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THE RIVER, NOT THE MIRAGE

1 John 1:1-4

Humorist Dave Barry, upon turning 50 years old, wrote a column about things that it had taken him 50 years to learn. Here are some of the wise truths he identified. “Never, under any circumstances, take a sleeping pill and a laxative on the same night.” He also advised, “Never lick a steak knife.” Good suggestion.

Those are all helpful thoughts I guess, but I hope that after my many years on this planet I have a few deeper ideas about life. We all know that there is more to life than merely existing. There is a scene in the classic movie *Braveheart*, where the central character, William Wallace, has been captured and imprisoned by the English king after he has led a rebellion by the Scots. In this scene the Princess of Wales visits him in prison. Distraught over the fact that he is in danger of being executed, she pleads with him to swear allegiance to the English king. He says, “If I swear to him, all that I am is already dead.” Weeping, she says, “You will die. It will be awful.” Wallace says, “Every man dies. Not every man really lives.”

It is a great movie line. The real Wallace never said it as far as we know, but it still strikes a chord inside us, because we all want to do more than exist, more than just take up space on the planet. We want to be alive, truly, fully alive. In his book, *The Journey Of Desire*, John Eldredge wrote, “We don’t need more facts, and we certainly don’t need more things to do. We need *Life*, and we’ve been looking for it ever since we lost Paradise.” Sadly, many of us sense that we are not living as fully as we wish. We’re going through our days doing the things we have to do, doing the best we know how, but we feel there ought to be more to it. Would you consider yourself to be one of those rare people who really lives, who experiences life to the maximum?

Everyone wants to have that life. An expression I have used many times to express amazement is “man alive.” That is God’s plan for us. He wants us to be fully alive. His goal is for us to be restored to life as it was supposed to be. Today I begin a series I call “Man Alive” because it is about being fully alive. Life was a common theme in the writings of the apostle John. How does one have the full life we long for, the one we were created to live? John addresses that question in his writings. The small book we call 1 John was a letter written near the end of his life, late in the first century. One of the reasons he wrote this letter was that there was some false teaching that had cropped up and was threatening the true good news of Jesus Christ. It was false teaching about how to have life.

John wrote this letter in part to correct that thinking and bring people back to the truth of the gospel of Christ. In the passage we consider today is the question of where life is really found. Let’s look at the first 4 verses of the letter.

REAL LIFE IS IN JESUS CHRIST

It is helpful when studying the Bible to pay attention to words that are repeated. In this little 4 verse section the word “life” appears 3 times. That should give us a clue. That is the thing that is of major interest in the author’s mind. Verse 2 makes a profound statement. It says “the life appeared.” John did not say, “life appeared” or “a life appeared.” He’s not talking about life in general or about just any life. He said “*the* life” appeared, the life that is what we all need. He also said what he and his colleagues proclaim is the word of life, or the message of life. If you want to have life, this message is where you can find it.

This life was “from the beginning.” John also says that he and his colleagues had heard it, had seen it with their own eyes and had touched it. He is talking about Jesus, whom he had listened to, seen with his own eyes, and had physically touched. He said Jesus Christ was “the life” appearing in physical form in this world. This is consistent with what John wrote in his gospel. In John 1:3-4 he wrote of Jesus, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.” There you see those same ideas. Jesus was there from the beginning. All things were made through him. “Without him nothing was made that has been made.” If it exists, he made it. Second, he says in Jesus was life, and that life is the light of the human race. In other words, this life is the hope of everyone. There is no other way to gain the life that we all want other than Jesus.

Jesus specifically said that in John 14:6. “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He did not say, “I am a way, I have some truth, and I have some life for you.” He used the word “the” every time. It is explicit in the Greek text. He claimed that he is the truth, he is the way to God, and that he is the life. If you want to have this life that is really living, then you have to get it from him.

This is a problem in our culture. Our society finds any claim to absolute truth to be not just spurious, but abhorrent. There is, we are told, not just one way to real life. Each must find his or her own way, and for everyone it is different. Laurie and I went to the beach at the end of the day a couple of weeks ago. We took a walk and then just sat on the sand enjoying being by the ocean. Not far from us was a man going through some rather curious motions. He would do some slow motions with his arms, then after a few minutes of this he would do some jumping and turning. He was practicing some form of tai chi. He was looking for life. He thinks he will find health and peace, a mastery of life, through that exercise and its philosophy.

There are people who think that there is a unity of all things in the universe, and getting in sync with that is what produces life. There are people who think they just need to realize the divine within them and that will bring them life. There are people who think they will get life by following Mohammed. There are people who think that all that exists is matter and the spiritual is an illusion. They believe the closest we can come to “the life” we all long for is to have the most experiences they can in this world, to have the most fun and pleasure they can get before it’s all over. Once it’s over, it is over forever, so better make it as good as you can now.

The premise of our culture is people must find their own way. There isn’t one life, one truth. This isn’t a one size fits all kind of thing, and to assert otherwise is both foolish and intolerant. That is being dogmatic about a doctrine. So our culture is opposed to John’s assertion here and to anyone who accepts it. Is there any reason to believe that this counter-cultural thing John avows is true?

There are a couple of things we need to factor in as we consider how to respond to that objection. First, we should observe that the claims that there is no one truth, that there are many ways to find life, are actually doctrines of faith. They are claims about religious truth based solely on faith. There is no evidence for such doctrines. They are primarily based on the opinions of those who hold them. We should note that they typically hold them dogmatically nonetheless, with little to no tolerance for those who disagree.

Is there any reason to accept what John asserts in this passage? Yes, there is. That evidence was that John personally saw the source of life at work in this world. He saw Jesus do the impossible and feed a crowd of thousands of people by miraculously expanding one boy’s lunch. He helped pass out that food. He saw Jesus stop a storm dead in its tracks merely by telling it to stop. He was there when Jesus told Lazarus, who had been dead for 4 days, to stand up and walk out of his tomb, and it happened. He touched Jesus’ living body after it had come back to life. He could see and feel the scars from the nails of his crucifixion. John personally witnessed Jesus on a exercise abilities and powers that no other human being ever has had or ever will. This was not philosophical or religious speculation. It was actual experience of real events.

John saw it and passed it on to us, which means there is empirical reason to believe. This assertion is not purely based on faith, but on the evidence of history. How do we know that George Washington led his troops in crossing the Delaware River on a December night on their way to a surprise attack at Trenton? We weren’t there. We can’t see it or hear it. We know it because people who were there have testified that it was true. They saw it happen and told others about it until it was passed on to us. And that is the same reason why we can believe the truth about Jesus and the life. People who were there have testified and passed on to us the news that all of it is true.

REAL LIFE HAS SEVERAL COMPONENTS

What is this real life actually like? How is it different from what people often experience? Typically we think of a set of circumstances that would be essential for having the life we think we want. Laurie and I were recently lamenting the fact that vacation options this year have been seriously limited by the corona virus. We had saved some money and had hoped to go to Hawaii this fall, but Hawaii is closed. It may open next month, they say, but they’ve been saying that for months. Then I came across an article about places you can go that are open for business to vacation travelers. One of them is Bora Bora. It looks spectacular. But it is way too expensive for us. I looked at some pictures of it and thought, wow, that would be the life. Just relaxing in all of that incredible tropical beauty. Wouldn’t it be cool to just be able to afford going there and saying as long as you want? That would be the life!

But would it? The truth is that at some point it would get old and be kind of boring. Everyone has some mental image of what the ideal life would be like that is defined by some set of circumstances. But if we listen to the words of Jesus we will realize that circumstances cannot have anything to do with it. Jesus said in John 7:38, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

I grew up in Bakersfield which most people think of as hot and dry. That’s because it is often hot and dry. What some don’t often associate with Bakersfield is a powerful river, the Kern River, not far away. It is one of the steepest and fastest flowing rivers in the country. People die in it every year. This year there have been 5 drownings so far. One of the worst years was 2017 when 14 people drowned in the Kern.

There are stretches where the river looks like a fairly calm, benign river flowing at an easy pace. But it actually has a fast and powerful current that can quickly sweep people away if they are not careful. There are places where the river goes through violent rapids where it makes a thunderous roar. One expert said if you can raft the Kern River rapids you can raft any rapids in the world. Think of that powerful river thundering down the Kern River Canyon. Jesus said believing in him will produce a river of living water, an unstoppable torrent of life like that. But where is that river? He said it will flow from within the one who believes. It is inside. It is a river that will flow regardless of what is happening to or around a person.

If we believe in Jesus we will receive his Spirit and that will be like a river of living water in us. The life we seek is inside so that it can and will exist in any and every circumstance. It is possible to have this life no matter where we are and what is going on around us. It is not limited by circumstances.

The fact that a set of circumstances cannot be the key to having this life is confirmed by our experience. We all have focused on some circumstance that we think will produce this life, usually we have done that repeatedly. We had a window washer at our house this week. He turned out to be a fervent follower of Jesus. As Laurie was talking to him he asked how she came to know Jesus. She told him how her last year in high school she was focused on being popular. The height of popularity would be to be the homecoming queen. If she got that she would be really alive. It would be just what she wanted. Well she got her dream. It was a significant moment in her life, not because she had the life now, but because though it was nice, it was an oddly hollow feeling. Nothing was different. She was still the same person and still felt a longing for more.

We have all gained those circumstances we thought would give us real life only to find that we don’t get the life we thought we would. It’s like someone keeps moving the goal posts on us. There is an interesting thing you’ve probably experienced while driving across the desert. You look down the freeway an off in the distance you see what appears to be water, maybe even on the freeway. It’s like there’s a lake out there. But when you get to that spot there is no water there at all. What you saw was a mirage. The idea that some circumstances can produce that life we want is a mirage like that. You can chase it all over the desert, but every time you get to the place where you thought you saw it, there’s nothing there. That’s what the idea that some circumstance can give us the life we want is like. It is a mirage, and chasing it will always lead to disappointment.

What must we have inside us to have this life? Here are six things I believe are essential to it. We need to have a connection to and on going experience of God. We need to have love. We need peace. We need passion. We need joy. We need hope. The fact that we need love is obvious. Without love our souls and our lives become seriously distorted and ultimately die. It is also obvious we need peace, because without it life will be stressful and unpleasant. When I say we need peace I mean we need what the ancient Hebrews called shalom. It means an overall sense of well-being. It means being at peace with who I am as well as being confident and calm about what is happening in my life and will happen in the future. We need passion, because to live apathetically, not caring about anything, is just a form of death. No one wants to live like that.

But that raises the question, passion for what? And where does passion come from? I recently read Michael Lewis’ book *Moneyball*. In it he wrote about a man named Bill James. James was a graduate of the University of Kansas who served in the Army. After he got out of the military he worked for a time as a security guard at a Stokely Van Camp pork and beans cannery. That was his job, but not his passion. His passion was baseball statistics. He was obsessive about analyzing baseball stats and understanding their real significance. He began writing about them, looking at the statistics in a revolutionary way. He has had tremendous impact on how baseball is understood and how it is played. *Time* magazine named him to be one of the most influential people in the world. His wife said if she had really understood the depth of his obsession about baseball, she probably would not have married him. He’s passionate about baseball.

Ultimately where does the passion we need for a full life come from? It comes from having a mission, from having a point to life, from having our lives mean something. But it must be something truly meaningful. Anything less will eventually fail us.

Obviously we need hope and joy. Without them we die. Maybe the most controversial in my list of things we need to have a full life is that connection with God. This one gets missed by many people. We were created by God, and we were created for him. We were made to live connected to him, in relationship with him, with him a reality in our lives every single day. Without that connection, without that relationship, we can have everything else, but we will have a nagging sense that it is all empty, that something is missing. We have that sense because something fundamental, something essential to full human life is absent.

At one point during our recent hot weather I turned on a fan. Or I tried to. This is an old fan that has become a bit balky. It is a matter of time until it dies, and I figured that day might have come. But then I noticed a problem. It wasn’t plugged in. Without being connected to a source of power it is useless. It can’t be what a fan is created to be. We are like that. Remember that God is the source of life. If we aren’t plugged into him we will never have the life that we were created to live.

I submit to you that if a person has all 6 of those things, that individual will have the fullness of life we all long for. No matter what situation that person is in, they will be full of life. They will have contentment even if the situation is something they’d prefer to change. But a person could have what most people would consider to have ideal circumstances, the best that life has to offer, but if that individual is missing even one of those 6 items, they will not have the life they long for. Take any one of them away, and that person will feel it. Whether it is love, peace, passion, joy, hope or the connection with God, that one thing will color everything else that is going on in their life.

That brings us to why John said Jesus is the life. Jesus is the life because he had all those things personally. He had life as we long for it, even though his circumstances mostly were terrible. More relevant to us right now, he wants to give us that life. John wants us to know we can have the life we want, and that it is found in Jesus. We can see some of that specifically in these verses. In John 14:27 Jesus said he would give his followers peace. It wouldn’t be the kind of peace the world gives, a peace that is fragile and dependent on the right circumstances. It is a peace one can have even while on trial for one’s life. Jesus had that, and he said he would give it to his followers.

We will have all the love we could ever want. Ephesians 3:19 says God’s love surpasses knowledge. It is so great, so vast that we can never find the end of it. Romans 8:38-39 says nothing can separate us from that love. We also need human love, and John tells us this life in Christ brings fellowship with other people. It brings love into our lives at a deep level.

In verse 4 John mentions joy that is part of the life that one can have in Christ. He says something interesting. John wrote these things to “make our joy complete.” That’s not what I expected. I expected he would say he wrote to make “your joy complete.” There is some controversy about that because some of the ancient manuscripts had that wording. In English there is only one letter difference between “our joy” and “your joy.” Though the words are different that is also true in Greek. So did John write to increase “our joy” or “your joy”? It’s hard to know. In cases like this, scholars tend to take the harder reading, on the premise that it is unlikely that some scribe would change it from an easier reading to the harder one. I’m not convinced that is necessarily true here, but let’s assume it is. Either way, the fact is that there is joy in this life in Christ. And it is a joy that perhaps John said can be increased to fullness by helping others experience it.

That is actually a characteristic of joy. Joy is always increased when it is shared. Our daughter, Carissa, saw a news item that made her laugh. The article said that there had been an incident at the San Diego Safari Park, not far from here, in which a guest at the park had come into contact with a bat that was captured, tested and found to have rabies. Unfortunately they didn’t know the identity of the guest, so they were trying to find the woman. She might have to get rabies shots. Well guess who Carissa thought of. Her parents are the only people she knows who have had to have rabies shots. So she immediately shared the story with Laurie. When Laurie saw it, she immediately found me and showed me the story. Why do we share things like that? Ultimately it is because our joy increases in sharing it with others, and so does our laughter.

Verse 3 tells us that this life that John had found in Jesus also includes “fellowship with the Father.” This is element that is essential if we are to have real life. We need to have a real, dynamic connection to God. It is this connection that is the fountain of all the other elements of full life. There is a physical condition that first manifests itself with weakness and malaise, but if it goes on it begins to produce gum disease, poor wound healing and even bleeding from the skin. It can cause personality changes, and ultimately death from infection or bleeding. It is called scurvy. During the age of sail on long sea voyages half of the sailors would die of this disease. Scottish surgeon James Lind found in the middle of the 18th century that it could be treated with citrus fruit. It is a result of lack of vitamin C. The thing about scurvy is that you can eat all the bread you want, you could drink all the grog you could handle, you could eat as much pork as you could stand, and none of that would help. Only vitamin C will keep you healthy. What about niacin, or riboflavin, or magnesium or vitamin D? Your body needs all those things, but those will not fix the problem if you lack vitamin C. Without it you will get sick, and ultimately die. I bring that up because if you don’t have that connection with God, you will have something a bit like spiritual scurvy. It will produce negative impacts on your soul, you’ll know something is wrong, something is missing, and if it goes unchecked your soul will die. Just like nothing can substitute for vitamin C physically, nothing can substitute for that connection with God. People try all kinds of things to heal what they feel in their soul, but only real fellowship with God will solve the problem. We can have that through Jesus.

Notice in this passage John talks about eternal life. This life we have also has hope. It brings meaning to us, because we are connected to God. For our lives to have meaning, they have to mean something to someone. It’s nice if they meaning something to other people. That’s very important to us. But in the end we need ultimate, even eternal meaning. That only comes from God.

CONCLUSION

Writer Sybil Stanton wrote, “Your purpose…has nothing to do with grandiose goals, lofty achievement or universal fame. It is the quiet confidence that even if you never leave your neighborhood, you will have lived fully.”

William Alexander asked a good question in his book, *The $64 Tomato*. If you were required to live the same life over and over for eternity, would you choose the life you’re living now? Then he asks, “If not, why are you living it now?”

Are you living the full life God has called us to live? Colleen Moore was one of the most highly paid actresses of the silent film era. She had an experience once that I found hilarious. She was touring in Europe, and while she was in Zurich the mayor of the city held a banquet in her honor. At the beginning they had the orchestra play what they thought was our national anthem in honor of this American actress. Everyone stood as they played *God Save The Queen*. She made a mistake when they sat down by telling the mayor, “That was nice, but that’s the national anthem of England.” The mayor, dismayed, told the orchestra leader about the mistake. So everyone stood up as they tried again, this time playing *The Stars And Stripes Forever*. Laughing, Moore said, “Yes, that’s an American patriotic march, though it’s not our national anthem.” Now mortified the mayor asked what the anthem is. She told him it’s *The Star Spangled Banner*. The humiliated mayor relayed this news to the orchestra leader. Everyone stood up yet again as the orchestra played *Yes, We Have No Bananas*. Nearly in hysterics but having learned her lesson, Moore said, “Yes, thank you. That was wonderful.”

I fear that for many of us the life we are living is as close to the real life that we want and God wants for us as *Yes We Have No Bananas* is to *The Star Spangled Banner.* There are some things we should take from this passage.

First, there is a life that is the full life that is possible for us. It is tragic to miss out on that life. Not only will that be a terrible waste here on earth, it will have eternal consequences. But this passage reminds us that there is a remarkable life available. It is a life connected to God, one where there is always hope, peace, joy and love, in every possible circumstance. It is a life with meaning and passion. It is a river of living water within us.

Second, that life is available in Jesus Christ. It doesn’t come from circumstances, or achievement, or pleasure, or excitement. It doesn’t come from being more disciplined than other people. It doesn’t come from obeying rules better than others or from being more religious. It doesn’t come from following a formula or taking the proper steps. It comes from believing in Jesus Christ, trusting in who he is and what he has done for us. It comes from knowing we are forgiven, accepted and loved by God and living in the reality of that, living in his presence, each day trusting that what he supplies is enough.

Third, we are not in heaven. Pastors like me are sometimes guilty of overselling. Yes, there is a different kind of life offered to us in Christ, but it is not yet life in God’s eternal kingdom of peace. Romans 8:23 says, “We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.” We have the Spirit, and the fruit he produces, love, joy, peace. But Paul says we still groan inwardly. In other words, we still deal with the reality of life as fallen people in a broken world.

This world has been infected by evil. It is like a virus. When you have a virus you don’t feel well. You know something is off. It is not like corona virus where you can have it and feel fine. Everything else can be right but with the virus you won’t be living at 100%. Some will feel deathly ill, while some will feel just a little off.

A few months after Laurie and I got engaged, I moved from the LA area to Encinitas. She was still living in LA. We were apart until our wedding a few months later. This was before cell phones, so there were no free calls or texting. We would call each other a couple of times a week, but those were something known as long distance calls, and they were expensive. So we did something that no longer happens much. We wrote letters to each other. We’d write mostly every day. Those letters from Laurie were the highlight of my day. They were life giving. I hated being away from her. We lived for weekends when she could come down on the train and we could be together for a couple of days. Talking to her on the phone, exchanging letters, being with her for short visits, having her in my life and being loved by her was infinitely better than my life had been without her. But what I wanted was the day we could get married and be together permanently. We both looked forward to that passionately. I remember people would ask me how long until our wedding, and I could tell them how many days and hours until that great day. I was counting them every day.

Right now believers in Jesus live in that engagement period. The life we will have when we can be in his presence, in his eternal kingdom, permanently, is the life we all long for most. It is what we were made for. But we don’t have that yet. We are still waiting for it. The life we have now in Christ is way better than what we had or would have without him. It is a huge improvement. It is a taste of what is to come. But it’s not the final thing, the life that awaits us. Because of that we will still feel some longing for that time when the perfect comes.

Fourth, it may be that we still have this desire for something more than we have and a sense that we ought to experience that better life. Why is that? Is there something we need to do about that? Part of that is the effect of being in that engagement period. We just have to live with that reality. But there is something we can do to increase our experience of the life Christ gives us. We need to remember that we subtract from our experience of this life when we try to substitute something other than walking with Jesus as the source of the life. The more we focus our eyes on Jesus, the more we give thanks for him and for all that he provides for us, the more we trust that what God supplies is enough, the more that we see him as the source of what we need most, the more we live in his presence every day, the more of that life we will experience. To the degree that we think life comes from something other than him, we actually end up lessening our lives.

Let’s remember this. Life is about relationship. What fills our lives with love, joy, peace, is loving and being loved. It is no surprise then that what fills us with the fullest life possible is a dynamic, powerful relationship to God.