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Two Men, Two Deeds, Two Destinies

Romans 5:12-21

Romans is known for many things, one of which is that more than a few scholars consider it to be the most theologically complex and challenging book in the Bible. That being the case, it is worth asking: “What specific passages in Romans give it this reputation?” Some of you who are familiar with Romans might point to Romans 7. Others would argue that Romans 9 is the most challenging chapter. But I believe it has to be Romans 5:12-21.

When we began our series in Romans, I mentioned to you something that the Apostle Peter said about Paul and his writings. In 2 Peter 3:16 he referred to Paul’s letters in which are some things “hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction.” I can almost hear someone listening to Peter, saying in response:

“Oh, yeah. I know just what you mean, Pete. Romans 5:12-21. Right?”

“Right,” Peter responds with a smile on his face.

So, I have laid it before you clearly. Romans 5:12-21 is the most theologically challenging passage in this theologically challenging book. Therefore, you have been warned in advance. I’m tempted to say what the flight attendant always says before takeoff: “Ladies and Gentlemen. This is Flight #6343 destined for New York City. If you do not wish to go to New York City, now is the time for you to deplane.” Folks, this is Paul’s most challenging passage in Romans. If you do not wish to be challenged and befuddled by it, now is the time for you to exit the building! Oh, but never mind. The cabin doors have already shut. You have to stay on board!

Universal Sin and Universal Death

The real issue addressed in this paragraph is three-fold: Why do we all sin, why do we all die, and how might we then be saved? And how do the answers to those three questions relate to each other?

There are approximately 8 billion people alive today on planet earth. Experts tell us that approximately 100,825,272,791 people have died thus far. The only exceptions to this, up until today, are Enoch and

Elijah. The reason they didn't die isn't because they were sinless. In fact, all of the more than 100 billion people who have died were sinners, except for one: Jesus Christ.

Does it not make you wonder and ask: Why hasn't there ever been at least one person, aside from Jesus, who never sinned? *Why do all sin?* With more than 108 billion people who have lived or are living, wouldn't you expect there would be more than one who lived a sinless life? *Why is sin universal? Why is death universal?* And what remedy has God provided for this? Paul answers all three questions in our text today.

Original Sin

This paragraph in Romans 5 is the primary text in Scripture that describes for us the doctrine of original sin. When I say "original sin" I'm not simply referring to the first sin of the first man, Adam. I'm also referring to the effect or results of that sin on us, Adam's posterity, and the fact that we are all born spiritually dead and alienated from God. I don't know how closely you have read our statement of faith here at Bridgeway, but Article 7 reads as follows:

7. We believe that Adam was created in the image of God, righteous and without sin. In consequence of his disobedience, Adam's posterity are born subject to sin and moral corruption, and are therefore by nature and choice the children of wrath, justly condemned in the sight of God, wholly unable to save themselves or to contribute in any way to their acceptance with God (Genesis 1-3; Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:9-18; 5:12-21; Ephesians 2:1-3).

The way many people react when you mention original sin reminds me of a story told by Professor D. R. Davies concerning an experience he had in England during WW II. He was standing outside, looking at the ruins of a house in a town that had been horribly and mercilessly bombed by the German Luftwaffe.

Professor Davies remarked to the owner of the house, a gracious and seemingly well-educated lady, that there was original sin in operation. She turned to him with a look of pained surprise and said: "But surely, Dr. Davies, you don't believe in that dreadful doctrine, do you?" To which Davies responded: "Madam, such dreadful happenings as these," pointing to the ruins of her house, "demand some sort of dreadful doctrine to explain them." Davies then goes on to say:

"Here was a woman, one of the best representatives of modern life and way of thinking, staring at death and devastation wrought by deliberate human will, who could only see something dreadful in the Christian affirmation of original sin. Nothing in hard concrete fact, could be more terrible than the destruction and mutilation and terror she had witnessed with her own eyes. Nothing could be more insulting to modern man's rose-water dream about human nature than the utterly irrational and horrible bombing of defenseless children. Nevertheless, you must not utter the libel [of] original sin! Such is the aversion of the modern mind and human pride with its peacock feathers to the Christian challenge."

As I said, no passage in either the OT or the NT is any more explicit on the subject of original sin than is Romans 5. Its purpose, however, is not simply to teach us about the fall of Adam and the ruin and depravity that his sin unleashed on the human race. It is also designed to explain our justification in

Christ, the last Adam, by contrasting it with our condemnation in the first Adam. Paul aims to describe the magnitude of the blessing we have in Christ by comparing and contrasting them with the curse we have from Adam.

The structure of the passage is clear. Paul begins with a crucial proposition in v. 12, followed by his conclusive proof of the proposition in vv. 13-14. This is followed in vv. 15-21 with the contrasting parallel between the first Adam and the last Adam.

The Proposition (v. 12)

There are 5 phrases in v. 12 that call for comment.

(1) **“through one man”** - Adam was a historical figure. He had a mind, body, a spirit just as we do. He lived in space-time history just as we do, in a geographical location no less than you or I. The importance of affirming the literal, historical existence of Adam is seen in other texts as well (see Matt. 19:4; Mark 10:6; Luke 3:23-38, esp. v. 38; 1 Cor. 15:20-22).

(2) **“sin came into the world”** - Lit., sin *invaded* the world. This does not mean Adam was the first sinner; Eve was. It does not mean that sin began its existence at that time in the Garden of Eden. Paul says sin *entered* the world, not that it began to be for the very first time. Sin already existed as a result of Satan's rebellion. This text speaks of sin's inaugural entry into the world of humanity. Sin, therefore, is portrayed as an *intruder*. It was not a constituent element in the original creation.

(3) **“and death through sin”** - See Gen. 2:17; Ezek. 18:4; Rom. 6:23; Js. 1:15. Sin is the cause of death. Thus, death is a penal evil; it is punishment. Death was not inevitable for Adam and Eve. It was the punishment for rebellion. “Death” in this verse refers primarily to spiritual death, the alienation of the soul from God and the subsequent spiritual corruption of the whole person. In Ephesians 2:1-2 Paul speaks of all humanity as being “dead” in trespasses and sins. But Paul also likely had in mind physical death which is the result of our being dead to God.

(4) **“so death spread to all men”** - Adam's sin and its consequences did not stop with him. Death is universal. Although we may escape paying taxes, no one escapes death (except for Enoch and Elijah). But why do all die? The answer is in the fifth phrase: “because all sinned.”

(5) **“because all sinned”** – In what sense have “all sinned”? This difficult statement has been interpreted in a number of different ways. We will focus on the major views.

First, is the doctrine of *Pelagianism*. According to this view the only reason people die is because they themselves personally sin. It is true, of course, that we die because we sin. But this view argues that the only link or connection between Adam's sin and us is that he *set a bad example* which we have unwisely followed. We each individually re-enact Adam's transgression in our own experience. There are several objections to this view.

a) It is historically and experientially false: not all die because they voluntarily sin (e.g., infants).

b) In vv. 15-19 Paul says 6 times that only *one* sin, the sin of Adam, is the cause of death.

c) If all die because they are guilty of actual transgression, then they die because they sinned like Adam did. But v. 14 says some did *not* sin that way.

d) This interpretation would destroy the analogy or parallel that Paul draws between Adam and Jesus in vv. 15-21. If this view were correct, Paul would be saying that since all men die personally because they sin personally, so also men become righteous personally because they personally obey. But the point of these verses is that just as we died because of the sin of one, so also we live because of the obedience of one.

e) Finally, this view cannot explain why every human being (except for Jesus) does in fact sin. It would appear that there must be something inherent in human nature that causes everyone, without exception, to decide to turn to idols rather than the true God (see Rom. 1:22-23).

Second, there is the doctrine called *Realism*. This view asserts that all of us, all of humanity, were present in Adam naturally, biologically, physically, seminally. It is from Adam and Eve that all have descended. Thus it may be said that we were all in his loins. Even as I was biologically and physically in the loins of my father before I was ever conceived, so too the whole human race was in the loins of our first parent, Adam. Therefore, when Adam sinned, you were *really* present, being *in* Adam, and thus you participated in his transgression. When *he* partook of the fruit, *you* partook of the fruit. Augustine advocated this view based on his reading of 5:12 in the Latin translation of the NT. According to the latter, the final phrase of v. 12 is rendered, "*in whom* (a reference to Adam the "one man" of 12a) all sinned," not "*because* all sinned." There are also problems with this view.

a) How can we *act* before we *exist*? In other words, how can we personally and individually sin before we are individual persons?

b) If this view were correct, would we not also be guilty of all Adam's subsequent sins?

c) Again, it is the sin of *one* man, not of all men in Adam, that accounts for death.

d) Realism says that all die because all really sinned in Adam, but this again destroys the parallel in vv. 15-21. Surely it cannot be said that all live because all personally obeyed. We were not physically or seminally in Christ when he obeyed. The point of vv. 15-21 is that just as men are justified for a righteousness not their own, so also are they condemned for a sin not personally their own. Paul's point is that death came by one man so that life might come by one man.

Third, there is the doctrine known as *Federalism* or *Covenant representation*. In v. 12 Paul says all die because all sinned. But in vv. 15-19 Paul says all die because *Adam* sinned. In both statements Paul is saying the same thing. But how can it be that the sin of *one* man, Adam, is also the sin of *all* men? The answer is that there is some kind of union or solidarity between Adam and us. It can't simply be a physical or natural union, as the realists contend. It must be a *legal* or *representative* union, i.e., a *covenant union*. God entered into covenant with Adam as representative head of the human race. God dealt with Adam as with all his posterity.

God said, in effect, "Adam, I'm going to appoint you to stand as the representative of all your posterity, the entire human race. Your obedience will be counted as theirs. The blessings you earn will be theirs as well. But likewise, your disobedience will be reckoned as theirs, and they will suffer whatever judgment you incur." God dealt with one man, Adam, in the Garden of Eden, concerning sin and death, the same as he dealt with one man, Jesus Christ, the last Adam, on Calvary's tree concerning righteousness and life.

Thus, we became guilty of Adam's sin and suffer its penalty, not because we personally committed a sin like Adam's sin, as the Pelagians argue, nor because we sinned in Adam as our physical or biological root, but because Adam served in the capacity as *covenant head of the human race*. Similarly, we become righteous because of Christ's obedience, and experience the life it brings, not because we personally obeyed, but because our covenant head, Jesus, obeyed (see 1 Cor. 15:21ff.).

Two men, two deeds, two destinies. Adam ruined us. Christ renewed us. As we are condemned for the sin of the first Adam, we are justified for the obedience of the last Adam. This is why Adam is called the *type* of Christ in v. 14. According to this view, God has not dealt with men as with a field of corn, each standing for himself, or as pebbles of sand on the shore, each person isolated and independent of all others. Rather he has dealt with men as with a tree, all the branches sharing a common root. While the root remains healthy, the branches remain healthy. When the axe cuts and severs the root, all die.

The principal objection to this view is what appears to be the injustice of it. To hold all of the human race eternally accountable for the sin of one of its members *seems* morally inconceivable.

A Conclusive Proof (vv. 13-14)

I have to openly admit that vv. 13-14 are among the most difficult verses to interpret in all of Paul's letters. One thing is quite clear. Paul is talking about that period in OT history stretching from Adam to the Mosaic Law. During this period people certainly sinned. But in the absence of law, their sin was not imputed to them or registered against them (v. 13). Nevertheless, *they died*. But why did they die, if God did not impute or count their sins against them? The answer would seem to be: they died because of the sin of another, someone who *had* indeed violated a divinely revealed law. That other person, of course, would be Adam.

Moreover, says Paul, death reigned even over those who did not sin like Adam did. In other words, there is a class of people who never sinned against an explicitly revealed divine law, like Adam did. These are the people who lived in the time between Adam and Moses. Whom does he have in mind? Many believe

he is referring to infants. If infants don't sin voluntarily and personally against a divinely revealed law, why do they die? If death comes only as a penalty for sin, why do infants, who commit no sin, still die? It must be because of the sin of another. It must be that those who die in infancy, before they commit conscious, personal sin, die because of the sin of their representative head, Adam. That is one way of interpreting these verses.

The problem with this view is that it fails to take into consideration what we read in the book of Genesis concerning sin and death in the period between Adam and Moses. Two examples will suffice. Consider the great flood in the days of Noah. Clearly those destroyed in the flood were judged, condemned, and died because of their personal sin (see Gen. 6:5, 11-13). The second example comes from the story of the Tower of Babel as told in Genesis 11:1-9. In both of these cases that occurred between the time of Adam and Moses, God held people accountable for their sin and judged them because of it. They died because of their personal sin.

This is confirmed by what Paul said in Rom. 2:12. There he declared that “all those who sinned without the law will also perish without the law.” He is talking about Gentiles who weren't given the Law of Moses but were still held accountable by God and judged by God for having violated the moral standards and norms revealed in creation and indelibly imprinted on their conscience (see Rom. 1:18-23, 32; 2:14-16).

Paul wants us to understand that we all enter this world as sinners because of our connection with Adam in his fall. But we also are held accountable and judged because of our own personal sin and not simply because of Adam's sin. If that is the case, what does Paul mean in v. 13 when he says that “sin is not counted where there is no law”? In other words, he needs to answer the question of “how those who never had the law can be guilty of sin” (Schreiner, 283). He is obviously not saying that their sins were not counted against them in any sense. The people who lived between Adam and Moses were held accountable to God for their sin and were judged because of it.

His point appears to be that although they sinned, their sin was not counted against them the same way Adam's was. Adam's sin was in defiance of a clear commandment from God. His sin was registered against him in a truly technical and legal sense. It was, therefore, more explicitly defiant and rebellious than the sins of those who did not have access to divinely revealed commandments. Although people who lived after Adam and before Moses also sinned, it wasn't sin that was registered or accounted in the same way as Adam's sin or the sin of those who would later rebel against the Law of Moses.

As you can see, this is a challenging text for everyone. But we must not lose sight of Paul's primary aim, namely, to highlight and magnify the contrasting parallel between Adam and Jesus Christ.

A Contrasting Parallel (vv. 15-21)

Instead of trying to explain all the details in vv. 15-21, I want to set before you a series of parallels between the first Adam and the last Adam, between the Adam of Eden and Christ Jesus.

As bad as it was what Adam did; greater still is what Christ has done. The consequences of Adam's sin on the human race cannot compare with the glory and consequences of what Christ has done to reverse the effects of the fall. Paul's aim is to magnify the saving work of Jesus by comparing and contrasting it to the condemnation brought on us by the work of Adam. Back in v. 14 Paul said that Adam was a "type" of Jesus Christ, a foreshadowing, if you will. In other words, there is a parallel that we are to see in the two men. He wants us to look at the work of the last Adam, Jesus, alongside the work of the first Adam. In doing so we will come to marvel and rejoice in the superior saving work of Christ.

The point of verses 15-21 is also to show how Christ is *not like* Adam. Notice the words "not like" in v. 15 and again in v. 16. So, in one sense there is a similarity between the two Adams. But the primary point is that greater still is the dissimilarity. What Adam destroyed by his transgression, Christ has restored by his obedience. We see this not only in the two-fold use of the words "not like" but also in the two-fold use of the words "much more" (in vv. 15, 17).

In other words, the main point of this passage is that what Christ has done for all who are in him by faith is far greater than what Adam did for all who are in him by nature.

v. 15 - the offence of one brought death; the obedience of one brought the free gift of grace;

v. 16 - one (the first Adam) sinned, bringing condemnation; one (the last Adam) obeyed, bringing justification;

v. 17 - through one offence death reigns; through one act of obedience life reigns;

v. 18 - the offence of one brings judgment; the righteousness of one brings justification;

v. 19 - by virtue of one man's disobedience men are made sinners; by virtue of one man's obedience men are made righteous;

v. 21 - through Adam sin reigned unto death; through Christ righteousness reigns unto life.

Before objecting to the doctrine of covenant or representative headship, remember this: ***only if Adam represents you in the Garden can Jesus represent you on Golgotha.*** It was on the cross that Jesus served as your representative head: his obedience to the law, his righteousness, his suffering the penalty of the law, were all the acts of a covenant head acting in the place and on behalf of his people. If Adam stood for you in the garden, Christ may also hang for you on the cross.

If you insist on standing your own probation before God, instead of submitting to the covenant representation of Adam, you must also stand on your own in regard to righteousness. And how do you

think you will fare? In other words, if you fall individually and by your own doing, you must be saved individually and by your own doing.

I realize that your instinctive reaction is to lodge a protest. “Wait a minute, God. I had no say in Adam standing as my representative head. That’s a decision you made, not me. So why should I be held accountable for what he did?” I could as easily respond by saying, “Yes, but you had no say in Jesus standing as your representative head on the cross. God made that decision. So why should you be the recipient of the forgiveness and eternal life because of what he did?”

Are we wiser than God? Do we really believe that we could have devised a plan for the human race that was more just, wiser, more equitable than the one God devised? I may not fully understand how this works, but in the final analysis I would rather trust the goodness and wisdom of God than put confidence in my or anyone else’s ability to concoct a better scheme.

Was Paul a Universalist?

In v. 18 Paul says that “as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.” Did you see that? **“All men.”** The conclusion some draw is that Paul is teaching universalism, the notion that when all is said and done, every single human being will be saved. Just as every single human being was condemned because of what the first Adam did, every single human being (“all men”) will be justified because of what the last Adam did. Is this what Paul is saying? No.

First, all through Romans up until now Paul has made it clear that only those are justified by God who have faith in Christ: “since we have been justified **by faith**” (Rom. 5:1). Justification does not come by any other means. Salvation comes only to those who **“believe”** (Rom. 1:16). In Rom. 5:22 he speaks of “the righteousness of God through **faith** in Jesus Christ for all who **believe.**” See also 3:26, 28; 4:3, 5, 16, 22.

Second, we have also seen in Romans thus far that there will be eternal and irreversible judgment under God’s wrath for those who refuse to embrace Jesus as Lord. We saw this in Romans 1:18, 32; 2:2, and especially Romans 2:5 – “But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” The same truth is found in Romans 2:8-9. Paul speaks of God judging the world in 3:5-6, and this only accounts for texts in the first four chapters of Romans.

Third, in Romans 5:17 Paul speaks of those who **“receive”** the grace of God, as over against those who do not. Those who do not receive it but reject it in unbelief are eternally lost. Again, justification is never automatic simply because you are a human. It is a status that God confers only to those who believe.

Fourth, Paul’s point is that the obedience and righteousness of Jesus Christ come to all who are connected or related to him, just as judgment comes to all who are connected or related to Adam. Whereas every person is “in” Adam, only those who have faith are “in” Christ. Adam acted sinfully and, because we

were connected to him, we were condemned in him. Christ acted righteously and because we are connected to Christ we are justified in Christ. Adam's sin is counted as ours. Christ's righteousness is counted as ours.

Fifth, we must also reckon with what Paul says later in Romans, after chapter five. He speaks of “death” coming to those who live according to the flesh (Rom. 8:13). In Romans 9:23 he speaks of certain individuals as “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” If Paul believed all would eventually be saved, why does he pray fervently for the salvation of his Jewish kinsmen in Romans 9:1-5 and 10:1?

Sixth, we should never read what Paul says in one passage without considering what he says about the same subject in other places in his letters. And in numerous others texts he speaks of eternal condemnation for those who reject the gospel of Jesus (1 Cor. 6:9-11; 11:32; 2 Cor. 11:15; Gal. 1:8; 5:19-21; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Thess. 1:5-12; 2:9-12; among others).

Conclusion

As complex and challenging as this paragraph obviously is, we must not lose sight of Paul’s primary point. The justification, forgiveness, and salvation brought to us by Jesus Christ is far superior and more glorious than is the sin, condemnation, and death that came to us through Adam. Jesus has more than conquered and overcome the devastating effects of the fall of Adam, and for that we are to give thanks and praise to God for his marvelous saving grace!