

September 12, 2021

Dear Praying Family and Friends,

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- I have finished the penultimate week-long, in-hospital infusion of chemo. As I write this, I've almost finished the two-week recovery from the last hospital admission.
- I am doing very well indeed! The last admission went very smoothly, as it should have after four previous near-identical week-long IV infusions. The past two weeks of recovery have featured several joyous times of fellowship with family and old friends in the Lord.
- I enter the hospital for the sixth and final week-long infusion tomorrow afternoon (Monday, September 13). After that, I get a six-week rest before a PET scan shows us what the next step is going to be.

As I approach some sort of finish line (at least for this variety of therapy), I am hugely grateful to each of you who have prayed for my well-being, and for Barbara's as well.

WHO IS THAT IN THE MIRROR??

I use a social media app on my phone called [Marco Polo](#) to communicate with immediate family. It's similar to email, except the "messages" are not in text form, but rather in short videos.

When I create a message, I see my face as my addressee sees it, or as I'd see myself talking while looking into a mirror. *What I see has for weeks unsettled me.* I haven't seen what I have always seen for the past half-century (!). It's a different person staring back at me.

I've mentioned this in previous updates. What I haven't mentioned until now is the chagrin, the perplexity I feel toward this stranger in the mirror. To judge by his expression, he too feels surprise and dismay as he looks back at me. Just who is that old man in the mirror?

WHO AM I ANYWAY?

For many decades now, I've understood that our Heavenly Father orders our steps, our circumstances, our course through this world so to weave spiritual truth into the warp and woof of all that we experience. *Everything we see and hear, everything we experience means something.* Our Lord chided Nicodemus for failing to perceive the depth of meaning, the "spiritual things" embodied in earthly things. (cf. John 3:11ff).

So, my bathroom mirror presents me with a puzzle - the image of a man I'm NOT accustomed to seeing! Who is he? Why does he look so shocked? Surely there's a parable here! For weeks now, I've worried over this like a dog gnawing at a bone he can't quite grasp between his teeth.

IDENTITY - THEN AND NOW

Scripture tells us two certain things about a Christian's identity. First the Bible tells us who we are from birth. The creation shows us God's wrath against sin, and that knowledge

renders all of us liable to judgment (cf. Romans 1:18-20). We're sinners.

Second, for those who trust in our Lord's death on the cross to satisfy God's righteous judgment, for those who are born again, we are by baptism placed into the Body of Christ (Romans 6:3ff; 1 Corinthians 12:13ff), and so we acquire a *new* identity. We become, by adoption, sons of God, heirs of God and joint-heirs with our Lord (Romans 8:14ff).

So far, so good. But . . . just how far do these two truths take us? The second truth - as wonderful as it is - does not take us very far if we're talking about that new identity. To see this, compare the two notions of ourselves for a moment.

How much and how well do you know and understand about your identity as a sinner? Paradoxically, the more mature we are spiritually, the more we perceive and understand our own sinfulness!

There are excellent reasons why old age is beset with regrets. From the perspective you and I have at the end of a long life, our own follies, mistakes, and criminality lay before us in an awful vista of moral wreckage. It is rare for a young man to possess this self-understanding. It is ordinary for old men to see this. The blessed among old men and women know to flee for refuge to the One who offers to forgive them that lifetime of sin.

On the other hand, compare this knowledge of your own identity as a sinner with your knowledge of your identity as a child of God, your identity as a member of the Body of Christ, *your identity in eternity*. Do you know your eternal identity as much as or as well as you know your identity as a sinner?

Of course not! The Apostle personally closer to our Lord than any of the others says this about our eternal identity:

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (1 John 3:2)

On one hand, we know a few theological facts about our redeemed identity. The Apostle John tells us we are children of God. On the other hand, ***we know nothing*** about what that means except for this: it will be like our Lord.

St. Paul ***also*** tells us we are children of God. For that reason we are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:14ff). Paul tells us we are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ. Yet, while these affirmations about our eternal identity are true, ***we have no idea*** what that will be like, what our eternal life will consist of, how it will "work" or anything else concrete about it.

Our knowledge of ourselves as sinners is vastly greater than our present knowledge of our identity in eternity.

AT THE LAST WHO ARE YOU?

Let me bring this all back to the puzzle I'm seeing in my bathroom mirror. Scripture tells me two things about myself, about you, too. We are first of all wretched sinners. I am, by God's grace, His child and destined for a glory that Scripture tells me very little about, almost nothing beyond the assertion that my identity in Christ is glorious. That's it.

Now, moving from sinner to saint is a breathtaking change! That change is what our life this side of death is chiefly concerned with. From the moment I first looked to our Lord for mercy, for His forgiveness, until now - it's been one long episode of change. And to confirm this, the changes I see in my body are emblems, tokens, sacramentals in the sense that St. Augustine defined them: tangible, concrete, visible signs of a grace whose operation is otherwise wholly inward, invisible to others, sometimes even to ourselves.

CONFORMITY TO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

Now for a hard saying . . .

How cometh this change? The theology book calls this *process* sanctification. That word is an answer to the question "What?" What does God's Word say about the "How?" If sanctification is a process that changes the sinner into a saint, what makes the change happen? What *drives* the change forward?

It's *not* an answer to say "The Holy Spirit." The Spirit of Christ is the **agency** for the change. The Holy Spirit is the One who directs that process of sanctification. What, then, is that process? How does it "work?" How does the Holy Spirit "conduct" that process of sanctification? He does for us what He first did for the Eternal Son of God once He was identified as that Eternal Son at His baptism - "Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness." (Mark 1:12)

Our Lord's suffering is not confined to His passion and crucifixion. ***It begins in the wilderness***, where . . .

. . . in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, & though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. (Hebrews 5:7-9)

Here's the hard saying: **suffering** is how the Holy Spirit leads us toward glory. This is truly a hard saying in a world where people who are ostensibly poor have a life that would boggle the minds of most kings in history for its luxury and delights. The New Testament shouts at us that **suffering** is the path on which the Holy Spirit conducts us toward glory.

Why **that**? Because, it is the path our Lord trod to arrive at His present glory at the right hand of His Father in Heaven. And, so, Jesus told his disciples:

"Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." (Mark 8:34).

James, in the first New Testament letter written, begins his letter with this:

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (James 1:2-4).

See? James tells us that the goal - "that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" - is arrived at through various trials.

St. Paul warns his disciple Timothy that suffering and persecution is *normal* for a disciple:

... you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (2 Timothy 3:10-12)

Do you want to know if you're traveling the main route to the New Jerusalem? Paul rejoiced to know this! And look at how he knew:

... most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

St. Peter agrees:

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. (1 Peter 4:12-14)

WHO IS THAT MAN IN THE MIRROR?

He is a sinner in the process of being redeemed, a man in the process of growing up in Christ. He is beset by sundry medical trials tests, and temptations to fear. He endures various indignities and humiliations of body and spirit. He's lost his hair, his life-long beard, his eyebrows, even 20 percent of his flesh has melted away. Purplish bruises now decorate his arms as if some mad tattoo artist had attacked him in a dark alley. Shall we pity such an old man? Or shall we, instead, bellow encouragement at him as if cheering on a spent runner churning toward the finish line of a marathon?

If it's an old Christian we're talking about, let's cheer him on. If we're among the cloud of witnesses who behold him as he goes by, let's pray he can lay aside every weight, and any sin which might ensnare him, so that he runs with endurance the race that the Holy Ghost has set before him.

I know I would covet such prayers.

Much love in Him,

Fr. Bill