

Adult Bible Study Commentary
Death Becomes Life
Romans 6:1-4, 12-14, 17-23
Dr. Jeremy K. Pridgeon

Advancing his argument in Romans, Paul takes up the question of sin as it relates to grace. Rhetorically, he asks, “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” The answer is a resounding, “No!” Through our baptism in Christ, we have died to our old self and our old ways, in order that we might rise to new life in Jesus. We have been set free from sin because of Jesus and we should live in a way that reflects this new reality.

One of the great contributions of John Wesley and the people called Methodists to Christian theology is our understanding of grace. We speak of prevenient grace, that grace which goes before us even realizing we stand in need of salvation. God’s love for all of us is so pervasive that it extends to us in preventative ways, guiding us and keeping us as children of God. We know of justifying grace, when we experience God’s saving work in our lives, feel the release of our sins, and understand that through Christ we are reconciled to God and have new life in him. We continue in sanctifying grace, dying to self, daily, growing in Christ as we seek to be made “perfect” in love toward God and neighbor.

Paul is reminding us that experiencing the grace of God calls for a response on our part. When God initiates the saving act, we are to turn our hearts and lives towards the things of God. Failure to do so is to abuse the gift that is grace. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and theologian wrote in his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, there is a distinction between “cheap” grace and “costly” grace. For Bonhoeffer, “cheap” grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ. Cheap grace is to say, “You have sinned, but everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness.” There are no expectations placed upon us as disciples when grace is “cheap.” Costly grace, however, calls us to recognize that we are to surrender ourselves fully to Jesus, as forgiveness results in a broken and contrite heart on the part of a believer.

Paul is clear that the result of sin is death. While certainly we know we will experience earthly death, I think that too narrowly defines the fruits of sin. Rather, earthly death is the culmination of sin for the human being. Sin, and the brokenness that accompanies sin, brings about death throughout our lives: the death of relationships, the death of promises and possibilities for one’s life, the death of dreams and hopes. God certainly works for good in all things, seeking to bring about new life from the many “deaths” we encounter, because God is a God of possibility. But God is working through the brokenness we create and experience as a result of sin and its power.

We are a culture that knows death all too well. We know pain, we know sorrow, we know hurt, and we know brokenness. We know these things so well that I believe it is difficult for many people – those in the church as well as those outside of the church – to experience grace and the hope it can bring. Individually we tend to look at life from a glass half-full perspective, considering our perceived shortcomings and deficiencies. In our churches we often operate from a theology of scarcity, thinking that if we only had more young families, more money, more (you fill in the blank) that our situation would be much better.

We do not seem to possess as robust a “theology of the resurrection” believing that God does bring new life from deadly and destructive forces. But if the resurrection of Jesus is not real, why bother?

I love that God has fashioned the theology of resurrection into our everyday lives here on this earth. We get up each morning from our beds and from our sleep – literally our graves. We awaken and rise to a new day, a new reality, where we labor and toil, offering our gifts and abilities to contribute to our communities and to the well-being of our brothers and sisters in a variety of way. At day’s end, we retire to our beds once more, for rest and needed sleep, in the hope that we will rise again the next day. In a 24 hour microcosm, God has given us a glimpse of eternity.

We all have been born, we labor and toil, and when we pass from this life to the next, we do so in the sure and certain hope that we will rise with Christ to new and eternal life. And that, too, is grace.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...When we consider what God has done for us, in and through Jesus, the living Christ, it is remarkable to consider the depths of God’s love for us all. The realization and recognition of this love should compel us to let go of sinful ways in order that we might fully experience the presence of Christ in our everyday lives. We have been set free and the result is eternal life.

One final caveat: Eternal life is not something gained only when one dies. Wesley understood that for the believer, eternal life begins in that moment. Eternal life is experienced in this life, because the promises of God hold even on this side of the grave. Death is merely a transition from this life to life eternal.

Let us experience life in Christ in all of its fullness, letting go of our sinful ways to know the amazing grace that God makes available to us all!