

## A Babble About Joy

I know this is an odd way to begin speaking of joy, but recently, I began thinking of the state of people in hell. We know from the Bible that all men, once created, have eternal existence. All people experience resurrection, but not all to the same destiny. The eternal state is experienced either with God, in heaven, or without, in hell. Now, for people to exist eternally in hell must still require that the basic necessities of existence are continually met. For them to suffer eternally the punishments the Bible affirms are God's just judgments, their bodies, and their minds, must be durable so as not to fizzle into nonexistence under said punishments - not to be burned up in flame, not to dessicate for lack of water, nor to go quite insane for lack of company, for it appears that each must suffer alone.

For such people, God's love must, I guess, be shown forth in His justice. What I mean is that the punishment for each shall fit his or her guilt before God. Now, I am convinced that the primary offence of each is not believing in Christ.

*He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. John 3:18,19*

But I also reckon that there is a difference between "many stripes" and "few stripes" (Luke 12:47,48) and that those having received lesser light shall experience lesser punishment for unbelief. But perhaps we might all agree that no place or state in hell is to be preferred above another, but rather we should prefer salvation.

However, the reason I was even thinking of this topic had something to do with the realization that all men in hell are provided with the sustenance of existence. That they do not enjoy this existence is a given, yet they have what they "need". Clearly, then, their state lacks other qualities. We may enumerate some.

- The presence of God - without Whom they once hoped to do
- Any real comfort, physical or otherwise
- Any satisfaction
- Any hope of fulfillment
- Any hope of escape

Moreover, each has the certain knowledge that he or she deserves to be there, has earned it by acts and choices, and has no one else to blame. Sobering thought, that.

Still, what has all this to do with joy?

Well, for one thing, people in hell, we imagine, are not experiencing joy. The rich man spoken of in Luke 16 wanted some relief. He was answered but not accommodated. Then he had what appeared some concern for his brothers. Perhaps had his request been fulfilled and he had known that even one of his brothers had listened, he might have had a measure of peace, or even of joy, for one moment, feeling that something he had done there had some good outcome. But he was denied even this - of course we are assured that the brothers could heed the Scripture, else no messenger from the dead would have changed their choices.

But what can we say about joy?

- Well, Christian believers know a few things about joy.
- Joy ultimately comes from a relationship with God.
- Joy is often associated with our correct reckoning of truth.
- Joy and happiness are not the same thing.
- Joy is orthogonal to, or even in spite of, our circumstances.
- Joy is not about me.
- Joy, indeed, is related to submission.

Part of my musings proceeds from my experiences as a musician. I know of few things which compare to playing truly well. There is first the pleasure (or joy) which comes from accomplishment. That is, I say "first" because the taste of accomplishment comes well before the experience of true proficiency. One has to accomplish before one can be said to be accomplished. There is the pleasure of the recognition by others of the goodness of one's work. This is gratifying perhaps to the degree that recognition is tied to a real, truthful perception rather than a popularity issue or simple ignorance - recognition **can** feel hollow. There is the confidence that development by means of diligent practice provides certainty of a good result. But there is (and to me the best part) the hearing of one's own output that is pure and clear and by every measure the faithful rendering of the intention of the composer - music that leaves oneself in awe: "Did \*I\* just do that?" It is near to subtracting out the "I" while still allowing one the intimacy of being a part of it. And this is what I might call the real joy of performance.

Now, it has been obvious to me over the years that those musicians who do not (at least visibly) profess Christ nonetheless experience this feeling. It seems associated with the high degree of proficiency acquired by those who have sacrificed prolonged, consistent, diligent effort to their art. I make this out to be a matter of submission to excellence, of putting self below and behind the music. It is not altogether the same as submission to God, but the similarity is too strong to ignore. Perhaps it is in the category of doing good, as we know some unbelievers do in spite of unbelief. Last night (now a few years back), I heard the Dallas Symphony plus its chorus plus several other artists produce a Christmas special on TV. Some of the numbers were good Christian theology, but executed well and faithfully with remarkable musical unity by a group that must necessarily have been some mixture of believers and unbelievers. Yet the execution and the delivered message exceeded in effect the inferior deliveries of inferior music as we too frequently hear in today's genuinely Christian churches - and these churches sometimes are staffed by no mean musicians, but those with excellent training and skill.

In said churches, the words "worship" and "joy" seem often to be confused with "a loud noise such as I like" and senseless motion and repetition. Let alone the congregation, I do not think the musicians themselves experience joy as I describe above. And the lack, I think, proceeds from the difference between giving oneself to the excellence of art faithfully executed and displaying the skill (such as one may have) to gratify the ego. I don't say this motivation is even always conscious.

To extend the discussion beyond music, I observe that the musician who has through faithful and diligent development of skill is able to use that skill to submit himself to the composer's fondest wishes thereby experiences the best joy of his art. So, then, the spiritual application might be that those who through diligent application to the study of God's Word, becoming skillful in it, may submit themselves more completely to God's will, "performing" as it were a life with similar fidelity, and experiencing the more complete joy as attends.