

The life force (Ephesians 2:1-10)

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by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [March 21, 2006](#) issue

On Larry King Live the other night, a well-known Christian musician was telling his life story, and it was exactly the kind of story I prefer not to hear from the pulpit. As King peered at him through his owlish glasses, the musician told of being raised in a warm and loving Christian family and of discovering in high school that he was blessed both with a vibrant faith and with a rare musical gift. Eventually shaking off the dust of his little town, he took his faith and his keyboard and headed off toward the bright lights of Nashville, aiming at a career in gospel music.

In Music City, he found some success, but, unfortunately, he also found drugs—lots of them. A life once young and hopeful soon spiraled out of control; a faith once alive soured into despair. One desperate night, he came completely apart emotionally and found himself lying face down on the linoleum floor of his kitchen, sobbing uncontrollably, crying out to God for salvation. “I woke up the next day,” he said, “and I haven’t been the same since. That was 28 years ago.”

“I just give credit to the Lord,” he said, reflecting on three decades of sobriety and productivity. “I think God just rescued me.”

I can provide a number of good reasons why I don’t want to hear this kind of story from the pulpit. It seems simplistic, for one thing, theologically naive; it belongs in the Christian tabloids. What is more, as a southern Protestant, I am trying to leave these “Just as I am, without one plea” stories behind. I was steeped in a sweaty revivalist culture, the South that Flannery O’Connor called “hardly Christ-centered . . .

. most certainly Christ-haunted.” There personal testimonies, all of them bearing identical “I was sinking deep in sin” plots, were standard evangelistic fare. Nowadays, liturgically I much prefer the aroma of incense to the smell of sawdust, and I know I am not alone in this.

Frankly, though, the real reason why such stories of sin and salvation cause us discomfort may well be that they bring us too close to the molten core of the Christian faith. We prefer to leave the control rods safely in the reactor, but as much as we might like to domesticate the gospel, to make the faith about spiritual enlightenment or ethical ideals or the broad love of God that inspires tolerance, the fact of the matter is that the gospel is at root a rescue story. Even Jesus’ name, as theologian William Placher reminds us, means “the Lord saves.”

“You were dead through trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world,” says Ephesians, but now “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing.” To see this statement as applicable to us, to swallow even one ounce of this claim, we must admit a cluster of truths about ourselves we would rather not face—that we are captive to cultural and spiritual forces over which we have no control, that they have drained the life out of us, that we are unable to think or feel or crawl our way free, and that we are in urgent need of a God who comes to rescue. In short, we need saving. We can accommodate this, perhaps, in a 12-step program, but to encounter it as a description of our true and basic selves sends us scrambling for safer ground.

A pastor friend told me about the day a very disturbing telephone call came into the church office. A part-time staff member, who had been out in his neighborhood walking his dog, had been mugged, stabbed in the heart and rushed to the hospital, and was now in intensive care with virtually no prospect for survival. When the word spread among the church staff, they gathered spontaneously to pray. Standing around the communion table, each person prayed. My friend told me that he and the others offered sincere prayers, but mostly polite and mild petitions, prayers that spoke of comfort and hope and changed hearts, but prayers that had already faced the hard facts of almost certain death.

Then the custodian prayed. My friend reported that it was the most athletic prayer he had ever witnessed. The custodian wrestled with God, shouted at God, anguished with God. His finger jabbed the air and his body shook. “You’ve got to save him! You just can’t let him die!” he practically screamed at God. “You’ve done it many times,

Lord! You've done it for others, you've done it for me, now I am begging you to do it again! Do it for him! Save him, Lord!"

"It was as if he grabbed God by the lapels and refused to turn God loose until God came with healing wings," my friend said. "When we heard that prayer, we just knew that God would indeed come to heal. In the face of that desperate cry for help, God would have been ashamed not to save the man's life." And so it happened.

Recently a popular theologian declared, "The Jesus who 'died for our sins' has simply got to go. . . . Christianity must move beyond a rescuing Jesus." Part of me wants to purr like a kitten in relieved agreement. Yes, let's sweep away the cobwebs clinging to Jesus the rescuer. But then I realize that I am face down on a linoleum floor somewhere in my life, powerless, praying like mad, "You've done it for others, God. I am begging you, do it for me." And when I find myself lifted up into new life and hope, I am more grateful than I can say that "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing."