

## **ATTACK OF THE LIVING DEAD**

6th in a Series on Ephesians called, “Messages to the Misfits”

Passage: Ephesians 2:1-7 – Topic: The Human Condition

We finally got fed up with Spectrum, our cable TV provider. They combined soaring prices with poor service, to the point where we decided we’d had enough. Our kids had pulled the plug on cable TV some time ago and had been suggesting we try a streaming TV service. So we did it. We got a Roku device and have been very pleased with the result. It has been more consistent and we are saving quite a bit of money.

However, we are not millennials. We are not as technologically adept as some in our family. With the cable company when there was a problem we could call the company and eventually get some help, usually. With this new set up we are more on our own. One day a few weeks ago our TV told us it was not receiving a signal. Now I had to figure out what was wrong. I went through checking to make sure our Internet was working, that the router was fine. I checked all the connections. I rebooted the system, and nothing was working. I was stumped. I thought about calling Toby, our family tech guru, but he was working. Laurie came into the room and asked what was going on and I told her. She immediately had an idea. We have an electrical outlet that doesn’t always hold plugs securely. Maybe the power cord for the Roku had come loose from the plug. She pushed it in... and bingo! Everything began working again.

Once again we were reminded of that high tech solution, that it really helps to plug an electronic device into a power source. If it is not connected to the power source, it’s not going to work. There is a great spiritual implication of that lesson. If we humans are not connected to the source of life, we are not going to experience life. We will see that truth again in Ephesians 2:1-7.

### **WE ARE A ZOMBIE RACE**

Have you noticed the persistence of zombies in entertainment? They are still around in movies, television, video games and books. The zombie genre is kind of self-descriptive. It’s about beings who won’t die (which is much like the genre itself!). Zombies have had a resurgence in the past 20 years. Some trace this back to the enormously popular video game, *Resident Evil*, that was released in 1996. The zombie genre depicts people who are dead, but who keep walking around, and they are a threat to others. I read an article not long ago in which the author suggested that the reason that genre continues is that it reflects a reality we sense at some unconscious level.

Ephesians 2 tells us this is the reality of all humans. Paul says there was a point for all of us that we were dead in our transgressions and sins. We were spiritually dead. We were

walking around, trying to negotiate life, interacting with people, but we were not truly alive. You might say we are spiritual zombies. This is not a message many will receive gladly. In fact, often they will be offended by it. That is especially true when we see that Paul said we were “by nature deserving of wrath.” Literally Paul said we were “by nature children of wrath.” I will explain what that means shortly. While we may not like this, the crucial point is not whether we like it, but whether it is true. There is good reason to think it is true.

Paul says we “followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air.” He equates the ways of this age and the ways of this ruler he refers to. The ruler he means is Satan. You mean he’s accusing us of being Satanic? He doesn’t mean we are possessed by Satan, but he does mean we and the entire world are duped by Satan to buy into his ideas.

Go back to Satan’s first appearance in recorded history. It is found in Genesis 3. What ideas did he peddle to the first humans? He had two messages. First, you should be like God. You should be on the throne he’s on. You should be the center of everything. And second, you cannot trust God because he’s trying to keep you from having what is clearly for your best.

Those ideas are pervasive in human beings. They are our default. I recently saw something that I see in various forms a lot. I was at the grocery store. I had done my shopping and was heading toward the exit. A woman who had checked out, pushed her loaded cart away from the checkout stand and got to a choke point where there was a fairly narrow aisle to head for the exit. She stopped right there, blocking that choke point, so she could examine her receipt and make sure it was all correct. There she stood, apparently oblivious to the fact that no one could get by her without ramming her cart out of the way, carefully going over all the charges for her groceries. She was doing what she thought she needed to do, and for her, that was all that mattered. No matter if it inconvenienced other people. She was so focused on what she thought important that she couldn’t think about others. Now you might say that she intended no harm, but my point is she should have known better. She was so intent on what she felt she needed to do that it eclipsed everything else. You might say she was just a kind of oblivious person, but the reason I took note of it was that day I had already encountered three other people doing similar things in the store. It was like somebody declared it National Me First Day. You might say this is not a big deal, but start watching: you will see it all the time in ways large and small. You might say I’m making mountains out of molehills, but these are little reminders of the default of human nature. We all wake up obsessed with ourselves each day, and are preoccupied all day with self. That is living in the ways of Satan!

Not wanting God to tell us what to do also fits with Satan's agenda for us. We don't want anybody telling us what to do. We want autonomy from that kind of authority. That again was part of Satan's sales job on Eve. Don't listen to God and his rules. You know what's best for you. Who is he to tell you what to do? He is looking out for himself, not for you.

Paul says one sign of being dead spiritually is that we live "gratifying the cravings of the flesh." Literally he said we conduct ourselves "in the lusts of the flesh." Oh, there you go again. You religious people are so hung up on sex. What's your problem? Uh, this isn't about sex. Rather as Paul used it here the flesh is that core part of us that seeks to live apart from God. It is the part of us that wants to do it our way and not have to be accountable to God.

We tend to think of lusts or cravings as some dark urge within us, but that's not what it meant. The desires of our flesh are desires rooted in an effort to find life without regard to God. Most of the time these desires are not remarkable or dark. They are the temporal desires all humans have, such as the desire for food, money, success, security, comfort, pleasure, approval, sex, acceptance and so on. These are not inherently evil. The problem is that we tend to pursue them as though they are all there is to life. We pursue them as though these are the eternal things that can give us life.

If you went to some public place and interviewed people and asked them, "what do you think you need to have the life you most want?" what kind of answers do you think you would receive? My guess is it would be things like someone to love me and share life with, good friends, enough money that I don't have to worry about it, some level of success in my career, and so on. None of those things is evil. The problem is that we are generally totally driven by those desires. We are convinced that they are what life is all about.

The irony is that we have lots of evidence that they cannot give us what we most want. An article by Kirsten Powers in *USA Today* in June last year quoted Jim Carrey, the comedic actor, saying, "Achieving all your goals provides the opposite of fulfillment; it lays bare the truth that there is nothing you can purchase, possess, or achieve that will make you feel fulfilled over the long term." Listen carefully to those words. There is nothing you can purchase, possess, or achieve that will make you feel fulfilled in the long term. The desires we all have for those things are fine, but they distract us from what life is really about. We sort of know that, yet somehow, down deep, *we don't really believe it*. We keep pursuing those things in the perverse certainty that if we just get

them then we will be satisfied, at peace and fulfilled. This is evidence of being dead as Paul described it.

One of the things Paul said that's really incendiary to people in our culture is that we are "by nature deserving of wrath," or literally, "children of wrath." Before we fly into a wrath rage of our own at such denigration, let's understand what that means. Our concept of wrath is an outburst of uncontrollable anger. I saw a football game on TV last year where there was a series of bad calls against one team. After the most egregious of them the coach completely lost it. He screamed at the official and, though I'm far from an expert at reading lips, I could see that he used some words that deserved some Lifebuoy soap. His face was contorted and full of anger. You hear the expression, "if looks could kill." In his case his look would have been a weapon of mass destruction. He ripped his headphones off and threw them to the ground in a display of rage. That's what we think wrath is.

But that is not what biblical wrath is. In Romans 1:18 Paul wrote, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people." Notice that is present tense. God is revealing his wrath from heaven right this minute. Yeah, that's right, God is really hacked off at people and he is out to get them. He's sending tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, terrible diseases and all kinds of stuff to get back at them. Wrong. If you read on in Romans 1 you will see how God's wrath comes. Repeatedly it says, "God gave them over" to various pursuits and desires. God's wrath comes about by God saying, "You want to defy me, be free of me so you can do whatever you want? All right. Since you insist, I will let you have what you want." And the result is disastrous.

Let's review again who God is. According to the Scriptures he is the source of all life and all good. So when we seek to be free of him, what are we being freed from? All life and good. So what do we get? The opposite of those things. We get death and evil. God is pouring out his wrath on us by saying, "I love you enough to respect your choices. So if you choose to reject me, I will give you over to your choices." God pours out his wrath on us by giving us what we think we want, letting us have our way. And all over the world we can see this happening. What happens when we are spiritually dead, receiving God's wrath? We are cut off from the source of life! We will be physically alive, but not truly experiencing life. We become like those zombies. We are dead, but still walking around. Sadly, we become dangerous to others because in our deadness we are preoccupied with self. If you are preoccupied with self, you will harm others. It's 100% sure.

Hold on, there, Rick. I know lots of happy people who are full of life. But look at our society. We know that we have a huge problem with drugs like opioids, but alcohol, now being joined by marijuana, is also pervasive. We are the richest, safest, most free nation the world has ever known, and people are scrambling to medicate themselves. Why? Because they are not experiencing true, full life. They are cut off from the source of it! Drugs and alcohol are just one evidence of this problem. You can see it everywhere. People sense there is something missing, something wrong and they're trying to fix it.

One of the things that being spiritually dead does to us is separate us. It separates us from God and from other people. This manifests itself in a sense of loneliness that is pervasive in humans. Author Thomas Wolfe said, "The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence." Poet Sylvia Plath said, "Life is loneliness...(and) the loneliness of the soul...is horrible and overpowering."

Second, God is true good. If we are dead to him, what else are we dead to? We are dead to true good. In other words, we are not the people we know we ought to be. Once again, we know this is widespread among us because psychologists tell us that guilt is a huge problem for us. The human race just isn't what it ought to be.

Last year *US News and World Report* had an article in it that included an interview with a 102 year old woman in France who had once painted with the great artist Monet. Her candid comments were quite revealing about the state of human nature. She said, "My spiritual vision means everything to me. I am against all war. It doesn't solve anything. I have this great interest in the world and in people. And it annoys me so, that as I sit here, a little old lady, I, who do not believe in violence, would like to have cannons shooting all the people I do not approve of." Yep, there's the problem. I'm all for love and against violence...except for those people. I'd like to wipe them out.

In his best-seller, *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller wrote of the time when he realized the depth of the human condition. "I knew, because of my own feelings, there was something wrong with me, and I knew it wasn't only me. I knew it was everybody...It wasn't on the skin, it was in the soul. It showed itself in loneliness, lust, anger, jealousy and depression. It had people screwed up bad everywhere you went...It was as if we were broken...It was as if we were cracked, couldn't love right, couldn't feel good things for very long without screwing it all up."

William Forstchen is an author who has had three books on the New York Times best-seller list. His first best seller was *One Second After*, which considers what would

happen if America was hit by an electromagnetic pulse attack that wiped out our electric system. A congressional report on that issue projected that if it happened, within one year, 90% of Americans would be dead. At the end of his most recent book he has an essay that reveals a little of his history that explains his interest in disaster scenarios. Years ago he was a grad student at Purdue pursuing his doctorate when northern Indiana was hit by an ice storm of epic proportions that knocked out electric power over the entire region for a whole week. He wrote that after four days, “it started to get freaky. That is when I found myself observing human nature; if just a few props are pulled out from under us, things start getting a bit weird, and you can see how it could quickly slide into dangerous.” Police and National Guard units had to accompany power company crews to protect them from mobs and angry citizens. People began threatening each other if they had some resource that others lacked. It was clear that chaos was not far off.

We behave civilly most of the time, but put humans under duress and you begin to see something start to peek through that is not quite so good. Laurie and I had a very small reminder of this once very late at night. We were scheduled to fly home from a vacation trip on a red eye flight, but it was delayed until they finally had to cancel the flight at midnight. So there we were with a couple hundred stranded travelers wondering what we were going to do. After some delay the airline people informed us they were going to put us up in a hotel for the night. They helped us line up flights for the next day while we waited for busses to come to take us to the hotel. The first bus finally showed up at about 2 AM. The problem was that we had a plane load of people and at first there was only one bus. That bus could take maybe 60 people, meaning there was not going to be room for all of us on it. What ensued was not a riot. People weren’t overt savages. But there was a clear, “I’m tired, it’s really late, so I and my loved ones are getting on that bus” kind of attitude pervading in that group. There were no outright fights, but there was a lot of maneuvering and some subtle pushing going on. Laurie and I just backed off because I could see that it wouldn’t take much for some fisticuffs to break out. Even in that minor of a situation something crops up in humans that is pretty ugly.

The upshot is that we are experiencing the effects of being spiritually dead. The result is we don’t experience life as we long for it, plus the human condition is full of conflict, inhumanity, and a litany of miseries that despite all our technological advances we can’t solve.

## GOD MADE US ALIVE

In verse 4 there is a major change. In Paul’s original Greek text that verse begins with the words, “but God.” God enters the scene and rescues us. Why does he act? It’s not because we deserve it. It’s not because he has no choice. It’s because he is rich in mercy and because of his great love for people.

Note two obvious facts here. First, it is God who acted. We did not make ourselves spiritually alive. We didn't fix our problem of being spiritually dead. That's because we can't. The most obvious truth in the world is that dead people cannot solve their problem. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago one of my favorite classic movies, *Charade*. It has a scene where there's a funeral. A man enters the chapel, walks up to the open casket, looks at the body of the deceased, pulls out a needle and jams it into the corpse. He wanted to know he was really dead. Because he was dead he did not react to the pain, because he couldn't.

The dead cannot respond. They are powerless to do anything. You can go to the cemetery and exhort the people there. "Come on, show a little life. You are being so boring. You're not doing anything. Quit just lying there. Get up and do something!" How effective will your pleas be? Utterly ineffective. Dead bodies are incapable of doing anything other than being dead. They cannot help themselves.

Those who are dead in their transgressions and sins are as incapable of changing their circumstance as are those who are physically dead. Trying to exhort them to get better or to educate them into a better condition is doomed to failure because they are dead!

I heard about a woman who insists that children are inherently good, and that any bad behavior they exhibit happens because they are taught it. I can't help but wonder if that woman has ever had children of her own. Our two little granddaughters are exceptional wonderful children. But I watched at one point how Ella handled it when Cara picked up one of Ella's toys that she did not want Cara to play with. Ella said, "No, baby!" Then she just ripped the toy away from her and shoved her down. Laurie and I try to be very careful of boundaries and not try to tell our kids how to raise their children. But in this case I thought, "Clearly I have to talk to Toby and Anna, and tell them to stop teaching Ella to rip things away from her sister and shove her." Do you believe that? I hope not. You know as well as I do that they are not teaching Ella to do that. She hasn't learned it by watching how they interact with each other. It's just there. That kind of selfish behavior is just natural, because all of us start off life spiritually dead. My point in all this is that spiritually dead people cannot solve their problem any more than physically dead people can solve theirs.

The second thing we need to keep very clear is that God didn't make us alive in Christ because of anything we did for ourselves. We were dead. We couldn't make ourselves somehow deserving of being rescued by God, because we were dead! We did not merit what he has done for us. What drove him to do that was his great love for us, a love that

is undeserved, and his mercy. By definition mercy is not deserved, it is granted purely by kindness and grace.

There is one obvious objection to this claim that we have been made alive in Christ. If this is true, why don't we look like it more? Why do we still exhibit some of the symptoms of spiritual death? That's a good question. I don't have a simple answer to it. But note that Paul is going to spend considerable time in Ephesians instructing his readers how to live as spiritually alive people. That means that coming alive spiritually has both a one-time aspect to it and a gradual process aspect. I take it that means God brings us to life at one point in a dramatic way giving us the ability to live, but then there is a process of learning how to do that.

It is analogous to what happens when we get an infection and the doctor gives us antibiotics to deal with the disease. Often you can sense within a day that the medicine is working. But it will be some time before you are fully healthy. Late last year I got a sinus infection. My doctor gave me a week long dose of amoxicillin and I started feeling better. But a few days later I began having symptoms again. The doctor put me on a 10 day course of the medicine. I got mostly better, but then it came back again. Then the doctor put me on a three-week-long treatment. Finally after that I was all the way healthy. In a way, we've been given the medicine that heals us, but the process of healing is not yet complete.

## IMPLICATIONS

### UNDERSTAND THE TRUTH OF THIS WORLD

Everyone knows there are many problems in this world. A recent example is the college admissions scandal that came to light. People do things that aren't fair or right because they are spiritually dead and determined to serve their own interests no matter what. There are lots of recommendations on how we solve the problems of the human race. Some suggest more equitable economic systems, some suggest more and better education, some suggest better medical care, some suggest psychological support and counseling, some suggest abolishing war, and some say, "all you need is love."

But again I will ask you to think about the people at the local cemetery. Education won't help them. More money won't make a bit of difference. Counseling certainly isn't going to change anything. Medical care, at this point, is useless. Loving them more also will not help. Only one thing can help them. They need to be returned to life somehow.

If people all over the world are spiritually dead as Paul claims, then the starting point for resolving their problems can only be for them to be made alive. Spiritual death is the



root cause of every problem the human race faces, and every attempt to solve human problems apart from that reality is doomed to fail.

Should we do all we can to alleviate human suffering and problems? Did Jesus do that? Yes, he did. He healed sick people and fed the hungry. So we should follow his example. When I had a sinus infection my nose was totally stuffed up, my nose was running, my teeth hurt, my sinuses ached. I took decongestants and some pain killers to alleviate the symptoms. But I needed to heal the disease. We can help with symptoms of people, and we should, but the problem is the disease. Jesus treated symptoms, but he didn't come here to treat symptoms. He came to heal the disease, to deal with the root of the problem. So yes, by all means, let's seek to help the hungry and downtrodden, let's stand against racism and violence, let's try to educate people. But let's also be very clear that the heart of all these problems is spiritual. Let's not be surprised when more than 50 years of the war on poverty has been a near total failure and somehow education seems to be worse than ever.

#### REMEMBER THE PROBLEM OF THE ZOMBIES

I've seen Christians get upset and angry at those who do not believe in Jesus and sometimes argue vehemently with them in the attempt to enlighten them to the obvious errors of their ways. What have they forgotten? They've forgotten that those poor people are spiritually dead! How effective will be your attempts to argue with a dead person? You will never convince a dead person of anything! You might as well be firing spit wads at an aircraft carrier. That's how much impact you'll have.

That person has to be made alive before they can even hear and process what you are saying! In John 6:44 Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Oh, so like, God has to paint a portrait of a person first? Wrong meaning of the word draw. Jesus meant draw as in attract. Only the word in Greek was a lot stronger than attract. It meant to drag. At one point it was used of the disciples dragging a net full of fish to shore. Have you seen a cowboy movie a scene where someone gets dragged behind a horse? That's how we got into the kingdom of God. He dragged us there. God drags us into his kingdom, we don't choose it. If he didn't drag us, we would not choose it. In John 6:65 Jesus repeated that idea saying, "no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them."

What this means is that we are challenged by God to share his truth with everyone, to be prepared to give a defense for the hope that is in us, to love people and to live in such a way as to reveal God's character. But we must always remember that for anyone to enter God's kingdom that person must be made alive by God, and that is totally outside of our control. This means we should always be loving, kind, gentle and respectful toward all

people, even if they are antagonistic toward us and our faith. And we must remember that the single most important thing we can do for them is to pray for them. We must pray for God to do his mysterious thing and make them alive to him.

LIVE!

If you believe in Jesus you have been made alive by God, otherwise you wouldn't believe. So the first thing on your mind and your heart continually should be gratitude. Whatever else happens in your circumstances, you should always be saying, "Thank you for making me alive in Jesus, Lord." If he did not do that you would still be dead in your transgressions and sins. You would be doomed to live in the misery of spiritual death. You would be a zombie, walking around, but dead.

Last fall Laurie and I had the joy of going on vacation on Maui. To our surprise we had none of our usual misadventures with airlines. Everything started off great. About the third day I noticed when we went to breakfast that my left eye was feeling kind of irritated, like there was something in it. I ignored it at first, thinking it would resolve itself. Meanwhile, Laurie mentioned she also wasn't feeling her best. We tried to just go on about our day, but both of us just got worse as the day went on. We finally had to admit that we both had a problem. In our hotel there was a doctor on site. A little before noon we found ourselves in the doctor's office filling out forms. Laurie had a urinary tract infection that was getting worse by the minute and I had some clogged oil glands in my eyelid. Neither of us was very happy about what we were feeling, nor were we exactly thrilled with being in a doctor's office. But I noticed an interesting thing. We were both actually in pretty good spirits. We were together, we were on vacation, and we were in Hawaii. So despite the bumps in the road, we had a lot to be thankful for. We got some medicines and by the next day we were much better. But the thing that was interesting was although we had less than perfect circumstances, we had things to be thankful for, so we could be joyful despite the little irritations.

We are alive in Christ. We have hope. We have God's presence with us. We are loved unconditionally by him. We have peace because he is working good for us in everything that happens. We can live in his peace, hope, joy and love every moment of our lives. God has given us life in Christ. Whatever else happens that one great truth should color how we see everything in our lives. We have something to be happy about every moment of every day.

In light of that, let's not make the dumb mistake of going back and emulating the zombies. Let's not fall into the trap of living by the lies of our enemies and thinking life will come from the things of this world. Let's actually live the life that God has made possible for us, so the world can see what a fully alive human being actually is like!