

Wanted: Dead and Alive

Reward: Gold, Silver & Precious Stones

“Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Romans 6:11

Mug shots in the post office are about as ugly as pictures come. These folks sure look guilty; in fact any one of us might appear just as suspicious with our photo shot in such an awful light. Thankfully, most of our images will never grace the wall of the post office, yet what may rank a close second to a mug shot is our driver's license picture.

Although not considered a sentimental portrait, I've saved my old driver's licenses, if only for their amusement value. The image on each was something I once saw daily in the mirror, but each has become a part of history. Instead, someone else looks back at me these days looking a whole lot different. Of course the same soul occupies the same body with the same DNA; furthermore, some things seem immutable, like my need for allergy medication, or my love for Italian food. Yet other things seem as buried as my ash brown hair. I groan at never seeing the scale read 115 again, or not needing glasses to read fine print. And I've long since ceased being the youngest person in a group who felt sorry for anyone older than 25 years old, thinking they were ancient and over the hill.

All these collective changes didn't happen overnight, but as a result of time mixed with innumerable decisions, events and processes. Because with time inevitably comes not only change, but also specialization. At the earlier stages of life our fate was unknown and we all could have been one of many things, hence the rhyme, “Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief; doctor, lawyer, Indian chief.” But fast-forwarding to adulthood, we pretty much know onto which track we've split off.

However, specialization doesn't inevitably go hand in hand with inflexible older folks who get stuck in their ways; in reality the process begins very early, in the womb in fact. In utero, embryonic stem cells all share the same potential to form a heart, skin, brain cells, and so on. Yet once committed to its fate, a stem cell can never go back; once upon the path to becoming brain tissue, its potential to be part of the stomach vanishes forever.

Outside the womb specialization and change continue, and our increasing complexity is marked not just by successive birthdays, but progressively advanced stages. Each new stage necessitates cessation of the previous; a child ceases to be a baby, an adolescent ceases to be a child, a young woman ceases to be an adolescent, and a mature woman ceases to be a young woman. In fact this process never stops, not until the end of our days do we cease to change, when the heartbeats stop and the soul exits the body. In spite of countless events defining the uniqueness of each life, one final appointment with death awaits everyone.

Okay, since I'm probably getting more philosophical than practical, what's the point? Change is a part of life, yet if we're to benefit from change, the latter stages should be better than the former. In other words change should mean progress. Spiritually speaking this is true as well; in 1 Corinthians 13:11 Paul affirms, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.” Therefore growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ means to abandon lesser things in pursuit of the greater. Furthermore, some things are rendered dead and buried, such as our guilt. But others are rendered dead and not buried, so that we can be both dead and alive, that is, dead to sin and alive to the Spirit.

This is available through the marvelous work of our redemption. The gift of eternal life changed us forever and the hope of a future in God's presence is wonderful beyond comprehension. However, our eternal life doesn't begin in the future at physical death. Our eternal life is now; it started at spiritual birth. We're new creations, severed from our old position in Adam (1 Corinthians 15:22). At our first birth we were separated from God; at our second we were joined to Him. We entered this world spiritually dead, yet we'll leave it spiritually alive; in the interim there's His purpose for our life. So He wants us not only spiritually alive, but dead to sin.

He redeemed us in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4-5) and of course nothing can remove the indwelling of the Spirit who sealed us (Ephesians 1:13). We couldn't redeem ourselves, but we can redeem our time (Ephesians 5:16) and count ourselves dead to sin (Romans 6:11). Even though our earthly tent is corrupted by a rebellious sin nature, it was crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6). So the flesh needn't be our master anymore, just dead weight that must be carried around for a season. Joined to Christ, our new Master, we can choose to live according to the life of the indwelling Spirit, dead to the flesh. We can do this because we're not slaves to sin anymore.

We're slaves to righteousness now and free from the hold that once drew us like a magnet into immorality, idolatry, anger, jealousy, pride or whatever. Because the magnet of sin can't pull us from Him, we needn't look back in apprehension as if it could and unwittingly give authority to an old master that covets our attention, yearns to subvert, never yields willingly and always seeks to entice.

The days of the flesh are numbered, and though our outer vessels break down, what should continually build up is the treasure contained within them. Thus we can be shaped from the inside out, transformed to increasingly greater glory (2 Corinthians 3:18) so that as the body dies what's still visible is His undying image.

In eternity our life will be on display in God's presence. How much will make us cringe as if we saw a bad driver's license picture? How much will be rewarded with gold, silver and precious stones because He saw in us a reflection of His only begotten Son?