

## “A Most Unlikely Turn of Events”

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Third in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 2.1-10

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*Marley was dead, to begin with. There was no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. . . . Old Marley was as dead as a door nail.*

That’s how A Christmas Carol begins, Charles Dickens’ classic.<sup>1</sup> It continues:

*There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate.*

The story will only get to its good ending, if we start with this harsh beginning. Death follows life. Marley’s death follows from his life poorly lived. Scrooge’s will too, if he does not change his ways. Hope still lives for Scrooge. Yet for poor Marley . . . he’s already dead! Dead means done. Dead means finished. Dead is the period at the end of a life’s sentence.

The story I’m about to relate, however, undoes death.

I

“You were dead” This is how Paul begins, in today’s reading, and it is peculiar. Saying “You are going to be dead!”, to someone about their future makes sense. But speaking to us about our deaths in the past – “You were dead” – and expecting us to hear?

Realize that we can be as good as dead while our heart still beats, our lungs still breathe and our brain still thinks. Paul is using our physical death to talk about our spiritual death, which is more fatal!<sup>2</sup>

We live to enjoy companionship with God, to experience community with others, and flourish within God’s good creation. That’s life!

But we’re dead.

We’ve done it to ourselves. Paul uses the word “transgressions.” We’ve ignored the signs

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<sup>1</sup> First published by Chapman and Hall (London) in 1843. My thanks to Rev. Fleming Rutledge, who connected for me the beginning of Dickens’ tale with Ephesians 2. See her blog post, <http://ruminations.generousorthodoxy.org/2013/12/christmas-eve-footnote.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “We were created to enjoy [God’s] companionship constantly. Because of sin, however we were separated from the life of God, which is a living death. Our future held only the prospect of eternal death and destruction.” Timothy G. Gombis, The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 91.

and crossed into a minefield.<sup>3</sup> He uses the word “sin” which is about missing the target, like coming in for a landing, falling short of the runway and crashing instead.<sup>4</sup>

It’s like we’re driving down a highway, heading for a cliff.<sup>5</sup> We turn onto this road. We do not act loving toward God nor our neighbours. We are responsible. We have a remarkable ability to destroy ourselves and others. Now on this road, we’re dead! . . . unless we turn around.

Not so easy, however. All around us, others are heading the same way. Paul calls this “the way of this world.” We look at the other travellers, assume it must be the right way, and go with the flow.

It gets worse. Suppose we want to turn off. The signs have been changed, the off ramps closed. It’s like the roads authority has been hijacked, and is conspiring in our destruction. Something malevolent has trapped us. We can’t imagine any other way to go, even if this is leading off a cliff.

Maybe it’s not that bad! Maybe we’re only “mostly dead,” or mostly alive! We’ve got problems, but we’ll figure them out. Maybe with some help from God. Maybe.<sup>6</sup>

It seems to me our efforts to get humanity right – or just myself – are like treating coughs and sniffles while we’re hurtling toward the edge. Perhaps helpful, but beside the point. And given our track record, our efforts are too often like stepping on the gas!

We’re dead. This diagnosis is complex and tangled. Many factors work for our destruction. We’ve put ourselves on this road, we are in it together, and we are stuck.<sup>7</sup> The precipice looms. . . .

## II

. . . But God! . . . Two powerful words. Despite what we predict, against the direction things are heading, God does something.

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<sup>3</sup> “Transgressions” or “trespasses,” from *paraptoma* (παρὰπτωμα) which has the sense of falling away.

<sup>4</sup> “Sin” from *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) which comes from a word that means “missing the target.”

<sup>5</sup> I adapted the highway image from Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Epistles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 18f.

<sup>6</sup> I paraphrase Tom Wright here. He writes, “Often, today, people don’t believe there’s much wrong with the human race, and with themselves in particular. As a result, they don’t see very much need for God’s grace. Perhaps they think, God might help me out in a tight corner here or there, but basically I can get along fine without him. All that God then has to offer, it seems, is a kind of spiritual enhancement of ordinary life, a gentle enrichment of what’s already there rather than a radical rescue from imminent disaster.” Wright, 22.

<sup>7</sup> “. . . Paul depicts an extremely complex and tangled situation in which a variety of factors work together to produce the oppression of this present evil age. We have here our own captivity, the involvement of Satan and the dynamics of the present evil age, along with the role played by human will.” Gombis, 91.

God comes in Jesus, and joins us to him. So what happens to Jesus becomes what happens to us. We are dead, and Jesus is crucified, becoming dead with us. God raises Jesus, and God raises us with him.<sup>8</sup> In Jesus, God begins the new beginning, and becomes our new beginning.

We were dead. Now we are alive!

Resurrection is not an add-on.<sup>9</sup> It is not about basically good people who want some forgiveness here and there. Resurrection is not about largely put-together people who want some helpful wisdom. Resurrection is not about mostly self-sufficient people who want some spirituality to top things off. Resurrection is for dead people. When you're dead, nothing else matters.

We were dead in sin . . . but God . . . made us alive with Jesus. We were going the wrong way, missing the mark and crossing the line, again and again. We were going with the ways of this world. We were stuck, heading toward the cliff, pressing the pedal to the floor.

In Jesus, God changed everything. Forgave us. Made a way where there was no way. Set us free. Gave us life. Brought us into a new age. Made us citizens of God's kingdom.

We were dead. Now we are alive!

Of course, we will act sometimes like we're back on that road to nowhere. Switching images, we lived in the cemetery for so long, we have a lot of graveyard habits to unlearn. It takes time for the Holy Spirit to teach once-dead people the rhythms of life.

Yet what needed to get done, God got done in Jesus.

### III

Why does God do this?

As someone put it, "*God loves to do good.*"<sup>10</sup>

God made us for life not death, delight not despair. Despite everything, God still wants that for us. God's passion is to bring us back to it. So God does.

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<sup>8</sup> In verses 5-6, Paul employs a chorus of words with the Greek prefix "syn-" ( $\sigma\upsilon\nu$ ) which means "with" or "co-". Michael Gorman captures the meaning: God "coenlivened, coraised, and coexalted us with Christ." *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 510.

<sup>9</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 90.

<sup>10</sup> Gombis, 96.

Here's a secret. Dead people are not very helpful. They lack initiative, drive, ambition. They won't lift a finger. When we're soul dead, we're pretty much the same.

We're dead. So God does it all. We don't ask. We're dead! It's God's idea. We don't set things in motion. We're dead. God does what needs to be done. We don't apply. What would you put on your resume? "Recent accomplishments: Died. Valuable skills: Really good at lying still." Our credentials are nil. We can't earn resurrection. God gives new life.

Think about how your life first began. No one said, "*Congratulations on your conception!*" Or, "*Good job at being born, screaming performance.*"

Life and resurrection life – it's all gift. Grace . . . God's great love. Grace . . . immeasurably rich. Grace . . . precious beyond words. Grace . . . lavished. Jesus, God with us, gave up everything to give us everything. God's pure grace.

#### IV

It's a most unlikely turn of events. We were dead. But God made us alive with the Messiah Jesus. So we can finally and freely live.

After diagnosing our deadness, and celebrating God's grace, Paul writes this: *We are God's masterpiece, created in the Messiah Jesus to do the good things God prepared beforehand, for us to walk in them.*"

We are not rescued by anything we do; it is all God's doing. But now we hear about doing things.

Think again about your first birth. We don't get born, and that's it. Being born is the beginning. We've got stuff to do! The same way, resurrection, our new birth, is the beginning.

God has graciously and freely rescued us, so we can finally live the flourishing life God had for us from the beginning. We can enjoy companionship with God. We can heal community with others. We can thrive with all creation.

Together, we're learning to live our resurrections. To travel on new roads that lead somewhere. Filled with the Spirit and following Jesus, we are learning to walk in the rhythms of grace, to speak in the language of peace, to dance in the movements of praise, and to love . . . yes, love.

For we are alive. Thanks be to God, by the Spirit, and in the Messiah Jesus our Saviour.

Amen.