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Testament were Jews. They knew the ninth commandment and the seriousness of breaking it, an offence punishable by the death penalty. The view that Joseph was the father doesn't have probability on its side.

On the other hand some have supposed that some other man was Jesus' father as Joseph and probably the Jews had initially suspected. This means that Mary had been unfaithful to Joseph during the betrothal period. Such was a serious charge attracting the death penalty in the Old Testament and Joseph determined on a quick divorce until persuaded to do otherwise.

In recent times some theologians have put forward, albeit tentatively, the suggestion that the birth of Jesus was achieved by some form of parthenogenesis. One thing which can be said in response to this view is that parthenogenesis is a process which is only known to occur among invertebrates and lower plants. In reality parthenogenesis in human beings has no precedent. As Dr. David Whittingham of Carshalton stated: 'We know from our work in mice that an embryo doesn't develop after parthenogenesis unless it has the proper complement of male chromosomes.'²² If on the other hand we assert some form of divine parthenogenesis we might just as well opt for the New Testament and historic Christian belief that Jesus Christ was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

In the final analysis the whole doctrine of the Virgin Birth probably boils down to a question of how we view the New Testament narratives. Do we regard them as containing large sections of fictional material in which poetic license has obscured historical fact or do we see them a reliable vehicle which communicates the plain truth about God in a manner that the ordinary man can understand without confusion? Presumably if God is God it is reasonable to assume that he would organise things in such a way that the record of his coming to men would not be misleading. One thing is plain: in asserting this doctrine we are not concerned with possibility or likelihood. If God is God, all things that are in keeping with his nature have to be possible. Indeed the Lucan narrative says as much: 'For with God nothing will be impossible.'²³

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Hope in a Hopeless World

Naim Ateek

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These exegetical studies of two passages from Romans are extracted this time from a Middle-East context. There the hopelessness of the situation often leads one either to presumption

²² Turner G., 'Frankensteins or Saviours?' *The Sunday Telegraph* 26 May, 1985.

²³ [Luke 1:37](#).

or despair. The studies reflect how Christians there are hoping against hope solely on the basis of God's Word. Coming from the pen of a pastor rather than an academician, the expositions have a cutting edge showing the Bible's relevance in the midst of Asian suffering.
(Editors)

MEDITATION I:

Introduction:

Appropriately for us Christians in the Middle East (ME), the theme which has been chosen for the IV General Assembly of the MECC and the celebration of its 10th Anniversary is *the Living Hope*.

Each of the meditations which I will be giving, will deal with one aspect of this theme. We will begin with a reading from Holy Scriptures. After its brief elucidation and exposition, we will move on to apply it in the experience and life of ME Christians. The aim of these meditations is, therefore, to speak to our concrete and relevant situations in life. May the Holy Spirit of God touch our minds and hearts as we meditate together.

'The Paradox of Hope' (Romans 4:18-25)

Before we meditate on this passage, let us recall the background story of Abraham in the Old Testament.

Abraham was almost 100 years old. Sarah, his wife, was nearing 90. God gives a promise to Abraham that Abraham will be the father of many people and nations and that his seed will be multiplied greatly. Abraham expresses frankly and realistically his situation to God. He tells the Lord that since he and his wife Sarah have no children of their own, his servant will inevitably inherit them. The Lord assures Abraham that it will not be the servant who will inherit but a son. The words of promise were—'your own son shall be your heir'. God asked [p. 34](#) Abraham to look at the stars of heaven and then told him 'so shall your descendants be'. Abraham believed God and the Bible says that God counted Abraham's faith as righteousness for him.

With this background in mind the passage becomes clearer:

18-19. Here is the Paradox of hope for the Christian. 'In hope he believed against hope'.

Abraham had all the right reasons for despair. He was old, verse [19](#), 'when he considered his own body which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old ...' His wife Sarah was old, '... when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb'. Everything around him signalled the absence of hope. It was for him and his wife a situation of utter hopelessness.

What did he have, however, on the positive side that made him hope?

1. God gave him a promise (vv. [18](#) and [20](#)).
 2. Abraham continued praising and glorifying God (v. [20](#)).
 3. Abraham's faith in God's ability to keep His promise did not falter (v. [21](#)).
- v.22. That is why God considered Abraham a righteous man. A man who was walking rightly with Him. A man who has fulfilled the demands of the relationship between him and God.
- v.23. St. Paul makes the application of Abraham's story to his readers and by extension to us today. The story of Abraham can be our own story. His intimate relationship with God can be our own story of intimacy with God. We too can be considered righteous before God. There is, however, a difference which has been the consequence of the death and resurrection of Christ.

v.24. The question therefore is this: What should we do so that God would consider us righteous before Him?

1. We must believe in God who raised from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ.

v.25. 2. We must believe that Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification.

In other words, we are made righteous before God by the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ died for our sins and Christ was raised to make us righteous before God.

The experience of Abraham is shared by us ME Christians, though with certain differences. For Abraham it was a matter of birth of a son against all medical and natural odds. On the positive side, he had God's promise, he never ceased to give glory to God, and above all else, he had an unshakeable faith in the power of God who would keep that promise. Many of the problems which Christians face in the ME are as great and seemingly insurmountable as the birth of a child to [p. 35](#) a 90 year-old mother. But we have more than a promise from God. The promise has been fulfilled in the coming of Christ. The Lord has come. The incarnation has become a historic event. Even more, the Lord has died for our sins and what is even more which has become the epitome of faith is that the Lord is Risen. Therefore, in the face of all the great odds which work to destroy the Christian presence and witness in our countries, the Churches of the ME do not lose heart. In the midst of gloom, despair, and utter hopelessness, the Christian still hopes and still clings to God in hope.

This is the paradox of hope—'In hope the Christian believes against hope.'

Let me summarise this study by mentioning three important conclusions:

1. The resurrection of Christ is the central, focal, and pivotal point of hope. We have a living hope because we have a living Lord. St. Peter wrote 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.' ([1 Peter 1:3](#)) St. Paul wrote in [Romans 1:4](#) that Christ was designated Son of God in power ... 'by his resurrection from the dead' ... The resurrection of Christ becomes the vantage point. One can look because of the resurrection as through a telescope backwards and forwards into history and see clarity and meaning. It is the resurrection of the Lord that caused the early Church to come alive in the power of the Spirit. The resurrection was the total surprise of God to the world. The early Church looked backwards at the life of Christ through the resurrection and discovered him as Lord and Saviour. It looked to the future and the eschaton through the resurrection and saw the living hope of eternal life. Christians could not and cannot see the future, but because of the resurrection they have always been able to affirm it.

2. Faith cannot be separated from hope. 'In hope he (Abraham) believed ...' Hope as one great Church theologian said is the 'inseparable companion' of faith.

'Faith believes God to be true, hope awaits the time when this trust shall be manifested: faith believes that God is our Father, hope anticipates that He will ever show himself to be a Father toward us: faith believes that eternal life has been given to us, hope anticipates that it will some time be revealed: faith is the foundation upon which hope rests, hope nourished and sustains faith ... (hope) invigorates faith again and again with perseverance' (Calvin). As Moltmann put it, '.. in the christian life faith has the priority, but hope the primacy ... without hope, faith falls to pieces, becomes a fainthearted and ultimately a dead faith. It is through faith that man finds the path of true life, but it is only hope that keeps him on that path.' [p. 36](#)

3. The source of both faith and hope is God.

Today in the ME we are confronted with different myths of hope. Many people believe that hope lies in progress and technology. They say that progress will ultimately solve man's problems. Some see theft hope in total self-confidence and self-sufficiency. When people place their hope in such things, their faith in God has certainly declined. And when the false hope vanishes, their lives become opened to a process of inner decadence and disillusionment. We are daily witnessing in the ME the perpetual hopelessness of conditions and persons. Our hope can only be based on the Risen and Living Lord, the Alpha and Omega. Our hope is based on a trust in God who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the Christian theological foundation of hope. This is the paradox of hope, 'In hope (the Christian of the ME) believes against hope'. This is our hope. May we continually cling to it.

'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope'.

([Romans 15:13](#)).

MEDITATION II

Hope in the Midst of Suffering (Romans 8:18-25)

Chapter [8](#) of Romans is one of the great chapters in the New Testament. St. Paul deals with the victorious life of the Christian. The life of the Spirit.

Just before our passage begins, Paul has said that all those who are led by God's Spirit are children of God. These can call God 'Abba'—Father, i.e. the most intimate and personal address of a son to his father. Moreover, Paul says that if we are children of God; then it goes without saying that as children we will be heirs. We are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided that we suffer with Him. For suffering in this world is the inevitable part and parcel of life on earth. The assurance, however, is that having suffered, we will be glorified with Christ.

- v.18. St. Paul continues by saying that 'yes' we will suffer. But suffering in this present life is nothing when we compare it with the glory and splendour which is in store for us.
- 19-22. It is not we only who are awaiting the glory, but even nature, indeed, the whole creation is waiting for its freedom. There is the conscious realization that we live in a world that has gone radically wrong. Man's sin has brought upon him its inevitable consequences. It did not, however, end there. It has affected all the created order. The whole [p. 37](#) universe has been subjected to decay because of sin and will have to be set free. So although nature has been subjected to decay it is not without hope. It will share in the glorious liberty of the children of God because Christ has won for us that liberty.
- v.23. Not only nature groans for liberation; we too who have received a taste of the Spirit of God, who is living and working within us, wait for the final victory. We wait for the final adoption. Our experience of being sons of God is genuine but it is incomplete. Christ has won the war against sin and death, but side battles are still being fought and will continue to be waged as long as we are in these mortal bodies. We long for the end when the victory will be completed and our full sonship is realized.
- 24-25. In this hope we are saved. This hope that Christ has won the victory. Christ has beaten Satan under His feet. Through His death and resurrection He has

accomplished all. The final consummation is, however, not yet realized. That is why we wait patiently. That is why we look to the future in hope.

This passage deals with two important subjects significant for the life of Middle Eastern Christians, namely, suffering and hope. There is suffering in the world. People as well as nature suffer. Christians who have the Spirit of God dwelling in them also suffer and groan. Many times suffering can lead to hopelessness. According to Joseph Pieper hopelessness can assume two forms—that of presumption and that of despair.

Presumption is the premature anticipation of fulfilment. Why has God not acted yet! Why has He not come! Why doesn't He do something now! Such unanswered questions have led many Christians in the ME to hopelessness.

The second form of hopelessness is despair. Despair is the premature anticipation of non-fulfilment. Despair is when people say 'nothing will happen'. 'Nobody can do anything about this situation.' 'God is not going to act.'

Both presumption and despair cancel out hope. St. John Chrysostom has said, 'It is not so much sin that plunges us into disaster; it is rather despair'. Oscar Wilde put it in a similar way when he wrote in 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' —

We did not dare to breathe a prayer
Or give our anguish scope!
Something was dead in each of us,
And what was dead was Hope.

The message of the Risen Lord to the Churches of the ME is to cast down the shackles of hopelessness. Hopelessness cripples the Church [p.38](#) of Christ. Hopelessness dooms it to inactivity. It turns it into a mere organization and saps out its life as an organism. It tolerates its survival as an institution but deprives it of any vitality. It makes it a museum rather than a living library. Hopelessness petrifies and fossilizes the Church. And if we want to be honest with ourselves and before God, this is a painfully true picture of many of our Churches. We must reiterate the words of St. John Chrysostom, 'It is not so much sin that plunges us into disaster; rather it is despair.' In other words, it is not the evil which we do, but the good which we do not do. When we do not do the good, that implies hopelessness. It is not as though we and our churches in the ME were bad and sinful; the tragedy lies in the fact that many of us are living in hopelessness. Theologically we have conceived the original sin to be Adam's desire to be as God. The great temptation which many of us face is not that we want to be as God, but in failing to be what God wants us to be—instruments of peace and reconciliation, holy vessels in witness and unity so that the world might believe.

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, we must long to be what God wants us to be. And let us heed the warning of St. Augustine, 'What we do not long for, can be the object neither of hope nor of our despair'.

Hopelessness has become for many of us a haven against disillusionment. It is a shield to protect us against disappointment. We call it realism-realistic thinking. We have become the followers of Camus who said, 'thinking clearly and hoping no more'. Hope on the other hand ventures with God. And those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is. They confront it, challenge it, and contradict it, even to the point of suffering. This is not a call to revolution, but to unity and witness.

Let us continue our journey of faith, having hope as our companion. Let us sustain our hope in the Risen and Living Lord who holds all things in His hand. In this God we put our trust and we wait patiently for him, for 'those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength ...'

'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.'

[Romans 15:13.](#)

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The Cross as Evangel in Mission

Chun Chae-Ok

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Seen in the light of the modern Korean missionary movement and against the background of Jewish/gentile approaches, this article is a typical Asian way of looking at the central element of the Christian message: The Cross. The writer's challenge, evolved out of her context, is convincing—namely, Only a Cross-bearing Christian can preach the Cross of Christ.

(Editors)

INTRODUCTION

The Korean church has been recently more on world Christian news for its rapid expansion. There may be varied approaches for attempting to understand the Korean church growth. This article is one of the attempts to understand it from a mission strategy point of view. It points to suffering as a means of church growth.

Understanding and interpretation of the meaning of suffering and pain are vitally related to the depths of one's own world view, with the basic components of his faith, and with his experience of God with the backgrounds of his theology. As it is one of the central themes and questions throughout history, there have been efforts at defining its meaning and providing possible answers to it. Firstly, many have taken the position of fatalism, especially in the subcontinent of Asia where Hinduism and Islam prevail. They see suffering as something inevitable and accept it with total submission. They live with it, through it, and almost for it. They do not see that there is something which points beyond suffering. It is a completely negative attitude toward suffering. This school of thought is so predominant in the life of Asia that it has affected all realms of thinking which depict the Asian philosophies. It is not looking forward and far-sightedly towards the future, but, rather, lives in the past. Secondly, some have interpreted the law of cause and effect. All suffering comes because of sins which are committed through human desires. One deserves suffering because he sins. This concept is present in the Jewish world view. Thirdly, another school of thought which one can more readily accept is that of suffering for the sake of training and education. Suffering teaches something which nothing else can teach. It is a necessary ingredient for growing toward a mature and wholesome personality. It is almost like a compost for producing a beautiful creation whatever [p. 40](#) it may be as near to an ideal person whom the Creator intended to produce. It seems to be a reasonable solution, but its interpretation has its problems. Fourthly, there is