



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Faith and Hope
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Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

Some people are optimists. Some people are pessimists. And some of us are neither.

A pessimist proverbially looks at a glass and says it's half empty, while an optimist looks at the same glass and calls it half full. Fantasy writer and essayist James Cabell said, "The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds; and the pessimist fears this is true."

Optimists tend to have sunnier dispositions than pessimists. I've often thought that personalities are like weather forecasts. Some people are mostly sunny, some are partly sunny; others are partly cloudy, and still others, mostly cloudy. I mentioned this the other day, and somebody claimed that his own personal forecast is "hurricane," at least some of the time.

As a life-long student of human nature, it seems to me that optimism and pessimism are largely personality traits. They're part of our wiring, as far as our basic tendencies go. Some people are just naturally sunnier, while others tend to be more overcast.

There's room for movement, of course. Personal outlooks can change in one direction or the other – either because we have a run of good luck or bad luck, and so feel more or less buoyant, or else because we decide to stretch in a different direction. Usually that means trying to look on the brighter side of things. Not many people work hard to become more gloomy.

One encouraging ode to optimism comes from a perky country music song recorded by The Carter Family in 1928, which got woven into the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Maybe you know it. The refrain goes like this:

Keep on the sunny side
Always on the sunny side
Keep on the sunny side of life
It will help us everyday
It will brighten all the way
If we keep on the sunny side of life.

It's not surprising that people are always telling us to look on the bright side, to be more optimistic. It feels better to be upbeat, after all, and gloomy people drag everybody else down. Nobody likes a "downer," and most of us don't want to be one.

All that is true. But still, I'm not as big a fan of optimism as some people are. That's not because I'm a pessimist. I'm not. I'm neither an optimist nor a pessimist, because I think Christianity has something to offer that's better than pessimism, but infinitely deeper and more reliable than optimism. Christianity offers us faith and hope, and I would much rather live with them.

My dictionary defines hope as "to want something to happen or be true and think that it could happen or be true." It defines optimism as "a feeling or belief that what you hope for will happen." Do you hear the difference? Hope is *wanting* something to happen; optimism is believing that it *will* happen.

We hope for all sorts of things, because we want lots of things to be true. We hope the new baby will be healthy. We hope the test results from the doctor will show that everything is all right. We hope to get that job we applied for.

Hope is a desire for something we want to be true that also has a reasonable chance of being true, but we don't know for sure. We don't hope for things we already know. We don't hope that today is Sunday. We just know it is, because the calendar says so and we're all here together for worship. And most of us don't hope for things that are extremely unlikely either. We don't hope that the Nobel Prize committee will call us up tomorrow and tell us we've won. There's no good reason to think that will happen.

The essence of hope is that we want something to be true, and it might well be true, but we're not at all certain that it is. Optimism, on the other hand, is the inclination to *believe* things will turn out to be true, simply because we *want* them to be. The obvious pitfall of optimism is that just wanting something to be the case doesn't make it so. If we tell ourselves that things will turn out the way we want them to, and then they don't, we set ourselves up for disappointment; and if that happens often enough, we might end up in a kind of disillusioned cynicism. I know some people like that. You probably do too. Their optimism has been disappointed too many times, and it's more than they can bear.

We humans are prone to all sorts of wishful thinking. We're inclined to believe things just because we want them to be true. Psychologists call that "motivated reasoning." We see what we want to see, and don't see what we don't want to see.

Then again, we confuse *certainty*, which is a psychological state of mind, with *truth*, which is the way things really are. But certainty and truth are entirely different conditions. We can be completely certain and altogether mistaken at the same time. In fact, we often are. So, for example, we take a wrong turn on the highway, and later we say, “I was *sure* that was the right exit.” We send someone a birthday card in March, only to find out that their birthday was in February. But we *thought* it was in March.

That sort of thing happens all the time. We routinely believe things that turn out not to be true, and we’re more inclined to do that, the more we want something to be true. Optimism, then, turns out to be just a form of motivated belief – telling ourselves something will be the case, simply because we want it to be.

That seems like a dangerous way to live, setting ourselves up for lots of disappointment. We rightly hope for all sorts of good things, where hope means that we want them to be true, and there’s a decent chance they could be true. But hope carries the understanding that we don’t know how something will turn out. Hope acknowledges the uncertainty that optimism sweeps under the rug and tries to ignore. Hope may be disappointed when things don’t turn out the way we want them to, but hope will not be surprised, because it knew that was a possibility all along.

So hope is not the same thing as optimism. And what sustains hope for Christians is faith.

The New Testament letter to the Hebrews says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of

things not seen.” Now faith is not quite the same thing as hope, and neither is it just another word for optimism. Christian faith is about trust in a *person*, not mere confidence that some particular wish will come true. Christians have faith in God, which means we believe that God is faithful, worthy of our confidence and trust.

Here again, trust involves an element of uncertainty, doesn't it? It's at least conceivable that God might not be faithful. It's even possible that there is no God, for that matter. Faith fully acknowledges that possibility. That's why we call it “faith.” But we trust in God because we have good reasons to believe that God is real, and God is faithful. Our own experience and the testimony of countless generations tells us so.

Whenever we trust someone – God or any human being –there's at least a possibility that he or she might let us down. We don't believe God *will* let us down, just as we don't think another person we know who loves us will let us down. We trust God in something like the way a paratrooper trusts his parachute. It's possible that the chute might fail, and that would be a matter of life and death. But experience with parachutes and trust in the people who pack them give the paratrooper confidence to jump out of the airplane and believe he'll land safely on the ground.

The Bible says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for – not in the sense that every specific thing we hope for will turn out to be true, but in the broader and deeper and infinitely more important sense that the One who is behind all things is faithful, and in the end, all that truly matters will turn out well.

That kind of faith makes it possible to live with a confidence that's far more reliable than mere optimism. People who have faith in God can live in hope because, as somebody said in our Tuesday morning men's group, it's as if faith reaches down and lifts up hope. Many of the things we hope for will come to pass, and some of them will not. We may be disappointed sometimes, but we will not lose heart, because our faith lies not in ourselves alone, or in luck or circumstance or any particular outcome in this life, but in the God who watches over all of life, and holds us with a love that will not let us go.

Faith in God strengthens us to hope for good things, and motivates us to work to see that good things will happen. But even the bad things that happen will not defeat us. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, we can be confident even in our sufferings, "knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

So it really doesn't matter whether our personality tends to be sunny or cloudy. Either way, we can build our whole life on a foundation that is vastly surer and stronger than mere optimism or pessimism. We can build our life on faith and hope, which are grounded in God our Creator. And there is no firmer foundation in all the world.



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