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The French Revolution

The French Revolution began in 1789 and completely changed the political and social structure of France. Before the revolution, France was ruled by King Louis XVI under an absolute monarchy. Society was divided into three estates: the clergy, the nobility, and the common people. While the first two estates enjoyed wealth and privileges, the Third Estate carried heavy taxes and struggled with poverty, rising food prices, and unemployment. At the same time, France faced a serious financial crisis caused by costly wars and government spending.

Frustration among ordinary citizens grew rapidly. Inspired by Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Rousseau, many people began demanding equality, liberty, and a voice in government. In May 1789, Louis XVI called the Estates-General to address the economic crisis, but disagreements over voting led members of the Third Estate to form the National Assembly. They promised to create a constitution that would limit the king's power.

One of the most famous moments of the revolution came on July 14, 1789, when angry crowds stormed the Bastille prison in Paris. Although few prisoners were held there, the Bastille symbolized royal oppression, and its fall became a powerful sign of resistance against the monarchy. Soon afterward, revolutionary ideas spread across the country, and feudal privileges were abolished.

In 1791, France adopted a constitutional monarchy, but political tensions continued to rise. Many citizens no longer trusted the king, especially after he attempted to flee the country. Radical revolutionaries gained influence, and in 1792 the monarchy was abolished entirely. France was declared a republic, and King Louis XVI was executed by guillotine in 1793. His wife, Marie Antoinette, was executed later the same year.

The revolution then entered a violent phase known as the Reign of Terror, led by Maximilien Robespierre. Thousands of people accused of opposing the revolution were executed. Although the Terror aimed to protect the republic, it created fear and instability. Robespierre himself was eventually arrested and executed in 1794.

By the late 1790s, political chaos allowed Napoleon Bonaparte to rise to power. In 1799, he seized control of the government, effectively ending the revolution. Despite its violence, the French Revolution had a lasting impact on France and the world. It promoted ideas of democracy, equality, and human rights, inspiring future revolutions across Europe and beyond.