

Just Because You're Breathing Doesn't Mean You're Living!

by Ron R. Ritchie

My wife and I once took a young couple to our favorite little restaurant in Half Moon Bay. We were sitting there, talking about God, about his love and his concern for us and about the richness of our life in Christ, when an old man walked in, ordered some coffee and sat listening to us. (Some of you may have already heard this story, but it's pertinent to the passage we'll be looking at today.) There came a moment in our conversation where there was a natural pause, then, without asking permission or even checking with us, the old man said, "You know, I've been all around the world. I was in the Navy during World War I and I stayed for World War II. All my life I've been looking for something, just like the whole world is looking for something, but in 78 years I haven't found it yet."

I have thought about that many times since that day. I have been amazed at his honesty. At 78 he was candid enough to tell the truth, when so many who are still looking for "it" (whatever "it" is) would not because they haven't found it and that would be embarrassing to admit.

What is it that this man and most of humanity is looking for? Well, based on the Scriptures, I submit to you that what they're looking for is life, life as it was intended to be lived, life as most of us suspect it should be lived, life that is filled with joy and peace and love and concern, life that has rhyme, rhythm, reason, and wholesomeness, life that has a sense of direction. Isn't it funny how at Christmas time people say, "Why can't the Christmas spirit stay with us all year long?" That's because we know that there is something more to life than what we're experiencing. The longer you live the more you discover that just because you're breathing doesn't mean you're living. From God's point of view, breathing does not equal life.

I would like to take you back some 2,000 years, to the writing of the Apostle Paul in the book of Ephesians. There we will see what is blocking humanity (and what is blocking that old man) from tasting life as it was intended to be lived. Paul is writing to encourage a group of believers in western Turkey whom he led to the Lord. In chapter I of this letter he encourages them by telling them who God is and who Jesus Christ is. Then in chapter 2 he reminds them of who they were before they met Jesus, who they are now in Jesus, and what Jesus wants to do in and through them.

First, Paul talks about the breathing dead, what it was like to be alive without Christ. He talks about how the Ephesians were remaining that way; how they were captured, why they could not get out of the net, so to speak, because they were hemmed in by forces they could not understand.

1. The Breathing Dead 2:1-3

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lust of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Paul says, "The first thing I want you Ephesians to remember, you who were caught up in idolatry and magic, you who gave your lives over to things you didn't understand, is that before Jesus Christ came into your life you were dead." Now to be dead is to be helpless, to be hopeless. To be dead is to be in a constant state of corruption. From God's point of view, all those Ephesians and all of humanity are dead, without life, without hope, and in a constant state of corruption.

And, Paul says, "I'll tell you why you were dead: 'You were dead in your trespasses and sin'." That is, you were dead because you violated the very nature of God; you violated his laws, and how he wanted you to live. Paul says they did it in ignorance. That is what to "trespass" means, to break laws that you do not know about,

but you break them anyway, and that cuts you off from the very God who gives you life. The Ephesians (and all of us) were born "in Adam," so they were born with that nature that wants to rebel against God. We cut off our very life from God by our trespasses.

Then, to make matters worse, we sin. We do those things that are premeditated. We know some of the laws of God, we know something of his character (for God has revealed himself in nature (Rom 1) and in his Spirit (John 1), yet we deliberately sin. Because of this you were dead, Paul tells the Ephesians. I remember trying to live as a young man in North Africa. I remember telling everybody how great it was, how I was so happy and how much fun I was having. But why did I have a hangover and why were all those people angry at me and why was I being court-martialed "Well, I'm living," I told myself. "That's the way life is, you know." But I was dead. I didn't know it at the time. I was breathing, but I was dead.

Then Paul tells the Ephesians what is behind the curtain of time and space, what the forces are that are keeping them dead all their breathing life, keeping them separated from God so they will never enjoy life as it was intended to be lived. What are those forces? Well Paul shares three of them: the World, the Devil, and the Flesh. First, he says, "they formerly walked according to the course of this world." They became victims of a course that was going nowhere, that was not designed by them. They were caught up in it; they were listening to a great floating mass of thought, opinions, speculations, hopes, impulses, fears and anxieties. They were always taking from people who had no relationship with God or his Son who is the very source of life and meaning. Don't you sense that in everything you read and in everything you hear? I'm afraid to pick up the newspaper in the morning, in one sense. I'd like to see some good news, but there's not a lot of it so I just turn to the funnies now. But then I got to page two and there's Doonesbury. He doesn't help me at all. He's always complaining about something that's destroying us, or the "Rose--Garden" situation or something. He always has some political thing that reminds you, "Yes, things are really bad."

Listen to the commentators today: "Things are bad, but don't worry, they're getting worse. Gold was up; now it's down. Silver was up; now we don't know who owns it. You think gas prices are bad this year? Well, wait 'til next year." Have you noticed that there's just not a lot of good news? Somebody is in a little room somewhere cranking out all these thoughts and opinions and speculations that keep the world in a constant jitter. You just don't know what to do next. You have this great plan to retire, but then you find out that somebody had blown it all for you. You don't know who he is, but you're going to get him one of these days if you can afford it. People are held captive by a philosophy and a course of action but they don't know how they got on it; they don't know where it is going; they don't know who is behind it. The Ephesians had their problems in their day, now we have ours. Today the course of the world is telling us, "There is logic behind abortion. There is harmlessness in sexual immorality. There is a need for mercy killing. There is folly in marriage." (Do you ever feel like you are the last married couple on your block? You think maybe you're doing something wrong.) "There is the joy of being gay. There is pleasure in drugs. There is wisdom in buying before the bubble bursts." Who is telling us all these things?

Well, Paul says, "Not only will I tell you, as I pull back the curtain of time and space, that there is a course that you were on, but I will tell you who designed the course: it is designed, 'according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.'" The Lord called this spirit, "the prince of the power of the air, the ruler of this world, the evil one, Satan, a deceiver, a liar, a thief, a murderer." So not only is the world hacking away at us, but Satan is constantly designing a course to destroy us. But he does it in such a way, Paul says in 2 Corinthians, that he comes as an "angel of light." He shows up just like us. He doesn't come in a red suit. He doesn't come as a snake. He comes in wing--tip shoes, with a three-button vest; he drives a Mercedes; he tips God. He comes in a religious form. Have you noticed all the religious wars that are going on? In Ireland, that's a religious war; in the Philippines, in Iran, in Afghanistan, in Jerusalem, those are all nicely religious wars. Satan comes as an angel of light. He comes with false philosophies, like Eckankar and TM. He comes with false prophets like Sun Myung Moon and Joseph Smith and he leaves you with the sense that all is well and that you are pleasing to your god. But now you discover that from God's point of view you are "dead in your trespasses and sins. "

Paul asks the Ephesians, "Do you remember how it was? Not only were you on a course going nowhere, designed by someone you did not know, not only were you influenced by the evil one, the ruler of this world, but you also had your flesh to contend with. "Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh,

indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath." Now there is nothing wrong with the flesh. We need food, shelter and clothing. But here Paul is talking about our nature, our nature as it is separated from God, our nature we were born with from our father Adam, the nature we woke up with that wanted to be the center of the universe. I always wanted to be the center of the universe, but I wondered why no one ever served me as king of that universe. Then I found out that everybody else thought he was the center of the universe and he was so busy doing his thing that none of us could ever get together. Our flesh makes us selfish, arrogant, self-righteous and conceited. We rebel against God within our spirits.

Then Paul says not only do we indulge in the lusts of our flesh, but we indulge in the "desires of the mind." We go all out. We cannot just live, we have to do everything all out. We drive ourselves to the ninth degree, sometimes beyond. We can't just eat, we have to be gluttons; we can't drink, we have to be drunkards; we can't love, we have to envy; we can't be satisfied with a Honda Civic, we have got to get a Rolls Royce. We are driven, driven, driven. And what is it that drives us? It's our own flesh, for which we are held accountable before the Lord.

Furthermore, Paul says, we were by nature "children of wrath." We could not help ourselves. We were born separated from God. We were born struggling. We were born unfulfilled, and once born, life was downhill from there on. Now the wrath of God is not thunder and lightning. As a boy I used to think that when I sinned God was going to get me with a big stick. I would scoot around corners expecting him to whack me. I expected typhoid fever or smallpox or cancer across my whole body in one streak, something that would get my attention. But it never quite comes that way. The wrath of God is simply letting you alone, that's all, just allowing you to take life to its farthest consequences by letting you experience it without him. You think you've got all of life together, you are holding it in your hands, but like mercury it keeps slipping right on through. You can't figure it out: "Just one more month and I've got it all together. If I could just pay this bill I'd have it. If I could just meet this man I'd have it. If I could just get this promotion I'd have it." But there's no way you can keep up with life. It's too quick for you. Too many things happen. It's like letting a bunch of rabbits out of a cage. They run in all directions and you can't grab them, you can't hold them; you're just all caught up. Your life is one series of events that get worse and worse.

I was talking to a young man whom I was marrying. (This was the third time for him.) He had just come to know that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. About five minutes before the ceremony I said to him, "Jim, I have to be totally frank, you don't look too happy about this marriage." "Oh," he said, "she's a great woman. I really need her; she's really important to me." I said, "Why do you look so depressed?" He said, "Well, I just realized that I'm still in love with my first wife." That is a consequence of the wrath of God. You cannot violate all of God's principles and think that there won't be consequences. This man had to suffer them.

Some of you here this morning are suffering just like he is. Some of you don't even know how you got here. You saw a bunch of cars and you thought there was a rummage sale. You came and sat down and you thought I was the auctioneer. We already took your money, so you don't know what you are getting. You don't know whether you bought the piano, the xylophone, or the microphones. Well, I tell you, you are here by God's design. At one time we were all where you are now. We were caught in the course of this world, we were caught in the power and in the grip of the evil one as some of you are now, we were caught in the lusts of our own flesh as some of you are now. Isn't this a great Easter message? Yes, it is a great Easter message! Because there's hope. There was hope for the Apostle Paul, there was hope for the Ephesians, there was hope for me, there was hope for so many of you, so there must be hope for the rest of you. Is there hope? With the Apostle Paul I can say, "Yes, a thousand times, yes." Look at the next two words in our text, two of the greatest words in all of scripture:

2. Made Alive With Jesus Christ 2:4-7

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ [by grace you have been saved], and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

But God! The only source of hope was a living, pulsating God who revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ and to believe in him was to have life. But God! He walked into the Ephesian graveyard and cried out, "Come forth," and men and women all through Ephesus rose again in newness of life. And this same God can do that in our lives today. He cries out, into the deadness and emptiness of our lives, and says, "Come forth," and you will come alive for the first time.

Now Paul says that not only were the Ephesians rescued from the graveyard of sin and transgression, but God did four wonderful things for them. First of all he displayed his character: "being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us." What a God! He was merciful to us who were dead. We could do absolutely nothing, but in his mercy, his compassion and pity he reached out and did something about it. He sent his Son Jesus Christ to die on a cross to take care of the sin and the transgression. That was the expression of his love. He could not express it any other way. His Son Jesus Christ took our place. We should have been dead and cast out of God's sight forever. But what does he do? He sends his Son and says, "No, my Son will die for you and then you will be made alive. If you will believe this truth you will taste of life."

Then the moment you believe this truth a second thing happens: God makes you "alive with Christ." Paul says, "You Ephesians who were dead, you who were caught up in your idolatry and your magic and your wickedness and your sin and your transgressions, he made you alive with Christ." What a God we have! He gave us life as we never could experience it up until this point. It is a life that is so rich: it is the life of Christ in us. If you think I understand that you're wrong. I don't. I don't understand how I could marry my wife Anne--Marie and we became one person, but the Scripture says we are one. I don't understand it when Jesus Christ says, "If you love me and trust me for your sin and let me come into your life as Lord and Savior, then I will become one with you and you will become one with me." But do you know what I do understand? I understand the fruit of it. I was driving my car last week on a cold, stormy day, but I felt rich. I didn't have any money (I had 8 cents in my coin box) but I said, "Why am I feeling so rich?" Then it dawned on me, "Because I'm alive. That's why." I can't spend it financially, but I can spend it by getting involved with people, caring about them and moving into their lives. It is a richness that I cannot get used to. I can be all alone on a beach, and yet feel rich and alive. I can be in a crowd and feel rich and alive. I can be in the midst of a funeral and feel rich and alive. Not because I am so clever, but because the resurrected Jesus Christ lives in me and is pulsating through me, and in that he gives me his life. I who was once only breathing am now alive.

The third thing Paul says happened is that God has "raised us up with Jesus." Not only were we made to live through God and his mercy, now we have come alive with a new power to live life. And this life that he has within us is called the resurrection life. "Raised up with him" means to live in resurrection power, the power that enables us to love the unlovely, to forgive those we cannot seem to forgive, the power that helps us not to be crushed when we are afflicted, that helps us not to despair when we are perplexed. When Betsie Foss came back from the hospital after her son had just died in an accident at a local amusement park (having lost her husband in a freak motorcycle accident six months earlier) she walked into my arms and said, "Oh, Ron, what is God seeking to teach me?" That is resurrection power. That is being totally perplexed but not despairing. Resurrection power is that power that keeps us alive and vital when everything and everybody around us is dead and lifeless. Don't you sense this deadness where you work? The conversations are so stupid you could cry. Don't you sense it when you talk to people in the store? Don't you sense it at the PTA meeting? I went to one that was so dull, so lifeless, so boring, that I said, "Do you mind if we just have a word of prayer and go home?" Then I got some amendment thrown at me and someone said, "Thank you Reverend Ritchie, but we don't want to confuse state and religion." We are perplexed but not despairing.

Now finally, Paul says, God "seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Do you know what that means? "Heavenly places" is where you are living in the Spirit. That is your relationship with the Spirit of God; that is where you have your hopes and your dreams; that is where you place your fears, your doubts and your anxieties. And we are to be "seated" with him. I never quite understood that until recently. Do you know what that means? It means that when Jesus Christ rose again from the dead by the power of his Father that God placed into his hands all authority in heaven and on earth, over everyone and everything. That means that he is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and since every knee will bow and every tongue shall confess him as Lord, he is saying to us, God is in control, so rest. Give him your life. Stop trying to be Lord.

Ten days ago as I was being prepared for eye surgery (which I'd waited for for three years) the nurse said to me, "My goodness, your pulse is so low. You're so relaxed. What's going on here?" So I got a chance to share a little bit about the Lord and how I was trusting him and not the doctor. Then they took me into the operating room, and who does God send along? I'm lying there with nothing but a smile and a sheet on, and this girl says, "Hi. My name is Joyce. I'll be scrubbing in. I know who you are. I've been praying for you. Just hang in there." Isn't that fantastic? We have such a gracious God.

So I'm lying there half doped. Now one thing I can't stand is glare, but they put two big spotlights right on my eyes. The tension is incredible. Finally I got scared. I really panicked. I thought to myself, "I'm just going to tell them that I don't want to play any more and that I'm going home." Everything in me wanted to say, "That's it, Doc. Thanks a lot for coming, but I'm going home. This is too much for me. I can't stand it." I asked him, "How much time have we got left?" (thinking maybe two or three minutes), but he said, "Oh, half--hour, forty--five minutes" I knew within my spirit that I could not go on, but then I remembered this verse and I said, "Wait, that's right. This stuff is supposed to work. He's a real God and a real pulsating Holy Spirit and he is supposed to be here. I am supposed to live like he is alive and here I am suddenly taking over and panicking on the operating table."

So then, not being able to do a thing about it because I'm paralyzed, I said, "Lord, I'm sorry. Please, I need you. I need to rest in the heavenlies. I need to have you take over here. I'm frightened. I don't know what to do. The pain is unbearable and I just . . ." Next thing the doctor slaps me on the wrist and says, "O.K. Let's go." And I was wide awake. I looked at the clock and forty-five minutes had gone right on by, and I can't remember any one of them. That's what it means to rest in the heavenlies. That is not theological language. That is as practical as eating breakfast. Let God take over your life and rest in him, that's all. That is living.

Then Paul says, "Now the purpose behind all that is this: 'in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.'" God is not only extending his mercy and his love to us, he is not only making us alive together with Christ, he is not only raising us up with him, he has not only seated us with him in the heavenly places, but we are going somewhere, there is something behind all of that. And that is that in the ages to come, ages upon ages upon ages, he is going to use us to display his character, his kindness and his grace towards all of creation. We are going to be trophies of his grace and his kindness. That is what all this is about. That is what all this pressure is about. That is what all the terrible times, what all the good times are about: so that he can display us in eternity.

Then Paul concludes this section with a reminder to the Ephesians just in case they forgot how they were made alive; and what God intends to do with all those alive people.

3. Created For Good Works 2:8-10

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

First he says, "You were saved by grace." Grace is God extending unmerited favor toward us, we who deserve nothing, we who were dead, who could do nothing. I needed an illustration for grace for this message, something that would really show forth what grace is on a human level, and I was thinking about this as I was driving my boy to camp at Mount Hermon. Suddenly I looked in the mirror and there was a highway patrolman with a nice red light shining in my rear window. I looked at my speedometer and said, "Oh my, I'm caught." I gave up. My hands were in the air before I got out of the car. So I reached for my wallet and I take my license out, which is an admission of guilt. The patrolman said, "Do you know the speed limit?" I said, "Yes, I believe I do. I believe it is 55." He said, "That's right." He looked at my car and said, "Well, Mr. Ritchie, do you have the registration?" So I gave him the registration. He said, "How fast were you going?" "70," I said. He said, "That's right, Mr. Ritchie. Well, I drive this road all the time. I want to tell you something, I appreciate your honesty. I'm not going to give you a citation this time, but if I catch you again you are going to get one." I said, "What?" He said, "You heard me." "Oh, great," I said. "This is wonderful. Can I thank you?" He said, "Yes." I said. "Thank you very much." He said, "You're welcome."

I got in the car, so excited. My wife asked, "What happened?" I said, "I just got my illustration for grace"! That's grace. Oh, he had me. For 15 miles he followed me. If my insurance man heard that today he'd have a heart attack! The point is, I broke the law and I deserved the penalty that the State of California could impose, but he let me off. I wasn't dressed well; I didn't treat him that well; I didn't give him any money; I didn't do a thing. By grace I was saved. That is what it says here in verse 8: "By grace you are saved." From what? From your death. You are saved from your trespasses and sin. You are made alive by grace, through faith. Faith is believing in invisible realities. We did not see Jesus Christ die on the cross, but the Holy Spirit through the apostles tells us he did and we accept that by faith.

Paul says that faith is the movement of the will to believe that God did that, but if you are dead you have no will, so how can you believe? Well, I was taught this simple illustration which I never forgot by Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse in the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He said, "Here's your will. Now it is true that God said, 'Whosoever will may come,' but because you are dead in your trespasses and sin it takes the Holy Spirit to come along and jiggle the 'willer' so that it comes alive; and when it comes alive then you can believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins."

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." What is a gift? It is something you didn't work for, isn't it? What do you do when someone gives you a gift? Do you say, "How much was it? Oh, I can't accept that. Let me pay you for it." No. That would destroy the gift, wouldn't it? No, when you are given a gift you are to take it and open it up. Now when you open up this gift that Paul is talking about you find that God has presented to you, based on nothing you have done, his Son, and life in his Son. "For by grace you are saved through faith, not of yourself, it is the gift of God not of works lest any man should boast." What a marvelous God!

But Paul does not leave us there. He does not leave us with all this great truth, that because God was rich in mercy he loved us with a great love, that he made us alive together with Christ, that he has raised us up with him, and that he has seated us in the heavenlies with his Son. God does not stop there. He says he is going to give us; something to do. Paul says to the Ephesians, "You are his workmanship, his creation, his poetry. You were created for good works that you should walk in them." God creates a good work. You have nothing to do with it. You cannot take credit for it. You know what you do? Here is a good work: you show up. Here is a good work: you show up. Here is another good work: you show up. Another good work: you show up and it's dinner time. You look back and you say, "My goodness, what kind of a day was that? It was filled with good works. Why? I don't know. I woke up this morning and told God I was available so I just kept walking into these good works." Because they were created before the foundation of the world! What a God! What a God, who not only gives us his life, but then gives us his ministry and we are allowed to express his life and his glory.

For a Christian Easter is every waking moment. It is not a day. Every pulsating moment that you are breathing is Easter, for you have been made alive in Christ Jesus. Can you think of any other way you would want to live? For those of you who are breathing but not living I offer you Jesus Christ as a gift. Accept it. The fact that you are here today already indicates that the Holy Spirit is jiggling your "willer." He just wants you to respond to accept his Son and his Son's death on your behalf and you will be made alive in Christ forever. You will be a trophy of his grace and kindness age upon age upon age.

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