



**LIVING WORD  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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## **Alive to God in Christ Jesus**

### **Romans 6:1-11**

Fr. William Klock

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When I was about seven years old my mom came home from the grocery store with a box of my favourite cookies. As she was putting them away in the pantry she made sure to wave them in front my face so that she could tell me not to eat them. They weren't for me. Company was coming and she was saving them for our guests. She opened the box and gave me *one* to tide me over. But a few hours later I was home alone— with the cookies. I knew she'd never notice if I took another one. I did, however, know that God would know. But I also knew that God would forgive me for taking another cookie. All I had to do was ask for forgiveness afterward. That's grace, after all, isn't it? So I took a cookie, ate it and enjoyed it while simultaneously trying to work up a feeling of shame that I could bring to God as I prayed for forgiveness. I looked in the box. Mom wouldn't know if I ate two instead of just one. So I ate another one and was praying for forgiveness before I'd even swallowed the last bite.

I think it's obvious to everyone that, even for a seven-year-old, I had a profound misunderstanding of the nature of grace. I wasn't the first. We can gather that many of the people— particularly many of the Jewish people—that Paul encountered were afraid that this is just the sort of thing he was preaching. In 5:20, Paul wrote that where sin abounds, grace *super-abounds*. "Paul," they warned, "if you keep teaching about grace this way, people will think that they can just go on sinning forever and not have to worry about God's judgement." No doubt the Jewish converts who

insisted that Gentiles must first be circumcised and start living according to the law were particularly concerned about this.

Paul responds to this in Romans 6:1-2.

**What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?**

Yes, in theory, the more we sin the more God's grace abounds. That's the nature of God's grace. *But* that's not the point. Where God's grace abounds, *it creates new life*. That's also the nature of God's grace as we saw last week in Chapter 5. God's grace abounds towards sinners, not just to cover their sins, but to transform them in to saints. This is what Paul's getting at when he writes about we who died to sin.

To explain this, Paul spends the next several chapters—through Chapter 8—taking us back to the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt. You know the story, but the general outline goes like this: Jacob went down to Egypt as a guest of Pharaoh, but his descendants were eventually made slaves. In their misery they cried out to the Lord for deliverance and he sent Moses to lead them out of their slavery into freedom and eventually to the promised land. The journey began with God miraculously leading his people through the Red Sea and then, in the wilderness on the other side, he met them at Mount Sinai and gave them his law. God led them through the wilderness. They grumbled a lot. When they were finally ready to enter the promised land they lost faith and were afraid to follow him. As a result they wandered in the wilderness for another forty years. But God never stopped leading them, caring for them, and providing for them. He manifested his presence in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, and when they stopped travelling, his presence descended into the holy of holies in the tabernacle, where it rested on the ark of the covenant.

When they were ready, God led them across the Jordan River and into the land he had promised.

We know that story well. What we often miss, however, is that the story Paul tells here in Romans 6-8 is modelled on that story of the Exodus. Here in Chapter 6, Paul explains how we Christians pass through the baptismal waters in much the same way the Israelites passed through the Red Sea. It's a step of faith in God's promise of deliverance—for the Israelites it was deliverance from their bondage to the Egyptians and for us it is deliverance from our bondage to sin and death. In Romans 7, Paul writes about God meeting his people at Mount Sinai and the problems the Israelites had there, which then leads to a new kind of fulfilling of the law now in the Messiah. In Chapter 8, Paul goes on to describe our life as Christians in terms of God leading his people into the inheritance he promised them—this time not a small piece of middle-eastern real estate, but all of Creation, itself made new. On the way there, Paul warns us not to fall into the same kind of grumbling and idolatry that the Israelites fell into in the wilderness. "Do we really want to go back to our former life as slaves," he asks. After all, how can we who died to sin still live in it?

There's a reason Paul tells the story this way. It's to give us perspective. It's so that we can see the big picture of redemption, know our place in it, and have assurance of God's righteousness—his covenant faithfulness. Paul actually started this story back in Chapter 4, when he took us to Genesis 15 and to God's promise to Abraham. Part of that promise was that after centuries of slavery in a foreign land, he would lead Israel back to her home. Here he's picking up the story again in order to show us that the promise God made to Abraham is really about what we see being fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. Jesus is putting Creation to rights in fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham.

I hope I can communicate clearly this morning that what Paul is saying here is that what God has done through Jesus the Messiah is the fulfilment of his promises to Abraham and to Israel. One of the most popular theological systems in the Evangelical world these days completely misses this point. It's what you're likely to hear in popular books and from TV preachers. It supposes that God's promises to Israel have been put on hold while he deals with the Gentile peoples through the Church and that when he's delivered representatives of all the nations, he'll "rapture" them all to heaven and then return to fulfilling his promises to the Jews. But this sort of theology rips Jesus out of the bigger story, it rips the church out of the bigger story, and it rips you and me out of the bigger story. It robs us of the assurance to which Paul points us here—assurance grounded in the story and God's faithfulness to his promises. It also robs us of our part, our mission in the big story of redemption as well. God has been working through Israel from the beginning to bring redemption to his Creation. God will always be working through Israel to do that. What is often missed is that Jesus, as the Messiah, embodies Israel himself and through him and through the Spirit, Israel has been reborn in fulfilment of God's promise and for the purpose of fulfilling the promise to Abraham that he would bless the nations and have them as his inheritance. The Church isn't some sudden new entity formed by Jesus. The Church—made up of Jew and Gentile alike—is that new Israel, born to fulfil God's gracious purposes.

What Paul stresses here is that the redemption accomplished by Jesus the Messiah and the work being completed by the Holy Spirit is the fulfilment, is the goal of everything that came before. Now, you might be wondering what this has to do with Paul's answer to this question about grace and sin. We'll get to that momentarily. But first, that question

again: Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? Paul says, "Absolutely not. We've died to sin. How can we then go on living in it?" He then goes on to develop this idea. What does it mean to die to sin? Look at verses 3-5:

**Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.**

**For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.**

Here's why Christians can't go on living as we used to live: We've been changed. Paul writes about walking in newness of life. Something very literally life-changing has happened to those who are "in Christ". It happens, Paul says through baptism, but let's talk first about what it means to be "in Christ". We hear this a lot. Paul says it a lot. But we may not fully understand what it means. This is why it's vitally important that we understand Jesus within the context of the big picture and as the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham and to Israel.

Our first problem is that we miss the significance of that title: "Christ". That's just what it is—a title. It's not Jesus' last name. It's important to note that Paul's logic doesn't work here if we substitute Jesus for Christ. Yes, we are in Jesus and that's important, but this new life, this transfer from one kingdom to another, this being dead to sin is specifically dependent on our being "in Christ". And remember that Christ is the Greek word for "Messiah". And that brings us back to God's promises. Who was the Messiah? He was the one promised. He was the one who would fulfil God's promises to his people.

But it wasn't just that the Messiah would fulfil the Lord's promises to his people. The Messiah was also the one who would represent Israel.

I know that when we think about Jesus' death we think of it this way: Jesus died for *everyone*. He did, but when we say that we, short-circuit Paul's argument. Jesus, as Israel's Messiah and as Israel's representative, died for Israel. He warned of the judgement that was coming on Israel if they persisted in using God's grace as a means condemning the nations and pushing their own nationalistic agenda. When Jesus died, he didn't die any old way. He was crucified. He died the death that the unrepentant Jewish revolutionaries would die a generation later. He literally died the death his people faced when God's judgement came on them. Those Jews who trusted Jesus escaped the judgement that came forty years later. *Jesus died for Israel*. But in dying for Israel, Jesus opened the arms of God's grace to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. When we become Christians, Paul says, we die, not just with a man named Jesus, but we die with Israel's Messiah and we rise to life with the Messiah. Paul uses a string of compound verbs that don't come across very powerfully in English, but what he says is something like "we and the Messiah have been *co*-crucified and we've been *co*-buried". And if we've died with Jesus, Paul says, just as he has been raised from the dead to a new kind of life, so have we. We are united with Jesus, Israel's Messiah, who is not just the king, but the representative of God's people.

And how does this happen? Paul writes that it happens through baptism. Baptism in the New Testament repeatedly looks back to the Exodus story. John the Baptist was the first to do this, going out into the literal wilderness to baptise people in the Jordan river where the people had once passed on dry ground into the promised land. Paul makes a similar

connection. As the Israelites, in passing through the sea, died to their life of slavery in Egypt and were born to a new life so those who identify with the Messiah through baptism die to sin and are born again to the same new life the Messiah was raised to on Easter.

Brothers and Sisters, here's the all-important key: Baptism is *into* Jesus the Messiah. This idea of being "in Christ" has the idea of solidarity. We were each born into solidarity with Adam—into his family. But God's grace has met us in our sin and in our idolatry—in our rejection of him—and has called us into solidarity with Jesus, into the family of the Messiah. This is why the New Testament can speak of a new Israel formed of all those who, by baptism, have been united to—are "in"—the Messiah.

In verse 5, Paul writes about our being united with Jesus in both his death and in his resurrection. The word he uses literally means something like "grow together". Paul might have had in mind the time Jesus described himself as the vine and his people as the branches. In him we have life. He's poured his Holy Spirit into us to make it real today, but we also live in hope of the day when we are resurrected as Jesus was and fully experience the life of God. But the point is that we've been transferred from one kingdom to another, from one solidarity to another, from one life to another. The old is dead to us. We need to live the new life God has given us. I know we have a tendency to think that all of this is *waiting* for us in the future, but Paul stresses that this is our life right now. Yes, there's more to come, but we need to start living it right from our baptism on. Getting ahead of Paul a bit, but think of his statement in Romans 8:30, where he writes that those whom God called, God also glorified. Note: "glorified"—past tense. Yes, there's more to come, but new life is very much our present reality. It's done. It's accomplished.

This is Paul's point in verses 6-7:

**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.**

I've heard a lot of preachers over the years talk about the "old self" as if it were something we Christians still drag around with us, as if we're chained to it or as if the old self is perpetually clawing its way up out of the grave to drag us back down. I'm sure I've probably talked about that sort of thing myself in the past. But that's not right. Paul's very clear here. The old self—our solidarity with sinful Adam's family—has been crucified with Jesus. Just he surely died, so has our old man. Again, Paul is clear: the old man has been brought to nothing. It's dead. It's gone. There is no chain. It's been broken by Jesus. That doesn't mean the world, the flesh, and the devil aren't still out there tempting us to sin. I think that's what those preachers were trying to get at, even if they were getting at it the wrong way. We are no longer enslaved to sin any more than the Israelites were still enslaved to sin after they'd crossed the Red Sea and watched the Egyptian army drown in the waves.

The reality and the problem we face is that we don't always *feel* that this is true and that's precisely why Paul's writing these things—so that we can have assurance. We'll get to that in a bit in verse 11. In the meantime, in verses 8-10 he continues to stress just who we are as a result of having been baptised into Jesus the Messiah. He writes:

**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.**

Jesus died and Jesus was raised from the dead. He wasn't raised to a new existence that was merely spiritual. The tomb was empty. His body was gone. He was raised to new life in a very physical way that included all of him, not just his soul or his spirit. And the point Paul stresses here is that it was a once-and-for-all thing. Other people had been raised from the dead—people like Jairus' daughter and Lazarus—but it wasn't to a new life. Eventually they grew old or got sick and died again. They were raised, but death still had dominion over them. But not so Jesus. He's been raised to the life of God's new creation, never to die again, and never to go back. Death has no power of him. Jesus lives and he lives for God alone. In him the new creation has begun. In him God's kingdom of grace has been born.

And, Brothers and Sisters, as we have died with the Messiah, so we shall live with him, sharing in his life. Again, yes, we still wait for our own resurrection, but Paul is also very clear that all of this is a done deal. In our baptism, God's future is pulled into the present for us. We live, we swim in the resurrection of Jesus. We were once "in Adam", but our membership to that family has been broken. We are now "in the Messiah" and members of his family. And that changes everything.

All of this now puts us on the map. Paul's quickly given us a rough sketch of the big picture of redemptive history and he's shown us our place in it. What does it mean? What does it mean in terms of his original statement that we can no longer continue in sin because we've died to sin and now live to Jesus? That's what we really need to hear, because all of this stuff about being "in Christ" and God's future being pulled into the present is

sometimes hard to swallow when the temptation to sin is right in front of us and it's easy to think of grace in cheap terms—I'll just give into temptation. God's grace will cover it. Look at verse 11. Paul writes:

**So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.**

Consider yourselves. This is the same bookkeeping term that Paul has used before. Consider yourselves, reckon yourselves—I've given you the facts, now do the math and see the inevitable sum: you are dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus the Messiah. It's not that the reckoning achieves the dying to sin and being alive to God. It's simply recognizing the reality of where we already stand.

A number of years ago I read a book on investing in which the author told a story about an elderly couple he had advised. They were retired missionaries. They'd never made more than \$15,000 in a year, but they had lived very simply and had saved and invested for their retirement. They had been retired for a few years and their investment advisor was surprised at how frugally they were still living—their lifestyle was painfully frugal. He visited them at home and explained to them that they had done such a good job saving and investing for so many years that they no longer needed to live the same way. They had the money to travel, to replace fifty-year-old appliances and broken-down furniture, and even to share with their children and grandchildren. They really struggled with this, so he sat down with them and showed them the details of what was in their investment portfolio. It came to almost a million dollars. That reckoning didn't change their situation, but seeing it for themselves, doing the math, knowing what the situation really was, brought about a transformation in their thinking. It wasn't easy to break old habits, but they began to do so having

done the reckoning and the way they lived changed.

Paul does that for us here. He shows us our place in the world. By our baptism, we have been transferred from the kingdom of sin and death to the kingdom of grace. It's not that sin isn't still a powerful force that continues to tempt us. It's not that we won't all still all grow old or become sick and die someday. But Paul is speaking to us on a different level. If someone from the Roman church had told Paul that sin and death were still just as powerful for him as they were before his baptism, Paul would tell him that he hadn't reckoned just how significant his baptism into Christ was. If someone else came and claimed that, having been baptised, sin no longer had any appeal, Paul would rebuke that person and remind her of the seriousness of sin. Paul understood the reality of trials and temptations, of fear and of death. He didn't take them lightly. He never dismissed them with easily platitudes. What he's doing here, what he's reminding us of, Brothers and Sisters, is that when we do inevitably face these things, we need to do so knowing—in full assurance—that we face them standing in the kingdom of grace, on the ground of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus the Messiah has defeated these enemies. They no longer have any hold on him, and because of our baptism, we have been united with him. For that reason, we must reckon ourselves—we must be always doing the math, putting it all together, reminding ourselves of our place in the big picture—and knowing that we are dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus the Messiah. Faith consists not in taking a leap as we shut our eyes and try to believe the impossible, but as we open our eyes to the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection and to the reality that by our baptism we are now united with him. Faith means recognizing who are in Jesus and then living accordingly.

Let us pray: As we acknowledged in the Collect this morning, Father, you have shown us your grace. Continue to pour out your grace on us we pray, that we might always remember that we are no longer in Adam, but belong to Jesus the Messiah. By your grace we have been made your people through and through. Give us the grace to reckon what this means for us, that we are dead to sin and alive to you, and give us grace that we might, each day, consciously set aside our old selves and walk in newness of life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.