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**The Necessity of Hope as it Pertains to Mankind
in the Midst of Suffering and the Implications of
Our Hope Being an Omnipotent God
Who Promises to Be with Us Always**

Rodney Scott, M.A.¹

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¹ Rodney Scott, B.A. Biblical Studies, Biola University; M.A., Philosophy of Religion and Ethics, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; Progressive Community Church, Stockton, CA, USA; Co-Founder AYCE Apologetics, USA. See rscott@progressivecc.org.

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Introduction

It should come as no surprise that the human race is plagued with suffering. Our experiences bear witness to this fact. The deepest part of man’s being longs for answers to the most compelling questions of life. Does God exist? Can we possess real items of knowledge? Do moral absolutes exist? And, of course, what is the reason and solution for suffering?

Naturalism, pantheism and theism are three worldviews competing to answer these questions. The Christian, however, aligns himself with the last option and consults the pages of Scripture to find resolve. A careful examination of the Old and New Testaments reveals that there are clear answers to all of the above questions. However, we will assume a positive answer to the first three questions and seek to address features related to the latter one without attempting to offer a theodicy as we will assume the existence of an omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent God.

Let us now turn and look back in time to see if any distinction can be noted between the world mankind experiences now and the world at the beginning of its inception.

A. Paradise Lost: A Precursory Examination to the Study of the Necessity of Hope

1. The Original Created Order

Each creation day is accompanied by God’s declaration that it was good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).² This fact is especially important as it sets an interpretive framework that helps the reader understand the state of man’s relationship to his Creator and the created order he found himself in. It is also interesting to note that none of the Hebrew words for “hope” are found anywhere in the

² All verses cited are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

creation narrative of the first two chapters of Genesis as there existed no social or spiritual context that necessitated it.

Instead, we find man living in harmony with God, the animals and his wife. This is the setting of the original created order and the kind the Hebrew prophets promised God would restore for his glory and the enjoyment of mankind (Isaiah 11:6-9; Hosea 2:18). It should be noted that the Hebrews were not the only people in antiquity that had a concept of a paradise lost. Many of the ancient Greeks and Romans also spoke of what was sometimes referred to as the Golden Age or a time of universal peace where mankind lived harmoniously in a paradise with the gods, one another and with animals. Colin Spencer has this in mind in his book *The Heretic's Feast* when he makes mention of Empedocles, the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher:

He believed that ancient humans had been perfect because of their vegetarianism, peacefulness, and refusal to sacrifice animals. He harkened back to the Golden Age when humankind offered to the gods nothing but perfumes and honey, when they were gentle towards animals and birds.³

Later Spencer mentions Ovid, the Roman poet when he writes:

Then Ovid praises the beauties and peace of the Golden Age when 'no blood stained men's lips...until some futile brain/envied the lions' diet and gulped down/A feast of flesh to fill his greedy guts.'⁴

Unfortunately, the paradise spoken of in Genesis was no more than a temporary reality as we learn that Adam and Eve's transgression ushered them into a world that contemporary man is all too familiar with. This world is the present order.

2. The Effects of Adam's Fall on the Created Order

Sin and death—both physical and spiritual death—are the primary effects of Adam's fall on creation (Romans 5:12). All other ills are manifestations or symptoms of these two realities. Adam was forewarned that if he sinned he would immediately enter the realm of spiritual death (Genesis 2:17). He sinned and was driven out of the Garden of Eden with no access to the Tree of Life which apparently was needed to obtain immortality. (Genesis 3:6-7, 22-24).

³ Colin Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast: A History of Vegetarianism* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

It is apparent upon closer examination of the book of Genesis that something within the nature of Adam and Eve changed after they sinned. There was now a privation of good in their souls and bodies. Something was very different, but what? There seems to be good reason to believe that sin brought about such a deep kind of destruction that it struck at the very core of their essence yielding a sense of hopelessness manifested in (1) their souls as they now lacked relational confidence with God—they ran away from him—and, in (2) their bodies as they lacked bodily confidence before Him. Both of these facts are clearly attested to in Scripture (Genesis 3:7-10).

The apprenticeship was terminated as Adam and his wife chose to hide themselves from the presence of God. Their souls could no longer bear the holiness of God and the hiding of their bodies was the outward manifestation of this. God in his mercy made temporary provisions for their sin and the shamefulness of their bodies. The blood and skin of a sacrificial animal served as a redemptive instrument for body and soul (Genesis 3:21). However, the original paradise became a memory of the past and now mankind was in need of a renewed sense of hope and relief from their current state of suffering.

The Hebrew people were not exempt from the aftermath of Adam and Eve’s destructive behavior. Nevertheless, as the covenant people of God they possessed something that other communities lacked. They possessed a kind of hopefulness in the midst of suffering quite different from what most people today have ever experienced or contemplated. Before we turn our attention to examine the New Testament teaching on the notions of hope and suffering, let us consider what we might learn from the book of Joshua and the Psalms.

The first place the word for “hope” appears in Scripture is in the book of Joshua. The Hebrew word תִּקְוָה (*tiqvah*) is used where we read:

Now the men had said to her, “This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house (Joshua 2:117-18).

תִּקְוָה (*tiqvah*) is translated as the word “cord” here.⁵ However, it is most frequently translated as “hope.” The context in which this word appears in Joshua is significant as it gives us a sense of how the Hebrews conceived of “hope.”

Joshua has just ordered two men to act as spies in the land of Canaan, particularly the city of Jericho as this was the land God had promised to give them. Rahab ends up hiding the spies from the king of Jericho and in return she requests that they give her a “sure sign” that when they return to destroy the city they spare her family members’ lives and all who belong to them (v12). The “sure sign” they gave her was the scarlet “cord” she was to tie to her window. This cord was to serve as a cord of hope that would assure her she could confidently expect her family members to be delivered. Rahab remained confident and sure about the agreement as she had already learned of Yahweh’s power and no doubt his character as well (v8-11).

We see this same understanding of hope as a confident expectation when we turn to the Psalms, albeit more clearly expressed. Two words in particular come to mind. יָחַל (*yachal*) and תְּלַחֵת (*tochelet*). The former is found in Psalm 33:22 and Psalm 130:7 while the latter appears in Psalm 39:7. A most astonishing fact emerges on the pages of Scripture as one examines the verses surrounding these three passages. There is a historical-redemptive aspect seen in all of them. That is, in all of them the Psalmist is suffering in some sense that necessitates he places his *hope* in God to *deliver* him while he *waits* on the Lord (Psalms 33:19-20, 22; 39:7-8; 130:5, 7-8).⁶

This same threefold like redemptive-historical feature is seen when we look closely at certain portions of the New Testament. It is to this testament that we now turn our attention.

⁵ The KJV translates it as “line” and the NIV as “rope.”

⁶ See these passages in the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

B. The Interim of Hope and Suffering

1. Romans 8 as the Explanation for Natural Suffering and the Hope of Deliverance from It

First and foremost, a distinction should be made between natural suffering and sacrificial suffering. Natural suffering is that suffering which comes about for any number of reasons, albeit not necessarily as a result of one's relationship to Christ, whereas sacrificial suffering is that suffering which always comes about as a result of one's personal decision to follow Christ and identify with him in his sufferings. This section will address the former mode of suffering and the next section will deal with the latter.

Romans 8:18-25 is the classic text that seems to offer the most thorough treatment of natural suffering. Here in verse eighteen we find the Greek word *πάθημα* (*patheima*) meaning "suffer." The noun form and its verbal form *πάσχω* (*paskoe*) are used by the New Testament authors to describe physical suffering as well as mental or soulful suffering.

An example of suffering in the first order is recorded in Mark when he writes that "A woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse" (Mark 5:25-26). An example of the second order can be seen where Matthew records Pilate's wife's words about Jesus when she says, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him" (Matthew 27:19).

This is right in sync with what we saw earlier as Adam's transgression ushered him into a world that seemed to be filled with hopelessness and despair. Clearly, there were physical and soulful aspects involved in Adam's experience. Yet, ever since Adam man has not been able to rest. It seems as though he is caught in a quandary. He longs for deliverance from physical and mental suffering but exists in a state of hopelessness apart from God.

Paul informs us in Romans 8 that man and the entire creation have been negatively affected by Adam's sin and that both desire deliverance of some sort. The creation desires to be set free from the bondage of corruption but man desires deliverance from corruption and suffering (Romans 8:18, 20-22; 1 Corinthians 15:42ff).

Unfortunately, man's deliverance from suffering on this side of eternity is inseparably tied to the redemption of his body. It is this redemption the Christian hopes to experience (v23).

It is important to understand that as a Jewish scholar, Paul would have been quite familiar with the Hebrew words used for hope in the Tanakh. It is evident that he employs this same understanding of hope in Romans 8 when he speaks of the assurance the Christian has been given that they will receive their redeemed body in the near future. This can be seen when he uses the word "firstfruits" in v23. Firstfruits referred to the first part of the reaper's harvest that was to be offered to the Lord in faith. This act required a person to place their confidence in Yahweh because any future harvest was uncertain apart from his graceful provisions.

More importantly is Paul's identification of the firstfruits spoken of here with the Holy Spirit when he writes, "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies" (v23).⁷ This identification of the Holy Spirit with the firstfruits means that the Spirit is what God has given the believer to serve as a sure sign that there is more to be given to him later, namely, a newly glorified body!⁸

Finally, Paul introduces the Greek counterpart to the three Hebrew words discussed above. In v23-25 he uses the noun *ἐλπίς* (*elpis*) four times and its verbal form once. Once again, we see the same threefold formula that appeared in the Psalms appears here as Paul says:

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen

⁷ The phrase "of the Spirit" is in apposition to firstfruits which means the Spirit is the firstfruits.

⁸ Notice the correlation between the purpose the Holy Spirit serves in the Christian's life today and the purpose the scarlet cord served in the life of Rahab and her family. Both serve as a sign of assurance that God will certainly bring something to pass.

is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.⁹

Therefore, as it pertains to natural suffering, we learn that mankind experiences many woes of the physical and soulish kind, that he remains in a state of hopelessness as long as he's alienated from God, and that Christians are the only class of humans that possess a confident expectation that the Lord will do away with all suffering. In the mean time, God has called all believers to join him in the ministry of reconciling as many people back to God as possible. Though this is an honorable call, it nevertheless requires the Christian to sacrificially suffer.

2. Colossians 1 as the Explanation for Sacrificial Suffering

As stated earlier, sacrificial suffering is that suffering which comes about directly as a result of one's personal decision to follow Christ and identify with him in his sufferings. Christ suffered for us physically and soulishly. In Gethsemane he suffered mentally and on the cross he suffered physically. This kind of suffering stems from being spiritually responsible and should be distinguished from suffering due to bad choices.

We get a glimpse of sacrificial suffering when Paul says in Colossians, "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24). These words sound strange at first but upon closer examination a powerful message emerges. Notice that the context involves Paul's reminder to the believers in Colossae that they have been reconciled to God through Christ's death (v22) and that the gospel has given them hope (v23). However, Christ did not personally preach the message of reconciliation to the Colossians, but someone did.

We have no record of Paul planting this church or ever visiting it, though there is some internal evidence that he indirectly ministered to them through his personal prayers on their behalf as well as through Epaphras, his partner in the ministry (v3, 7, 24). Paul is suggesting that suffering on behalf of others is what he does because Christ did it for the entire world (Luke 22:39-44; Hebrews 12:2-3). Nothing was

⁹ The three words are wait, redemption (deliverance) and hope.

deficient in the atoning work of Jesus or his perfect obedience to the Law. What was lacking, though, was his ability to personally take the message and work of God to the ends of the earth in his own physical body.

Therefore, sacrificial suffering is a calling to act like Jesus did towards others. It is a calling that sometimes strips the Christian of their time, talents and resources. At times it demands that a person suffer in their body and soul for the sake of reconciling others to Christ and advancing the kingdom. It is a tedious task that requires God's strength, but it is also the surest way to identify with Jesus (Colossians 1:29).

3. Romans 6 and the Believer's Identification with Christ as the Basis of Hope in the Midst of Suffering

The thing that makes sacrificial suffering possible is the identification of the Christian with Christ. It is in Romans 6 that Paul explains the grounds for the believer's justification with God. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). Being in Christ is to be identified with him and all of his experiences that are properly transferable (Galatians 3:27). Since he died to sin—died to remedy its effects—those who are a part of him die to sin's mastery (Romans 6:1-3, 6). Because he is holy and blameless all who are part of him are holy and blameless (Ephesians 1:4). As he is God's son, so his followers are children of God (Ephesians 1:5). Even the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to the Christian because of his or her union with Christ (Ephesians 1:13). And finally, because he was raised from the dead in glory, so too shall all men who are found in him experience a glorious resurrection when they receive their new bodies (Romans 6:5; 1 Corinthians 15:50ff). Theologian Leroy Forlines expresses the implications of this union well by offering the following analogy:

Identification by union makes that which was not actually a part of a person's experience his by identification. For example, prior to the time that Hawaii became a part of the United States, a citizen of Hawaii could not have said, "We celebrate our day of Independence on July 4." Immediately upon becoming a state, the same person who formerly could not make the statement could say, "We celebrate our day of Independence on July 4." What happened on July 4, 1776, became a part of their history. The history of the United States became

the history of Hawaii, and the history of Hawaii became the history of the United States. Prior to the union with Christ on the condition of faith, a person could not say, “I died with Christ.” Immediately upon union with Christ, a person can say, “I died with Christ.”¹⁰

This union with Christ will be fully realized at the end of the age when he returns for his people in his glory. Old Testament scholars Andrew Hill and John Walton make this clear in their book *A Survey of the Old Testament* when they write:

The Old Testament leaves us with hope. God is not done. Everything is under his sovereign control. His plan has not been and can never be thwarted. Our faith is an Old Testament faith that God will keep his promises no matter how bleak the circumstances may look. The New Testament contribution to that faith is that Jesus Christ made this hope incarnate and revealed in his ministry, death, and resurrection a major new component of that hope. We wait for his return and the accomplishment of God’s plan as history is guided to its grand finale.¹¹

Therefore, just as the ultimate cause of mankind’s suffering is Adam’s sin, the grounds for mankind’s hope is his identification with Christ. This union with Christ is the basis of hope to attain the resurrection of the dead and thereby be freed from a state of hopelessness and suffering.

C. The Implications of Hope in an Omnipotent God Who Promises to Be with Us Always

1. The Fortitude of the Believer

There are many implications of placing hope in God but three of them will briefly be mentioned now. The first is the fortitude of the believer. While hope in God does not relieve a person of all suffering in this life, those who trust in God are nonetheless endowed with the most precious and powerful gift, namely, the power of God through the person of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enables this person to withstand all the tragedies and evils that he encounters in life and gives him the fortitude it takes to suffer with Christ (Colossians 1:29; Psalms 46:1).

¹⁰ Leroy F. Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation* (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 2011), 216.

¹¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 446.

2. The Consolation of the Believer

The second implication is the comfort the Spirit provides those united with Christ. Again, we learn from the Scriptures that the world is full of death, sickness, pain and tragedy, but none of these things can separate the believer from God's consolation. In fact, the Spirit helps those who trust in God in their greatest time of need so that they might continue to bring encouragement and comfort to others (Romans 8:26-28).

3. The Purification of the Believer

The final implication is a purified life. As all Christians hope to receive full and complete deliverance from the presence of sin, they are to wait eagerly yet patiently for the Lord's return. In the mean time, God has given them the charge of holiness. Holiness is to be realized both positionally and actually. Both aspects of holiness are to be distinguished from morality as "There can be a measure of morality without dedication to God, but there can be no holiness without dedication to God."¹²

It is upon Christ's return that all his followers must give an account for the life they lived while in the body (2 Corinthians 5:10). Theologian Henry Thiessen in his book *Lectures in Systematic Theology* makes mention of the connection between the hope of Christ's return and the purification of the believer's life when he writes, "The coming of Christ is the great incentive to biblical Christianity."¹³ He then goes on to say, "The acceptance of this truth also induces self-purification."¹⁴ Therefore, it is up to God to make the Christian positionally pure but up to the Christian to play a role in making himself actually pure. Hope in God and his promise to conform the body and soul to the likeness of his Son is the catalyst for this purification that the believer is to work out (1 John 3:2-3). After all, it is in this state of perfection of body and soul that the redeemed will live in paradise restored.

¹² Ibid., 280.

¹³ Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 343.

¹⁴ Ibid.

D. Paradise Restored: Glorification and the Eradication of Suffering

1. The Removal of the Curse

The ultimate manifestation of the curse is death. In the final consummation of all things the curse of death upon the earth will be lifted and humanity will once again experience shalom in the new Eden of God (1 Corinthians 15:20-26).

2. Revelation and the New Eden

The hope of all the godly ultimately extends beyond this world. Their hope is not in a Platonic world of pure forms absent the material world but in a material world not yet seen because God has not yet transformed it (2 Peter 3:12-13). It is in this future world that paradise lost will become paradise restored and man will be perfectly united with God because his hope has been realized (Revelation 21:3-4).

Conclusion

Biblical hope is the confident expectation that God has a plan for the world and is faithful to bring it about. In the interim of the consummation of all things man should expect to suffer both bodily and soulishly though not necessarily without resolve. All men will for certain experience natural suffering but only the redeemed are privileged to experience a sacrificial suffering that can only be experienced by being united with Christ.

It is this union that forms the basis for the believer's hope as he is confident he will experience all the benefits of Christ that can be properly conferred upon God's children. These benefits include fortitude, consolation, and purification to live victoriously on this side of eternity, but most importantly it includes a renewed relationship with God that will be fully realized when the saints receive their glorified bodies and enter the new Eden where righteousness dwells. It is in this future state that mankind will be perfectly whole in body and soul and will once again have the confidence and holiness to stand before the Lord in peace knowing that God will be with him always.



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