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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #24

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Three Times Saved!

Romans 6:1-14 (1)

Why did God become a man? Why did the transcendent, majestic Lord of the universe, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, condescend to become a human being in the person of Jesus Christ? Why did he suffer humiliation and rejection from his own creation, ultimately to die naked and beaten upon a Roman cross? Why did Jesus Christ come into this world?

I realize, of course, that this is a question we typically ask children when they are young and know little, if anything, of the Christian faith. But it is a question that even adults need to ask and answer. So here is the answer. *Scripture teaches us that Jesus Christ came into this world and died on Calvary's tree and rose again from the dead to save his people three times.* Now that I have your undivided attention, let me repeat myself. Jesus Christ came into this world and died on Calvary's tree and rose again from the dead to save his people three times. Let me explain.

Salvation is always to be thought of in relation to sin, for it is sin that has made salvation necessary. It is our sin that has alienated us from God and reduced us to his enemies. And when we look at Scripture, we discover that we all sustain a three-fold relationship to sin.

First, we are all under the *penalty* of sin. Having transgressed God's law and rebelled against him we are guilty, and thus liable to the punishment which the violation of God's law demands.

Second, sin also exercises a *power* over every individual. Each of us is born spiritually dead, morally corrupt, under the influence and mastery of sin. So, not only are we under the penalty of sin, but we are also subject to its power.

Third, there is the *presence* of sin within us. The principle of sin resides within our hearts and minds and from that base of operation within us it exercises its power.

There you have it: the penalty, power, and presence of sin. Salvation, therefore, consists of deliverance from this three-fold bondage. This is what I mean when I say that Jesus came to save us three times, or in three ways. He came to save us from sin's penalty by suffering in our place, on the cross, the punishment we deserved. He saves us from the power of sin by providing the Holy Spirit through whom we experience victory over the influence of sin in our lives. And he saves us from the presence of sin when at the end of this age he returns to transform and glorify us in body, soul, and spirit.

Thus, we may say that a believer in Jesus Christ has been saved from the penalty of sin the moment that he/she believed. Salvation from the penalty of sin occurred in the *past*.

A believer in Jesus is being saved from the power of sin right now, as he or she is progressively transformed by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Salvation from the power of sin occurs in the *present*.

And finally, a believer in Jesus Christ shall be saved from the presence of sin when in the *future* the Lord returns and wholly eradicates sin from our being.

Thus, we *have been* saved from the penalty of sin, we *are being* saved from the power of sin, and we *shall be* saved from the presence of sin. Thrice saved! That is what Jesus Christ came into this world to do.

But now let me give biblical or theological names to each of these aspects of salvation. Salvation from the penalty of sin in the past is *justification*. Salvation from the power of sin in the present is *sanctification*. And salvation from the presence of sin in the future is called *glorification*.

Many of you are undoubtedly already aware of these truths relating to salvation, so the question may be asked, Why bring them up at this stage in our study of Romans? I do so for two reasons.

First, many Christians tend to think of salvation from sin exclusively in terms of justification or salvation from sin's penalty. Whereas it is true that when we believe in the Lord Jesus we are immediately and forever saved, that is not the end of our struggle with sin. Justification is not an end in itself. It is the foundation or the beginning or the inauguration of practical, personal holiness in which the power of sin's grip on our lives is broken.

Second, and more directly relevant to our study of Romans, is the fact that *with Romans 6 Paul shifts theological gears*. In Romans 1-5 his primary theme has been justification or deliverance from the penalty of sin by faith in Jesus Christ. But with Romans 6:1 he shifts into a discussion of sanctification, or deliverance from the power of sin. Thus, if we are to understand Paul's argument in Romans, we have to understand the three-fold character of Christian salvation. So let me summarize:

Justification is past and positional.

Sanctification is present and progressive.

Glorification is prospective and permanent.

Justification is how God sees us in Christ.

Sanctification is what we are in daily experience.

Glorification is what we shall be in heaven, forever.

Justification is something done for us.

Sanctification is something done in us.

Glorification is something done to us.

A Blasphemous, Misguided Deduction (v. 1)

That God is in the business, through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, of saving us from sin's penalty, power, and presence, has led some to draw what can only be called a blasphemous and utterly misguided conclusion. Paul says it clearly in v. 1,

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (6:1).

Now, why would anyone in their right mind think that Christians are free to continue living in sin? They draw this unwarranted conclusion on the basis of their misunderstanding of something Paul said at the close of Romans 5. Let's go back to the final two verses of chapter five.

“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 5:20-21).

Did you see that? Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. Sadly, some then reason like this. “Well, since I have already been justified by faith and set free from the penalty of sin, if I sin again I will still be justified. And if what Paul says in Romans 5:20 is true, namely, that wherever sin increases grace abounds, I guess I should sin all the more to give grace even more plentiful opportunities to display itself.” Or again, “If God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5), and delights in doing so, why then be godly? If our acceptance with God depends wholly on what *he* does, it doesn't appear to matter much what *we* do. So let's sin all the more!”

This sort of reasoning comes as no surprise in view of such statements made in Romans 3:20, 24, 28; 4:5; 5:9-10, 20-21. In fact, it is only when one preaches salvation by grace alone through faith alone, apart from works, that such charges are brought. The person who preaches salvation by good works or by observing the law or by obedience to religious ordinances will never be accused of what Paul is being accused of. Let me explain.

Someone once said that the gospel itself, much like the Lord Jesus, is always crucified between two thieves – legalists of all sorts on one side and antinomians on the other. Legalists rob Jesus of the glory of his work *for* us, while antinomians rob Jesus of the glory of his work *within* us.

What I'm saying is this. Whenever the gospel is preached, one can be sure to find either of two extreme reactions in the audience. On the one hand, there are those we call *legalists*, who believe the essence of true religion and Christianity is obedience to the law, and that salvation is by our good works. They believe that the Christian life consists primarily in the many do's and don'ts of obedience. They rob Christ of his work for us by denying the grace of God whereby our Lord satisfied the demands of the law and set us free.

On the other hand, there are those we call *antinomians*. The word antinomian literally means "against the law." These people so greatly stress the grace of God that eventually they deny that holiness and good works are even an important part of Christian living. The result of antinomianism is a life of sinful licentiousness and self-indulgence.

Many in Paul's day believed he was an antinomian. It is clear that he preached salvation by grace apart from works of the law (Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). Because of this they erroneously concluded that Paul taught that all works at any time were wrong, and that we should actually make every effort to sin all the more so that God's grace could be glorified all the more. That is what is behind the words of Romans 6:1. It was precisely because Paul elevated and celebrated God's saving grace that many concluded we should continue in sin so that his grace would have increased opportunities to be magnified and appreciated.

An Indignant Denial (v. 2)

And what is Paul's response? "**By no means!**" "**God forbid!**" "**May it never be!**" "**Heck, no!**" Paul's reaction is one of indignant denial. He is appalled that anyone would think his emphasis on grace justifies a life of on-going and deliberate sin. But note well. Paul doesn't respond to this accusation by retracting his teaching about grace. He doesn't qualify God's grace or somehow diminish its importance. He in no way corrects or softens what he has said in Romans 1-5. He doesn't respond by saying, "Well, now that I think about it, I probably went a bit overboard in the first five chapters of Romans in my comments about God's grace." No, he simply proceeds to prove the stupidity of the objection itself.

Christians, says Paul, and that's you and me he's talking about, are people who have "died to sin" (v. 2). He doesn't mean that we are insensitive to sin, far less that we are unable to sin. The translation, "how *can* we still live in it" is misleading. That would suggest it is impossible for us to sin. But the verse more literally says, "how *shall* we continue in sin." It is not the literal impossibility of sin but the moral incongruity of it that Paul has in mind. It makes no sense for people who have "died" to sin to continue to "live" in it.

Paul's response to the suggestion that Christians should sin all the more so that grace can be magnified all the more is that it betrays a fatal misunderstanding of what justification means. If you have been justified, you have "died" to sin. How can you go on living in that to which you have died? You can't be alive and dead to the same thing at the same time.

Baptized into the Death, Burial, and Resurrection of Jesus (vv. 3-4)

The incongruity of us living in sin when we have died to it is based on our solidarity or union with Jesus. This notion of our being united with Jesus is found repeatedly in vv. 3-11.

“buried . . . *with him* by baptism into death” (v. 4a).

“united *with him* in a death like his” (v. 5a).

“united *with him* in a resurrection like his” (v. 5b).

“our old self was crucified *with him*” (v. 6a).

“now if we have died *with Christ*” (v. 8a).

“we will also live *with him*” (v. 8b).

I want us to dwell for a few minutes on this idea of our union with Christ. I fear that all too often Christians hear those words and think little of them. But they are profoundly important. I would go so far as to say that if you don't understand what it means to be “one” with Jesus, united “with” him in his life, death, and resurrection, you probably won't make nearly as much progress in your Christian life as you would if you truly grasped what Paul is saying.

Look at v. 5 where Paul says “we have been united with him” in his death and thus we will be “united with him” in his resurrection. There is a union of some sort that God established between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Christian believer at the moment we first come to faith in him. Paul spoke of this explicitly in numerous texts. His typical language is to speak of the Christian as being “in” Christ. But how can we who live 2,000 years after Christ lived be “in” him?

“And because of him [God the Father] you are *in* Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

It was “because” of something God the Father did when we believed in Jesus that we now have wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. And what he did was to unite us with Jesus. He placed us “in” him.

Or consider 2 Corinthians 5:21.

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that *in him* we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Paul is saying that just as Jesus was reckoned to be guilty of our sin, in our place, we are reckoned by God to be righteous in his sight. And all this because of a spiritual, covenant union that God established between us and Christ.

In Galatians 2:17 Paul describes how we “endeavor to be justified *in* Christ.” Later in Romans 8:1 Paul will say that there is “no condemnation for those who are *in* Christ Jesus.” In Ephesians 2:10 the apostle describes us as “his workmanship, created *in* Christ Jesus for good works.” And everyone is familiar with 2 Corinthians 5:17 where Paul says that “if anyone is *in* Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Paul describes two people named Adronicus and Junia and says that

“they were *in* Christ before me” (Rom. 16:7). In Galatians 1:22 he even speaks of entire local churches “that are *in* Christ.”

Perhaps the best way to sum up how critically important this notion of union with Christ is comes from noting Ephesians 1:3. There Paul says that God “has blessed us *in* Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” That means if anyone is outside of Christ, not “in” him by faith, not united to him in spiritual oneness, there are no spiritual blessings to be had.

Think about this for a minute. Every blessing we have from God is ours only because we are “in Christ,” united to him in spiritual oneness, identified with him in his life, death, and resurrection. Whether pertaining to our salvation, our adoption as God’s children, our hope, or our ultimate destiny of living with God in eternal happiness on the new earth, everything is available only to those who are “*in*” Christ.

“Sam, this really sounds mystical! I’m accustomed to dealing with cold hard facts, things I can see and smell and touch and hear. What you’re talking about now is beyond my level of understanding.” I agree! It is a stretch for all of us. But in a very real, undeniable, life-changing way, God has created a spiritual relationship between each Christian and the Lord Jesus. He not only is “in” us but we are “in” him. When God thinks of us, sees us, responds to our prayers, hears our worship, he considers us inseparable from Jesus. As spiritual as this is, it is also very, very real.

As far as Romans 6 is concerned, union with Christ is clearly the key to understanding sanctification. There is no meaning whatsoever to becoming a new kind of people, who don’t continue in sin, who are no longer enslaved to sin, but who walk in newness of life, apart from our being united and identified with Jesus.

The Meaning of Baptism

There is probably no more explicit statement concerning the meaning of water baptism than that which we find here in Romans 6. When we are immersed in water, it symbolizes or portrays our co-crucifixion with Jesus. It is our way of identifying with his death. His death is reckoned as our death. That is why we don’t have to be crucified ourselves and suffer the wrath of God. When Jesus was crucified God saw us in and with him, united as one. His death is counted as ours.

When Jesus died under the penalty of sin, we died under the penalty of sin. In God’s sight, what is true in the experience of Jesus is true of us. By virtue of our covenant solidarity and union with Christ, when he died, we died. When he was buried, we were buried. When he rose from the dead to a new and glorious life, we did too.

When God looks at a person who has trusted in Christ and been baptized as an act of obedient identification with the Savior, God sees a person who has died under the penalty of sin. He sees a person who has been buried and thus cut off from the old way of life. He sees a person who has been triumphantly raised to live a new life. Does he see this because the Christian believer has literally died,

been buried, and been raised again? No. It happened to Jesus, with whom we are united by faith. And because we are one with him, when it happened to him, it happened to us.

Paul says much the same thing in Colossians 2:11-12 – “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been **buried with him** in baptism, in which you were also **raised with him** through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:11-12).

Some people read Romans 6:1-4 and conclude that it is our literal baptism in water that actually saves us. But Paul has just spent five chapters in Romans arguing that we enter into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ by faith alone. We are justified by faith alone, not by faith plus water baptism. Baptism is the outward sign, seal, and pledge of what God does for us inwardly through faith. Baptism, then, is designed to direct our attention to the source and cause of our salvation: the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. We are not saved because of or through baptism but because of and through Christ and what he did for us. When people witness a person being baptized, they should immediately think about the way salvation has been obtained for us.

The living Christ was crucified for our sins and was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. He was finally raised from the dead and entered into a new and glorious phase of life. **Baptism in water is a visual enactment of the gospel itself.** The gospel is the good news of what God did in and through his Son, Jesus Christ, to obtain for us redemption and forgiveness of sins. The Jesus who lived a sinless and perfect life on our behalf, was crucified where he suffered the judgment and wrath of God we deserved. The sufficiency and adequacy of his atoning death was confirmed when God raised him from the dead unto a new life.

So, when you watch someone who is alive be immersed or buried beneath the waters of baptism, only then to be raised up out of the water, you are witnessing the gospel. You are seeing with your eyes and hearing with your ears what God did for sinners in Jesus.

Baptism is also the way in which a Christian says: “I am **a new creation.**” The person you saw step into the waters no longer exists. He/she has been created anew by the power of the Holy Spirit and emerges from the waters governed by new affections and a new power.” The person who is baptized is making it known that he/she has, by God’s grace, taken on a **new identity.** “I am not the man/woman you once knew.” He/she has died to the world and its ways. He/she is alive to God and his kingdom. In other words, in baptism we say, signify, and symbolize our faith in Christ. Faith unites us to him and baptism symbolizes that union.

Baptism is also the Christian’s **public pledge of allegiance** to Jesus. To be baptized “in the name” of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit points to a change of ownership. It is a visible and vocal declaration that he/she now **belongs to Christ.** It is an individual’s statement for all to see and hear that from this point on he/she is devoted to Jesus and is determined by his grace to follow Christ in all of life. Water baptism is the way in which a follower of Jesus makes it known that he/she is not of this world, that he/she is governed by a new system of values and beliefs. Although the Christian is a citizen of an earthly state, his/her ultimate allegiance and dedication is to Christ and his kingdom.

Is Sinless Perfection Possible in this Life?

As I said earlier, beginning with Romans 6 the apostle turns his attention and ours to the subject of sanctification. Sanctification is simply a fancy word that describes our present, on-going, incremental, progressive, little-by-little transformation into the image of Jesus. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in us by which he enables and empowers us to gain ever-increasing victory over the power of sin in our lives.

This obviously raises the question: How much victory can we gain? Does Paul mean to say here that a Christian can attain sinless perfection in this life? He uses two phrases in Romans 6:1-2 that some think is an indication he believed that sinless perfection is possible in this life. Here they are:

“Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (v. 1).

“How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (v. 2).

Does this mean that Paul believed we might reach a point in our Christian growth where we never sin? No. I don't believe that is what he means. When Paul says we should not “continue” in sin and that we should not “live” in it, he isn't saying we can reach a point where sin is no longer an issue for us. There are a couple of hints in Romans 6 that sinless perfection is not in Paul's mind.

First, Paul clearly says that a born-again believer in Jesus cannot “*continue*” in sin or “*live*” in it. I think this is his way of saying that a Christian must not sin as an unchanging, unbreakable pattern in life. In other words, he isn't denying that we commit sins, but that we do not abide in them or linger in them unrepentant. It is one thing to fail and commit a sin. It is another thing entirely to “continue” to “live” in it as if sin were the dominant feature or characteristic of our existence. It is the difference between a snapshot of one's life and a full-length film of it. All of us sin, here and there, and on occasion are seen rebelling against God. But when the full-length film of our entire earthly existence is seen, it is one of progressive victory, marked by occasional defeat. But the overall tenor of our earthly existence, the general pattern and direction and orientation of our daily lives is one of ever-increasing obedience.

Second, Paul refers to much the same thing in v. 6 where he says that we no longer live “enslaved to sin” (v. 6b). I can commit individual acts of sin without being “enslaved” to it, held in complete bondage and total defeat to the power of sin. Later, in v. 14, Paul says, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” Yes, we sin. But we are not dominated by it. We are not enslaved to it. God has graciously given us the Spirit by whose power we can achieve victory. But this is not the same as saying that we are altogether perfect and entirely incapable of ever sinning.

Third, Paul issues several commands in vv. 11-13. In v. 11 he tells us to “consider” ourselves “dead to sin and alive to God.” In v. 12 he tells us not to let sin “reign” in our lives,” and in v. 13 he exhorts us not to “present” our members, our bodies, “as instruments for unrighteousness.” If we are not still battling against sin and sometimes yielding to temptation, why bother issuing these sorts of commands? Paul's point is that we should instead embrace our new identity as those who are one with Christ, alive from the dead, and by his Spirit present ourselves to God as instruments for righteousness.

Conclusion

When Paul speaks of our not being “enslaved to sin” (v. 6) he is talking about your life in its totality. He isn't merely describing how you think and act when you come to church on Sunday or gather in your community group on some night of the week. He's referring to how you talk among your co-workers at the office and how you fill out your tax return every year and the way you interact with your spouse and the things you watch on TV or on the internet. You are not to be “enslaved to sin” when it comes to how you dress and how you daydream and how you make use of your leisure time and how you spend your money.

His point is that you are one with Christ, so live like it. When he died, you truly died with him. When he was raised from the dead, you were truly made alive with him. Therefore, you can't be one with Christ if you "continue" to "live" in sin, enslaved to its power. So, hear and heed the commands Paul gives us.

By the way, think about the simple fact that Paul *does* issue commandments, exhortations, and appeals. He obviously did not believe that simply because you are united with Christ in his death and resurrection that you will automatically obey. No. He says, yes, you died with Christ, and yes, you were buried with Christ, and yes, you were raised up with Christ. Therefore, consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God and pay heed to my exhortation that you not give yourself over to sin. Be, in daily life, who you already are by faith in Jesus.