

Professor Ivan T. Blazen



Where is God when we hope? Out of personal suffering experiences and deep reading into the writings of the apostle Paul, a professor challenges our reflection.

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Dr. Blazen has done extensive graduate work at a number of universities and seminaries. These include Andrews University and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary in New York City, the University of Heidelberg in Heidelberg, Germany, Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, and Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, where he received his Ph.D. degree. In addition to his teaching, writing, and other scholarly interests, Dr. Blazen maintains an active ministry in the areas of preaching and counseling. One of his main concerns is the application of biblical teaching to the practical concerns of everyday life.

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Shabbat Shalom¹: Dr. Blazen, in the last few years we have noted a number of books and discussions on hope. How do you explain the recent interest in this subject?

Blazen: There may be a number of reasons for this but, in my opinion, a major point would be this: it is certainly *not* because human beings have, by virtue of a kind of demonstrable individual and corporate goodness, shown that there is a reason to hope. As we look to history in the 20th century, there are many reasons *not* to hope. Hope, as something connected with human goodness, has been shattered by World Wars I and II, the Holocaust, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the violence in

Cambodia, Palestine, Ireland, Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, and countless other places. These events give a feeling of hopelessness, rather than hopefulness. But then, I think it is at just such a time, when we have such hopelessness, that hope arises.

I would illustrate this by referring to the apocalyptic literature we find in the Bible and in Intertestamental and First Century C.E. Jewish writings. The apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation, and others like them, have been described as "tracts for bad times." So, when the world powers are threatening the people of God, when violence and tyr-

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anny are prevalent, it's precisely then that apocalyptic writings emerge to give God's people the hope that the Lord of history will indeed intervene, and redeem His people. When times get bad we are forced to look again to the source of our hope, Scripture, and to the object of our hope, the God revealed in Scripture, who has worked redemptively in history for His people. For Israel, He brought deliverance at the Exodus; in terms of Christianity, He worked through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Based upon what He has done, we may hope for what He will yet do.

As with apocalyptic, the great American "Negro Spirituals," which sounded the note of hope in God, arose at those very times when the oppression was great. So I think when civilization becomes dark—and we are living, I believe, in an apocalyptic age when the powers of darkness

abound—then hope once again arises, because we, in our hopelessness, begin to cast ourselves upon God.

Shabbat Shalom: So with the rise in the possibility of nuclear annihilation, people's fears because of crime, AIDS, and all kinds of things that surround us and seem to point to death and destruction, there would be an accompanying rise of interest in hope. Am I understanding you correctly?

Blazen: Yes, I think so. I mean, how are we to survive? We can give up in despair, or we can once again turn to God, and this is exactly what I see taking place today. People are once more looking to God. Where else can we go?

Shabbat Shalom: Let me ask you this, then. In your view, what is the composition of hope? What is hope made up of?

Blazen: An important question. I think we can define hope in two senses. First of all we can think of hope in terms of what we hope for, the object of our hope. And if Scripture is framing our thought, we are talking about the arrival of the Kingdom of God in all its fullness on earth, transforming human life, bringing justice, universal peace, and so on. That's the object of hope. The second aspect of hope is the attitude of hopefulness. Hope is not just what we look forward to, but is a present feeling of confidence in God and His purposes, with which we move into the future. And we in the present look hopefully toward the future because we are related to the God of the future.

I'll cite a New Testament passage which may be helpful in defining the components of hope. In the fourth chapter of Paul's

letter to the Romans, Paul has a discussion about Abraham, whom Paul sees as the father of us all, both Jews and Gentiles. A great promise had been made to Abraham that, in spite of his age, God would bless him with innumerable descendants. Well, interestingly, in Romans 4:18, Paul says this about Abraham: "Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations.'"² Hope is what you do when there doesn't seem to be any hope at all! And you can only do that if you are in touch with God and relying upon His word. Nothing else would give you hope at such a time.

Another important passage is the latter half of Romans 8. Here Paul is talking about suffering, and he describes our present world as one in which there is incredible groaning. The creation is groaning and we are groaning. We groan because we are painfully waiting for the final redemption which isn't yet here, but we are hoping for it. Then Paul says, in verses 24 and 25, "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." So, hope is a kind of patient confidence in God and patient waiting for that which we do not see. We're pinning our lives upon something which is not available to sight, but is present in the word of God and the experience of God that we have.

Shabbat Shalom: How then would you differentiate between faith and hope? In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul seems to draw some kind of distinction between the two. As you were talking about hope, the images that flashed into my mind were very similar to the word faith, so I'm curious about the connections between the two.

Blazen: Yes, I think there is a real connection between them. Let me put it like this: Hope is faith turned toward the future. In other words, I don't see hope as being different from faith; it is faith's future orientation. Faith looks upward; it has a vertical stance. It looks up to God. And

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hope looks forward. It has a horizontal or linear element to it. It looks forward to what this God in whom we have faith will do in history. In 1 Corinthians 13, which you referred to, we have one of Paul's great statements. It closes with the affirmation that what really counts in this world is faith, hope, and love. These are interrelated realities and, according to Paul, the greatest is love. So, in this light, it is insufficient to talk only about faith and hope; we must also talk about love. We have faith in the one whom we love. We have hope for that which is the object of our affection. I think, then, that hope is the affirmation of the ultimate victory of God's love in the world. That's the way, at least, I would express it.

Shabbat Shalom: O.K. We have talked about the definition of hope. Now let's talk about the importance of hope. Why is hope important for Christians? Why is it such an integral element in the Christian's life?

Blazen: What characterized Christianity at the very beginning? Hope was part and parcel from the very start. There was a sense of fulfillment, that the redemption which had been hoped for had been powerfully inaugurated in Jesus, whom Christians identified as the Messiah. There was the sense that the Hebrew

Scriptures had found their deepest meaning in the proclamation and deeds of Jesus, who died and rose again. His resurrection was a vindication, showing that his life and death had great significance. But was that the end of the matter? The early Christians said, "No." The one who died and rose again would, and indeed must, come back again to complete the work of redemption. It was as if there was an unfinished symphony. His death had meaning, his resurrection had meaning, but there was more yet to take place. That is why they looked forward to the return of Christ, the Second Coming of Christ, as Christians speak of it. The whole New Testament is filled with hope in that coming.

Remember the two Emmaus travelers, mentioned at the end of the Gospel of Luke, who were making their way to Emmaus after the crucifixion of Jesus? In an unrecognized form the risen Jesus appeared to them. Their words to him were words of hopelessness. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21), which meant, of course, that their hopes were now in vain. But when they recognized that this was Jesus, who had risen, their hope was revived and they could look forward to the future in hope again. 1 Peter 1:3 speaks of us as being born again to "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." And I might just say this: I think the

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question of hope is really the question of God. If there is no hope, then God's promises to Israel and the Church have failed. So, when you are talking about hope, you are really talking about God. That's why hope was so important for the early Christians.

Shabbat Shalom: Then what about the difference between Jewish hope and Christian hope? You've talked a little bit about the importance of hope in the Christian life, and that seems obvious. What would be the difference between Jewish hope and Christian hope?

Blazen: I want to be careful here, because there are many points of contact between Jewish hope and Christian hope. I suppose, as a generality, I could say that Jewish hope is hope for deliverance *in* this world. Jews have always looked for the fulfillment of hope in terms of what was going to happen here on earth. And what was going to happen? A major point was the restoration of Israel. Israel has found itself, all through its history, under domination by foreign powers. Thus, this restoration was very important. There was also the expectation of universal peace and justice as realities in this world. Christian hope, on the other hand, is to a large degree deliverance *from* this world. So you might say that for Jews there is a more worldly hope, and for Christians a more transcendent hope. Yet I don't want to overplay this, because the note of transcendence is itself derived from Jewish apocalyptic, and because there are obvious similarities and overlapping between Jewish hope and Christian hope. But in terms of difference, Judaism emphasizes human involvement in the realization of hope more than Christianity does. Christians, especially conservative ones, seem to be waiting

more for God to do that which needs to be done, and Jews, generally, though not exclusively, have tended to see human beings as involved in the actualization of this hope.

Shabbat Shalom: Now, although the differences seem

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somewhat clear, there is, you say, certainly a relatedness, an overlapping between Jewish hope and Christian hope. Could you speak about that?

Blazen: I think there are a number of things in common, and Christians have taken these, in large measure, from Jewish understandings and from the Hebrew Scriptures. First among these is that the basis of hope is the God who acts in history. Both Jews and Christians emphasize this point. Jews look back to the Exodus as the major event in which God acted in history and which is the basis of their belief that He will act again. They also see Him acting in bringing Israel back from the Exile. Christians believe that, in Jesus, God has acted again for the salvation of the world. What He did in Jesus is the basis of hope. So, we both look to history and what God is doing in history.

Other things that are similar involve Messianic expectation itself, the idea that a Messiah would come. True, there is a difference. Jews are hoping for the First Coming of the Messiah;

while Christians are hoping for the Second Coming of the Messiah, but we both look to the coming of the Messiah. We could mention other things, such as the concept of the Kingdom of God, the notion of the resurrection from the dead, the idea of the judgment of God in which

justice will be manifested, and the idea of the renewal of the earth. Jesus says in one place, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). That’s a very Jewish idea. We share these ideas in common.

And I would like to share a thought that I found in a Jewish book. Allow me to just read one little section from the book, *Paul*, by Hans Joachim Shoeps. What Shoeps says has really moved me. It bears upon the difference, but also the similarity between Judaism and Christianity. Here is his statement:

Thus difference as well as affinity becomes clear. The Messianism of Israel is directed toward that which is to come, while the eschatology of the universal Christian church looks for a return of him who has come. Both are united in the common expectation that the decisive event is still to come, that event which will disclose the consummation of God’s ways with men, already partially and differently manifested

in his dealings with Israel and the church. The church of Jesus Christ has kept no picture of its Savior and Lord, but it might well be that he who comes at the end of time, he who has been alike the expectation of the synagogue and the church, will bear one and the same countenance (page 258).

Shabbat Shalom: Wow!

Blazen: I seldom am moved so much by a statement as I am moved by this one, and it tells me I want to keep very close to my Jewish brothers and sisters, for we are all looking for the coming of the Christ. We are looking for one who will indeed bring universal peace and universal justice. We are very much alike in this.

Shabbat Shalom: It seems very clear that there are similarities and much overlap when it comes to Jewish hope and Christian hope. We have talked at some length about this. Now, what about other issues? Is it possible to hope without the religious dimension, without God?

Blazen: I don’t think so. No. If we were to hope without God, what would be the basis of our hope? Would it be the self, our self? Would it be man? Would it be human society and human goodness? We have learned that

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these things fail. I would find no source for hope at all if God were not a part of the picture. In the light of Romans 15:13, which speaks about God as “the God of hope,” I think that if you omit God, you omit hope as well. In another letter of the New Testa-

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ment, the book of Ephesians, in the second chapter, Paul pictures the Gentile world prior to its reception of the message of salvation. He describes the Gentiles with two phrases (verse 12): "having no hope," and "without God in the world." I think this is quite correct. Without God there is no true hope at all.

Shabbat Shalom: It happened before my lifetime, but people who live in my generation have certainly been immensely impacted by it. The interest in it has had ever widening ripples, which are still being keenly felt, as is evidenced by films such as *Schindler's List*, and others. I'm speaking, of course, of the Holocaust. When something like that happens, I guess one of the obvious questions that arises, Dr. Blazen, is, can we still hope after that? Can we still hope after Auschwitz, after something so horribly incredible has taken place among us?

Blazen: I think this question is very much related to the previous one you asked. Auschwitz proves that we cannot hope in man. Man, not God, is the creator of Auschwitz. But the question is, Can we hope in God, the Creator of this world? Many have found it very difficult to continue hoping in God, precisely because God allowed Auschwitz. I have a great deal of feeling for those who are troubled by this. Rabbi Rubenstein, in his book, *After Auschwitz*, believes that Auschwitz proves that God can no longer be understood as

before, and the Jewish people should no longer be seen as God's chosen and covenant people.

For me, as a Christian, I read the story of Jesus, one who, like the Jewish people, manifested goodness, looked toward God, and so on. Nevertheless Jesus was crucified. His life was ended. It seems to me that you have the same problem with the suffering and death of the one that you have with the suffering and death of the many. Yet, in the life of Jesus, we see vindication. We see not only the strangeness and horror of a crucified Christ, but we see the glory of a risen Christ as well. So, it seems to me that even when things look the darkest, from the vantage point of faith, there is reason to hope. **Out of the ashes of suffering and the darkness of pain and death God does His new thing.** He brings resurrection. Today we see the new state of Israel, and we observe Jews making a real comeback in the world. I believe that the Christian view of Jesus as the crucified and risen Christ gives us incredible reason to hope as well. Consequently, I think it is possible to hope after Auschwitz; not because of anything that happened in Auschwitz, but because God brings new life. We can hope because we dare to maintain our faith in God as the Creator of the world and the Redeemer of it.

Shabbat Shalom: I can't help but notice, as you speak about not just Auschwitz, but about hope, that you speak of it with

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conviction and obvious feeling, much more than in just an academic way. Is there a special experience in your own life that has had a distinctive impact upon your understanding of hope?

Blazen: In my life there have been a number of special experiences. When I was a young boy, a religious teacher instilled great fear in me. The teacher said, "You could die at any moment, and, if there are large sins upon your soul, you will be lost forever." The thought of dying at any moment, even more than that of being lost forever, seared its way into my youthful consciousness. One day when my parents were gone, I became an emotional wreck thinking that this might be the day. Fear and a rapid pulse worked together. My mother's comfort upon her return, while soothing, did not do away with the fear.

Years later, I heard the preaching of Seventh-day Adventists. They taught that the Jesus who had once come unexpectedly as the suffering Christ was soon going to come again as the victorious and conquering Christ. As I grasped hold of this, hope was kindled in me. Of course, there still was the ever recurrent reality of death, but the proclamation of the fact that Christ had risen from the dead and as the Risen One was coming back again was what made it possible for me to go on in hope. Yes, even if I die—though Christ's soon coming might keep me from death—there is the resurrection. Christ will return to bring life to the dead.

Another event has to do with the loss of my first wife and its aftermath. I lost my first wife to a malignancy, and later was remarried to a woman who had lost her husband to a massive heart attack. Just a few days after our

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marriage, both of my wife's children were killed in an automobile crash. This had a tremendous impact upon us and our understanding and need of hope. In 1 Peter 5:7 it says, "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." I think this is what happened with us. We put all our cares on God and prayed that He would give us the hope we needed to sustain us after such a tremendous loss. I believe He has done just that. The message of Scripture about a God who has acted in Israel's history and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the basis of our hope.

Shabbat Shalom: It's hard to imagine being in that kind of position, with such immense personal tragedy and loss. Is there a way you could articulate the place that hope has in your personal life, even further than what you've just said? Some other word that you might share about its place in your life?

Blazen: Well, I think that as a Seventh-day Adventist, hope is the essence of my life. We believe that God brings us special rest on each seventh, or Sabbath, day, and the fact that He does so is itself a basis for believing and hoping that one day He will give us the full rest, the fulfillment of the hope toward which we are looking. Without that hope it would be very easy to fall into depression and despair. Hope is related to meaning. If there is

nothing to look forward to, and hence no purposeful movement into the future, this will affect the way we live the present, and there will be a tremendous loss of meaning. In arguing for the future resurrection, the Apostle Paul once said, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). That is to say, if our hopes go no farther than the circumference of these very temporary lives we now live, then we, as Christians, are really pitiable. To proclaim resurrection but not to have eschatological life is an unbearable contradiction.

Shabbat Shalom: You have literally given your life to the study of Scripture, and have just been sharing with us also how the issue of suffering has touched you in very profound and personal ways, so I'd like to ask about the intersection of those two things. What, for you, at this point, would be the biblical text which might contain the most powerful lesson on hope?

Blazen: There are many wonderful passages, but I think the one that moves me, perhaps the most, is found, once again, in the book of Romans. I refer to chapter 5. According to verse 2, we rejoice in our hope of one day sharing the glory of God. The question then becomes, Will this hope pan out? Will it actually happen? Paul answers this very

question in verse 5. He says that our hope will not disappoint us. It will not fail us. It will not prove to be an illusion. It will not be a cunningly devised fable. Why not? What gives certainty to our hope? I think the rest of verse 5, as well as the rest of the section down to verse 10, gives the answer. Paul says our "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." So, according to this verse, we can have confidence that our hope for the future will succeed, because of what God has done for us in the past. Now what is that? He has poured his love into our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This has already happened. Now we must ask, what is the content of this love which we must know in order to have hope for the future? The answer begins to emerge in verse 6 where the topic is the death of Jesus. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." Here Paul focuses on the death of Jesus upon the cross. From one vantage point, this death looked as if it had no meaning, but from another it had great meaning. He was there for us. Well then, in verse 8, Paul goes on to say, "But God *proves* his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

This leads to a conclusion which almost shouts out from the chapter. It revolves around the

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words, "how much more," in verses 9 and 10 which indicate that, if God has done the most difficult thing, given His son to die for enemies, how much more will He do the easier, save to the uttermost His newly constituted friends!

I remember seeing a film on Mother Teresa. She is cradling in her arms a very dirty, diseased and dying person. He is looking up at her and saying to her, "Why are you doing this?" She looks at him and responds, "Because I love you." She takes him into her hospital and he's cleaned up, laid on nice clean sheets, and cared for every day. What does he know? That if she was willing to come to him in his diseased and dying condition, and express her love to him then, how much more can he count on the fact that she's going to be with him every moment along the way. So, I think Romans 5 is the chapter that moves me perhaps more than any other.

Shabbat Shalom: It certainly is not hard to understand why it would. While listening to you talk about it I sensed hope welling up within me anew; it's a wonderful passage.

Your story of Mother Teresa leaves me with a vivid image in my mind. I hope you don't mind my dipping back, just a little bit, to something you spoke of earlier, to bring it in line with that image. You suggested earlier that without God it is really not

possible to hope; yet those of us who believe in God have a very real hope in our hearts and lives. My question is, How might it be possible to incarnate hope in those around us who may not have the hope that we have and may not have the belief we hold? Is it possible to incarnate hope in them?

Blazen: I'm glad you asked this question, because we do not want to isolate ourselves from the wider world community. Our joy must not be merely self-focused. We wish that we might aid in bringing hope to the world, that our own particular faith may make some contribution to human hope for people in different cultures. We need to recall once again the connection of faith, hope, and love found in 1 Corinthians 13. Without the love dimension, I don't think your question can be answered.

You know, here at Loma Linda University it is very interesting to teach health professional students. I have had certain students read parts of Bernie Siegel's book called *Love, Medicine and Miracles*. Bernie Siegel is a former Yale University surgeon who is now retired but continues to lecture. In this book, he says that as the physician loves the patient, and the patient senses this love, this gives birth to hope in the patient, which can turn on the immune system, so that the miracle of healing can take place. I think it's like that in the spiritual realm.

Shabbat Shalom: Very good. A very clear connection, then. Now, such a grand theme as hope must have maybe a last word, a last thought. It's obviously something you have experienced in your own life and had reason to experience because of pain and suffering. So would you give us a final thought, a last word on hope?

Blazen: Since our hope is so much connected with Scripture, I would like, in concluding, to point to Romans, where Paul says in a prayerful blessing, "May the God of hope 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). This is a blessing which connects hope with the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life, and Paul prays that we might have this hope.

I would like to reiterate this prayer. May the God of all hope help us know what is the hope to which He has called all of us. According to Ephesians, this is a hope which is said to be first of all the hope of Israel. It was Jews who were first to set their hope on Christ (Ephesians 1:12). Then the Gentiles, through the influence of Israel, through the Scriptures of Israel, and through the true Israelite, Jesus, came to know the meaning of this hope as well. We Christians thank God for this and pray that all of us, both Jews and Christians, may have a firmer grasp of this hope.

Shabbat Shalom: Thank you, Dr. Blazen, for these most hopeful thoughts on hope.

¹This interview was conducted by Randy Roberts, Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Loma Linda University.

²All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.