

Vigorous Virtues

Have you ever heard a convention speaker, a Sunday School teacher, or for that matter a Presbyterian preacher – after, say, 20 long minutes of harangue – come to a perfectly good stopping place in his speech, but, just as you were breathing a sigh of relief that at last he was about to hush and you were about to be let loose – suddenly, like an athlete getting his second wind – the speaker would wind up again and ramble on for another 10 or more interminable minutes, while you twitched and turned in your seat and prayed that when he came to the next stopping place, surely he would (please, please) quit?

Of course you have had this experience, not only in listening to me and the Democrats, but also if you have listened to the Apostle Paul. For several times (5 to be exact) in the Book of Romans (at 11:36, 14:23, 15:13, 15:33, and 16:10), the Apostle Paul comes to a perfectly good end – only to pick right up and start out again on a brand new train of thought. Paul, like so many speakers and teachers and preachers before and after him, had the bad habit of not being able to let his audience go – he could always think of 9 or 10 more things they absolutely had to know. His theory in writing and preaching was – “once you’ve got ‘em, keep ‘em” – which reminds me that I have always had a sneaking suspicion the teenager named Euticus didn’t really fall asleep in that window during Paul’s sermon – the poor boy was just trying to escape the 2nd hour of the preaching and his foot slipped as he went out!

But seriously, some of the Apostle Paul’s best writing and speaking occurs precisely in these typical before-the-end endings, in which by a few well-chosen words he summarizes the thought or the spirit of the previous long passages.

St. Paul, writing to the 1st century Romans: “May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in your faith, that by the power of the Holy Spirit, your whole life and outlook may be radiant with hope.” (Phillips) … “May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in your faith, that by the power of the Holy Spirit, your whole life and outlook may be radiant with hope.” That is to say: according to Paul, no matter what the situation there is no such thing as a despairing saint. If we are full of despair, then according to Paul, there is something wrong with our Christianity – it’s out of order and our faith needs fixing. For true religion, says Paul, does not produce a pack of grumblers, hand-wringers, weepers and wailers and gnashers of teeth. Rather, when you meet a Christian, says Paul, you meet – not a hostile, negative, deflated

individual, but a positive person who enjoys life and who lives in peace with his fellows and never gives up. Never give up hope, come hell or high water. For "joy", and "peace" and "hope", these are the hallmarks of the Christian life.

"Joy, peace and hope" – "Dear God," we say, "wouldn't it be wonderful!" Wouldn't we like to live around people like this! And wouldn't we all like to be people like this ourselves! But ... alas and alack, as a matter of stark fact, some of us, in situations like ours, would settle for just an hour or two of peace and a small glimmer of hope somewhere along the way, and here and there, at least a modicum of joy. But as for saying our whole life as God's children should be all "joy" – that as Christians our days should be nothing but "peace" and our outlook should be ever radiant "hope" – that there should be no room, therefore, for morbidness, no room for gloom, no room for despair – why then, we want to say to the old Saint: Come off it, Paul. Be realistic, man – be practical – what you are saying is just so much sentimental eyewash – wishful thinking – human life can never be all sunlight and roses or moonlight and magnolias for anybody. It can't be all sweetness and light no matter how pious you are – who are you trying to kid, Paul? You're not being "radiant", ole boy, you're being ridiculous! What do you think we are? Smile button saints? With painted on grins? About the only way you could get Presbyterians to smile all the time – paint it on. But, we're not and don't want to be – plastic saints with painted on smiles – we're saints with problems, Paul. We have lots of frowns and lots of tears and a right to them too. We have enough to make us frown – enough to cause us grief. We get scared, Paul, and we get tired, and we get angry; we get hurt. And with good reason too. We worry about living and we worry about dying. In fact, there's not much we don't worry about – so don't talk to us, Paul, about a life where there's nothing but "joy and peace and radiant hope" – not in this world anyway – maybe in the world to come – maybe in glory – but most of us aren't sure of getting there. So, dear Paul, just let a fellow enjoy what little he can – let us just have a little peace now and then – mostly when the children are asleep and "you know who's" out of town – and let us see maybe one or two rays of hope every other day – but surely, Paul, that's about all we can look for in this life. You know, Paul, we must be a lot different from those 1st century Roman Christians you were writing to. I guess your letter is not for us late 20th century Americans after all.

But to this complaint of ours, I think Paul's rebuttal would be something short and cutting like this: "Nonsense, you latter day Saints," he would say, "it was no easier to be a Christian in

1st century Rome than it is today in 20th century Durham. There was plenty then to make us early Christians sad and mad and despondent as the devil wants us all to be..." And I think maybe Paul would be right in that; indeed, the people to whom he was writing then – they were not marble saints themselves, any more than we are plastic ones. They certainly had their problems: death and taxes ran high in 1st century Rome and their K.G.B., the secret police, were everywhere – besides those Roman Christians were themselves guilty of some horrendous sins – read the book and find out. Even some of the more straight-laced ones were conceited and quarrelsome, and they had some mean and hypocritical types among them too. Some were far too deep in debt and some drank far too much, and on and on and on. In short, they had their problems, and besides, the whole Empire was on the skids: corruption within and barbarians without. So surely, if Paul's prayer for "joy and peace and radiant hope" could be answered for at least some of these 1st century Christians, and I firmly believe it was, it can also be answered for some of us. Of course, to be perfectly honest, it will not be answered for all of us – for some of us, like some of them, will never take more than a few tiny sips of joy and some of us will never have more than a temporary peace and some of us will never possess more than an illusive hope. But some of us, surely some of us, can get and some of us can keep our religion and our life in such a state of repair as to make these old virtues present and even pertinent.

For – some of us will believe in – that is some of us will actually rely on "The God of hope" – as Paul calls the Almighty – as the source of our own hope. Trouble is, when we try to manufacture a little joy and a little peace and a little hope for ourselves, it is always just that: only a very little that we attain – for only God himself can "fill you", as Paul said, with these things.

You see, the Christian hope is not based on either the world situation, or on our own individual condition – not on our financial state or our health, etc.; it is based solely on God Himself. It is based on the "God of Hope" – which means on the God of Tomorrow. You and I are indeed caught in the time sequence, but not God; God is the God of tomorrow as well as today. Did you not know, God is already in the future; therefore, we should not fear what is coming for our Father in Heaven will be there – waiting for us – tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow – in blessing as in judgement. This is the basis of our hope. When we rely not just upon ourselves and others, both shaky, but upon the overarching providence of Almighty God, we are filled with a profound, unshakable hope. We even have hope to spare, and hope to share

with others – because it is not our own – it is of God Himself. Through the Lenten darkness of life, a light shining – beyond the terror of this cross, all it signifies of sin and death – an empty tomb and a new day coming – “It will be daybreak soon!”

We hear a voice saying, “I have called thee by name; thou art mine and so
“Fear not, for I am with thee – Be not dismayed for I am thy God – I will help thee; yea, I will strengthen thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.”

There is, as Paul said, joy and peace in believing. Try it and see. Indeed, how could a Christian believe in Jesus Christ, and not be filled with Christ’s joy and Christ’s peace? So may it be with us, today, tonight, and all the days to come.

“So may the God of hope fill us too with all joy and peace – so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, our whole life and outlook may be radiant with hope.” Amen.

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