

*Imagining Life As
It Ought To Be*



Soaring
HOPE

LYNN THRUSH

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LYNN THRUSH

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DEDICATION

To: Carol

Sharing hopefulness with you over a long time is a gracious and sacred privilege.

To: Alan, Beth, Michael, Emily, and Sheena

I see you investing in hopeful enterprises—how powerful.

To: Simon and Nadia

I never expected to be a grandpa; now, enthusiastically, I say, “Your future is bright.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge four distant mentors whose insights and spirits have paved the way for me to enter the delights of the good news of God.

Desmond Ford, a Seventh-Day Adventist theologian who helped me to interpret and then love the prophetic literature of the Bible.

David and Karen Mains, who helped me appreciate the significance of the local church.

Ralph Winter, who so creatively called the Church to take the good news to all the world.

N.T. Wright, who continues to elevate Jesus as the true God of the world.

ENDORSEMENTS

Christians will never change the world, Lynn Thrush contends, apart from hope and imagination. But hope and imagination suffer when private morality trumps the common good and when the life to come obscures the life we live today. In this powerful, practical, and intensely constructive book, Thrush guides us into a deeper, richer, and more faithful understanding of the biblical text—an understanding that can liberate Christians for the world-transforming work that God has called us to undertake.

RICHARD T. HUGHES

Director, Sider Institute for Anabaptist, Pietist, and
Wesleyan Studies at Messiah College
Author, *Christian America and the Kingdom of God*

Frankly, the constant moaning about how bad things are really gets old. Of all people, Christians should be the

harbingers of optimism and hope. Lynn Thrush, in this book, invites you to embrace the heart of the Christian message and find the hope it brings to everyone. He challenges us to think differently about our language, our mental constructs, our tendency to bemoan a loss of influence, and to soar with the energy, optimism, joy, and possibilities that come with truly bringing the Kingdom of God near. The natural human spiral into despair is soundly reversed in *Soaring Hope: Imagining Life As It Ought To Be*. Catch a vision of God's idea of life for you!

KEVIN W. MANNOIA, PHD
Chaplain, Azusa Pacific University
Founder and Chair, Wesleyan Holiness Consortium
Former President, National Association of Evangelicals

Lynn Thrush has a “deeply hopeful” understanding of God's will for the world as revealed in the Bible. Too often people—including Christians—become locked into a hopeless view of life and the future, sometimes appealing to the Bible in rationalizing their hopelessness. On the contrary, Thrush finds story after story in the Bible that gives people reason to hope here-and-now for the improvement of their lives and world as well as hope for eternal life.

DON THORSEN, PHD
Professor of Theology, Chair of Graduate Department of
Theology and Ethics
Azusa Pacific University

I commend this book to every Christian in every corner of the world. Here is a book that will change your thinking

and understanding of what it means to live with hope in a hopeless world. Like pieces of cloth neatly put together to form a magnificent quilt, Scriptures and ideas have been brought together to make sense of life and yet challenge our long-seated belief in the future we long to embrace. In going through the pages of this book real hope is rekindled. Life is worth living and the future worth pursuing.

There is a silent cry within many hearts for something better and more meaningful in life. For this very reason this book is timely. When we know our sovereign God is in control, God's people are also in control—they possess the land! When God is in charge, Christians are in control and secure in His might.

God's people, wherever they are around the world are an embodiment of hope! They are the bearers of the good news. They are the messengers of hope. The rest of humankind ought to be drawn to them, to feed and experience what the world has from the beginning desired and promised to give, yet without success—hope.

Hope oils the engine of our lives so that the engine keeps working. It creates overcomers out of those overcome by hopelessness. Hope has power to bring wholeness to situations and circumstances of life where otherwise disintegration and disillusionment about life seem to prevail. One is better off reading this book than ignoring it!

DANISA NDLOVU
Bishop, Brethren in Christ Church of Zimbabwe
President, Mennonite World Conference
Zimbabwe, Africa

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FOREWORD

IF THERE IS A DEFAULT setting in contemporary Christianity, it is unquestionably that of fatalism.

Having lived through the end of the world one more time this past year, predicted by a well-meaning, yet thoroughly uninformed follower of Jesus Christ (I forget how many of these predictions I have lived through in my lifetime), I was beginning to wonder if I was the only one longing for an alternative way of reading the Bible and responding to the world.

Then, along comes Lynn Thrush with his book, *Soaring Hope: Imagining Life As It Ought To Be*. Now I know that I am not alone.

In this provocative work, the author dares to ask counter-culture questions like: What if this world is not something to escape, but something to renew? What if the God of Abraham still desires to bless the entire world?

What if this God is not only God of the “sweet bye and bye,” but also God of the here and now?

What if the good news is actually good enough to help restore an evil and broken world?

The author grew up under the achingly negative teaching he critiques. This largely dispensational view of the Bible was not intended to be overly pessimistic; it sincerely desired to be true to the witness of Scripture. Yet, as Thrush argues compellingly, this view of the Bible and the world is not sufficiently rooted in the Scriptures themselves, and falls uncomfortably short of adequately describing God’s irrepressible hope for the world.

This book takes as its starting place the life and teachings of Jesus. Christ’s prayer for God’s Kingdom to come and will to be done on earth as it is in Heaven (see Matt. 6:10) is ground zero for Thrush’s theological paradigm. The practical outworking of his interpretation of Scripture is the Incarnation itself. Christ taking on human flesh is God’s most affirming statement about the state of the world; it is a world worth redeeming, and the incarnate Christ is the fulfillment of God’s grand scheme for accomplishing His work on earth.

This book spends a lot of time plumbing the depths of Scripture, especially the prophetic literature, to show just how widespread is God’s desire to redeem and restore the world. Of particular value is the author’s insightful use of Isaiah 65. In Chapter 10, he goes to great lengths to show how practical and relevant is God’s intention to bless the world. Thrush’s glimpse of a Church intimately involved in bringing about God’s new creation is inspiring. It is a

refreshing look at how central to the Christian faith are issues that are so often held captive by agenda-driven politicians and a secular media—important, life-giving issues like health care, housing, healthy families, and jobs.

The task of this book, as described by author Lynn Thrush, is to unpack biblical pictures of hope. Indeed, it's a soaring call to imagine life as it ought to be, empty of the fatalism and negativity that is so pervasive in the Church today. It's an invitation to re-imagine the good that the Gospel can accomplish in our lives and the lives of those around us. It's a message of optimism and hope from the heart of God to a world and a Church so desperately in need of good news today.

PERRY L. ENGLE, BISHOP
Pacific and Midwest Conferences
of the Brethren in Christ Church



INTRODUCTION

OVER THE WEEK BETWEEN CHRISTMAS and New Year's Day, my daughter and I were jogging on a beautiful Southern California morning and she wanted to ask a few questions about buying a house. I said, "I believe the willingness to talk about this is more than 50 percent of the journey of buying a house." My wife and I had taken this journey just four years prior. We agreed to explore house-buying, and remarkably that led to actual purchase.

This book calls you to the "more than 50 percent of the journey" of believing the good news of God. Having hope that God's Kingdom will come and His will be done on earth leads to it happening. "According to your faith be it unto you," Jesus said.

I write as a pastor of nearly three and a half decades, and a professor at a Christian university for a fourth of that time. Primarily I help people interpret the Bible. When

Soaring HOPE

that task is done faithfully and well, I am persuaded that it points to remarkable hopefulness for life now.

I invite you to imagine life as it ought to be. Spread the good news that God reigns. As you take initiatives based on God's good news, share that with your friends. I would be pleased to hear your story at LynnThrush.com.

LYNN THRUSH
Christmas 2011

Part I

WHEN GOOD NEWS
GETS ABORTED:
WHY THIS BOOK IS
IMPORTANT



Chapter One

A GLIMPSE OF WHAT COULD BE

FIFTY-FOUR ABORTED BABIES WERE FOUND in a box off a major LA area freeway not far from my home. The year, 1997—a clinic was disposing of these babies, and remarkably, a box tumbled off the truck. Concerned persons organized a memorial service, and I was asked to speak. Individuals were invited to name the babies; our nine-year-old daughter picked the name Zachary David (Zachary means “God has remembered,” and David means “Beloved one”). On the day of the service, a procession of fifty-four small white boxes were carried in somber procession to their burial site.

Those fifty-four babies would be about fourteen years old as I write. We will never know, but some of them would be demonstrating musical aptitudes by now. The boys would have men’s voices, and the girls would now have

their adult bodies. Some of them could be demonstrating language aptitudes, while others could be demonstrating early gifts of wisdom. The tragedy of abortion is that we will never know of these possibilities. The world goes on, there are other things to take up our time, other causes that engage our passions, but we will never know what could have been. It would be nice if somehow we could see those fifty-four stories. It would be nice if we could run the clock back and save those babies, and then run the clock ahead to see all the developments of what might have been.

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* lets the reader do that. I remember reading that play in eleventh grade, and to this day I remember the impact of that story on me. In the play Emily Gibbs dies in childbirth. After her death she has the opportunity to relive one day of her life, so she chooses her twelfth birthday. While reliving that day, she realizes just how much life should be valued "every, every minute." Poignantly she asks the stage manager whether anyone realizes life while they live it, and she is told, "No. The saints and poets, maybe—they do some."

I want to learn Emily's lesson: I want to value "every, every minute." I believe you do too. In a sense these people in Emily's town were experiencing an abortion of insight. They did not value life, certainly not "every, every minute." For lack of insight, Emily Gibbs did not savor life; she never knew what could have been. If she could have had a glimpse of what could be while she was alive, her story might have been quite different. For her, tragically, her imagination was not released until after she died.

I have observed imaginations squelched, hope aborted. I saw it when my wife miscarried twice after delivering three healthy children. One of the older ladies said to me with resignation reigning in her voice, “I just don’t think I could bring children into the world, as bad as the world is.” It’s a good thing we did not listen to her; the world would have been the poorer for not experiencing the blessing of our fourth child.

I have observed imagination squelched as I study students. It has been my privilege to teach university students for nearly a decade. Many reflect a kind of passivity about faith and life. This is especially so if the sum of faith is “my sins are forgiven and I am going to Heaven”; then the attitude toward the Christian faith slouches: “been there, done that.”

In addition to limited imagination aborting hope, I have observed what I am calling *The Sword of Damocles Syndrome*. Damocles thought the king was most fortunate because he was surrounded by magnificence. The king offered to allow Damocles to sit on his throne; but in order to have Damocles understand the pressures of leadership, King Dionysius fastened a huge sword above the throne, held only by the single hair of a horse’s tail. Several generations have lived under the constant anticipation of immediate doom. It is self-evident that that experience does not nourish hope; rather, it aborts it.

But what if...what if clichés of doom are not true? What if Jesus answers His prayer that we pray regularly that His Kingdom comes and His will is done on earth as

it is in Heaven? What if there really is hope, for now? We could then get glimpses of what could be.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, that wonderful movie where banker Andy understands a bigger picture than prison, he broadcasts classical music across the loudspeakers of the prison. He spent two weeks in solitary for that stunt, and later told his fellow inmates, “easiest two weeks I have ever done in solitary.”

“Why?” they asked. “Did they let you take the music in with you?”

Andy points to his heart and his head. “They can’t take music from you.”

One of the prisoners tells Andy that hope is a dangerous thing inside a prison. “Hope can drive a man insane.”

“In here is where music makes the most sense—so you don’t forget that there’s something inside they can’t touch; it’s yours,” Andy says.

“What are you talking about?”

“Hope.”

The task of this book is to unpack the biblical pictures of hope. The material herein is not new, but the task is necessary because the flame of hope can so easily be minimized or extinguished. Consider today’s usage of the word apocalypse, or apocalyptic. It’s a transliteration of the Greek word meaning “revealing,” a quite wonderful, positive, and magnetic word. The title of the last book of the Bible is the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Paul says that creation is waiting with eager longing for the apocalypse/revealing of the children of God (see Rom. 8:19). Waiting for revealing is an activity of eager anticipation. Today,

however, apocalypse and apocalyptic are words now meaning something far different. Now the focus is on “sudden, violent end,” “one that is unsettling or threatening.” Now the word focuses on the “sudden, violent, and destructive.” The word has been taken hostage by foreign meanings, and hope has been diminished.

“Things are going to get worse and worse” is a phrase that is underneath a lot of worldviews of persons who call themselves Christians. That’s bad news, and Mark opens his gospel with Jesus saying, “*Repent [from that way of thinking], and believe the good news that Jesus rules the world.*” We’ll unpack that text more in the next chapter. How broadly and deeply held is the “worse and worse” perspective? Allow my observations to prompt your own alertness to how persons think about the future.

At the beginning of the semester, I draw on the whiteboard a long line gradually ascending, and a long line gradually descending. Then I ask the mostly freshmen university class, “Which way do you think history is going?” It’s a substantially unfair question, and yet it gets at fundamental assumptions about hope, about what one might attempt, about what one might believe to be possible, or perhaps just as importantly, about what will get preached and talked about to the following generation. The question gets about a fifty-fifty response of those willing to give their opinion. Really, the issue is not small is it? It’s akin to half the students saying the world is round, and half saying it is flat. It’s an assumption with lots of issues related to it.

The question raised in this book is, for how much may we hope in this world? The disciples of Chicken Little will

say, "Improvement is not going to happen." (Some will say it with an exclamation point!) Some may believe that ultimately things will improve, but not until Jesus returns and makes everything right. The strength and breadth and length of one's hope influences the sophistication (a more developed, complex, refined form, technique, level) of our response. The story is told of the mountain town with the well-developed ambulance service to care for the many accidents that occurred on a wicked curve in the road. From recruiting drivers to keeping up with the best equipment, this town provided for the victims who did not navigate the turn safely. Then a mother began to hope that accidents would not happen in the first place, and she proposed the idea of cutting a road through the mountain to avoid the curve altogether. This book is about dreaming about cutting roads through mountains, about every valley being raised up, and every mountain and hill made low, about the crooked made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, in the anticipation that all flesh shall see the salvation of God (see Isa. 40:3-5; Luke 3:4-6).

Many students, and congregants alike, think of faith as personal and private. They have less perspective on what God may want from them in the world. When I asked a young lady what was so good about the good news of God, she said she could not wait to go to Heaven to be with Jesus. No doubt that has been what she has been taught. Here was a nineteen-year-old in the bloom of life, and she holds that what is good news about the good news of God is that she gets to go to Heaven to be with Him. She does not have a vision of the good news for this world, and so she

emphasizes a personal and private faith that most importantly gets her private self to be privately with God. There's an abortion here. She has no language for hope now. She is not dreaming about what might come to pass now. She and we will never know what might have been accomplished through her for she is not imagining the world as it ought to be. This is tragic tragedy.

Truth be told, this personal, private, and other-worldly version of God's good news is not deeply engaging ensuing generations. The appeal of Heaven and the fear of hell simply are not the heavy hitters they once were. Who knows the reasons? Heaven, for all its other-worldness, is hard to make appealing. It is life in another magnitude and hard to imagine. Then, with the development of housing that comfortably keeps us out of the elements, to all kinds of instant communication, to fabulous medical assistance, to remarkable transportation—well, the contrast between Heaven and earth is not as great as generations ago.

Further, hell is hard to make more scary or awful. Horror movies depict evil and mayhem and cacophony, and news capacity brings us mind-bending and heart-wrenching pain from all around the globe to our televisions and computers and Blackberries. Hell is not as frightening as it once was. The personal, private, bottom-line rationale to enter Heaven and escape hell seems ultimately weak, and getting weaker; and it's not engaging subsequent generations very deeply. It appears people are saying, "I'll take my chances."

To the extent that faith is demonstrated to be for the individual solely, to that extent such persons have the

appearance of being marginal, of being out of touch, of being insignificant players in the world. In July 2009 President Barack Obama nominated Evangelical Christian Dr. Francis Collins to head the National Institute of Health. Dr. Collins led the Human Genome Project. He was unanimously confirmed by the Senate. Several news analyses registered surprise that such a one should be named to such an important medical role, and further questioned whether such a person could carry out the duties given his faith stance. Not only, the reports insinuated, are such persons marginal, but indeed their personal, private faith may mitigate against their functioning responsibly in the public square.

There's another rather surprising and disappointing fallout from making faith solely personal and private. Because their Christian faith has little to offer regarding this world, the deduction such persons make is something like this: "Jesus is good for the private stuff; beyond that, if you're smart you'll pack a six-shooter." This kind of faith takes on a variety of characteristics. It can contribute to bad attitudes because the personal-and-private-salvation-only perspective does not understand salvation to have much to do with this current world. Thus when disappointments arise in the world, they contribute to these persons becoming irritable and angry. Everything is at risk in this view. There is no calm assurance about the world in this faith that is solely about Jesus and me.

Private faith can lead not only to bad attitudes, but this understanding of faith contributes to these persons taking up the wisdom and weapons of the flesh. The weapons

of their warfare are worldly: F16s, bazookas, land mines, hand guns, and war. So while Jesus is in Heaven, while we wait for Him to take over, we'll fight with the best six-shooter technology we have. And when Jesus comes back, He'll iron-fist His enemies like we do now, only His iron fist is more effective than ours. Nya, nya, nya.

By the way, fear sells. You can gather crowds to hear a diet of fear. It's kind of odd, when you think about it, being drawn to fear, but it works. "You better know what *they* are up to, or you will be overcome." "If we don't wake up, the Church will be destroyed." "They are going to overtake the world." "They are about world domination." "Come hear the secret story of how they are infiltrating us." "Come hear how you can defend your faith against them." "If such and such happens, you can be sure we will not last much longer." "How to protect your wealth." "What to do before everything collapses." It's kind of hard to be joy-filled after a diet of this, isn't it? It's difficult to be hopeful. And frankly, I do not see world-changers among my friends who live on this steady diet of fear. Their imagination for good has been aborted, and the world does not experience what might arise out of their healthy imagination. It is abortion when imagination is ripped from one's life by the scissors of fear. Tragedy, indeed.

Now the person I am describing can indeed believe that things are going to get better, that the beautiful pictures of God's rule working in the world is indeed ahead; oh, but there's a catch. The catch effectively denudes one of the necessity of praying for, expecting, and working for the Kingdom on earth. "When will this happen?" I regularly

get asked this question when speaking on this subject. A common assumption is, “This will happen after the second coming of Jesus.” End of discussion. End of hope for this world. End of imagining what might happen. Why? Because the assumption is deeply held, “Those good things occur after Jesus returns the second time.” Another abortion. We’ll never know what this one might have imagined for this world, might have prayed for, might have hoped for, might have worked for. Tragic.

I’ll not forget the startling possibility I encountered as I was reading from New Testament scholar, biblical theologian, and accomplished author N.T. Wright. He wrote that first century Jews did not expect the end of the world as we know it. I was stunned. I have always expected the end of the world. But what if God does not plan to destroy this earth, but restore it? What are the implications? We’ll get to some of the biblical references that may be coming to your mind right now, but if it is the case that the assumption that God has in mind to incinerate His earth and make a new one is not correct, then there are a sea-change of considerations before us. Maybe it is not so unwise to cut a road through the mountain.

This writer grew up with influential authors and preachers assuring us that history would conclude within a generation of 1948. I have in my files a booklet, “88 reasons Jesus will return again in 1988.” Theological schools, publishing houses, television and radio broadcasts, magazines, and devotional guides grew up around that guiding light that history could close at any moment, and most probably would be closing in some relation to 1948.

How keenly I felt this as a youngster. I remember in junior high school I was in a Chess Club tournament, I in the winner's bracket, my friend, in the loser's bracket. I needed but one more victory to be the champion. In the class immediately before Chess Club, I had a Social Studies class, and we had a test that day. At the end of the test the teacher said that three persons had cheated, and should let her know on the way out. I had cheated, and I spoke to the teacher about that. Though I had confessed to the teacher, I was deeply concerned that the Lord might have returned during the time right after I had cheated and before I had confessed. During Chess Club I desperately wanted to see my cousin walk past the door of my room. If I saw my cousin through the door, I would know that the Lord had not returned. Alas, she did not pass the door, and alas, thoroughly distracted, I lost not one but two games. For many years the Queen's trophy (rather than the King's) sat on my bedroom mantle as a witness not to cheat, and as a witness to my anticipation of the near close of history.

"The soon return of the Lord" was a phrase oft used, and those of us influenced by that teaching got the point loud and clear: we were the last generation. You could do the math: we may have time to get married, hopefully so, but we did not envision ourselves as grandparents. That would be two generations after 1948. No, we were assured the Lord was returning soon. Occasionally a specific day has been chosen. Harold Camping claimed the world was coming to an end on May 21, 2011. Shortly before that day I saw him being interviewed on a Los Angeles television station; I saw pictures of billboards on Internet news, and

read some of the stories of young couples who had emptied their savings in anticipation of the end of the world. For certain these young people were not planning how to make the world better; they were getting ready to leave.

I have in my office a picture frame with a statement: “Nothing happens without conversation. When that kicks in, anything can happen.” Rodney Stark, in his book *To the Glory of God*, does a wonderful extended chapter/mini-book on the rise of science within Christianity, and he says Christianity was necessary for the rise of science because Christianity’s view of God as faithful, dependable, consistent, and orderly opened the way for Christians to imagine that God’s creation could be explored because it likely shared these traits of its Creator. Stark observes that science was not attempted in other cultures/religions. His deduction: “No one will attempt what philosophically they believe to be impossible.”¹

That is precisely the point of this book. I maintain there has been an abortion of hope. Our imaginations have been squelched, because we have been told that things are going to get worse and worse, and that’s an untold tragedy. I will be making the case from the Scripture that there is soaring hope, and I will invite us to imagine the world as it ought to be. One coed, after studying the Scripture about God’s good news for this world wrote, “I am deeply hopeful.” When this is the testimony of an eighteen-year-old, the foundation is in place for the Spirit to work mightily in her imagination. To participate in the unleashing of the imagination that springs from irrepressible hope for our world, this is an endeavor to which I am delighted to give

myself, and to which I invite you to join. We look next at the biblical expectations that contradict hopelessness for this world. If we will allow, we may find that the good news of God is far better news than we first imagined. Oh to get a glimpse of what could be!

ENDNOTE

1. Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 151.

Part II

BIBLICAL EXPECTATIONS
THAT CONTRADICT
HOPELESSNESS

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ABOUT LYNN THRUSH

Lynn Thrush has had the privilege of serving two congregations as pastor across thirty-three years, one church near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and the other in Southern California. The last fourth of these years has included adjunct teaching at Azusa Pacific University.

He is a graduate of Messiah College, BA; Asbury Theological Seminary, M.Div.; and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, D.Min.

Anchored in the local community of faith, Lynn has been actively involved in the network of which he is part: his denomination, The Brethren in Christ Church, the pastors of the city where he ministers, Chino, and with friends of a wide variety of backgrounds.

He celebrates the faithfulness of God in his wife of thirty-seven years, their four adult children, grandchildren, and his experience of the energy of consistent hopefulness across the ministry decades. This book unpacks some of the rationale for living with expectation that includes both perseverance and exhilaration, and confidence that we reap harvest if we do not give up.

You can follow his writing, blogs, and communicate with him at LynnThrush.com.

IN THE RIGHT HANDS, THIS BOOK WILL CHANGE LIVES!

Most of the people who need this message will not be looking for this book. To change their lives, you need to put a copy of this book in their hands.

But others (seeds) fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some a hundred-fold, some sixty-fold, some thirty-fold (Matthew 13:8).

Our ministry is constantly seeking methods to find the good ground, the people who need this anointed message to change their lives. Will you help us reach these people?

Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop (2 Corinthians 9:6).

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