

April 3, 2022 - Pessimism

James 1:2-4

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3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything



Laid At His Feet

A Lenten Study

Can we let go of the things that we love that hold us back?

Pessimism

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Special Music:

"Pessimist" Julia Michaels

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcQbUFR8v00>

Changing Perspectives

Martha had a new hobby. Photography. She had needed an additional elective course for her bachelor's degree in biology and her faculty advisor had encouraged her to find something that could serve to enhance her appreciation for her studies as well as scratch a possible creative itch. After going through the list of possible electives, she had settled on photography and treated herself to a new camera for the course. The instructor was encouraging and let her know that she had a great eye for composition. She learned about technique, lighting, composition, contrast, focus, aperture settings, camera speed, color, and so many ways that a camera could be used to record wildlife and landscapes. She was hooked. Martha was so looking forward to her final project of ten images that would put in the school gallery at the completion of her course. Her plan was to spend a weekend camping specifically to capture images of wildlife.

Beth was in the same photography class. She, too, had discovered a love for creating images with a camera, but seemed to enjoy more modern and urban subjects. She would photograph old buildings, people sitting on their porches, streetlights, and interesting architecture. Beth was also looking forward to her final project only she had chosen to spend a weekend in a small town upstate and attempt to capture images that would define that town and the people within that environment.

When the time came to actually begin the projects, the instructor passed out 3X5 cards to everyone in the class and then asked each student to write down

a brief description of their project. He then collected all the cards, shuffled them and passed them out randomly back to the class. After all the cards had been passed back out, the instructor informed the class that what was written on the card they had received would be their final project, not the one that they were planning on. Everyone in the class was upset but knew that arguing with their instructor would do no good and might negatively impact their grade.

Martha and Beth had received each other's cards. Martha began to rethink her project and how to approach the new subject matter with the same intensity that she would have brought to her images of wildlife. Beth, on the other hand, was despondent. She hated camping. She hated being out in the woods. She knew there was no way that she could capture the subject matter in a way that would make it interesting. She probably wouldn't even see an animal and the thought of spending time in the woods made her cringe. She was almost in tears when she left the classroom.

On the weekend set aside for their projects, Martha stayed in a little bed and breakfast in the town where she was shooting. She wanted to get a feel for the town and the people there. She introduced herself to the owner of the little market downtown and told her about the project she was working on. The news spread fast and soon Martha was busy capturing the essence of the town with the help of the locals, who were more than glad to help. The images were stunning, especially the last shot where she captured an image of the local pastor racking leaves in front of his church at sunset, the brilliant colors of the sun as it set

behind the steeple. Martha could hardly believe how well the project had turned out.

Beth, on the other hand, hated every minute of being in the woods. She didn't like the bugs. Her shoes got muddy. She didn't bring enough food or water. She didn't even bring a tent and slept in her car which made her legs and neck cramp, and her back stiff. All she wanted to do was go home. Only two of her images were in focus. One was a dead bird crawling with insects and the other was a flat gray rock. Beth didn't even stay the whole weekend. She was miserable and extremely angry with her instructor for forcing her into this situation.

Martha had seen her change in projects as an opportunity to stretch her skills and enter into a new paradigm with her camera; to bring her vision to something encompassing more than just the wildlife that she loved. She embraced the challenge and discovered that she was able to provide insight beyond her specialization.

Beth, on the other hand, chose to focus on all the things that were working against her. She saw the project as a punishment rather than an opportunity and the results were obvious in her work. Perhaps if she had taken time to watch the sun creating shadows in the trees, or birds passing overhead, things might have been different. She chose to embrace the ugliness and uselessness of the assignment rather than envision the possibilities. She set her mind on failure, and she achieved it.

If we choose to make failure our target, we will probably hit the bulls eye every time.

The image that you see in today's graphic is one that I captured almost a decade ago. The building is part of the abandoned and desolate Swift Armor Meat Packing Plant just to the north of downtown Fort Worth. The plant was functional for 60 years before it closed in 1962. It slowly deteriorated over the decades and today, only a few buildings remain. But for some people, old architecture can bring new vision. The campus of this abandoned facility has been used as a setting for movies and television shows. The administrative building was renovated and became a Spaghetti Warehouse for several years. It's not so much about one person's trash being another person's treasure. It's more about perception, seeing beyond decay.

Some people look at things that are broken or worn out and think, "This is useless. Just get rid of it." Other people look at the very same thing and think, "Gee, I can use that. I can clean it up, fix it, paint it, and make it shine." I just happen to be one of those people that look at that old train station off Dickenson and think, "I just love that architecture. That building needs to be saved. If I had the money, I'd fix it up and turn it into a restaurant or office space. It is just too wonderful to let it die a slow death. There is a rich history there that needs to be preserved."

I know, you probably think I'm a silly optimist. And you would be correct in thinking that. I am. But I want to tell you, it is the silly optimists of this world that see beyond the decay and work to make it better. The pessimist seldom

accomplishes anything worthwhile. They choose to look at the ugly rather than envision the potential wonder of things. When we focus on the decay rather than the vision, it eats into our soul and gives us permission to walk away and let the vision die. We forget that at one time, the object, building, vehicle, whatever, was used by people. People with hopes, dreams, and passions. And in many cases, that memory is all that is left, and we choose to let the memory die because it is too expensive, too time-consuming, too far gone to try and revive it.

I am fascinated with craftsmen who can restore things, make them new and useful again. I love it when something old is given new life. It's like it was never neglected to begin with. But it takes time, skill, craftsmanship, resources, and vision to bring those old things back to life. I told you how I rebuilt my dad's Lambretta scooter. What a thrill it was the first time that engine turned over. What a sense of accomplishment to bring life back into something that everyone else thought was dead, useless, and taking up space.

Too often we are afraid of the work. Afraid of the investment. Afraid of the time that it will take. Afraid that we are not going to be up to the task; that we don't have the skills needed. Sometimes we think people will laugh at us for thinking there is value where they see only junk.

People's lives are like that. We will sit in judgment and condemnation thinking that they are too far gone; that they are just taking up space; that they are breathing someone else's air. We believe that they had their chance and blew it so, why should anyone bother to help them. Why spend good money and waste our valuable time on a life that we find little value in. Surely God can't expect for

us to use our valuable resources to lift and care for people who care so little about themselves and the rest of the world. What would be the point? Shouldn't we spend our resources helping people that we think might have a better chance of bringing some good into this world?

Let's read our scripture from James again as we consider this notion of pessimism and how it relates to ourselves and others.

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James 1:2-4

Normally, when we hear these words from James, we think about the trials that we are facing, and attempt to correct our attitude to understand that trials can produce positive results and growth in our lives.

That's the key to this passage. Our perception of our situation greatly changes the way that it will affect us, and how we can use it to encourage growth towards a closer dependency and relationship with Jesus Christ. We look at what is perceived as a difficult situation and find joy, not in the decay and rust of neglect, but in the possibility and the vision of something better.

I watched a video the other day about a man who had purchased an old child's push scooter which was made in the 1940s. It was pretty badly beat up. It had sat out in the weather, the rubber was bad, most of the paint had been replaced by rust. The wheels hardly turned and the brake (yes, it had a spring foot brake) was rusted and rotted. The video then showed how the man deconstructed the scooter into its sundry parts and then began the process of removing the rust and what was left of the paint. He carefully cleaned every part and those parts that he could not salvage he replaced. He repainted the scooter powder blue, installed new rubber surfaces for the brake system and added new tires. Then he reassembled the scooter and added new handlebar grips. The scooter looked like it had just come off the showroom floor. And it wasn't just cosmetic. Every part of the scooter was in original, factory, perfect working order.

Can we envision the same thing when we see people? Can we look beyond their brokenness and see what God intends for them to be? Or are we stuck in a mode where it looks like too much work, and we want to just throw them away?

Both Christians and non-Christians can become broken. Non-Christians don't usually know how to find joy in their trials. Christians can let the trials overcome them as they feel guilt, defeat, worthlessness, and pain. Either way, once these individuals are broken, we often allow them to stand neglected and alone in the elements. When they find themselves in the darkest part of their lives, they see the world through sunglasses tinted with pessimism. They believe that things will not get better simply because they can't get better. The world has

thrown them away and they truly believe that because of their failures, they are doomed to live their lives on the streets or in dumpsters.

It is a horrible cycle to watch. We often feel helpless. Our logic tells us that if we help them, there is the possibility that we may be pulled right into that same abyss.

But here's the thing about the abyss. We can close our eyes and let the darkness of pessimism overcome us, wallow in the gutter, and even trick ourselves into believing that we deserve to be there. Or... or we can open our eyes and see that the world continues to turn; that it is full of wonder and color; that the possibility of joy exists.

If we are on the outside of the abyss and looking in, we can be a part of the wonder that helps remove the tinted glasses of pessimism from those who seem to be stuck there. God gives us all the ability to do that. The Spirit of God working through us can bring light to even the darkest perspective. And for those who are struck, being able to remove those glasses and see the wonders of God's creation is the first step towards moving away from that abyss.

I also want to share with you that there are those among us who maintain their optimism in the abyss. That is what James is attempting to share with us. They see their presence there as an opportunity to help show others the path back from the obscurity of nothingness. Our greatest example of this is Jesus. Jesus lived on the road. He had no home. He had no bed. He walked everywhere he went. He was surrounded by negativity. Even his own disciples had a hard

time believing him most of the time. In Luke 9:58, Jesus says, **“Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”**

Jesus could have had a palace, or at least a consistent bed to sleep in. But instead, he chose to climb into the abyss with us, where pessimism ruled, and darkness prevailed. He knew that the only way to show us the way out, was to get right in there with us. He came to show us that we do not have to live our lives in the darkness of pessimism, but that we can open our eyes and see God’s wonders. That we really don’t have to worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will take care of itself. He was so confident in his trust of God’s protection and provision, he allowed a known thief to carry what little money his entourage had with them. He knew that Judas was “borrowing” from the common purse, but Jesus didn’t change things up.

So many of us live our lives worrying that we will wind up homeless that we forget that Jesus actually preferred living life that way. He would break bread with the lowest of the low, the outcasts, the disenfranchised, the pessimists of this world. He welcomed the thieves, adulterers, prostitutes, tax collectors, skeptics, zealots, abusers, and miscreants to His table and by doing so was able to show them a way into a new light where pessimism was no longer inevitable.

When we think back to our story today about Martha and Beth, where do we see ourselves. Are we like Martha, embracing the opportunities of an unexpected life? Or are we like Beth, giving up before we even get started? Maybe we sit somewhere in the middle, living on optimism with a healthy dose of pessimism thrown in. Are we worried about tomorrow or are we living for the

moment? Are we comfortable enough in our relationship with our savior that we aren't concerned about stepping into the abyss to help someone out? Or are we frightened that we might be swallowed up by it and become a part of that dark universe?

I had a friend once who took a trip. He did no planning. He was a photographer and at the time, one of the bus lines was offering weekly passes. For a certain fare, you could get on a bus and go anywhere you liked, getting off where you found something interesting, getting back on another bus when you were ready to go to the next place. My friend figured he would just travel around the country for a couple of weeks gathering images of the people he encountered. He bought two weeks' worth of unlimited travel. He lasted four days and came home. The constant pressure of finding a bus, finding places to eat, constantly checking his watch and the bus schedule was just more than he wanted to deal with. He was so stressed out. He had a few images to show for his time on the road, but it wasn't really worth the price he paid with his dignity and stress. This is a very hard thing for humans to do.

Have you ever in your life just gone somewhere with no planning? Have you ever taken a couple of weeks off and gone to the bus or train station, or maybe an airport and just gone somewhere that you have never been? It is something more common to young people than to those of us who have aged a little. It is so adventurous of us when we think about backpacking across Europe. We pretend its wisdom that keeps us from doing it, but if we are truly honest with ourselves, we just don't want the stress. And Jesus did it for three years. He

helped a lot of people on the way, and he managed to tick off an even greater number of people. He paid the ultimate price for his ministry to us.

This week, I want you to think about your perception of life. Do you feel that you can maintain an optimistic attitude even when surrounded by pessimism? Perhaps you prefer being pessimistic, but is that a choice made through your understanding of Christ and his control in your life? Can you lay your pessimism at the feet of Jesus and not pick it up again when you walk out the door? That's the real question, isn't it? Are we willing to give Christ that much control in our lives? There is joy in doing that. And the joy that we receive far outweighs any pleasure that we might receive from hanging onto our pessimism and worry.

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We simply cannot know the joy that James is talking about unless we are willing to give our pessimism over to Jesus and let Him transform it into the joy of optimism that outshines all our trials. I pray that we can all sacrifice our pessimism at the foot of the cross.

God bless you all,

AMEN

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