

THE OVERFLOWING LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

The end of a year always brings news articles that highlight the events of the past year. I read this week an article entitled "The Most Boring People of 1986." Some may place me in that category, but at least I was not included in this article. A group calling themselves "The Boring Institute of New Jersey" picks the most boring people of the year every December. You may be interested to know that in 1984 Michael Jackson was the "Yawn of the Year," primarily because of his over-exposure in the media. In 1985 it was Dr. Ruth Westheimer, who, as this article says, "debunked the cherished myth that talking about sex is always interesting." The winner this year was Joan Rivers. "Her rival talk show," the article says, "reveals the genius of Johnny Carson."

Whether we agree or not with this article, it does point out one of the major problems of life---boredom! I would not be at all surprised to learn that most of the toys that were opened at Christmas have become boring now and are lying neglected. Even fathers have tired of playing with them! Have you ever asked yourself, what is boredom? Why do people grow bored? I believe boredom comes as a result of looking to something outside yourself to keep you excited. We blame our boredom on everything else. "There's nothing to do," is a frequent complaint of children, as though it were somebody else's fault. But boredom is really our problem. There is something wrong in us. There is no inner resource from which we can draw. Boredom comes when we find ourselves demanding satisfaction from some instrument or activity, or even some person, outside ourselves. It indicates there is a real lack within us.

The letter to the Colossians is actually dealing with the problem of boredom, of apathy, and lack of vitality. Life had no zest, no zing and delight for these Colossian Christians. That is why the apostle Paul seeks in this letter to reveal the true secret of a turned-on life: it is the discovery of a Person who can live within us. As we have already seen, that is the great mystery, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Christians who have discovered this---not merely in an intellectual sense, but have begun to live on that basis day by day---are very seldom bored. To them, everything is exciting. Even difficulties and trials are regarded as adventures and they look forward to how the Lord will work them out. They may feel a sense of risk, perhaps even danger, but they also have a sense of excitement and anticipation as they look for God to act.

This is why the Scriptures often refer to the word "riches." Paul frequently makes mention of the "riches of the gospel." In one place he says his greatest joy was to declare "the unsearchable riches of Christ." The gospels make frequent mention of "treasures." Jesus talked about "laying up treasures in heaven." We have within our bodies, Paul says in Second Corinthians, "a treasure in earthen vessels, that it may be evident that the power is not from us but from God." That inner treasure is what makes the Christian life rich, zestful, and worth living. So these letters of Paul seek always to create a sense of this in people, to help them understand that the answer to the problem of boredom and apathy is a "well of living water," as Jesus put it, "springing up from within." That is what will refresh our spirits, and save us from perpetual boredom.

Hear these words of Paul from the opening verses of the second chapter:

"I want you to know how strenuously I am exerting myself for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

The apostle's purpose for writing is stated very clearly there. He specifically wants to enrich their lives, encourage their hearts, and enable love to spread throughout the congregation.

But do not overlook the process! There is an unfortunate chapter division here that separates verse 1 from the

closing verse of chapter 1. These two verses actually belong together. In verse 29 of chapter 1, Paul says, "To this end I labor [or, I toil], struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me. And I want you to know how strenuously I am exerting myself for you..." Notice how he calls attention to the effort and toil he was putting into this matter of bringing the Colossian Christians into vitality, excitement, and a sense of adventure.

You may ask, how could a man who is chained to a Roman guard day and night, in the city of Rome, a thousand miles from Colossae, so toil as to help the Colossians? Paul does not tell us here but elsewhere we are given ample information as to his method. Earlier in this letter he talked about laboring continuously in prayer for them. That is one way he toils for them---through frequent prayer.

I want to stress again the tremendous importance of praying for one another. You can do all the right things to help someone, but if his attitude is wrong nothing you do will serve to assist him. What can change that? It is your praying for him! Prayer can change the heart and mind, the inner attitude. It is a powerful force to transform an atmosphere and make something acceptable when otherwise it would appear to be dull and uninteresting. Paul prayed ("agonized" is the word) for these Colossian Christians over and over again, even though he had not personally met most of them. Also, it is evident from his letters that he was alert to every word of information about them. When Epaphras brought news to the apostle in Rome about the church at Colossae, Paul questioned him and extracted from him all the information he could in order that he might know how to pray for the Colossians. That is an indication of his special concern for them.

But probably the most strenuous toil of the apostle on behalf of the Colossians was to compose these letters. These are extremely powerful and thoughtful letters. They are not something he dashed off effortlessly, although he had a marvelous mind and was capable of tremendous spontaneous statements of truth. The letters reveal that much thought had gone into them. When did he have time to think? I have always felt that he worked through these deep theological statements on occasions when he was unable to sleep at night. I find that happens with me. When I can't sleep I often start thinking about a passage of Scripture that I am studying, and insights come in the quiet hours of the night that I never seem to get during the daytime hours. Oftentimes I am able to work through a whole message and outline it in those night hours. Then I go back to sleep and usually sleep peacefully till dawn. Perhaps Paul found his chain made sleep difficult and he used the night hours for difficult mental toil.

Notice that Paul's immediate goal is to encourage the hearts of the Colossians and to unite them in love. I confess I am rebuked by that, because too often I find myself ready to jump on someone and try to straighten him out on the spot. It is a great lesson to see how Paul seeks to lift their spirits first and to cause them to appreciate one another. It indicates that building a relationship with individuals is the true way to go about helping them. Have you ever tried to help someone, only to find your efforts fell on deaf ears? The apostle indicates the right way to help is to find something encouraging to say first. None of us like to be corrected by a negative approach. We first need a word of encouragement, as the apostle so beautifully demonstrates here.

Then, when the apostle has lifted their spirits, they will be able, he suggests, to experience the excitement of understanding the mystery, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Occasionally I meet people who seem to be turned on constantly by Scripture. They discover a new, fresh verse every morning. But others find the Bible dull and boring. That is probably because they have not fully understood what it is saying. When you grasp what the word of God is saying on how to handle life it becomes exciting. It puts zest into living. It gives you the sense that you are not alone, that you don't have to handle your problems by yourself, or that you don't have to lean heavily on human advice, though God often provides help in that way. The main thing is, are you reckoning upon the wisdom of your Lord? He put you in a certain situation and he will work it out as you turn to his Word. Out of that Word come wisdom and understanding.

I ran across a quote last week that puts this well:

Why is it that the older one grows, the more topsy-turvy the wisdom of Christ appears, and yet the more it appears to be wisdom? He seems to be looking at life upside-down. He tells us that the poor have security, the mourners will be happy, the sexually deprived will be fulfilled. It seems, by the wisdom of this world, as if he got everything the wrong way

around. But live a little bit, and one discovers that this is not necessarily the case at all. If the world is inverted, then the only way to see it clearly is upside-down.

This is why the Scriptures are different than any other book. They say things that are difficult and seemingly impractical, and yet are the very essence of realism, wisdom and sanity. For instance, in Romans 12 the apostle Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." Have you ever tried that in traffic? It looks like an impractical solution, but if you try it you discover you have touched on something you did not know was there. You will have a different attitude to irritations. You will be relaxed and calmer, and not get upset so easily. You can get through the commute hour a lot easier. That is the wisdom Paul is talking about. It is not to stuff your mind with theological ideas, but to discover the secret of how to handle things, how to stay sane and sober, joyful and thankful, in the midst of the pressures and difficulties of life.

A second reason for Paul's concern is that he is very much aware of how easy it is to miss these hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ by being misled by false teaching. In these verses we have the first clear hint of what was threatening the Colossian Christians.

"I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is."

"Fine-sounding arguments" reveal Paul's concern lest they be easily deceived. This is one of the major problems all Christians must face. The word for "deceived," literally translated, is "to reason beside something." If the target is the truth, there is something alongside it that looks very much like the truth, and one begins to focus upon that, rather than the truth. That is one of the favorite weapons of the devil. To be deceived is to think you know that something is right, but it is really wrong. Truth and error look almost the same, but one is a counterfeit. In these days when we have so many counterfeit and imitation things around we are used to being deceived and do not feel alarmed about it any more. Plastic looks like metal. Flowers are made of silk. We are daily touching things that are but imitations of the real thing. But imitations have obvious limitations. If you start regarding them as real you are in trouble. That is what Paul is worried about. A quotation from J. I. Packer puts this very well:

Sad experience shows that bad theology infects the heart with misbelief and unbelief, the spiritual equivalents of multiple sclerosis! Many who ran well have been progressively paralyzed through ingesting bad theology, and the danger remains. Theological expertise can feed intellectual pride, turning one into a person who cares more for knowing true notions than for knowing the true God, and that is disastrous, too.

Our churches are filled with people who are being misled in this very way. On this past New Year's Eve there was a movement to gather all Christians across this country into churches to chant a meditation for a world-wide shift in consciousness from war to peace, in 1987. That sounds admirable, and many thousands participated. What was not known, however, was that the words to be chanted included such phrases as,

I begin with me. I am a living soul and the Spirit of God dwells in me, as me. I and the Father are one. All that the Father has is mine. In truth, I am the Christ of God.

Do you see how misleading that is? It sounds right at the outset, referring as it does to "the Spirit of God dwelling in me." Then the two words are added, "as me." That is, I myself am the Spirit of God. And finally, there comes the not particularly original blasphemy, "In truth, I am the Christ of God." Such prayers seem good on the surface. They appear to offer freedom---they may deliver for awhile---but soon there comes decreasing pleasure, increasing bondage and, ultimately, disaster and death. This is the progress of evil. That is the story of drug addiction, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality and gambling. They seem to offer something new and exciting, but when practiced they invariably destroy, leaving one at last bored, empty, and despairing.

This is also true of personal ambition, the lust for power, love of fame, and pride of race or position. All these things are like narcotics. We run after them and we are encouraged by the world to do so. But they are

substitutes, counterfeits of the real thing. What Paul desires is that all may discover the real life. This struggle is, in essence, a struggle between two gods: the great god, Self, and the true God of man, Jesus. We hear much today of self-realization, self-actualization, self-development, self-discovery, self-esteem, and self-love. Self is really a disguised god! It sounds right to us. We do not want to hate ourselves. Yet there is a "self" that is very wrong. In the next section of this letter the apostle will tell us what it is, and what God has done about it in order that we might be able to enjoy the true freedom that is found only in following and serving Jesus.

Recently I attended a seminar in Chicago featuring Dr. John White, who has written a number of very helpful books on family life. The seminar was on sexual deviations. Dr. White made it very personal by pointing out that sexual sin always offers a new sense of freedom. But it is an illusion. It seems to offer more, but if you try it you will find that you have gained nothing. Dr. White put it very strongly: "I have found," he said, "that when I give up the illusion of freedom, I then am free to discover the true freedom that is in Jesus Christ." That is the secret of zest and excitement in living. The answer to boredom is to reject the cheap imitation so you can discover the exciting God whom we serve.

There is a note of encouragement here in these words. Paul says there are two things about the Colossians that delight him and encourage him to believe that it will be difficult to deceive them by the false teaching in their midst. Here are his words:

"For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is."

Two things help against being deceived: first, a well ordered, disciplined life. The spirit of our age says, do whatever you feel like doing, respond to whatever you like. Deny yourself nothing. Paul, however, delights that the Colossians are orderly and disciplined. They make themselves do right whether they feel like doing it or not. A disciplined life will always be hard to deceive. Gordon McDonald's book, *Ordering Your Private World*, is helpful in assisting many to discipline their lives in right and proper ways to discover the freedom of disciplined living. I have always wanted to be able to play the piano, or some musical instrument. I envy people who are able to sit at a piano and play it, seemingly without effort. But I cannot do that, because I have never disciplined myself to study and practice music. Thus, I have no freedom in this area. Almost any discipline will help us resist error and Paul compliments the Colossians on their orderly life, for it makes them resistant to deceit.

Second, the apostle delights to see how firm is their faith in Christ. They understood clearly that it was Christ who held them, not they who held Christ. When they strayed, he would send someone to them to point it out to them, or stop them by some circumstance that would make it difficult for error to take root among them. A strong faith in the presence of Jesus is a powerful bulwark against being misled.

Paul closes with an admonition which I consider to be one of the greatest passages in the New Testament:

"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."

I would urge you to memorize those verses. Here is a guide to an exciting, zestful life: "Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him." Obey him, follow him, converse with him, draw upon his grace, lean on him, look to him for comfort. That is how to "continue to live in him."

Three things have happened to you, says Paul. You have been "rooted" in Christ. (These are all passive participles, meaning these things have been done to you.) Like a deeply-rooted tree, you have been planted in Christ and those strong roots will hold you. Secondly, you have been "built up" in him. Not only are the roots going deep, but you are growing up as well. You are increasing in faith and experience. And, thirdly, you have been "strengthened" in the faith. You have tested it, put it to work in your home, in your neighborhood. You have had to face problems which were tests, and your faith was strengthened by them.

As those three things take place, we are to add one more: we are to be "overflowing with thankfulness." Be grateful to God for everything he has given you, no matter what it is. Have you learned yet to be thankful in

everything? That means you do not grumble, complain and criticize. You cannot have it both ways. To be thankful means to find something in every situation for which you can genuinely be grateful.

The great Bible commentator, Dr. Matthew Henry, once was robbed as he walked along a highway. Afterwards he told his friends there were four things for which he gave thanks. First, he was grateful that he had never been robbed before. After many years of life this was the first time he had been robbed and for that he was grateful. Secondly, he said, "Though they took all my money, I am glad they did not get very much." That was something to be thankful for. Thirdly, he said, "Though they took my money, they did not take my life, and I am grateful for that." And finally, he suggested, "I am thankful that it was I who was robbed, and not I who robbed." There was a man who had learned how to be "overflowing with thankfulness!"

Have you ever learned to talk to yourself and ask yourself questions? If you read the Psalms you will often find you are listening to a man talking to himself. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why are thou so disquieted within me?" The psalmist is standing at the mirror shaving, feeling blue, and asking himself, "What's the matter with you? Why are you like this?" That is a good thing to do.

When you ask yourself questions about yourself you must also ask, why didn't worse things happen? Look beyond what has occurred and realize it could have been much worse. Then discover all the things which God has supplied and which you have been taking for granted: his care, his love, the shelter of your home, the fact that you have a little money in the bank, the fact that your children love you, or your parents love you (whatever fits your situation), and begin to give thanks for those. If you do, something will happen: you will find yourself turned on about everything. You will find life filled with zest, vitality and excitement. You will have discovered the answer to boredom!

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