

Happiness Money Can't Buy

Letter to the Colossians

In 1985 Lyn and I flew for several hours in a light plane right up into the Highlands of Papua New Guinea into a very remote airfield carved out of the jungle. From there we joined a missionary couple that we knew and walked for two hours up river to a Christian village to meet some National Christians. The houses were made of bush materials. There was no furniture, apart from a few weaved mats on the floor. The only fruit in the house was one pawpaw which they generously gave to us and invited us to eat. By our standards these people had absolutely nothing, and yet they were some of the most generous and happiest people I have ever met.

I often asked myself why it is that some people in wealthy nations like Switzerland are so unhappy. It's one of the most beautiful countries in the world. It's a country that escaped two of the most devastating wars Europe has ever seen. By the standards of most world economies we are fabulously wealthy. We have cars to drive, houses to live in, machines to wash our clothes, machines with coloured screens to entertain us, and machines to cook our food in. We've got heat and light at the flick of a switch. Hot and cold pure water. We can have an ambulance or fire engine at the press of a few buttons. There are millions in the world who would kill to have a lifestyle like ours. So why on earth would people in a society like ours be unhappy?

One of the characteristics of our society is that we are piling it on the outside and the inside is falling apart. More leisure. More pleasure. More material goods. More education. More money. More amusement. In fact we are amusing ourselves to death. But on the inside there is no peace, no purpose, no power, no direction, no freedom and no hope. Just a great big hole. An emptiness that we cover up with a big smile. When somebody asks us "How are you?" we reply "I'm fine!" Some of us have lied so much to other people about how happy we are that we have almost begun to believe our own publicity.

When the Apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians he had every reason to be unhappy. He was in prison at the time, chained by the wrist to a Roman soldier 24 hours a day. Yet the letter he wrote to these new Christians in the town called Colossae is full of joy and thankfulness. There is not a trace of unhappiness in it anywhere. These new Christians had been introduced to Jesus Christ through one of Paul's converts, a fellow named Epaphras. In Jesus they had found something that had filled at the inside of their lives, and for about five years they had been going great. Then some teachers came to their church and told them they didn't have it all and that they needed a bit more. So one of Paul's purposes in writing this letter was to encourage them and tell them what they had received when they believed in Jesus. His message to them was this. "When you believed in Jesus you received all you will ever need, so just relax and enjoy what God gave you."

This is part of the letter he wrote to them:

" We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints-- the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought

us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:3 – 14 NIV)

What We Have In Jesus.

Today I want to encourage you with some of the things Paul told those believers they already had because they were in Christ. Here's the first.

1. Knowledge Of God And Of Gods Will.

When we are in Christ the Spirit of God within us begins to speak and tell us the sort of things that God wants for us. We begin to get God's wisdom on the events that we face every day. Instead of living life running around in circles, God begins to tell us some of the directions we can take that will get us to the destinations he wants us to reach.

In the four months before we arrived at Westlake, Lyn and I toured the UK and Europe with a car and caravan. We drove 17,000kms in four months, often with a right hand drive car in Europe, which is fun when you are towing a caravan. But our lifesaver was supposed to be our GPS. A GPS is supposed to be able to navigate you anywhere, and theoretically that's true. But it doesn't know you have got a caravan on the back, and sometimes it takes you up narrow streets and places you just can't go. It doesn't know about road works. At Lake Maggiore in Italy it tried to get me to drive into the lake in order to reach McDonalds. It's didn't tell me McDonalds was on the other side of the lake. If you don't have a GPS yet, let me tell you what you finish up doing when it's driving you nuts. You go back to the original mark one eyeball and read direction signs. You pull out an old fashioned thing called a map. And you do something you should have done in the first place. You pray. Buy a GPS. It will do wonders for your prayer life.

Now here's the deal about being a Christian. God knows the end from the beginning and is willing to navigate me way through life. The Spirit of God keeps speaking to me, giving me directions and showing me the way he wants me go. Sometimes I get it wrong, and sometimes I don't listen to his instructions, but even when I go off track, He is still there to help me get back to where I need to be. He gives me his wisdom to make wise decisions. It's not until I meet someone who doesn't know Christ that I realize what a wonderful thing it is to have his direction on a daily basis. Sometimes we don't appreciate what it's like to be found until we get lost. Thank God for the knowledge you have of him. Ask him for spiritual wisdom and understanding. He is with you and wants to guide you.

Here's something else that is available to you as a Christian.

2. Hope.

In verse five Paul says this: ***"The hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel."* (Colossians 1:5)** Everyone who is a follower of Jesus has a hope that comes from an understanding of the truth of the gospel.

Every one of us has a place in our hearts where we store our deepest longings. Every human being has the ability to hope. In fact when we lose hope, we die. The question for us is not, "do we have hope", but where do we put our hope. All human beings are hoppers. We hope to get married. We hope to have children. Hope is why people have exercise machines, and play the stock market. Hope is why people go on blind dates and why little children go nuts on Christmas morning. It's why we read the Bible. It's why we are in church this morning.

The question is, "what we putting our hope in?" In the Bible the book of Proverbs says ***"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life"* (Proverbs 13:12)** The human spirit can survive just about anything, but it cannot survive the loss of hope. One of the experiments the Nazis did in the concentration camps was to assign people to absolutely meaningless work. They would have people shift mounds of dirt from one side of the road to another and then back again the next day. They would keep going with this until the people realized that there was absolutely no purpose to what they were doing. The Nazis found when they did this to people, they died at a faster rate than the normal concentration camp victims. When there is a sense of meaninglessness, people die.

What are you putting your ultimate hope in? We live in a world where there are lots of offers of hope, but they are all long shots. Did you put your hope in stocks and shares in the last 12 months? Well, that turned out to be a real winner didn't it!

Paul says we need to put our hope in the right thing. In Romans 5 he talks about the hope of the gospel which does not disappoint. When Paul talks about the hope that is stored up for us in verse five he is talking about something we can count on as a certainty. There is very good reason for us to put our hope in the gospel. He says to these Christians in Colossae, "you are not the same people you used to be". If you want a good reason to put your hope in the gospel, take a look at the fruit that it bears. Look at the fruit that it bears in your own life and in the lives of the people around you.

I want to do what Paul has done in writing this letter. If the gospel has borne fruit in your life in one of the following ways, at the end of this list that I read I want you to stand. If this was true of you in the last 12 months, I want to ask you to stand up when I have finished reading this list:

- ***If you have a greater sense of peace and security in Christ than you had a year ago.***
- ***If you have known God has been asking something of you, and you said "yes" to Him.***
- ***If you have trusted God in some the area in your Christian life and have discovered that the Lord has supplied your need.***
- ***If your family was dramatically helped in some way by God in this last year***
- ***If you have gained some victory over some sin or habit in the last year.***
- ***If you have seen an answer to a prayer this year, either in your own life or in someone else's life.***
- ***If you have learned some new truth from the Bible that has changed the way you have been living.***
- ***If you have sensed the Lord calling you to some area of ministry in the last year.***
- ***If you have trusted Christ in a way you haven't before.***

Look around you. This is the fruit of the Gospel. If you want to know where to put your hope, take a look around you right now. The Bible tells us to put our hope in something that is a sure thing. The sure thing is the lives that are changed by the power of the gospel. As Christians we have this hope. Not a "hope so" hope, but a "know so" hope. This hope is one of the treasures you have as a Christian.

What else do we have?

3. Power.

Paul says that God strengthens every believer with his power. God gives us the power to live a life that pleases Him. That power is linked to two things – endurance and patience. For many people, including many Christians, life is an endurance test. Things happen to us that are quite beyond our control and there is nothing that we can do to change them. It might be an illness that we just have to cope with. It might have been something done to us when we were much younger. It might be some tragedy that almost overwhelms us. You might have had to cope with debilitating effects of a broken relationship. Yet even though you have felt like quitting, God has given you his power to keep going. To those of you that have got through this past 12 months relying on his power, and you feel as though you are just hanging in there, I want to applaud you. Like Paul, I want to pray that you will be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience.

Power is related to patience. Mothers of little children know what it is to need patience. Mothers of teenagers know what it is to need patience. Teenagers need patience. We need patience when we are caring for a difficult person. It's God's power that enables us to be patient year-in and year out. He strengthens us with his power as we need it. That power is offered to us, on a 24 hour a day, 7-day a week basis. It's Gods promise. It's God's gift.

Here's one last thing for today.

4. We Have Been Rescued From Darkness And Brought Into Light.

Paul reminds these new Christians that God has done an amazing thing and brought them out of a dark, dark Kingdom, into a Kingdom of light that is ruled over by Jesus his Son. What was true for them is also true for us. God has mounted a rescue operation to bring us out of darkness into the marvellous light of Christ.

In the city of Venice there is a fabulous palace called the Doges palace. The Doges were the rulers of Venice. They were enormously powerful and wealthy. The palace is filled with priceless works of art, gold, marble, and rich tapestries everywhere you look. In years gone by, in the palace of the Doges they used to sentence wrongdoers to death. Once the person had been condemned to death, the condemned person would walk out of the fabulous wealth of the palace, across the canal to the neighbouring dungeons. The dungeons were a place of torture, darkness and death.

There is a bridge that connects the Doges palace to the dungeons. It's called "the bridge of sighs." Those who used that bridge would never see light and beauty again. They would forever be in darkness and horror in the dungeons. As I walked over that bridge and down into the blackness of the dungeons I could feel the evil of what had been done there in the past. It was oppressive, dark and evil. But coming back out of the dungeons, back over that bridge, and back into the light and beauty of the palace was breathtaking. Stepping out of darkness into the glory of the palace was an amazing experience. But not half as breathtaking as stepping out of darkness into the Kingdom of the light of Jesus.

All through the New Testament we are reminded that we are now children of the light. We no longer walk in darkness because Jesus has brought us into the light of his Kingdom. The characteristics of that Kingdom are joy, thankfulness, forgiveness and love. That's happiness money can't buy.

Today I have talked about just four things that we enjoy because we have begun to follow Jesus. Knowledge of God and of God's will. Hope. Power. And being rescued from the Kingdom of darkness and being brought into the Kingdom of light. You can't buy that sort of happiness with money. It comes from knowing Jesus and following him and being in a right relationship with God.

As Christians we have all this and a whole lot more. The offer of this sort of life of happiness is open to anyone who will accept it. Will you?

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