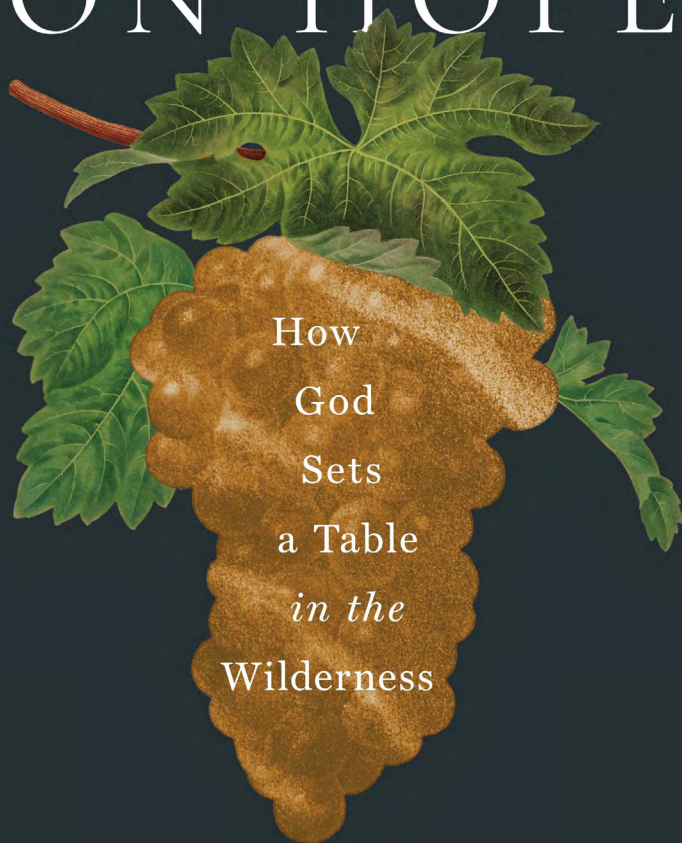


FEASTING ON HOPE



How
God
Sets
a Table
in the
Wilderness

HANNAH MILLER KING



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CONTENTS

FOREWORD by Esau McCaulley	1
PROLOGUE: <i>A Tale of Two Tables</i>	3
1 HOPE: <i>The Feast and the Foretaste</i>	9
2 ENCOUNTER: <i>What Is Salvation Anyway?</i>	20
3 EMBODIMENT: <i>Broken Bread for Broken Bodies</i>	33
4 GIFT: <i>The Prophetic Practice of Joy</i>	47
5 COMMUNITY, PART 1: <i>The Table That Makes a Family</i>	59
6 COMMUNITY, PART 2: <i>When God's Family Contributes to Our Pain</i>	72
7 ABUNDANCE: <i>Will There Be Enough for Me?</i>	85
8 HOSPITALITY: <i>The Fullness That Feeds Others</i>	98
9 COURAGE: <i>When Self-Giving Includes Loss</i>	111
10 HOME: <i>The Longest Table in the World</i>	124
EPILOGUE: <i>Let Us Keep the Feast</i>	139
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	145
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION	149
NOTES	157



1

HOPE

The Feast and the Foretaste

*What you believe about the future will
change how you live in the present.*

DANIEL NAYERI, *EVERYTHING SAD IS UNTRUE*



I WAS ELEVEN when my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

He and my mom came home from the doctor one morning after what I assumed was a routine check-up—if he'd been having symptoms of some unseen illness, I didn't know it—and they corralled us all into their bedroom to “talk.” This was unusual, but my dad often had a grandiose way about him, so we complied without too much confusion.

Their bedroom wasn't large. I'm not sure why they chose to crowd six children into this space for our life-altering conversation. Maybe it was the place in our house with fewest distractions. No toys, no snacks in eyesight. Maybe their room represented their own safe place. Its central feature was two large windows on the far side of the bed that bathed the ancient wood floors in sunlight.



That's what I remember most from our conversation. Not the words exchanged, not my siblings' reactions to the news; just the shimmering white light pouring over my dad's enormous frame as he spoke.

He said, "Today we found out that Daddy has cancer. And we have decided that whether I live or die, we want my life to glorify God."



In the years since this moment, I've wrestled with how to articulate its impact on me. I don't believe that God glibly kills people—that he removes fathers, mothers, friends, spouses—to teach us a lesson or to “get glory.” I also know that my father didn't just accept his cancer diagnosis like a death sentence. During the four years of his illness he fought, literally, for dear life.

But the words he spoke over us at the beginning of this journey were like a prophecy: They invited me into a truth I will never fully understand. They introduced me to the mystery that a life yielded to God is a glorious life, regardless of outcomes.

This mystery does not fit neatly into our paradigms.

Religious or not, we all have a script in mind for the story of our lives. We expect, or at least we hope, that circumstances will work out in our favor. Some struggle is permissible as long as there's a happy ending. My young sons, who've been catechized by Disney and other kid-friendly films, reassure each other during tense moments on family movie night: “The good guys are going to win.” But what happens when they don't? How do we find equilibrium when our personal narratives take an unexpected turn and deprive us of the resolution we crave?

These questions are especially troubling for Christians, who believe in a God that is both powerful and good. When God allows tragedies to occur, people of faith are rightly scandalized. Our

oldest prayer book, the Psalms, is full of the question *why*? Sometimes, it is the only honest word of faith we can muster.

Early in my father's battle with cancer, we anticipated healing. Confident in God's abilities, we prayed for a miracle. But after four years of praying and hoping and submitting to every treatment available—including, to our shared dismay, gallons of fresh carrot juice and other dietary changes that we implemented as a family—the miracle never came. My father died at age forty-four. Twenty years later, I'm still asking *why*? It's a question I've learned to carry with me, like a piece of jewelry I never take off. It's simply there, so much a part of me that I rarely notice it anymore. But this unanswerable question has also become like an expansive room in which I live, and where I have met God more profoundly than if our prayers had been answered as we hoped.

In the bewilderment of grief, we come to the end of ourselves and our paradigms. We encounter a reality beyond our ability to control. In the wilderness of *why*, we come face to face with God. Perhaps, when my father was diagnosed, he recognized this: that even when God can't be understood, he can be trusted.

Crisis disrupted my script. But paradoxically, it gave me a better one.



Christian hope is often articulated in seemingly oppositional ways. Either we have an imagination for healing and renewal in this life, or we teach patience in suffering while we wait for heaven. Sometimes we fluctuate between these two frameworks. My family's own journey reflects this.

During my father's illness, we worshiped for a season with Christians who confidently prayed for his cancer to be reversed. We were energized by their joyful expectation that God, who raised

Jesus from the dead, is still at work in the world. But when my father wasn't healed, I struggled to pick up the pieces of our faith. Things hadn't gone according to the formula. In the wake of his death, my theological maxims came to a breaking point: Was this tragedy my fault or God's? Had my faith not been strong enough, or had God not been true to his word?

We needed a bigger frame for our grief.

As a struggling teenager, I was comforted to learn about God's mysterious reign over all circumstances, even the bad ones. I needed to hear that his good plan does not ultimately rest on the strength of my faith, and that no loss is outside of his power or his mercy. But at times I wondered how to reconcile this newfound understanding of God's sovereignty with my former expectation that he acts powerfully on behalf of our prayers.

In the face of a cancer diagnosis—or chronic illness or job loss or divorce papers—we scramble to make meaning and find a way forward. And the Christian story offers a spectrum of possibilities: Do we continue to “ask, seek, and knock” for what we believe God can accomplish by his power?¹ Or should we entrust our circumstances to the One who works all things according to the counsel of his will?² The answer, of course, is both. Full-throated Christian hope cultivates an imagination for present renewal alongside a theology of suffering. But holding these things in tension takes practice. And it takes *practices*.



The earliest Christian ritual is an exercise in hope.

The Lord's Supper began, appropriately, with the Lord himself. On the night before he died, Jesus reinterpreted the Jewish Passover meal in light of his own ministry. For centuries, God's people had celebrated their deliverance from Egypt by sharing a meal that allowed them to remember—and, with the senses, to reenact—the

historic night that God secured their freedom. In associating the elements of this meal with himself, Jesus claimed them as symbols of a “new covenant,” a new promise of deliverance for those who’d follow him in faith. He also promised that one day, he would share table fellowship with them again in person.³ Among his first followers, then, the Lord’s Supper was equal parts remembrance and longing: They celebrated Jesus’ victory over sin and death, and they looked eagerly for his return. This poignant meal was a centerpiece of their worship from the earliest days of the church.⁴

In the first century, Christians gathered for worship under threat of persecution. Both Jewish and Roman leaders deemed allegiance to Christ problematic and sought to snuff it out through violence. The apostle Paul, himself the recipient of extreme persecution, addressed the reality of suffering in almost all his letters to churches.

Peter, who would eventually die by crucifixion, encouraged other believers to see their hardship as both normative and lasting: stand “firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”⁵ For the first Christians, patience in suffering was nonnegotiable. Jesus’ own words were still fresh in their collective memory: “In the world you will have trouble.”⁶

But the early church also believed and acted in accordance with the second half of Jesus’ promise about trouble. On his last night with the disciples he’d said, “In the world you will have trouble. *But take heart; I have overcome the world.*” In this hope, Jesus’ followers gathered to break bread at the risk of their own lives.

On the first Easter morning, God demonstrated that his victory over sin and death is both secure and has already broken into the present age in the body of Jesus. His resurrection was proof that renewal is real, and it has arrived. The bread and wine, then, which Jesus described as his own body and blood, became a sample of the new world that is coming. The Lord’s Supper is a taste of resurrection—of

new creation—here and now. This meal literally feeds our imaginations for what is possible in Christ, even as it reminds us of all that remains incomplete until we see him face to face. The central practice of Christian worship helps us hold seemingly opposite versions of hope in tension. At Jesus' table, we feast on the life that conquered death—and we proclaim that death until he returns to complete his work.

This tension is characteristic of the time in which we live: Jesus has been raised from the dead, but he has not yet returned to make all things new. Theologians often call this time-between-the-times “the already-not-yet,” in which God's Kingdom has *already* been inaugurated on earth but is *not yet* fully established.⁷ As those who follow Jesus in this overlap of ages, we can and should expect to see evidence of his Kingdom among us in many forms, from physical healing to spiritual transformation to social renewal. But we should also expect that some things will remain unhealed until the King returns to finish what he started.



Living with tension is hard work. Despite our best efforts to create one, there's no algorithm or formula by which we can predict exactly when or how God's Kingdom will manifest itself here and now. Sometimes, prayers are answered beyond our imagining. Sometimes they are not. This mystery compels some of us to try harder to “crack the code” of God's power, to search desperately for an explanation or a principle by which we can obtain our desired outcomes. Others of us, fearing the discouragement or disillusionment that may accompany unanswered prayers, decide to stop praying for a desired outcome altogether. We would rather not ask than risk being disappointed.

Beginning in high school, I developed chronic back pain that progressed into my early twenties. I visited an array of doctors and tried numerous treatments, exercise regimens, and dietary tweaks.

Nothing brought lasting relief. My aches and pains were well known by my church friends and prayer groups. “How’s your back today?” they’d politely ask as I fidgeted in my chair or stood up to stretch awkwardly in the corner.

“About the same,” I’d respond.

By halfway through seminary, the pain was so intense that I was often in tears by early evening. One Sunday in December, I was sitting (uncomfortably, as usual) in church when I felt prompted to ask someone to pray for my healing. But the thought of asking again, and hearing *no* again, seemed almost unbearable. I didn’t know if I could handle the rejection. When I finally did muster up the courage to ask a volunteer to pray for me, I downplayed my request. “Please pray for my back,” was all I could say.

To my surprise, I was healed that morning.

Twelve years and three children later, the chronic pain has not returned. I do not know why my prayers were answered that day and not in the years leading up to it. I do not know why my father’s prayers for healing remained unanswered despite our many fervent requests. These experiences don’t add up in a neat, mathematical equation. They illustrate the tension of our time: the “already-not-yet” of God’s Kingdom on earth.



When I come to the Lord’s Table on a Sunday morning, I do not regret asking for my father’s healing. The bread in my hands validates my childhood faith, reminding me that in raising Jesus from the dead, God has already done the impossible. We should feel no shame in asking for miracles, seeking family reconciliation, or working for justice in the world. As Esau McCaulley put it, Jesus’ resurrection “reshapes the Christian imagination, forever obliterating the limits we place upon our Creator.”⁸

If I didn't have the repetitive practice of Communion to keep this truth in front of me, the sting of unanswered prayers might be enough to dampen my hope. But at the Table, my unanswered prayers find a place as well. They are caught up into the collective longing of the church throughout history that prays, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus." Our experiences of persistent grief help us get in touch with the fact that right now, we feast in Jesus' absence. We celebrate the start of new creation, but we still live with the shadow of death until he returns to wipe every tear from our eyes.

Whether we gather for worship under the threat of persecution, in the fresh wake of a national tragedy, or in the quiet pain of personal loss, we gather as those with visceral awareness that the story of redemption isn't over yet. Our present pain teaches us to yearn more sincerely for the day when Jesus will set things right. In this way, unmet longings don't hinder our faith, they enhance it. They release us from the pressure to look or feel as if we've "arrived" at complete wholeness, and they increase our desire for the sustenance God has provided in the meantime.



In a world obsessed with eradicating discomfort, the Lord's Supper is prophetic. At the Table, we name the hunger that cannot be fully satiated here and now. The meal that feeds us is both a feast and a foretaste. When it's presented as a version of the American dream, in which prosperity can be achieved through adherence to certain maxims, Christianity falls flat. There are better ways to get rich or stay healthy.

But when our faith sustains hope *despite* short-term disillusionment, we learn a way of being-in-the-world that is rooted in the next one. "The world to come," as the Nicene Creed describes it, is the world we humans are looking for. We won't create it through

human collaboration or the right politics. We can't protect our personal versions of it from tragedy or loss. And even when we try, we can't entirely snuff out our God-given belief that it exists and is our home. C. S. Lewis calls it our "inconsolable secret," this desire for a "far-off country" that haunts the religious and nonreligious alike:

I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence. . . . Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter. . . . These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.⁹

At the Lord's Supper, we taste the food from that far-off country. We bear witness to the fact that there is another world, in which the dead are raised and the impaired fellowship of humanity is restored. Right now, we only see a glimpse of these things. We practice resurrection by moving our bodies toward a Table, brushing elbows with other hungry and homesick bodies. Maybe those other bodies offended us in this past week. Maybe our relationships are strained. As a pastor, I have learned that this is more often the case than not. Every Sunday at church I see couples who are struggling to stay married or to stay connected with their kids. I see extended family members on opposite sides of a generational debate. I see colleagues who fell out at work but are working to restore their friendship. They all come, as I do, in need of supernatural help.

In the present world, our communion—with each other and with God—seemingly hangs by a thread. Sometimes it is completely



invisible to us. But because Jesus has already been raised, it is a thread that holds. In him, Scripture tells us, all things hold together.¹⁰ And by him, we are fed: not abstractly, but concretely. In our great vulnerability, we hold in our hands a small, tangible reminder of the One who is in fact holding us until he comes.



Some might see this description of hope as a kind of cop-out. Expecting present renewal alongside unmet longing is like trying to have your cake and eat it too. But if that's true, maybe there's more cake to go around than we've been taught. Maybe Christian hope offers a more expansive version of reality than the zero-sum. As others have articulated, Christianity teaches us to think less in terms of either/or and more in terms of both/and.¹¹

My own experience bears this out. My persistent belief that God can and will heal creation has amplified my grief over the things he hasn't healed—my father, my family, my own lingering trauma-related dysfunction. But grief is not the enemy of joy. And in God's economy, sometimes our gains and losses function in reverse order. When we learn to hold our desires with open hands and offer them back to God with raw trust, he can make them—and us—into something more than we could previously imagine. He can bring renewal out of defeat, life out of death. This is, in fact, the mystery of our faith. We preach resurrection. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

And in remembrance of him, Christ has commanded us to “take and eat.”¹²

When we look to the host of our sacred meal, we see what hope looks like in real time. Jesus spent his ministry teaching that God delights to give good gifts to his children. He healed the sick, cast out demons, rebuked religious profiteers, and fed hungry crowds. He also, near the end of his own life, cried out to God with such

desperate yearning that he sweated blood. Just before being handed over to death, Jesus prayed, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”¹³

Jesus lived, and died, in the tension of trust. He asked for God’s intervention while also surrendering to God’s mercy in the face of suffering. Though Jesus was divine, he allowed himself to feel the existential angst of humanity when he asked in agony on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹⁴

Our Lord has gone with us through the wilderness of *why*. He has endured the crucible of unmet longing. And he has made his own journey into an offering. Now, his death becomes our life. His loss is our gain. His wounds bring us healing.

Many historic Christian traditions call Communion by an older name: Eucharist. A shortening of the Greek word *eucharisteō*, which means “to give thanks,” the Eucharist is fundamentally a thanksgiving meal. In taking the bread and wine, we receive again the good gift of Jesus’ life poured out for us, and we thank God for incorporating us into that life—for making us, individually and together, members of Jesus’ body.

Seen in this light, the Eucharist is not just a meal. It is the shape of the Christian life. Whether or not our prayers are answered in the short term, whether or not our stories turn out the way we hope, we can learn to give thanks to the One who shows what lies beyond our loss. We can learn to offer ourselves to God, fully confident that in Christ, even the cup of suffering can become the cup of joy. Jesus rejected the false paradigm of either/or; he now invites us to share in his ministry of both/and. He calls us to lives of hopeful surrender that can become, in God’s hand, food for others.

When I think back to my dad’s original interpretation of his cancer diagnosis, I see now that it was a bread crumb for me: a sign of something I didn’t yet have words for but knew I needed. When I come to the Table, I understand. A life yielded to God is a eucharistic life.

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