

N U R T U R E
F A I T H
with
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The Trouble with Pessimists

READ: Mark 9:23 (Common English Bible)

“At that the boy’s father cried out, ‘I have faith; help my lack of faith.’”

REFLECT:

Here is a remarkable story of a man with remarkable candor and honesty before Jesus, “I have faith; help my lack of faith.” The man has faith but that faith seems to be running low like a car’s gas tank that is not quite empty but requiring a stop at a gas station nonetheless. The man’s son is ill. He has tried every avenue of hope, sought everyone for help, including Jesus’ disciples. No one has been able to do anything for the boy. The boy remains with his illness. Calling from a crowd that had gathered around Jesus, the man asks Jesus, “If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!” (Mark 9: 22b CEB) It is a plea that shows evidence of life’s failures and frustrations. Repeated disappointments in securing healing for his son has sapped the man’s reserve of faith, of his capacity to hold onto hope.

As faith for this man wanes, nearly being doused by negative experiences, pessimism grows; “If you can do anything...” What is clear in this biblical narrative is that when faith diminishes, a void isn’t what remains. As faith is depleted, pessimism enlarges to fill the space. Simply, a person either lives with a narrative that with God all things are possible or they question the existence and activity of God. Life is lived with faith or with pessimism – or something between the two. This man is moving from the former to the latter. The concern for this man is that pessimism is growing rapidly as faith is withering. Pessimists are not people who don’t believe. They are people who believe in the wrong thing. The denial of God and God’s capacity to change our lives is every bit a belief structure.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about this story is that the man recognizes within himself the withering of faith and the flourishing of pessimism, “Help my lack of faith.” He wants to turn things around in his belief narrative. Yet, he can’t do it alone. When personal faith has reached its limits, the man throws himself on the grace of God. The man asks God to supply what the man cannot, a faith that once again expands measure upon measure until pessimism is choked-out. He is unwilling to concede to the growth of pessimism.

This man becomes our example. Repeated disappointments and difficulties can culminate in the unfortunate experience of believing in the wrong thing; of believing that life has no purpose and that we are victims of circumstance, some of it good and some that results in pain and loss. This remarkable story is a call to not settle when life disappoints. There is pain and failure and brokenness enough for all people to experience from time to time. But God remains God. The man in this story, from Mark’s Gospel, grabs hold of whatever faith he has that remains and clings to God, trusting that it will be enough. And it is.

