



# Solitude in Death Births Life in Community

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## LIFE FLOWS FROM THE DEATHBED

Christian community was born out of the death of my friend Opal. She was ninety-seven. As her death approached, the people she blessed as a beloved grandma wanted to say goodbye. Pilgrimages were made from great distances. What each of these children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews needed was an opportunity to share something with Opal. And for a few, the need was to give and to receive forgiveness. Her children especially needed to say, “I forgive you, Mom.” And they needed to hear their mom say to each of them, “I forgive you.” For this to happen, solitude was required.

So the solitude (one-on-one) took place as we sat around Opal’s bed on the last Monday morning of her life, sharing the Lord’s Supper. During the confession of sins, each child personally asked their mom for forgiveness, and then each forgave her. After one son asked her to forgive him, she said, “Oh, that’s OK.” To which he quickly responded, “No, Mom, you need to tell me: I forgive you.” Which she did, somewhat obligingly.

*Human beings develop “armor” to defend themselves from others, but this shuts them out from real human community. Taking down this armor requires forgiveness and reconciliation, an openness to community and the willingness to “relocate” oneself.*

When we were finished and had received the sacrament, we enjoyed the conversation of saints and sinners with the special reality this word of forgiveness had created. Each son had forgiven his mother. Each had heard her word of absolution. The miracle of community began in the solitude of confession and ended with the forgiveness that reconciled them to God and to each other.

Why do we resist this experience of community that is created by solitude with Christ? Does it require a death experience?

### THE “B” BROTHERS TO THE RESCUE

To answer this question, we need to look to the “B” brothers: Becker and Bonhoeffer. Both address what needs to happen for community to be created in a world where people experience isolation instead of solitude.

In addition to his major works, *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, Ernest Becker wrote a book called *Angel in Armor*, which is a selection of essays made up of lectures on human behavior. One of these essays is based on the movie *The Pawnbroker*. He uses the movie for his assessment of how people isolate themselves.

Becker uses the term “character armor” to describe the way we “arm our personality so that it can maneuver in a threatening world.”<sup>1</sup> This effort to insulate ourselves from any influence of the outside is an intentional method of self-protection in a world where we feel threatened. People use character armor to isolate themselves from any possible intrusion. “It shuts them very tightly toward others, who risk invading their world, and perhaps upsetting it, even if they upset it by kindness and love.”<sup>2</sup>

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Character armor finds its biblical roots in Genesis 3. We see how the world of vulnerability for the man and the woman is changed when they lose the intimacy with their Creator. The serpent promised intimacy with evil. (The Hebrew word for “know” is about intimacy.) As soon as the man and the woman experienced this intimacy, they discovered that they were “naked.” Their first act was to cover themselves with their version of character armor, “fig leaves.”

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Becker, *Angel in Armor: A Post-Freudian Perspective on the Nature of Man* (New York: G. Braziller, 1969), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Becker, 84.

Now they have no choice but to hide, from God and from each other. Fear of discovery creates the need for blame. Their armor is in blaming others. They are victims. The man blames both God and the woman. The woman blames the serpent. They are trapped. Becker says they cannot get free because “it takes strength to love, simply because it takes strength to stand exposed without armor, open to the needs of others”<sup>3</sup>

But the problem gets worse. In *Escape from Evil*, Becker shows the evil outcome of a life armed against others. Humans invest their identity in bigger groups to overcome their fears. This effort to immortalize the private ego into a larger body creates the “group ego.” This process of transferring the isolated self into a larger group beyond ourselves is what Becker claims has devastated society:

The thing that feeds the great destructiveness of history is that men give their entire allegiance to their own group . . . they give structure to the formulas for heroic transcendence. History can then be looked at as a succession of immortality ideologies.<sup>4</sup>

Becker knew that people need to find a group that will transcend the meaninglessness of their lives. These groups or projects perpetuate their armored identity after death. Letting go of this striving for immortality is impossible:

No person is strong enough to support the meaning of his life unaided by something outside him. But this is the last thing the individual will admit to himself, because to admit it means to break away the armored mask of righteous self-assurance that surrounds his whole life striving.<sup>5</sup>

So, to discover freedom from one’s armor, help must come from the other “B”: Bonhoeffer. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer exposes the problem that our armored self has no power for intimacy with anyone:

There is no way from one person to another. However loving and sympathetic we try to be, however sound our psychology, however frank and open our behavior, we cannot penetrate the incognito of the other man, for there are no direct relationships, not even between soul and soul.<sup>6</sup>

The armed person controls every relationship to his or her advantage. For this reason, Jesus must be the mediator who frees us from our armor. He gives us intimacy with God and our neighbor. “He is the Mediator, not only between God and man, but between man and man, between man and reality.”<sup>7</sup> So, when Bonhoeffer says we have to die, what must die is our need to arm ourselves. God begins this dying with our call. “At the very moment of their call, men find that they have

<sup>3</sup> Becker, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 153–54.

<sup>5</sup> Becker, *Angel in Armor*, 130.

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 87–88.

<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer, 85.

already broken with all the natural ties of life. This is not their own doing, but his who calls them. For Christ has delivered them from immediacy with the world and brought them into immediacy with himself.”<sup>8</sup> To experience an immediate relationship with Christ requires solitude as we consider what it means to be dead to ourselves.

In Romans 6, Paul states that we die with Christ in our baptism, and newness of life follows: “We too might walk in newness of life” (v. 4). Paul affirms this new life as living “not under law but under grace” (Rom 6:14). Dying to myself is dying to the curse of the law, which demands that I put on my character armor each day. “Under grace” means it is no longer my life. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). This is the profession of faith for anyone freed from character armor by the claims of Christ. Solitude is essential for that freedom.

Solitude gives Christ the time to connect the new me with a new community of saints and sinners. Outside of Christ we will create a group ego that supports us in our personal ego needs. But in Galatians 3:27–28 we read of the other community: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Since we are dead to our ego, we are given the communion of saints and sinners, as a gift and as a God’s means of continuing to keep us under God’s grace.

Bonhoeffer declares freedom from the group ego since as people who have died in Christ, we no longer have immediacy in any relationships. “Since the coming of Christ, his followers have no more immediate realities of their own, not in their family relationships nor in the ties with their nation nor in the relationships formed in the process of living. Between father and son, husband and wife, the individual and the nation, stands Christ the Mediator.”<sup>9</sup> We no longer need to verify ourselves through anything. No team. No party. No occupation. No racial heritage. We are free. When I was in college, one of the preppie seniors would snidely ask, “What does your daddy do?” My answer would be, “He’s the creator of the heavens and the earth. What does your dad do?”

The solution that frees humans for community is Christ alone. Christ stands in the center between my neighbor and me. The new me is able to be alive to my neighbor because Christ alone mediates the relationship for me. I now get to enjoy my neighbor through my Mediator. Becker also knew this possibility. He chose the title *Angel in Armor* to convey our calling to be an angel in a different kind of armor. He points out the significance of being dead to our character armor:

The saint lives openly, with an absolute minimum of character armor, and so each life that he touches is enriched by his sympathy, generosity

<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer, 84.

<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer, 86.

and true fearlessness. How can one live openly unless he is fearless, since we put on character armor because of our fears? And how can one be fearless unless he is willing to let go of life, to make the very meaning of his life the sacrifice of it? This was the real “secret” of Christ’s strength.<sup>10</sup>

### ISOLATION TO GROUP EGO, OR SOLITUDE TO COMMUNITY

How does a saint run naked in a world where everyone else is fully armed? This is the question Becker raises. How do we get free from our ego and become available to the neighbor in love? Isolation is the human condition. It is that which keeps us from true community. Isolation seeks the larger group ego that will offer some meaning to one’s desolation. But it is not community. How does Jesus mediate community to us?

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Let’s consider the prodigal son. He sat in isolation among the pigs. What came to mind? He recalled the community of love in his father’s home. Even though he created a speech to mediate his reunion, he knew there was more to his father. This memory drove him to come home. Jesus says he “came to himself,” the self of his home. The boy experienced solitude in his desolation as he remembered that he was beloved to his father.

The father was the source of hope for the prodigal. Parents are the first source of community in the world to which we are born. Parents become the primary source of community for every child. But isolation occurs in this community as we disappoint one another, creating hurt, regret, shame, and fear. As revealed in Opal’s family, there is always need for forgiveness. Every family centered on love can become a relationship of remembering one’s faults.

Drs. John and Julie Gottman have studied this human condition of finding fault. They learned that you must give up your right to be right and instead convey kindness to the person to whom you are married. Emily Esfahani Smith describes the significance of their work in an article quoting John: “Much of it comes down to the spirit couples bring to the relationship. Do they bring kindness and generosity; or contempt, criticism, and hostility?” Julie Gottman adds an extra element that expands the problem: Is the spouse seeking the good of the other or harm? She adds this thought about fault finding: “It’s scanning the partner for what the

<sup>10</sup> Becker, *Angel in Armor*, 95–96.

partner is doing right or scanning him for what he's doing wrong and criticizing versus respecting him and expressing appreciation."<sup>11</sup>

Now we are back to Becker's problem of arming ourselves when we are being scanned for our faults. We all know that as humans we are better at responding in kind than with kindness. So how do we get from this fearful pattern of contempt and instead create faithful patterns for kindness? The answer is the same as for the prodigal: solitude. We begin by meditating on what creates kindness in us. St. Paul writes in Romans 2:4, "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" Our Lord wants to give us the power to be kind. This happens when we spend time in solitude with Jesus, who says in Matthew 11:28–29, "Come to me . . . learn of me . . . I am gentle and lowly in heart."

All humans need kindness mediated by Christ. I, too, needed to receive kindness from the people I was called to serve: my spouse, my children, and people I encountered in my work. But a shame-based upbringing made me fearful of having my faults scanned. As a result, I created my own armor by becoming a codependent person. I labored to prove I was worthy, so I became a workaholic. I was controlled by the validation I received from those I felt I needed to impress. To help me get free, I went to two counseling services with my wife. They gave me an analysis of the problem. Solitude was not suggested as a solution. So how does one break the habits practiced for years? I was isolated. Trapped in the armor I had created.

## CHRIST FREES FOR SPIRITUAL RELOCATION IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The solution that made kindness a reality required solitude. This process started with a friend. She trained us in Martin Luther's method of praying Scripture using the T.R.I.P. (Thanks, Regret, Intercession, Purpose) questions.<sup>12</sup> Each day we took a time of solitude with the *Daily Texts* from the Moravian Church in America to write down our answers to the T.R.I.P. questions. Writing the "Thanks" prayer for the kind words I was hearing from our Lord was extremely hard at first. It was contrary to my codependent mindset. But Jesus mediated my self-esteem with his promises instead of my performance. I learned to listen for our Lord's voice in the daily verses. My reality of shame was slowly replaced by his reality of blessing. Just as Jesus restores the intimacy with God that human beings lost in Eden, so Jesus became the mediator of our marriage. We discovered in these times of solitude a new community.

The fruit of our solitude was kindness. My shame-based character armor had been replaced with the clothing of grace. The Spirit gave birth to kindness in me

<sup>11</sup> Emily Esfahani Smith, "Masters of Love," *The Atlantic*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/06/happily-ever-after/372573/>.

<sup>12</sup> The explanation of the T.R.I.P. Bible Study method can be found in *Daily Texts 2022* (Bayport, MN: Ground Up Grace, 2022), as well as on the brief sample podcast at <https://groundupgrace.com>.

toward myself and, as a result, toward my wife and family. Kindness replaced the rotten fruit of my sarcasm. In our time of solitude, Christ's words daily mediated fresh fruit in our relationship. Instead of being surrounded by fruit flies, we had the joy of fruitful lives.

This spiritual relocation that took place in our lives is at the heart of Martin Luther's teaching on meditation. He connects the need for relocation with the incarnation of Jesus. He compels his friend George Speinlein to take time to be quiet, to meditate on what Christ's relocation means for us as citizens of his kingdom. "For Christ dwells only in sinners. On this account he descended from heaven, where he dwelt among the righteous, to dwell among sinners. Meditate on this love of his and you will see his sweet consolation."<sup>13</sup>

Luther challenges Speinlein to pour whatever goodness he may have into the lives of the people who surround him. For Luther, the entire experience of relocating is at the heart of what he called the happy exchange, in which Christ makes our sins his and gives us his righteousness. As with Bonhoeffer, Luther encourages his friend to fix his eyes on Christ as his mediator. He tells Speinlein to reflect in solitude on what it means to live a relocated life in the kingdom. "Only keep your eyes fixed on what he has done for you and for all men in order that you may learn what you should do for others. If he had desired to live only among good people and to die only for his friends, for whom, I ask you, would he have died or with whom would he ever have lived?"<sup>14</sup>

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## PHYSICAL RELOCATION IS POSSIBLE ONLY BECAUSE OF SPIRITUAL RELOCATION

Luther's exhortation to Speinlein explains why many people seek ways to be relocated physically. What begins as a spiritual experience mediated through the kindness of Christ results in freedom under grace. Christ frees us from ourselves for our neighbors, whether they be parents, siblings, spouse, children, or others. Dr. John Perkins, founder of Christian Community Development Association, describes the radical revolution of community that is created when believers are free to relocate themselves physically into the world of people they are called to serve:

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, "To George Spenlein, Wittenberg, April 8, 1516," *Luther's Works* 48, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 13.

<sup>14</sup> *LW*, 14.

Relocating myself makes me accountable to the real needs of the people because they become my needs. Ministering from within the neighborhood or community, I will know and be able to start with the real need of those around me instead of forcing on the people what I have assumed their needs are.<sup>15</sup>

One of the ways relocation happens is with mission trips. Adults, families, and youth groups relocate for short-term service. Every person who makes this commitment from a world of comfort to one of discomfort must first meet in solitude with Christ. Only then does the spiritual relocation make the physical one an act of freedom and joy. Longer-term relocations involve God calling people to relocate physically after the spiritual relocation has set them free. Two couples who are friends of our family discovered this call. The Saadas relocated to Jericho on the West Bank and the Tolos to Frogtown in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 2007, Tass and Karen Saada moved to Jericho and founded a school to provide a loving learning environment for young people to feel the compassion of our Lord. They served there for ten years, through 2018. Tass's story of being relocated is found in his autobiography, *Once an Arafat Man*.<sup>16</sup> In 2011, John and Jen Tolo moved to the Frogtown area of St. Paul. They bought a house and converted several others into homes and ministry centers. Ten years later, and with many stories of ministry transformation, what once was a community plagued by crime, violence, and fear has become "Godtown."

Every calling to spiritual relocation must begin in solitude with Christ. This allows for physical relocation. Becker and Bonhoeffer give the formative steps for this new birth to take place. Solitude with Christ frees people from their character armor to become angels dressed in Christ alone.

Spiritual relocation brings us back to Opal and what happened at the time of her death. When Opal was giving and receiving farewells, final blessings from her grandchildren included the estranged daughter of one of the sons who was in Opal's room on Monday morning. When this son found out that his daughter was coming from Texas to see his mom, he became alarmed. He had not talked to her for thirty years. He wanted to flee. But fortunately, his sister-in-law became his mediator. She reminded him of the reconciliation he had experienced with his mom. The forgiveness he had exchanged with his mom had healed that relationship. However, when his daughter arrived at the hospice, he became anxious again and still wanted to "relocate" by running away. Thanks to his sister-in-law, he was able to die to those fears, and he remained and met his daughter. He asked her to forgive him, and she did. They were reconciled. What began for him on Monday in forgiveness with his mom led to his being reconciled with his daughter.

<sup>15</sup> John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution: The Christian Response to Human Need, a Strategy for Today* (Waco TX: Word, 1976), 213–16.

<sup>16</sup> Tass Saada and Dean Merrill, *Once an Arafat Man: The True Story of How a P.L.O. Sniper Found a New Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2009).



In a world where all people suffer at some level from being hurt by others, the simple words of absolution from a dying mother to her boys reveal God's desire to create community out of solitude. Forgiveness freed them from the isolation that guilt and resentment had created. Every person's story of pain needs a time of solitude for giving and receiving forgiveness. Christ alone mediates this experience. For a person to be spiritually relocated from isolation depends on the words of grace coming to that person from God. Under the grace of Christ, the old person daily dies and new life is born. The fruit of solitude gives life in community. ☩

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