

HOPE IN
TIMES
OF FEAR

SAMPLE

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

The Reason for God

The Prodigal God

Counterfeit Gods

Generous Justice

King's Cross

The Meaning of Marriage

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The Prodigal Prophet

A Seal Upon the Heart

On Birth

On Death

On Marriage

HOPE IN
TIMES
OF FEAR

THE RESURRECTION
AND THE
MEANING OF EASTER

TIMOTHY KELLER


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TO RAY AND GILL LANE,
CHRISTIAN FRIENDS FOR DECADES,
FAITHFUL LABORERS IN THE LORD'S VINEYARD,
WHOSE SUPERNATURAL GIFTS OF HOSPITALITY HAVE
SUCCEEDED US FOR MANY YEARS.

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PREFACE

When I had thyroid cancer in 2002 I read an eight-hundred-page masterwork, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by N. T. Wright. It was not only an enormous help to my theological understanding but, under the circumstances, also a bracing encouragement in the face of my own heightened sense of mortality. I was reminded and assured that death had been defeated in Jesus, and that death would also be defeated for me.

Now, nearly twenty years later, I am writing my own book on the resurrection of Jesus, and I find myself again facing a diagnosis of cancer. This time I have pancreatic cancer, and by all accounts, this condition is much more serious and the treatment a far bigger challenge.

I am also writing in the midst of the worst world pandemic in a century. Many people are living in fear of sickness and death. My apartment in New York faces some of the great hospitals of the city, and especially during the height of the virus, every window blazed all night and the wailing sirens and red flashing lights came at all hours. Hopes for an early solution to the virus and a quick turnaround have been dashed again and again.

But the pandemic has brought more problems than just sickness. There may be major disruptions for the worse in nearly every sector of our society that will last for years. We may be in for unemployment unknown since the Great Depression, the failure of innumerable businesses, the painful contraction of whole industries, massive tax shortfalls jeopardizing the lives of millions who rely on government services and retirement, and crises for both private and public education. And that's just the list that comes

mind now when I am writing in the very earliest days of the crisis. There will inevitably be others that we cannot yet foresee. In any case, the most socially and economically vulnerable will pay a higher price. On top of everything else, the social isolation has brought despair and a sense of hopelessness to millions.

In the midst of skyrocketing deaths from the coronavirus, protests over a different kind of death erupted into the streets during the early summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis. The demonstrations happened in over two thousand U.S. cities and around the world, drawing millions of people, making them the largest such social protests in our history, far larger than those during the civil rights movement of the 1960s under Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Nearly all the current protests have been focused on the ongoing racism in our society at large. But being old enough to remember the civil rights movement protests firsthand, I have been struck by a contrast. Our recent protests and calls for social justice, as encouraging as they are in so many ways, have little of the same sense of hope that that the earlier movement had.

In Dr. King's masterpiece, his "I Have a Dream Speech," he says:

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.¹

King's reference to cutting a "stone of hope" out of a mountain of despair is a reference to Daniel 2:34–35,45. The chapter was a divine vision of the future, given to the king of Babylon in a dream. In that vision the idolatrous kingdoms of this world are smashed by a small rock "cut out" of a

mountain “but not by human hands,” which then grows into a mountain of justice and peace that fills the earth. Christian interpreters have understood the stone as the kingdom of God, a supernatural work (“not by human hands”), starting as quite a small thing, seemingly powerless, yet eventually toppling all proud regimes that perpetuate evil and oppression. Dr. King used the image with great rhetorical skill, but the image is more than rhetorical. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,” Jesus says in Matthew 13:31–32, “Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it . . . becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

Dr. King did not let the financial and political powerlessness of African Americans in the U.S. dash his hopes. The hidden systemic racism and the overt racial exclusion and violence that the civil rights leaders faced in the 1950s and 1960s were enormous. But he knew that God moves in this way—from small beginnings and weakness through sacrifice and service toward change. Dr. King was not merely a sunny optimist. Read his speeches and letters and you can see anger and realistic fears about the movement, but the note of hope remains.

It has often been pointed out that the civil rights movement was led by African American pastors and Christian leaders, and so the biblical references that fill their speeches and calls to do justice were not mere grandiloquence. They were statements of faith and hope rooted in God.

Death, pandemics, injustice, social breakdown—we again desperately need a stone of hope.

And there is no greater hope possible than to believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Saint Paul says he was “crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power” (2 Corinthians 13:4). If you grasp this great fact of history, then even if you find things going dark, this hope becomes a light for you when all other lights go out. That’s why Paul can add, “Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him.”

This is a book on the resurrection of Jesus. I am not trying to do the same exhaustive work on the historical sources and evidence for the resurrection that N. T. Wright did—nor am I capable of it. Early in the volume I

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try to summarize much of his work, which I don't think can be bettered at the present time. Because I am a preacher and not an academic, I am concentrating on the resurrection as a key to understanding the whole Bible and to facing all the challenges of life—suffering, personal change, injustice, moral clarity, and the uncertainty of the future.

Theoretically everyone knows that they could die at any moment. But a diagnosis of cancer or heart disease or the threat of a pandemic transfers us into the realm of those who know it as an immediate reality. During a dark time for most of the world, and for me personally, as we all long and grasp for hope, there is no better place to look than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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