

LIVING IN NEW LIFE

INTRODUCTION

If you know who you are, then you'll know what to do.

I grew up in a smaller Church of Christ. We had a building that probably was like most church buildings built during the 1950s. It had oak pews with pads that were added later. In the front of the auditorium, there was a solid oak pulpit with a couple of big oak chairs behind it—off to the sides. There were oak “scoreboards” on the front walls on both sides. One showed last week’s attendance and contribution, and the other had the song numbers we were going to sing that day.

Behind the pulpit, there was a baptistery. It was mostly hidden, but there was a little glass section at the top so you could see the beginning and ending of baptisms. At the right side and left side of the baptistery, some stairs began in the water and ascended to a small landing where there was a solid oak door. The doors opened into changing rooms—one for men and one for women.

When someone was baptized, it was always special. A couple of men would move the big pulpit so we could see the baptism. The big, solid oak doors were slowly and carefully opened. The opening and closing of those doors before and after a baptism always seemed somewhat sacred and a little mysterious, especially for a child.

My little sister, for a long time was afraid of baptism because she thought that people who were raised up out of the water by the preacher, who then turned and ascended the steps out of the baptistery to the landing and then made their way past the big oak door, didn’t stop there. She thought those stairs ascended and extended to Heaven. She thought that when you were baptized, you were raised up out of the water and walked up the steps, which became a stairway to heaven. And that was it. You were saved and taken out of this world. Gone forever.

That sounds kinda nice, but that’s not the way it works. We are raised up to live a new life with a new identity in this world while we anticipate the next world—the New Heaven and New Earth.

Paul reminds the Colossians of this, and Shawn did a great job last week talking about it. In Colossians 2:12, Paul reminds them that they were buried in baptism and then raised up out of the water, symbolizing the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It’s all an embodiment of their desire to live by faith. Baptism is a beautiful reenactment of the Good News of Jesus—The Gospel.

Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.

—1 Peter 3:18 NLT

Jesus, the One who had no sin became sin—a sin offering according to 2 Corinthians 5:21—for all of us—a perfect and pleasing sacrifice. He dies on the cross, shedding his blood, for my sins and for yours. He is buried in a borrowed tomb. On the third day—a wonderful Sunday morning—He rises up and walks or runs out of that grave. Resurrected!

In Romans 6, Paul says we identify with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus when we are baptized. We die to sin—I no longer want sin to dominate my life. When something is dead, we bury it. But burial in baptism is different because it’s temporary. Just as Jesus did not stay in the tomb, we do not stay underwater. As Jesus rises from the dead, we rise out of the watery grave to live a new life with a new identity. And *if you know who you are, then you'll know what to do.*

DISCUSSION

New life, new identity! Doesn't that sound appealing? I can leave behind the guilt I have over things I've done or things I did not do that I should've done. In this new life, I don't worry about creating and sustaining an image, an identity. I don't have to fake it until I make it. In this new life, I can find authentic love and acceptance from God Almighty and from others who follow him. I can be real and relax. I can find rest for my weary soul. I can be at peace with who I am. This is what Jesus offers.

The key to this new life and identity is Resurrection Power. It's transformative power in my life, and the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. At our baptism, we receive the Spirit of God¹. The Spirit's role is multi-faceted, but He is always pointing to Jesus. He is always wanting us to be like Jesus. He is working to make us like Jesus.

In this new life and identity, we must cooperate in transformation by giving the Spirit of God time and space to work. One of the key things is controlling our thoughts. Remember this from last week:

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.

—Colossians 3:1,2 NLT

As we set our hearts and minds on things above, empowered by the Spirit of God, we take off some things that Paul mentions in 3:5-9, things maybe that *were* a part of our identity:

- ▶ Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires
- ▶ Greed – idolatry, worshiping the things of this world
- ▶ Get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language
- ▶ Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds

Before and after saying these things, Paul emphasizes our new life—our new identity. We are beloved children of God. We are holy, blameless, and perfect in the eyes of God (see Colossians 1:22) because we have clothed ourselves with Christ in our baptism (Galatians 3:26,27).

By setting our sights on the realities of heaven, by thinking about the things of heaven, we are transformed. We take off some things and put on others. In this new life, we reflect the Son, Jesus. Consider our text this morning, Colossians 3:10,12-17.

Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.

¹Acts 2:38, 1 Corinthians 12:13. See also Titus 3:4-7.

Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.

—Colossians 3:10,12-17 NLT

There is nothing too hard to understand in this passage, but it is hard to do! We are all messed up in one way or another and tend to revive our old ways that created so many problems. But a new life and identity leads to a new way of living. If we know who we are, then we'll know what to do.

There are some interesting things in the backstory of Colossians that help bring these challenging words alive and make them real. There was a key leader in the church at Colossae; his name was Philemon. He was wealthy, and the Colossian church met in his home. You can read about it in the little book that bears his name. Philemon was a slave owner, which was very common in the Roman Empire. One of Philemon's slaves ran away, probably stealing as went. His name was Onesimus.

Well, Onesimus, the runaway slave, somehow comes in contact with a prisoner named Paul. Paul leads Onesimus to Christ. In his new life and identity, Onesimus knows what he needs to do—go back to Philemon and make things right. In Colossians 4:7-9, we learn that a man named Tychicus carries this letter to the Colossian church. Along with Tychicus is Onesimus, the runaway slave. We believe these two not only carried the Colossian letter but also the little letter in your Bible called Philemon.

Can you imagine Onesimus showing up at Philemon's door? Onesimus deceived, probably stole, and then ran off. Tychicus hands Philemon a short little letter from Paul that essentially says, "Onesimus is now your brother in Christ. Forgive him. Accept him. Love him as your brother." Wow!

At the same time, perhaps, Tychicus hands this letter we call Colossians to Philemon and other leaders of the church. It will be read to the church soon and will be very important in dealing with this delicate and controversial matter of Onesimus showing up. Don't you know all kinds of controversy will unfold around Onesimus and his new life and identity? I believe the words of our text this morning were meant to be applied to that situation and to a million more that we all face.

In this new life in Christ, the dividing walls of hostility have been torn down. There is now peace—peace with God and peace with others all predicated on love and forgiveness. We have a new life, a new identity, and a new responsibility where the love of Jesus permeates everything we do—all relationships, all behaviors, and all situations.

It involves compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. In the name of love, we learn to look past the flaws and faults of others, knowing we have our own. In the name of Jesus, we forgive the unforgivable because we have been forgiven of the inexcusable. We let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts as we seek and pursue harmony and unity. It's all governed by gratitude—gratitude for the gift of life, and gratitude for this new life in Christ that has a glorious future.

We allow Christ to rule our lives, and we share with others the things we are learning. We sing. We pray. Whatever we do or say, we do it as representatives of the Lord Jesus, always giving thanks for all things.

In this new life, there is no Gentile or Jew, no slave or free, no Republican or Democrat, it is Christ and Christ alone who is all, above all, and in all! It is Christ that allows us to rise above the things that divide us and seek to identify us—they all become secondary or even disappear. We don't dwell on our differences but we concentrate on commonalities in Christ—our shared identity and our glorious future.

With our new identity, there is no room for guilt. There is no need to fake it until you make it. There is no need to isolate and live alone. In my new life, with my identity, there is peace, joy, and confidence.

This sounds good, but it's difficult. How do you remember what to do? The key, again, is setting our *sights on the realities of heaven* and thinking about *the things of heaven, not the things of the earth*.

It's hard to stay focused, especially with the constant noise of news and entertainment, but we can control that. Being still and quiet—turning things off—is so important. Taking in Scripture daily and praying are keys to controlling our thoughts. I think it's important to imagine the realities of heaven.

I recently read a book that encouraged me and made me excited about the realities of heaven. It's John Burke's book, *Imagine the God of Heaven (JPEG)*. The subtitle is *Near-Death Experiences, God's Revelation, and the Love You've Always Wanted*. Burke, now a minister, began as a trained engineer, a natural skeptic; he spent 30 years studying Near Death Experiences. In this book, he carefully examines the amazing love of God revealed in Scripture and beautifully and powerfully illustrates God's love by sharing thrilling experiences people have had in "dying" and then coming back.

We think Paul, the Apostle, may have had a near-death experience², and it's not unlike these modern experiences people share. People who are considered dead and are later resuscitated, come back and describe all kinds of wonderful things. They see and experience things that are nearly indescribable.

Nearly all of the experiences involve light brighter than the sun, and yet they can look at it and see it. They know it's God. In His presence, there was a feeling of unconditional love and acceptance, even while there is an awareness of their sin.

People often experience spaces and places full of color, places where the grass is greener, the flowers more vibrant, the mountains more majestic, and all of them radiate beautiful light. They see more colors than we know and experience it all with more senses than we have.

Some see Jesus and his scars—the only manmade thing in Heaven. Many years ago, there was a man in our church who was very friendly and talkative, just a great guy. One day, he had a severe stroke that nearly took his life. In fact, we thought he was gone. Once he finally regained consciousness, he was so different. The stroke took most of his ability to speak. But the first thing he said to me—and he said with such passion and wide-eyed awe—was, "I saw him!" He said it repeatedly. I think he saw Jesus.

Some of these folks, having Near Death Experiences, see the outstretched arms of loving mercy—arms of invitation. I'm not doing Burke's book justice, but to me, it all points to this:

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him."

—1 Corinthians 2:9 NLT

²In Acts 14:19, a crowd stoned Paul, drug him outside the city, and left him for dead, but he survived. Some believe this is tied to the fascinating description in 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul is caught up in the "third heaven," and he even says it may have been an out of body experience (vss. 2,3).

CONCLUSION

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven; think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.

Ultimately, this is all about a new identity that flows into community. If we know who we are, we'll know what to do. Like most people, I have struggled with identity. Who am I? Is my identity about what I achieve, accomplish, and how I perform, which then shapes what others think of me?

Many years ago, I started reading the works of Henri Nouwen. He was a brilliant Dutch scholar and theologian, but his writings are so simple and accessible. He wrote a lot about identity because, surprisingly, he struggled with his.

He was brilliant and accomplished. He taught at Notre Dame, Yale Divinity School, and Harvard Divinity School. Yet, he struggled with who he was. After nearly 20 years of teaching, he left academia and began working in a home for people with all kinds of disabilities—some quite severe.

Nouwen had a long journey regarding his identity. He concluded that his, and our, core identity is not found in accomplishments, roles or titles, or external validation. What Nouwen concludes, and this changed my life, is that **we are beloved children of God**. We are God's children loved unconditionally.

I am a beloved son of God

This truth—that we are beloved children of God—which becomes our true identity, transcends everything else and becomes the foundation upon which we build our new lives in Christ. I know who I am—a beloved child of God—so I know what to do. I live for Jesus. I live and love like Jesus no matter what I do. It's a life-long journey, filled with love, grace, and mercy—received from God and given to others.

RESPONSE TIME (9:30 & 11:00)

As we enter into a time of contemplation, reflection, and response, you are invited to take communion, worship in song, pray by yourself, or with others. You are also invited to be baptized, reenacting the beautiful story of salvation found in Jesus through his death, burial, and resurrection. As you ascend those stairs, they are not a stairway to heaven but rather steps into a new identity as a beloved child of God.

If and when you belong to Jesus:

- ▶ Your past does not define you; your failures don't define you.
- ▶ Your successes don't define you—not roles, achievements, or accomplishments.
- ▶ God defines you. He calls us his beloved, and nothing can change that.
- ▶ You are treasured, valued, and of extreme importance.
- ▶ You are enough because He is enough—more than enough.
- ▶ You can relax about your image and let go of the guilt.
- ▶ You can connect with God and with others.

In Christ, you are a beloved child of God. That's who you are. And since you know who you are, you know what to do—live and love like Jesus!