

C. Hope by Virtue of Deliverance from Sin (6:1-23)

In the previous chapter Paul showed how the gospel of righteousness by faith secures in the believer a steadfast hope that cannot disappoint. The reason is that it stands upon the justifying work of Jesus Christ that has effected full, unqualified peace with God (5:1-2). The hope secured by Christ's redemption also cannot be frustrated or diminished by tribulation; on the contrary, tribulations nurture and strengthen hope (5:3-4). At bottom, the steadfast confidence that marks the believer's hope is grounded in the love of God for him: God's love rescued and renewed him when he was an *enemy*; that being the case, how could it possibly be that, now being a reconciled *son*, the same love will fail to fully transform him and usher him into the blessedness of eternal glory (5:5-10)? Thus the believer's hope - and so also his exultation - is settled entirely in God through Jesus Christ (5:11).

Paul then proceeded to advance the same proclamation of immovable hope by demonstrating that, because the believer's righteousness before God has nothing whatsoever to do with him, he can never fall short of the inheritance God has promised to him. Since everything in the Christian's present state and progress in sanctity depends solely upon God's purpose, power, and accomplishment in the second Adam, the hope of future glory cannot possibly disappoint; where sin has abounded the grace of God has abounded all the more (5:12-21).

But if it is true that grace triumphs *over* sin - and that it accomplishes its victory through sin's *operation* - then do not two implications logically follow?

- The first is that, if grace always triumphs over sin, doesn't it follow that the presence of sin is ultimately irrelevant in the Christian life? In turn, doesn't this irrelevance tend to give license to sin's continuance and increase?
- Even more, since grace triumphs in the context of sin, can't it be argued that sin *should* continue in the believer's life for the sake of the increase and victory of grace?

These questions underlie Paul's argumentation in the sixth chapter of Romans, and the cohesiveness of his argument makes it impossible to separate the chapter into discrete contexts. Nonetheless, there is a noticeable transition at verse 15, and further consideration reveals that verses 6:1-14 are primarily focused upon the *fact* of the believer's triumph in Christ over the power of sin, whereas 6:15-23 focus upon the *practical implication* of that triumph, namely the Christian's perspective on his sanctification and the conduct that results from it.

In essence, then, this chapter is concerned with the relationship between *justification* and *sanctification*. Up until this point Paul has been concerned fundamentally with justification - that is, with the believer's righteous standing before God upon the basis of Christ's justifying work. For this reason he has addressed the issue of sin more with respect to the satisfaction of its *penalty*, and so also how that satisfaction secures present righteousness and the hope of future glory. But how does the believer's righteous *constitution* (5:18-19) implicate the *practical living out* of his present life? This is the question of sanctification, and, unlike justification, its concern is not so much with sin's penalty, but rather sin's *power* as it operates in the life of the Christian.

As Paul transitioned to the matter of sanctification, the way in which he did so is by raising the obvious question as to how the believer is to understand and approach his life in this world in view of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Most simply, how does the truth of righteousness by faith work itself out in a Christian's everyday life? To that question Paul will be seen to give a simple and straightforward response: *the same power and divine accomplishment that alone secure the believer's justification also secure his progress and final perfection in sanctification.* Accordingly, the grand theme of chapter six is the Christian's deliverance from the enslaving tyranny of sin through the power of transforming grace. Douglas Moo observes:

Paul's overriding purpose in this part of the letter is to show that the justified believer can be confident that he or she will be 'definitively' saved on the last day. No mere legal fiction, justification transfers the believer into the new age of redemption, where, joined with Christ, he or she lives under the reign of grace and looks confidently to the outcome of that reign, eternal life. This teaching, which dominates chap. 5, shows that union with Christ frees the believer from death. But what about sin and the law, both of which are also prominent in chap. 5 as two other 'powers' of the old age? Chapters 6 and 7 deal with these, as Paul shows that union with Christ also frees the believer from the tyranny of sin and from the regime of the law."

Because the Christian is a part of the new aeon of redemption inaugurated by the last Adam, he is delivered not only from the jurisdiction of the former Adamic realm, but also its governing principles as well, namely *sin* and *law*. In the present chapter Paul establishes this truth with respect to sin by using the imagery of slavery (6:15-22); in chapter seven he uses the language of the marriage covenant to do the same thing with respect to law (7:1-6).

Its treatment of sanctification in relation to justification makes this chapter vitally important as well as hotly debated. For the relationship between justification and sanctification lies at the heart of the centuries-old "antinomian" controversy so central to the history of Reformed Theology. In general terms, this controversy is concerned with the role of personal "law works" in Christian faith and experience. The issue of antinomianism came to the forefront during the Reformation as the Catholic Church charged the Reformers with heresy for insisting upon justification by faith alone apart from any and all personal works. The controversy has continued in various forms since that time, with many today facing the same charge of antinomianism for making the claim that sanctification is also solely a work of sovereign grace.

This is to be expected, for men's innate insistence upon some form and degree of personal righteousness insures that the charge of antinomianism will always be present as long as there are Christians who proclaim a *full* salvation - from first to last - that is by grace through faith alone. As it has been since the Reformation, so also it was in Paul's generation. People are the same in every age; regardless of whether their religious framework is Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, or anything else, they naturally approach their religion from the perspective of self-righteousness. Thus, everywhere that Paul declared his gospel of righteousness by faith alone he was denounced by his Jewish countrymen as an antinomian who taught men to forsake Moses and the Law (ref. 3:8; also Acts 21:26-28, 25:1-8; etc.). He knew from experience how men naturally respond to the gospel of triumphal grace, and it was that consciousness that led him to anticipate and raise the objection by which he introduced the next context consisting of verses 6:1-14: "*What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?*"

1. As noted, this question represents the natural human response to his previous contention that, “*where sin increased, grace abounded all the more*” (5:20b). It reflects the logical conclusion that, if grace abounds in a context in which sin abounds, then the continuance - even the *increase* - of sin is a good and desirable thing because of how it promotes the increase of divine grace. Verse 6:2, then, provides Paul’s answer to 6:1:

“*May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?*”

- a. The first thing to observe is Paul’s emphatically unequivocal response: *may it never be*. This expression is common to his writing, and he always uses it to convey the absurdity of a suggestion and his own incredulity with it (3:4, 6, 31, 6:15, 7:7, 13, 9:14, 11:1, 11; also 1 Corinthians 6:15; Galatians 2:17, 3:21).
- b. The reason for Paul’s astonishment with the idea that the Christian should continue in sin is given in the second clause of 6:2. Such continuance is absurd for the simply reason that the believer has *died* to sin. This being so, how is it possible that he could (or would) continue in it?

Fundamentally, Paul’s contention is this: just as a person can never be justified by law, neither can he be sanctified by it; it is grace alone that justifies and transforms a man (ref. Galatians 3:1-5). But precisely because grace effectually transforms, it is absurd to regard it as encouraging or cultivating sin; *quite the contrary, grace is the sole means by which sin is overcome*.

Because grace has “dethroned” sin in the believer’s life, Paul could insist that Christians have “died” to sin. The believer’s death to sin is the central theme of chapter six, and this expression in context has reference to his deliverance from sin’s tyrannical and invincible power. Recalling Paul’s “two-age” perspective, he was speaking of the Christian’s deliverance from the Adamic realm in which sin and death are the dominant principles, and his “translation” into the domain of the last Adam - the kingdom of God - which is defined by righteousness and life (cf. 6:5-11, 17-18, 20-22, 7:1-6; also Ephesians 2:1-6, 5:8; Colossians 1:13-14; etc.).

And in that the Christian has been translated from one kingdom, or realm of dominion, to another, how is it possible for him to continue to “live” in that realm from which he has been delivered? No person can inhabit two kingdoms at the same time. To use Paul’s language, having “died” to the realm defined by sin and estrangement, *how can he continue to “live” in it?*

- 1) This rhetorical question has been interpreted by some as indicating an exhortation to godly living (cf. 6:12-13, 19). In other words, by virtue of his commitment to Christ, the believer needs to understand that he must no longer continue in sin; his “death to sin” in coming to Christ means that he must forsake his sinful ways and pursue godliness. Thus Paul’s point was not a statement of an objective reality (the believer *cannot* continue in sin), but a call to a certain course of action (*do not* continue in sin).

- 2) The other option is that Paul was indeed making an observation about an objective truth pertaining to the Christian. Because he is a “new creature” in Christ, and because of the transforming power of grace, the believer is not able to continue in sin in the way he formerly did (cf. 6:6, 17-18, 22).

If by “continuing in sin” Paul meant any presence of sin whatsoever, then he clearly intended his words to constitute an exhortation to pursue holy living. For it is painfully obvious that no Christian can lay claim to the absence of all sin in his life. But if, on the other hand, he was speaking of the Christian’s deliverance from the realm of sin’s tyranny, then the latter option makes perfect sense. The believer no longer inhabits the “age” of Adam defined by sin and death; having entered the new “age” inaugurated and determined by the last Adam, sin’s reign has been ended for him; he has “died” to sin and death in order to be joined to another. In the end, both views can be supported by the larger context, since in it Paul weaves together the indicative (what is true) with the imperative (what must be done). But since the overall thrust of his argumentation in chapters 5-7 is toward what is objectively true of the believer in Christ, it is probably best to understand his rhetorical question in 6:2b as a proclamation of objective reality more than a call to personal holiness (though such a call is present in this chapter). Douglas Moo’s observation would appear to provide the proper balanced understanding:

“It is not sin, but the believer, who has ‘died,’ and sin, as Wesley puts it, ‘remains’ even though it does not ‘reign.’ Therefore, while ‘living in sin’ is incompatible with Christian existence and impossible for the Christian as a constant condition, it remains a real threat.”

2. In keeping with this contextual thrust, Paul drew upon the language of *death*. In the present passage the idea of death is seen to serve two purposes: first, it communicates the reality that union with Christ effects a defining and permanent *alteration* in a person’s state of being, just as does physical death; but it secondly implicates the principle of *satisfaction for sin* that is the basis for that alteration. In other words, the believer’s “death” to sin’s dominion stands upon the fact of Christ’s atoning death at Calvary. More specifically, it stands upon his own *participation* in Christ’s death; *the Christian’s death to sin is objective and actual because it is grounded in his union with Christ in His death*. And so, while sin is an ever-present threat, it is a conquered foe and the believer has gained ultimate triumph over it through the working of divine grace. In fact, were this not the case, Paul’s exhortations to holy living would be empty and useless. They would constitute nothing more than another pressing of “law” upon the Christian’s conscience, and Paul has already insisted upon the inability of law to accomplish anything but death.

It is not law but grace that secures and perfects the victory over sin, and Paul here explained the believer’s death to sin in terms of his “baptism” into Christ Jesus and, therefore, also into His death (6:3). Immediately the question arises as to whether Paul meant to indicate water baptism or, as elsewhere, was speaking metaphorically of the believer’s spiritual participation in Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, 12:13). Scholars and commentators fall out on both sides.

- a. It is certainly conceivable that Paul was referring to the baptismal rite, especially when 6:3 is compared with verse 6:4. And because water baptism symbolizes the Christian's spiritual participation in Christ, the emphasis of the larger context upon this participation does not necessarily preclude this interpretation.
- b. Nonetheless, the overall contextual emphasis upon the spiritual reality of the believer's union with Christ (5:1-11, 17, 19, 6:5-11, 7:1-4) lends credence to the conclusion that, at least in the present verse, Paul was speaking metaphorically.

The strongest argument against the latter interpretation is verse 6:4, which clearly appears to be referring to water baptism. This being so, holding the metaphorical view of baptism in 6:3 means that Paul transitioned in these two verses from the spiritual "baptism" that is participation in Christ to the sacramental rite that symbolizes it. Conversely, if it is concluded that Paul was in fact speaking of water baptism in both verses, then it is crucial to recognize that he was not indicating that the sacrament of baptism *itself* brings about a person's participation in Christ and His death; such an understanding cannot be supported anywhere in Paul's writing. His reference to the ordinance must be understood in terms of its *sacramental representation* of the reality of the believer's union with the Savior.

3. But as Christ's death was not ultimate, but had its goal in His resurrection and glorification, so it is with those joined to Him. Their baptism into His death is more importantly their participation in His *resurrection* (6:4). As Christ was raised in incorruptible glory, so they also have been "raised" from the dead in Him. Though the believer's share in Jesus' resurrection looks ultimately to the final resurrection of the last day (ref. 6:5, 8:18-25; cf. also 1 Corinthians 15:12-23; Philippians 3:20-21; etc.), he participates even now in the power of Christ's resurrection life. He is a "new creature" renewed to walk in "newness of life" (cf. 6:11; Ephesians 2:1-6; Colossians 3:1-3).

But how is it that Paul could insist that the believer's "entombment" with Christ and subsequent "raising" were accomplished by means of his baptism? Does this not appear to teach *baptismal regeneration*? Furthermore, how does baptism bring about a person's burial *with* Christ? In what sense can anyone be said to have been buried with Him? Many explanations have been offered, some more complicated and far-fetched than others. Arguably it is best to take Paul's words in the most natural sense, taking into account his redemptive-historical perspective: *when he spoke of being buried with Christ through baptism he was simply acknowledging the Christian's very real share in the last Adam, even as he shared in the first Adam.* Being "with" Adam in his transgression resulted in all men sharing in his condemnation and death; likewise, being "with" Christ in His death, burial and resurrection results in the believer's share in His righteousness and resurrection life. As Christ's death at Calvary brought the conquest and destruction of death - having once died, He is "alive forevermore" - so also the Christian's participation *with* Him in that redemptive triumph has caused him to pass from death into eternal life.

"For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes...Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."