

Volume II: CRISIS

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Interlude II



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WHY DON'T WE HOPE?

The Crisis of Supremacy and Our Loss of *Hope*

On New Year's Eve 1999 a multitude gathered in St. Peter's Square to welcome the Third Millennium. Pope John Paul II challenged the pilgrims to enter the 21st century determined to "conquer fear" and "rediscover the Spirit of hope". At the same time near my home, in Times Square the Millennium Ball made of Waterford crystal and dubbed the "Star of Hope" descended the pole at the stroke of midnight. Thousands of revelers cheered the future while a billion others watched by television across the globe. Millennium celebrations everywhere — in Beijing, at the Pyramids, on the Thames — unanimously emphasized similar anticipation about the coming decades.

Instinctively every human being knows hope is what both individuals and civilizations need to survive and flourish. In the same sense hope is key to the vitality and impact of Christians in any generation.

QUOTABLE QUOTE

Behind the debris of our self-styled, sullen supermen, there stands the gigantic figure of one person, because of whom, by whom, in whom, and through whom alone mankind might still have hope: the person of Jesus Christ.

(G. K. CHESTERTON)

However, if not grounded in a comprehensive vision of Christ — if not shaped by everything He is, seated on His throne — every promising outlook we profess can quickly dissolve into uninvited *crises* of hope. Our one reliable refuge against every onslaught of hopelessness and despair is our bedrock conviction about the inexhaustible riches of His supremacy (Eph. 3). Whenever diminished hope overtakes a believer, it is usually a sign of a far greater challenge: *the crisis of supremacy*.

But there's also good news each time hope is shaken! The experience can bring a blessing *if* the setback drives Christians to re-examine what we really believe about the glory of God's Son — and *if* in turn this wakes us up to all the hope we are meant to have because Jesus is Lord.

So, what is the state of hope in the Church today? Let's find out by surveying four vital topics:

- **Everyone's critical need for hope and its role in our survival.**
 - **The loss of hope within our generation and how this impacts Christians.**
 - **The loss of hope *inside* today's Church and three major sources of it.**
 - **The need for Christians to take seriously this struggle for the soul of the Church.**
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Everyone's Critical Need for Hope

(Psalm 102:1-22)

Philosophers suggest there are at least three seminal issues everyone must confront to find deeper meaning for their lives:

- What must I *know*?
- What ought I to *do*?
- What may I *hope*?

In many ways, our answer to the third question precludes our response to the other two. It is *hope* that sets the agenda for both our “knowing” and our “doing”. Life's priorities are determined mostly by what lies ahead, where we believe we are going and how we expect to get there.

THINK WITH ME ...**What is the relationship between hope and human survival?**

When coalition forces liberated Iraq from the brutal tyranny of Saddam Hussein, they found millions of traumatized people debilitated by years of ruthless indoctrination, fearful of severest reprisals, paralyzed by a reign of terror involving death squads and unspeakable tortures, and ground down by abject poverty. Without hope many Iraqis initially were unable to act rationally much of the time, or to care about others' needs, or to respect others' property. *U.S. News* concluded a special report with an insight that, frankly, applies to all peoples: "In the end, the ultimate therapy for a traumatized nation is a hopeful personal vision of the future."

History teaches that not only in Iraq but in every nation the ability to believe in the future separates growing civilizations from dying ones. Only where hope exists can meaningful life be sustained, whether for nations or for individuals. Without hope one can lapse into everything from lethargy to bitterness to mind-numbing gloom. There's a predisposition in human nature that demands we anticipate something better to come. We all need something to look forward to, something that holds promise of more than we have yet experienced. This is no less true for every *Christian*.

Thoreau wrote that humans "live lives of quiet desperation" where hints of happy expectations quickly fade. Agnostic philosopher Bertrand Russell cynically concluded shortly before his death: "There is a darkness without. And when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendor, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment, and then nothing." Jean-Paul Sarte confessed the same despair: "I've discovered I'm alive, and the thought of it sickens me." How many of *us* at one time or another hear ourselves asking: "Is this all there is to life? Is this as good as it will get?"

By comparison Viktor Frankl, who studied Jewish prisoners in German concentration camps, wrote *A Man's Search for Meaning*. In it he documents the resilient power of "*hope-fullness*". What made the difference between those who survived and those who perished, he found, was often

QUOTABLE QUOTE

The way we conceive the future sculpts the present, gives contour and tone to nearly every action and thought through the day. If our sense of future is weak, we live listlessly. Much emotional and mental illness and most suicides occur among men and women who feel that they 'have no future.'

(DR. EUGENE PETERSON)

the degree of hope they nourished. Those who prevailed through horrible trials did so primarily because they were convinced there was “something beyond the barbed wire to live for, something to look forward to, something to go home to.”

Many times followers of Jesus face the same tug of war between hope and disillusionment. In determining the outcome for *us* the magnitude of our vision of the Sovereign Savior proves most decisive.

This was clearly the case with Russia’s brilliant 19th century novelist, Leo Tolstoy. As much as anyone he exhibited how spiritual survival for Christians requires a good dose of hope. His writings were acclaimed far and wide. He was lavished with the trappings of fame. But through it all Tolstoy endured a secret nightmare of depression. More than once he threatened suicide. At one point he imagined himself abandoned in relentless confusion — someone lost in a forbidding forest who must forever wander, with no way out. His personal crisis of hope came down to one unavoidable question, as he put it: “*What’s next?*” He agonized about whether any larger purpose for life could transcend his fleeting accomplishments.

Finally the years of torment began to lift as he turned back to his Christian roots. He rediscovered that all along, deep inside, one truth had preserved him from total despair. From childhood he had clung to a deep-seated conviction that God was “there”. This gave Tolstoy an unshakable prospect: If he chose to seek the Lord, the Lord would be found. He did not postpone the seeking. He encountered his Savior afresh. He began again with Jesus as Lord. This hope led to his survival on every level. And subsequent generations have benefited from the spiritual insights of his later writings.

So, if we need hope to survive, what does that tell us about the condition of the current generation?

The Loss of Hope for Our Generation

(Ephesians 2:1-3, 12)

Probably no previous generation has been as preoccupied with the future as citizens of the 21st century. “Future shock” has become the normal experi-

ence of those caught up in the advance of unfettered technological innovations. NASA's space explorations tease the imagination with images of "Star Wars" adventures just ahead. The promise of impending medical breakthroughs, leading to increased quality and longevity of life, keeps us dreaming of healthier tomorrows.

However, buoyancy over breakthroughs bogs down for many who face fruitless attempts to fulfill cherished expectations. A vague dread descends upon us, a fear of pursuing dreams that will ultimately deceive and disappoint. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* said it well for both Elizabethans and multitudes of moderns: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in its petty pace from day to day.... It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

THINK WITH ME ...

What is responsible for today's disappearance of hope?

Above every other explanation, the Bible is clear that humankind is deprived of lasting hope simply because we are *dead* in sin and *dead* to God (Eph. 2). Psalm 7 recognizes that "he who is pregnant with evil and conceives trouble gives birth to disillusionment" — to shattered dreams. And yet it is often the nature of sin to keep us defiant, seeking self-made solutions with an arrogance that God critiques like this: "You were wearied by all your ways, but you would not say, 'It is hopeless'" (Isa. 57).

Depraved at heart, corrupt in affections, self-seeking in relationships, fearful over death, enslaved to forces of darkness and candidates for God's everlasting wrath — this is the pitiful pit from which humankind cannot extract itself. If, as psychologists tell us, "melancholy" overtakes people who've lost the ability to imagine a better future, who suspect that life is absurd and will never meet their deepest longings, then *all* of us must succumb eventually.

Adding to the universal plagues of spiritual lostness, unprecedented adversities have ambushed the last few generations, piercing hope to its core. The 20th century witnessed the crumbling of a host of novel "pseudo-hopes" — extraordinary projections masquerading as whole new beginnings for the human race. Instead of finding promised foretastes of "Paradise

QUOTABLE QUOTE

How does one dare to propose the way of trust [or hope] in the face of raw, undifferentiated heartache, cosmic disorder and the terror of history?

(BRENNAN MANNING)

Reclaimed”, however, the 1900’s regularly descended into battlegrounds over deceptive, humanistic utopias. Deficient, even demonic, worldviews competed with one another for the allegiance of nations: communism, socialism, fascism, totalitarianism, along with scientism, secularism, fanatical Hinduism, radical Islam. Each deadly dream unraveled in tragic ways, not the least of which took the form of two World Wars followed by a paralyzing Cold War standoff. In the words of Alexandar Solzhenitsyn, the 20th century became “what previous generations would have called ‘*Apocalypse*’”.

False fulfillments embedded in alluring Western materialism left many people ambivalent. A *New York Times* best-seller *Affluenza* called rampant consumption an “all-consuming epidemic” negatively affecting health, wealth, economy and environment and monopolizing our citizens with elusive promises that never seemed to match their hype. Not a few found that a sense of super-abundance fostered unanticipated *fear* — fear over how material blessings of such a magnitude simply could not last much longer.

QUOTABLE QUOTES

Hopelessness is hell — literally. God made us creatures for whom hope is life, and whose lives become living deaths when we have nothing good to look forward to.

(J. I. PACKER)

Christians, unfortunately, have not escaped these forces unscathed. Hope has taken a beating for us as well. Many believers, though prosperous, remain inwardly empty and confused. “We’re so *blessed* we’re *stressed!*” someone put it. Overwhelmed, overcommitted, oversold, overextended, overactive. Clearly it is hard for disciples to anticipate greater Kingdom advances when they can hardly see past the relentless demands of daily routines.

On the flip side, multitudes of others have succumbed to hopelessness in the midst of *want* — poverty, misfortune, disease, violence, oppression. Many could identify with the sign over the inferno in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Written across every facet of their deplorable circumstances were the words: “Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here.” A friend of mine attending a Yankees game in the Bronx saw near a main gate a homeless man holding up a large cardboard sign as fans filed past. He wasn’t asking for a handout. The scrawled message simply said, “I have no hope.” These past decades countless others like him — an estimated 40 million poor residing in the US alone, *many of whom are also*

our brothers and sisters in Christ — have been stripped of dignity and diminished by demons of doom day after day.

Our world is being slashed to pieces by waves of injustice, brutality, terrorism, poverty, racism, phantom affluence, perversion, epidemics and illusionary utopias. How do we convince people imprisoned in a canyon full of broken dreams to risk believing that some form of concrete, lasting hope still exists? Instead many say, “Eat and drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” reminiscent of Paul’s quote about pagans who lacked confidence about a victory over the grave (1 Cor. 15).

What does this have to do with the Church’s crisis of supremacy? For the moment recall this: Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 15, the great “resurrection chapter”, to challenge *Christians*, some of whom had bought into the fatalism of the wider culture around them. Would he need to address the same concern to modern-day American congregations? As we saw in chapter 6, there seems every chance he would.

THINK WITH ME ...

How does hopelessness hit us at the heart level?

When you get right down to it, every modern expression of insufficient hope — whether for believers or unbelievers — hits at the heart level. The struggle may mask itself with a host of unsavory feelings that every human, including every *Christian*, knows all too well:

- Loneliness
- Panic
- Grief
- Fear
- Isolation
- Guilt
- Anger
- Anxiety

Gordon MacDonald reminds us that even Christians can lose personal hope due to the basic heartaches of life, such as when:

- marriages go sour.
- investments go “south”.
- catastrophic illnesses overtake us.
- friends betray us or abandon us.
- youthful ambitions hit the wall of midlife limitations.
- someone we deeply love dies.
- our own mortality threatens us.

 QUOTABLE QUOTE

To lose one's spirit of hope is a terrible thing, but it happens. And not to a small percentage of us, but to a huge percentage of us. Over and over again I get the feeling that I'm talking to people who have lost their vision, who have forgotten how to dream about a future in which there are growth, achievement in Kingdom purposes, and joy at the thought of meeting Jesus.

(DR. GORDON MACDONALD)

Such setbacks can crush any of us at any moment. Without warning we can find ourselves anxious over irreversible results of past actions; or bewildered with the disintegration of once-close family relationships; or despairing over unbearable disappointments on the job; or disillusioned when life's circumstances cut off our best efforts to pursue long-held goals. This can hook a Christian's heart as well, challenging at the core what we say we believe about Christ's supremacy.

It should be no shock, therefore, that in a land inhabited by over 140 million citizens with *no* church participation whatsoever, swamped with pluralistic babblings about the divine, many have lost confidence. They doubt life holds any paramount purpose for them to pursue. Around us reside friends and neighbors who are, in the

words of Eph. 2:12 "without God and without hope". As C.S. Lewis noted, "futility" is the legacy for those who have lost a sense of personal "utility". Hopelessness is all that remains for those to whom a divinely orchestrated destiny appears to be permanently impossible.

THINK WITH ME ...
Why do the world's crises of hope impact Christians even harder?

At the end of the day, every heart-level crisis of hope is fundamentally *spiritual* in nature. That's why Christians, despite a saving relationship with God's Son, can't expect to remain immune to feelings of "perplexity" (2 Cor. 4), or times when we also "despair of life" (2 Cor. 1). This world of our pilgrimage is a mine field of disillusionments. As they do every other human being, attacks of angst can threaten the believer.

On top of this, Jesus' followers frequently find themselves taunted with *additional* misgivings uniquely experienced by saints — troubling questions pagans would never even think to ask. For starters, in the midst of every difficult challenge the world faces, Christians must come back to foundational issues of faith, such as: Does God's Word promise tangible triumphs

through His Son that I can anticipate at this moment with *confidence*? Even if it does, is Christ ready to deliver on those promises any time *soon*? Is He actively shaping my future right now, or just watching it unfold? Will He empower me to prevail and sail, even when the storms of life overwhelm me? Will His supremacy make any *practical* differences in the midst of my most despairing circumstances?

Now I ask you: What Muslim, or Hindu, or hedonist do you know who feels it necessary to address at this level such personal questions about hopefulness?

When it comes to dispersing disillusionments, the answers given by too many Christians may ring just as hollow as that of unbelievers. Buying into the same futile fears that plague our whole generation, many disciples approach uncertain futures exhibiting little noticeable contrast with the response of secularists, New-Agers or Buddhists. We may be credited as “survivors” but still retain little testimony as “thrivers”. Too many of us hear the daily news, cast its pessimistic resignations with stained-glass language, and bring it *inside* the Church, into our daily walk with Christ, only to undermine both our personal confidence toward God as well as our message of hope to each other.

1 Peter 3 puts it this way: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Even pagans should be so impressed with the boldness of our forward-looking faith in Jesus that they regularly require us to define it for them. The compelling courage they observe in us should intrigue them to beg us to explain how we keep going.

The implications of this are huge. Any *loss* of hope inside the Church wounds our witness outside the Church. It guts the credibility of our claims to a deeper spirituality. It significantly paralyzes our mission to neighbors and nations. It reveals to the world that our vision of God’s Son is too small. In turn, our message about the Kingdom unravels into

QUOTABLE QUOTE

You can’t read the number of Puritan sermons I’ve read and not confront the central question of those sermons: *your mortality*. The Puritans knew that this life doesn’t go on forever, and that you need to live your life in the shadow of eternity. It’s frightening to confront your own mortality. Studying the Puritans made me confront what we try so hard to avoid in this society. But it confirmed in me the sense that there needs to be an eternal hope.

(DR. HARRY S. STOUT)

little more than meaningless mutterings.

But it's the demise of hope originating inside the Church that creates our greatest challenge.

The Loss of Hope *Inside* the Church

(Hebrews 3:1-8, 12-14)

Christian demographers such as Ray Bakke tell us that of all the major barriers to reaching the world's cities for Christ, ninety percent are found *inside* our churches, not outside. These hindrances include such things as lack of holiness, Biblical illiteracy, avarice and disunity. At the top of the list is what Bakke calls a *spirit of hopelessness* often originating from the pastors themselves (documented in studies of congregations in hundreds of cities on all continents).

The results of such studies indicate that urban challenges can seem too formidable for the Gospel to handle. Malignant forces — poor housing, injustice, addictions, crime — appear virtually unstoppable. Many Christians conclude incorrectly that few tangible evidences exist where the lordship of Jesus effectively turned the tide. His reign seems inadequate for the pressures city-dwellers confront, including gangs, drugs, pollution, noise, racism, substandard health care, inadequate housing and injustice. Cut-and-run becomes much easier as we pull back turtle-like and say to one another, in essence, "Let's just try to hold the fort until Jesus comes back again!"

This spirit of hopelessness reinforces other internal impediments to God's work in the city. Disunity among local churches is often the result of a vision of Christ's kingship so introverted that leaders become embroiled in debates over secondary concerns like worship styles or spiritual gifts. Controversies like these cripple our ability to find ways to serve Christ together to further His triumphant mission within our communities.

THINK WITH ME ...

How does a spirit of hopelessness show itself as *spiritual paralysis*?

Harassments of hopelessness aren't unique to the urban Christian experi-

ence, however. One poll documented that pessimism about the future of the Christian faith in America was expressed by over 80% of all U.S. pastors. Not a few clergy indicated anxiety that non-Christian religions and New Age spirituality would increasingly dominate national life. Even more disturbing, one of America's largest Protestant denominations verified by its own studies that *depression* is the biggest problem among its pastors — a more debilitating challenge than church conflicts or marital difficulties. And most of these leaders were found in *suburban* churches.

As all of this illustrates, Christians who lose hopeful hearts inherit a huge handicap — a kind of *spiritual* paralysis. When part of a person's physical body is paralyzed, that individual may have commendable ambitions, but often to little avail. The common frustration of paralytics is that they feel trapped by an inability to do with their bodies what their minds can visualize and what their hearts desire. Future options seem greatly limited. In the same way spiritual paralysis is a good diagnosis of a church's deadly disabilities caused by despair.

Paralysis takes hold when Christians, feeling powerless before the darkness in our culture, grow awkward about proclaiming Christ's kingdom where they live. Having experienced persistent times of barrenness and frustration, not infrequently through a variety of failed Christianly enterprises, we doubt things will ever improve. Dreams of meaningful service to Christ elude us. For many it is not so much an issue of being *unwilling* to overcome previous heartbreaks but rather a sense of being *unable*. Tim Stafford calls some believers "the walking wounded". They are unhappy ghost-like disciples composed of the abused, the neglected, the lonely and the guilt-laden whose endless neediness leaves them with empty hearts that nothing seems to fill.

QUOTABLE QUOTE

When I stand to welcome the people to worship on Sunday morning, there are spouses who can barely talk. There are sullen teenagers living double lives at home and school. There are widows who still feel the amputation of a fifty-year partner. There are single people who have not been hugged for twenty years. There are men in the prime of their lives with cancer ... There are soldiers of the Cross who have risked all for Jesus and bear the scars ... What they need is a kind of joyful earnestness that makes the broken heart feel hopeful and helps ones who are drunk with trifles sober up for greater joys.

(DR. JOHN PIPER)

Reduced to spiritual paralytics, we may dream big dreams of what we'd like to do for the glory of Christ. But little — personally or corporately — seems to cooperate. Our strength feels unequal to the needs and opportunities around us. Grappling with the same disheartening challenges unbelieving neighbors experience, we pull back from the clear light of Scripture's teaching on the reign of Christ. We refuse to allow His bold claims to form our final interpretation on this "veil of tears".

To understand this phenomenon better let's explore three widely shared experiences of paralysis inside the Church: Busyness and fatigue, confusion over Christ's unfinished mission and disconcerting disappointments with Christ Himself. Ultimately all three boil down to a loss of Kingdom perspective rising from a crisis of supremacy.

THINK WITH ME ...

How does the evangelical "rat race" exhaust our hope in Christ?

Let's be totally candid with each other. Too many times we evangelicals abandon persistent pursuits of Christ and His power to entertain the opposite — a frenetic, over-extended pace in church-related meetings, reflected in the plethora of announcements in last Sunday morning's bulletin. (Everything performed, of course, in Jesus' name!)

It's really quite disturbing. A closer look indicates we've constructed ministry schedules that actually pull us away from the joy of Christ-focused obedience to which Scripture calls us. Our calendars of churchly events have drained the vitality out of whatever sense of Christ's presence we once knew. Tempted to sample from the abundance of religious options around us, we have inflicted ourselves with spiritual exhaustion. As crazy as it sounds, we have depleted our enthusiasm for glorifying God's Son by how we've tried to *serve* God's Son. Then we wonder why church members protest a lack of time and energy to handle one more personal investment in the advance of His Kingdom.

It's all so tragic! Pressures from pious programming block us from a restorative rest in God. Christianly routines and rituals deflect us from pursuing the deeper implications of the promises Christ offers us. We allow this even though we know His word points toward the life-changing renewal for which we so desperately long. Instead we attempt to make up by our own efforts for blessings in Christ that *seem* no longer relevant, or adequate, or dependable, or workable — at least in our own experiences.

Too quickly we fall into the same trap that stifled 1st century Christians in Galatia province. Having begun in the Spirit, they ended up *trying* to perfect God's work by their own desperate activities for Christ, called "the flesh" by Paul. (Look at Gal. 3:1-5.) As a result they no longer embraced their Savior for who He really is, or for what He imparts, or where He leads. By self-sufficiency and self-reliance they denied the hope Christ's supremacy offered them. Consequently, Paul confessed he was "in travail" until Christ would be formed in them again (Gal. 4). Paul's labors to rally them back to the preeminence of Jesus caused him great personal pain (both physical and spiritual). But he knew otherwise they would miss out on God's Kingdom blessings.

I hear Christian leaders everywhere groaning under this wearisome burden, the oppression of over-busyness. They are desperate to escape playing the role of "chaplaincy to the rat race" (as Richard Lovelace describes it). Research indicates most pastors in America are asked to function in as many as 17 different roles to fulfill parishioners' expectations – from teacher, to counselor, to mediator, to business manager, to fundraiser, to cheerleader, to promoter!

Where did these mounting demands come from? Primarily, I suggest to you, from hope-starved parishioners. Lacking solid confidence that Christ is supremely sufficient to meet their needs, they have turned to their leaders demanding that *they* make up the difference. Yet none of us were ever meant to take over Christ's role as the sovereign in other saints' lives. Help bear their burdens? Yes. Eliminate their burdens? Impossible.

No wonder even clergy, wrestling with congregational frustrations and stresses, gradually lose hope in Christ for themselves. Eventually they succumb to disillusionment with the ministry, which evolves into a "hardness of heart" as a form of self-protection. In private conversations over the years scores have shared with me this sad outcome. Frankly, I've had to deal with the same battle in my own life more

QUOTABLE QUOTE

The Church is born of hope and it is necessary to rekindle it *today* if we want to give new impetus to faith and make it able to conquer the world again. Nothing can be done without hope. When a person reaches the point of having no hope in anything, it's as if he were dead. To give hope to someone is the most beautiful gift that can be offered.

(DR. RANIERO CANTALAMESSA)

than once and for the same reasons.

Recall the three foundational questions at the opening of this chapter:

- What can I know?
- What ought I to do?
- What may I hope?

Normally, activist-oriented Christians boast impressive answers to the first two questions. Most of us are confident about what Christians should *think* (our doctrinal positions are well-honed) and what they ought to *do* (our extensive curricula for discipleship bear witness to this). But do we have significant answers for the *third* and most important question? Are we abundantly clear about what and in whom our people may *hope*? Or about how *fully* they may hope in Him as Lord of all?

Furthermore, do we *consistently* feed those convictions to fellow believers? Do our Sunday schools and sermons and Bible study groups — as well as our counseling sessions, committee meetings, youth rallies and hospital visitations — *major* on making hope in Christ a prime issue? Are we doing everything we can to foster the fullest possible answers to “What may I hope?” for all whom we serve?

And are those answers faithfully magnifying the supremacy of the One in whom their hope must rest?

THINK WITH ME ...

How has our hope in Christ been paralyzed by the magnitude of the task?

World renowned mission strategist Ralph Winter speaks for thousands of hope-filled Christians when he exclaims that the Church is in “the final era of world missions”. Favorable facts seem to substantiate his encouraging outlook. For the first time in history, based on resources and manpower alone, the task of planting the Christian movement within every remaining unreached nation and people group could be completed in one lifetime. In many places around the globe the Church is exploding numerically.

Yet despite such prospects, a major reason for loss of hope — again, a reason unique among Christians — relates to the task God has given us. Many are disabled with hopelessness because of their erroneous perception that world evangelization has *failed*. Numbers of believers are unsettled over what seems like overwhelming, inexplicable gaps — disturbing discrep-

ancies between what the Church claims about the outcome of Christ's mission to the world and what has actually been accomplished so far. Equally, they are stymied by the magnitude of what remains to be done.

After two thousand years of massive, sacrificial efforts, why does it seem we still have so far to go? Despite bold beginnings in the book of Acts, why have 67% of all humans from A.D. 30 to the present day never heard the name of Jesus (as documented by the *World Christian Encyclopedia*)? Where's the bright tomorrow for God's Kingdom in *that*? — or, by extension, for our *own* destiny? Quite honestly, it is hard to sustain hope in Christ and His supremacy for *personal* challenges when we conclude that the immensity and complexity of the larger mission is still too elusive.

Billions still have no one like them, near them, to tell them about the Lord Jesus. Should we not feel compelled to ask: Where has our King been the past two millennia? What are the evidences of His lordship in the face of what seems like so little advance? Where are signs that His Kingdom is triumphantly advancing among the nations? — or, for that matter, even in our own neighborhoods?

To put it in perspective, there are more unevangelized people in our world right now, literally, than the number of times an average human heart beats from the day of birth to age 75. The nations are teeming with multitudes yet untouched by the hope held out in the Gospel. We might wonder: What does that say in the end about the hope Christ offers *us*? Does this picture really inspire the kind of unshakable confidence in Jesus on which to build *our* future? If we were brutally honest, many would have to respond “No”.

Based on the phenomenal opportunities, strategies, laborers and treasures at the Church's disposal the previous twenty centuries, recent missions research by demographer Dr. David Barrett and others has confirmed that the world should have been evangelized *a thousand times over* by now. Instead, there's so much left to be done. Satan seems to have retained the upper hand. But here's the kicker: What does this say about the dependability of God's promises *to us*? What does this say about the conclusiveness of Christ's supremacy for any of our own congregations?

QUOTABLE QUOTE

Many suffer with an unperceived smugness that drugs the soul with the notion that our present boundaries of understanding God are the permanent boundaries of His readiness to reveal Himself to us.

(DR. JACK HAYFORD)

This crisis of hope (and supremacy) haunts us yet another way. During the past one hundred years there have been more Christians worldwide martyred for their faith than in all the rest of Church history. In the Sudan, for example, hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters have been intentionally and systematically starved, slaughtered or sold into slavery by an oppressive Muslim government. What may *those* believers hope about a Christ who conquers amidst suffering? Where are the manifestations of His Kingdom for *them*? And what does this say about God's promises to lead any of us in Christ Jesus' victory procession (2 Cor. 2)?

What feels like a string of dashed expectations for outreach among the nations now haunts the *local* mission of our churches, as well. Surveys suggest that in the last 20 years 80% of American churches have been identified as either stagnant or dying in membership. This failure disheartens the very community that professes to follow the King of Heaven's Armies. It mocks the people who aim to proclaim the claims of the One called "the assurance of all the glorious things to come" (Col. 1:27, *Phillips*). Make no mistake: *This is merely the crisis of supremacy in different "clothes"*.

THINK WITH ME ...

How have we lost hope due to personal disappointments with Christ?

Hopelessness sneaks up on many of us in much subtler ways than we've explored so far. It multiplies within the murky pools of hidden disillusionments with God's promises. The most disabling form of despair any Christian can experience is this: *Our personal, secret disappointments with Christ Himself*.

Frankly, this tragedy is more prevalent in our churches than most care to confess. Many have concluded privately that they will never consistently experience what the Bible says an abundant life in Christ looks like. They've not been transformed into genuine Christlikeness — they know this. The victorious Christian life has not unfolded the way they thought it was supposed to work, and they're deeply confounded by this fact. Despite a few encouraging exceptions on a broad range of moral issues, current research by Barna and Gallup verifies there's little measurable difference between the quality of character found in Christians versus the life-ways of non-Christians in America. Why has Jesus made so little difference in us?

Unmet longings for promised spiritual advances, in heart and hearth, suggest that Christ somehow has *failed* us. He has not brought to pass what we have every right to expect from Someone who declares to utterly love us while at the same time holding sway over an entire creation. If truth were told, you and I have probably backlogged a bushelful of prayers for help and healing that inexplicably still remain unanswered.

On the surface we may teach and sing about God's mighty acts in Scripture. But in more reflective moments most of us are needled with nagging doubts about the whole story. Will the outpourings of God's blessings — Jesus' resurrection power that we've been told can conquer, above all, our battles with sin — ever become tangible *reality* in our lives?

As psychologist John Eldredge reminds us, such doubts can unleash “the most poisonous” lies in Satan's arsenal. Using them to intensify every other form of hopelessness, the Tempter whispers: “For you personally, *things will never, ever change!*” Once we buy into that definition of our destiny, expectations toward the King fizzle for sure.

If what I've described feels familiar, remember *you are not alone*. Take a look at the smiling saints around you politely perched in their pews while singing God's praises on a Sunday morning. Scores harbor secret sorrows just as you do. Their horizons are confined to the same fog of fleeting dreams we all experience from time to time. They assume that once Sunday service is over, the coming week will leave the sighings of their souls still unsatisfied by the Savior.

Instead of pressing into God's promises many of us nurture inwardly what I call a “*tentative spirit*” toward the Lord Jesus Christ. Like the state motto of Missouri “Show Me”, we bargain with God. It's as if we say, “From now on, God, I'll believe your promises in Christ only when You *show* me!” We might not verbalize it quite that way, but the attitude lurks deep inside.

QUOTABLE QUOTE

If for all practical purposes we believe that this life is our best shot at happiness ... if this is as good as it gets, we will live as desperate, demanding, and eventually despairing men and women.... All our addictions and depressions, the rage that simmers just beneath the surface of our Christian façade, and the deadness that characterizes so much of our lives has a common root: We think this is as good as it gets. Take away the hope of arrival and our journey becomes the Bataan death march. The best human life is unspeakably sad.

(DR. JOHN ELDREDGE)

We simply can't forget the times it seemed God did not come through for us even after we pleaded with Him for deliverance. When the pastor's sermon mentions miracles from Heaven, quiet suspicions nurture a suffocating cynicism inside our souls.

With reticence we wonder if we'll ever know consistency in how God fulfills the possibilities proclaimed from the pulpit. In the words of Brennan Manning, loss of confidence in the overarching dominion of God's Son causes "incalculable harm to Christian spirituality", leaving in its wake "the flotsam of distrustful, cynical Christians, angry at a capricious God".

We just never say so aloud.

THINK WITH ME ...

What happens if we don't get to debrief our disappointments with Christ?

It's regrettable that no forum exists in most churches today where Christians may openly confess their disillusion. There's no spiritual "emergency room" where we might join others to diagnose and treat our struggles. We have no place to debrief the soul's pain, no "safe haven" to explore troubled hearts, no mutually supportive ways to dismantle crises of hope. Instead many practice what Dallas Willard calls a "conspiracy of silence" by covering up the ways our lives contradict the claims of Biblical promises. In other words, *we live in denial*.

Things deteriorate further as we stand aloof from signs of new beginnings. We're alarmed whenever God appears to be urging us to trust

His Son "just one more time" for prospects that seem either too good to be true or have appeared elusive in the past. We tremble at the thought that if renewed reliance on Christ evaporates, it may permanently shatter our ability to trust Him for anything enduring, especially an eternity with the saints in glory. I mean, how can we ever dare risk finding out that Christ *Himself* may not be totally dependable — that He may be somehow neither sufficient nor supreme?

Finally something inside of us starts to *die*. Disappointments that lead to fear petrify eventu-

QUOTABLE QUOTE

Spiritual strongholds in the Church are the mindset impregnated with hopelessness that causes the believer to accept as unchangeable something that he or she knows is contrary to the will of God.

(DR. ED SILVOSO)

ally into a hidden *hardness of heart*, formed mostly for our own protection to help us avoid ever experiencing again the trauma of disillusionment with the Son of God. We garrison our feelings to fend off the pain of future betrayals. We forego any expectations toward Christ that might be dashed as before.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? As I'm sure you've suspected by now, I'm speaking out of my own pilgrimage here. I have waged the battle with hopelessness at a level that even the pagan world never faces! Why? Because, as I said earlier, for all believers any loss of hope *mocks* our main message that God's Son is Ruler over our total existence. It challenges our claims to the victory that defines the destination for which we trust in Him. If the promises of God seem to fail *us*, then as believers we are doubly doomed. Paul speaks to this when he concludes in 1 Corinthians 15: "If only for *this* life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."

A diminished vision of Christ leaves Christians functioning more like *mirrors* than *windows*. We tend to reflect the hopelessness of unbelievers around us instead of providing them ways to gaze out upon the wide-open spaces of Kingdom promises. We shrink from inviting our friends to look through our eyes at the wonders of the Son of God because we ourselves need our own sight restored.

There's far more to this drama than bearing up under individual heartaches. At stake is the potency of our vision for the future of God's Kingdom. At stake is the breadth of the belief that will dominate the Church and its mission throughout the 21st century. *What I have just explored with you in this chapter is the ugly underside of the crisis of supremacy.*

THINK WITH ME ...

How is all this paralysis evidenced in the Church's prayerlessness?

Without question one of the most pervasive manifestations of paralysis is the phenomenon of *prayerlessness*. It is far more prevalent throughout the Christian community than most care to admit. Too many churches and ministries today hobble along with a painfully persistent "prayer vacuum". For many, weekly prayer meetings are literally non-existent. Those scheduled are attended at best by just a handful of stalwart saints.

Prayerlessness in the Body of Christ is not only a *reason* for our frequent feelings of impotence before life's challenges. Prayerlessness is also the *sign* of a deeply-rooted (often unsuspected) paralysis already upon us. It rises from our busyness, our self-reliant service to Christ, our feelings of frustration over the failures of Christ's mission and our heartaches over a host of disappointments with Christ. But in the final analysis prayerlessness is really evidence of a pre-existing shortfall in our vision of the glory of Jesus. It bears witness to our shriveled sense of His supremacy. No believer or church is moved very often to pray Kingdom-sized prayers when faith is crippled by impoverished understandings of His claims. Who wants to pray if he or she assumes people or situations are beyond experiencing divinely-orchestrated breakthroughs?

For all practical purposes prayerlessness is like slamming the door in the face of Jesus. When we reject the possibility that God might be able, willing and ready to do something extraordinary on behalf of those who call on Him in the name of His Son, we function less like apostles and more like *agnostics*! Think of it: Christian agnosticism. It is the attitude expressed by believers who lack the courage to believe; who doubt the possibilities of tangible spiritual successes anytime soon; who live with a gnawing fear of further failures just around the bend; who have disqualified themselves from ever experiencing a Redeemer who accomplishes in them and through them that which is exceedingly, abundantly above and beyond all they might ask or think by His power at work within them (Eph. 3).

Some suggest we call this form of Christian hopelessness "*ig*-nosticism" because it ultimately rises out of our ignorance of key dimensions of Christ's dominion. If this is so, nothing short of a spiritual awakening to God's Son may ever reverse the curse.

The Battle for Hope is a Struggle for the Soul of the Church

(Luke 1:26-38, 46-59, 76-79)

Former first lady of the Soviet Union Raisa Gorbachev observed shortly before her death in 1992: "There is a struggle going on in my nation for the

soul of my nation. It is a struggle between good and evil, between truth and treachery, *between hope and disillusionment.*”

For me her observation reaches beyond the political landscape in Russia. What I mean is this: Christians everywhere are embroiled in a similarly sobering struggle, a struggle for the heart of our worship before Heaven and for the health of our witness to the nations. It is a battle not only for the soul of a country but for the life-breath of the Church in the current generation.

As we've seen in this chapter, the issue ends up being a very *personal* struggle. It's a tug-of-war between hope and disillusionment inside our own hearts. We wrestle with competing visions. The truth of the greatness of God's Son fights to reverse uncertainties that, left unchecked, paralyze our obedience to Him. We need to hear again about the hope His supremacy can bring. It is *this* hope we've been called to proclaim to one another. It is *this* hope for which we must campaign among the churches. Because it is *this* hope that can lead believers out of the crisis and back into an experience of everlasting triumphs through Him who sits at the Father's right hand.

More than a few Christians have prevailed in the battle, however. For many the crisis of supremacy has been substantially confronted and cured. In light of what we just discussed above, it is no small thing that millions of them are exhibiting this fresh “awakening to Christ” by the fact that they *are* praying like never before and are praying for fellow believers to be re-awakened at the same time.

In travels to many nations I have met personally with ordinary Christians who are not only praying but also changing the world around them in marvelous ways *because* they were restored to triumphant hope in Jesus ... and then acted on it.

I'll always remember sitting with Mother Theresa many years ago in her tiny, sparsely-furnished stucco office in Calcutta. We were talking about the far-flung ministries of her Missionaries of Charity founded decades earlier. Behind her was a weathered, hand-drawn map of the world with inked lines radiating out of one of India's most desolate cities and flowing to cities all over the globe. The poster indicated the extent of the nuns' outreach. Across the top was printed their motto. It went something like this: “Ministering to the poorest of the poor, we will preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the nations of the world.”

That day with delicate animation Mother Theresa told me of great expectations toward God that propelled her in her work. But she affirmed this could be sustained only as she spent the first hours of each day in prayer, re-devoting her life to the lordship of Christ. A short while later as we toured her “Home for the Dying”, I had an extraordinary sense that Jesus was present among us revealing a measure of His victory over death. I could see Him at work in the destitute men and women lying on cots before me as He filled them with Heaven’s hope — the very same hope that sent her missionaries back into the streets to rescue others like them, day after day after day.

That one afternoon permanently spoiled me for anything less for my own life. In her little corner of Calcutta I was challenged on the shallowness of my own service to Christ. I became desperate for deliverance from my own poverty of *spirit* — from every shortfall of hope that might cripple involvement in Christ’s global cause. Haven’t you ever sensed the same need to be re-awakened to hope in the supremacy of God’s Son?

THINK WITH ME ...

How much do *Christians* need to be re-awakened to a larger hope in Christ?

One Sunday in church not too long ago just after the opening prayer our congregation recited the *Nicene Creed* in unison. As we did, I reflected on the eternal truths contained within. Regarded as one of the premiere documents of Church history, the creed was developed by an all-church council in the 4th century. As we spoke it aloud line by line, I wondered to myself: How many of these insights on Christ determine my daily outlook on life’s challenges? What practical impact do these characteristics of my Redeemer have on the anxieties that drive so many of my daily decisions? How should this confession help me develop a greater hope — a more *sustainable* hope — beyond what any non-Christian could ever experience? How often, I wondered as we came to the last line, do I respond to life in a way that does justice to this glorious 4th century acclamation?

That morning we confessed:

- One Lord Jesus Christ
- Only begotten Son of God
- Begotten of the Father before all worlds

- God of God
- Light of light
- Very God of very God
- For our salvation came down from Heaven
- Incarnate by the Holy Spirit
- Ascended into Heaven
- Sits on the right hand of the Father
- Will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead
- Whose kingdom shall have no end
- To be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Spirit

Mentally, of course, we would all assent to each truth spoken in unison. How could we do otherwise? Each rings out the glories of our Lord. But when I get right down to it, I must admit that this confession does not always provoke me on any practical level to re-shape my day-to-day activities as His disciple. Too rarely do these truths set the tone for weekly worship with my church family. Too rarely do they inspire me to sacrificial giving to missions. Too rarely do they incite in me trust in God for tomorrow's demands at the office.

Unfortunately, I'm not alone. Many have not yet reclaimed the kind of comprehensive Christology we need for a restoration of enduring hope throughout the Church. Too few are convinced, at the moment anyway, that a crisis of supremacy has overtaken us (by whatever name we choose to call it). Fewer still are ready to engage it with urgency as if our lives depended on it – which they do!

THINK WITH ME ...

How is *passion* affected by the battle for hope?

For the moment some readers might remain hesitant or unconvinced about the current struggle for the soul of the Church. It may be helpful to examine the *second* fallout from the crisis of supremacy, our increasing loss of *passion*. We will do just that in chapter 8.

Why does the issue of passion need equal consideration? Let me illustrate. In his 12th volume of oral history *Hope Dies Last* Studs Terkel focused on the theme of how people get on top of hard times. He uncovered

a number of personal stories from activists who changed the world — people of passion — from union organizers to war protestors to civil rights leaders. When asked, “What trait do most activists share?” he responded: “They have hope, and they imbue others with hope.” Hope and passion walk together. As Terkel’s research confirmed, the quality of one’s passion for something springs from the degree of enduring hope that surrounds it.

This has powerful implications for the Church. Vision of the King of Kings (or our lack of it) pretty much determines the strength of our heart-felt zeal for His Kingdom. If hope in Him dies, the death of passion will not be far behind. One can’t exist without the other because the one always quickens the other. Plummeting passion among God’s people is one of the chief characteristics of the absence of Christ-exalting messages in the Church. Deflated desire provides indispensable insight into the serious nature of the crisis of supremacy. It is part of the struggle for the soul of the Church.

The way I see it, when it comes to confronting the crisis and finding its cure, the next chapter — *Why Don’t We Care?* — may be precisely what the “Doctor” ordered!

Author's Extra Curricular Activity

Please feel free to skip this final section and go straight to chapter 8: *Why Don't We Care?*

However, if you would like to work through some of the themes of chapter 7 — if you would like to explore a little more the potential loss of hope in your own life — the following questions may prove helpful. At least they have been for me. They can help you pinpoint where *your* vision of Christ and His supremacy still needs to grow larger. They might guide you toward more of the hope you and I are meant to have.

But I suggest you reflect on these questions not only as they relate to yourself. Think as well about the Christians you fellowship with regularly. How do you think *they* would answer these questions? What might that tell you about the nature of their own struggle to sustain a vibrant hope in Jesus as Lord?

- **Who really is the Christ to whom you were converted in the first place? In what kind of Lord did you seek to place your eternal hope at the beginning? Did you knowingly receive Him for who He is as the Son of God, full of majesty and authority? Even more importantly, do you sense that He truly *conquered* your heart that day, the way a King of Kings has every right to do? Do you sense that as reigning Lord He *still* maintains full sway over you right now? How would you describe this relationship? What do your answers tell you about the “state of hope” for your life? (Or for your congregation?)**
- **Are you *convinced* all the promises of God are really and truly summed up in His Son? Or do you still struggle with hopelessness? For you, are His promises as sure as the fact that He's alive from the dead? Do you view God's promises as *totally available* to you in Christ Jesus? Do you know Him as trustworthy, as the One on whom you can depend without reservation? Do you expect Him always to be sovereign and sufficient for you? Do you expect Him to back His claims that He will ultimately overrule with victory in every challenge you confront? If so, how do you exhibit such convictions? What kinds of practical differences does this make in your daily walk with Him? Do you consider**

Him able, willing and ready as the reigning Lord to minister increased blessings to your life? How do you show it?

- How has He, to any depth, become *experientially* what Paul meant by “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27)? Are you fully relying on Him to be to you increasingly everything God’s Word promises Him to be? Do you daily expect Him to work in you above and beyond what you have received from Him thus far? Do you harbor any *tentativeness* about this happening for you? What do your answers tell you about the “state of hope” in you? (Or in your congregation?)
- In light of the pervasive loss of hope in the Church — fostered from both outside and inside — how might the Church be *flooded* again with the Bible’s magnificent message about the full extent of Christ’s supremacy? What do you think you should do about it? Why should any serious Christian make His supremacy her or his premiere proclamation to other *Christians*? Why ought we to consider at least a “*Campaign of Hope*” throughout the Church bent on restoring to *believers* a fresh vision of hope in God’s Son for ALL that He is? Can there be any more strategic step for any of us to undertake than the mission to awaken God’s people to our glorious destiny in Jesus? We take this step so that in turn they might join us in taking this vision to neighbors and nations. If this seems right, what does this mean for your own sense of mission for Christ? (Or for your congregation?)