

1 **Optimism and Your Brain**

- Can it be a disorder?

2 **Introduction**

- In writing to the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul says something that is rather puzzling. He says, we do not lose heart (2 Cor 4:1 NIV).
- Why this is perhaps so puzzling is because of the context. Paul had been experiencing all kinds of trouble, difficulties, and set backs.
- We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor 4:8–9 NIV)

3 **Optimism**

- Never felt better!
- So then, when someone is overly optimistic we all have a tendency to look at that person as being a little strange — especially when everything around them seems to suggest otherwise.

4 **Research**

- In a study published in the October 2011 issue of Nature Neuroscience, researchers at the Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging at University College London presented evidence that people who are naturally optimistic learn only from information that reinforces that rosy outlook.

5 **Optimism**

- This perhaps applies to Apostle Paul and why he lumped all his problems into the category of light and momentary troubles (2 Cor 4:17a NIV), which are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (2 Cor 4:17b NIV).
- That "eternal glory that far outweighs them all" outcome was so bright that Paul could disregard his present troubles as indicative of anything about the future.
- Therefore, people may look at Paul as clearly a troubled man!
- In fact, the people at Wellcome Trust Centre may have loved to have had him as a subject in their research.

6 **Neuroscience Research**

- The study actually suggests that many of us are hardwired for optimism as well.
- "Our findings suggest that this human propensity toward optimism is facilitated by the brain's failure to code errors in estimation when those call for pessimistic updates," the study authors wrote.
- Some reporters have shorthanded this finding to describe optimism as a "brain defect."

7 **Neuroscience Research**

- Brain defect or not, optimism seems necessary for personal progress.
- We have to be able to imagine better realities. “
- Without optimism,” wrote Tali Sharot, one of the researchers, “our ancestors might never have ventured far from their tribes and we might all be cave dwellers, still huddled together and dreaming of light and heat.”

8 Neuroscience Research

- The study suggests that while there are individual exceptions, as a human race we are tilted toward optimism and that the evolutionary process selected optimism because on balance, positive expectations increase our odds for survival.

9 Neuroscience Research

- Optimism can be a problem, of course.
- It can cause us to not take prudent precautions, skip health checkups, not apply sunscreen, put too much confidence in investment prospectuses and take other risks we later regret.
- There are definitely situations where we'd be a lot better off if we'd approached them expecting -- and preparing for -- the worst.

10 Neuroscience Research

- Nonetheless, says Sharot,
 - “on the whole we're probably better off with an optimism bias, as long as we use the awareness of that bias to strike a balance -- plan on staying healthy but get medical insurance anyway.”

11 Summary

- The point of the research is that optimism is not always a good thing.
- It can be and in many cases is irrational because we're not properly looking at all the facts the way we should.
- However, optimism is not always bad because sometimes we need to take risks and not let fear always control us.

12 Hope

- Optimism, particularly when it's tied to ultimate outcomes, is often a synonym for hope, which is a word with strong religious dimensions.
- Biblically speaking, hope, along with faith and love, make up the “big three” virtues of Christianity.

13 Hope

- As the Apostle Paul says when everything seems to fail us and when all we see is through a “poor reflection,” our faith, hope, and love are our critical essentials.
- In other words, when we look for the qualities that come from the experience of the believing life together, these three things are the solid footing on which we stand—even if everything else seems like a blur.

14 Irrational Hope?

- However, we must ask ourselves, when everything is going crazy in our lives and disappointments are everywhere, is it wrong or irrational to be optimistic?
- Is it wrong to focus on the unseen (inheritance) when everything that is seen (here and now) is falling apart?
- Or was the Apostle Paul engaged in wishful thinking when he said, we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. (2 Cor 5:1 NIV)

15 The End-View

- Christianity itself presents us with a view of life as seen from the end.
- While we can't see this ourselves, we trust that God can, and thus we base our hope on that "eternal perspective."
- This end-view is of supreme importance to a life of faith because without it, we have nothing to look forward to beyond whatever we ourselves can make of this life.

16 The End-View

- If we limit ourselves to just the evidence of this existence, where right seems to win only some of the time, we can make a case for a pessimistic outlook and even for hopelessness.
- This is not to say, prayer doesn't change things or God's promises to take care of us are unfounded.
- But it does say, our real hope is in the unseen and is waiting for us.

17 Optimism & Hope

- Optimism and hope are radically different attitudes.
- Optimism is the expectation that things -- the weather, human relationships, the economy, the political situation, and so on -- will get better.
- Hope is the trust that God will fulfill His promises to us in a way that leads us to true joy and peace.
- The optimist speaks about concrete changes in the future.
- But person of hope lives in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands.

18 Firstfruits

- So then hope for a better future when combined with faith in God is not a brain defect.
- Why? Because God is faithful and has the power to fulfill His promises.
- This is why the resurrection of Jesus is so important. It was foretold in the Old Testament, Jesus predicted it would happen, and it did.
- In fact, Jesus' resurrection is called "Firstfruits" because it is the first of many resurrections—including ours, which give us hope.

19 Firstfruits

- Not only is the resurrection of Jesus the foundation for our hope in God, but so is the Holy Spirit.
- Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. (Rom 8:23–24 NIV)

20 Firstfruits

- In 2 Corinthians 4, the Apostle Paul says the same thing about the Spirit and our future hope.
- Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling . . . we groan and are burdened . . . so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (2 Cor 5:2, 4 NIV)
- Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. (2 Cor 5:5 NIV)

21 The Comforter

- According to John 14:26, the Holy Spirit is our Comforter.
- Several of the translations of this passage refer to the Holy Spirit as our Counselor, Helper, Intercessor, Advocate, Strengthener, and one who Stands-by.
- In other words, the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives, both individually and corporately, is for our strengthening, encouragement, comforting, which gives us hope. [See 1 Cor. 14:3]

22 The God of all Comfort

- In fact, the Bible also says, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who (through the Spirit) comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Cor 1:3–4 NIV)
- Interesting enough, when Paul was going through a rough time in his ministry, he says, But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us . . . (2 Cor 7:6 NIV).

23 God's Mercy

- This is why Paul says as well, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. (2 Cor 4:1 NIV)
- So then, what encourages Paul and his associates not to give up?
- God's mercy and comfort.
- We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor 4:8–9 NIV)

24 God's Mercy

- No, in all these things (hardships) we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Rom 8:37 NIV)

- This is why all of us with a sincere faith can say, For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38–39 NIV)

25 **Our Hope**

- What give us hope and optimism about the future is not irrational thinking.
- Neither is it do some sort of brain defect.
- Our hope is fully established in the faithfulness, power and goodness of God.
- The resurrection of Christ, the activity of God's Holy Spirit, and the mercy and comfort we receive from God Himself.
- These all give us reason to have hope regardless of what is going on in our lives.

26 **Conclusion**

- Christian hope is validated by God's promises and people's personal testimonies.
- In others words, what God has done for others he can do for you.
- So then, no matter what we're going through there is always hope.
- As the writer of Hebrews tell us, do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. (Heb 10:35 NIV)