

“HEARTS AFIRE FOR CHRIST JESUS”
 Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19, I Peter 1:17-23, Luke 24:13-35
 April 15 & 16, 2023

Jeffrey Cotter shares this marvelous account (*Eternity* magazine, March 1981):

“A pastor, dressed in a comfortable pair of old blue jeans, boarded a plane to return home. He settled into the last unoccupied seat next to a well-dressed businessman with a *Wall Street Journal* tucked under his arm. The minister, a little embarrassed over his casual attire, decided he’d look straight ahead and, for sure, stay out of any in-depth conversation. But the plan didn’t work. The businessman greeted him, so, to be polite, the pastor asked about the man’s work. Here’s what happened:

“I’m in the figure salon business,’ the man said. ‘We can change a woman’s self-concept by changing her body. It’s really a very profound, powerful thing.’ His pride spoke between the lines.

“You look my age,’ I said. ‘Have you been at this long?’

“I just graduated from the University of Michigan’s School of Business Administration. They’ve given me so much responsibility already, and I feel very honored. In fact, I hope to eventually manage the western part of the operation.’

“So you’re a national organization?’ I asked, becoming impressed despite myself.

“Oh, yes. We are the fastest growing company of our kind in the nation. It’s really good to be a part of an organization like that, don’t you think?’

“I nodded approvingly and thought, ‘Impressive. Proud of his work and accomplishments. Why can’t Christians be proud like that? Why are we so often apologetic about our faith and our church?’

“Looking at my clothing, he asked the inevitable question, ‘And what do you do?’

“It’s interesting that we have similar business interests,’ I said. ‘You are in the body-changing business; I’m in the personality-changing business. We apply ‘basic theocratic principles to accomplish indigenous personality modifications.’

“He was hooked, but I knew he would never admit it. (Pride is powerful.)

“You know, I’ve heard about that,’ he replied, hesitantly. ‘But do you have an office here in the

city?’

“Oh, we have many offices. We have offices up and down the state. In fact, we’re national: we have at least one office in every state of the union, including Alaska and Hawaii.’

“He had this puzzled look on his face. He was searching his mind to identify this huge company he must have read or heard about, perhaps in his *Wall Street Journal*.

“As a matter of fact, we’ve gone international,’ I went on. ‘And Management has a plan to put at least one office in every country of the world by the end of this business era.’

“I paused for effect. ‘Do you have that in your business?’ I asked.

“Well, no. Not yet,’ he answered. ‘But you mentioned management. How do they make it work?’

“It’s a family concern. There’s a Father and a Son, and they run everything.’

“It must take a lot of capital,’ he asked, skeptically.

“You mean money!’ I asked. ‘Yes, I suppose so. No one knows just how much because there’s never a shortage. The Boss always seems to have enough. He’s a very creative Guy. And the money is, well, just there. In fact those of us in the Organization have a saying about our Boss, “*He owns the cattle on a thousand hills.*”’

“Oh, he’s into ranching too!’ asked my captive friend.

“No, it’s just a saying we use to indicate His wealth.’

“My friend sat back in his seat, musing over our conversation. ‘What about with you?’ he asked.

“The employees? They’re something to see.’ I said. ‘They have a “Spirit” that pervades the Organization. It works like this: The Father and Son love each other so much that their love filters down through the Organization so that we all find ourselves loving one another, too. I know this sounds old-fashioned in a world like ours, but I know people in the Organization who are willing to die for me. Do you have that in your business?’ I was almost shouting now. People were starting to shift noticeably in their seats.’

“Not yet,” he said. Quickly changing strategies, he asked, “But do you have good benefits?”

“They’re substantial,” I countered, with a gleam. “I have complete life insurance, fire insurance - all the basics. You might not believe this, but it’s true: I have holdings in a mansion that’s being built for me right now for my retirement. Do you have that in your business?”

“Not yet,” he answered, wistfully. The light was dawning. “You know, one thing bothers me about all you’re saying. I’ve read the journals, and if your business is all you say it is, why haven’t I heard about it before now?”

“That’s a good question,” I said, “After all, we have a 2,000-year-old tradition.”

“Wait a minute!” he said.

“You’re right,” I interrupted. “I’m talking about the church.”

“I knew it. You know, I’m Jewish.”

“Want to sign up?” I asked.”¹

I like the way that this pastor presented the stand of the Christian church. He wasn’t offensive. He wasn’t “in your face” about it. He wasn’t putting down the other who wasn’t a part of it. He made it interesting to this businessman to the point that he was able to share all of the wonderful benefits that we have as we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. He used an everyday situation to tell the Good News of Jesus so that this man might stop and consider where the real benefits in life are. He challenged this business administrator to see life from a different perspective. Rather than changing the body of a person, He was challenged to change the spirit and soul of the people he worked with in order that they might have real life, now and forever.

Now, we’re just a week off of the marvelous remembrance of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection from the dead. What an amazing thing Jesus has done for us in order that we might have access to God the Father. While Jesus worked at times to change the bodies of the people who needed help, His full goal was to change the spirit and the soul of that person so that they could really have life.

¹ (Chuck Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989] pg. 616-618)

But sadly, even some of Jesus' closest followers still didn't understand what was happening when Jesus finished lining up all of our benefits. Just a few hours after it was reported that Jesus' tomb had been "raided" and His body "stolen," a couple of His followers were headed back home. They were talking about all of the strange things that had gone on over the weekend, when a stranger showed up with them. Listen to what happened. This is Luke 24:13-35. (READ Luke 24:13-35)

Now, Jesus didn't tell these men how to get over their grief so that they could get back to "normal," everyday life. Instead, Jesus told them about the Messiah using the Scriptures, in order that they might see His real purpose of calling all people to Himself and help them to find Salvation for their souls. It wasn't about making Israel free from her enemies, but rather how to make disciples of those same people, so that either free or in captivity under a foreign rule, the people could have purpose, and ultimately, eternal life. It wasn't about making better persons of them by changing their physical characteristics, but making them better people by changing their spiritual foundations. If you change the spiritual nature of the person, you are then able to change their physical characteristics.

The first four verses of Psalm 116 give us this model of Jesus' goal for all of us. The psalmist says, *"I love the Lord, for He heard my voice; He heard my cry for mercy. Because He turned His ear to me, I will call on Him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'Lord, save me!'"* (Psalm 116:1-4).

The psalmist loved the Lord, and because he loved the Lord, he turned to the Lord for help in every situation in his life. He knew that life was out of his own control, but he also knew that the Lord controlled everything. Therefore, if he turned to the Lord for help, the Lord was gracious to answer him and grant His mercy to him.

And this man's nature was changed such that his whole life was filled with joy and thanksgiving. He looked at God differently, and rather than serving Him out of compulsion or out of fear, this man now served the Lord with exuberance, completely confident that nothing was able to affect his life that

together he and the Lord couldn't conquer. The psalmist was ever so confident in the abilities of the Lord God that he willingly and joyfully sought to serve Him in all that he did. His life was changed from the inside out, finding his heart warmed to the things of the Lord.

The two men walking to Emmaus were also encouraged when they encountered the living Christ Jesus. Though they did not recognize Him as their Lord, these two started out glum and disappointed about all that had happened while in Jerusalem. But when Jesus opened their eyes to the truth of the Scriptures and informed them of the true intentions of the Messiah, their hearts began to burn within them for the work of the Lord.

And when, at the meal that evening, Jesus broke bread and gave it to them, their eyes were fully opened, and they recognized that IT WAS JESUS, risen from the dead and sitting right there with them at the supper table! And after reflecting on the afternoon's walk, they realized what a difference Jesus had made in them as He shared the Scriptures with encouragement. The conversation on that uneventful stroll toward Emmaus had lightened their spirits, had challenged their minds, and had given them hope of believing that what the women had told them that morning was true, that Jesus was alive!

And they got so excited about Jesus being alive, that these two men turned right around and RAN the whole 7 miles back to Jerusalem in order to share this great Good News with the disciples and other followers of Jesus. They couldn't wait to share the fantastic news that Jesus was not dead, as they had supposed, but that He was really alive, risen from the dead. And upon joining the other disciples, they were even more encouraged as they heard accounts of Jesus' other appearance to Simon Peter. And they had the chance to share their own account of all that had happened with them during the afternoon.

It's no wonder that Christian church flourished in those early days. Having had an encounter of their own of the risen Christ Jesus, these men and women could not contain their joy and excitement about Jesus fulfilling His promise to rise again from death on the third day. WOW! What a life changing event! What a transformational experience. And how can one contain such an event to themselves? We can no more keep the joy of Jesus living within us to ourselves than one can contain

the effects of opening up a bottle of soda that has been shaken up. It's all over the place! The only difference is that the clean-up is much easier for Christians sharing their effervescence of joy in having the risen Jesus Christ working in their lives.

But I have to wonder along with the businessman on the airplane with the pastor in the opening story, "Why can't Christians [today] be proud of what Jesus did for them? Why are we so often apologetic about our faith and our church?" Is it that we have lost that effervescence within us? Have we become flat in our spirits because the joy of Jesus Christ has bubbled all out of us? Has our life become so burdened that we can see no more hope in all that Jesus has done for us? Have we lost contact with Jesus so that all of our faith had become routine, religious practice rather than exuberant joy in Jesus? Or, did we really have that joy in us from the beginning?

It's not hard to notice the joy in a person's life when they have Jesus living and active within them. It's not hard to see the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who are serious about living their faith. There is a glow about those who have Jesus with them, and they can't wait to share the good news of what Jesus has done in their lives. They are all about touching the lives of others around them with the hope they have in Jesus. And imagine what would happen if there was a whole church full of people who have encountered Jesus and their joy is visible? People would surely want to go to that church just to see what was going on and what had made the difference in the lives of those whose lives were changed by Jesus!

We saw that happen in Asbury University earlier this year, when the Holy Spirit poured out onto the students and teachers and others present at the worship service at a chapel service. Their hearts were strangely warmed and then began to burn for the hope of Jesus within them. And they didn't keep it to themselves, but shared it with friends and family and others in the community, such that word spread that a revival was happening. And it wasn't long before people from around the world were making their way to Asbury University, just so that they could be a part of the presence of the Holy Spirit, too.

People are yearning for new life in Jesus Christ! They are hungering for a change in their lives

that gives them hope and life and love unlike anything that the world can give to them. They are seeking the life that only Jesus can give to them. But how will they know about the love and joy and hope that is found in Jesus unless we let Him live in us and live through us to influence the lives of others around us? We have to experience Jesus for ourselves, and then we can let Him change our hearts and lives to be His disciples, ready to share this great Good News with the ones that are hurting and floundering around us.

Let's not let the worries and concerns and troubles and trials of this world make us lose the joy of Jesus Christ. Let's not allow the troubles of disaffiliation steal our hope for new life found in Jesus Christ. Let's not let the delights and thrills of this world dull our minds and overcast our spirits so that we forfeit our trust in Jesus. Let God's Holy Spirit reawaken your souls and pour out His great joy in your hearts so that we might be a people of joyfulness and delight putting our trust in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I Peter 1:17-23 gives us great guidance on how we are to live. You heard it earlier, but these words are so good I want you to hear them once more. *“Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through Him you believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and glorified Him, and so your faith and hope are in God. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God.”*

In other words, let Jesus live in you such that your whole life is dependent upon Him, and He will give you a life that is so full of joy and hope and love that you can't help but influence the hearts and souls of those around you. Let the worries and troubles that surround you and try to enslave you to

their turmoil and disappointment, let them go from your life. Don't dwell on them, or else they'll eat you alive. But trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, relish in the work that He has done on your behalf to free you from the sin that binds you, and then let Him transform your hearts and set them on fire for Him so that you begin to tell all those around you of the benefits of faith in Jesus Christ.

"Keep your minds fixed on things above, not on things of this world" (Colossians 3:2). Don't let the things of this world drive out the joy that is within you through Jesus Christ. Let your hearts burn within you as you contemplate all that Jesus has done to bring you new life through Him.

And then use everyday situations to creatively share that joy with those around you. Be it on an airplane, or in a car, or on a bus, or in a restaurant, or at home, be willing to boldly share the joy that you have as a follower of Jesus Christ. The world is longing for the hope that is in you. Don't keep it to yourself. Share it so that those around you might be enveloped in that great love of Jesus and they find their hearts beginning to burn, too.

Don't be ashamed of Jesus, or embarrassed at your faith in the One who died for your sin and then rose again to give you eternal life. Let Him live so powerfully within you that people can notice it a mile away without any words being spoken. Let your hearts become afire for Christ Jesus so that everyone can come to know the hope that you have within you. And let them know the love of Jesus Christ so that they might have hope, too.

Let's pray...Father, THANK YOU for giving us Jesus! Thank You for the life He gives to us as we remember His resurrection from the dead. Let our hearts rejoice that we no longer need to be afraid of letting others know that we believe in Jesus. Give us the courage to live boldly, love extravagantly, and worship passionately, bringing honor and glory to You.

Father, in these dark days, do not let the joy within us be extinguished. Give us an ample supply of Your love and joy each day so that we can rejoice in You each and every day. Then, give us the chance to share that love and joy with others so that they may also come to know that Jesus is alive, risen from the dead to be our Savior and Lord. This we pray in Jesus' Name. AMEN.