



## GRACE REIGNS

### Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #34

Romans 5:12-21

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In Romans, moving from the great truths of justification by grace through faith in Jesus alone—how sinners can be declared righteous by a holy God, not through any works we have done but solely through what God has done for us in Christ—now God is going to address the life of Christ in us. This is the doctrine of sanctification—how we live as God's holy people, His new creation, those in whom His Spirit dwells in newness of life.

But in Romans 5:12-21, a very theologically rich passage, Paul imagines an objector saying something like this: "Paul, you're saying all these wonderful things about justification by faith and enjoying peace with God and having access into God's presence and standing in grace and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. But have you seen the world we live in? Have you noticed that death is everywhere? Have you seen all the sin in this world—what a mess it is?"

And we too might ask, "How can it be that Someone Who lived so long ago can radically change my life today? How can it be that Someone Who lived so long ago can have such a radical impact on this world of sin and death in which we live? How can we be sure that the life Jesus lived 2,000 years ago can transform my life today?"

In this passage, Paul is answering that question by speaking of the two most influential men in history: Adam, the first man, and Jesus Christ, the last Adam, the second Adam, the final Man, the ultimate Redeemer. The passage itself is theologically dense, so we're going to spend at least two weeks with it. But we must not confuse the density with complexity. What Paul wants us to understand in this passage is really very simple.

I want to show you the simplicity of the message by reading verses 12 and 18. When these verses are put together, we pretty much find the main point of Paul's argument. Romans 5:12 says, *"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."* Then Paul goes into a parenthesis—not an unimportant one—and he continues the thrust of his argument in verse 18. *"Therefore, as one*

*trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.”*

Two men. All of humanity, all of us, have been affected by our union with the first man, and all of humanity can be radically transformed by uniting with the next Man, with Jesus, with the last Adam. The effects of these two men's lives prevail in all of us, but especially the effects of Jesus' life are amazing in their grace. As we look at verses 12-14, we will see the negative side of the answer to the question: how can one man's life have such an impact on our lives today?

This week I spent a little time in New York City and walked past the Federal Building where George Washington was sworn in as our first President. Looking at his statue outside the building, I had a sense of awe. I thought, "This is where our nation began." I thought of the sense of solidarity we have, even calling George Washington our founding father or our first father. Every time we pull out a one dollar bill, there he is. He's impacted all of us.

In verses 12-14, Paul faces the question of his objector head-on, who is looking at all the sin and death in the world and wondering how one man can change things. Paul responds:

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.*

Today we're going to focus on just these three verses. Paul is confident that what Christ has done can restore and redeem us from all the ravages of sin. But first he needs to make clear that he's not burying his head in the sand about the disastrous and devastating effect sin has had on humanity. It's like the song that says, "When sin runs deep, Your grace is more." Paul is saying, "I recognize that sin runs deep in the veins of humanity." Sin runs way deeper than any of us has ever begun to comprehend.

In verse 12, Paul looks at history B.C.—before Christ—where he basically sees three stages of human history. Stage one is when sin came into the world through one man—Adam. In stage two, death came through sin. Then in stage three, death spread to all human beings because all sin. Tim Keller calls this a three-stage chain reaction. First the entrance of sin, then the entrance of death, and then the spread of universal death because of sin.

Now, modern people in the Western world have a hard time getting hold of this concept. We really struggle with the idea of the transmission of sin, or what Christians call "original sin."

When we speak of original sin, we're not just talking about the first sin; we're talking about the origin or root of all sin—how we're all affected by the sin from the very beginning.

But we're not the only people who struggle with it. Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician in the 1600s who said, "It is an astonishing thing that the mystery that is furthest removed from our knowledge—the mystery of the transmission of sin—is something without which we can have no knowledge of ourselves." It's the mystery that's hardest for us to get our minds around, but if we don't embrace this mystery, we're always going to be confused about ourselves. If humanity is in chaos and confusion, it goes back to our unwillingness to embrace the mystery of the transmission of human sin.

Pascal continues:

For there is no doubt that there is nothing that shocks our reason more than to say that the sin of the first man was the cause of the guilt of those who are so far from the source of infection that it seems impossible that they should have been contaminated by it. The transmission seems to us not only impossible—it even seems very unjust. Nothing, to be sure, is more of a shock to us than such a doctrine. And yet without this mystery, which is the most incomprehensible of all, we would be incomprehensible to ourselves. The tangled knot of our condition acquired its twists and turns in that abyss.

Adam's fall—that's where the knot got all tangled up. "So man is more inconceivable without the mystery than the mystery is to man." Pascal is saying we can't fully comprehend what God is going to say to us here in His Word, but you're never going to understand yourself, and you're never going to understand humanity, unless you embrace what God is saying here in His Word. This is the mystery that unlocks the problem of human misery.

So we have the three-stage chain reaction—sin comes into the world, death comes through sin, death spreads to all men. But then there is a key phrase: "*because all sinned.*" What a mystery! What does that mean? Does it mean, "Like father, like son"? We've all followed Adam's example—we've all sinned like Adam did? No, that's not what Paul means here. It's true. We've all done what Adam did. But that's not what Paul is talking about here when he says, "*All sinned.*"

Paul is saying something more penetrating, more devastating than that. He's saying we were all "in" Adam. We were all united to Adam, so that when Adam sinned, so did we. We were there in the Garden of Eden. We sinned in Adam's sin. The verb he uses in verse 12 is in the aorist tense. It points to an action that was completed in the past. Paul is saying that the whole

human race sinned in one single action in the past. Because of that, death entered the world and spread to all men—because all human beings were guilty of that one act.

He then reinforces his point in verses 13-14. He talks about how between the time of Adam and Moses the law had not yet been given. But that doesn't excuse people in that period from sin. Just because you don't have the law doesn't mean you don't have sin. Now, a transgression is a violation of the law, of the commandments. So the more knowledge you have of God's will and Word, the more opportunity there is for you to transgress, to violate God's Word.

Adam did that in the Garden. He transgressed a direct command from God. But just because the people after Adam until Moses didn't have the Ten Commandments yet, didn't have the written law of God, doesn't mean they're not guilty of sin. You can see—as you read the early chapters of Genesis—that everyone is dying. We see that in Genesis 5 with the genealogies. What does it keep saying? “And he died. And he died. And he died.”

That's what Paul says in verse 14. *“Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam.”* They're still sinning, but not in the same way Adam did. Not all sins are the same. I hope you don't think every sin is totally equal. We're all equally guilty, equally unable to save ourselves, but there are some sins that are worse than others. Mass murderers are guilty of more sin, more transgression, than an infant is. But nonetheless, infants are still guilty.

Tim Keller describes it like this:

We can put the logic this way: Disease and death reign just as much over nice people as over cruel people, just as much over ignorant people as over instructed people, just as much over infants who haven't disobeyed deliberately as over adults. Regardless of individual sins, death still reigns. And why is this? Because all sinned in Adam.

This is the truth Paul is driving home here. John Stott summarizes it like this: “We cannot point the finger at Adam in self-righteous innocence, for we share in his guilt, and it is because we sinned in Adam that we die today.”

Now, let's talk about the elephant in the room. Is this fair? We are Western individualists. We love the idea of human autonomy. We think of ourselves as accountable to no one. We like to think we stand on our own record, that we rise or fall by our own merit, and that we will be judged by our own actions and decisions. We find this idea of solidarity with Adam—being guilty in Adam—as revolting, repugnant.

I mean, if you try to talk to your friends about this doctrine, I wouldn't be surprised if there's quite a reaction. "Really? Is that true?" And yet the Bible is radically different from our Western individualistic mindset. The Bible speaks of solidarity—of covenant relationships—where we are represented by someone else whose actions affect us.

Sometimes it's easier for other cultures—perhaps Eastern cultures—to swallow this truth than it is for Western cultures. There are cultures where it's less individualistic, where people are seen as part of a family or tribe or clan. We're not whole in ourselves, but what the head does affects all of us.

Even in our culture we have certain forms of representation. Think, for example, of collective bargaining. If you're part of a union, you entrust bargaining prerogatives to someone on your behalf, then they negotiate salaries and benefits for you. Or think of a head of state sending an ambassador into a foreign nation, saying, "You represent me here. You can negotiate on my behalf and make agreements in my name." Or what are we going to be doing in November? Electing representatives who will make decisions to which we all are a part.

Think about World War II. What would have happened if every individual in the United States of America had to vote whether or not we were going to declare war on Japan? Can you imagine how long it would have taken to get everyone on board with that, providing everyone enough intelligence to make those decisions? We have to rely on representation for lots of things in our lives. It's not always individualistic. Sometimes you have to hire a lawyer to represent you in court. That person has power of attorney and speaks in your name. We understand and function with that concept all the time.

But here's the thing. As Americans, we want to choose who our representatives are going to be—right? We want the power a couple years later to vote them out if we don't like them. We want to be as in control of that process as we possibly can be. Who chose our representative? Who chose Adam to be the federal head of all humanity? Who chose that he would be the representative human, that we all would be united to him, and that we would all share in what he did? Who made that choice?

God made that choice. God not only chose Adam, He created Adam and put him in an environment with perfect conditions to act in our place. The question we really have to grapple with when we come to this doctrine of original sin is: do you really think you would have done a better job than Adam? But even more deep, you have to ask yourself these questions: do I think I would have made a better choice than God? Do I think I know more than God does about who would best represent humanity?

Then one more choice: would you want to represent yourself before the throne of God above? Because if we reject what Paul is saying to us in verses 12-14, we also can't embrace what he's going to be saying in the verses that follow. He's going to speak to us of another Representative that God has chosen and ordained to represent sinners on His behalf. This Representative is a perfectly obedient Man Who became a great High Priest Whose name is Love, Who ever lives and pleads for guilty sinners who come to God through Him.

If we won't let God choose our first representative—if we say, “Nope, I'm going to stand on my own there”—then we forfeit the blessings, the super-abounding grace, that is offered to us through the last Adam, the second Representative, the greater Representative. We see Paul leading us toward Him at the end of verse 14. Adam “*was a type,*” or the NIV says, “*a pattern of the one who was to come.*”

God knows what He's doing here. We can't deny the reality of our solidarity with Adam in sin. It's all over the place. We see sin everywhere, and death reigns. We can argue about it. We can say it's not fair. We can say we don't like it. But in the end we're going to be confused about who we are as human beings. We're never going to understand our condition or our need—or the provision God has made—unless we embrace this truth: when Adam sinned, we all sinned. When Adam died, we all died.

But there's a better truth to come. There's a greater Adam coming into the world, and He came at Christmas. He's coming again, and you can be united by faith to Him, and you can live in Him. Look at how Paul ends this passage in verses 20 and 21: “*Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*” He's the better Adam. Let's trust in Him. Let's rejoice in Him.

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