

Easter Sunday

Grace First

Romans 4:25-5:5

Mark Vroegop

... who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 4:25–5:5).

I love stories of redemption and change.

There's something incredibly powerful and hopeful when you hear how someone enters into a dark and difficult moment only to emerge triumphantly. Just think of how many of our cultural narratives revolve around this theme.

- An unknown basketball team from a small school makes it to the Final Four
- A rejected woman is wooed and rescued by a prince
- A small-town lawyer wins a legal victory over a massive corporation
- A black woman who refuses to give up her seat on a bus sparks a national movement
- A prisoner of war refuses to be broken and is personally transformed

I'm sure that you could list many more. But I'm sure that many of you have a personal connection to stories of redemption and change:

- A serious health challenge that you overcame
- A relationship conflict that you've worked through
- An addiction that you've been able to overcome
- A season of depression that you've battled through

Stories of redemption and change are a part of our lives. When we hear them or when we live them, they give us hope. They are deeply motivating.

As personal and as poignant as those stories are, Easter Sunday is the most important and the most powerful. It's the greatest redemption story ever told. It's true. And it's transformative.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the most important news ever announced. It's the story underneath all stories of redemption. Or you could think of it like this: without the resurrection, there are no stories of eternal redemption.

That's why we celebrate this weekend. And it's what Christians celebrate every Sunday as we gather together on the first day of the week.

On this Easter Sunday and through six verses in Romans, I'd like to answer three questions that will lead us to not only understand the resurrection but also the fundamental priority of grace.

1. Why is the resurrection important?
2. How are grace and the resurrection connected?
3. Why does "grace first" matter?

1. Why Is the Resurrection Important?

Easter Sunday celebrates a mind-blowing turn of events through Holy Week. Seven days earlier, Jesus rode in Jerusalem on a donkey at the beginning of Passover. The crowds thought he was coming to them as their new king. The religious leaders were threatened by him, so they plotted how to kill him. Judas was disillusioned with him, so he betrayed him. Pilate saw him as a threat to peace and stability, so he crucified him. His disciples feared for their lives, so most of them abandoned him.

When Jesus was flogged and crucified, it seemed to the world that he was a fraud and that he had been forgotten by God. Even as darkness descended, an earthquake rumbled, and the temple curtain was torn, it looked as if Jesus had lost. His message was discredited. His movement was destroyed.

But three days later, an empty tomb flipped the script.

From death to life, from despair to hope, from judgment to mercy, from condemnation to grace—the resurrection of Jesus changed everything. It's the story underneath God's grace.

Now, the book of Romans is a pastoral letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome about fifty years after the death and resurrection of Christ. The book doesn't record the events of the resurrection—you need to read the gospels to get that record. But it does explain the implications of the resurrection for Christianity.

We read the following in Romans 4:25 – **“who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”** This verse gets to the heart of why the resurrection was important.

The word “trespasses” is another word for sin, and it simply means any violation of the Law and the glory of God. It is the wrong that we do, the wrong that we desire, and the basic brokenness that is in the world. It is sin that causes conflicts, impure desires, mixed motives, and deceitful actions. Sin is the problem in us, in the world, and in the universe.

It's why the crucifixion of Jesus was necessary. We summarize the message of the Bible this way:

- **God is holy:** “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. . .” (Isa. 6:3)
- **I am not:** “. . .for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).
- **Jesus saves:** “that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. . .” (2 Cor. 5:19)
- **Christ is my life:** “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace. . .” (Eph. 1:7)

The crucifixion of Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for sin, and that is why the cross is such a significant symbol. The cross is where a holy God poured out his wrath upon sin so that there is the possibility of forgiveness. Jesus’s death provided atonement for sin.

To understand God’s plan, we need to know what another phrase means: **“raised for our justification.”** The word “justification” is a legal term that means to declare someone innocent such that there is no guilt, no blame, and no punishment. But it means more than just being declared “not guilty.” Justification means that God has declared people to be completely righteous. It means that in the courtroom of heaven, God has pronounced the status of total obedience over you. God considers you to have never violated his law. It means that you are what you were not before. You are righteous even though you were not before.

Justification is what makes the gospel such good news. It means that God gives you the righteousness of Jesus. It means that God has declared you to be something that you would not be on your own: righteous. Justification makes those who trust in Christ righteous.

Regarding Jesus, it means that if he only died, then it would not signal that sin had been defeated. If death wins, then sin still reigns. If Jesus dies without a resurrection, then there is no hope that he is any different than any other person who lived on earth and claimed to be the Messiah.

So, the resurrection means that redemption is possible because death is defeated.

Some of you, however, may struggle with believing in the resurrection. It’s so important that I want to give you a few reasons why you can believe the resurrection is more than a story. These are taken from an excellent essay by Benjamin Shaw¹ and a blog post by Justin Taylor:²

1. Death by crucifixion was not something that the followers of Jesus were likely to invent
2. The burial account fits with all historical evidence that we have
3. The claim of the empty tomb was easily verifiable, but there are no contradictory accounts
4. The apostles claim to have met the resurrected Jesus face-to-face

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/bodily-resurrection-jesus/>

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-is-the-historical-evidence-that-jesus-rose-from-the-dead/>

5. These apostles were willing to suffer and die for these claims
6. Those who were very unlikely to be converted to this belief were, nonetheless, converted through personal experiences of the resurrected Christ

The resurrection means that redemption is possible because death is defeated. It's important.

2. How are Grace and the Resurrection Connected?

If the resurrection is true, then it opens the door for God's grace. It means that Jesus's death was acceptable to God for the atonement for sins.

- It means that Jesus was indeed the Son of God
- It means that the devil's scheme not only failed but worked according to fulfill God's plan
- It means that death and sin are defeated
- It means that those who put their trust in Jesus receive the grace of God

Faith in the resurrected Jesus opens the door for God's grace. Look at Romans 5:1-2. The resurrection has sweeping implications related to God's grace:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:1-2).

There are three incredible statements flowing from what it means to be justified by faith.

Peace with God - When we use the word "peace," it is usually an emotional term that indicating being internally settled. We use it to describe what we are looking for in big decisions (e.g., "I decided to take the job because after I prayed about it, I had such peace"). We use it to describe the happiness of moments in life that are tranquil and restful (e.g., "There is just something about being at the lake that is so peaceful"). While these uses might be true and relevant, they do not capture the depth of meaning that Paul has in mind here.

The hostility, enmity, and separation between us and God has ended through the work of Jesus. It means that God is no longer set against us because of our sin. It means that God's judgment is no longer directed toward us, that God is no longer against us because of our sin.

Standing in Grace - This is a legal standing and a granting of access to the presence of a holy God that would be impossible were it not for the atonement of Jesus. To say that "we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand" is another way of saying that we are justified by faith with a more relationship context. In Romans 8, Paul will talk about this access in familial terms such that we cry out, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15). This standing has so altered our relationship with God that we are invited to come into fellowship with him. Through Jesus we are now more than just former enemies, we are "graced" sons and daughters of God. We have a new standing! God has turned from judgment to mercy, from condemnation to justification, and from enmity to being "graced."

Rejoice in Hope of the Glory of God - When a person is justified by faith and has peace with God, there is a new appetite for the glory of God. When peace with God becomes what you have tasted, you have a new love and affection for who God is, what he has done, and the mercy that you have experienced.

The Bible is about God's glory, and the gospel is how believers are set on a path to glory. God's grace connects us to God's glory. The End Times features the restoration of God's glory on the earth. From Genesis to Revelation, God's glory is a central theme.

Those who have tasted of God's mercy love the glory of God.

They have, by sovereign grace, acquired a taste for the glory of God. They rejoice over it, exult in it, and value it above all other things. The glory of God is their hope and joy. They rejoice in hope of the glory of God. The grace of God has caused them to love the right thing.

This Easter marks the completion of thirteen years of ministry for me at College Park. Before my family moved to Indianapolis, I honestly viewed the city as the halfway point of a very long state on the way to Florida. I had no affection for the Colts, had never really watched the Indy 500, didn't know about St. Elmo's cocktail sauce, nor understood the difference between Purdue and Indiana University affections.

But my change in proximity and location changed what I'm interested in.

Marriage has done the same thing. After almost twenty-eight years of marriage, I see things through my wife's eyes. I walk around IKEA with a different kind of interest in rugs, draperies, kitchen goods, cabinets, and couches because of my relationship with Sarah. Our marriage has created new affections.

That's what the resurrection has done in ways that are so much deeper. A Savior who is alive makes receiving grace possible.

1) Why Does 'Grace First' Matter?

What's remarkable about the resurrection is not only what it accomplishes in terms of our relationship with God by faith in Christ, but the resurrection transforms our entire orientation about life. A living Savior changes how we see everything in the world—especially those things that are incredibly hard.

After all, if Jesus has conquered death, that brings a level of hope to our lives that is incredible. When you understand the priority of grace ("grace first") it has the potential to give you hope amid very challenging circumstances.

That's why Paul says, "Not only that. . ." in verse 3. Justification by faith through the resurrection of Jesus leads to a very different perspective on suffering and hardship.

Romans 5:3-4 identifies that the reason a follower of Jesus can rejoice in suffering is because of that fact that there is no pointless suffering. Let me say that again even more emphatically: there is never a time in the life of a believer where bad things are only bad. If you have been around College Park, you will remember me saying it this way: "Hard is hard; hard is not bad."

Followers of Jesus can rejoice in suffering because somehow, in some way it is part of God's kind and merciful plan to move us and all of creation toward his glory. And therein lies the potential problem.

If you do not love the outcome (the glory of God) and if you are not in awe of how you got here (peace with God) what I am about to share with you will not be valuable to you. Without peace with God and joy in the glory of God, there is no place for suffering. If life is just about being happy and pain-free or if life is not on a trajectory to something greater and more glorious than our human existence, then suffering is inexplicable and without resolution.

If there's one thing that the last year has taught us, it's how testing and trials tend to reveal a lot about us.

Suffering demonstrates that there is a depth to what *you believe*.

*When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace
In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil
On Christ the solid rock I stand; All other ground is sinking sand.*

Suffering proves that peace with God can go this distance, walk through the valley, and assure us that there is never, ever anything that ever happens which is pointless. Grace first means that life is hard, but God has a plan. And he can be trusted because Jesus is alive.

The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit personally dwells in the heart of every believer as a down payment of their future redemption (Eph. 1:13-14) and to bear witness with our spirit that we are indeed the children of God (Rom. 8:14-16). So it is the Spirit who gives us the supernatural assurance that suffering, while hard, is actually for our good. It is the Spirit who helps us to understand the painful grace of God's love.

Peace with God means hope in hardship because the fundamental and eternal problem of our sin was addressed by the death of Jesus. God saved us. He loves us. We have peace with him. That settled condition has given us an appetite for the glory of God, and a lens through which we can see suffering. While life is still very hard and unfair, there is meaning and purpose behind everything that we experience. The resurrection establishes the basis upon which we can deal with every and any hardship.

So is that how you see the resurrection?

Do you see God's grace to be so sweeping, so beautiful and so attractive that it pales in comparison to every hardship in life? Do you see what could happen if believers really lived in this area?

Do you see how they could embrace the hardest situations and even run toward the pain of life and culture because they know that they are secure in God? Do you see how this could transform the hurtful, frustrating, or painful circumstances in your life? Do you see that an empty tomb changes everything?

The resurrection of Jesus is the basis for your redemption story when you first understand the power of God's grace through Christ.

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