

Romans: The Good News of God

The Work of Adam

Romans 5:12-14

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The Work of Adam

Scripture

Pastor and commentator Warren Wiersbe says that “since Romans is a book of logic, it is a book of ‘therefores.’ We have the ‘therefore’ of *condemnation* in Romans 3:20, *justification* in Romans 5:1, *no condemnation* in Romans 8:1, and *dedication* in Romans 12:1.”¹

In writing to the Romans, the apostle Paul has demonstrated that the entire world is under the righteous condemnation of God because of sin (1:18-3:20). But, in his grace God has provided his own righteousness to justify sinners. Then Paul has explained the *source* of our justification (3:21-31), provided an *example* of our justification (4:1-25), and discussed the *blessings* of our justification (5:1-11), which we examined in the past few weeks.

Today, Paul introduces another “therefore” in Romans 5:12. As I have said before, whenever we see the word “therefore” in Scripture, we must examine to see what it is there for. Paul is now about to explain the *basis* of our justification (5:12-21), which is a summary of all that he has said up to this point in his letter.

In Romans 5:12-21 the apostle Paul presents Adam and Christ as two “representative figures” whose acts determine the destiny of all who belong to them. We shall take a few weeks to unpack these verses. Today I plan to examine verses 12-14 in which we shall explore “The Work of Adam.” However, let me read Romans 5:12-21 so that we can see the work of Adam in the context of Paul’s entire argument. So, let us read Romans 5:12-21, bearing in mind that our text for today is Romans 5:12-14:

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, “An Exposition of the New Testament Comprising the Entire ‘BE’ Series”—Jkt. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996, c 1989), Romans 5:1.

because all sinned—¹³ for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.¹⁶ And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:12-21)

Introduction

John MacArthur points out in his commentary on Romans that “many people consider Romans 5:12-21 to be the most difficult passage in the epistle.”²

At first reading, it does seem difficult and complex. And in one sense it is. The truths that are contained in this section of God's Word are deep and unfathomable.

But, when we approach the text and accept what is revealed in humble faith as the Word of the living God, then the truths become wonderfully simple and clear. And as John MacArthur says,

² John MacArthur, *Romans* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996, c1991, c1994), 289.

“just as it is possible to accept and live in accordance with the law of gravity without fully understanding it, so it is possible for believers to accept and live according to God’s truth without fully understanding it.”³

Lesson

In Romans 5:12-21 the apostle Paul contrasts the work of Adam (the sinful, representative head of all humanity) with the work of Christ (the sinless, representative head of all redeemed humanity).

Today, we shall examine the work of Adam. We shall see the reality (5:12a), result (5:12b), extent (5:12c), and universality (5:13-14) of Adam’s work.

I. The Reality of Adam’s Work (5:12a)

First, let us examine the reality of Adam’s work.

Paul says in verse 12a, **“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man. . . .”**

In the first part of Romans 5 the apostle Paul has discussed the blessings of our justification. He has confidently asserted that Christians have astonishing blessings as a result of being justified by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone. Christians have peace with God, standing in grace, rejoicing in hope, rejoicing in suffering, God’s love demonstrated, and full salvation in Christ.

Paul knows that this is a stupendous claim. As Tim Keller notes, Paul is probably anticipating questions from a “realist” such as, “How can you make such a confident claim in light of the enormous power of death and sin now in the world? And, how can one person’s sacrifice (noble as it was) bring about such astonishing blessings to so many?”⁴

In the rest of Romans 5 the apostle Paul explains how Jesus’

³ John MacArthur, *Romans*, 289.

⁴ Tim Keller, *Romans*, 67-68.

sacrifice overcomes death, sin, and provides salvation for so many.

Paul begins by acknowledging that **sin came into the world through one man**. That **one man**, of course, was Adam.

Now, I want you to notice that **sin** did not *originate* with Adam. Paul is a gifted theologian, and he carefully notes that **sin came into the world through one man**. Sin, of course, originated with Satan, and from Satan **came into the world** through Adam.

After God created and placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, “the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’” (Genesis 2:15-17).

Adam had only one, single, simple command to obey. But the consequence for disobeying that command was catastrophic.

After God gave Adam this command he then created Eve who joined Adam as his companion and helper. Satan then went to Eve and tempted her to disobey God’s command that had been given to Adam. She in turn went to Adam, and together they both disobeyed God’s clear and unambiguous command to Adam.

Now, it is important to note that although Eve disobeyed first, the primary responsibility for the sin was Adam’s. Why?

There are at least two reasons. First, the command to obey God had been given directly by God to Adam, and not to Eve. God held Adam—and not Eve—primarily responsible for obeying his direct command.

And second, God had given Adam authority over Eve. And Adam should have insisted on their mutual obedience rather than allow her to lead him into disobedience.

And so God held Adam responsible for the **sin that came into the world**.

Another point I want you to notice is that Paul says that **sin** (singular) and not sins (plural) **came into the world**. What does he mean by this?

John MacArthur rightly points out that “**sin** does not represent a particular unrighteous act but rather the inherent propensity

to unrighteousness.”⁵ In other words, as a result of his disobedience Adam received a **sin nature**. And it is that sin nature that he has passed on to his posterity. Just as Adam passed on a *physical* nature to his posterity, so he also passed on a *spiritual* nature to his posterity. And that spiritual nature is characterized by sin.

So, the reality of Adam’s work is that sin entered the world through Adam.

In the April 2008 edition of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s *New Horizons* magazine is a story about a little three-year-old girl named Sophia, who was learning the catechism. She was asked the question, “Did Adam keep the covenant of works?” In other words, did Adam obey God in the Garden of Eden?

She answered correctly, “No, he sinned against God.”

And then she paused and, looking soberly at her mother, added, “Somebody needs to spank Adam.”⁶

Adam was indeed “spanked,” and that brings us to the next truth regarding Adam’s work.

II. The Result of Adam’s Work (5:12b)

Second, notice the result of Adam’s work.

Paul says in verse 12b, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, **and death through sin. . .**”

We could say that the “spanking” that Adam received was **death**. The consequence of his sin was **death**.

Now, when God created Adam, he created him without mortality. That is, Adam was not subject to death. If Adam had obeyed God’s one, single, simple command in the Garden of Eden, he would have continued to live forever. But God warned Adam that if he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would surely die (Genesis 2:15-17). And that was indeed the consequence of Adam’s disobedience. **Death** was the consequence for his **sin**.

Now, what is meant by “**death**”? In its essence, **death** is

⁵ John MacArthur, *Romans*, 292.

⁶ Kelly Orr, “Out of the Mouth. . .” in *New Horizons*, April 2008, 13.

separation. And in the Bible, there are several kinds of **death**.

First, there is physical death. That is a separation from life. Although Adam did not die physically immediately, he became subject to physical death the moment he sinned. His body began to age and deteriorate, and he eventually died physically.

Second, there is spiritual death. That is a separation from God in this life. Adam experienced this separation from God immediately when God banished him and Eve from the Garden. He was not able to enjoy a personal relationship with God because he was spiritually separated from God.

And third, there is eternal death. That is a separation from God after physical death. This is also called the “second death” in Scripture (Revelation 21:8), and it is accompanied by torment in hell for all eternity.

Now, if you are not yet a Christian, you should fear all three deaths. Physical death closes any further opportunity for salvation. Spiritual death prevents any true joy on earth. And eternal death means everlasting torment.

Is that what you really want?

Or do you want what every Christian has?

A Christian experiences physical death, but its sting is gone. And through faith in Christ a Christian has an abundant and an eternal life instead of a spiritual and an eternal death.

So, the result of Adam’s work is death.

III. The Extent of Adam’s Work (5:12c)

Third, observe the extent of Adam’s work.

Paul says in verse 12c, “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—**”

Because of Adam’s sin, not only did he die, but **death spread to all men**. No human being ever escaped **death**.

Now, someone may say, “Wait a minute! Weren’t there some people in the Bible who did not die?”

Well, there were two people who did not die physically: Enoch (Genesis 5:24; Hebrews 11:5) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11). They were both taken up to heaven. They did not experience physical or eternal death. However, they were both spiritually dead before they trusted in the Lord and received the gift of eternal life.

And even Jesus died physically. However, he did not die because of his own sin but, rather, he died because of our sin that he bore vicariously.

Now, it is very interesting to note exactly what the apostle is teaching in this verse when he says, “**And so death spread to all men because all sinned.**” At first glance we may think that the reason **all men** die is because of their own sinful deeds. After all, **all men** inherited a sin nature from Adam. Thus, **death spread to all men because all men sinned.**

However, there are two reasons why this is not the correct interpretation. First, infants die and even though they have a sinful nature, they have not yet committed any actual sins. So, clearly infants die but not because of any actual sins they have committed.

And the second reason why **all men** do not die for their own sinful deeds is because the tense that Paul used for “**sinned**” is the aorist tense. A Greek aorist tense means that a single action in the past has present continuing effects. Thus, what Paul is saying is that at one point in time **all men sinned**. That, of course, was the time when Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden.

And so, the reason **all men** die is because of Adam’s sin. The reason people die is not because they sin *like* Adam, but they **sinned in** Adam.

In theology, we call this “federal headship.” The word “federal” comes from the Latin word *foedus*, which means “covenant.” Thus, a federal head is a person who, through a covenant relationship, represents or stands in for someone else.⁷

In former times, and in eastern cultures today, it was considered legitimate for some person to have this relationship to you by

⁷ Tim Keller, *Romans*, 69.

birth or by assignment.

In western society, however, we typically only recognize the legitimacy of such a person we voluntarily choose to be in that relationship.

For example, we choose someone to have “power of attorney” over our affairs. We allow that person to make legal transactions with our assets and even our lives that is fully binding.

Another example is the power we give to elected representatives. We allow our representatives, for instance, to declare war. People do not vote whether or not to declare war. The reason is that ordinarily it is necessary to make a quick and fully informed decision, and it is not usually possible to take the time to inform people before such a decision needs to be made. Therefore, when our representatives act on our behalf, their actions become our actions. If our federal representatives declare war on another country, we cannot say that we are not at war. Yes, we are. If our representatives have declared war, then we have declared war.

Tim Keller is very helpful at this point. He points out that when it comes to our text, the rub for many of us is two-fold. First, we do not like the idea of someone else representing or standing in for us. We say, “It’s not fair that I should be condemned for what someone else did! I should be able to represent myself!”

But, second, even if we grant that federal headship is legitimate, we don’t like the fact that we did not choose our federal head. What strikes us as unfair is that we did not elect Adam as our federal head. It’s worse than a Presidential election. Even if our preferred candidate did not win the election, at least we had a chance to cast a vote in order to elect him. But, with Adam we did not even get to vote! You see, we would want someone to represent us who really would be our preferred candidate, who would represent all of our views and perspectives.

But if we think of it this way, says Keller, we are on the verge of understanding how God did it! First, no one could choose a representative for us as well as God could. Do you honestly think that we could have made a better choice of a federal head than

God? As soon as we ask the question, we realize that God is in a much better position to choose a representative than we ever could.

But second, God did not simply *choose* Adam to be our federal representative; he *created* him to be our federal representative. He was created with absolute perfection, and designed to act exactly as we would have acted in the same situation. And so we cannot say, “We would have done a better job” because that would mean that we would have been or chosen a better representative than God did. And that of course is impossible.⁸

No. God created the perfect representative, and all humanity would either succeed or fail in Adam. And unfortunately, sin came into the world through that one man, Adam, and death through sin, **and so death spread to all men because all sinned** in Adam.

IV. The Universality of Adam’s Work (5:13-14)

And finally, look at the universality of Adam’s work.

Paul says in verses 13-14, “. . . **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.**”

What does Paul mean when he says that **sin is not counted where there is no law**? It is clear that **sin was in the world before the law was given**. Furthermore, **death reigned from Adam to Moses**, the one to whom **the law was given**.

Basically, what Paul is saying is that after the giving of the law people could count or note a specific transgression of one of the Ten Commandments. However, the reason **death reigned** is because of the sin of Adam that was credited to all of his posterity.

In verse 14, **Adam** is called **a type of the one who was to come**. Paul is anticipating the rest of his argument in which he contrasts the work of Adam with the work of Christ.

⁸ Tim Keller, *Romans*, 70.

Adam is a **type**, or picture, of Christ.

Adam came from the earth, but Christ is the Lord from heaven (1 Corinthians 15:47).

Adam was tempted in a Garden, surrounded by beauty and love, but Christ was tempted in a wilderness, and again on a cross, surrounded by ugliness and hatred.

Adam was a thief, and was cast out of Paradise, but Christ turned to a thief and said, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

The Old Testament is “the book of the generations of Adam” (Genesis 5:1) and it ends with “a curse” (Malachi 4:6, *NIV*), but the New Testament is “the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ” (Matthew 1:1) and it ends with “no more curse” (Revelation 22:3, *NIV*).⁹

Conclusion

So, in these verses we note the reality (5:12a), result (5:12b), extent (5:12c), and universality (5:13-14) of Adam’s work.

Friend, you cannot help *being* “in Adam” because this came about as a result of your first birth, over which you had no control.

But, you can help *staying* “in Adam” because you can experience a second birth—a new birth from above—that will put you “in Christ.”¹⁰

If you are not yet a Christian, call out to God today and ask him to give you new life in Christ. Amen.

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Romans 5:12.

¹⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Romans 5:12.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for your Word that you have given to us today.

These truths are deep and profound, and yet they enable us to understand so much about ourselves.

We understand that Adam is the federal representative of all humanity.

We understand that Adam sinned, and death came into this world through his sin.

We understand that all people inherited a sinful nature from Adam, and that is why people commit actual sins.

We also understand that all people sinned in Adam, so that when he sinned, we sinned.

Oh God, I pray that you will help each one of us to understand as clearly as possible the work of Adam.

And all of this I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.