

Joy In Our Time?

The Best of Times; The Worst of Times

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Charles Dickens' book *A Tale of Two Cities* is considered a classic of English literature. It contains an opening sentence that, all by itself, is considered as one that any author should attempt to emulate by grabbing one's attention and motivating them to read on. That sentence is, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

The story takes place in 1789 in two cities, Paris and London. Paris was in the chaotic grip of the French Revolution and the continuous use of the guillotine to eliminate enemies of the regime in power. At the same time in London, they were getting over the shock of losing the colonies in the United States, and nationally, things were beginning to look up. The reality was that the English were at the beginning of what became a long period of national expansion. It was the best of times there. The attitude was positive and hopeful for the majority. Things were really looking up.

I began to think on these things yesterday in relation to the times that we are now living in, when another arresting opening sentence of a different kind of book came to mind. It is the first sentence of M. Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*. That sentence is, "Life is difficult." Peck was not making a statement about any particular time in history. He was making a general and true statement that life is difficult *regardless* of when one lives. It is a challenge for one to make the best use that one can of the time that is given him.

Later on, yesterday evening, I thought of these both in relation to joy. That's one of the fruits of God's spirit—in fact, the second one listed, preceded only by love, and love is the greatest of all virtues, God says. Listed immediately after love in that listing makes joy seem to be pretty important. I discovered that the Greek word underlying the English "joy" means "cheerfulness; calm delight." That word "calm" is important because joy does not mean anything approaching either giddiness, hilarity or mirth. It has nothing to do with thinking that something is funny or humorous. In fact, Solomon, in Ecclesiastes, asks, "What does mirth accomplish?" and then he just breaks it right off there, leaving the implication that it accomplishes nothing.

William Barclay, the Presbyterian commentator, says that biblical joy is not a quality that springs from earthly things. The *Interpreters Bible Commentary* says this joy is inseparable from godly love and impossible without it. It also said that both the words "grace" and "joy" spring from exactly the same root. It goes on to explain that this joy springs from a life generously lived, kind, and full of good, even when the person is persecuted. It goes on further to say, "Every book in the New Testament is instinct with the capacity to rejoice in the midst of the worst of circumstances."

Are we living in such a time? Are we moving toward such a time?

The *New Testament Commentary* says that Paul, no fewer than seven times, expressed in a combination of different words a statement that he was "sorrowful and yet always rejoicing," as though the two may go together. Peter spoke of "joy unspeakable and full of glory."

I was driven to reflect on this because of the times and my attitude toward what is happening, especially in the United States. I do not know about you, but I was reared to love this country and the

general way that people live their lives in this country. It was not just at home, but in school, too, and the way history was taught to me and the other kids as we matriculated.

I do not know what the practices in your school district were like, but I started in public elementary school in 1938. This was during the depths of the Depression, and I went through elementary school through the Second World War. Through elementary school, every morning began with saluting the flag, followed by saying the Lord's Prayer in unison. Then the teacher read through a brief number of scriptures. This process did not end all through elementary school until I got to high school. Even in high school, the saluting of the flag continued right on.

Schooling in American democracy continued every year, but each year at a more intensive level. I admit that it was my favorite subject. I do not know that I ever thought of this nation as being perfect, but it did always fill me with hope regarding it. In fact, my favorite of all history classes was reserved for our senior year. It was titled "Problems of Democracy." So when I graduated from high school, I knew there were problems, but I never dreamed the problems would be as many, as intense, or what was the major cause. I never dreamed it would be a lack of a relationship with God, contact with Satan the devil, filled with people who are self-centered, and all of the resulting immorality. I hate what is happening, and I hate the sorrow that it makes me feel. I hate to see from God's word that it's not going to change as long as things are as they are now constituted.

I've had to do a major adjustment to my attitude because I have been looking at things too earthly. Why should that have an impact? Well, remember what William Barclay said. This joy arises from nothing earthly, and brethren, there is nothing earthly that gives rise to any sense of joyous well-being.

This commentary came to a head last evening after reading the latest GEAB report. It was sent to me by Mr. Smith out there in Louisburg. It that is an economic report published in Europe, perhaps in Switzerland. It was very dire. They forecast that around the summer of 2011, by their estimation, the disaster we are now in will be so clear *everybody* will recognize it and see that there is no turning from it.

This did not bring me to repentance, because that had already occurred. But it did much to confirm that I am on the right track in my thinking. And so I pass on to you that we, each and every one of us, must be about our Father's business, because that is absolutely the only hope and activity of hope that there is.

Living is difficult, and these are leading to the worst of times because of what we see beginning. But this is also the best of times, because the Kingdom of God—our country—is about to ascend.