

Romans 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 6 We shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died, he died to sin, once for all. But the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

[1 : 27] For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law, but under grace?

By no means. Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

But thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification.

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.

[2 : 32] But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6 begins with the question of how we are to respond to the abounding of grace in the place where sin abounded, a point that Paul made at the end of chapter 5. If the blackness of human sin occasions the most dazzling manifestations of divine grace, couldn't an argument be made for continuing in the domain of sin, so that the radical character of God's grace might be even more apparent.

If God justifies the ungodly and the greatness of his grace is most apparent in this, why should we ever leave the domain of sin? In the previous chapter, Paul spoke of opposing reigns, the reign of sin in death and the reign of grace through righteousness leading to eternal life.

God's grace bursts into the realm of sin's power like a blinding light, but its effect is to release us from that realm and to bring us into another realm, the realm of grace, where it reigns through righteousness.

If grace delivers us from the realm of sin, so radically that we are described as having died to it, continuing to act as if we lived in the realm of sin would be to empty grace of meaning.

[3 : 54] It would be like the freed slave that continued to grovel before his old master. The Christian has experienced a transition from the old realm of sin's reign in death to the realm of the reign of grace in righteousness leading to eternal life, and this transition is enacted in baptism.

In baptism, we are united to Christ and his death so that we might also share in his resurrection life, in the present by moral newness of life, by the work of the resurrecting spirit, and in the future as our bodies themselves will be raised to eternal life.

Many people get nervous when Paul speaks about baptism in this way. Some have argued that Paul cannot be speaking about actual water baptism. His statements suggest salvation by baptism. He must be talking about some inner spiritual baptism. However, for Paul, these things are not detached from each other. Entrance into the new realm of life in Christ occurs through baptism. How then are we to make sense of this? The first thing to consider here is that baptism is an integral part of the larger movement of turning to Christ. An analogy might help.

[4 : 59] When an old king dies, the next in the line of succession immediately accedes to the throne. The throne is never left vacant. However, while the accession to the throne is immediate in some senses, there is a process by which it is proclaimed, formalised, and put into full effect.

The coronation of the new monarch can occur months after the accession. In the case of King Edward VIII, in the UK, there was never a coronation, as he abdicated beforehand. In Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's case, the coronation was 14 months after the accession.

She was the queen months before the coronation, but her coronation was not an afterthought. When people think of Her Majesty the Queen becoming queen, it is probably the coronation that comes to their mind.

King Edward VIII's entry into kingship, however, was abortive, not least because there was no coronation ceremony. The coronation is the ceremonial formalisation and glorious manifestation of the new reign, and baptism is not dissimilar.

Entrance into the new life of Christ is both instantaneous and a process, a process of which baptism is the great formalisation and enactment. Conversion without baptism for Paul would be seen as incomplete, a failure to enter into the full reality of what God has given us in salvation.

[6 : 16] Like the coronation of a new monarch, baptism ceremonially enacts the reality of the transition in a way that symbolically manifests the meaning and significance of what is occurring.

It brings the transition into its full effect, bringing the baptised person into full and public communion in the church. A coronation is a public and dramatic manifestation of the reality of what has and is taking place in acceding to the throne, assuring the newly crowned monarch of their full and true possession of the authority and dignity of the throne, and displaying the reality of the glory of the new monarch to both the kingdom and the wider world.

Baptism, again, is much the same. It is a seal of the transition to us, assuring us of its reality, of the firmness of Christ's promises to us, and of the unreserved dedication of our lives to which we are summoned.

It also manifests our transition to the church and the world, calling them to treat us differently from here on out. Paul speaks of baptism as actually accomplishing something, of bringing us into possession of new life.

Is Paul teaching some magical doctrine of baptism? Not at all. Ceremonies can affect remarkable changes. Two single people can walk into a church, go through a ceremony, say some words, exchange rings, and come out as a married couple.

[7 : 36] Now, the two persons could conceivably go through the ceremony and leave the church, go their separate ways, and never interact again. Everyone could continue to treat them as if they were still single, and the wedding would be a fairly empty charade.

Although formally their status would have changed, in actual fact, little else had. The efficacy of a wedding ceremony is in large measure found in the fact that the participants live and view themselves in a very different way afterwards.

The efficacy of the ceremony is largely prospective. It anticipates the couple confirming the meaning of the ceremony in living new lives after it, new lives that are lived in terms of what occurred in the ceremony.

Although a couple may fail to live out the reality that a wedding ceremony ushers them into, many do fail in this way. A wedding does not bring one into an ambivalent status.

It anticipates a positive response, and the person who fails to live faithfully in the newness of married life empties the wedding of its meaning. Baptism is much the same.

[8 : 41] Baptism formalises, ceremonially enacts, and seals to us our entrance into the privileges of sons and daughters of God. Its efficacy is mostly prospective. It anticipates our actual living out of the new lives into which we have been brought.

Paul wants the Romans, and us, to look at our baptisms, and to live out the meaning of what God has declared concerning us in them. The expectation is that baptised Christians will be living lives of a markedly different character.

The baptised Christian who is going on living as he did before is violating the meaning of his baptism. For Paul, our baptism anticipates and assures us of future resurrection.

In baptism, our bodies are marked out as bodies to be raised in glory on the last day. Our baptisms call us to look at our bodies differently. God has claimed our bodies in all of their weakness, frailty, mortality, unshapeliness, ugliness, and indignity for the glory of his heavenly kingdom.

Our bodies now belong to the realm of grace. Our bodies are to be released from the dominion of death, from the shame of sin that we feel when we are exposed to others' gaze, or experience a sense of violation on account of things that we have done with, or others have done to, our bodies. [9 : 57] We have been set free, and God wants us to enter into the full experience of that freedom, as his grace reigns in the realm of our bodies through his saving righteousness, until that great day when we are reclathed with glorious bodies like our saviour, Jesus Christ, and God's deliverance is consummated in our enjoyment of life eternal.

This transition, however, is one that only occurs through union with Christ. We are delivered as our bodies are united with his body, as his death becomes our death, as our old man is crucified with him and laid to rest in his tomb.

As Christians, we exist as people between death and life, people caught in the tension between Christ's death and his resurrection. Our lives play out in this realm. Our release from sin through union with Christ has been proclaimed in baptism, and now we live in anticipation of its full realisation on the last day.

Christ no longer lives in the realm of the dominion of death. He has overcome it. If we are united with Christ and his death, a reality ceremonially enacted and sealed to us in baptism, we need to think about ourselves very differently.

We are simultaneously dead and alive. While we still have one foot in the realm of death and have mortal bodies, yet we already experience the new life of the resurrecting spirit within us.

[11 : 19] Recalling the fact of our baptisms, by faith we are to reckon what they declare to be true of us. Henceforth, we are to consider ourselves very differently. Considering ourselves dead to sin and alive to God involves no longer habitually living in terms of the reign of sin as puppets of our passions.

Being set free is of little meaning if we still continue to turn up for work for our old master every day. Likewise, the new life of grace is something that we are called to live out. You can't have new life unless you are actively living it.

For Paul, this living out of new life is focused on the realm of the body. We must cease offering our bodily members as instruments for unrighteousness and must instead present ourselves to God as those raised to new life with our members as instruments of righteousness.

There are sacrificial overtones that we might recognize here. In Romans chapter 12 verse 1, Paul urges the Roman Christians to present their bodies as a living sacrifice. This sacrificial presentation of the body powerfully symbolically enacted in baptism is confirmed in lives of Christian obedience. The sacrificial paradigm that Paul employs in Romans chapter 12 is not so explicit but it is no less present in this chapter. We are called to present our members to offer our bodies like sacrifices to God and the grounds for this exhortation are found in our union with Christ and his death and resurrection.

[12 : 48] The sacrificial overtones in Paul's statement are to be seen not only in his use of the term present but also in the notion of presenting members. Sacrifices were offered to God in a dismembered form.

This is also priestly in character. Priestly initiation involved the symbolic devotion of limbs and organs to God's service with the blood placed upon particular parts of the body.

By speaking of the presentation of our members our limbs and organs to God Paul accords a greater prominence to the body. What we present to God is not just our actions not just our agency nor even yet ourselves as agents but our limbs and organs themselves in their givenness and objectivity.

All of this presents a sacrificial model for Christian obedience. In Christian obedience we confirm in practice the offering of our bodies which occurred in baptism. Paul's grounding of Christian obedience in the limbs and organs of the body also creates an extremely tight connection between

person and action.

By acting righteously I am presenting my limbs and organs to God a membering of the sacrifice of my whole self. John Barclay draws attention to a further importance of the body within Paul's account of ethics in Romans highlighting the way that Paul locates the operation of sin and its defeat within the body.

[14 : 09] He writes it is precisely in his or her corporeality that the believer is simultaneously dead and alive. It is not for nothing that Paul here uses military language weapons since the body is the critical site of resistance.

The very location where sin once had most visible sway and where its grip still draws believers bodily selves towards death is now the location where the newness of life breaks through into action displaying in counterintuitive patterns of behaviour the miraculous Christ life that draws their embodied selves towards the vivification or redemption of the body.

Some scholars have spoken about the notion of a habitus. A habitus is our basic embodied orientation towards life our dispositions perceptions sensibilities our ordering structures our tastes our styles our bodily skills and our habits.

A habitus is what we have learned by body those things that have become second nature to us.

Paul John Barclay suggests had a sense of this when he spoke of the body of sin.

He writes he seems to have a sense that the body has been commandeered by sin such that its dispositions emotions speech patterns and habitual gestures are bound to systems of honour self-aggrandizement and license that are fundamentally at odds with the will of God.

[15 : 33] The Christian life of obedience that Paul expresses is a life that begins with and in the body. The bodily habitus of sin has to be unworked and a new righteous bodily habitus instilled in its place and baptism is the place where this training of our bodies most clearly begins.

Barclay writes again one could hardly imagine a more effective demonstration of this rescue than the physical rite of baptism which Paul interprets as a transition from death to life performed on and with the body.

Henceforth believers give themselves over to this new life as alive from the dead in as much as they present their organs as weapons of righteousness to God. In other words they are committed to instantiate a new embodied habitus.

This training of the body is almost invariably a social matter. Our bodies are trained as they are incorporated into a larger social body. No one is born as a native of such a community nor can we simply choose to be natives.

We must all be formed into natives through the inculcation of a particular habitus. This is a slow process where we take on the character of new people. Baptism is a first step in the process of forming the habitus of the Christian faith within us.

[16 : 51] At the point of baptism our bodies are written into the larger social body incorporated into it. This formation of the individual body through the social body is alluded to in Romans 12 verse 1 which speaks of presenting bodies plural as a living sacrifice singular.

Our individual bodies are rendered sacrificial as they are made part of the many-membered body of Christ. It is a matter of great significance that baptism brings us into the social body of the visible church.

The movement of the body into the life of the church a movement whose first major step occurs in baptism is an essential part of Christian training and the process of conformity to the likeness of Christ.

Without baptism's process of incorporating us into the body of Christ and the bodily training that follows it in the visible church, the pedagogical process of conforming us to Christ would be extremely limited and the most fundamental part of ourselves would not have been offered to God. In baptism our limbs and organs are set apart for God's service. This divine claim upon our bodies is a founding principle of Christian ethics. It's one of the chief reasons why Christian obedience should be properly understood as sacrificial.

[18 : 05] Baptism manifests and initiates a reorientation of the body and its members. It incorporates us into a new social body. Indeed it's a practice that forms the social body itself the body of the church and it does so in order that we might through its co-option and training of our bodies that we might begin to think to desire to perceive to be disposed and to relate differently that we might learn to live as natives of the body of Christ Baptism then not only expresses the sacrificial principle that grounds Christian imperatives it also begins to instill in us the sacrificial

habitus by which we will fulfil them sin's dominion over us a dominion that impels understanding is strengthened by the law has ceased we now live in the realm of grace however our release from the realm of sin and death has to be lived out as we present ourselves as servants to a very different master the story of the exodus for instance a story that had its great transition in the crossing of the Red Sea was a story of moving from the oppressive service of Pharaoh to the dignifying and glorifying service of the Lord we must make a similar movement we make a mockery of our release if we carry on living our old way of life for Paul slavery and freedom are paradoxically interrelated freedom from sin is discovered in obedience from the heart to the teaching that we have been placed under and in becoming slaves to righteousness this is a willing slavery to God and we often think of freedom as living without a master and living without any law or standard for Paul true freedom is obedience from the heart to a new good master who liberates us from the cruelty of other masters not least the mastery of our own passions freedom for instance can be found in authorisation the Israelites enjoyed a much higher status when they were made servants! of a kingdom of priests not just allowed to fend for themselves in the wilderness they came under the more direct rule of God but that rule was one that authorised them and gave them authority not just one that placed them under authority likewise there is freedom to be found through obedience to a standard the person who learns the standards and the principles of a musical instrument to the point that they can play as a virtuoso is far freer with that instrument than the person who observes no standards or principles and ignorantly treats the instrument as if no training were required to play it the point of obedience from the heart is important the law is written on the hearts of the people of God in the new covenant no longer is the law just an external master something that we resist and rebel against rather it should be something that we willingly obey from the heart something in which we find true freedom the old slavery that we were in was one that escalated we might recall the progressive stages of giving people up in Romans chapter 1 it was a movement into greater levels of impurity and lawlessness leading to more dreadful degrees of dishonor and bondage however as we present ourselves to a new master the vicious cycle is replaced by a virtuous one as we present our members as slaves to righteousness it leads to sanctification to our being set apart for God's presence and service the old slavery seemed to promise a sort of liberty it declared that we were free from the demands of righteousness and God however the true nature of that supposed freedom was disclosed through its progressive outworking it yielded the fruit of shame it led to bitter consequences in our lives as we reaped its fruit it led to bondage to our passions it led to the breakdown of our relationships and ultimately its outcome was death however while we are replacing one form of slavery with another in becoming slaves of God rather than slaves of sin the two forms of slavery could not be more different and the difference is ultimately revealed leads to the honour and the glory of being set apart for God in contrast to the old shame and the tyranny of our old master slavery to God instead of yielding death ultimately leads to eternal life and Paul returns to the conclusion of chapter 5 in the final verse wrapping up the entire argument of the chapter there are two contrasting ways the way of sin and the way of grace A question to consider what are some practical ways in which we can more fully express the corporeality of our presenting our bodily members to God in Christian service