

# Dead to Sin and Alive to Christ (Romans 6: 1–23)

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## *Introduction*

Paul begins the next section of his epistle by taking up a question which he has already asked once before (3:8). This is the old 'chestnut'—if God bestows his grace on sinners, and if the law, by making sin more

serious, anticipated a correspondingly greater work of God's grace, should we not sin even more so that grace might be poured out to a correspondingly greater degree? It sounds clever, but Paul comes down against this kind of logic more firmly perhaps than against anything else in this epistle. In 3:8 he is even more severe than

he is here, but his reaction is sufficiently brusque to make it plain that he had no time for this kind of argument. Associating himself here for the first time with those to whom he was writing, Paul insists that as Christians we have died to sin, and so can no longer live in it. For us to go on sinning is not to earn more grace, but rather to lose the inheritance of the kingdom of life which has been opened up for us in Christ. To be justified by faith in Jesus Christ is such a great privilege that the thought of ever going back to our previous ways should not even enter our heads—certainly not if our aim is to have a deeper experience of Christ.

Paul backs up his argument by using the illustration of baptism. This is the sacramental sign by which we pass out of the control of death and enter into the life of Christ. We do this by being baptized into Christ's *death*, an interesting fact which we need to look at more closely. The death of Christ was a passing from one life to another. It was closely connected to, and followed immediately on, his atoning sacrifice, but here it is not completely identified with that. Paul puts the emphasis not on Christ's passion but on his burial, and it is this aspect which is so unusual. Paul appears to be saying that it is Christ's departure from this life which is of greatest practical significance for us. This is balanced and completed by what follows—to be buried with Christ in baptism is but the prelude to the resurrection, which is the real model of the Christian's present experience. Like Christ himself, we do not just die to the world; we are born again into a new life which is shot through with the glory of God the Father.

### *Retrospect*

We ought to pause at this point and reflect on what Paul has been saying about Christ throughout this epistle. First, he mentions that Christ came at the right time, to rescue us from the curse of the law (3: 21–25). His explanation of Christ's saving work begins with the incarnation, an important reminder that God's purposes were known even before Christ's coming into the world, having been seen and recorded by the prophets of old. Nothing in the life of Jesus was an accident; his career could not have turned out in some other way if he had been given other opportunities for ministry. What God did in Christ was planned from the beginning, and he came to earth as the man able and determined to do his Father's will. But if the history of salvation begins with the incarnation, it does not end there. In fact, Paul spends very little time on it, preferring to regard it as a preparation for Christ's sacrifice and treating it accordingly. There is certainly no justification for making the incarnation the heart of the gospel, which some Christians have been inclined to do. They have understood it as being God's acceptance

and enjoyment of the created order, and then used it to develop an understanding of the Christian life based on the earthy; ministry of Jesus. Whether this then produces an exaggerated hedonism, on the ground that Jesus ate and drank with sinners, or an itinerant healing ministry, rooted in the conviction that Jesus came to make the crooked straight, appears to be largely a matter of personal preference. In the final analysis, both these approaches are based on an incarnational emphasis which is not that of the New Testament.

Paul passes over the teaching ministry of Jesus and concentrates next on his sacrifice and death. Here we are within the orbit of the covenant made with Abraham, in which we see how Christ's work has ransomed us from the power and the effects of sin. For many people, this is the heart of the gospel message, and it is an aspect of God's purpose which we cannot possibly overlook. The cross of Christ is the symbol of Christian faith in the world because of its evangelistic significance. It speaks to us where we are, tells us what is wrong with us, and shows us how to put it right. The cross reminds us of the heavy price which God paid on our behalf, and it keeps us from ever feeling proud that we have become members of his family by faith in the shed blood of Christ. To carry the cross is an act of self-humiliation and suffering in imitation of Jesus, but in the knowledge too, that it is by the sacrifice that he made on that cross that the penalty for our rebellion was paid.

But however important the cross is, we must remember that it can be overemphasized to the point of denying the Christian's hope and joy in Christ. Taken by itself, after all, the cross is negative. It is a reminder of the burden of sin, of the need for expiation, and of the redemptive power of suffering which can easily set the agenda for a life of grim and humourless duty. Christians can so easily create a law for themselves which takes the suffering of Christ as a model, and practise forms of self-denial which in the end become a means of justifying ourselves in the presence of God. The unpleasant reputation for joylessness which has hung over the church for so long, and which nowadays we are trying so hard to eradicate is one direct result of this approach.

Paul gives due weight to Christ's suffering and death, and is never afraid to identify himself with it, but this is always balanced by a corresponding emphasis on his resurrection and victory. From the perspective of living the Christian life today, it is this which is the most fundamental truth of Christ's work, and this is why Paul puts such emphasis on it here. Throughout the epistle to the Romans, whenever Christ's sacrifice is mentioned, Paul never fails to add that the end result was a new life, and it is this new life, following on but not bound by the experience of suffering and death, which is the keynote of his gospel message. At the heart of

this new life is the glory of God the Father. The Father is glorified because the Son has done his will to perfection and completed the work which he had been sent to do. The Father is glorified because the miracle of the resurrection demonstrates that his power is greater than that of man, greater by far than that of sin and death. Lastly, the Father is glorified because in place of a race of rebellious creatures who can do nothing except dishonour his name, the Son has won for him a new people, whose purpose will be to live out the consequences of the resurrection victory as a witness to his saving power at work on earth. Our past now belongs to Christ's death; our future lies with his resurrection. What we see worked out in his life must also be worked out in our lives, so that we will be properly equipped to bring glory to God the Father in the way that he has prepared for us to do.

### ***Getting down to the basics***

Having stated the general principle, Paul now goes on to explain in detail what dying to sin and rising with Christ actually means. He starts at the beginning, with what he calls the *old man*. The word used here for *old* implies something which is no longer valid or useful; it is old because its purpose has now passed away. We were once in this condition, because as descendants of Adam we had inherited that state of rebellion against God, that broken personal relationship with him which cut off the source of our life and made us spiritually dead and useless. But this old man of ours has been crucified with Christ. This does not, and cannot mean that we have undergone the same experience of suffering and death as Christ, nor does it reduce the crucifixion to a psychological crisis, followed by rebirth, of the type which is sometimes advocated today. Paul's language must be understood in the context of the covenant, which is the context in which the sacrifice of Christ finds its meaning. When we look at matters in that light we realize that Christ's death for us is substitutionary—he has taken our place on the cross. We are with him there because by faith we have entered into the experience of his life, and hence also of his sacrificial death. Our faith is not merely faith in the risen Lord, as some modern scholars want us to believe, but it is faith in the incarnate and crucified Son of God as well.

Now the purpose of this substitution is the destruction of what Paul calls the body of sin. A literal interpretation of this verse has caused untold anguish in the church, leading thousands of faithful believers, including the young Martin Luther, to torture themselves in a vain attempt to kill the desires of the flesh without actually committing suicide. Sins of the soul have caused equal anguish, as the spiritual autobiographies of the great saints remind us. Augustine was tortured by his

love of philosophy and literature, while countless others have given up music, painting or even television in the fight for a purer, less burdened walk with God. Whatever satisfaction this may have brought them, it is others who often feel the pinch, being forced to live with people for whom every secular activity is an endless source of sin, a bottomless pit from which there is no escape outside the desert or the cloister. But just as being crucified with Christ is a spiritual, not a physical experience, so the death of the body of sin is to be understood also in spiritual, and not in physical terms. Paul explains it by saying that we are no longer to be slaves to sin, acting in a way which guarantees that everything we think, say or do will be governed by a principle which is alien to the spirit of Christ. This principle is coherent and all-embracing; there is no part of us which escapes its power and influence. For this reason, Paul does not call it a disease, or restrict it to a particular part of the body; for him, it is simply the body itself. We cannot get rid of it by half measures, for when we die, the whole body dies at the same time. When we rise again with Christ, the whole body is renewed in his new life.

The man who has died in Christ has been justified in the sight of God, so that he no longer has to pay the price for his sins. This is the meaning of verse 7, and it is extremely interesting to note that most translations do not stick to what the text actually says but translate what the consequence of this act is. They say that the man who has died has been *set free* from sin, putting the emphasis on the result of the action of justification rather than on the justification itself. This is certainly Paul's underlying logic, and it is fitting that it is at this point that he shifts his own perspective and moves from the death of Christ to the experience of his resurrection.

What does it mean to share in the resurrected life of Christ? In explaining this, Paul's language is much more tentative than it is when he is talking about Christ's death. Frequently he uses the future tense, or even the subjunctive mood, to describe something which to him is still incomplete, open-ended, and therefore not definable in the same precise way. In verse 8 he says that we believe that we *shall* live with him, that is to say, that we shall share his life, indicating that the fullness of this reality has not yet materialized in our own experience. Yet Paul does not hesitate to draw out the implications of this new life for us, because he knows that even if the fullness has not yet come, there is enough of the reality present in our lives now to make a description of it necessary. The first point to notice is that our new life is one that will be shared with him. The concept of a common life in Christ is one which runs right through the New Testament, and it is important for us to understand what it means. First of all, it means that as believers we all draw on the life which Christ has

given us. He is not just the president of a joint stock company, the figurehead ruler of a kingdom governed by committees and sectional interests of various kinds. His rule and sustaining power in our lives is direct, and it is in and through him that we find fellowship with one another.

### ***Popular misunderstanding***

It is important to say this today, because the concept of common life has been widely abused and misunderstood. It is abused when one Christian sets himself up over others, either as the prophetic leader of a house church or as the spiritual guide of those whose sanctification appears to be less evident than his own. Nothing causes pain and division in the church more quickly than this, and nothing is harder to heal once the damage has been done. For sectarian division is ultimately the product of a spirit of divisiveness, a desire to cause trouble—which is the very opposite of the true teaching of Christ. On the other hand, the principle of common life is misunderstood when it is assumed that anybody who calls himself a Christian has the right to enjoy all the privileges of fellowship without any questions being asked. We cannot agree with those who say that self-identification, backed up perhaps by participation in a common liturgical and sacramental life suffices by itself to ensure that we have fellowship with one another. The true criterion for this is a common fellowship *with* Christ and not merely *in* him. It is when we sense that others share an experience of him which we recognize as being compatible with ours that we know we are in fellowship with them—not when all that we see are the external signs of a common belonging to a church or institution.

The resurrection life of Christ is a life which will never come to an end. In this life we have nothing we can be sure of looking forward to except death, but that assurance is taken away when we are in Christ. Instead, we are given a better and greater assurance—that in the new life, death is no longer the determining factor. It has been removed, so that we can know that the life we are now living has a purpose and a validity which will never come to an end. Moreover, when we died to sin we died once for all.

It was a single action with a permanent result. There can be no going back, and no repetition of what has already happened. But when we live the new life, the future is open-ended, because we live to God, for God, and in the presence and in the strength of God, whose being and whose purpose for us are eternal. It is therefore our duty to take stock of the situation, to recognize that as far as sin is concerned we are now dead, and to face the fact that our new life is one which must be rooted and grounded in God. Fortunately we do not

have to guess what this means in practice, because our relationship with God is established in Jesus Christ, who has shown us what it involves. Paul goes on to spell this out in verse 12.

First, with Christ's help, we are not to let sin have control over our mortal body. Here the word body is being used in the physical, not in the metaphorical sense which we saw earlier, and it includes everything which we would understand as human nature, i.e. the soul, the will, the mind, the conscience and so on, in addition to the flesh. This nature has desires which it tries to satisfy. In themselves, these desires are not wrong, since our bodies need food, drink and exercise in order to keep going. Our minds need intellectual stimulation and training if they are to serve us properly. But in satisfying the legitimate desires of the body we are not to listen to the dictates of the spirit of rebellion against God. This is the source of disorder in our lives, the principle that turns need into temptation and which totally corrupts the whole concept of desire. By the same token, we are not to let parts of our nature become instruments of sin. The human mind has a wonderful capacity for compartmentalization, and we can often keep certain areas of our life relatively free from impurity whilst indulging ourselves without limit in other areas to which we are paying little or no attention. It is one of Satan's subtlest tricks to teach us that there are some sins and temptations which we find it easy to resist and to give us a burden for them, particularly when we see others who are less fortunate than ourselves in that respect, and to shut the door on our own more serious faults which we just have not got time to notice or energy to deal with.

### ***Conclusion***

Paul concludes his remarks in this section by saying that sin must not control us because we are no longer under the law, but under grace. He postpones the full development of this thought, as he did in chapter 5, because he has not quite finished what he wants to say about our human situation in the face of both sin and grace. But the throwaway remark is a reminder that we have still to consider the question of the law which has been laid aside for the moment, but which still looms in the background. First though, he takes us back to the question with which the chapter opened. If sin is defined by the law, and we are no longer under the law, can we then carry on in that way and not worry about the problem? Once again, Paul's answer is categorically sharp—no way!

In working through this particular piece of false logic, Paul uses the image of the servant, or slave, and takes us back to first principles. He reminds us that once we have committed ourselves to serve someone,

we are then bound by our commitment to do whatever that person requires. Slavery is not an act, or even a series of acts; slavery is a position, or status, which implies a relationship with another person and determines the conditions by which that relationship will be governed. Looked at in that way, slavery is a fairly simple concept—the master commands and the servant obeys, no questions asked, no objections tolerated. The conditions of service are the same, whether the end result is sin and death or righteousness, which leads to eternal life. Now, says Paul, because of the grace of God to whom thanks are due—the Greek word for grace and thanks is the same—we who were once slaves to sin have been liberated from it and given the freedom to serve God willingly. The difference between the two forms of service thus becomes clear. The old slavery was an enforced bondage, to which we were accustomed by habit, but which had originally been imposed on our nature by an outside power which was determined to enslave us and bend us to its will.

In Christ however, the power of God is at work inside us, giving us a new life and therefore a natural desire to serve him. We are no longer in bondage to something we begrudge, even if we cannot see our way out of it and might even, in our blindness, prefer the security of slavery to the risks which freedom without direction would bring. Now we are free, but we have a purpose, which is to serve Christ. As Paul says, we have been given over to the model of instruction, who is none other than Jesus himself. It is important to note this description of Christ, because it is unusual and may not be readily understood. Jesus provides the model for our instruction, not because we are expected to copy everything he ever said or did, but because we are expected to see in his life the principles which must now govern our lives. Again, these principles do not follow a one-to-one correspondence in the way we might think. Rather, they are the spiritual lessons which we are called to learn from the events of the life and death of Jesus. Not many people realize that when we recite the course of Christ's life in the Apostles' Creed, or in the Nicene Creed, for example, we are really summarising, in addition to the historical facts, the pattern by which our own salvation is worked out. We have already seen how Paul does this in his treatment of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and that is what is intended here. The life of Christ, as told in the Gospels, is meant as a guide for us along the path of spiritual growth. We have not just been set free; we have been given a model to follow, and that model is Christ.

Paul pursues his theme by recognizing that his analogy is imperfect. He is forced to speak in terms of slavery because we are unable to grasp the spiritual truth he is trying to convey without the help of

this kind of image. But in reality, of course, we are anything but slaves—to serve God is perfect freedom! Furthermore, it is fulfilling the law in a higher and more perfect way than when we had the law over us, threatening to come down on us every time we were caught in some kind of transgression. For it is at this point that Paul makes a clear connection between impurity and lawlessness. Naturally this follows his general principle, that what we do will be determined by what and who we are, but the word itself appears here for the first time, Being subject to the law, even trying to keep it, only brings out even more the sad fact that by nature we are lawless creatures, incapable of attaining our goal because of the basic impurity which governs our lives.

The purpose of submission to Christ, of being slaves to righteousness, is that we should attain holiness. Holiness reflects the character of God who is holy, and the Jews tried by any and every means to attain it under the law. Like many Christians today, they thought of it as a quality which could be found in things—holy places, holy books, holy ceremonies of one kind or another. But because holiness reflects the character of God, who is personal, true holiness can be found only in persons. Jesus told his disciples that it was not what entered a man which defiled him, but what emerged from inside, and elsewhere Paul reaffirms that to the pure, all things are pure. Holiness is not a matter of doing, or of not doing, certain things. It is primarily a matter of establishing a right relationship with God and growing in it. Now that we are free from the deadly power of sin, we are also free to discover how we too can enter into the life and experience of true holiness in Christ.

In verse 20 Paul finally abandons the human analogy of slavery and speaks openly of freedom. He thinks back to the things which may still haunt us from the days before we were Christians. Are there things we have done which we are now ashamed of, things which will lead only to death? The Christian does not have to despair of his future when he looks back over his past life. We have died with Christ, and the death of our evil deeds will no longer entail our death along with them. Instead, we are now free to turn away from all that and to start doing things which will lead to holiness, and eventually to eternal life with God in Christ. In him we have a whole new direction, a new purpose and a new fruitfulness which will show up in the way we live and in the way others perceive us. The change in a Christian's life is a real change, something which can be seen and which can make itself felt. It is a change which breathes life, not death, into everything we do. In the life of sin, death was the only reward we could expect, but in the life of grace, of the free gift of God, our reward is eternal life, in and with our Lord Jesus Christ.