

Super-Abounding Grace: Secure Salvation in Christ

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. (Romans 5:9-10)

Go back through this context and look at the various phrases that convey essentially the same truth, what God has accomplished for His elect in the death of Christ.

1. *Christ died for the ungodly*, Verse 6.
2. *Christ died for us*, Verse 8.
3. *We are now justified by his blood*, Verse 9.
4. *We shall be saved from wrath through him*, Verse 9.
5. *We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son*, Verse 10.
6. *We shall be saved by his life*, Verse 10.
7. *We have now received the atonement*, Verse 11.
8. Seven distinct notes communicate and emphasize one common truth. In light of the generally accepted interpretational tool, the "perspicuity of Scripture," the clarity of Scripture (The idea is that the more important God thinks something is the more clearly He states it in Scripture, and the more frequently He repeats it in Scripture.), this passage distinctly intends to convey strong emphasis on a central truth of our salvation in Christ. Reconciliation, atonement, justification, and salvation (a varied term, but in similar contexts as this) all distinctly refer to what God did for His elect in the Lord Jesus Christ, not to what we do.

Given the idea of the critics' false accusation of Paul, it seems bold and altogether fitting for him to drive the point home that they falsely represented his teachings. What better way to make that point than by presenting a thorough, balanced, and concise statement of his beliefs for all to read directly from his own pen. Then all could read for themselves both Paul's true beliefs and the straw man misrepresentations of his critics.

In these verses we see clearly the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. That is, that the Lord Jesus Christ died for a specific people, not simply to bring salvation within reach of all. Paul does not leave the death of Christ clouded with any uncertainty whatever. Paul repeats in each of these terms a reference to a specific people for whom Christ died, as well as a specific price paid to secure that benefit for those people. For whom did Christ die? For 1) *the ungodly*, 2) for *us*, 3) for those who are *now justified by his blood*, 4) for those who *shall be saved from wrath through him* (not through their own works or through a cooperative effort by both Him and them), 5) for those who *were* (factually, not merely potentially) *reconciled to God by the death of his Son*, 6) for those who *shall be saved* (a note of certainty regarding their salvation, not a mere statement of potential or possibility based on something they might or might not do) *by his life*, and finally 7) for those who have *now received the atonement* (literally, the reconciliation). In none of these terms did Paul leave any doubt or uncertainty as to the fact that Jesus' death clearly secured the salvation of those for whom He died.

It is my belief that Paul's unnamed critics were in fact two warring groups of people inside the Roman Church, people who had allowed pride and the party spirit to become stronger than their faith in Christ. I reach this conclusion because throughout the letter Paul specifically rebukes both Gentile and Jewish

pride. He confronts Jewish pride in the second chapter and Gentile pride in the eleventh, though these two contexts are by no means the only sections where this pattern appears in the letter.

What was the actual belief of these people? In what specific details did they disagree with Paul? It may be more difficult to deal with specifics in this point, but it seems clear that much of the disagreement in Rome was at least similar to what Paul repeatedly encountered where ever he preached and established new churches. The most concise statement of this disagreement appears in the fifteenth chapter of Acts. If we read the opening verses regarding the initial disagreement in Antioch between Paul and Barnabas and those who taught a different gospel than they, it appears that the disagreement was over how God saves sinners in the ultimate or eternal sense. If we read the Jerusalem Church's actual letter (Acts 15:22-29), it seems quite likely that they were teaching that a non-Jew must become a practicing Jew before he/she can possibly become a "true" Christian. If we observe that the letter seems to have been written by the authority of the Jerusalem Church, we may reasonably conclude that the people who were teaching this error and creating the problem in Antioch, as well as likely the churches in Galatia (likely the churches that Paul established during his "First Missionary Journey" in the fourteenth chapter of Acts) were in fact members of the Jerusalem Church. Although we could not make dogmatic conclusions to this whole scenario, it pulls together a wide variety of facts that do appear in the context of Acts the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters.

The idea that a contingent of Christians in the Jerusalem Church was behind this error is—to say the least—intriguing. It goes a long way to explain why Paul repeatedly emphasized the true nature of both our eternal salvation as well as our discipleship in all of his letters.

Through this possible scenario we may focus the likely problem, both between Antioch and Jerusalem and between warring factions within the church in Rome, to one of two possibilities.

1. Despite all that Jesus did during the Incarnation, He merely made salvation possible. True and final salvation in fact depends on a person's belief and good works. Perhaps it even depends on his/her becoming a practicing Jew as an intermediate step to becoming a truly good Christian.

2. Salvation is by grace, but a believer in Christ may only gain spiritual maturity in the faith by embracing Judaism and growing through Judaism into "true" Christianity."

It matters little which of these two views we adopt; either view helps us to understand the dynamic with which Paul was confronted where ever he traveled and where ever he preached. We get the distinct impression that these errant believers "shadowed" him everywhere and lurked in the shadows till he left. Then they would begin sowing their false ideas, likely claiming superior knowledge and authority because they were respected members of the "mother church" in Jerusalem.

Factually Paul and Barnabas preached the same gospel truth that Peter, James, and others in Jerusalem preached. As the Jerusalem Church's letter in Acts 15 affirms, the problem was not at all a theological disagreement between these men; it was rather a dissenting contingency within the Jerusalem Church who disagreed with their own church and its pastor or pastors.

Based on a scenario that roughly approximates this situation, Paul's reasoning in Romans is logical and reasonable. He must cover every detail of his beliefs so as to remove any doubt from the minds of the at-large-membership in the church in Rome regarding his faith and apostleship. In order to accomplish this objective he must confront and refute the errors of both sides in the contention that was tearing at the very fabric of the Roman Church.

Ah, how typical of human nature. A few egotistical and pride-driven people strive for supremacy while large numbers of hungry sheep go hungry seeking sound and balanced spiritual meat. Rather than conclude that this problem was inevitable, Paul devoted his whole Roman letter to healing the breach, to breaking the egotistical pride of the schismatic leaders in both Jewish and Gentile parties within the

church, so that all of the church in Rome would reunite in the faith and in their respectful fellowship, viewing the Lord Jesus Christ and His truth as more important than their ego or pride.

Nothing softens sinful human pride as fully as being brought face to face with the reality of one's own sinful condition and utter dependence on God for salvation and for everything good. Prior to our salvation, none of us was deserving and good in the eyes of God! We were alike—Jew or Gentile made no difference whatever—fallen in our sins and not only undeserving, but also wholly incapable of doing anything at all to remedy our plight. The change that transformed us from darkness into light, from “children of wrath even as others” to “children of the King” was brought about by God alone through the Lord Jesus Christ, not by anything we did or even thought to do. It is no coincidence that Paul goes immediately from this powerful teaching on what we have through the death of Christ to what we inherently possessed in our native human existence in Adam. Our utterly hopeless and helpless condition in Adam is the reason that our salvation must be wholly—beginning to end—by God alone and not by anything in us.

We have a secure hope of salvation with God throughout eternity, based on what Jesus did on our behalf, not based on what we did. No single passage in the Bible more clearly teaches this truth than the verses we have been studying in Romans fifth chapter. May we anchor our faith in these verses and in the profound truths that they affirm. We have the potential right now for joy in these truths as we melt the demands of personal ego and sinful pride. Praise to God alone for salvation and all things good.

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