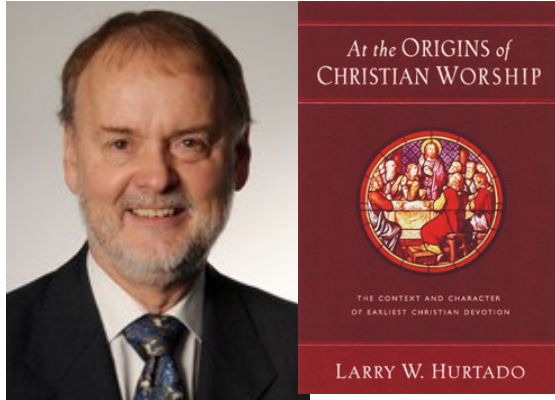


Wake Up O Sleeper!

Ephesians 5: 8b-21

**First Presbyterian Church
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In recent years, some great research has explored the earliest Christian worship. Scholars such as Larry Hurtado from Edinburgh University have established that from the very beginning, the first Christians gave devotion to Jesus as unto a god. Praising the man Jesus as the divine Son of God was not something that came along centuries or even decades later. From one

decisive moment onward, the followers of Jesus hailed him as Lord and Christ. They would never waver from that affirmation, even though it cost them their lives. What was that moment? *The resurrection*. From earliest times, the disciples of Jesus worshipped him as the risen one. The first believers saw him alive again after his crucifixion. Jesus' rising established him as the true Son of God who came to save us.

You don't have to believe in the resurrection to acknowledge the evidence-based history. The documents prove that the earliest Christians affirmed Jesus' rising and because of it, they hailed him as divine. The evidence also shows that believing that Jesus rose had a profound effect on his followers. Trusting in the physical resurrection of the man Jesus created spiritual resurrection in the lives of those believers. People changed. They reported coming alive inside. They became moved to write soaring praises. They established a community characterized by open sharing and deepening love. In other words, giving themselves to the reality of Jesus' resurrection created a powerful internal experience in the believers. They reported, consistently, that faith in Jesus arisen made them feel reborn inside, like new people, filled with a sense of fresh, everlasting life.

If you follow the history of Christian worship and spiritual practices, you discover that this inner experience of resurrection remains the *usual* occurrence for those who come to faith in Jesus. It's reported all through the centuries and all over the world. Someone tells us the story of Jesus. How he lived and taught and healed. How he died by Roman crucifixion. How on the third day he rose again from the

dead and is Lord and Savior. Suddenly, we believe it. It's like we come awake to reality out of a deep sleep. Light shines in our darkness. The truth gets revealed to us. The meaning of everything gets illuminated. We see where we've been wrong. We see what our purpose is. We feel a surge of life, forgiveness and love inside us. It motivates us to change many patterns of living. It moves us to share the story. It inspires us to move out of ourselves and love others.

What's really fascinating to me is how this pattern of revelation and resurrection happens not just once at conversion. It's the pattern for our continual growth in Christ. Light shines to wake us up. A voice sounds inside us to lift us out of ourselves. We get called to die to an old life and rise to a new one. Over and over.

Now I tell you all of this because I believe it's the key to our passage today. It's the motivating power in changing our ethics and behavior. The resurrected Jesus calls his people to new life. This is the basis for Paul's calling the Ephesians to the morality and habits of a life stunningly different than the Roman culture around them. At the heart of this passage are the poetic words Paul quotes. Many believe this is part of an ancient hymn. The lines Paul gives us are sourced in two passages from Isaiah. They have to do with both light and resurrection. Paul says:

“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

We all get these words at the most basic level. You're a teenager “dead asleep” at 11 in the morning. Your Mom comes in, turns on the light, and says, “Wake up sleepy. Time to get back to life. We've got lots to do.” We also get this as a word picture. Your friend in class says to you “Hey, are you asleep? The teacher said to open your book to p. 125. Come on, snap out of it.” We can sleepwalk through our days when we're preoccupied with something else. We need people to call us back to waking life.

But on a still deeper level, this is a call to spiritual resurrection. We know that Paul elsewhere describes death as being asleep. We know that Paul told the Ephesians how before they were united to Christ, they were dead, spiritually dead, in their sins. The gospel is like reveille in the morning. The trumpet of this news about Jesus rouses us to get up out of spiritual death and come into new life.

This snippet of a hymn also brings us to the mystery of God’s work and our participation in it. When your Mom wakes you up, she tells you to wake up. But if she hadn’t already wakened you, you wouldn’t hear her say “Wake up!” She wakes you and calls you to *participate* in being awake. Pull back the covers. Engage the day. Embrace being waked up. Yes, the sun is already shining. But when you participate in being awake, you feel it rays warm you and call you out into the world.

So this passage is a call to faith. A wake-up call to trust and participate. Wake up, O sleeper and rise—not from the bed, but from the dead. And Christ will shine on you. Can you feel the power this call exerts, just by hearing it?

To explore its meaning, I’d like to turn us to an image that Christian artists have been painting for many centuries. And I’d like to take us to an excerpt from a sermon even older than the images.



Take a look at this painting by Joakim Skvogaard from 1894. It’s called “Christ in the Realm of the Dead.” You see Jesus with his arms outstretched. Light streams in from behind him. Life invades the world of the dead. There kneeling before him with arms reaching up is our first mother Eve. Behind her comes Adam, also stretching out his hands in prayer and welcome. Behind them a

multitude of departed souls surges forward. They have been in darkness so long. Has one come at last to liberate them.

Now, is this a picture of a real event? We can’t say for sure. We know that Jesus in spirit entered the realm of the dead between the cross and resurrection. We know that the power of his atonement stretches backwards in time as well as forwards. His salvation affects those who awaited a savior before he entered history. But whether or how he liberated the dead occurred out of our sight. We can only wonder. What would it have been like for Jesus to crash the gates of death.

The spiritual truth in this picture, however, remains profound. At the least, this image figuratively portrays what happens whenever the risen Jesus shines his

light in a spiritually dead soul. He calls us out of darkness. He brings us to life. He changes everything. So try this picture on for a moment. For just a little while, don't worry whether this is a literal or figurative picture. Let your imagination enable you to feel with the moment described in the ancient sermon.

The preacher, whose name is lost to us, tells us what Jesus is up to:

[Christ] has gone to search for our first parents, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death (Luke 1:79), He has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, He who is both God and the son of Eve.

The Lord approached them bearing the cross, the weapon that had won Him the victory...Christ took Adam and Eve by the hand and raised them up, saying: 'Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.'

'I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and for your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise.

I order you, O sleeper, to awake.

I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell.

Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead.

Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image.

Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.

The spiritual truth in this message knocks me over. *I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell.* You were made for so much more than this darkness in which you languish. Come on, get up. Let's get out of here. I defeated the death that killed me. I also defeated the death that defeats you, deflates you and destroys you. All the deadly habits that entomb you. All the deathly patterns that sabotage your relationships. All the guilt that enchains you. All the hell into which someone put you. All the heavy gloom that descends on you every morning and makes even daylight like twilight. Look, I did not create you for death. I did not go to a God-forsaken death in order to leave you as a prisoner in hell. Are you ready to go now?

Come on, get up. Let's get out of here. As I rise in body, you will rise. Spiritually now, but one day also in body just like me. Will you come? Will you take my hand? Will you trust me?

Wake up O sleeper and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. That's the basis for the ethics Paul gives them in Ephesians 5. Jesus called you out death into life. He calls you every day into more light, more life. If this is remotely true, why would you go back to playing with dead things? Why would you waste your life in disordered sexuality? Why would you keep nurturing greed, seeking to stuff yourself with things that don't satisfy but make the hunger worse? Why would you keep getting wasted with alcohol or gummies or weed or pills when Christ has such life for you?

That's why Paul can describe a life of being filled with the Spirit. Not filled with vitriol, with lust, with revenge, with backbiting, with staying foggy with chemicals. But a life overflowing with his Spirit. My hero Raniero Cantalamessa loves to talk about "the sober intoxication of the Spirit." Imbibing the Spirit deeply, we do not lose ourselves, but find ourselves. We fulfill our very being. We get to enter the conversation of love and joy that has been going on between Father, Son and Holy Spirit since eternity.

That's why the conclusion to this section on ethical behavior has to do with fellowship and worship. We're not just talking about being straight arrows. We're talking engaging one another at deep, fulfilling levels. We get to speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We get to live lives marked by gratitude and satisfying habits of thanksgiving. We get to sing and make melody in our hearts to God.

Recently it struck me just how distinctive this way of resurrected life is from those not yet in Christ. I was at a service in which we sang two of the most famous and popular hymns in western culture. Yet 80% of the people were not singing. They looked surprised, stunned to be standing and asked to open their mouths in worship. The idea of such joy and gratitude appeared completely foreign to them. It pained me. I can't imagine how dull life would be without the praise of God. How empty my days would be without my Father in heaven to thank. How lost I would feel if there were no higher purpose than getting through the moment. I'm pretty sure I'd just fall back into the moral chaos of the culture around me, living for the moment. I'd be a prisoner in the hell of a godless world.

But that is not our fate. The news of Jesus risen has been told to us. And the Spirit enabled us to believe it, and we got made new. Now we live with the lovely trumpet sounds of heaven calling to us all the time. Now we hear Jesus say, every hour, “Wake up O sleeper and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell. Rise with me! Live a resurrected life.