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# CHAPTER 1

## INVITATION TO HOPE

Please make the bad news stop.

For most of our lives, we've been committed—even passionate—followers of the news and global events. We have valued information as the foundation for involvement. But in the last season—when racial injustice, political polarization, and the moral failures of prominent leaders dominated the headlines—we've felt that knowledge drive us not to engagement but to discouragement.

Bad news surrounds us, and it feels as though the frequency and volume of these stories are increasing.

If the headlines tell the whole story, then our world has every reason to lose hope.

As followers of Jesus, it's particularly painful when we read of people within the faith community whose words and actions betray our faith. Who claim to follow Jesus but use power and position to subjugate, not serve. Duplicity and hypocrisy, #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements, and viciousness from people who pin crosses on their blazers.

In the wake of all this bad news in the world and in our churches, we talked with friends whose faith was faltering. We witnessed the fallout of elevating leaders to a godlike status, only to watch their very human

flaws undermine their credibility and leave a trail of destruction—and often a crisis of faith—behind.

At the height of our own discouragement, we uncovered a story about early believers in AD 260. During a deadly plague that inspired a frenzied mass exodus from Athens, Christians rushed into the infected city to care for the sick and dying whom others had left behind. Dionysius, the first bishop of Athens, noted believers' remarkable willingness to rush toward the dying at the risk of losing their own lives. He commended them for their "unbounded love and loyalty," their pattern of "never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ."<sup>1</sup> They put their faith into action through self-sacrifice, and the world was turned upside down.

Does faith in Christ still have the power to prompt sacrificial, world-changing action? Can it still motivate people to battle disease, fight injustice, and alleviate poverty—not just for days or weeks but faithfully for a lifetime? Can it transform our self-centered hearts, making us people who don't just speak of the good news but live as though it's a reality?

We often hear about and retell inspiring stories of the way the Church showed up thousands of years ago. But we needed the assurance that these aren't just "early Church stories." That beyond the bad news that dominates the headlines, there is an incredible amount of *good news* in the world today.

To find it, we temporarily closed our newsfeeds and silenced the daily doses of discouraging stories. Jill and Brianna came alongside us to study the biblical virtue of hope as it's portrayed in the pages of Scripture. We also turned to the wisdom of trusted friends to point us to present-day accounts of the courageous faith, hope, and love of God's people transforming communities around the world.

Throughout our careers, we have served alongside, partnered with, and admired global leaders who routinely face corrupt governments, religious persecution, natural disasters, and extreme poverty. And while we have had countless conversations with men and women leading and serving in difficult circumstances, until researching this book, we had never overtly asked, "What keeps you there? What sustains your life of

service? How have you not given in to discouragement? How do you hold on to hope?” It was time to start asking.

## **Longing for Hope**

In society we see many monetizing and marketing their solutions to hopelessness and despair. Leadership gurus promise easy hacks to resolve our disappointments and deepest struggles. Instagram influencers outline diet and exercise plans guaranteeing a healthier life. Technology companies insist their latest app will decrease our stress and anxiety, bring peace to our relationship challenges, improve our sleep, and make us look younger.

In 2020, “self-care” expanded to a \$450 billion industry, forty-five times larger than it was just one decade earlier.<sup>2</sup> From Fitbit to candles and from self-help books to meditation apps, we are spending close to half a trillion dollars annually in our attempt to find hope.

But our experience is that these solutions leave us utterly unsatisfied. Our Western cultural obsession with self-improvement is insufficient. Rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal thoughts continue to increase throughout the United States.<sup>3</sup> We are spending more time and money but coming up empty. More than half of Americans say they are more anxious today than they were one year ago.<sup>4</sup>

Within the Church, the solutions Christians propose are often equally unhelpful. Trite Jeremiah 29:11 memes assuring us our hardships are NBD (“no big deal”) because God has a plan aren’t helpful. “It will all work out” is not just untrue: It is hurtful. We don’t need any more advice amounting to tying theological bows on hardship.

Cultural remedies point us to something we can discover or architect within ourselves: “Look within and find your inner strength.” But the Old Testament prophets and the modern-day leaders we feature in this book describe a very different journey and conclusion: Within is the wrong place to look.

We cannot master our circumstances, engineer our happiness, or find refuge from real pain. We cannot avoid hardship and deep disappointment. We are unable to control all our circumstances.

When everything feels like it's falling apart, how do we respond? How do we find hope? Where do we turn to navigate the troubles we'll inevitably encounter in ourselves, in our organizations, and in our service?

## The Guides

As we sought to understand what sustains a lifetime of faithful service, we asked our wisest peers, *Who are the pioneers responsible for leading organizations and demonstrating "long obedience in the same direction"?*<sup>5</sup>

We sought leaders with a minimum of twenty years of service in their fields and interviewed those who demonstrated staying power, sticking around long enough to experience the thorniest and knottiest difficulties. We intentionally sought leaders who had wounds and setbacks that could have forced them to give up—but who pressed on anyway.

In a world consumed with short-term results, quick fixes, and instant gratification, we wanted to uncover the beauty and strength of long-term commitment. We wanted to understand what builds and sustains leaders of hope and resilience.

We applaud people who serve four years. We admire people who serve forty.

Through in-person conversations or phone interviews, we spent time exploring the underlying beliefs, faith, and practices that sustain the long-term service of these global leaders.

From the streets of Guatemala City to the academy in Wrocław, Poland, from a school in Oklahoma City to a jail cell in Zimbabwe, we can't wait to introduce you to the leaders we met. These are not stories of sanitized saints or easy wins. They all faced unimaginable struggles and disappointments. They inspired, challenged, and taught us as we explored their stories of running toward need rather than from it, cultivating hopeful communities, and spurring lasting movements.

These stories are not of individual heroism but rather of a God who is present in pain and heartache—a God who doesn't seem to solve all the problems in the way we might like—yet is enough.<sup>6</sup> These leaders

pointed us to the inspiration and truth they relied upon in Scripture. Again and again, they referenced Jeremiah, the curious Old Testament prophet who wrote the longest book in the Bible and is known as “The Weeping Prophet.” The prophet and the eponymous book seemed like unlikely authorities on the virtue of *hope*, but Jeremiah inspired us, too, and provided the framework for this book.

Chapter 6 details Jeremiah’s story. For now, suffice it to say that Jeremiah understood a thing or two about holding on to hope, even when the world fell apart all around him. He delivered God’s truth to people who were lost in self-reliance, nationalism, and the worship of false gods. He continued speaking as the Jews lived as exiles and refugees, their once-enemies now their rulers. As their world came apart, Jeremiah reminded them, and reminds us, where hope can be found.

In a world bombarded with negative news, we need a biblical perspective on enduring hope and stories of courageous service in our world today. And we need the global Church. For too long, global and marginalized communities have been the recipients of international aid and charity, yet seldom are they recognized as teachers and mentors, those rich with wisdom and experience who have much to offer us. It’s far past time to recognize our need to be taught by the witness of the Church beyond, as well as within, our borders. North to South, East to West, we need each other in this journey.

## **The End of Idealism**

Serving in ten different countries across the globe, the group we profile is diverse—in geography, interests, background, gender, culture, and a host of other factors—but in their stories, a consistent pattern emerged. While we will emphasize a single attribute of each leader in the chapters to come, there were glaring similarities in their leadership journeys. Multiple times we listened with delight to the curious repetition of key phrases and ideas.

Almost always, these leaders described beginning their service full of **idealism**, brimming with hopes and dreams.

Idealists see a need and feel an inner prompt to respond. Not content to merely bemoan injustice or just ponder how to respond, they step out with the courage to *do something*.

Idealism is rooted in the recognition of what's wrong in the world and a longing to see it made right. It motivates leaders to take a stand for justice and fight for a cause. It's a desire to see God's "will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."<sup>7</sup> At its core, idealism is built on promise and possibility—a vision of what could be.

But sooner or later, our expectations collide with our experiences. We realize there is more complexity, nuance, and challenge than we anticipated. We learn it's harder to solve problems than we thought. People disappoint us. Teams run into conflict. There are no easy solutions to deeply entrenched problems.

Idealism is also besieged by the pain we experience. From poverty alleviation to racial justice to foster care to missions to education reform, service inflicts wounds. If we love others, we will inevitably experience hurt and disappointment. As lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson says in his book *Just Mercy*, "You can't effectively fight abusive power, poverty, inequality, illness, oppression, or injustice and not be broken by it."<sup>8</sup>

Idealism and optimism draw us in, but they eventually feel incompatible with the complicated reality we experience. We nurse our wounds and wonder if it's really worth it. We learn how inadequate and incapable we are to do what we set out to do. Our idealism clashes with reality, leaving battle wounds on our hearts. Inevitably, we realize the insufficiency of our abilities and reach the end of our idealism.

Our unmet expectations and painful experiences lead to **disillusionment**.

Consulting firm McKinsey describes disillusionment as "occurring when deeply held beliefs and expectations are challenged by circumstances."<sup>9</sup> Shattered assumptions can shake even the most optimistic leaders.

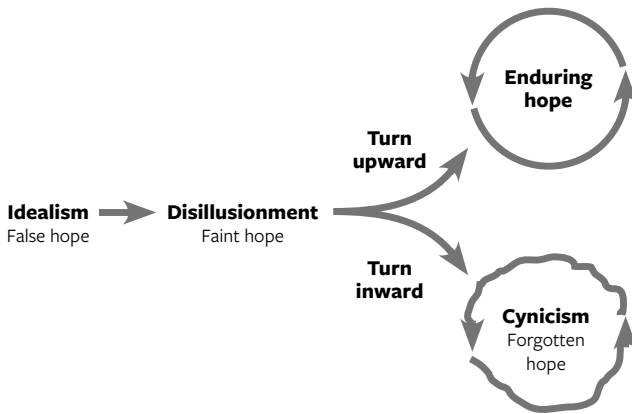
Idealism lasts only if we bury our heads in the sand, willfully ignoring the complexity and depth of the problems we're addressing. When

our expectations and experiences inevitably collide, disillusionment results. And it's unsettling.

As we began our research, we expected disillusionment to be a challenge leaders must endure and overcome. We've instead come to see it as a pivot point on every leader's journey.

Wrapped in the pain of disillusionment is a gift: It's an invitation to turn not inward but upward.

## The Journey from Idealism to Enduring Hope



### Turn Inward

If we turn inward, we follow the well-trod path to **cynicism**.

Comedian George Carlin once said, “If you scratch any cynic, you find a disappointed idealist.”<sup>10</sup>

The cynic begins as an idealist but then resolves, *It just cannot be done. We’re wasting our time. People don’t change. It doesn’t really matter. What God has called us to is impossible.*

Cynicism prompts us to slip back from the dance floor and move to a place of safe distance in the balcony, where we can smugly critique the moves of others. *Look at those ridiculous dance moves, we criticize.*<sup>11</sup>

Fearful of getting hurt, cynics build shells of self-protection and self-preservation. They abandon hope for themselves and mock it as naïveté in others. Cynics resign themselves to perpetual hopelessness.

Cynical leaders damage themselves and those around them. In conversations with enthusiastic people who want to engage in solving problems, such leaders regale them with bitter stories beginning with a knowing eye roll: *Let me tell you why you would never want to do that.*

Seeing only what is wrong with the world, cynicism acknowledges the pain of a post-Eden reality while denying the reality that God “has promised new creation.”<sup>12</sup>

And cynicism is on the rise. When a recent poll asked Americans whom they most admired, the most common answer by far was “nobody.”<sup>13</sup>

As the young composer Mohammed Fairouz summarizes, “The age of anxiety has given way to the age of cynicism. Among my generation, cynicism is no longer a bad word; it’s being celebrated.”<sup>14</sup>

When hope dims, cynicism lurks close behind. It’s a contagion, spreading throughout our churches and organizations with blistering speed. It’s seen every time someone gives in to the belief that the world is broken beyond repair or that individuals and institutions will never

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### **Cynicism isn’t neutral ground; it corrodes and corrupts.**

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get any better. We might still go through the motions, but we no longer believe that real progress is possible.

Around the world, Christian leaders and organizations see hope slipping away, both in themselves and in their organizations. Idealism does not sustain. Disappointment leads to disillusionment. The siren call of cynicism promises sanctuary to hurting hearts and wounded egos, but cynicism isn’t neutral ground; it corrodes and corrupts.

## **The Invitation**

This book expresses our longing to figure out how to move beyond the false hope of idealism, the faint hope of disillusionment, and the forgotten hope of cynicism. It is a journey to discover an enduring hope that enlivens and sustains our service. We want to figure out how to be, as the book of Jeremiah puts it, “serene and calm through droughts, bearing fresh fruit every season.”<sup>15</sup>

We promise this book will point to *real* hope, not to happy endings. We will not minimize or rationalize the pain we all endure. We will not slap out-of-context Bible verses onto real problems. We will not offer quick fixes to entrenched challenges. Our world does not need another book promising simple solutions to complex problems.

We feature Jeremiah in this book, knowing literally nothing worked out as he hoped it would. Jeremiah and his contemporaries watched everything they cherished and hoped for crumble. Their leaders failed them. Their city walls no longer protected them. Their security, safety, and certainty evaporated. Their hope ran very thin. Many gave up on God. And no amount of positive thinking or inspirational Christian wall art promising a hope and a future would change their circumstances. Yet Jeremiah remained faithful and hopeful throughout his journey.

Whether you’ve been serving for years or are early on your journey, we pray the truth found in Scripture and the stories in these pages point you to the God of hope. To the God who sustained Jeremiah when the world imploded around him. To the God who guides and empowers the leaders you will meet in this book. And to the God who we believe is the only way to sustain your service, too.

We invite you to look away from the dire headlines and the discord on your newsfeed. To find respite and renewed strength as you journey with us in exploring stories of hope that will encourage you to get your hands a little dirtier, grow your faith a little deeper, and lift your gaze a little higher. To “hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise.”<sup>16</sup>

Hope is not lost.

### **Application Questions**

1. What experiences or stories have drained you of hope? What might this reveal about the source of your hope?
2. Which individuals or stories profiled in Scripture have enlivened your own hope?
3. On the journey from idealism to enduring hope, where do you currently find yourself?