Romans 6: Death and Life

When I came to faith in Jesus at age 17, it was very dramatic - I had a serious mystical experience of something like a physical weight dropping from my body - but the following weekend, I did some truly stupid, sinful things. It dawned on me at the time that I could no longer continue to party and enjoy what I was doing… though, in all honesty, partying hadn’t actually been that great even before I came to Messiah. There are many people who come to genuine faith in Jesus, but still struggle with sin, and find themselves in a battle - stumbling, getting up, staggering… this is one thing, and, as we will see as I describe my own early experience as a Christian, is one that isn’t terribly unusual.

So I knew a guy… There was a guy who I knew years ago. I had shared with him repeatedly, and finally, he had a supernatural experience, and went forward and prayed to receive Jesus. Praise God! I was grateful and hopeful. I began to wonder, though, about what was going on with him, and discovered that he was still doing a lot of partying. There was something different about this, though: this wasn’t a situation in which someone is *struggling* with sin, falls, but then seeks their way back. No, when I spoke with him to encourage him, he sought to make a case that the manner in which he lived was really “no big deal.” Why? “Because,” he said, “he’s under *grace*, not the law or rules, so it doesn’t matter how he lives - he knows he’ll go to heaven.”

As we’re in the midst of our series in Romans entitled, “No Excuse,” we’re seeking to get our heads wrapped around the basic Gospel concepts which Paul offers us in the letter to the Romans. Today, let’s have a look at Romans 6, and we’re going to focus on grace. *Grace* is one of the central ideas of what the Gospel is and means, but we often have an understanding of what grace is that is so much less than it’s meant to be.

I’m going to begin with the final phrases of chapter 5. Remember that Paul is there describing how sin came through Adam, bringing death, but how in uniting ourselves by faith with Jesus, we are given life.

**Romans 5:20b - But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, 21 so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?**

Paul repeats a rhetorical question here from Roams 3:8 (which is repeated again in v. 15). Here he is answering the question in response to both those who would try to insist that non-Jewish believers need to take on Jewish identity, including all elements of the Law, but here he also addresses those who would go in the opposite direction, saying we could just “do whatever” since we’re “under grace.” He continues with the contrast of the death which we inherited from Adam, and the life which we have as we are graciously joined by faith to the life of the Messiah, Jesus, the one who is both within God’s Self, and yet fully human.

Here it’s important that we are clear by what we mean by both *grace* and by *salvation*.

We often understand that *grace* conveys the “legal” idea of *unmerited favor*, that we “get something which we don’t deserve.” The idea being, of course, that we get “salvation,” which we often understand to be “forgiveness from our sins, and going to heaven when we die.” These understandings of *grace* and *salvation* aren’t inaccurate, but they are so much less than God has for us.

The reality is that *charis*, grace, carries with it the idea not just of unmerited favor, but more: that of the uncreated, transforming power and presence of God’s Spirit. This is why grace *does* something to us. It’s still “unmerited,” we still can’t do anything to earn it, but this is more, bigger than forgiveness. And this brings us to the idea of *salvation*: It surely *includes* forgiveness and eternity with God, but so much more: It involves our lives being completely transformed, ultimately into God’s image in Messiah Jesus, and an eternal, resurrection life that begins *now*.

Let me illustrate this for a moment by stepping out of Romans, and into a brief, for many familiar passage in Ephesians 2:8-10:

**“8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”**

We often read this passage like this:  
  
“For it is by the favor of God that you don’t deserve that you have been saved, forgiven and are going to heaven after death, through faith expressed in a sinner’s prayer, this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Again, this isn’t inaccurate, but it doesn’t give us a complete picture. Let’s read this again, with a fuller understanding of both grace and salvation, and go on to v.10, too:  
  
“For it is by the uncreated, transforming power of God’s Spirit that you don’t deserve that you have been forgiven and given eternal life and are being transformed into the very likeness of God in Christ, this not from yourselves, it is the gift (charisma) of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.

Now, v.10 makes so much more sense: For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Here’s the thing: We often conceptualize salvation as God saving us from the *consequences* of our sin, but he means to do so much more than this: He means to save us from sin itself! He means to not merely forgive and leave us there, but to change us.

Suppose a man were to walk continually too close to a sewage pit, and finally slips and falls in. He’s covered in filth, and he’s injured and unable to climb out. All-too-often, our idea of salvation is something like Jesus coming by, responding to the cry for help, and saying, “Do you believe in me?” and with a positive response, he replies, “Then you’re fine. You’ll be okay in the end,” and taking off. But the reality is different: He knows that we’re filthy, and injured, and utterly unable to help ourselves. He calls out to the man, and with the man’s desperate response, Jesus climbs down, lifts the man up, cleans him up and heals him. *That* is the kind of salvation, and the kind of Savior we have.

In order to illustrate this, Paul uses the picture which we have in *baptism*. In 6:3-4, he writes,

**“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.**

*Baptizo* is the word usually transliterated, but the meaning is immersion or dipping - it’s the word which would otherwise be used to describe, say, when cloth is immersed into dye: Not only does the cloth emerge *wet*, but it now has the *properties* of the dye: A white cloth into blue dye is now blue cloth. It has taken on the properties of the dye itself. 20th century Indian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh gave the illustration for the meaning of union with God: like a dry sponge into a bucket of water. Paul goes on:

**5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with,[a] that we should no longer be slaves to sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.**

**8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.**

Thus, in the power of God’s uncreated, transforming *grace*, when we approach him by faith, clinging to him, letting him lift us out of the pit, he unites us to his death, and thus to his resurrection life. The life of God in Christ, the *Gospel* itself, is not exchanging one set of rules for another set of rules: If our own efforts are involved in merely trying to keep another set of rules, it is our own death that we hurtle towards, since we cannot somehow “work up” his resurrection life. But again, this is a work of *grace*: we believe Him, and He *graciously* gives us his transforming power to walk in his death and in his life.

This is so important that he repeats the rhetorical questions with which the chapter begins in v. 15, and goes on with another metaphor about being servants given over to the righteousness empowered by God’s grace, and not to the slavery of sin.

He concludes the chapter with 6:23,

**For the wages of sin is death, but the [gracious] gift of God is eternal life in [through] Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Sin produced death in us, crippling us, leaving us powerless against our own evil inclinations and also the powers of darkness, but as we are graciously brought into union with God by faith in his Messiah, joined with him, His death becomes ours, and the very life of the Resurrection - the life which will characterize our lives through eternity, is given to us. Yes, this is also about forgiveness and being with and in God forever, but it’s also about being freed from sin and being given that Resurrection life now.

I’m going to conclude this on a bit of a personal note, with a Spoken Word poem that I wrote last year, about my first time in church, about 2 months after coming to faith in Jesus. I’d been in church for 12-step programs and for a friend’s funeral, but never to a *service* - and this was in a building which, I realized, had once been a synagogue. God met me in a remarkable way, bringing his transforming power to bear on me.