THE REIGN OF GRACE

Romans 5:20-21; 8:26-39 (NASB)

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In Romans 5:20-21 the Apostle Paul paints a piercing picture of the overarching spiritual powers at work in the lives of all people: **“The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”** (Romans 5:20-21 NASB). Believers in Jesus know both realities. Apart from Christ we were ultimately under the power of sin and death. In Christ we have a new principle of rule, the reign of grace in Christ.

But there are nevertheless challenges which slam into our lives as Christians which can make us wonder whether sin and death have really been defeated.

I remember sitting in a coffee shop with a young Christian woman who wanted to meet and ask me hard questions. I have told parts of Shannon’s life story before, and she has given me permission to do so. Shannon grew up in a dysfunctional family. She had her own part in that. In her teens she discovered that she could blunt the sufferings of life with alcohol. It became her practice to down an entire fifth of vodka every weekend. She was well and truly stuck in this pattern.

In spite of all that Shannon managed to qualify as a nurse’s aide. She took a position as a home health care aide for a woman named Aimée with a profound traumatic brain injury. Aimée’s mom, Bobbie, was a dedicated Christian. Day after day, week after week, Shannon would show up to care for Aimée and Bobbie shared the gospel with her over and over again. Eventually, Shannon received the gift. *Maybe Jesus can help me with the mess in my life.*

And of course he did! But the battle had just begun. Alcoholism is a complex problem with spiritual, psychological, and physical components. Shannon found quick victory but then discovered that she would fall back into the old addictive pattern from time to time. Her question in the coffee shop was basically: Has Jesus really overturned the reign of sin in my life? Did getting saved not “work” for me?

We are also told that apart from Christ death reigns. A very personal story for me is that of my grandson, Jacob, who was diagnosed with a brain tumor at the age of five. Imagine the questions his parents, Alex and Stephanie, faced as they walked this road with their sweet boy. Endless trips to doctors, weeks and weeks of hospital stays, the terrible sufferings of chemo, and months at a proton beam treatment center in Cincinnati. In the later part of a year of treatment it became clear that there was nothing more that doctors could do. The last months of his life were spent in a wheelchair, horribly disfigured by the powerful medications he was taking. Amazingly, this little soldier trusted Jesus the whole way until the Lord took him one day before his sixth birthday.

But that’s not the end of sorrows for Alex and Stephanie. Before they could even begin to try to return to normal life Stephanie was diagnosed with breast cancer. In their low state of heart from the loss of their son they had to walk the road of radical surgery and its recovery. I am not saying that they thought this, but any Christian facing that road of griefs might be inclined to ask: Are we still under the reign of sickness and death? What does deliverance from it look like if this is what we are experiencing?

So what, in fact, do believers need to know at times like this? What do we need to do? In Romans 8 Paul urges us to appropriate ten realities of the reign of grace in Jesus Christ our Lord.

1. First, we are not left without help. It can surely feel like it! But Jesus promised to send the Helper after his ascension to heaven. Paul wrote: **“In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness**…” (Rom. 8:26a). He is going to apply this to prayer in the same verse, but Jesus made it clear that the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, comes alongside us to give every kind of help we need.

In our moment of weakness when everything looks dark, we must not give in to the lie of Satan that our Lord has left us to fend for ourselves. There is a moment in *The Lord of the Rings* when the evil Saruman is using a compromised advisor to the king, appropriately called Wormtongue, to speak this lie to the Lady Eowyn: “You are helpless. Everything around you is going down and there is nothing you can do. No one is coming to help you.” He seeks to make her into a kind of slave by manipulating her emotions. She seems to be falling into darkness under his spell. In a life changing moment, she wrenches herself up from the pit and says: “Get away from me, snake! Your words are poison!” We should do the same when we hear such devil talk because the Holy Spirit is with us to help with everything.

2. Second, our prayers are not ineffective. How often have we prayed and wondered if it was doing any good at all? Paul urges us to know that even though **“…we do not know how to pray as we should…the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words”** (Rom. 8:26b). How weak are we? So weak we can’t even pray right! But the Holy Spirit of Jesus goes to work in us to empower our prayers.

Furthermore, Paul went on to write in the next verse: **“…He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God”** (Romans 8:27). The Father searches our hearts. He knows what is going on with us and what we are experiencing. This knowledge directs the intercession of the Holy Spirit which is powerful because it aligns perfectly with the will of the Father.

Puritan John Owen wrote on this concept which he called “The Unity of the Divine Operations.” He argued that since the divine nature is one and undivided, all words and deeds of the persons of the Trinity are inseparable. They have different roles and functions according to their persons, but they always work together in absolute harmony.

The Spirit knows two things we don’t know as we pray: the state of our own hearts and the will of the Father. On this basis the God of the Universe is attending to us in our prayers even when we cannot form our prayers into words. He is empowering our prayers through the operations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Whatever our emotions and experience may be telling us, our prayers are not ineffective.

3. Third, we are not left without hope. In a moment of crushing difficulty we need to know what Paul wrote in verse 28: **“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”** (Romans 8:28). Paul is the last person to say that there would be no sufferings along the way. But behind what we can see with our eyes God is working all things according to the counsel of his will for our good (Ephesians 1:11).

This applies to people with two characteristics. They are those who love God. This is crucial, because there are people with a head knowledge of God who do not love him. Faith is not faith without love for the Father in heaven. Be sure to invest your own heart in the God who invests his heart in you. The other characteristic of those for whom God works all things for good are those called according to his purpose. In this context the calling is not merely a general invitation, but an effective one. It is those who heard God’s call and came.

Nothing ever happens in which God is not involved. And no matter how tough our perplexities may be, we may trust that a good God is bringing good things, whether now or later. This is the source of an indestructible hope.

4. Fourth, we are not left without a family. Some of us have had solid earthly families. Some did not. Some have experienced abandonment and abuse through their families. But even the best family on earth cannot supply the relationship for which our hearts yearn—a holy, healthy connection with no shadows and no end. And the Lord is giving us that exact family by his sovereign working: **“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters…”** (Romans 8:29).

God has worked to give us a family resemblance to Jesus by transformation. He has added us to his family with many brothers and sisters. He has given us Christ as the head of the family.

While this only scratches the surface of the meaning of this verse, we must not let the depths of the first part of the verse obscure the precious truth of family in Jesus found in the second part. He knows us, he calls us by name, he grants us a common heritage in him which we share with people of every tribe and tongue and nation. Membership in the family of God is an unspeakable blessing!

5. Fifth, we are not left in doubt of our salvation. God is carrying us unfailingly through the entire process of salvation from beginning to end: **“…And these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified”** (Romans 8:30). As our founder, Dr. Albert Simpson, was fond of saying, this is the security of the believer. It begins in eternity past and reaches to eternity future.

One of my summer jobs as a college student was working at an electronics plant making automotive slide mounts for CB radios. We sat there day after day soldering many colored wires in correct sequence and sealing bolts, nuts, and washers into little bags. It was brutal! I did memorize Scriptures while working there. But I begged the supervisor for a change and she put me on the repair line. Some of the slide mounts came down the assembly line missing a wire or having the wires in the wrong order. My job was to straighten them out. This is a picture of what is emphatically not happening to any believer! Nobody’s salvation is missing a piece or has the *ordo salutis* in the wrong order. God will never say: “Well, I wanted to save that person but I bobbled it!” There is immense peace in knowing that our salvation is secure in him.

6. Sixth, we are never victims. Verse 31 is the death of victimhood for everyone who believes: **“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?”** (Romans 8:31).

We live in an era when victimhood has been weaponized. If you feel that you have been getting a raw deal in life you can leverage it to get an advantage of some kind. The problem is that you end up feeling like a victim all the time because that is how you learned to cope. In addition to that, there are people who are eager to manipulate others by convincing them that they are victims. These people are not really interested in helping anyone, but in getting something they want by shoving masses of people around.

If the omnipotent God is for you, you are not a victim! You are a victorious child of God with a new reality which raises you above everything which this ruined world full of broken people can dish out. None of this is to deny that we may have been victimized in the worst of ways. Our souls may have been crippled by it. But believers have a recourse which others do not have! We have a God whose compassions for us are new every morning. The Paul who wrote these words was victimized by persecutors more than any of us but could still say: **“But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us”** (Romans 8:37). The children of that Lord are not victims.

7. Seventh, we are not left without what we need. Following Jesus puts us at odds with the Principality, which is the collaboration of earthly and demonic powers which temporarily controls this sphere. For example, we can feel frustrated that Harvard, which works incessantly to destroy faith, gets billions of dollars from the government while Christian schools are struggling to keep from closing. The Principality never stops working to disempower genuine Christians.

That’s a group reality, but there is also the individual experience of feeling desperate that a personal need seems to have no way to be met. To both of these scenarios Paul wrote: **“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”** (Romans 8:32). God, who owns everything, has already given us the most valuable thing possible, his only Son. He will not fail to give us what we need both in time and eternity. This, like all the previous points, is a call to a profound faith which itself is the victory which overcomes the world. We can trust that our God will not leave us bereft of what we need.

8. Eighth, we are not at the mercy of accusers. The Devil is called the Accuser of the Brethren. He is at work all the time. Sinful humans, which includes all of us, are also inclined to cast accusations about. Accusations against others were among the first manifestations of sin in the Garden of Eden after the first people fell. They are pernicious. How can anyone forget an evil accusation? They are damaging to our souls. And against most of them there is no refutation, no defense, no permanent putting to rest.

To this Paul wrote: **“Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?”** (Rom. 8:33-34a). We don’t have to go to war to root out gossip and accusations. We don’t have to fix every wrong thing said about us. Our souls find peace that the Judge of All the Earth, the Holy One of Israel, knows all of our failures and metes out perfect justice for all of our sins…to Jesus, who bore them all on the cross.

9. Ninth, we are not left alone to face life. No matter how much we may feel this way at times, it is not so! The risen Christ, reigning at the right hand of God, is with us and acting on our behalf all the time, as Paul wrote: **“Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us”** (Romans 8:34). This intercession is not merely speaking on our behalf but actively doing things to help us—all day, every day.

Years ago I was sent for an MRI for my sinuses. As a man with a medium grade case of claustrophobia, I saw the MRI machine as the ultimate torture device. I loathed the idea of being strapped down so I could not escape, sliding my head into a tunnel, and all to the soundtrack of a giant banging sound! I prayed silently: *Lord, please help me. Grant me a peace which I do not have.* So I put my soul in the Lord’s hands, laid back, and accepted the straps. I was shocked to discover that the Lord took me through the whole experience in a state of placid calm! I just closed my eyes and let the machine do its work—no panic, no desperation to flee.

Whatever your fear may be, whenever you feel alone, whenever Wormtongue whispers poison in your ear, know that the Lord is with you wherever you go, interceding on your behalf.

10. Tenth, and last, we are not unloved. Some of us have had people in our lives who have expressed love to us. Some have had few of those or none at all.

This is one of the great existential questions every human being asks of the universe: Does anybody love me? Other questions include: Does anyone see my pain? Are God and church for real? Does my life matter? What will become of me? Our lives are spent, whether consciously or not, striving for the answers to these questions. And love is at the top.

To this question Paul wrote: **“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 8:38-39). If God loves you, you know you’ve been loved. Believe it! Receive it! Spend time with your God learning all the ways he has loved you, is loving you now, and will be loving you forever.

These are the realities of the reign of grace which cannot be overthrown:

We are not left without help.

Our prayers are not ineffective.

We are not left without hope.

We are not left without a family.

We are not left in doubt of our salvation.

We are never victims.

We are not left without what we need.

We are not at the mercy of accusers.

We are not left alone to face life.

We are not unloved.

These are the answers to our every need. This is how we go forward until Christ comes for us. This is how we win. Grace reigns!

How did Shannon make out? She learned that after every sinful flop she had the right, as a child of God, to run to Jesus. She learned to live in the reign of grace.

How have Alex and Stephanie done? They have a permanent sorrow which cannot be shed, and which never gets any smaller. But by the unstoppable grace of God they have weathered their storms and become larger.

In neither of these cases, nor in any of ours, should we think that escape from the reign of sin and death is easy and final in this life. The battle to live in the reign of grace must be fought every day. I urge you to appropriate the realities of this precious, powerful grace! As we do that by faith we cannot lose.

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