

Joy in the Morning

By Dr. Noel Weeks

*“In the evening, weeping comes to stay,
But for the morning, a shout of joy.” (Psalm 30:5).*

The Bible loves contrasts and this is a vivid one, but if we are to feel the full force of contrasts we have to know and feel the reality of each pole.

WEEPING

If we read the Bible carefully, not dashing over the sad bits to reach the good bits, we will find it full of human sorrow: the anguish of Hagar as she leaves her son to die (Gen. 21:14-16); the sorrow of Jacob, believing that his son was dead (Gen. 37:34,35); the bitterness of bereaved Naomi (Ruth 1:20); the anger of hopes betrayed for the Shunamite (2 Kings 2:18-28); the frustration of Jeremiah in knowing that if Judah would just take seriously the death certificate he brought before the time, then the death could be averted; the wails of the desperate who came to Jesus; the despair of the shattered disciples after the crucifixion.

The reality of sorrow in Scripture contrasts with our age’s refusal to face it. Like death it is best done out of sight, quickly, and then not mentioned again. Weeping with those who weep is commanded in Scripture (Rom. 12:15), but is poorly practiced in the church. It is like the crippled child in the congregation, whose presence contradicts the preacher’s claim to be a great healer. So our age believes that it has brought happiness and prosperity such as the world never saw before. The church conforms to the world by making its great advertisement to be that it brings prosperity and joy. Let us not parade the negative evidence. Let the drum roll of the upbeat song drown out any verses that echo the pain of this life. Thereby our age increases grief by leaving those who grieve to grieve alone. We add the

sorrow of loneliness in loss, to the sorrow of loss. For just as joy shared is joy doubled, so grief shared is grief halved.

JOY IN THE MORNING

Why is it in the morning that joy comes? Is it just a metaphor of time; a way of saying that there will be a certain time of grief but after that rejoicing? I think it is more than that because of the way “morning” is used, especially in the Psalter. Psalm 49:14, in the context of the judgement that will come upon unbelievers, speaks of the righteous ruling over them “in the morning”. In addition, Psalm 46:5 sees the morning as the time when God’s help and salvation comes for his people. The word “morning” is not used in Psalm 17:15 but is surely suggested by the idea of awaking. It is then that David will see God.

These expressions indicate that the morning in question is a special morning: the morning of the day of God; the morning when the sun of righteousness rises (Mal. 4:2); the day the ransomed of the Lord come with joyful shouting (Is. 51:11).

THE FUTURE ASPECT OF JOY

Joy in Scripture has a very strong connection to the future. It is because the unbeliever has no future that it is so important for him to have joy here. The joy here is of course very superficial and contrived. Why do sit-coms dominate evening TV? Why is binge drinking a weekend entertainment for many? These and many similar questions must be answered in terms of the lack of any anticipation in the life of unbelievers. The shadow of the old peoples’ home or the morgue tells them they had better get their small ration of “joy” now.

Joy must be connected to the future for the believer because it

was so for Jesus. It was the future joy which inspired Jesus to endure the cross (Heb. 12:2). There is a tendency for the future aspect of Christian joy to be derided because it so cuts across the understanding in our culture of what makes life worth living. I will deal with that subsequently. Here I merely want to stress that any deriding of future joy must be an attack upon Jesus. A lampooning of “Pie in the sky when you die” is a mocking of what sustained him.

THE PRESENT ENJOYMENT OF FUTURE JOY

There is a part of Scripture teaching, which reminds us to endure here in the anticipation of what we shall receive. The church in Philadelphia was urged to remain faithful in the now in view of Christ’s speedy coming so as not to lose the crown. Yet there is another aspect which shows us that we can enjoy here what we might properly think of as the future blessing. Jesus holds out eating with him as a present reality to the Laodiceans (Rev. 3:20). That is because what will appear in its fullness in the age to come is already intruding into this present age. Jesus said “If I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Luke 11:20). That power that shall be fully realised and visible when Jesus returns is already at work in the world.

Just as we experience now what belongs to the future, so the Old Testament saints enjoyed what properly belonged to a latter age. In that passage in Hebrews 6:4-5 where the writer is describing the great blessings bestowed upon Old Testament Israel, the writer describes it as “having tasted...the powers of the age to come.” While the full manifestation of the divine power was not to be until later, Israel was already, particularly in the journey through the wilderness, to which these verses allude, experiencing the great mercies of God. So we have anticipatory experiences of what is to come. Since it is not the full reality it does not obliterate our longing for the future reality, rather it whets our appetite for it.

BLESSING AS ANTICIPATIONS OF THE CONSUMMATION

In Matthew 24 Jesus does something which to us seems strange. He mingles together the coming destruction of Jerusalem with the final judgement. All sorts of theories of the nature of the end are dependent upon taking now this, now that, part of the description as referring specifically to one or the other. My concern is not those many theories but rather the phenomenon of the mixing. We should be ready for it, even before we come to the New Testament, because the book of Daniel does something quite similar. The events of the Seleucid domination of Judah, and the Maccabean War, are mingled with pictures of the end. We find similar things in many other prophecies.

Behind this must lie a particular view of history, namely that there is a close relationship or similarity between the final act of judgement and redemption, and provisional acts of God during history. Every coming of Jesus in judgement or blessing is an illustration, on a small scale, of the final coming. I suspect that it is this perspective which lies behind verses that perplex us, such as Matthew 16:28. Jesus there says that some then living would see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom before they died. What Jesus describes there is not to be taken as exclusively a reference to his final coming. It applies also to those great post-resurrection blessings when the reality of the presence and power of God descended upon God’s people.

In other words what I wrote earlier, on an intrusion of the blessings of the future age, is a part of a larger pattern. We might say that heavenly blessings are not a wholly different sort of blessing as contrasted to present Christian blessings; they are rather different in magnitude. Jesus is the blessing in the present Jerusalem just as he will be in the new Jerusalem. Now we behold as in a mirror but then face to face.

CONSEQUENCES

1. *Mystical exercises are pagan*

When the issue of experiencing “joy” is raised, some people think that we mean a set of exercises which will induce a state in which the pains of this world can no longer be felt: what one might call a Christian form of self-hypnosis. Those things are pagan rubbish. What do the Scriptures reveal as the joys of the future state? They are being in the presence of God and his Son, and the worship that flows from that. Hence it follows that joy here will be greatest when we have glimpses and foretastes of that. That of course does not mean that private and individual seasons of devotion are wrong and will not be blessed. Rather what it means is the blessing received in those private seasons is not different in kind to the blessings received in corporate worship.

If the worship of the church does not exalt Jesus, then it is not Christian worship and a Christian has no business partaking in it. However assuming we are talking of Christian worship, it is very concerning to hear people depreciate such worship by comparison with their private exercises. Private exercises are not corporate and one prominent aspect of the future experience is that it is to be the most corporate of corporate experiences (Rev. 5:6-14). As the believer knows that the Father and the Son deserve the praise of all creation, so his joy is crowned when he is part of that creation encompassing song of praise. A small congregation is a pitifully minor anticipation of that great song but it is at least better than the song of the individual.

2. Please, No More Joyless Worship

If our joy here is an anticipation of future joy, then the closer we approximate to the future joy, the greater will be the joy. Since we have seen that the celebration of Jesus is described as the prominent aspect of the future experience, then we would expect that praise to be the prominent aspect of our joy here.

How then can Christians say that worship here is entirely horizontal, addressed to fellow men and not to God? Surely by the logic of Scripture that must mean that it is joyless worship. I am aware that this error has arisen out of reaction to a form of ornate liturgical worship where ceremony and coloured robes sought to hide the fact that they no longer believed the gospel. However surely the proper answer is the gospel and the praise of Jesus which it brings forth.

3. Christianity is Not Escapism

The accusation is sometimes made that our faith is a form of escape from the realities of life. How ridiculous! How opaque to the escapism which modern culture thrusts in our face! Why is high volume so crucial in modern music? Loud noise excites and the synthetic excitement of loud music is crucial for the popular escapism which attempts to temporarily blot out the realities of life. We could say the same about the use of light. It is not surprising that we see coming together that form of theology that tries to deny the reality of present suffering (prosperity gospel or healing gospel) with that form and volume of music which tries to create artificial excitement. Both belong to the escapism of contemporary culture.

Weeping is real in this age of darkness before the dawn of a new day. Yet even in this night there is compensating knowledge that the morning is coming. More than that there is the intrusion of glimpses of the future blessing into this night (Ps. 112:4).

It is sometimes the complaint of historians that histories, written from a modernist or progressivist perspective, treat as significant only those events that in some way foreshadow or lead to the culture of this present age. Yet surely it is natural to see what leads to where we are now as the important thing. Just as natural is it to see what anticipates and leads to the final triumph of Jesus as the most important and most significant. To the degree we as Christians do not have that perspective, so we will lose touch with what should give us joy and be forced to the world's futile escapism.

4. The Real and Living God

For the great, wondrous and miraculous future to intrude

into this age, God has to be present and active. I have written before in this magazine of the danger of treating God as an off-the-scene deity, who made the world long ago and at some very distant point in the future may do something, but for the moment he leaves it all to us. In this context the point to be made is that such an unreal god cannot bring the future into our present experience. That must lead to a joyless Christianity or a Christianity that relies on the same artificial devices as the world. If I may use theological jargon: Deism must lead to worldliness.

5. Church Joy and Private Joy

I quote, from the O.M.F. Pray for China booklet, the words of a Chinese pastor:

“We thought things could only get worse. But in 1976 Mao died and a month later Madame Mao and the infamous gang of four’ were arrested. God intervened! Now the churches are open again and are full to overflowing. It’s a miracle!”

Such events are what I am describing as anticipations, intrusions of the great event. God comes in provisional judgement to remove his enemies and in mercy to bless the church. On smaller or larger scale such events dot the history of the church and of the individual Christian. What we pray for in the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer are just such happenings. If our Lord has taught us to pray for them, surely we can anticipate them happening. Those who tell us that the age of revival is over and/or we must adjust our expectations to living in a post-Christian age, know neither Bible nor history nor do they sense the rumblings of approaching judgement and blessing in the chaos of the present age.

If you had lived through the repression of the church in China and the consequent pain to individual believers, surely what has happened would fill you with joy. Even if your pain was physical, surely the demonstration of God’s power would give you hope in his power and mercy.

In the Lord’s Prayer we pray for the coming of God’s kingdom and the meeting of our present personal needs. As we see the answer to those petitions and as we anticipate the even greater future answers, so our joy grows. Joy must be both a private and a corporate thing.

Dr Noel Weeks wrote this for Evangelical Action, and, despite its being longer than the usual AP article, it seems especially appropriate in the light of his recent death (8 March 2020).