

Hope IN 1 PETER

By Gerald L. Stevens

AFTER THE NEW Orleans Saints football franchise was created in 1967, the team languished in the doldrums of defeat. I, along with other loyal fans, waited every year with eager expectation for the next season. Forty-three years we waited. Suddenly, like living a dream, fan loyalty paid off when the Saints won Superbowl XLIV in 2010. New Orleans exploded with exuberant celebration. An estimated 800,000 screaming fans lined the streets for the victory parade.¹ The wait for the head float to turn the corner was almost unbearable. I craned my neck in confident expectation that coach Sean Payton and

Page 31: Italian artist Amerighi da Caravaggio painted in 1601 this scene depicting the crucifixion of Simon Peter. The original painting is in the Cerasi Chapel in Rome. Simon Peter instructed first-century believers to be ready to

give “a reason for the hope” they had within themselves (1 Pet. 3:15, HCSB). Early church history teaches that Simon Peter died a martyr, crucified upside down, at the hands of Rome’s Emperor Nero.

the Superbowl trophy would soon be coming around the bend. I had hope to see the victorious team. I had hope for the trophy, and I had a solid reason for that hope—because the Saints were champions.

Confident Expectation

Sometimes we do not reflect on the extent to which hope powers our everyday lives. The power of hope is fundamental to Christian life. Christian hope powers the Christian’s life. Christian hope is the confident expectation that what God has promised in Jesus Christ, God will deliver. Such hope carefully needs to be distinguished from wishful thinking. Wishful thinking has no solid reason as its basis. As a result, hope in general conversation means uncertainty about the outcome. Christian hope, on the other hand, is a completely different reality. Christian hope is the opposite. Christian hope is a certainty about the outcome.

This hope has a solid reason as its basis. This hope is solidly based on what God already has done. God already has sent his Son to die for our sins and raised Jesus from the grave (1 Thess. 5:9-10). The battle already has been

fought and the game already won. The victorious team will be coming around the corner any moment with trophy in hand.

One of the great epistles of Christian hope is 1 Peter. Before we are even three verses into this wonderful epistle, the word *hope* figures prominently in an opening benediction: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has regenerated us unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”² The way we would say this colloquially is, “done deal!” Why was this message so amazing to Peter’s audience? Because, the ancient world did not have hope.

Astounding Message

The Greek word for “hope” in 1 Peter 3:15 is *elpis*. This word is defined three ways: (1) in terms of expectant longing with reason for certainty, (2) in terms of its ground, and (3) in terms of its object.³ The Christian life is filled with courageous hope and expectant anticipation that is reflected even in creation itself (Rom. 8:18-21). The ground of Christian hope is what God already has accomplished in Jesus by raising Him from the dead (1:4). The object of hope is God Himself (1 John 3:2). Since God is Author of life, the object of hope is resurrection to new life (Acts 23:6). Since God has accomplished this new life in Jesus, who already has been resurrected from the grave, the object of hope also can be described as being brought to glory through Jesus (Heb. 2:10). Peter’s favorite way of speaking this truth is to describe Christian hope as a “living” hope (1 Pet. 1:3). The hope is living because the object of that hope is living.

No other “philosophy” in the ancient world had such a marvelous



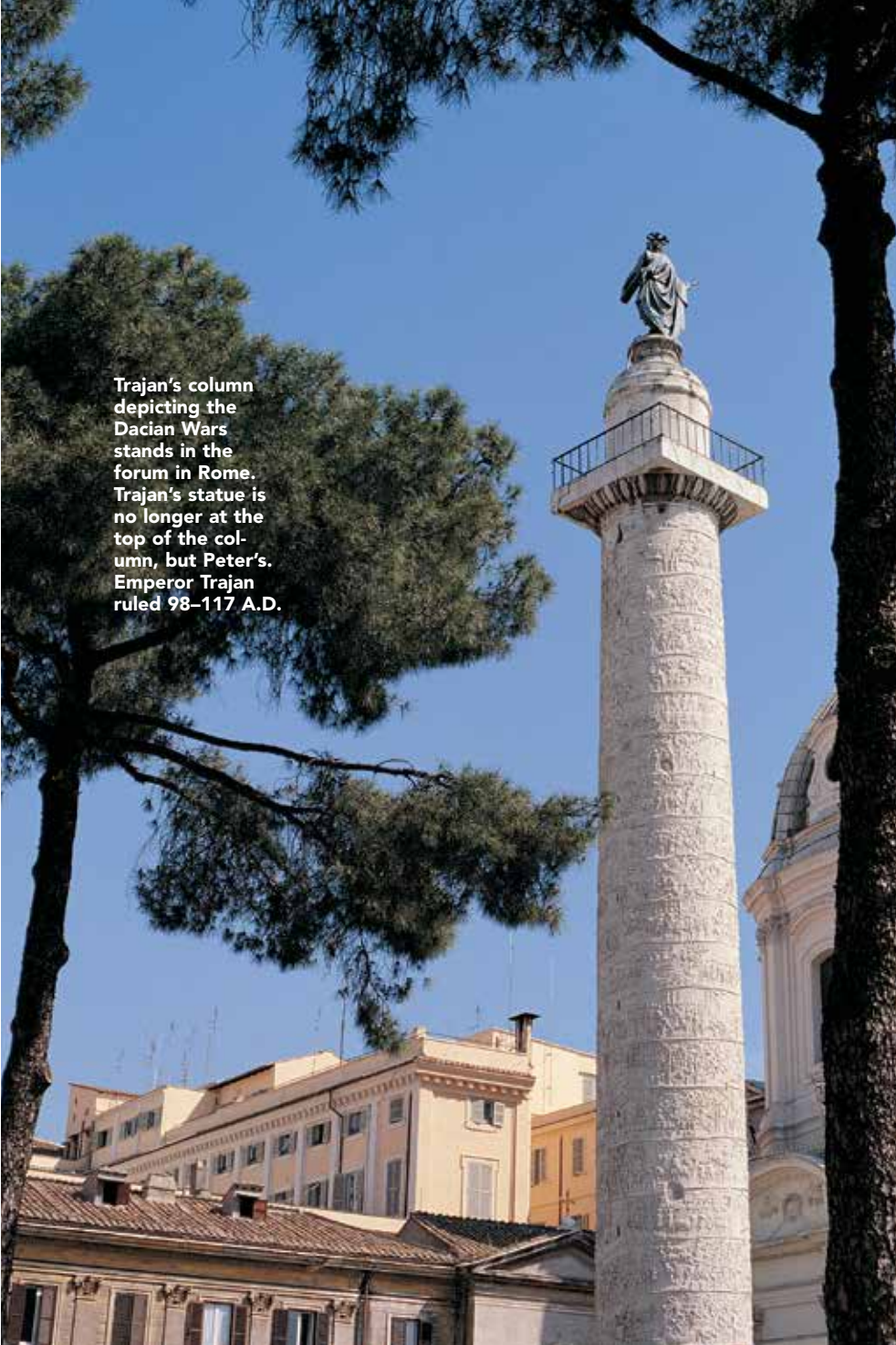
Above: Bronze portrait, likely Sophocles, a Greek playwright who lived 496-406 B.C.

Left: Equestrian statue of Rome’s Emperor Marcus Aurelius (ruled A.D. 161-180). A classic stoic,

Emperor Marcus Aurelius’s work *Meditations* called for obedience to nature and the suppression or mastery of personal passions. Further, Stoics believed hope was a vice and thus was to be avoided.

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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/22/27)



Trajan's column depicting the Dacian Wars stands in the forum in Rome. Trajan's statue is no longer at the top of the column, but Peter's. Emperor Trajan ruled 98–117 A.D.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHAIZ (20/14/2)

message based on such solid ground. Interestingly, one will search long and hard to find much discussion of hope in the ancient world. Major philosophies were propounded without even having much to say about hope. Stoicism even taught hope was a vice, not a virtue.⁴ Cynicism seemed more to rule the day. Without knowledge of a personal and caring God, why would cynicism not prevail? Those outside the Christian faith are, as

Paul said so well, “without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

The attitude one sees in the playwright Sophocles, one of the most famous Greek tragedy writers from the fifth century B.C., might have been common among citizens walking the streets of Athens. Sophocles deadpanned,

Not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best; but when a

man has seen the light of day, this is next best by far, that with utmost speed he should go back from where he came.⁵

The Christian message flooded into this void of the human heart in the ancient world with an overwhelming message of God's love (John 3:16) and extraordinary hope for a glorious future (Rom. 5:2; 8:24).

Uncertainty of the outcome of faith never was a hallmark of Christian preaching. Christian hope was core to this preaching that produced a unique message not heard anywhere else in the world. This exclusive message really was “news,” and “good news” at that. The unique message is why Peter exhorted believers to be ready at any moment to explain the “hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). In fact, Peter anticipated that unbelievers would persecute believers, because those without faith cannot understand Christian hope. Christian hope is based on what God actually did in Christ, an astounding truth to try to fathom, yet meeting the need of every human heart (v. 16). We all need hope. God in Christ meets that need. ☩

1. Ramon Antonio Vargus, “New Orleans Saints Super Bowl Parade Crowd Was Largest in Memory, Organizer Says,” *The Times-Picayune* [online; accessed 15 August 2013]. Available from the Internet: www.nola.com/superbowl/index.ssf/2010/02/new_orleans_saints_super_bowl_9.html.

2. Scripture quotations are the writer's translation.

3. “ἐλπίς” (elpis, hope) in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed. (Chicago; Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), 252-53.

4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 358.

5. Sophocles, *The Oedipus of Colonus of Sophocles*, ed. Richard Jebb (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1889), line 1225.

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