

# *Interrupting Death*

Ephesians 2: 1-7

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Paul speaks some strong words. He reminds the young Christians in Ephesus what life was like before they got united to Jesus. You were as good as dead. Stuck in sins. Controlled by the flow of the world. Breathing in the air of a world that lives for itself. You were mad all the time, and felt like everything and everyone was always against you. You didn't even know it, but you were slaves to desires that were betraying you. Not much has changed.



Here's our new kitchen when it was almost finished. Isn't it beautiful? It reminds me that I am but a servant of our house. When we moved here, we bought the nicest house we could. I love the oak trees and the balcony in the front. I love the established neighborhood. It's a great house. And it demands to be served. I am but it's slave. Fix me! Change me! Tend me! Pay for me. If you're gonna have a house this nice, you'd better have a great kitchen. I feel like there's no choice. I'm locked into a certain level of affluence that demands to be fed with money. I'm controlled by the course of this world that I chose to enter but cannot leave.



Last month's In Register magazine had a cover story about sober curiosity. Kelly Hurtado wrote about discovering how much alcohol was controlling her life. When she tried a 30 day alcohol fast, Kelly realized she was spending a lot of time planning when she could drink nice wine. She also realized that after the first 20 minutes of drinking, everything went downhill. She spent the rest of the evening chasing the buzz and never catching it. The month of refraining from drinking opened her eyes to how much she had been captivated by it, just as part of the normal course of social life. For Kelly, 30 days turned to 60 turned to a year, and a lovely sense of freedom and joy in her life. That gave her courage to reveal what we know in our festive south Louisiana culture but seldom can say. Drinking is diminishing my life, but I don't know how to stop.

The pressure on parents these days is tremendous. Parents of little ones can feel as if they have no choice but to ride on the busy train. Most of the day is spent getting kids from one great activity to another. School lasts longer than ever. Then, dance, or sport, can rule the evenings and weekends. Everyone is exhausted. We get locked into a life we're not sure we even want.

So what happens as these kids get older? I have friends who work with college students. A professor tells me that the students experience a great deal of fragility. Resistance throws them for a loop. Opposition infuriates or incapacitates. A therapist surmises that many adolescents "do not know their own strength, grit and resiliency. They know their triggers, but seem to buckle in front of them . . . Young people see life as happening to them, not them happening to life. Often I feel like I am trying to help lambs find wolf teeth . . ." Our adolescents feel caught in the grip of forces too powerful for them.

But that's not where it ends. I keep hearing about broken hearted parents of children in their 20's and early 30's. Though raised in love, given every advantage, poured into, these young adults stop talking to their parents. It's not teenage rebellion. They're past that. It's something else. Something in the air. Families are willing to divide over politics, and views on sexuality, and personal autonomy. It's not just disagreeing. It's the grown children deciding their parents are toxic and not worthy of the effort of relating. It's like the parents and their adult children get locked into two different worlds, separated from each other by a huge dividing wall.

We're all breathing the air. We're all drinking the Kool-Aid. And so many of us are just mad all the time. I've never seen so many people so angry so often. We're ready to swear, sue, pound, or denigrate others. We are, as Paul says, children of wrath. In his letter to Titus, Paul described our former life as "slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another" (Titus 3:3). This was before we could launch our vitriol from the safety of our phones!

The gospel is relentlessly honest about the human condition. It can be grossly offensive. How dare you tell me that I am dead in trespasses and sins! As if you get to decide what's right and wrong. As if you have the right to say that I am not OK in myself. I am glorious. You are a bigot to suggest there's anything wrong with any of us.

But this relentlessly honesty of God's Word, when spoken in love, gives me freedom to admit the truth. Things aren't working out so well. I'm locked into patterns of life that I don't want. I can't afford them. They're exhausting me. Draining me. Stealing my health. Making me crazy and agitated all the time.

We're *dead* in the water. *Dead* men walking. *Dead* tired. On a *death* march down a path we thought we had chosen but discovered too late has enslaved us. And it will use us until we've nothing left.

Then Paul turns it. With two tiny words. The most blessed words in all the universe. *But God*. We were dead. We were slaves. We were children of wrath. But God. God interrupted death. He did this based on his essential character.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

We were dead. God made us alive with Christ. Why? Because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are, by nature, rich with mercy. Overflowing with kindness. As a guy said this week, God's currency is mercy. He acted in grace towards us. Because of an irreducible quality of his very existence as the Triune God. The great love with which he loved us. There's nothing greater than that. Nothing behind that. No other reason around the corner from that. He loves us because he loves us. He showed mercy because he is merciful. Life is hard. The world and the devil want to eat us alive. We make horrible choices and get ensnared. But God loves us because he loves us.

Back to Paul's letter to Titus, we hear him explain it this way:

But when the goodness and lovingkindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us . . . according to his mercy.

God's essential nature as love showed up in the world when he stepped into our midst in Jesus Christ. Jesus loved all the way unto shedding his blood for us. He poured out his life on our behalf. In order to show us mercy. He saved us. These works of Jesus established the grounds for our reconciliation with God. He came to us as one of us. He lived in faithfulness to his Father and open hearted love to all he met. He took a cross he did not deserve in order to take the sins of the world as his own. In his rising he broke the power of death. In his return to

heaven, he made a place for us in the inner circle of God's love. In every way, he saved us.

And how do we get in on that? There's no other way to describe it than mystical and spiritual. We get joined to Jesus. We get united to Christ. We hear the gospel, believe it, and find that we get connected to the dying and rising of Jesus. He lives inside us. We live inside of him.

Paul is so enthused about this union that he actually coins new words. He jams the preposition "with" to the verb "make alive." So it's one word, "make-alive-with." He compacts words to convey just how closely aligned with Jesus we are. One word, "raised-with." One word, "seated-with." It feels like he'd like to just find a word or draw a picture that puts us inside Jesus.

Union with Christ means we are connected to the whole journey of Jesus. Jesus died. We died with him and so got free from the deathly sins and patterns that controlled us. Jesus rose. We rose with him and so have the power of a new life coursing inside us. Jesus got seated in heaven. We are there with him. Think of the way an elected representative gets seated in the legislature. This person now has the authority and the right to take a place in the house. We, in Christ, now have a place with him in heaven. It's our homeland. It's our source.

This means that when we get joined to Jesus, we get free from the enslavements of the world. Our head breaks water and we can look around. We can see the game. We can actually notice where we have been locked into destructive patterns. We can begin the long journey of living in freedom. Of bringing freedom and life to others who are in bondage. We can ask questions that clear the air. What if I lived a simpler life? What if I stepped down my lifestyle so I could have more freedom to live, to give, to serve, to share? What if I took 30 days away from alcohol so I could see the effects it's been having on me? What if we cut down from 3 sports to 1 sport? What if we missed a game now and then and discovered the world goes on and we got some sanity? What if we realize life is too short to let polarizing differences box us out from our loved ones and made more attempts to cross the lines? What if could find strength within through union with Christ to make us less fragile and more resilient? What if the peace of Christ and the future he has promised could still my anger and overflow me with hope?

The news about our fallen condition jars us. On my own, I am dead in sins. I am a slave to desires. I am controlled by the very air I breathe through

media and advertising and peer pressure. I am alienated from God. I am in conflict with others. I hate myself. I am a child of wrath.

But God. But God, being rich in mercy, according to the great love with which he loved us, made us alive together in Christ. This morning, we can press deeper into our spiritual, mystical union with Christ. As we go forward to his table. We can say Amen as we receive the bread. We can say Amen as we receive the cup. And we can know that our verbal Amen means something marvelous. Amen. Yes. Yes, I want to be joined to Jesus. I want to be joined to his death so I can be freed from the dominating power of sin. I wanted to be joined to his rising, so I can have new life in me. I want to be seated with him in heaven, so I can see through the world's game and live for what matters. Yes, yes, a thousand times Yes!