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GRACE IN THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Romans 3:21-24

One Main Thing

The grace of God, embodied in the death of Christ on the cross, demands a response from believers. The gift is surely free and cannot (could not) be earned through meritorious work. But grace compels the Christian to a new way of living, Christ having defeated sin victoriously on the cross.

Introduction

The word "grace" occurs in the New American Standard version of Romans 21 times in 18 verses, but the concept undergirds almost all of Paul's thinking throughout the entire letter. Paul's explanation of the gospel in Romans is centered by his own personal understanding of God's grace (Romans 1:5). He had first received it himself, and now he has rethought everything in light of his own personal transformation.

From Paul's consistent opening formula in 1:7 ("Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ") through his closing doxology in 16:20 ("The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you"), his letter to the church situated in Rome is stamped from front to back with thoughts of grace. This is consistent with Paul's conversion and his understanding of God. Where would Paul have been without God's intervention on the road to Damascus? He says later in 1 Corinthians that it is "by the grace of God, I am what I am" (15:10).

This deeply personal understanding of grace stands behind Paul's exposition of God's rescue of the human race through the Messiah Jesus. Paul knew what it was like to be under sin, falling short of the glory of God (3:23). He knew what it was like to miss the all-to-important message of Jesus and his teachings. And he later knew what kind of peace with God comes as a result of being reconciled with God (5:1 and 5:10). Paul understood his teachings about the Messiah from his expansive knowledge of Old Testament Scripture. But he also understood his teachings from the very distinct and personal point of view of an apostle who was "untimely born" (1 Cor 15:8).

Paul felt that this grace which he knew from his study and his experience had real and practical implications for the way he should now live. In Romans 1:14 he will say that he is "under obligation" to preach the gospel to anyone who will listen, presumably because of what God has done for him. This "obligation of grace," we

might call it, is an important theological point for Paul in all of his letters, but particularly in Romans. Paul was evidently slandered by others for teaching about God's grace, because they misunderstood him to be teaching that people could do evil because God is so gracious (3:8). A critical point of the letter to the Romans is 6:2, where Paul definitively states, "How shall we who died to sin still live in it!" God's grace is good and efficacious, but it is no reason to dive headlong into sin.

This is so important to Paul that he speaks of two "reigns" over the human race: the "reign" of sin, and the "reign" of grace (5:21). We'll explore these further as we go a little deeper.

Going Deeper

For the reigns of sin and grace to make sense, we must first consider what a reign actually is. The reign of a king or queen is the exercise of sovereign power or rulership over a certain territory. This is the figurative picture we get in the passage at the end of Romans 5—like a king or queen would rule a country, grace now rules the world. But how can that be?

First, we must recognize that sin is real and truly exercised its own reign or rule over the world from the very beginning (5:12). From the time that man first received a commandment, he broke it. And from that point forward, sin seized its opportunity (see this metaphor for sin in Gen 4:7) in each of us, as we have

all made choices to break the commandments of God in one way or another.

The earliest chapters of Romans are the sure way for us to see this. In Romans 1:18-32, we read of God's wrath being poured out on those who sin in rebellion against God. And lest we should be too self-confident in our morality, Paul says in 2:1 "Who do you think you are?" (my paraphrase). What I mean by this is that Paul asks why we would pass judgment on another, because we too have committed sin. Even Jews, who were given the Law, were guilty of trespassing it (2:17-24). So, Paul can confidently say that God is impartial (2:11), and that all have sinned and fall short of his glory (3:23).

When I was 2 years old, and barely putting words together, we had a great big snow storm in our little section of Northwest Alabama. Snow is not common where I was raised, so even a dusting is a great experience that leads flocks of people to the grocery store to purchase bread and milk lest they perish. My parents were extremely excited about the snow, realizing that they would be able to bring their newly minted toddler to the large front window and show him the picturesque scenery of several inches of snow. As they pulled back the curtains, they said I put together my first ever sentence: "What a mess!"

And so it is with sin. A mess! As God has given us direction to follow, we have inevitably stepped outside of what he's asked for us to do and to be. And this has happened with everyone. A mess indeed.

But just as sin had its reign (and with sin comes death, because that's what the payment for sin is according to 6:23), there came along another reign. What could come along and give a proper response to sin? Romans 5:17 is helpful here:

> For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

The Messiah Jesus Christ! God's gift to us of Jesus Christ (3:24) dealt a resounding blow to sin once and for all (Hebrews 9:28). How grateful we should be to God for this!

In our day and time, sin can no longer claim that it holds its reign over the earth (1 Cor 15:56-57). Jesus has claimed that victory, defeating sin and death. Does this mean that we do not all sin and fall short of the glory of God? Unfortunately not. Sin still finds its ways of attack and we all still fall through temptations. But, spiritually speaking, for those who choose to respond to God's gift of grace with belief, repentance, confession, and baptism (Rom 6:3-4), there's a new sheriff in town.

Grace reigns. And the wages of grace are life.

> so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 5:21)

Application

This is great news, but what does it mean to the Christian and how the Christian should live? This is the very question Paul raises in Romans 6:1.

> What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?

So many Christians have just this sort of response to the message of God's grace. Since God has conquered sin, and did so even when we were all so bad (helpless, 5:6), why don't we just keep on sinning and let God continue to show up and defeat sin? While many people have treated grace like this, Paul's answer is as strong as any in all of Scripture: "God forbid!" (6:2).

Why is it that those who have responded to God's grace in belief, repentance, confession, and baptism should no longer live in sin? Because God's grace creates in us an obligation (6:14).

When your mom or dad gave you something freely as a gift, did you then go and immediately trade that gift for something else or try to sell it? If you were gifted a

new car, would you go and trade it in for your old one? Neither should you or I, as ones who have received the grace of God, exchange it for our old body of sin. Paul says it this way:

> But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. (Rom 6:22)

Conclusion

We all know people who have great gifts and talents in this world, and yet they squander them and waste them. We all know Christians who have been given the beautiful gift of the gospel, and yet do not feel any obligation to it. What sort of response will we give to God's beautiful gift of eternal life that comes through the Messiah Jesus?

Discussion

1. Look up grace in a concordance or Bible app and find all of the occurrences in the book of Romans. Which verse stands out to you among those listed, and why?
2. How did Paul's personal conversion story influence and impact his ministry? Why?
3. In what ways have you personally seen sin to be a destructive force in this world? How does this relate to God's grace?

4. What is the proper Christian response to God's grace, and why?
5. How does it feel to see someone who has an abundance of blessings, gifts, and/or talents squander them all away? Why do we feel this way to those who make choices like that? How does this relate to the concept of grace?