



Hope Amidst Despair: Theologizing the Love of God

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The twenty-first century is a time when Africa is experiencing changes in infrastructure development, health care, and education in many domains. At the same time, Africa continues to face threats of gender inequity, poverty, ethnic wars, climate change, and many destructions to human creation and ecology. The latter create despair, pain, and suffering such as death, diseases, and drought which are causing human displacement.

In Tanzania, social norms and high rates of early marriage and childbirth lead to women facing gender-based violence. Both men and women face hardships, but women face a disproportionate rate of abuse. In the above suffering and despair, the God of hope has been intervening through both government and the church. There is great hope

In the midst of the difficulties that many African people experience in their daily lives, hope becomes an important element of being able to carry on. Yet Christian hope can be hijacked by some Christian leaders, so it is critically important that Christian hope be proclaimed in the context of healthy Christian communities that will support and guide believers.

that all forms of dehumanizing the dignity of human creation will completely end.

This article discusses the theological importance of positioning hope in God, who is the source of our hope in the past, present and future dimensions. It will explore biblical understandings of hope, deploy biblical and contextual characters who trust the promises of God, and manage to retain their hope in God despite the despair they encountered. It will also discourage false teachings from groups of both “futurists” and proponent of “realized hope” and encourage contemporary Christians to keep their hope in God who is with them in their present journey of faith and who will be with them in the future. By rethinking the theology of hope, the article will discuss what should be understood as hope in believing communities.

The article will use the methodology of Experience Sampling Method (ESM), and argue that hope is not only a wish to be fulfilled in the future but it is the capacity to endeavor for what must be improved, amended, and remedied in order to realize that promised hope. This argument is validated by the fact that although hope is a human virtue given by grace, human creation still has a freedom of invoking the *Paraclete* to keep hope in God despite despair. To explain how both biblical and social characters have survived despair, this article maintains that in both joyful and despairing situations, we should think positively to let hope endures no matter the experiences.

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Bible believers in both the Old and New Testament have looked for the Triune God for their survival and happiness especially during the times of fear, anger, suffering and despair. The concept of hope was born out of misery, tyranny, tribulations, and wars. Major prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel give both future and realized hope as they proclaimed the deliverance of the Israelites from bad leaders or

despotism in Babel, Assyria, and Persia. Below is what was envisioned as hope from Old and New Testaments.

Emmet Russel puts it clearly that “Hope has deep root in the [Old Testament], where [King James Version] ‘hope’ translates a variety of Hebrew words, which mean confidence, trust, safety etc., sometimes so rendered in modern versions.”¹ Ekeke, quoting Burton Easton, went further and explained that in the Old Testament, the word “‘hope’ stands for some fifteen Hebrew words, nearly all of which in other places are given other translation.”² Some other translations have “attempted to be more systematic and have mostly often translated words *machseh* (Jer 17:17) *tiqrâh* (Ezekiel 37:11), as hope...”³ Rudolph Bultmann maintains that “in the Old Testament conception hope as expectation of good is closely linked with trust, and expectation is also yearning, in which the element waiting or fleeing for refuge is emphasized”⁴ Hence, I can conclude that the exact conception of the word hope as it is in English is not found in the Old Testament, but the concepts and teachings of trust, expectation, confidence in God works express a similar meaning.

Suffering for the Biblical characters is a repeated theme throughout the Old Testament, and the discussion of suffering is prominent within biblical commentary. For Biblical women, one of the major causes of suffering was due to infertility because it threatened a woman’s identity, lineage, and status.⁵ Why does God allow suffering of different kinds? Harold Kushner has tried to answer the question of suffering in one of his arguments: “‘Pain,’ he writes, ‘is the price we pay for being alive;’ and as such can be ‘creative,’ making people more ‘sensitive and compassionate.’”⁶ For Kushner, then, suffering and pain

¹ Emmet Russel, “Hope,” in *New International Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 448.

² Emeka C. Ekeke and Ubong Ekpenyong Eyo, “The Necessity of Hope: A Philosophical and Theological Appraisal” in *European Scientific Journal* 12 no. 5 (2016): 374, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/236407873.pdf>.

³ Ekeke, “The Necessity of Hope,” 374–375

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, “The OT View of Hope,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 523.

⁵ Faith K. Lugazia, “Naweza”: *Masomo ya Biblia kwa Wanawake Wakristo Tanzania* (Bukoba: NorthWestern Publishers), 41.

⁶ Quoted in Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House), 156; for original, see Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York City: Schocken Books, 1981).

are part and parcel of humanity. However, one's hope in the same God encourages him/her not to give up.

In the book of 1 Samuel 1:6–18, we find Hannah, the first wife of Elkanah living in despair because the Bible says that “God shut up her womb” (1 Samuel 1:6 NRSV). The reason why her womb was shut is in the knowledge of God since the story does not narrate anything negative from her side which could make one to think that she was in punishment. We do not know much about her faith other than in this moment, but we do know she relied on the One who could change her situation. So she did not shy away from boldly approaching God in prayer. Hannah honestly approached God with great hope of having a baby despite her barrenness. In all her plans, especially that of going to Shiloh for prayer pointed to the realized hope that God was going to give her a child in present time. In her prayer, Hannah was even confident enough to ask for a boy.

Theologically, Hannah's barrenness indicates the delineation over the infertility women. Barren women kept silent and were surrounded with shame for not being able to fulfill the expectations of their husbands and the extended family which was bearing children to keep the lineage. According to Moss and Baden, “[not] only is infertility Hannah's defining descriptive feature, it also seems to be all anyone can speak to her about. Before she bears Samuel, every word Hannah speaks... is related to her distress.”⁷ Hannah, herself, says to God, “I am a very unhappy woman... I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress” (1 Samuel 1:16 NRSV). It becomes clear that Hannah understood that her childlessness consumed her. On the other hand, Hannah's insistence of asking God through her prayers at Shiloh indicates the hope that was in her. Hannah believed that God's compassion, loving kindness, truth, and sufficiency heard her cry and remembered her by giving her a son, Samuel.

One may not see the purposes of her pain and suffering, but one can trust that God is using it for good (Romans 8:28), just as God used Hannah's suffering for good. The last verse of Judges reads, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). In the middle of that mess, God used a

⁷ Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, “The Matriarchs as Models,” in *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 23.

barren womb to birth a prophet, Samuel, who guided Israel in godliness. According to Michelle Osherow, “Hannah represents the character of the earnest petitioner and grateful celebrant of divine glory.”⁸

The word most often translated hope in the New Testament is the Greek word *elpis* (ἐλπίς).⁹ Hope comes from the promises of the resurrected Christ that he will give creation life in its fullness, and bring transformation. On the other hand, hope comes amidst social misery that comes to a person or society and seems to take permanent residence. The letter to the 1 Corinthians insists on hope as the one of the three highest gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 13:13).

Christian hope is more than apocalyptic in nature because such future-oriented beliefs can make believers forget their social responsibilities of loving and serving neighbors in this world. Human creation embraces hope through gaining resources which help them to deal with forces that affect everyday lives, or when people are given chances to question unjust society.

Hope liberates from the powers and principalities of this world and encourages believers to forge ahead despite the many obstacles surrounding them. Hope, on the other hand, is eschatological; that is, it is not fulfilled at the same time.

Hope in the New Testament is, on the one hand, present in the everyday life and struggles of human race. Hope knows what God has done in Christ, sees it continually surfacing in everyday life, and waits for the fulfillment of God’s promises. Hope liberates from the powers and principalities of this world and encourages believers to forge ahead despite the many obstacles surrounding them. Hope, on the other hand, is eschatological; that is, it is not fulfilled at the same time. This hope is already active where faith in Christ moves us

⁸ Osherow, Michelle, *Biblical Women’s Voices in Early Modern England* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2009), 5

⁹ James Strong, “ἐλπίς,” in *The New Englishman’s Hebrew Concordance: Coded to Strong’s Concordance Numbering System* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984).

to participate in the Spirit's work to renew the face of the earth and reform unjust systems.

To illustrate this I mention the personal narrative of an African woman, Mrs. Odiria. She and her husband were blessed to have eight children, but when they were divorced in the early 1970s she was left with all the children to take care of. She worked hard to make sure that her children went to school and got their basic needs met, despite being poor—living below the poverty line based on global economic index. Among the work she did was to sell local beer for her family's survival.

In the late 1980s, three of her children got jobs with the government as primary school teachers. Life for her changed for the better because the children helped each other for household needs and other needs as required. In the early 1990s, her son and four of her daughters got married. Unfortunately, when HIV/AIDS became rampant in our region both a son, a daughter-in-law, and four daughters died and left young grandchildren behind, for which she had to care. The death span between daughters was hardly a year; they died one after the other.

She experienced continuous pain, grief, and despair as she was stigmatized by some Christians in her community. Living in hopelessness, she was convinced that there is no way out which could make her accepted in her community like other women or other parents. To her, nothing could be done to alleviate the sorrowful feelings she experienced. As a believer, the theodicy question was part of her thinking. "Why do you, God, allow bad things to happen to me God? Don't you see that I have been faithful to you in many ways?"

Her experiences with pain, suffering, and despair changed her. In the midst of despair and meditation, she came to learn that God is the creator and nurturer of her children, and when time came, the same God took them away from her in the way God chooses. Therefore, she needed to live in hope that God would give her joy and happiness with the people surrounding her and her grandchild and that in the future she would meet her children again. Graciously, she realized hope in God, she unveiled all the shame, grief, and despair and decided to join women groups in her parish, a mothers' choir, and did different activities which brought her back into a life of joy, trusting in God, and happiness. Today, in 2024, though getting older, she is a very thankful woman. Besides, she is now giving hope to others who lost

hope due to the deaths of their loved ones. Indeed, the work of Christ on the cross liberates all who go to Christ with faith and hope from all despair and fear. God who raised Christ from the death is with all as Emanuel.

In the 1970s, in my African context, south of the Sahara, we experienced “futuristic and millennialistic” preachers who encouraged believers to see that this world is bad, and they encouraged believers to fast, pray, and prepare for receiving Christ when he comes to take human creation to everlasting life full of joy and happiness.

Then after the year 2000 the same context began to raise up groups emphasizing realized hope through misleading theologies. For example, “proponents take Mark 10:20–30 on ‘hundred folds’ in a family, without the second side of the reward of Jesus’ disciples—that they have to be accompanied by ‘persecution in this life.’”¹⁰ So when members face suffering and pain, they lose energy and hope but decide to leave Christ and his promises of being with them always. Hence, with regard to the concept of hope, people have remained confused. Many of our people were changing churches like clothes and are in despair with regard to their destiny.

The holy Bible teaches that our salvation lies in hope because, yes, we have been saved and justified by grace through faith, but we await with hope the promise of God; therefore, we hope for the coming of everlasting joy and praise. Salvation and all that we receive by grace are part of the realized hope. Our participation in accepting baptism and receiving all blessings are all one side of God, and so diseases, despair, and sufferings are inescapable as long as we are in this world.

Theology is a religious belief system about God or ultimate reality. Hope is the expectation of the believer that God will fulfill promises made in the past. “The theology of hope views the future as already begun in the present based on the hope and the promise generated by Christ’s resurrection.”¹¹ Theology can build hope because it shapes the human cognitive and affective aspects influencing his/her actions during crisis. Our hope and the ability to endure—our enduring hope is rooted in the character of God. Since hope relies on God

¹⁰ Faith K. Lugazia, “The Gospel Promises of Fullness of Life and Critical Considerations of the Gospel of Prosperity” in *African Christian Theology: Focus on Human Dignity* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2015), 285.

¹¹ “Theology of Hope,” in *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, eds. Stanley J. Grenz and David Guretzki (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 113.

and looks to the future, it has a natural connection with the promises of God. It depends on them. What God promises is certain, yet is still to come. Towards the end of Romans, Paul highlights both “the God of endurance” (or steadfastness) and “the God of Hope” (Romans 15:5, 13). Through a theology of hope, humans build bridges over ignorance and frightening situations with transcendent awareness, practically and spiritually. When theology returns to God during despair, that is when hope stands, and it gives internal strength to acknowledge human limitations in trusting God’s promises. That is why the theology of hope is the essential spiritual resource in crises.

Contrastingly, fortitude is the ability to withstand trials, and in its presence, faith gives rise to the hope of working together to turn trials into blessings. The challenge of a theology of hope lies in what some Christians understand Christian hope to be.

Following this, we see that hope is the vision of the present in a pregnancy state. Contrastingly, fortitude is the ability to withstand trials, and in its presence, faith gives rise to the hope of working together to turn trials into blessings. The challenge of a theology of hope lies in what some Christians understand Christian hope to be. Following biblical terms with regard to the concepts of hope, they have elapsed what the Bible teaches with regard to hope and instead falls in the either merely “futurist hope” which encourages believers to abandon social responsibilities of loving and serving neighbors with love today and now and run for the abstract life claiming to be citizens of heaven. Others have fallen victim to the prevailing heresy of “realized hope” which encourages believers that the saving and all loving works of Jesus Christ is ending in this materialistic world so people should make efforts by their works, power, and ability to realize this hope here and now. Such teachings have made divisions between Christians, that the former do not see the need of any engagement in social injustices in this world while the latter even forgot their belief in the second coming of Christ.

A theology of hope is very important and makes more sense in this time than ever because people have lost hope due to spiritual

bankruptcy, economic uncertainty, cultural norms, social media influences, and increasing fear of eco-anxiety. This article embraces the theology of hope as a hermeneutical tool to confirm how graciously God grants positive thinking to accept what one cannot change and to work responsibly for what one can change. Further, it has explained the concepts of future hope as already begun and being consummated by Christ. As the apostle Paul to the Romans said: “May God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may bound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13). In the midst of despair, the God of hope makes us active for the possibility of joy and comprehensive wellbeing. ⊕

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