

To our dear Papsda community

*to the people that sit here each week,
to the people that each of you are connected with,
to those who watch our services online,
to those who call Papsda home but live in another country,
to those who say 'Jesus I believe you but your followers I am not so sure about'.*

*To those who are on top of the world,
to those who are struggling to get out of bed each morning,
to those whose marriage is in trouble (or ruins),
to those whose children are breaking your heart,
to those of you whose heart is broken,
to those who are depressed,
to those who are lonely,
to those who feel like they are on the outer of the "in-group",
to those who are struggling with addiction,
to those who are "too busy".*

*To those who only come to our church for Spring Praise and Christmas Praise,
to those who invite people here,
to those who are planning to invite someone,
to those who are invited and are here for the first time.*

*To those who are in a Life Group but don't come at 11am,
to those who are not in a Life Group,
to those who have small children and have been up since the wee hours of the morning,
to those who wish they had small children,
to those who have almost completed their lifetime of growing and are ageing.*

*To those who wish we, as a community, were changing faster but continue to support us anyway,
to those who keep coming even though they don't really understand or buy into our vision yet,
or think that maybe we've changed too much.*

*To the church who share this building with us but don't worship on this day,
to our broader Adventist community,
to you who serve countless hours in the local church,
to you who serve in far off places,
to you who have not yet felt prompted to serve,
to those who serve by giving financially,
to those whose hearts are overflowing,
to those who long for more.*

Grace and Peace.

"Thank You"

To every individual in the Papsda extended family near or far we want to say 'THANK YOU'.

Thank you for being Christ followers. Thank you for serving, for being contagious, gracious, and accepting, for being willing to change – thank you for going out on a limb for the gospel to be advanced outside your comfort zone, in our city.

Thank you for joining a life-group and going out on cold night when you would prefer to be at home watching T.V, and for recognising that we are far, far more than just a one-hour-a-week religion.

Thank you for loving each other and being there for each other, both in the happy times and in the pain. Thank you for serving locally and far away. Thank you for being ministers of the gospel. Thank you for saying 'Yes' to the call on your life.

Thank you to our young people for asking questions, thank you for your passion, your energy and your enthusiasm. Thank you for being willing to let our young people lead and to be involved. Thank you to those who share their wisdom and experience and heart.

Thank you to our children for teaching us what it means to be "contagious" as a part of normal life and for showing us the simple faith that is needed for the kingdom. Thank you for being accommodating and letting us experiment with this thing we call "church."

Grace and Peace to every one of you.

"Grace and Peace"

We keep saying these words over and over. They are the words that Paul's letter began with and six weeks ago we started with Grace and Peace.

When we explore Grace and Peace – when they get a hold on you – you will never be the same.

Paul is showing a new pattern of thinking, of feeling and of acting, a Christ pattern. It begins with Grace and peace.

Grace is a gift. What is a gift?

The love of the **F**ather who created,
the **g**ift of the **s**on who died & lived a perfect life for us,
the **p**resence of the **H**oly **S**pirit in our lives.

- **THAT** is the **g**ift.

The tension is knowing that God is still sovereign, even when a young man takes his own life or families fall apart or financial ruin is imminent. Even in that tension, we continue to embrace the gift of grace. We continue to surrender. We continue to baptise. We continue to celebrate newborn babies. And we are ever so grateful for the friends that support us.

Grace and peace.

The world sees grace like obligation (like the feeling we have when we get an invitation to dinner, and we feel that we have to invite them back) acting out of guilt, not grace.

It's easy to give because we have all the power and strength. It's harder to receive because that makes us helpless and powerless. Growing up we learnt that you earn your keep. You work, you study, you do things out of obligation. So we assume God must be the same?

BUT, Jesus shows us differently.

- He let's a loose woman with a questionable reputation wash his feet in a culture where that is forbidden.
- He defends a promiscuous woman against those who are ready to throw rocks & stones.
- Jesus hangs naked on a cross, thirsty, suffering, saying, "forgive them".
- Jesus chooses to give His first followers authority.

In all of these interactions He gave them Grace.

Do you know what Grace does?
Grace sneaks into the old shed
that is filled to the roof with grief and shame and loathing and despair
and grace smiles.
Grace lights a match until it burns it to the ground.

"A place of grace"

We desperately desire that our church continues to grow into a place of grace, a place where people find acceptance no matter what their situation in life is - a place for the person who smells bad, a place for the person who thinks differently to me. This is a place for the powerless, the low-life's, the disenfranchised, the people with no-other-place-to-go, a place that is the hospital to the sick. That is what we want Papsda to be.

We want Papsda to be a place of connecting, a place of worship, a place of serving, a place of sharing, a place of growing. Not a physical place, but a relational place. Relationship with each other, relationship with people far from God, relationship with people close to God, and relationship with God above all.

We want Papsda to be a place of ministry, a place of serving. Ministry carried out not just by those who are appointed or gifted or paid to lead, but ministry by everyone – every person. The Biblical metaphor we have is 'a kingdom of priests' – the priesthood of every Christ follower, ministers of the gospel, proclaiming God's grace, women and men, children and elderly, poor and rich, black and white and everything in between – all **ministers** for God.

What we desire and dream for our church, is that it would be a place of equality, a place for the sharing of ideas, a place for both suffering and joy, a place for growing, a place for ministry, a **place** for grace.

"Suffering & Joy"

We read this letter from this man Paul who writes from a dungeon – it is dark, it is underground. He is on death row. He is as low as you can go.

And yet, this prisoner uses words like joy and peace and rejoice. This is somehow disturbing because this is **not** where you expect to hear words like these.

Paul insists that suffering and joy are good friends; that suffering and joy can hold hands; that suffering and joy can even kiss.

This is not conventional wisdom. You are either happy because your life is going according to your plan **OR** you are horrible because "God" messed up your plan and now you have suffering, financial trouble, car accidents and relationship setbacks.

Conventional wisdom says it is one or the other – **joy OR suffering** – and yet everything in this world around us, has suffering **AND** joy together. Within our church we experience suffering and joy together.

**All sorts of flowers grow up between the cracks of ugly pavement
- their location makes them strikingly beautiful
because you wouldn't otherwise notice them.**

That's why some of the best letters come from prison, the best poems from suffering, the best songs from longing and the best stories from 'giving up thinking that anything would come from this'.

People within our church family run counter to conventional wisdom and show us the joy that they cling to even in their suffering...

Even though a marriage might have seemed more bad than good, the joy comes in knowing that it is beginning to be strengthened by new trust and new experiences of closeness, like Pete and Belynda who shared their joy, their struggles and their victories with the teens last weekend.

Parents that hang on with tenacious hope even though it's the hardest thing that they have ever done. Cherishing the moments of joy in the bleakness of routine despair. Like the family of Kevin Inglis who suffers from profound autism.

People that experience physical set backs like Terry, whose eyes don't see, but whose heart is open to see the joy of new life in his grandkids.

Teens that have become a part of this church, that have adopted **US** as their family, to go on this life journey, even with no support from home or parents.

JOY is learning to discern that God is up to something – 'even in THIS'. Joy is learning to perceive things that run counter to the prevailing wisdom about how the world works. Joy is evidence you are being formed in a particular kind of way.

"The Incomparable Christ"

Much more than anything else, we would wish that every one of you would know and understand the incredible, incomparable, indescribable God of the universe that truly became like one of us.

This Jesus, who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something that should be grasped or hung onto, but instead, was the one who was willing to empty Himself, to take on the form of a servant slave, and become one of us – human.

Then having become human, He humbled Himself even further, right to the point of death, death on a cross, death at the hands of His brothers – the very race of beings He had created.

And because of all this, God exalted Jesus to the very highest position in the universe, giving Him a name above all and every name, and at the very mention of His name – Jesus – every knee would bow down, and every tongue would confess that **Jesus is Lord**.

We desire that these would be Papsda knees and Papsda tongues that bow down and that confess Jesus as Lord. More than anything else we desire for you to know this incredible Jesus – this incomparable – this indescribable Jesus, who gives us grace as a gift and who transforms our thinking into God-like thinking.

The Jesus who is our brother, who was willing to suffer for us, but who now rules the universe and is the King of all. He is the King in our community. He is God of Papsda. We exist to represent His Kingdom and to hold Him up as our only hope – our hope and the hope of the world.

"Knowing Jesus"

We desire, as passionately as Paul did, that you would know this Jesus. We count, we consider everything else as rubbish, as garbage, as worthless in **comparison** to the incredible value of knowing Jesus Christ our Lord.

By 'knowing Jesus' you really can become the kind of person that lives in the God way of feeling, and thinking and acting.

By 'knowing Jesus' you really can become the kind of person who is the hands and feet of Jesus in this world.

By 'knowing Jesus' you really can become a person who sees your life in a whole new way.

We desperately desire that you would **know** Him.

That you would become, as it says in the Psalms, a person who is like a tree planted by the water who yields its fruit in season and whose leaf doesn't wither. Always prospering. Do you know what trees like that do? When the wind and storms and rain come – they bend, they sway – **BUT THEY DON'T BREAK** because they are so firmly planted in the soil of grace and peace. So set yourself on becoming this kind of person. One who can write letters exploding with joy and wisdom and vitality, as Paul does.

We desperately desire that you would **know** Him & **experience** Him – not just know about Him.

As we grow to 'know Jesus' more we will become a new person who resolves to find grace and peace in any situation. A person who will not be crushed by the circumstances they find themselves in. A person who will always assume, even in this situation, even in this tragedy, even in this desert experience, in this failure, mistake, regret, nightmare, "even in this" there will be some sort of resurrection. **"Even in this"**.

You will become the kind of person who doesn't grumble or complain because of your larger perspective. You decided on grace and peace.

You will become the kind of person who is the unshakable. You don't judge situations in a hurry because you know that surprises are just around the corner.

You don't blow your fuse, you don't fly off the handle, or react to provocation.

You don't feel weighed down or regret your past – because you see your past through Christ. So the tough, hard, shameful parts are now living and breathing examples of grace.

You will become the kind of person who doesn't say: "I could never talk about that." Instead you will say "let me tell you what I have made it through".

Like a sport lover who plays the game and does not yell at the ref even though their call was bad.

Like a shopper who gets through their entire list without angst.

Like someone stuck in traffic who doesn't give into the road rage.

Like a parent who did not yell at their kids in the height of frustration with them.

All the things that should have killed you, made you stronger.

All unspeakable things are evidence that Christ is real.

All those things that should have been wounds are in fact evidence that grace and peace are real. You can say, "rejoice" and again you can say "rejoice" because you know grace. It has changed your life.

You are not anxious. You don't have to live with that. Living on the edge of your seat freaking out about what is next. Christ's pattern is yours.

**The same creative energy that unleashed the universe
is being unleashed in YOU.**

You are going to be fine because He lives in you.

"Sharing Christ"

Paul ends his letter with ...

"All the Lords people here send you greetings – and all the rest of God's people send you greetings too, especially those in Caesar's household".

In Caesar's household? How can this be?

He is in Caesars prison because he does not believe that Caesar is Lord and yet somehow now Caesars workers, the people within his very household have heard Pauls message and believe it too.

Paul's whole life was committed to the one all encompassing goal – to share His God with other people. And the fact that they are pagans, the fact that they are the very people who have incarcerated him does not stop him or prevent him from sharing Christ with Caesar's household.

Paul's enthusiasm for God is infectious, it is contagious – it cannot be stopped.

In concluding our letter to you this morning, we desperately desire that we would take up the mission of Paul to share Christ. We want nothing more than for Papsda people to be contagious, contagious Christians.

In your school, in your office, in your factory, in your home, in the car, in the plane, on the fishing boat, at the sport's field, in the rugby corporate box, in the jail, at the ball, in the hospital, at the park – Contagious Christians passionately sharing Jesus Christ so that even Caesar's household would send us greetings.

I want you to know, Paul writes, "that everything that has happened to me here, everything has helped to spread the Good News. And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear".

**What will it take in our family?
What will it take in the Papsda community
for us to gain the confidence to boldly speak God's message without fear?**

Whether we live or die is not the question – the question is how will we live? Will we share Christ with the people of this city – Auckland city?

I pray that you will ask God to show you what the "next right thing to do is?" You WILL receive. You will receive grace, pure grace.

For Paul, the last word has not yet been spoken. Pain, humiliation, shame and suffering are not the last word. The last word has not yet been spoken. The worst word to be spoken was the word "cross", but the best word was "exalted", which only came from hanging on the cross. Our worst words are: aids, hunger, homelessness, genocide, greedy executives, rape, and loneliness.

Resurrection messes it all up – it brings all people to the party and announces that the last word has not yet been spoken. Until then – in our fear and trembling and doubting and rejoicing and being forgiven and giving and receiving there is more left to be said.

We come to the end. What a letter! What an ending!

Like all good endings – it's just a good beginning.

We long – we desperately long for all of you to know and to understand and to live and to experience Grace and peace.

And so with all the love we can muster in our beings towards you – our family, our church, our community ...

Your brother, your sister, your servants, your leaders,
Stephen & Leanne & the Papsda teaching team.