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A Relational Reading of Romans 5

JOHN YORK

The Text

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

¹²Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—¹³sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. ¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.

¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. ¹⁸Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹For just 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. ²⁰But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (NRSV)

Preliminaries

Romans 5 presents the interpreter with a series of exhilarating promises of blessing and hope, along with an equally long set of questions and puzzles over what Paul is trying to say. As readers we find ourselves celebrating the promised justification (v. 1); the hope that we have through the Holy Spirit that has been poured

out (v. 5); the promise that “at just the right time” Christ died for us (“ungodly”) sinners and we now have been reconciled (vv. 10–11). While we are not quite as certain about the meaning of 5.11–21, we are confident that Christ has “reversed the curse” and God’s grace now is available to those “justified by faith.” But we are also left to puzzle over the difference between a “righteous man” and a “good man” (v. 7); we have more assumptions than well-understood concepts about “rejoicing in our sufferings” (v. 3) and how exactly the blood of Christ/death of Christ has now reconciled and saved us; we ponder how the giving of law actually increases sin rather than inhibiting it; then there is the seemingly endless debate over the impact of the first Adam’s sin and the rest of us. We soon start hearing names like Augustine and Pelagius, and conversations about imputed or original sin, and issues of free will and moral depravity.

All of this may lead us to the commentaries and some extended wrestling with the questions, particularly with regard to good versus righteous or the meaning of verses 15–17 and the death that reigned in Adam. We may attempt to sort out exactly how the “curse was reversed” or we may simply hurry along to chapter six and the more likable proof-texts about baptism (at least that’s how it works in my tradition!).

It seems to me there is a more significant question that lies behind the rest of the queries and affirmations in this text and that is the portrait of God that we bring with us to the text—not just chapter five but in the chapters that lead up to this. For most of the last 500 years at least, encompassing the Reformation and Enlightenment—and certainly the twentieth century in most understandings of Protestant Christianity in America—our dominant understanding of God and the language of “justification” in Romans has assumed a law-court setting in which the primary metaphor for God is Judge. Salvation has been understood through the lens of the prosecution of sinful humanity and the penal substitution of Jesus’ death on our behalf. “He paid a debt he did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay. Christ Jesus paid a debt that I could never pay.”¹

This view carries with it several corollaries: a paradoxical view of humanity as morally depraved on the one hand, but capable of the rational decision of faith/belief on the other hand, which opens the way to receiving this salvation; and extreme individualism in which each person is self-contained and Jesus is “my personal savior.” Conversion is a transactional moment that occurs either at the moment of baptism, or the utterance of the sinner’s prayer. Sin is understood to be the breaking of God’s law, and grace is the means by which God no longer counts our sins against us.

In this reading of Romans, chapters 1–4 then articulate God the Judge’s actions in Christ to overcome his own wrath and provide appropriate retribution for human sin. The death of Jesus satisfies that condition and we receive pardon by faith (alone). Chapters 5–8 then describe life after the transaction of faith, typically termed “sanctification”—the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit within the individual to “cover” us while we continue to be sinners who now are saved. Chapter seven becomes an autobiographical account of our ongoing struggles with sin even though we already made our faith commitments, and chapter eight brings the assurance that, even still, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

A Different Approach

I want to suggest an alternate reading of Romans 5 that begins with a different set of definitions and metaphors. I’ve been deeply influenced in the last few years by the works of N. T. Wright,² Scot McKnight,³

1. Lyrics of a popular American folk hymn.

2. N. T. Wright, “New Exodus, New Inheritance: The Narrative Structure of Romans 3–8,” in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 26–35; “The Letter to the Romans” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 393–770; *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); *Simply Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011); *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012). For a rebuttal on Wright’s perspective of Romans 5, see Cornelis P. Venema, “N. T. Wright on Romans 5:12–21 and Justification: A Case Study in Exegesis, Theological Method, and the ‘New Perspective on Paul,’” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 16 (2005): 29–81.

3. Scot McKnight, *Embracing Grace: A Gospel for All of Us* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2005); *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2007); *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

Richard Longenecker⁴ and most recently Douglas Campbell.⁵ What follows is certainly oversimplification and caricature of their often book-length descriptions, but necessary to understanding my efforts here. Wright urges us to read Paul through the lens of Second Temple Judaism and, especially in Romans 5–8, to hear echoes of the exodus. Exodus is Israel’s salvation narrative, from slavery to freedom, and is but one effort of God to fulfill his promises to Abraham—and ultimately to restore relationship with his good creation. For Wright, the story of God’s activity in Christ is the completion of his efforts to “put the world to rights” (his definition of justification in Romans). Faith is more often about the integrity and fidelity of God and the trusting obedience of Jesus than about the rational decision making of individuals to believe.

Scot McKnight first led me to think about the origins of sin in Genesis not as breaking God’s law but as breaking relationship. Once one thinks of the fall narrative in Genesis 3–11 as a series of events that break trust with God and therefore break relationship, then our metaphor for God changes and our understanding of salvation begins to change. It is a communal God who creates (“Let *us* make humans in *our* image”) and humans are created to image God amidst the rest of creation. That image is necessarily communal (Adam and Eve) and the violation of trust that occurs (Genesis 3) damages all of the relationships: humans with God, with each other, self-understanding, humans and the land (rest of creation). The result of broken relationship is not just physical death for humans but the death of relationship with creator. When God comes in the flesh, Christ bears witness with his life to God’s creation design for humans. In the death and resurrection of Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, communal God has acted to heal all of the relationships. In fact, any account of gospel or plan of salvation from this perspective inevitably points to relationships being made whole.

More specifically with regard to Romans, Longenecker and Campbell have suggested that we understand Romans 5–8 as the center of Paul’s understanding of gospel rather than understanding Romans 3.21–31 as the crux of the matter. Out of our Reformation roots, 3.21–26 has been the centerpiece of all talk about salvation, and penal substitution has been the primary metaphor for the efficacy of Christ’s death on our behalf. Following the lead of E. P. Sanders and others who have questioned the modern Christian depiction of first century Judaism, Longenecker suggests that most of what Paul writes in the first four chapters is not particularly new or different from Jewish Christian thought about law and grace otherwise. What distinguishes Paul’s gospel to the Gentiles is more clearly seen in chapters 5–8.⁶

Campbell moves the discussion in a slightly different direction by suggesting that we think of the words translated by “righteousness” or “justice” or “justification” in a non-retributive sense. Through an intricate set of word studies, he suggests that the language can point us toward liberation and deliverance.⁷

None of these scholars can be blamed for the blending of thought I’m about to suggest. Yet pulling together these different ideas begins to produce a different portrait of God and God’s activity in Christ to bring about the sweeping announcements of peace and reconciliation we have in these chapters, into which all of creation is leaning (chapter 8) and against which all the powers of sin and death have been overcome.

It’s All About Relationship

The “justification” about which Paul speaks in the opening verse is the announcement of God’s deliverance from the powers of sin and death that he has enacted in his son, the (now) resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ. For Paul, because we now trust (have faith in) how God has revealed this salvation in Christ, even our ongoing hardships as humans can be understood not as God’s absence but as our opportunity for growth and development. Patience and endurance in the midst of suffering (a word that participates in the many instances of metonymy as Paul variously circumscribes the entirety of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and ascension with single references to cross or blood or death) produce character and hope. New life is sustained in such

4. Richard N. Longenecker, “The Focus of Romans: The Central Role of 5:1—8:39 in the Argument of the Letter” in *Romans and the People of God*, 49–69; *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul’s Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

5. Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

6. Longenecker, “The Focus of Romans: The Central Role,” 57–61.

7. Campbell, *Deliverance of God*, see especially pp. 62–88 and 658–665.

moments by the trusting awareness of the Spirit that has been poured into us. The timing of all this is a reflection of God's goodness and fidelity to his creation.

Paul's aside about dying for others may be a comparison between the person who does what is right (righteous) and the person who has been one's benefactor (good).⁸ The larger point about relationship still holds, whether we figure that out or not. The critical verse here is verse 8: "God shows his love for us for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (cf. v. 5 and "God's love" that has been poured out for us). This is not a portrait of a retributive justice-demanding judge, but of a loving, relational creator who calls us "children" and whom the Holy Spirit within us addresses as "Abba" (8.14–17). The testimony of God's love is the deliverance (from sin and death—the hallmarks of broken relationship) now offered through the death of Jesus that saves us.

A stumbling block to this relational rather than forensic/judicial approach is the language of being saved "from the wrath of God." However, it seems at least possible to understand this language in terms of the loving deliverance that has been given and thus as a metaphor for relational alienation. God's wrath is directed at the powers of sin and death that heretofore have resided in creation and thus preempted relationship.

Thus, Paul can describe how that alienation occurred through the one man, Adam. Suddenly we are taken back to the beginning, to creation design in Genesis 1 and 2, and all that goes wrong in Genesis 3.⁹ Broken trust, and thus, broken relationship occurred in the decision making of the first human. The consequences were universal. Sin and death signify the powers that reigned over humans, with or without law. This point becomes central to the ongoing announcements of Romans 5.13–21. Laws could only function in the already-broken relationships as signposts of the brokenness (vv. 13–15, 20–21). While human awareness (reckoning of broken relationship/sin) was absent apart from law, the status of broken relationship was constant and simply a given. Sin could reign from Adam to Moses (i.e., through the time of the Patriarchs; Abraham in particular was singled out for his "righteousness by faith"), because even the relationships that did exist could not transform the world or restore what once was in the beginning. Only the "one who was to come" could do that.

Grace—the free gift—functions in the opposite way as the breaking of relationship ("trespass") that occurred in the beginning. The judgment that came through Adam was human enslavement to sin and death, and thus alienation and brokenness in all forms of relationship. In contrast, grace announces deliverance from slavery (this language becomes much more explicit in chapter 8).

Thus, the argument here is not so much over whether or not a human being is born "in" or "with" sin or instead is some sort of free-will blank slate waiting for the age of accountability to be named sinner. It is the condition of the cosmos that was residual of the first Adam. Now, the second Adam (Christ) has overcome the powers of sin and death and opened the way to wholeness of relationship. The "obedience" of Christ bears witness to his trusting relationship with God that led from death to life. Human efforts at obedience (law) during the reign of sin and death could only heighten awareness of the powers of sin and death over relationship. That any relational awareness was possible at all in such times was always a gift of God (grace), always free and unmerited, but now fully revealed in the new creation work of Christ.

Why This Matters

For better or worse, much of Christian theology these days is shaped by what we sing ("He paid a debt he did not owe" is just one in a long history of songs focused on penal substitution). If not our one-liners from songs, it has been our debates with others about the nature of the transaction that gets us "saved." Much of our thought and conversation has turned on the human actions that are necessary. It is as though we got stuck in the question "What must *I* do to be saved?", and put all of the activity of the community of God

8. As suggested by Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 262. Schreiner notes support from Cranfield, Nygren, Clark and Winter for this possibility.

9. It is noteworthy that, for the sake of Paul's comparison/contrast between first Adam and second Adam that there is no mention of Eve in the story. This perhaps gives us some hint of how Paul thought to use these texts within particular settings and circumstances for the sake of particular argumentative outcomes, rather than as an ahistorical theological foundation (cf. 1 Tim 2.13).

(Father/Son/Spirit) in service to our activity—whether that be baptism or sinner’s prayer, or the rational decision to believe. In such a context, even the arguments over free will and moral depravity are settled by the smartest/latest/best argument we heard or read that somehow fits our personal experiences. In the process, we seldom get back to the activity of creator God and expressions of that activity in scripture that announce the reign of God in our midst.¹⁰

Our focus on a single strand of metaphorical language that speaks of God’s activity in the cross, namely, justification by faith, and even more narrowed understandings of the phrase left us with huge theological gaps in our efforts to give meaning to life and church and even personal identity. The “plan of salvation” announced that God the Judge has satisfied his own need for justice by crucifying his son so that when I make the rational decision to believe (independent of any and all other relationships) and I act upon that belief (now a completely subjective set of actions or decisions—depending on which group/church you “sign on” with, or just decide to have a “personal relationship with Jesus”), my personal account of broken rules (sins) gets expunged from the judge’s court records. Depending on how thorough my concept of grace is, it gets me into heaven when I die, plus or minus good deeds. Perhaps most importantly, even in the midst of our efforts to describe the love of God or to speak relationally of God as Father, deep in the recesses of our not-so-rational mind is the other metaphor of God the Judge. Our plan of salvation leads us even in our vocabulary to objectify and judge the world (everyone who doesn’t think right like I do) as “other” and “lost.”

Repeatedly in this line of thought, we treat the means as though it is the end. Forgiveness of sins is not the end, but the means to relationship. That is true when and wherever we practice forgiveness. The kingdom of God is the sphere in which the communal God lives in community with the new creation made possible by the one who has conquered sin and death. To be “in Christ”—to participate in the “grace that reigns through righteousness to eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord”—is to be relationally made whole (“justified”) with God, with others, with self, with the rest of creation. This salvation breathes God’s presence and outlook on all aspects of existence. The second Adam has inaugurated a new creation world now breaking in that is fundamentally relational (and thus communal) rather than independent and individual. Yes, there is always the “now/not yet” of these relationships. We have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. The Holy Spirit poured into our hearts is the assurance of hope that sustains as we live still amidst the dire consequences of the powers of sin and death. Thus we face down suffering with patient endurance, not out of the fearful prospect of an angry judge when we fail but in the confident hope of the loving God who has become the new first Adam. Therein we find reconciliation and peace—means to see the image of God in others and treat the cosmos with the loving care of its creator.

Placing relationship at the center changes our primary metaphor for God from Judge to loving (communal) Father. Our understanding of gospel and salvation is dominated by deliverance from the powers of sin and death (the rulers of this age) into relational wholeness in the kingdom of God with Father, Son and Spirit. Ethics flow out of God-presence and relationship rather than rules. Every other relationship with humans is seen through the lens of God’s image. We view the rest of creation (groaning with us to the coming of this new age) with relational care.

Finally, such a view changes how we think about church. The individualism that allows “my personal salvation” to stand aloof from others is not possible. This salvation is first and foremost relational.¹¹ If relationship is the center of faith, then the notion that doctrine trumps relationship is backward to all that God, Christ and the Holy Spirit have accomplished. To live otherwise—packing our bags and pulling out of church at every disagreeable moment—is to continue to live under the powers of sin and death in which breaking relationship is the norm. Make no mistake—what we practice as church is not the same as the fully formed reign of God. But we are the training ground for relational wholeness with God, each other and the rest of

10. Note the recent books by McKnight (*King Jesus Gospel*) and Wright (*How God Became King*) that focus on the announcement of the gospel by Jesus, that is other than the plan of salvation we have come to associate with the word “gospel.”

11. Campbell writes, “This anthropology is best described as fundamentally relational, and the new reality as communal and interpersonal (and even as networked).” *Deliverance of God*, 69.

creation. In our heart of hearts we know this precisely in crisis moments of suffering. That is when relationships come alive and we experience community at its best even when it looks like the powers of sin and death are temporary victors. God's love poured out through us by the power and presence of the Spirit announces our hope. The second Adam truly has brought reconciliation, peace and eternal life.

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