PREFACE

When I had thyroid cancer in 2002 I read an eight-hundred-page masterwork, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by N. T. Wright. It was not only an enormous help to my theological understanding but, under the circumstances, also a bracing encouragement in the face of my own heightened sense of mortality. I was reminded and assured that death had been defeated in Jesus, and that death would also be defeated for me.

Now, nearly twenty years later, I am writing my own book on the resurrection of Jesus, and I find myself again facing a diagnosis of cancer. This time I have pancreatic cancer, and by all accounts, this condition is much more serious and the treatment a far bigger challenge.

I am also writing in the midst of the worst world pandemic in a century. Many people are living in fear of sickness and death. My apartment in New York faces some of the great hospitals of the city, and especially during the height of the virus, every window blazed all night and the wailing sirens and red flashing lights came at all hours. Hopes for an early solution to the virus and a quick turnaround have been dashed again and again.

But the pandemic has brought more problems than just sickness. There may be major disruptions for the worse in nearly every sector of our society that will last for years. We may be in for unemployment unknown since the Great Depression, the failure of innumerable businesses, the painful contraction of whole industries, massive tax shortfalls jeopardizing the lives of millions who rely on government services and retirement, and crises for both private and public education. And that's just the list that comes

mind now when I am writing in the very earliest days of the crisis. There will inevitably be others that we cannot yet foresee. In any case, the most socially and economically vulnerable will pay a higher price. On top of everything else, the social isolation has brought despair and a sense of hopelessness to millions.

In the midst of skyrocketing deaths from the coronavirus, protests over a different kind of death erupted into the streets during the early summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis. The demonstrations happened in over two thousand U.S. cities and around the world, drawing millions of people, making them the largest such social protests in our history, far larger than those during the civil rights movement of the 1960s under Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Nearly all the current protests have been focused on the ongoing racism in our society at large. But being old enough to remember the civil rights movement protests firsthand, I have been struck by a contrast. Our recent protests and calls for social justice, as encouraging as they are in so many ways, have little of the same sense of hope that that the earlier movement had.

In Dr. King's masterpiece, his "I Have a Dream Speech," he says:

> This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.[1]

King's reference to cutting a "stone of hope" out of a mountain of despair is a reference to Daniel 2:34–35,45. The chapter was a divine vision of the future, given to the king of Babylon in a dream. In that vision the idolatrous kingdoms of this world are smashed by a small rock "cut out" of a

mountain "but not by human hands," which then grows into a mountain of justice and peace that fills the earth. Christian interpreters have understood the stone as the kingdom of God, a supernatural work ("not by human hands"), starting as quite a small thing, seemingly powerless, yet eventually toppling all proud regimes that perpetuate evil and oppression. Dr. King used the image with great rhetorical skill, but the image is more than rhetorical. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed," Jesus says in Matthew 13:31–32, "Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it . . . becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

Dr. King did not let the financial and political powerlessness of African Americans in the U.S. dash his hopes. The hidden systemic racism and the overt racial exclusion and violence that the civil rights leaders faced in the 1950s and 1960s were enormous. But he knew that God moves in this way—from small beginnings and weakness through sacrifice and service toward change. Dr. King was not merely a sunny optimist. Read his speeches and letters and you can see anger and realistic fears about the movement, but the note of hope remains.

It has often been pointed out that the civil rights movement was led by African American pastors and Christian leaders, and so the biblical references that fill their speeches and calls to do justice were not mere grandiloquence. They were statements of faith and hope rooted in God.

Death, pandemics, injustice, social breakdown—we again desperately need a stone of hope.

And there is no greater hope possible than to believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Saint Paul says he was "crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power" (2 Corinthians 13:4). If you grasp this great fact of history, then even if you find things going dark, this hope becomes a light for you when all other lights go out. That's why Paul can add, "Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him."

This is a book on the resurrection of Jesus. I am not trying to do the same exhaustive work on the historical sources and evidence for the resurrection that N. T. Wright did—nor am I capable of it. Early in the volume I

try to summarize much of his work, which I don't think can be bettered at the present time. Because I am a preacher and not an academic, I am concentrating on the resurrection as a key to understanding the whole Bible and to facing all the challenges of life—suffering, personal change, injustice, moral clarity, and the uncertainty of the future.

Theoretically everyone knows that they could die at any moment. But a diagnosis of cancer or heart disease or the threat of a pandemic transfers us into the realm of those who know it as an immediate reality. During a dark time for most of the world, and for me personally, as we all long and grasp for hope, there is no better place to look than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . . and so your faith and hope are in God.

—1 PETER 1:3,21

A New Age of Anxiety

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and its aftermath, the Western world had been experiencing a growing crisis of hope.

For at least two centuries Western cultures had been animated by a powerful hope that history was progressive, that the human race was moving inevitably toward creating a world of greater and greater safety, prosperity, and freedom. In short, there was a strong belief that overall every generation of human beings would experience a better world than the previous generation. This is one of the legacies of the European Enlightenment, whose many figures predicted that human reason, ingenuity, and science, once freed from superstitions of the past, would inevitably bring in a better future.[1]

But then came the twentieth century. In 1947 W. H. Auden wrote his book-length poem *The Age of Anxiety*. The poem is about four persons in a bar in Manhattan talking about their lives and about life. It won the Pulitzer Prize but is seldom read. What grabbed attention was its title, which seemed to capture the cultural moment. In less than four decades the world had passed through two world wars, a pandemic, and the Great De-

pression and, at the time, it was heading into decades of a nuclear-armed Cold War between the West and communist nations.

Yet when the Cold War ended in 1989, the older belief in inevitable human progress seemed to revive. Some even declared "the end of history," meaning that the lethal struggles between the great ideologies—fascism, communism, and Western-style democracy—were finally over. The fears of warfare that could bring about worldwide conflagration were diminished. International capitalism, fueled by globalization, went into high gear and many economies seemed to be thriving. The Age of Anxiety was over; the earlier optimism of the Enlightenment was rekindling. The number of people who said that children today will grow up to be better off than their parents' generation went up to over 50 percent of the population.[2]

One leading thinker who has provided an empirical basis for this optimism is Steven Pinker of Harvard University. His books *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* and *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* assemble data to argue that across the world there is decreasing violence, warfare, and poverty, as well as lengthening life spans and improving health care.[3]

Pinker confines himself to empirical measures of comfort and safety, but Yuval Noah Harari makes stronger claims. In his 2017 bestseller *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* he argues that in ancient times human beings turned to God or to gods only because they did not have control over the world in which they lived. But we have that control now.

> At the dawn of the third millennium, humanity wakes up to an amazing realization. Most people rarely think about it, but in the last few decades we have managed to rein in famine, plague and war. Of course, these problems have not been completely solved, but they have been transformed from incomprehensible and uncontrollable forces of nature into manageable challenges. We don't need to pray to any god or saint to rescue us from them. We know quite well what needs to be done in order to prevent famine, plague and war—and we usually succeed in doing it.[4]

The title of the book *Homo Deus* conveys its basic conclusion. It is not merely that we no longer need God. Humanity now *is* God. We are our own hope for the future, our own God. We can have not just hope but confidence in a bright future because we have all the resources within ourselves to bring it about.

The Loss of Hope

Pinker and Harari, despite having many followers, are not capturing the spirit of the age as did Auden. By the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century the numbers of people believing in a better life for their children began to decline again.[5] Pessimism about the future for our children and society has only deepened over the past fifteen or twenty years, as a variety of polls and surveys show.[6]

There are many reasons. Some point to a polarization and fragmentation in society that goes far beyond the usual political partisanship. There is a growing tribalism that reveals a culture in which there is a vacated center, a loss of any shared idea of common public good. There is a profound loss of social trust that appears to be undermining all the institutions that have held our society together.

There is another category of threats to our future that come not from a lack of scientific and technological progress but, ironically, as the result of it. For example, pandemics may be impossible to contain because of our mobility through air travel and because of the globalization of our economies, all due to modern technology. Our polarization and loss of trust in what to believe is now acknowledged to be, to a great degree, fueled by social media. Then there is the threat of climate change and the never-ending possibility of international terrorism, both heightened by scientific advances. The very things that were supposed to save us from terrible perils have created new ones.

Andrew Sullivan points to another category of reasons for the increasing sense of anxiety and hopelessness characterizing our age. Sullivan

professes to be a great admirer of Pinker, and in a review of his book *Enlightenment Now*, he finds no fault in any of its empirical conclusions. But Sullivan then adds: "[Pinker] doesn't have a way of explaining why, for example, there is so much profound discontent, depression, drug abuse, despair, addiction, and loneliness in the most advanced liberal societies." He notes: "As we have slowly and surely attained more progress, we have lost something that undergirds all of it: meaning, cohesion, and a different, deeper kind of happiness than the satiation of all our earthly needs."[7]

Yuval Harari believes that people turned to God for hope in the past because of an inability to understand or control the natural environment. But religion addressed something much deeper than that. The human dilemma from time immemorial has not only been about how to control nature "out there" but—the far more difficult challenge—how to control nature "in here," that is, the many enigmas and problems of human nature itself. We hunger for meaning and purpose. We find that things that we thought would bring us satisfaction do not. We are shocked at the evil things other human beings—and we ourselves—are capable of doing. What can we do about *us*? As Sullivan indicates, controlling external nature is not enough, and there is plenty of evidence in a year of the COVID-19 pandemic that we are far from having done even that.

Pinker and Harari believe that leaving religion behind is an important part of human progress. But the prominent philosopher Jürgen Habermas over the last twenty years has taken a different position. He recognizes the limits of secular reason for providing moral absolutes and motivations to sacrifice one's selfish interests for the good of others. Habermas, though not a Christian, believes that religion can provide a basis for the sacredness of all human life and a motivation for sacrificial love in human relationships. These are things mere science cannot give us.[8] The greatest threat to our hope for a better world is not the natural environment but the various evils that continually spring from the human heart. Science cannot eradicate human evil—in fact it can give it more tools to use for its own ends. And by "evil" we don't mean only the horrendous eruptions such as the

Jewish holocaust. We mean the ordinary cruelties of self-interest in business, racial bias, arrogance and pride, dishonesty and corruption, and the innumerable daily acts of selfishness that pull society downward.

The Hope of the Resurrection

One of the reasons for the remarkable rise of Christianity in its earliest centuries was that it offered resources for hope in the face of the numerous urban pandemics that were devastating the Roman world. Kyle Harper, a historian who has written on ancient pandemics, was interviewed and asked about how Christianity kept thriving and growing in the bleakness of those times. He said:

> For [Christians], it was a positive program. This life was always meant to be transitory, and just part of a larger story. What was important to the Christians was to orient one's life towards the larger story, the cosmic story, the story of eternity. They did live in this world, experience pain, and loved others. But the Christians of that time were called to see the story of this life as just one of the stories in which they lived. The hidden map was this larger picture.[9]

The Christian "hidden map" went far beyond ordinary religious consolations. For example, other religions spoke of the uncertain possibility of a better hereafter if our moral performance was sufficient. The Christian hope exceeded such quavering wishful thinking in every way. The biblical word *elpida*, translated as the weaker English word *hope*, means profound certainty. Christians view even the hardest circumstances as part of a history guided by God at every turn toward not merely some kind of afterlife but toward the resurrection of our bodies and souls into new, remade heavens and earth.

And all this hope centers on one explosive event—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is what Christianity offers a world that has lost hope.

The Christians to whom Peter wrote had already "suffered grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Peter 1:6) and were now in the midst of a "fiery ordeal" (1 Peter 4:1). But Peter reminds them of this: "He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. . . . so your faith and hope are in God" (1 Peter 1:3,21). The fact of the resurrection means we have a hope for the future not based on scientific advance or social progress but on God himself (1 Peter 1:21). And this is not simply an intellectual belief but, as Peter says, it is a "living hope," a vital part of the new spiritual life that comes into Christians by the Holy Spirit through what the New Testament calls "the new birth." Faith in the resurrection implants that hope into the root of our souls. It becomes such a part of who we are that we can face anything.

But what *is* this faith in the resurrection that can become a living hope, burning within us like a warming and energizing fire? And how do we get it?

Knowing the Resurrection

The first step is to believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ really happened. The resurrection is of little use as a mere symbol. And as we will see, belief in the resurrection was as difficult for people in Jesus's day as it is for us. Ancient and modern worldviews alike believe that resurrections from the dead simply can't happen. The evidence for Jesus's resurrection was formidable. It answered people's intellectual objections then and still can do so today.

However, accepting the bare fact of the resurrection does not automatically make it a living hope for us. We must understand not only that it happened but also, just as important, what it means. Many of us will have trouble thinking of any time that we heard an extensive treatment of the