"The Living & the Dead"

* By Tony Harriman

In 1998 my family and I finished building our home and moved in just before Thanksgiving of that year. It was a thrilling experience; everything about the place was so shiny new. The paintwork was clean and fresh. The carpet throughout the house looked new; smelled new; felt new. The bathroom and kitchen furniture was sparkly and squeaky clean. The cement of the garage floor still had that freshly-poured look and smell. One of the last things to be finished was the decking out the back of the house. The deck boards were beige-colored and straight, and allowed us to enjoy the great outdoors without having to share our food with the fire ants. The warmth lingers a little longer in Alabama in November, and as the sun heated the deck boards the sweetest aroma of freshly-cut wood rose into the air; it was a treat to go outside.
Well, time has gone on. We've repainted, several times in some areas. Some rooms in the house have better-looking carpet than do others, since it takes a little more effort to get that kind of stain out of that particular carpet; the concrete around the house looks pretty much like you would expect after all this time. And the decking -- let's talk about the decking, because I believe there's a wonderful illustration lying on the deck boards waiting to be picked up.

"All of the boards and spindles have a curve or a twist"

Perhaps nowhere else around the house is the evidence of time more clearly revealed than on the deck boards. All of the wood is gray, despite my best efforts to pressure wash and seal it. All of the boards and spindles have a curve or a twist, some more than others, but none of them are straight anymore. The top handrails are especially in need of attention, and the reason for that appears to be that they are first in the line casting a shadow caused by the sun; in other words, the sun hits them full on.

When I look around the forest from our back deck, I see a lot of wood absolutely thriving. There are huge trees swaying in the breeze, their long, waving branches providing homes for birds and squirrels. Some of these trees have been there almost as long as I've been alive; why haven't they grayed up and turned to dust? Well, of course, the answer is obvious: they are alive, and the sun nourishes them with its rays.

And therein lies the incredible contrast between the living ... and the dead.

All the while the tree remains alive, it thrives on the rays of the sun. But once the tree is cut down, cut up, trimmed and nailed to the framework outside my house ... a process and a battle begin to keep it looking nice. Even though the tree is now dead, I can, for a while, keep it looking respectable; but only for a while, because, no matter how hard I try, eventually the wood is going to return to the dust from whence it was taken. The light from the sun will whittle away at the surface of the wood until all integrity is gone and, in some cases, all that's keeping the fibers together is the paint. Hopefully nobody will break a leg by falling through a part that looks solid but is actually rotted out.

To my mind, the spiritual application is begging to be applied. Spiritual light from the Throne of God is constantly pouring into our world. Whatever the verse fully means in First John which reads that "God is light ...," we shouldn't miss the face value of the text. Whether spiritual or literal, without light our world as we know it would cease to exist. Perhaps we can break the spiritual concept down: Spiritual light pours from the Throne, and all things which are conscious and spiritually alive are nourished and live a spiritually thriving life. You've probably unknowingly spent time around these people; body language and words issuing from them tend toward higher purposes; more attention focused on the well-being of others than on their own spotless behavior. Someone once made the observation in my hearing that if Jesus were here today, the chances are we wouldn't recognize Him. I've thought about that over the years, and I tend to agree. My view of the world and its needs are far too selfish, and I have trouble getting my head out of my own nose long enough to recognize when a good, meaningful work is being done -- or needs to be done. And the chances are that Jesus would want to spend time in places and around people that are beneath my dignity. That sounds so pathetic; I should consider deleting the thought.
"The light from Heaven crept over my horizon"

What happens when spiritual light falls on someone who's spiritually dead? I suppose for this exercise I have to try not to be too judgmental, because I can only use myself and my own senses to find an example. I have to safely assume that there was a time in my life when I was spiritually dead; I had no interest in Godly things and was tending more toward the grave than toward Heaven. One day, perhaps in a moment, the light from Heaven crept over my horizon and touched that little part of my spirit that was not completely dead -- it had to be there, otherwise nothing would have been nourished. Perhaps the conditions were so arranged that the seed of Heaven which had lain dormant for so long was finally warmed and nourished. And just like seeds that awaken in the ground, when they burst forth into life ... everything around them gets shifted -- literally. I love that thought, and invite you to dwell on that concept for just a quiet moment.

It has been my observation that when the Lord steps into a person's life, things are never the same afterward. Things aren't always better, but they often are, and these better things cause believers to carry their testimony to the prison and the stake.

But let's talk more about what might happen when Heavenly light falls on the spiritually dead. If we can gain anything from the lesson in the physical world, we can find insight into what might happen in the spiritual world. I believe it would be fair to say that if a dead piece of deck board should be nailed up outside my house, then that piece of decking would have once been alive. You have to have life before you have death. So my illustration above should be squinted at. In other words, I wasn't spiritually dead, I just hadn't been spiritually awakened -- my feet and brain were firmly planted on the solid earth, and really couldn't see much higher.

"Is it indeed the fruit of a Holy Spirit of a Holy God?"

So then it appears that a person who has been very much spiritually alive ... can one day wind up very much spiritually dead. And once that happens, a period of decay -- sometimes a very long period -- sets in until there is nothing left of the person at all. I suppose one would have to be careful to avoid spiritual death at all costs, because, in the illustration of the tree ... there's no coming back -- no return to swaying happily in the breeze. The dead tree eventually provides food for worms, and nutrients for other vegetation of the forest.

Is it even fair to think about who might be spiritually dead? Probably not. Though when you look at the behavior of some individuals around the world, and you consider some of the body language and words spilling off some people, you have to wonder if their anger and lust is the fruit of death, hate and self-righteousness; or is it indeed the fruit of a Holy Spirit of a Holy God? How can I know who to rely on? Is this person solid wood? or just pretty paint covering up rotten wood? If I lean on this person, humanly-speaking, will he or she uphold me? Or will I fall through and break a leg? Personally, my philosophy is that if I don't like the fruit of the person, I don't spend much time around them or feeding on their food. Yes, I realize that can be construed as immaturity, because how can I be sure that their hideous fruit is not the result of insanity, rather than bad
food? Fair question. Answer: I don't know. Have to poke out a toe and test the integrity, I suppose.

A final thought: While we are alive physically, light changes our appearance. Just take a look in the mirror after you've spent a day working under the hot, bright sun. The physical sun in our lives changes the pigment in our skin -- the Spiritual Son in our lives changes the appearance of our soul.

*And that's just my take on it....*

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