

THE NEW HUMANITY

Hope is a good thing

The two friends in the film “The Shawshank Redemption” have different perspectives. Both are prisoners. Andy is hopeful; Red is pessimistic. Andy believes that he would shrivel without hope. Red believes that hope would sever him from reality. To Andy, hope is necessary. To Red, hope is dangerous. Eventually, Andy’s perspective wins out, and wins Red over. “Hope is good thing,” Andy writes to Red, “maybe the best of things. And no good thing ever dies.”¹

Are you like Red? Has the pain of life deprived you of hope? For me, cynicism sometimes gets the better of hope. But as Andy inspired Red, the Apostle Paul has inspired me. His vision of the future in Romans 5-8 is breathtakingly hopeful.

In Romans 1-4, Paul told the Gentile and Jewish stories of sin. The Jewish story, which was to be the answer to the problem of human sin, was fulfilled by Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, who made partnership with God available to all people. Paul told the story of Abraham to show how God, through the Messiah, fulfilled his promise to deal with sin and create a worldwide family.

Now, in Romans 5-8, Paul says that the members of this family may confidently hope for a future with God. The section opens and closes with assurance concerning this hope (Romans 5:1-11, Romans 8:31-39). As the new people of God, comprising both Jews and Gentiles who believe the gospel, we have experienced a new exodus, not from Egypt but from sin (Romans 6). We journey not through the wilderness of Sinai but the wilderness of this world. God gives us not the law, as he gave Israel (Romans 7), but his Holy Spirit (Romans 8). We anticipate the new Promised Land, which is the new creation (Romans 8).

The two sections of Romans 5, verses 1-11 and verses 12-21, both draw out the implications of “justification”—God’s declaration that people who believe the gospel belong to him—in order to make the case for hope.

Romans 5:

¹Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. ³And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; ⁴and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; ⁵and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

⁶For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. ⁸But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having

been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.¹¹ And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

¹²Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—¹³for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. ¹⁴Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. ¹⁵But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. ¹⁶The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. ¹⁷For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. ¹⁹For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. ²⁰The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The hope of glory

Justification, which was featured prominently in Romans 3:21-4:25, means that we as believers have “peace with God,” not only cessation of hostilities but a wholeness in God’s presence. Such peace, which was available in God’s covenant, or partnership, with Israel, has been achieved by Christ in God’s new covenant with both Jews and Gentiles. God’s peace, won by the Jewish king, the Lord Jesus, upstages Roman peace, the iron-fisted *Pax Romana* enforced by the world’s apparent lord, Caesar.

Christ has enabled us to approach God as high priests who stand before him in worship rather than as enemies who cringe in defeat. Grace, the place of unmerited favor for all who believe the gospel, is the ground on which we stand.

As a result, we may, literally, “boast.” Paul has already demonstrated that the Jewish boast—to be the people of God based on possession of the law—is an empty one (Romans 2:17, 23; 3:27; 4:2). Both Jewish and Gentile believers in the gospel, however, may quite properly boast that they belong to God, not in arrogance but in humble celebration.

Paul noted in Romans 3:23 that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” but now he says that we may boast “in hope of the glory of God” instead of dreading the wrath of God. We anticipate the day when we will reign with Christ in the new creation, with God’s image in us completely restored.

Paul connects boasting to hope once again in verses 3-4, with boasting in tribulations being the first step in a path that leads through perseverance and proven character to the final destination: hope. Our vocation is to suffer in a world whose values

reflect hostility toward God. Believers who endure suffering emerge as tested people of faith who are both more confident of their future with God and more convinced of its value. Therefore, we can even appreciate our tribulations.

In that the hope for a future with God in his new creation does not disappoint, it is not a hollow one. In God's new covenant with his people and in the new age that commenced with the resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit provides evidence for the validity of such hope by pouring out the love of God within our hearts. God, in his extravagant love, holds nothing back. If God's love has been poured out this way in the present, the hope that we have for a future with him is secure.²

The love of God

In verses 6-8, Paul illustrates the extravagant nature of God's love, which, as experienced through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, provides believers with assurance of their future hope. God's love, not surprisingly, is expressed in Christ.

When God's plan to save the world from sin and death reached its fullness, Christ died on behalf of humans, described here as "helpless" and "ungodly." All were in rebellion against God and were unable to rescue themselves from that state.

The extent of God's love is seen in the nature of those for whom Christ died. One might be inclined to die for a needy person with attractive qualities, but Christ died for the sake of undeserving sinners who spurned the love of God. It's not simply that God loves unsavory individuals, nor is it simply that God loves unsavory individuals who don't love him. It's that God loves unsavory individuals who are hostile to him. It's one thing to die for a friend; it's quite another to die for an enemy. Christ died for us, the enemies of God.

Whereas earlier in Romans Paul spoke of the demonstration of the righteousness of God, here he speaks of the demonstration of the love of God (Romans 1:17; 3:5, 21, 26). The gospel, the story and announcement concerning the lordship of Christ, reveals the righteousness of God, his faithfulness to save the world from sin and death. Now Paul demonstrates that the love of God motivates the righteousness of God. What God does, he does because he loves us, not simply because he is obliged to us.

Christ's death achieves justification, which leads to peace in the presence of God and hope for a future with God.

Certain future

In verses 9-10, Paul resumes drawing out the implications of justification, particularly in light of what he has said in verses 1-8. Paul now says that God will finish what he started. What he started, justification through the death of Christ, was an enormous undertaking, motivated by costly love. The difficult part of the job has been accomplished. If God did the hard part, he's sure to finish the job he undertook at great cost to himself. The reference to Christ as God's Son, for the first time since Romans 1:3, emphasizes the cost to God.

God's final act will be to save gospel believers from his own wrath. Justification assures us not only that we have been saved from God's wrath but that we will be saved from it in the final judgment. God's wrath therefore does not stand in the way of our hope

for a future with him. God doesn't reconcile people to himself just to banish them in the end.

Reconciliation takes place through the death of God's Son, but salvation—and here Paul is talking about future salvation—takes place through his life: his resurrection. The blood of his Son caused God unbearable anguish. The resurrection of God's Son, though requiring a mighty work of power, was not at all costly. Salvation, connected as it is in a final sense with the resurrection and not the crucifixion, is a relative snap.³

In view of the promise of future salvation, believers may, literally, "boast in God" that they are his people in the present. The boast is made possible not through possession of the law, as many Jews supposed, but "through our Lord Jesus Christ." Through his faithfulness, we have received reconciliation. We haven't earned a thing, and therefore our boast is in Christ.

Questions about hope

In Romans 5:1-11, Paul answers some fundamental human questions. Is there hope for humanity? If so, what is the nature of that hope? How can we be sure of it?

There is indeed hope for humanity. More particularly, there is hope for the new humanity, which comprises those whom God has marked out as his people in view of their response to the gospel. Hope, in its biblical usage, is not wishful but confident. What we hope for will be realized.

The nature of hope is to one day be fully human; to flawlessly bear and reflect God's image; to know him and serve him as his regents, creatively bringing his wise and loving care to his new creation; to bless and be blessed. Such is the nature of the eternal adventure which we await.

Is such a description in line with what you hope for? Indeed it is. What, in actuality, do you want? You hope that one day you will be able to be ... you. We know that there's something within us that's incomplete. So we search our hearts and scan our world in the hope that we will discover what we were made for. No matter what we find, it's never enough. The hope in our hearts is too big for this world. It can only be contained by a new world. So we wait and hope to be completed—to be completely human in a new world.

Actor Vincent Gallo, who has also been a painter, a musician, a model, a writer and a director, was once asked if there's anything else he'd like to do. It was a vocational question. But Gallo answered it in a deeper way:

"I would like one day to learn how to love and be loved in return, like the song 'Nature Boy' says. I'd like to learn how to become a human being and have a relationship, or something like that. That's always been where my real goals have been, to become a person."⁴

To become a human being. To become a person. It's what we all want. It's what the people of God are promised. Verses 1-11 tell us that we can be sure of this hope for two reasons: our suffering and God's love.

If suffering leads us to prize our future with God in a more confident way, then we would benefit from welcoming it. We're not masochists. We don't enjoy suffering. Nevertheless, we would be well-served to value it, not for its own sake, but for where it takes us. If we value a more hopeful outlook on our future with God, we should welcome the suffering that comes our way.

Henri Nouwen, emerging from the throes of a deep depression, wrote this:
“During my months of anguish, I often wondered if God is real or just a product of my imagination. I now know that while I felt completely abandoned, God didn’t leave me alone. Many friends and family members have died during the past eight years, and my own death is not so far away. But I have heard the inner voice of love, deeper and stronger than ever. I want to keep trusting in that voice and be led by it beyond the boundaries of my short life.”⁵

Suffering led Nouwen, who endured depression throughout his life, to more assuredly appreciate his future with God.

For all the reasons we could come up with for appreciating God’s love for us, Paul gives us another one: It validates our hope for future glory. When the Holy Spirit pours out God’s love for you within your heart, when you marvel at the torrent of grace that has swept you from hostility to worship, when you appreciate the costly mercy that flowed along with the blood of his Son, God is telling you that your future with him is both secure and glorious. His love for you is a promise. When you experience his love, he’s telling you, “I want to be with you forever.” If God loves you so much that he sent his Son to the world to die for you and his Holy Spirit to flood your heart, you can sing with confidence, “His grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”

We experience God’s love like one who is engaged to be married. Our Beloved’s affections for us, in the present, anticipate and promise a glorious future with him. The Apostle John, in fact, calls our future with the Lord a “marriage supper” (Revelation 19:9). The love God shares with us now, he will share with us forever. And our capacity to receive it will swell in a manner that matches its immensity.

Sin and death enter the story

In verses 12-21 Paul makes the case for hope by telling the contrasting stories of Adam and Christ. A short version of the story turns into a longer version when Paul breaks away to add more background in verses 13-17. The story demonstrates how God dealt with death, which poses the greatest threat to hope. Jesus fulfilled the Jewish story, which began with Abraham, in order to fulfill the human story, which began with Adam. He offers a new humanity—and participation in the truly human story—to all who would believe the gospel.

Sin and its consequence, death, entered the world through one man, Adam (Genesis 2:17).⁶ Sin invaded the world and took over. All, like Adam, sinned, and therefore became subject to death.⁷

Before completing his story, Paul offers further explanation concerning the Jewish law in verses 13-14. Sin was identified through the law, which God gave to Israel through Moses. Before Moses, sin was not identified by the law, but it was still present. Humans may not have sinned the way Adam did, against a revealed commandment, but they still sinned. The evidence for the pervasiveness of sin is the reign of death over humans between Adam and Moses.

Christ enters the story

In verses 15-17, Paul compares Christ to Adam in order to demonstrate how Christ defeated death, which entered the world through the sin of Adam.

On the one hand, the transgression of Adam, which allowed sin to enter the world, led to death of “the many,” which in Paul’s argument means “all.” On the other hand, the obedience of Christ to the saving plan of God channeled the grace of God, his unmerited favor, so that the gift of righteousness, or covenant membership, was extended to the many, or all believers.⁸ The gift is spoken of in greater terms than the transgression: It abounded. And if it can be said that the transgression in any sense abounded, the gift abounded much more.

The gift is also different from the transgression in that it has a different starting point and a different result. Adam’s transgression, which opened the door for universal sin, led to God’s judgment against sin and to his condemnation of those who sinned. Paul understands death to be not only physical but spiritual, wrapped up in God’s condemnation of humanity (Ephesians 4:18). Adam started when there were no transgressions, but God had to deal with a world in which transgressions had multiplied. Nevertheless, God still brought about justification, making right standing with him possible.

Adam and the humans who followed him were supposed to reign over creation (Genesis 1:26-28). However, his transgression opened the door for death to reign over humanity. God responded with abundant grace in order to grant men and women the gift of covenant membership. Those who were once dominated by death will triumph over death, through their connection to Christ, and fulfill God’s intention for humanity, reigning over the new creation.

Creating a mess is much easier than cleaning it up. One chemical spill can wreak havoc for miles and years. Adam’s transgression wreaked immeasurable worldwide havoc. The abundance of God’s grace is such that one man, Jesus Christ, cleaned up the mess.

Christ defeats sin and death

In verse 18, Paul resumes the story he broke off after verse 12. The parenthesis of verses 13-17, however, allows him to make his conclusion in verses 18-19. The condemnation that came to all humans and the justification that came to all believers is reminiscent of Paul’s argument in Romans 1-4, where he emphasized the equality of Jews and Gentiles in both sin and salvation.⁹ Paul’s goal to unite Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome is evident throughout the letter.

The “obedience of the one” is the Messiah’s obedience to God as it concerns the servant vocation marked out for Israel in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Implicit in Paul’s wording is not only a contrast between Adam and Christ but between Israel and Christ. In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul says that Christ took the form of a servant and became “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” The one man, the Jewish Messiah, was obedient to God’s plan to save the world whereas the one nation, Israel, was not.

The relationship between Israel and its Messiah comes out in the open in verses 20-21. In verse 13, Paul said the law, given to the Jews through Moses, identified sin. Now he also says that God gave the law with the intention that transgression, a particular expression of sin, would increase. This assertion would have been rejected by most Jews of Paul’s day, who thought possession of the law marked them out as God’s people and delivered them from sin.

How did the law increase the transgression? Transgression is violation of a revealed commandment. Adam was guilty of transgression. Against God's command, he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When the Jews broke the law, they too became guilty of transgression. In that the law increased "the" transgression, it increased the transgression of Adam. More people transgressed. An entire nation of people, which had entered into covenant with God, transgressed. The law did not create a race apart. It created a race where sin was identified and where it proliferated. Israel, God's solution to the problem unleashed by Adam, became the focal point of the problem. Israel was to be the new Adam, but it was the new Adam in the wrong way. The Messiah was the new Adam in the right way.

Where sin increased—in Israel—grace abounded all the more. God's Son came to where the problem was most acute. He came to where the law magnified sin, to the nation that represented all nations, in order to deal with sin once and for all. He came to Israel as its Messiah, to represent Israel, the representative nation, to defeat sin. Where sin did its worst, grace did its best.

Grace abounded all the more in that its reign, which results in eternal life, matched and even overthrew the reign of sin, which resulted in death. God's grace moved not only beyond Israel but also beyond the present age. God's grace was made operative through righteousness, the faithfulness of Jesus Christ our Lord. All who accept God's grace and give their allegiance to the Lord Jesus will reign with him in the age to come.

Romans 5 features three references to the lordship of Jesus Christ, in the beginning, middle and end. Caesar, the world's apparent lord, operates in the kingdom of sin and death. Jesus, the world's true lord, conquers sin and death and ushers in the kingdom of eternal life.

Gripped by grace

The story of Romans 5:12-21 can be summarized thus: Sin, along with death, entered the world through Adam and spread to all humans. The law identified sin and magnified it in Israel. The Messiah came to where sin had been magnified. God, through the obedience of the Messiah, defeated sin and death. Those who believe the gospel share the Messiah's victory and will reign with him in the age to come.

God defeated the enormous human problem, sin, in an even more enormous way, the obedience of Christ, so that the enormous consequence of sin, death, would be negated by an even more enormous consequence of Christ's obedience, life. Christ gains more than what Adam lost. The first creation, as described in the first two chapters of the Bible, is far outstripped by the new creation, as depicted in the last two chapters of the Bible. The story of Romans 5:12-21 is one of superabundant grace.

Grace wants to grip us. We may be hesitant to be gripped by anything, including a story and especially the author of a story. A story too good to be true is usually too good to be true. But we keep listening to such stories because we want to believe them. We want to believe in the knight that slays the dragon. We want to believe in "happily ever after." If grace wants to grip us, something within us wants to grip back.

The gospel is a true story of true love, extravagant love, costly love. It's too good to be true, but true nonetheless. Grace defeated sin and death. It can also defeat our suspicion and win our allegiance for the author of the story so that we allow ourselves to be gripped by him.

Sidney Carton is a self-absorbed cynic who features prominently in Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities." He is suspicious of everything good, including the gospel. Toward the end of the story, however, he begins to believe. Jesus told Martha, whose brother had just died, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). Those words worked their way into Sidney Carton's heart. As he contemplates sacrificing his own life for that of another, he meanders through Paris with Jesus' words to Martha on his mind. Dickens narrates:

"Now, that the streets were quiet, and the night wore on, the words were in the echoes of his feet, and were in the air. Perfectly calm and steady, he sometimes repeated them to himself as he walked; but he heard them always."¹⁰

For Sidney Carton, grace defeated suspicion and won his allegiance. He believed Christ defeated death, and he therefore anticipated his own victory over death, so much so that he was willing to give up his life for the sake of another. He says, famously, at the end of the novel, standing before the guillotine, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known."¹¹

Finishing touches

The "hope of glory," with which Paul began Romans 5, is nothing less than "eternal life," with which he finishes it. God himself is writing not just a chapter but an entire story. It's the human story. Just as surely as God in his artistry began the story, he will finish it with a grand and poetic flourish. The insertion of his Son into the middle of the story guarantees it. The human story began with hope, and it will end with eternal life.

Brothers and sisters, you who constitute God's new humanity: Be not despairing but hopeful.

Scott Grant / 6-4-06

¹ *The Shawshank Redemption*, © 1994 Castlerock Entertainment.

² In verses 3-5, Paul lays out the narrative structure that will support Romans 6-8. Believers are afflicted, like Israel in Egypt. Like Israel, which hoped for the Promised Land, believers hope for the new creation.

³ Paul is sowing the seeds that will flower in Romans 6, in which he will show that believers' connection with Christ allows his experience to be their experience. If Christ was raised from the dead, his followers will be raised from the dead. They will thus be saved, literally, "in his life": in his resurrection.

⁴ Julie Hinds, *He Works In His Indies*, © San Jose Mercury News, July 17, 1998. Eye 3.

⁵ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, © 1996 by Henri J.M. Nouwen, Doubleday, New York. P. 118.

⁶ Paul takes it that Adam was a real person in time and space. Evolutionary theory has not disproved the existence of Adam, nor has it discovered his replacement. God created Adam, a human being, different even from other creatures that may have looked like him, in that he was endowed with faculties that enabled him, and the humans who descended from him, to know God.

⁷ Paul's language is not decisive in favor of interpretations that all humans were present in Adam when Adam sinned and that sin was transmitted from him to the next generation and all ensuing generations. The reason that death spread to all is that all sinned. We may take it that sin entered the world because of Adam, and we may take it that all, in response to sin's presence in the world, capitulated.

⁸ Paul's use of the term "the many" is likely influenced by Isaiah 53:12, which he has already drawn on when speaking of transgressions and justification in Romans 4:25. In the Isaiah text, the Servant of the Lord "bore the sin of many."

⁹ For Paul to say that "there resulted justification of life to all men" is not to say that all have been, or will be, justified, any more than for him to say "the many were made sinners" is to say that only some, and not

all, were made sinners. He's saying that Christ is the way for all who were made sinners, both Jews and Gentiles. The word "all," like the word "many," appears in a particular context with a particular rhetorical effect and must be interpreted on that basis.

¹⁰ Charles Dickens, *Four Novels*, Gramercy Books, New York, Avenel. P. 804.

¹¹ *Ibid*, P. 848.