



# MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

## Chapter 5

St. Paul opens chapter five with an important statement about Christians' relationship with God: "Therefore, having been justified by faith..." (Romans 5:1). This builds upon his concluding point in chapter four: Jesus died and was raised for our justification which, as he says in this verse, we receive through faith. While you can learn more about justification in the "Words I Should Know" article, we will here understand justification as God forgiving a person's sins and declaring him or her righteous. Metropolitan Maximos Aghiorgoussis expands on this point:

*Humanity's justification through forgiveness of sins is not a mere covering over man's sins, but a real destruction of them. It is not a mere external decision but a reality. Sins are forgiven truly and really. God does not declare someone to be justified if he [or she] is not really free.*

This work by God is achieved through Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection (Romans 4:24-25), and is received by the Christian through faith.

Justification results in a new relationship with God. St. Paul lists some of the tremendous blessings that result from this relationship. First, justification brings "peace with God" (Romans 5:1). He explains this peace in verses 10-11: Jesus gives peace by reconciling God and humanity (see below).

All the sinful traits St. Paul describes in chapters one and two are ultimately a form of warfare against God. St. John Chrysostom explains that, despite this warfare against Him, God has justified us and forgiven our sins, thereby enabling us to live in peace and reconciliation with Him. St. John extends our experience of this peace to our relationships with others: "God is not a God of war and fighting. Make war and fighting to cease, both that which is against Him, and that which is against your neighbor. Be at peace with all people, consider with what character God saves you."

Christ also gives us access to God the Father and His grace (Romans 5:2; see also Ephesians 2:18). The ancient Israelites did not have access to the Holy of Holies - in which the presence of God dwelled - in the Temple: only the High Priest could enter, and then only once per year. Through Christ and His work justifying us, however, every Christian has access to the Father (see Hebrews 9:11-15).

It is easy for us to pass over St. Paul's mention that we stand in grace, but we shouldn't: this is a particularly powerful statement about God's transforming work in our lives. St. John Chrysostom tells us that God's grace "hath no end, it knows no bound, but evermore is on the advance to greater things." Because God's grace transforms us, and we can currently experience this transformation, we have the hope of even greater transformation. As St. John says,

*For this is why he says, 'And we rejoice in hope of the glory of God,' that you may learn, what kind of soul the faithful ought to have. For it is not only for what hath been given, but for what is to be given, that we ought to be filled with confidingness, as though it were already given. For one 'rejoices' in what is already given. Since then the hope of things to come is even as sure and clear as that of what is given, he says that in that too we in like manner 'rejoice.'*

Our relationship with God is not something about which we should be passive: we should rejoice in this transforming relationship! Think about all the great things God has done for you, and you will become even more excited as you realize that you can be in this relationship forever!

Many critics of Christianity would raise an objection at this point. "Sure," they might say, "you can be excited when you feel like you're close to God and are being transformed by Him. How would you feel if you're suffering? Would you be filled with hope if you're experiencing serious problems?"

St. Paul answers these questions in verses 3-5. As Christians experience tribulation, we develop perseverance. As we grow in our ability to persevere under tribulation, our character becomes stronger and refined. As our character grows, we develop hope in God. This hope is not simply wishful thinking that God will step in and relieve our current suffering: it is the peace that comes from our relationship with God, "Because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5). St. Ephraim the Syrian, a fourth century saint, summarizes this point, "There is a misery that is profit, it is a fountain of joys."

The love of God is the basis for our hope, because it was His loving action for us that enables us to have hope. What was the condition of humanity when Christ died for us? Were we strong and faithful? No, St. Paul explains, we were without strength and sinners (Romans 5:6, 8). We humans might be willing to die for a noble cause, or to save an innocent person: we generally would not, however, be willing to die for someone who was rejecting us. God's love is different: Christ's love is so great that He died for us even when we separated ourselves from Him. In fact, He died specifically to *end* this separation (5:10). St. Paul reminds us of this to reinforce his point: if the Father loves us so deeply that He had His Son die in order to reconcile us to Him, and He did this even though we were at war with Him, then we can definitely put our hope in God now that we have been justified (5:9).

This incredible love, and the reconciliation with the Father that results from it, is the basis for our hope (Romans 5:11). St. Cyril, a fourth century bishop of Jerusalem, proclaims this great hope:

*The real and true life then is the Father, who through the Son in the Holy Spirit pours forth as from a fountain His heavenly gifts to all; and through His love to man, the blessing of life eternal are promised without fail to us men also. We must not disbelieve the possibility of this, but having an eye not to our own weakness but to His power, we must believe; for with God all things are possible.*

St. Paul hasn't forgotten the argument he has made in the previous chapters: we are justified through faithful relationship with Christ, and not through merely following religious rules in an attempt to earn salvation. His examination of our reconciliation with God is based upon this point. "Therefore," he continues in Romans 5:12, we need to understand how sin entered the world, and how sin is defeated.

Sin entered the world, St. Paul explains, through the sin of Adam; death is the result of this sin (Romans 5:12, 14; see Genesis 3). St. Paul is even more succinct in 1 Corinthians 15:22: "In Adam all die." This concept seems shocking and horrible to us: you were not alive when Adam sinned, so how can St. Paul say that all sinned? Why should you suffer because of Adam's failing?

You should first note the words St. Paul uses at the end of Romans 5:12. The Greek words *epi ho* are translated in the New King James Version (used by the Orthodox Study Bible) as "because;" Fr. John Meyendorff points out that this could also be translated "because of." In other words, all sinned *because of* Adam. This means that - contrary to the teachings of many Western churches - we are not considered guilty by God for Adam's sin.

At the same time, however, while we have not inherited Adam's *guilt* for his action, we have inherited the *effects* that result from this action. St. Cyril of Alexandria, a fifth century saint, explains that humanity became "diseased...through the sin of one." St. Cyril answers our questions about our relationship to Adam and his actions:

*What has Adam's guilt got to do with us? Why are we held responsible for his sin when we were not even born when he committed it? Did not God say: Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin (Deuteronomy 24:16). How then shall we defend this doctrine? The soul, I say, which has sinned, it shall die. We have become sinners because of Adam's disobedience in the following manner...After he fell into sin and surrendered to corruption, impure lusts invaded the nature of his flesh, and at the same time the evil law of our members was born. For our nature contracted the disease of sin because of the disobedience of one man, that is Adam, and thus many became sinners. This was not because they sinned along with Adam, because they did not then exist, but because they had the same nature as Adam, which fell under the law of sin. Thus, just as human nature acquired the weakness of corruption in Adam because of disobedience, and evil desires invaded it, so that same nature was later set free by Christ, who was obedient to God the Father and did not commit sin.*

It is important to realize that our North American sense of individualism and independence, while useful in providing freedom and preserving human rights, can also sometimes blind us to our indivisible relationship to others. Adam was not simply an individual: he is the source of humanity. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains,

*If [Adam] had persevered in his righteousness, we would have inherited his joy, authority, access to God, and immortality, regardless of our deserving and simply because we were his offspring. As it is, we inherit his loneliness, weakness, and mortality, for precisely the same reason. It is not a question of fairness, but of what it essentially means to be someone's offspring...In the thought of St. Paul, Adam was the primeval source of all our race. Thus he can assert that the death Adam suffered passed to all his offspring as well.*

“Death,” Fr. Thomas Hopko teaches,

*Is the result of sin. It is the final victory of the devil, the result of his destructive activity. If man had not sinned, he would not have died. His body may have changed and evolved over great periods of time, but it would not have been separated from his spirit to return to the dust, And man's soul itself would not have been corrupted, losing power over its body and becoming its slave. This is the meaning of the sin of Adam, that man has emerged on the face of the earth, made in God's image and inspired with His Spirit, and has chosen death instead of life, evil instead of righteousness, and so through defilement of his nature in rebellion against God, brought corruption and death to the world (cf. Genesis 3, Romans 5:12-21).*

*‘Sin spread to all men because all men sinned’ (Romans 5:12); and in sinning man brought death to the children who partake of his mortal nature and life. In a sin-bound world, no person escapes, even those who are personally guiltless and innocent, for all are caught up in the sins of the world.*

In verses 14-15 St. Paul briefly breaks away from this point to note that, because the Law did not exist before it was given to Moses, those who lived before the Law are not believed to have engaged in as egregious a sin as those who knew the Law but nonetheless sinned. At the same time, even though the people before Moses did not sin in the same way as did Adam, they nonetheless suffered the same condemnation of death.

Returning to the main point, it would be easy for us to despair: if I suffer death because Adam sinned and died, then life is truly hopeless. There is hope, however, in the free gift of salvation offered by Christ. Adam was a “type” - or pattern - of Christ in that the effects of the actions taken by both were universal. Adam’s sin resulted in death and condemnation for all, while the gift of grace offered by Christ is freely offered to all (Romans 5:15-19). We can be hopeful because the two situations are not identical in power: Christ’s gift of grace is far more powerful and effective than Adam’s sin (5:15). This can be seen in the ways in which St. Paul describes Christ’s gift: it is “much more” than Adam’s fall (5:15); it is an abundance of grace (5:17) that abounded much more than sin (5:20).

St. Paul concludes the chapter by telling his readers that the purpose of the Law was to awaken God’s people to the seriousness of sin and their inability to overcome sin on their own. St. Cyril of Alexandria explains,

*The Law entered in so that the many-sided nature of the fall of those who were under the Law might be made clear. Nobody could ever be made righteous because of the weakness of human nature. Rather, everyone condemned themselves by their own crimes of transgression. The Law came as the revealer of our common weakness, so that the human race would appear even more clearly to need the aid of the medicine of Christ.*

However, while sin abounded (and still abounds in the world today), the grace of God abounded much more in the saving work of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:20). Fr. Lawrence Farley translates the Greek text as saying grace “over-abounded” to emphasize the tremendous gift that God gives us, in which “grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:21).