

# 1 In these times

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Because it's a field guide, this little volume starts with entries that look at the "field" itself—the general locations and situations in which you might find the hope you're looking for, or the despair you're trying to avoid. Two simple presumptions guide this section's entries:

- If you don't know where you are, you probably won't be able to figure out where you're going.
- Your contexts shape what you're looking for and how you'll find it.

In this section of the field guide, you'll review what you already know about the times we're in, which can become the fields of hope in which you find yourself. Born as a set of forthright assessments about the currently dire state of the world, this section also pokes holes in that viewpoint, letting some points of light shine on the landscapes you will explore.

In the entries that follow, "in these times" is a phrase into which you can add your own facts, feelings, or fancies. You know your context all too well, so this section presumes that you're savvy about what's happening at this moment in the world's history, especially your own locale. The entries might needle you a bit, injecting into your mind just enough sober reflection to push

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**context**, from Latin *contexere*, "to weave together"

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your attention and your temperament where they may not want to go.

Be patient with what you read. This Contexts section is just one way this book can help you seek and find hope. Use the margins of the entries to complement what you read there. Insert clippings or notes that add current news items, Web URLs, people to contact, or arguments with what's here. However you use what you read, hear, or experience, make these entries your own.

Enjoy getting to know your surroundings in the readings that follow!

*"The best of times" and "the worst of times" may occur at the same times.*

—Anonymous

## 2 Ignorance is no excuse

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If you're finding these times to be overwhelming, you might be tempted to claim that you don't know anyone who's hopeful, as though your lack of knowledge were an excuse to slog around in despair. Even though gloom might seem to fill news stories, undergird advertising, and grab the attention mechanisms of your brain, hope is equally present in those same venues. There's more to know than despair!

Here's an important fact: hope lives large within human societies. In most cultures, it manifests itself as both belief and knowledge. As belief, hope is central to the message of communities of faith. The bedrock beliefs of societies—mostly about God and God's will for the world—are a foundation for their hope. As knowledge, hope comprises propositions that cultures hold about the nature of things, about the process of change, about human existence through the ages. In many societies hope is the prime ingredient for persuasive speech.

Ultimately, hope is an embedded temperament in your brain—a basic approach to all of life—that guides both belief and knowledge. Because a hopeful (or bold and uninhibited) disposition is likely rooted in your genetic makeup, it emerges early in your life. As you mature, hope can become your default approach to life. This happens best when your hopefulness is

**ignorance**, related to Old Latin *ignarus*, “to be unaware of, not acquainted with”

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further reinforced by life experiences in which your hopes are realized or rewarded.

Founded in basic humanness, a hopeful approach generates hopeful actions. In your relationships, hopeful actions draw attention and admiration that reinforce their value and utility as a way of approaching life.

Because hope is pervasive and pragmatic in all societies—as actionable belief, knowledge, and temperament—it is hard to claim ignorance of hope's existence or its usefulness.

Unless, of course, you spend all your time watching the despair channels on TV.

**For whom might “I don't know how to hope”  
actually be true?**

*Hope is as hope does.*  
—Anonymous

### 3 The coming waves

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Two large, destructive waves are building or crashing around us, perhaps inside us as well. These crises may seem to be coming upon us suddenly, without warning. These surges of history have become more ominous in our own lifetimes, perhaps because we didn't notice their swelling. Because waves and wavelike occurrences operate according to the laws of physics, we can reasonably predict how these two waves might continue to roll toward the crashing-surf edges of our lives.

The names of the waves are well known: the worldwide economic crisis and environmental collapse. Both waves are likely to continue to influence human history and psychology for the foreseeable future. Both waves could seem to wash away hope, as though despair were actually bedrock.

In the one case—economic collapse—the wave seems to be a relatively short-term occurrence. The collapse of net worth and net profit, a rise in the number of unemployed and underemployed workers, an increase in worldwide poverty, the unraveling of assured economic theory—all point to inevitable outcomes that we hope will be survivable, given time.

In the second case—environmental collapse—the wave is much larger, growing slowly and inexorably, perhaps fueled by the same causes that engendered the first wave. This wave is growing large enough to block our ability to see any reliable reference

**collapse**, from Latin *collabi*, “to fall or slip together”

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point for thinking or acting. No human generation has ever experienced the large-scale environmental disaster that has been moving toward us during our mere centuries among earth's eons.

If the great majority of scientists are correct, this wave may not be survivable if we continue to behave as though waves don't exist! On the other hand, we may not survive if we behave as though hope—a wave of God's own creation—doesn't exist!

Perhaps we need to learn to “ride the waves” in new ways?

**How do you measure the size of these  
two waves in your life?**

Is not your fear of God your confidence,  
and the integrity of your ways your hope?

—Job 4:6

*Sea waves are green and wet,  
But up from where they die,  
Rise others vaster yet,*

*And those are brown and dry.*<sup>1</sup>

—Robert Frost (1874–1963), American poet

## 4 The coming waves (again)

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The first wave has probably already crashed into your life. So you may be enmeshed in unhelpful guilt or blaming, or trapped in the paralysis that seeds and nurtures despair. Hope is visible, though, because at least a few world leaders recognize the causes and effects of unbridled greed. They admit their own lack of large-scale and long-term accountability. Now they are working together to resolve these problems.

The second wave severely tests the source, strength, and usefulness of hope. It is possible that you will still be alive when the environment ceases to sustain life for most of the world's population. It seems increasingly apparent that your way of life—a major cause for the wave—will drastically change without your choice. You'll have to change your ways of thinking if you are to survive.

One glimpse of hope: the wave of economic collapse might very well be the dress rehearsal for the second, larger wave. During these times of economic recovery—is this an accurate term for you?—you may be learning together with others how to face the larger wave with tenacious commonality.

Another hopeful sight: although waves cannot be stopped, their effects can be mitigated, their energy dissipated, their force diverted. Complete escape may not be possible, but your

**enclave**, from Latin *inclavere*, “to shut in, lock up”

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survivability is enhanced when you remove from the wave the energy it needs to remain powerful and destructive.

One more glance at hope: your influence in these wave-times may be even more powerful than you know. Rather than merely living in a safe enclave or drifting in a well-equipped lifeboat, you have the capacity to gather others toward hopeful attitudes and actions that can bring God's will to bear on what seem to be intractable problems.

Now can you see hope in the waves?

**Where else in these waves do you see hope?**

[And God said to the sea,]

“Thus far shall you come, and no farther,  
and here shall your proud waves be stopped.”

—Job 38:11

*Friction (or any opposing force) will eventually reduce the amplitude of a wave to an undetectable disturbance.<sup>2</sup>*

—Norm Brockmeier

## 5 We've been here before

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Hope can be found in the middle of hopeless circumstance. This truth has always been a biblical theme. As people of God we've been this way before: flooded, surrounded, decimated, and buried. Sometimes clueless, hopeless, and lifeless. Throughout the eons, people just like us have faced dire situations that engendered a continuing prayer—"How long, O LORD?"—as well as continuing laments about our situations.

It's helpful to look back—Scriptures are always a good historical lens—and see how we acted and reacted under duress. Backed up to the sea, ruled by tyrants, weighed down by prosperity, beleaguered by enemies, and overwhelmed by oppressors—those have been the times when our hopes suddenly sprang to life. Songs, poetry, joyful prayers, new visions, surprising leaders, fervor for righteousness—all evidenced God's rescue of us from abysmal conditions.

History is helpful because knowledge of the past can compel actions in similar situations today. Our spiritual ancestors faced down evil; they lived through centuries of corrupt rulers and ruling classes. So have we, and so we will. They paid the price for moral decay, then reformed their cultures. So can we, and so we shall. Like beggars, they faced utter destruction but also experienced God's rescue in miraculous and ordinary ways. So did we, and so we may.

**abysmal**, from Greek *abyssos*, "without bottom"

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We can take heart from the lament of the prophets, the lessons the Babylonian captives learned, the pluckiness of first-century Christians under the boot of Rome, the martyrs, reformers, and missionaries. We can even look at God's most recent history and see how our spiritual parents and grandparents handled economic downturns, wars, and societal upheavals. We don't have to reinvent wheels, ideals, or lifeboats. We have places to turn, stories to retell, examples to follow.

As God's people, we've been here before. Thankfully, so has God!

**Where or with whom are you leaving a written record of your own history?**

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

—Deuteronomy 5:15a

*History is a vision of God's creation on the move.*<sup>3</sup>  
—Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975), British historian

## 6 Profile: Soul sisters

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Sara and Susa are sisters. Both are college students who hope to carve out careers by which they will save the world. They're serious about that goal, and they consider "dietitian" and "social worker" as good ways to achieve that common goal. They understand deeply how much they owe the generations before them, even as they anguish about the sorry state of the environment and its likely effects on their lives.

Depression and avoidance sometimes lurk at the back of their minds. Some of their friends have already given in to the notion that environmental collapse will destroy their lives. Others in their acquaintance have succumbed to generational anger and blaming. And still others won't admit that anything is wrong with hyperconsumptive lifestyles.

Sara and Susa are sticking to larger visions of their lifework. One sees herself eventually becoming involved in "big changes" in the world; the other is content with a smaller version of her life's impact on others. Their parents—and their church—convinced them years ago to be critics of contemporary culture. By their examples, both their parents and their church still support them.

When you talk to these two, they'll tell you that humility is a first step toward their hopeful worldview. They'll talk about not deserving what they have and who they are, about wanting to "pay forward" what has come their way, for the good of the

career, from French, *carriere*, "road or racecourse"

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world. They see themselves as capable of opening minds around them when those minds aren't already closed by fear, selfishness, or stupidity.

You'd enjoy a conversation with Sara and Susa because, like many of the young adults you know, they are drawn to a life purpose larger than their own happiness. And perhaps some day, when you're about ready to succumb to despair, one of the Saras and Susas who learned hope from you will come back into your life and say thanks.

It's something to hope for, right?

**What kind of congregation might Sara and Susa want to be part of? Pray for the soul sisters you know.**

*All human wisdom is summed up in these two words—  
wait and hope.*<sup>4</sup>

—Alexandre Dumas (1802–1870),  
French writer

## 7 Much obliged

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*Obligation*: since the sixteenth century, this word has denoted dutiful response to kindness. It’s a present- and future-tense word that is also dependent on a past act or relationship. It’s a good word to remind you that hope is probably a requirement for your life.

Obligation makes hope necessary. With a strong memory of being favored, you are grateful and thus feel indebted to someone else. You avoid thinking that the world owes you a living, creature comforts, or recognition for your sterling qualities. Because others’ kindness or favor gives you hope—and because you are grateful—you want to pass along the kindness (and the hope it engenders) to others.

To state the matter another way: you owe to succeeding generations some measure of hope, some reasons to be hopeful, some hoping skills. Oddly enough, this obligation—to pass hope along—rests on the reality that you can never repay those who made possible your own life. Your only option is to pay forward—to future generations—the debt of gratitude you owe to your forebears. These are the people who loved you, unseen and unknown, as their hoped-for future.

All around you are folk younger than you—children, teens, young adults—whose coming days may be filled with great tribulation. They will likely face degradations of the environment,

**oblige**, from the Latin *obligare*, “to bind around or up, bind by oath or other tie”

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lifestyle, and human relations. Their lives will not include the luxuries you may take for granted. They’ll want to know that you loved them from the past. They’ll want assurance that you tried to accomplish God’s will for the world, to bring God’s love into the future. They’ll want the hope that you offer from the past. And eventually they’ll be obliged to pass along hope to the generations that follow them.

Just as you did for them.

### Whose future is tied to your hopefulness?

The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.

—Psalm 33:11

*The future belongs to those who prepare for it today.*<sup>5</sup>

—Malcolm X (1925–1965),

*American civil rights leader*

## 8 Law and order

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In these times, you might also be hopeful because of the law of God. Hope lives inside the law, which infuses the theologies of both the Old and New Testaments. As curb, ruler, and schoolmaster, the law provides you what you cannot invent for yourself, a measure of order in what would otherwise be completely unfettered, destructive selfishness.

One benefit of the law is that it helps engender a civil society, a place where the good of all can be assured. When people agree on the rule of law, disobedience is punished, justice can be applied equally, and law-abiding citizens—those who literally “dwell in the law”—live well together. That’s hopeful.

The law also nudges you toward hope-filled repentance. The law invites you to confess that you are by nature a lawbreaker, that you have harmed others and broken your relationship with God. In admitting your wrongdoings, you hope for forgiveness. You become even more hopeful when you vow to amend your totally sinful individualism and trust the power of reconciliation. (Restorative justice is one hopeful example, in which convicted felons turn their lives around because they have been forgiven by their victims.)

The law has another value, to draw you continually toward God. Although you see yourself only as a sinner and a beggar, you hope for something other than continual punishment. Warned,

**law**, from the Old English *lagu*, “a layer, measure, or stroke laid down”

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dogged, and even terrorized by the law’s dreaded penalties, you see God’s grace as a hopeful alternative to saving yourself by imagined total obedience to the law. You can step aside from rampaging self-idolatry and grasp the gift of God’s forgiving love.

The delicate-yet-sturdy flower of hope can live within the nurturing soil of the law, a lively and lovely part of your life as a follower of Jesus.

A good thing to remember in these times.

### When does the law give you hope?

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.  
—Psalm 19:7a

*The essence of immorality is the tendency to  
make an exception of myself.<sup>6</sup>  
—Jane Addams (1860–1935),  
American social worker*