



The Epistle to the Romans

Romans 5: Living in Hope

In chapter five Paul presents his profound good news (Romans 1:16) in very powerful ways, beginning with the central truth for him that Christ died “for us ungodly folk” “while we were still weak (5:6).” The mass of humanity described so bleakly in Romans 3:9-20 do not merit God’s loving attention. But God gives it nonetheless, not after some human self-help endeavor, but “while we were still weak.” If the solution comes by God’s grace, the size of God’s love makes it impossible for sin ever to outrun the love of God.

These soaring themes fit well within the development of the letter’s argument. Paul has now described the basic problem that he sees confronting all of humanity, both Jew and Gentile (1:16-3.20). He has indicated the solution to that problem, which is God’s gracious act of redemption or justification made possible by the death of Christ (3:21-29), and in the last chapter, he has indicated how that grace is to be appropriated by human beneficiaries, through faith, initially exemplified by Abraham (4:1-25). Paul now draws out some of the implications of what it means to be “justified.” He makes two fundamental points, echoing some of the insights that he had developed in his dealings with his congregation at Corinth, which are now enshrined in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Throughout he balances assurance in the power of God’s salvific grace with a realism about the human condition in which that grace operates.

Romans 5:1-11: Justification begins a Salvific Process Lived in Hope

Paul begins this reflection with a focus on the relationship between the faithful and God. Justification above all means that that relationship is secure and that there is “peace” not enmity, between the parties (v. 1). Paul’s language here recalls the traditional Jewish focus on “shalom,” not simply an absence of hostility but a profound wholeness in the relationship between two parties. As he has done earlier in Romans, he complements this image with another. By being justified we have “access” (v. 2) to God. This language conjures for modern Americans the political realm, in which lobbyists have “access” to people with political power. Paul’s metaphor may call on a different sphere, that of the cult, in which priests have “access” or authorization to approach the sacred space of the Temple (cf. Heb 11:19- 22). Whether cultic or political, Paul’s imagery suggests a relationship of intimacy with the Divine.

In Paul's dealings with his followers at Corinth, he had dealt with a situation in which some people took a message of this sort so seriously that they tended to neglect the lives that they were called upon to live in the present. That experience may inform Paul's next move, which is to remind his Roman readers that the peace with and access to God that they now enjoy once they have been "justified" is not the end of the story. Justification provides a ground for "boasting" all right (v. 2), but that boasting should focus as much on the sufferings that the faithful endure as in their spiritual endowments (v. 3-4). The life of the justified is above all a life of hope (v. 5), thankful to be sure for the generous sacrifice of Christ (vv. 5-8), but above all hopeful of future salvation (vv. 9-10).

The distinction between "justification" and "salvation" made here is important for Paul. Pauline scholars have highlighted the distinction by noting the tension in Paul's thought between the "already" and the "not yet," between what God has done in Christ to establish a new relationship with humankind and what is yet to come as the fulfillment of that relationship. Paul concludes this reflection on the future of salvation by returning to the present and adding yet one more image to the theological mosaic that he has been constructing. We boast, he repeats (see vv. 2-3) in God through Christ, through whom we have "reconciliation," a theme that Paul had developed eloquently in 2 Corinthians 5.

Among the various ways in which one might construe the thematic development of Romans, it is interesting to reflect on the triad of "faith, hope, and love," which Paul had used elsewhere (see 1 Thess 1:3; 1 Cor 13:13; cf. Heb 10:22-24). Paul had begun the core of his argument in Romans with a focus on faith (chap. 4); he now insists on the importance of hope (chap. 5) and the theme of hopeful expectation will run through the reflections of the next six chapters. The concluding section of the letter will focus on the way in which the life of faithful hope works itself out in love, which appears as the focus of the admonitions in Rom 12:9-10.

Romans 5:12-21: Christ as the New Adam

When Paul had wrestled with the meaning of belief in resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:42-49, he had drawn a parallel between Adam and Christ, reflecting his fundamental conviction that in the Christ event God had done such a radical act of divine power that he had effected a new creation (cf. Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). He returns to that notion now, highlighting the role of Sin in the first creation and its remedy in the second.

This section of Romans has served as the foundation for much later theological speculation on the theme of "original sin," understood to be a condition caused by Adam's fall remedied by the sanctifying grace poured out by God in baptism. That theology and in particular the causal function of Adam's sin was particularly reinforced by the Latin translation of the last clause in v. 12, which offered an overly literal rendition of a Greek prepositional phrase meaning "because all sinned" as "in whom all sinned." Paul's thought is less interested in causal relationships than later theology would be, although he does think that Adam's deed provided a bad example for others to follow. He is more interested in a rhetorical move of setting up a typology or

comparison (what the rhetoricians called a synkrisis), with the final aim of celebrating what God accomplished in Christ.

The other major concern of Paul's argument here is not with the abstract questions of how sin originated or was transmitted, but with the relationship between sin and the Law. He begins with a brief echo of the story of the fall in Genesis, noting that through one man death and sin came into the world (v. 12), and these realities eventually affected all human beings, since all have sinned, a point that he had developed at length in the first three chapters. The concern with the Law immediately becomes apparent. Echoing a theme he had sketched in Gal 3:17-19, he notes that sin was a reality before the Law was given, which made clear what sin was.

Having posited that Adam was a "type" of the one to come (v. 14), Paul then elaborates on the comparison between the first and the second Adam, concentrating on the difference between the two. The "gracious benefaction" far exceeded the transgression (v. 15). While judgment led to condemnation and death, the gift of grace leads to life sharing in the reign of Christ (v. 17-18). The next contrast is particularly interesting for understanding Paul's notion of participation in the "faith" of Christ. Just as one man's disobedience provided an example that led all to sin, the obedience of Jesus led to "many" being rendered "righteous/just" (v. 19). Although Paul believes that God objectively dealt with Sin through the death of Christ, the exemplary quality of the faith of Jesus is as important as the exemplary quality of the sinfulness of Adam. It is not simply by believing in him, but by sharing his fidelity that the faithful enjoy the results of his sacrifice.

Paul concludes this stage of reflection by picking up the theme of the Law that he had introduced in vv. 13-14. His comment on the Law at this point is rather negative, echoing the kinds of things he said about it in Galatians. The Law appeared so that Sin might abound (v. 20). He will explain how he thinks the Law works under the power of Sin when he comes to chapter 7. Here his point is to emphasize the positive, the overwhelming impact of divine grace. His final sentence eloquently sums up the argument of the whole chapter and draws the essential contrast between what Paul sees as the old creation and the new. In the old, Sin and death prevailed. In the new, which is based in hope, grace prevails, grace embodied in the divine act of justifying sinners that the death of the Lord Jesus made possible.

The whole of chapter 5, rich with allusions to scripture, echoes of his own previous arguments and pregnant with themes that will pervade the tradition of Christian theology, celebrates the Christ event while it lays the groundwork for Paul's argument about what the Law can and cannot do.

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