

# Hanging onto hope

REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS  
FOR FINDING “GOOD”  
IN AN IMPERFECT WORLD

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## DEDICATION

*I dedicate this book to my  
grandnieces and grandnephews  
who give me hope:  
Aaron, Zachary, Cameron Telesz  
Rebecca and Marissa Hartman  
Ben and Olivia Hartman  
Reece and Owen Hartman  
Eric Himes  
Cody and Andrew Svoboda  
Alex and Candice Wicker*

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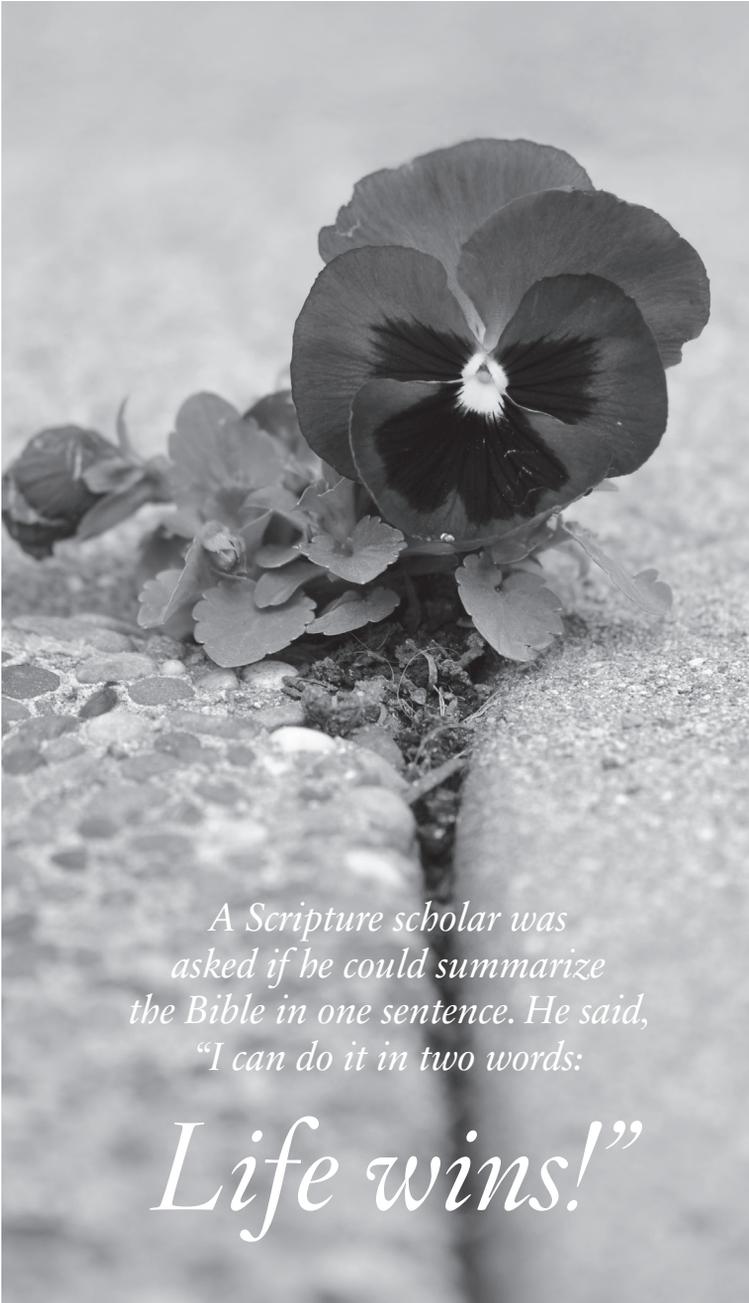
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*A Scripture scholar was  
asked if he could summarize  
the Bible in one sentence. He said,  
“I can do it in two words:*

*Life wins!”*

## *Introduction*

**T**he French poet Charles Péguy has given us one of the most memorable images of hope. Hope, he says, is a little girl. She is, in fact, the younger sister of Faith and Charity. Hope walks hand in hand with her two taller sisters on the “uphill path” called life. At first, she may appear to be the weakest of the three. But, on the contrary, it is Hope who carries both Faith and Love. It is Hope, says Péguy, “who moves the world.”

Péguy’s view of the importance and power of hope is not always shared by all Christians. A few years ago, there was a four-day conference on the three theological

virtues: faith, hope, and love. The presenters offered to give numerous talks on faith and love, but none of them chose to speak on hope. Eventually, one of the planning committee members volunteered to offer a few thoughts on hope. Closer to home, how many times have you heard sermons on faith and love? Now, compare that to the number of times you have heard sermons on hope. Chances are faith and love win the tally, while hope comes in third. Perhaps a distant third. No wonder some call hope “the forgotten virtue.”

Hope can seem to get short-changed even in Scripture. St. Paul’s often-quoted hymn to charity ends with these words: “So, faith, hope, and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). Such words, as beautiful as they are, could lead some to conclude that hope is second rate. But in other places in Scripture (as we shall see), hope is, in the words of Carroll Stuhlmueller, “the major driving force of life.”

When I mentioned to a few friends that I was writing a book on hope, some said, “Good! We need hope now more than ever!” What prompted them to say such a thing? Probably a glance at our headlines. When we turn on the news or open the newspaper, we see stories of war, violence, natural disasters, widespread poverty, political conflicts, critical environmental issues, and injustices of all kinds. Such stories make it easy to conclude that the world is, indeed, falling apart right before our eyes—and

we are powerless to do anything about it. In other words, the current national and world situation may seem hopeless.

And it is not only the larger world situation that can seem bleak. Many of us struggle with our personal challenges to hope: loss of a job, financial insecurity, marital infidelity, family conflicts, drug addiction, serious illness, and the death of a loved one. Even our church, once a refuge from despair, has been shaken to the core by scandal. In many places membership is dwindling and deep differences divide some parishes and dioceses.

We can be tempted to lose hope. That is one reason I felt drawn to write this book—not only for others but for myself as well. This book celebrates the importance and power of hope. It explores the virtue of hope from a range of perspectives. It offers definitions, images, and examples of hope in Scripture and today's world. In addition, it explores the relationship between hope and other aspects of our spiritual life such as desire, faith, love, courage, prayer, pain, and sorrow. Each chapter consists of a reflection on the given topic, a short prayer, and questions for personal reflection or group sharing. I firmly believe that music videos can enrich our prayer and reflection. With that in mind, at the end of each chapter I have suggested several music videos that fit the chapter's theme. Virtually all these music videos can be found on YouTube. Just search the song and the artist and the video

will come up—sometimes even more than one version.

It is my hope that this book will nourish your hope wherever you find yourself on your spiritual journey. My prayer for all of us is this:

*May we all hold hands with Hope,  
our “little sister,”  
as she helps us to move on the uphill path  
into the future.  
May hope bring us ever closer  
to the fulfillment of our deepest longings  
and desires:  
oneness in love with each other,  
and complete union with the life, goodness, beauty,  
and joy of our God.  
Amen.*



1

# What Is Hope?

*In our times, isn't hope the most important virtue?  
And the most necessary? And the rarest?*

MICHAEL DOWNEY

What exactly is hope? Let's begin with this basic definition: *Hope is a longing or desire for something good in the future.* Let's break that simple definition apart.

Hope is a *longing* or *desire*. This means that hope is something that arises inside of us. Hope begins when we realize there is something we want or need that we do not have yet. If we were perfectly satisfied with the way everything was in our personal life and in our world, then we would have no need for hope—except, perhaps, to hope that everything would stay exactly the way it was

now—and into the future. But ordinarily hope signifies a deep desire for something in the future that is lacking in the now.

Hope longs for *something good*. Normally, we do not hope for bad things. You did not buy this book saying to yourself, “I hope this book is lousy...I hope it’s a waste of money.” Or when you are at Mass on Sunday, you are not sitting there thinking, “I hope while I’m here in church, someone steals my car from the parking lot!” No—unless stealing your car would be a good thing for you. Maybe your insurance company would pay you more than it is worth! No, we hope for good things, or at least things we perceive as good.

When writing about hope, St. Thomas Aquinas said that the “something good” we desire is “difficult but possible to attain.” In other words, there is no need for hope if the something is easily attainable. Nor is there reason to hope if the something is completely beyond our grasp. At my age and physical condition, for example, there is no reason for me to hope to win an Olympic gold medal in weightlifting!

Hope longs for something good *in the future*. And here’s the rub: nobody knows the future. Nobody. That’s one reason we buy insurance—to protect ourselves against a possible future mishap or catastrophe such as a car accident, a house fire, serious illness, and even death. Insurance companies make their money based on the

fact that the future is the great unknown. As such, it can be a very scary place.

Yes, we can observe trends and make some predictions about the future. And sometimes our predictions are right. But not always. The tearing down of the Berlin Wall was not predicted. In fact, it came as a surprise to many people—even those serving in intelligence agencies around the world. The outcomes of some presidential elections are not always what the pollsters predict either. And what about the world of sports? Ordinarily we can predict that a superior team will defeat an inferior one. But sports fans know that on any given day, even a lousy team can beat a great team. That is one reason sports can be so exciting: Nobody *really* knows the outcome of the game. So, if you are a devoted fan of a lousy team (as I am sometimes), then you get a lot of exercise in hoping!

What are some of the implications of all of this for our Christian living? First, this definition of hope underscores the importance of desire in our life. Too often in the past, as we shall see, our tradition of Christian spirituality taught us to look with suspicion upon our desires and longings. Yet it is precisely through the deepest yearnings of our heart that God speaks to us and directs us. It is crucial to be in touch with these longings, because hope is rooted in them; hope springs from them. In this regard, I recall the famous guru who said to his students:

“The enlightenment you seek is already in you.” We could paraphrase: “The hope you seek is already in you. It is residing in the deepest longings of your heart.”

This definition of hope also raises several important questions. What is truly good? Is the good we are hoping for, good only for me? Or is it good for others as well? Later in this book we will explore the essential communal dimension of hope.

A third implication is this: We live in an imperfect world. Hope acknowledges this fact. For, what we essentially hope for is a better world, a more perfect world. As Péguy said in his poem, Hope is the virtue that *carries* Faith and Charity. Hope is the virtue that generates our concrete actions to make the world a better place, while whispering in our hearts, “A better world is possible.” Or, as Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is at hand” (Lk 10:9).

We also might be asking: Where does hope come from? To whom is it ultimately directed? For Christians, the answer to both of those questions is, of course, God. For it is God who plants these deepest longings in our heart, longings that can be filled only by our complete oneness with God.

Finally, all of this raises another question—perhaps the most significant one of all: In what or in whom do we place our hope? As we shall see, the answer to that question makes all the difference in the world.

*God of my deepest longings and desires,  
keep the flame of hope alive in my heart.  
Make me attentive to what is lacking  
in my personal life and  
in the larger world.  
Give me a view of the future  
that sees not desolation,  
but possibility.  
Keep whispering in my heart,  
“A better world is possible.”  
Give me the grace to partner with you,  
with Jesus, and with the Holy Spirit  
to help make that better world a reality.  
Amen.*

### **REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS**

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Michael Downey’s quote at the beginning of this chapter?
2. What is your basic attitude toward the future? Do you see it as a place of desolation or possibility?

### **SUGGESTED MUSIC VIDEOS**

- “On Eagle’s Wings,” Michael Joncas
- “All Is Gift,” Kathleen Sherman
- “Amazing Grace,” Il Divo at the Coliseum



2

# Longings and Desires

*Here, in this life, all symphonies remain unfinished.*

KARL RAHNER, SJ

Hope is rooted in our deepest longings and desires. Hope begins with the awareness that we are not yet fulfilled—no matter how successful we may be or how many items we have checked off our bucket list. Like little Oliver Twist, we are holding out our empty bowl and pleading with the powers-that-be, “More! More!” Centuries ago, St. Augustine penned those timeless words describing this innate discontent: “Our hearts are restless, Lord,