Waking the Dead: The Glory of a Heart Fully Alive

By John Eldredge

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

John Eldredge has been inspired by Irenaeus' thought that the glory of God is a person fully alive. His book Waking the Dead explores how we can give ourselves permission to be all that God made us to be and enjoy the life in all its fullness that Jesus brings.

The Resurrection of Jesus affirms the promise of that life, eternally. Eternal life is life that is unending starting here and now, not just something that comes later. Jesus came to bring people life in all its fullness now. We are free now to be all God meant us to be. It’s not about merely a long duration but a quality of life.

He recognizes the reality that life is often far from the ideal of peace like a river, joy unspeakable and abundant victory. It is more authentic to acknowledge with Tillich that it’s only “here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves” that we see evidence of a new creation.

Eldredge explains this with the metaphor of warfare. We struggle in life because we are at war and this, he maintains, is “the backdrop of the whole Bible”. I’m not sure about such a blanket assertion. I can recognize the truth he is seeking to communicate, but I struggle with the need for predominantly war language. He might suggest I am falling into the Enlightenment trap of ignoring the spiritual and other forces arrayed against us. But for me, words like “struggle” or “being light in a dark place” or even “battle” or “fight” convey the reality of my faith and ministry without having to imagine myself as some sort of spiritual commando. There is a war between good and evil, but warmaking language carries connotations of cultural imperialism and superiority that I’d rather avoid. In a similar way I see the element of truth that the church needs to market itself well, but marketing language carries connotations of consumerism that I shy away from.

Fortunately Waking the Dead is not all about spiritual warfare. Eldredge suggests four streams through which we can discover abundant life. One of them is spiritual warfare — fighting for our hearts. The other three are about walking with God (discipleship), receiving God’s intimate counsel (counseling), and deep restoration (healing). Some of his comments and prayers are a bit flowery, but the invitation to wholeness, balanced living and caring for ourselves points in helpful directions.

One of the most inspiring parts of the book is his reminder of how we all need friends who are committed to help us be what we are created to be. We need companions for the journey, an intimate community to encourage us on, a ‘small group’ who will fight for our hearts. In the Lord of the Rings, Frodo had the Fellowship of the Ring. Though he was a very brave hobbit, he didn’t stand a chance on his quest without the strength of Gimli and Boromir, the vision of Legolas, the mentoring of Aragorn and Gandalf, and the loyal friendship of Sam, Frodo and Merry. I need my fellowship of the heart. My partnership with my wife Jenni, the counsel of friends, the encouragement of my home group, and the regularity of spiritual direction all helped fuel the passion in my heart. Shrek needed the donkey. Noo needs the Nebuchadnezzar’s crew. Dorothy journeys with Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, Lion and Toto. Prince Caspian was joined by the remnant Narnians. Maximus rallies the Gladiators. Captain John Miller has the squad to rescue Private John Ryan. Jesus had the Twelve. Frodo and those other heroes needed their friends and I need mine. Eldredge asks: “Who is your fellowship of the heart?”

The main reason I would recommend Waking the Dead is that it has plenty of illustrations from the author’s own experience, Bible character stories, and popular culture including some of the most popular movies of the last decade. As well as the movie characters just mentioned, Eldredge explores themes from The Perfect Storm, Titanic, Braveheart, Star Wars, Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, The Lion King, Chocolate, Amadeus and others. It is not a book about movies but, if nothing else, the rich content drawing on gospel themes in movies makes the book worthwhile.