Exodus 34:6-7)*

This description of the covenant-keeping God, who abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness, so captures the imagination of God's people that it echoes through the rest of Scripture. When Moses wants to intercede for the people, he calls upon this description of God's beautiful character (Numbers 14:18). When Solomon consecrates the temple, all the people sing a song based on these words (2 Chronicles 7:3). When Nehemiah prays his great corporate confession, he calls on the God whom he knows to abound in steadfast love (Nehemiah 9:17). The Psalmists just can't keep silent about it (see most of the Psalms(!), especially Psalm 118). And Jonah even uses it as a cause for complaint (4:2) because God is more merciful than he would like.

Into the New Testament, John refers to it in his prologue, because the fullness of the character of God has now been seen in human form. *'The Word became flesh and tabernacled with us, and we [like Moses!] have seen his glory... full of grace and truth'* (John 1:14).

A God who is slow to anger. A God who is patient with us. A God who takes seriously the

harm we do one another ('by no means clearing the guilty'). A God who is merciful. A God who is faithful to his promises. A God whose character is the same today as it was back then on the mountain. That's a reason for hope.

## **We can hope because the Church is God's good idea.**

Maybe it feels a bit of a come-down to move from contemplating God's sublime, unchanging character, to talking about the very human institution that is the Church. And aren't we all just a bit disillusioned with church? From the multiple scandals that break across our screens so regularly, to the theological tensions that are straining most denominational allegiances... and let's not even get started on local church politics! How can the Church be a cause of hope?

Well, Paul certainly thinks it is. Let's return to the fragment of Ephesians I quoted earlier, and read on a bit:

*Remember that you were at that time without Christ... having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us (Ephesians 2:12-14).*

But Paul's barely getting started in his exploration of the great wonder that is the Church. Because, as he tells us in the following chapter,

*In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and*

*prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Ephesians 3:5–6).*

And in Galatians, he presses the matter home,

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28).*

A body of people where ethnic distinctions, class distinctions, gender distinctions, are all irrelevant? It's a miracle! It's like a utopia! And of course, this is exactly what it is. It's God's good idea, a plan conceived in eternity past; it's his chosen means of blessing the world, birthed at Pentecost; and it's a radical community that pulls something of the new earth into the old one. Yes, we bend it and break it and generally make a mess of it. But it doesn't go away. The persistence of the Church is at once a testimony to the steadfast love of God, the reconciling work of the Saviour, and the marvellous indwelling of the Spirit. There's a cause for hope.

### **We can hope because the new heavens and earth are coming.**

If the Church is a foretaste of the world to come, it's not the only one. Come back in your minds to an early morning long ago, when a man stepped out of his tomb into a garden. It was a Sunday. Why does that matter? Because on the Friday, humanity had finally pulled the whole house down on its own head. The sun was blotted out and the Creator himself was engulfed in the chaos.

But that was Friday. Now it is Sunday. The first day of the week (John 20:1,19). It is Day One of the new world.

And this is no fairy story, peopled with ghosts or fantasies or wishful thinking. This new world begins with a living and breathing man; a man you can share a meal with; a man whose wounds you can explore with your fingers. Flesh and blood. The firstborn of the new creation.

Yes, sometimes it's agony, waiting for the full unrolling of that plan. And the whole of creation feels it with us:

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. (Romans 8:22–24).*

Yes, in hope we have been saved. And hope does not disappoint us (Romans 5:5), for the one who has promised is true. We're back at 'steadfast love' again. Not a bad place to wait, in the meantime.



**Helen Paynter is Tutor in Biblical Studies at Bristol Baptist College. She is the founding director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence.**

**Throughout 2024 Helen has been taking viewers through some of the chief biblical reasons for hope in a series on YouTube: [bit.ly/paynterhope](https://bit.ly/paynterhope)**

