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ishah

exploring issues for Christian women



MAY WE YET
HOPE?

Jill Firth

CULTIVATING
HOPE

Gina Denholm

THE SURE
HOPE

Bev Campbell

DYING TO
LIVE

Jean Sietzema-Dickson



Woman (Hebrew ishah). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

What do you hope for? How far into the future are your hopes? How do your hopes influence your daily life? Health, wealth and happiness are often people's major hopes, all of which last only whilst we still have breath.

Someone once said that if one plans for this life but fails to think of the life to come, one is wise for a moment but foolish for eternity. The fulfillment of our hopes in this life is often beyond our control, depending on circumstances and other people's actions.

Many Christians struggle with an assurance of their salvation: the certain knowledge that they'll be with Christ for eternity. Others struggle to understand what God has promised whilst we still live here in this transitory life. How does hope in God speak into a life full of pain and struggle? How does hope in God affect the way I live in this world? Those who have faith in Christ have a hope in this life and beyond that is sure and certain.

This issue of ishah explores the hope we have in God and his promises – both now and into the future. As the writers explore the Scriptures they consider how hope in God impacts on everyday life. How exciting and liberating it is to be confident that our significance and security rests in God; that we can be sure of what we hope in because we have a living God who can be trusted to fulfill his promises.

Claire Livingstone

ISSUES TO COME...

ISSUE 16:
Wholly Single

ISSUE 17:
Father, Son and ...
who?

our aims

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

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May we yet hope?

BY JILL FIRTH

Homes washed away, lives lost, fragments of daily life in a tumbled mess on an empty beach. Health care in the first world normally disguises our mortality, but the recent Asian tsunami focussed our attention on the fragility of life.

Large scale tragedies such as S11, the Bali bombing, or the Asian tsunami, or personal tragedies of cancer, suicide or accidents remind us of the temporary nature of our time on this earth. These grim reminders can undermine our faith in the power of God to hold us in his love. In *The Age* on 2 Jan 2005, Misha Schubert wrote,

God has lost one of his virtues. It was misplaced sometime between my childhood catechism lessons and last Sunday's vicious tsunami as it tore into southern Asia, snatching lives, families, hopes and livelihoods from millions of the world's poorest people. Last I can recall, Christians were teaching that God was all powerful and all loving. Now it seems he's merely loving. (*The Age*, Agenda Opinion, 17)

Is God able to keep us eternally in his hand (John 10:28)? We know that God has not promised us a pain-free life on earth, but a tsunami or a friend's death can shake our trust in our eternal security in God. Where can we turn for reassurance and a way forward?

The book of Psalms gives us a way of believing and praying when life seems out of control. I can relate to David's dismay as the wicked murder the innocent (Psalm 10:8), despoil the poor (12:5), and exalt vileness (12:8). David's bones shook with terror (6:2) and his tears flooded his bed because of constant danger from his enemies (6:6). David often waited a long time for God's deliverance (4:2, 13:1-2). David was the friend of God, with whom God had made an eternal covenant (2 Samuel 7:16), and yet God allowed David to be in constant danger of death. The psalms show me how to put my trust in God's eternal power and steadfast love when the world around me is disintegrating.

The psalms reassure us that God is able and willing to hold us for eternity. They encourage us to live the life of the Kingdom by faith and not by sight.

We share God's permanence

God's *enemies* are described in images of impermanence. Those opposed to God will blow away like chaff, be swept away, or dissolve into slime like snails (Psalms 1:4, 73:19, 58:8). They are like a dream, a fantasy, ephemeral (73:20). By contrast, God is permanent. His throne is from everlasting, and he sits enthroned forever (93:2, 9:7). Even *God's people* are naturally ephemeral, as we sing in a popular hymn, 'grass withers, flowers will fade...' (90:3, 5, 6). Yet God plants and establishes those who belong to him, sharing

his permanence with them (1:3, 15:5). In personal tragedy or danger, in natural disasters or wars, God is a trustworthy refuge (46:1-3, 6).

The early Christians put their hope in eternal life with Christ. The fourth century historian Eusebius writes in his *Ecclesiastical History* (VIII.9) of the confession of Christ by whole families of Christians in Thebais despite torture, decapitations, and death by fire:

Then, also, we were witnesses to the most admirable ardour of mind, and the truly divine energy and alacrity of those that believed in the Christ of God. For as soon as the sentence was pronounced against the first, others rushed forward from other parts of the tribunal before the judge, confessing they were Christians, most indifferent to the multiform tortures that awaited them, but declaring themselves fully and in the most undaunted manner on the religion which acknowledges only one Supreme God. They received, indeed, the final sentence of death with gladness and exaltation, so far as even to sing and send up hymns of praise and thanksgiving, until they breathed their last.

In times of great difficulty and danger, and even in death, we can be certain that God, the everlasting one, can preserve us for eternal life with him.

We can trust in the steadfast love of our God

God is not arbitrary or fickle. He is trustworthy, for his steadfast love and faithfulness are established forever (Psalm 89:2). Celebration of God's faithfulness became almost a national anthem in Israel:

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
(Psalms 106:1, 107:1, 136:1, etc, NRSV)

When working with the Church Missionary Society on Groote Eylandt, we asked one of the Aboriginal pastors for a prayer point for a conference we were attending in the south. Our friend did not ask for success in ministry or personal comfort. He asked that he might always remain faithful to Jesus. This pastor met extreme opposition from some in his community who were opposed to the gospel, resulting in his death in his early forties. He held firm to the end, sustained by the steadfast love of Jesus.

We can live the 'not yet' in the 'now'

David lived in hope for many years as he awaited the fulfilment of God's promises. Israel looked forward to the coming Messiah (Psalm 110:1-7). The book of Psalms looks forward to a final triumphant reign of God, with his saints (145:21). There is the beginning of an individual hope of a

future life with God for his beloved ones (73:24-26). This future hope was not mere 'pie in the sky when we die'. The Psalmist's hope sustained him in faithful behaviour despite the flourishing of the wicked (73:18, 28). David's trust in God led to righteousness and justice (101:2-8). In the New Testament, the resurrection of the dead, the coming Kingdom, and eternal life with God are clearly taught (1 Corinthians 15:12-28; Revelation 21:3). Our life here and now is not all there is. God has much in store for those who love him.

In Hong Kong in the run up to the handover to China in 1997 we were sharing with a group of church leaders who had chosen not to exercise their right to emigrate to Canada and the USA, but to remain with the church in Hong Kong despite the possibility of suffering and imprisonment for the gospel. The pastors wept as they considered their children's reproaches were they to miss this opportunity for safety in the West. This danger has not yet eventuated, but these Christians have chosen where to put their trust and live each day in the light of it.

The Vietnamese Christians in the High Island Detention Centre in Hong Kong loved to celebrate the life-changing gift of salvation in the words of the song 'Give Thanks',

And now, let the weak say, 'I am strong',
let the poor say, 'I am rich',
because of what the Lord has done for us.
(*the source*, 1998, p 118)

Mr Le, a detainee in the detention centre had been masquerading under the name of a Vietnamese dissident in order to gain asylum in the West. If he revealed his true identity to UN officials, it would entail immediate repatriation to Vietnam. When Mr Le met Jesus, he realised that his deception was incompatible with the gospel. Valuing the riches of eternal life over a dishonestly acquired earthly security, he told the truth at his next interview and relinquished his claim for status as a political refugee.

When we live in the light of the 'not yet', our daily choices will be different in the 'now'.

Praying our own psalms

Some of us are hardly able to admit our fears even to ourselves, others can voice our doubts to close friends. In his times of darkness, the psalmist sometimes talks graphically to God about his feelings:

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me. (69:1-3)

Specifically telling God your situation and feelings is an appropriate way to pray.

In another place, the psalmist mourns, 'all your waves and your billows have gone over me' (42:7), then speaks to his own soul, gently encouraging himself to trust in God:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I will again praise him,
my help and my God. (42:11)

Many people find it helpful to dialogue with themselves in a journal, exploring questions of doubt and the shape of their re-emerging trust in God.

Hope in God takes a less anguished form in the prayers of confidence:

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
(130:5-6)

In our time of waiting, we can express our hopes and longings, and affirm our trust in God's faithfulness.

Summary

God is eternal, it is his enemies who are ephemeral. He shares his permanence with us, and he has made an everlasting covenant with us (1 Corinthians 11:25-26). He loves us, his steadfast love is forever; we do not need to fear that he is unable or unwilling to keep us in his hand. Life may be filled with danger and difficulty, for our current life is not yet heaven on earth. Our trust in our eternal fellowship with God helps us to live the reality of the 'not yet' in the now. Physical life here on earth may be fragile, but eternal life is secure for those who are united to Jesus. Prayers of lament and confidence can be used to deepen our trust and our relationship with God.

References

Eusebius. (1955) *Ecclesiastical History*. Trans C F Cruse, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 328.

All Bible references are to the Psalms unless otherwise indicated.

Further Reading and Praying

Psalms 1-150

■ *Jill Firth served with CMS with her husband, Len, in Grootte Eylandt and Hong Kong 1989-2000. They are currently at St Andrew's Hall in Parkville, training CMS missionaries for cross cultural service. Jill studies at Ridley College, where she also does some part-time tutoring and teaching in Old Testament and Church History. She attends St John Chrysostom Church, West Brunswick.*

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Cultivating Hope

BY GINA DENHOLM

If I have tried unsuccessfully to fake anything in the Christian life, it has been an enthusiasm for 'heaven'. I am pained to admit this. Surely, for any real Christian, the thought of entering the eternal kingdom should bring on feelings of comfort and expectant joy? But at no stage in my Christian walk have these feelings come naturally.

To me, this has posed a problem, because the more familiar I become with the pages of my Bible, the more convinced I am that my heavenly Father wants me to be a person of hope. I would even venture to say that hope is the prime virtue by which God wants to see me sustained and matured in this world. It is hope, rather than a sense of duty or a feeling of gratitude, which will grow me most in obedience to Jesus and perseverance in my faith. By hope I don't mean a general optimistic outlook, but the sort of confidence in and longing for the eternal kingdom that drove the apostle Paul to say "living is Christ, dying is gain", as he pressed on toward his heavenly call (Philippians 1:21; 3:14 NRSV).

How I have longed to hope as this man hoped! What gave Paul such fervent focus? Personality type? Special gifting? The result of a spectacular conversion experience? I've clung to these ideas as excuses for my own lack of hope. However, in the past few years I have been learning that hope, like its fellow virtues faith and love, is a gift of God that requires cultivating. I cannot anticipate with joy something which I secretly fear is not mine to anticipate. I cannot expect to long for something which I secretly doubt will bring satisfaction. Fear and doubt need to be combated. Slowly and steadily, I am becoming a Christian steeped in hope.

Being sure of what we hope in

Nothing weakens hope more than not having something to hope in. For a long

time, even though I trusted in Jesus, I wasn't convinced that this really meant I could be confident of eternal life with him. Yes, I was saved now, but what if I didn't stay a Christian? I felt that it would be arrogant to 'be sure', and might lead to complacency. Wouldn't it be better to doubt and be pleasantly surprised, than to hope and be tragically mistaken?

Combating this fear has been an ongoing process. I have come to learn that, somewhat paradoxically, it is the very certainty that my inheritance is "imperishable, undefiled and unfading" (1 Peter 1:4) that will help me to persevere in faith and obedience to the end. In promising us eternal life through faith in Jesus, God is not dangling the carrot. The message of the Bible is not "if you hang in there, you might get a reward" but "God's Son has secured you eternal life – now hang in there!" This difference may seem subtle but has had an enormous impact on my ability to hope. The Bible calls us to grow and hold fast because "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20), not in order to *gain* citizenship. We live as ambassadors for God's eternal kingdom because we are *already* its citizens and its heirs. This is our hope.

Trusting the sufficiency of God's promises

While doubting the veracity of God's promises is a strong blow to hope, I have found doubting the sufficiency of God's promises a far more subtle enemy. As I have grown more confident of eternal life, the question has shifted from "will I make it?" to "will I *like* it?"

We're all familiar with the popular notion of 'heaven' – harps, clouds, pearly gates. The general Hollywood depiction of the Christian afterlife is trivial and monotonous. I used to dismiss these images contemptuously, until it occurred to me that I didn't really have anything more tangible to hold onto – and that

secretly I was worried that eternal life might not be all that scintillating. This sort of thinking might seem harmless, but if hope is to enable me to persevere and grow, then its object cannot be trivialised. I need to trust that eternal life with God is worth hanging in there for.

I have gradually learned that I don't need an exact description – or itinerary – of eternity in order to feel joyful about it. God has taught me to hold onto what I can know. It has helped me to realise that eternal life is not a disembodied existence floating around the ether, but a physical life, in a resurrected body, on a new, restored earth. I don't know what comforts or relationships will look like, but I'm learning to trust that they will be truly satisfying.

However, the thing that most excites me and draws me onward is not what the physical reality will be like, but the fact that I can look forward to a time when I will not be sinful anymore. There will come a time when I will no longer struggle to love the Lord with heart, soul, mind and strength. There will come a time when worship of God will no longer be a discipline but an instinct. There will come a time when God will dwell among mortals, and I will delight to gaze upon his glory. There will come a time when I will no longer have to learn to hope, because all hope will be finally and eternally fulfilled.

Meanwhile, these things remain: faith, hope and love. And hope is definitely worth cultivating.

■ *Gina Denholm is a member of the ishah editorial team. She is currently enjoying the life of part-time student, part-time ministry trainee, and wife to her beloved husband Justin. She hopes there will be cryptic crosswords and coffee in heaven.*
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Dying to Live

BY JEAN SIETZEMA-DICKSON

**For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given**

Isaiah 9:6

Let it be autumn when I fall to earth
that those who bear my body to the grave
may see your splendour in the leafy flames
and understand my dying was not brave.

Not brave because I know the King of kings
as father, brother, partner, prince of peace,
to whom I turn, returning to my home,
to whom I look to bring me death's release.

Let there be sunshine after rainy days
that those who weep may see the mist dispersed,
revealing in the rainbow's promise here
the pattern of my life, in death reversed.

So may my dying boldly witness be
to God's unceasing care in everything,
and may my broken-heartedness reveal
the rainbowed radiant splendour of my King.

*Taken from **Sing to the King** by Jean Sietzema-Dickson.
In the book there are alternative verses for the different
seasons of the year.*



■ Jean Sietzema-Dickson is managing editor of Poetica Christi Press and leader of The Wordsmiths, a Christian poetry group that meets monthly at her home. She has published three books of her own poetry, including one about her healing from bipolar affective disorder, and is happy to talk about her life experiences using her poetry.

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THE SURE HOPE

BY BEV CAMPBELL

The Certainty of Hope

What comes to mind when we hear the word "hope"? For many it may mean something that could happen, even something that is ninety-nine per cent sure to happen, yet there is still an element of doubt. However, the hope that God offers is absolutely one hundred per cent sure because it is based on his promise which makes it certain. In fact, "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1 NIV). Hope is the very essence of the Gospel. It is grounded in the certainty that God, by his grace, promised to pour out his Spirit on all people. At Pentecost this promise came into effect. Everyone who repents and is baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17, 38-39). He is the Spirit of Christ in union with our spirit bringing about the new eternal life that has begun in those who trust in Jesus. He is the guarantee of our future resurrection when we will be clothed with a wonderful new body at Jesus' return: "For in this hope we were saved" (Romans 8:22-24).

The Inner Effects of Hope

I find that in my experience of living out my faith in everyday life it is important to know God as a real person and to understand how our relationship works. It is as I read God's word and apply it that my nature and life are changing. That sure resurrection hope continues to become a living reality, directly and indirectly affecting every part of my thinking and actions.

There were times in the past when situations in my life seemed overwhelming. I would feel that problems were pressing in around me and over the top of me and it was difficult to see the way ahead. As I am learning to see things from an eternal point of view my perspective is changing. Instead of dealing with situations at 'ground' level, I can view life from 'above', having a wider comprehension, a new assessment of what is really important and seeing the way ahead more clearly.

The Outer Effects of Hope

The inner effects of hope express themselves outwardly in everyday living. A personal example of this outworking of hope is when I experienced a minor stroke six months ago. The doctor told me it was a warning and prescribed the appropriate tests and medication. Viewed at 'ground' level, I could easily have felt insecure and nervous about my

health. Viewing my stroke from 'above', I know my life is in God's hands and he will care for me and my family. What he has ahead of me in eternity will be so wonderful. As a result, instead of insecurity there is a growing sense of appreciation of God's goodness and an increased understanding of peace and joy.

With regard to my children and grandchildren, my first concern and prayer for each of them is that they will know God and grow in their understanding, having the sure hope of life in Jesus Christ.

The love that the Spirit engenders in me causes me to want to be involved with people in their physical and emotional needs as well as their spiritual concerns. This sure hope has made me more enthusiastic to share the gospel message with others. It is a sheer delight to be able to go through a basic course in the Christian faith with people who are searching for the truth. It is a joy to see those who respond to God's gift of life in Christ growing and changing. They begin to know their worth as members of God's family and their attitudes gradually change toward other people and to situations within their lives that they were finding difficult.

The Comfort of Hope

When we look at our world the future doesn't seem very promising. Via television we can see countries torn by famine, disease and war. Terrorism is becoming world-wide. Once we thought of Australia as being isolated and free, but now strategies are being put in place in case of attack. We hear predictions of the effects of pollution, global warming and weather changes. An aging population and fewer young people causes concerns for economic and welfare needs. The decline in moral and spiritual values and the self-centredness of our society also causes grief. However, as conditions around us become gloomy, the sure hope of Jesus' return and our ultimate resurrection shines brighter. The Spirit within encourages us to grow into the nature and maturity of Christ as we look forward to his coming.

My dear friends, we are already God's children, though what we will be hasn't yet been seen. But we do know that when Christ returns, we will be like him. We will see him as he truly is. Christ is pure and everyone who has this hope in Christ keeps himself pure like Christ.
(1 John 3:2-3 NCV)

■ Bev Campbell is 67 years old and has six children ranging in age from 27 to 48 and nine grandchildren. She has been attending All Saints Greensborough for 28 years. During that time she has been involved with ministry to primary school children, high school children, adults and seniors. At present she leads a Know Your Bible group, is involved in Christianity Explained courses and seniors' ministry.

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write of reply

ishah welcomes reader responses to topics dealt with in previous issues. These should be no more than 200 words long and can be emailed (to ishahmag@hotmail.com) or posted (to ishah, c/- 56 Collier Cres, Brunswick West, Vic, 3056).

A quick note to say how much I am enjoying ishah. I have long intended to give some formal feedback to applaud the aims of the magazine and the fine articles that have featured. I did appreciate the recent issue on Women and Ministry. I particularly see this issue as being helpful in providing a framework for anyone wanting to do the hard work involved in arriving at a position. For the tertiary students that I am involved with through AFES as well as other women at church, the articles are a starting point for discussion. The brevity and also Claire's words and suggestions about how we might think and feel about "living with the differences" I find really useful, and I wouldn't mind getting another 30 or 40 copies! A big thankyou to Evonne (what an accomplished overview!) and to Cathy and the Claires.

Rosie Leslie, Macleod

Congratulations on such a well balanced and important issue. I found it was refreshing to read articles whose authors all wanted to interpret the Bible in a godly fashion, as it relates to Women in Ministry. Following on from this issue, some readers may like to consider the inclusive debate. One easy way is to read the debates about the updated NIV called the TNIV, in Christianity Today online. The translation itself is available free of charge from the Zondervan website.

Peter Cumming, Rosanna

Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

True Romance

After watching a romantic comedy I am an emotional bomb-site. As I watch Meg falling in love with Hugh I want to yell at the screen "It won't work! What happens when all those things you find endearing now become grounds for murder later?". But as I wistfully look at Hugh, wishing that I looked like Meg, I wonder if I am too cynical, and my heart melts. Sometimes I feel like romantic comedies are a tool of the Devil. They can be emotional pornography, in that they leave us yearning for something entirely unrealistic. The postmodern era has shaped our hedonistic mindset, telling us that passion should be our guide, that we should follow our hearts and do what feels right.

This same mindset has influenced our approach to relationship with Jesus. For many of us, Jesus has become our 'boyfriend' to the detriment of being Lord, King, Saviour and Mediator. Certainly, Jesus is spoken of as Husband to the Church, but we have to question whether we have imported our own romantic ideas into this relationship. Jesus becomes 'Hugh' instead of being the Son of God and Creator of the Universe. Of course, it's a good thing to feel passionate about our relationship with our Saviour. But when our emotions become the sole indicator of Jesus' faithfulness and character, we can feel let down when our expectations of ecstasy aren't met.

In the Christian walk, we cannot always 'follow our heart' as the world is so often telling us to do. Some days I cannot sincerely sing 'love songs' to God or gush of my love for Jesus, but can only thank God that His love for me is pure and enduring. My hope is that a gutsy, steadfast, practical Christianity does not become a casualty in this era where emotion and desire have become synonymous with truth.

■ Tracey Hogue has worked with the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students in both Hobart and Melbourne. She is currently a student at Ridley Theological College.

