

Grace Abounding

Romans 5:17–21ⁱ

To Him Be Glory Forever

One of the things that we occasionally find in Paul's letters is that even though, or maybe especially because he was writing as one who was "carried along by the Holy Spirit",ⁱⁱ he occasionally comes to a place where he seems caught up by the glory of the argument and then what follows marks the writing as a work of what John Piper calls "Expository Exultation", or "preaching as worship". Not preaching to equip worship, but preaching as worship; preaching that proclaims the truth so that in the proclamation itself we are lifted up by the Word of God to worship the God of the Word.

If the Lord is willing we will eventually get to it in the course of the time, but thinking ahead a bit, consider an example of this from Romans chapter 11. The Apostle is once again writing about that Jew/Gentile distinction that he has drawn throughout the book, and concerning the children of Abraham by natural descent he says:

²⁸ As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. ³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Romans 11:28–32 ESV

In other words, God is and has always been working His purpose out in the salvation of all those whom He has called in the grace of Christ, and though they may be seen as enemies of the Gospel for now, God is not scrambling around looking for an alternative plan, because this was always the plan. There will be more to say about that on another occasion, but for now, consider that verse 32,

³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all Romans 11:32 ESV

leads inevitably here, verses 33 – 36

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:33–36 ESV

And it may be that this doesn't seem like a natural transition for us—we think too much in human terms—but with the wind of the Spirit filling his sails Paul doesn't see the teaching of election as the ground for impertinent questions, but as the ground for overflowing praise.

Since We Have Been Justified

A similar thing happens in Romans 5. We start with a definitive declaration in verse 1 where the apostle wrote:

¹ Therefore, **since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 ESV

And this strikes me as one of those texts that really ought to be stenciled on the walls of every Christian home. We should fall asleep at night reflecting on this. Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God. It can stand alone as the very definition of what it means to be saved. But Paul was not through. Because we have peace with God, we stand in the grace of Christ. Because we stand in the grace of Christ we rejoice in hope.

⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Romans 5:5 ESV

Think of it this way. Verse 1 is the foundation, and verses 2 – 5 form the house which we moved into when we were saved, but knowing that we would have a problem just living there rent-free in a house that we didn't build and couldn't afford to buy, the Spirit gave us the rest of the chapter to assure us that this is indeed the truth. It's like we keep trying to send the landlord a check and He keeps mailing them back uncashed, with a note saying, "That's not how it works." Verse 6:

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Romans 5:6 ESV

And verse 8:

⁸ ...God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8 ESV

And verse 9:

⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. Romans 5:9 ESV

And 10:

¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Romans 5:10 ESV

We need to memorize this chapter, or write it down with our own hand and carry it around in a pocket or a purse so that we can lay hold of it whenever we struggle with assurance. If we are to write the Law of God on our doorposts and on our gates, we ought to keep Romans 5 on the bedside table. For

¹⁵ ...the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. Romans 5:15 ESV

¹⁶ And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. Romans 5:16 ESV

And then the three, parallel statements in the text that Peter read for us this morning.

¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

The Grace of the Law

And then this chapter which began with that shining summary of the gospel—

¹ ...since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 ESV

pulls all this together in the sovereign work of God, reminding us that even the law was meant to lead us to God's grace in Christ Jesus, because, verse 20:

²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass...

which doesn't strike us as very gracious, but,

...where sin increased, grace abounded all the more... Romans 5:20 ESV

In Galatians 3, the Apostle said it this way:

²² ...the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law...

(the particular Scriptures that imprisoned everything under sin),

...until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. Galatians 3:22-24 ESV

As we read back in Romans:

²¹ ...so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 5:21 ESV

So, the law of God was not given to save us,

²¹ ...for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. Galatians 2:21 ESV

Rather, the law was given in this sense to make it definitively clear that we cannot do this by ourselves, but on our own are prisoners to sin, and it did this so that in our desperation we would cast ourselves with reckless abandon on the grace of God alone.

²⁰ ...the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more... Romans 5:20 ESV

Grace Abounding

And there are so many examples of this, so many illustrations, both in Scripture and in the lives of God's people. In a few minutes we will sing once again a line that many of us have never stopped to consider, but Newton wrote, "'twas grace that taught my heart to fear..." and when he looked into the Law of God, there was much to fear in the life that he lived before he came to Christ. The list goes on and on and on and while every story is different, it's always the same, "... 'twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved."

But think for a few minutes this morning of that woman "caught in adultery" and brought to Jesus for judgment in John chapter 8, and I know that there are textual issues, and these days the minute you mention the story someone will point out that the act of adultery takes two and then will ask, "Where was the man? It isn't fair. How come they didn't bring the man too?" But leave all that aside for this morning and focus on the Word that we have received.

³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴ they said to [Jesus], "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" John 8:3-5 ESV

And it wasn't fair, as we see by the point which is described in John 8, verse 6:

⁶ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him... John 8:6 ESV

Because this was the real point. They didn't care about the adultery and they certainly didn't care about the woman any more than they did the man who must have been part of all this. They cared about having a charge to bring against Jesus.

But let's think about the woman in this context. She could not have cared about the motives of the scribes and Pharisees any more than they cared about her. All she knew for certain was that this was probably the worst day of her life. Torn, perhaps, from her bed and hastily clothed in whatever was close at hand (she was, after all, "caught in the act"), she was dragged through the streets of Jerusalem and right into the courts of the temple where Jesus was teaching the people.

Then, she heard these men who, whatever else we might say about them, knew the law forward, backward, and inside out, as they brought the full force of the law to bear on her particular sin.

⁵ ...in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. John 8:5 ESV

And, at the time, no one knew what Jesus would say or do in that moment, especially the poor, wretched woman at the center of the storm. To this day, for all the speculation, we don't really know.

⁶ ...Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. John 8:6-8
ESV

And when they heard what He said,

⁹ ...they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. John 8:9 ESV

Then He stood up, and said to her,

¹⁰ ..."Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord."
John 8:10-11 ESV

Then, textual issues aside, some of the sweetest, most precious words in all of the Gospel:

¹¹ ...Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." John 8:11 ESV

Of course, as the Son of God Jesus could have condemned her, and as the sinless One, He could also have cast the first stone, but as the Son of Man, He knew and kept the law of God, and the law required eye-witnesses. Besides, and maybe we have failed to notice this, at the bottom line *it was the law of God* with all of its impending judgment that brought this woman to Jesus,

²⁰ ...the law came in to increase the trespass...

and again, that doesn't strike us as very gracious, and maybe we don't like this, but it's true. God in His providence gave the Law, and then sent those scribes and Pharisees to condemn this woman, so that in the end His law would bring her to Christ for forgiveness and grace. For

²⁰ ...the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, Romans 5:20 ESV

So, Jesus turned, and graciously said to her,

"Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." John 8:11 ESV

And I don't use this as an illustration because this woman's sins were so much greater and more heinous than those of anyone else, including the scribes and Pharisees in the story. I use it because her sin was so commonplace. So, the Law brought a sinner to Jesus for condemnation, but in coming to Jesus, she found, instead, salvation, life, light, and righteousness. She found grace that was greater than all her sin. And we do too. To this very day, the Savior still says to all who will come with faith and repentance, "Neither do I condemn you..." for having been justified by faith,

¹ ...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 ESV

For,

²⁰ ...the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 5:20–21 ESV

i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
ii Cf. 2 Peter 1:21.