

Romans, Part 27 1-8-23

Romans 5:12-21, Part 1: Adam's Death

The last ten verses of chapter five of Romans lay out one primary idea or proposition. There is a lot here and I am wishing I could squeeze it all into one message, but we are too accustomed to half-hour messages. This is one of those times I feel compromised by that as my studies have led me to develop one long study or sermon. But, I will endeavor to divide it up over two Sundays. So, this study is not complete without what we will do next Sunday and I hope you will be with me for both. Romans 5:**12-21** *Therefore, 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.*

What is this thing we call “history?” Yes, it is a record of events past, but really only a tiny, tiny fraction of those events. We call certain occurrences “historic.” What do we mean? We use the term “historic” to mean “important” because history is really the record of occurrences that someone or some group has deemed to be “important.” Do historians have a bias? Why, of course they do. And, it is possible that some of the most important events of history are

completely lost to us. We know nothing about them because the historians missed their significance. As Christians we can name a number of historical events that are a big deal to us, that mean nothing to the unbelieving world. But we regard them, from our worldview, as monumental events with lasting, and maybe even, eternal impact. Right? We Christians, have something really special in God's book. Among other things, it is a history book. And, having been written and edited by the Holy Spirit, we know that it records the most important things for us to know. It tells us about the most important persons of history. And our text for today certainly does that, with its focus on two historical characters. Who might they be? Well – they be Adam, the first human, created by God from the dust of the earth. And, Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin some 2000 years ago. The last chapter focused on Abraham, another very important figure, but if you had to narrow the list of big names of history down to two, Abraham would not make the cut. Jesus is at the head of the pack and I would suggest from our passage today that Adam is in second place. This Adam made some choices, did some things, that more extensively impacted the entire human race than anyone since – save our Lord.

This is a copy of William Shirer's classic book, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. It is a record of what Adolph Hitler did to bring ruin and destruction on so much of the world. It is over 1,200 pages. What Adam did was yet more devastating and it is described for us in three words in Genesis 3. There, we meet the serpent, whom we know to be a fallen angel, called *Satan*. And there we read of the Fall of man into sin. You know the general story so I will read the one verse. *3:6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.* You see the three words? *And he ate*. And we still today have a massive problem with food. Oh my! But, how can those three words be so consequential? Well, behind them lay the character, the authority, the holiness of God. Behind them we find a clear, explicit command of God forbidding the consumption of that particular fruit. Behind them we find promises. The explicit promise of death in response to disobedience and the implied promise of life forever if the word of God is honored. The rest of Genesis 3 begins to set forth the consequences of Adam's choice. Genesis 4 where Cain kills Abel goes further. Then you have Genesis 6 and the flood of judgment. Then you have the rest of the Bible which is a record of fall, judgment, redemption, all sort of mixed together in this crazy casserole we call

human history. But the Puritan, Thomas Goodwin wisely said this: *When God looks at our planet he sees two men, Adam and Jesus.* And all of us fall under one of those two.

Next Sunday we are going to hold up Adam and Jesus, to compare and contrast. It will be an important and enriching exercise. But today let's see if we can get very clear on the relationship between sin and death, which the Adam story helps explain. 12 Notice it says that *sin entered the world*. Sin was something that already marked the angelic world, especially in the being we know as the devil. But, it was the choice of Adam that gave it entrance into our world with extreme consequences. Death spread like the omicron virus. Everybody got it. Verse 14 says death reigned. And who is responsible for that sad state of affairs? It is Adam. Verse 15 says that by the transgression of the one – Adam – many died. Verse 16 says that judgment came from one transgression. That one we read of in Genesis 3:6. *And he ate*. Verse 17 again – because of that one transgression death what? There is that word again. Death reigned. Are you getting this? It is critical for us to understand the world in this light. We are a planet, a race, under judgment and under the reign of sin and death. That death, understood primarily as separation from God and His blessing, is part of our condemnation by a just judge. So, verse 18 points us back to Adam again when it says *through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men*. Can one man actually do this much evil? This much harm? Apparently so. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, PolPot – no one has wrought more devastation than Adam because his sin unleashed all the other sins that were to follow. See verse 19 *through one man's disobedience the many were made sinners*. And finally, in verse 21 it says again – *death reigned*.

Probably would be good for us to go back and pay a little visit to the Garden of Eden, there in Genesis 3. I expect you know the story. God placed Adam in a garden and said, *that one tree right there --- That is forbidden. Don't eat the fruit of that tree. If you do, you will die*. After that, God creates the woman – Eve. And in chapter 3 the serpent comes to Eve to deceive her and she bit on his lure. She took the fruit and ate. Now, Scripture doesn't tell us much about what Adam is doing while Eve and the serpent are talking. Is he out there going, (shake head "no")? Is he listening at all? Was there a time lag between Eve eating and Adam eating? So many questions we would like to have answered, but the clear basic point is that God gave Adam one clear prohibition and that is the very thing he does. Such a little thing. Right? I mean just a bite of forbidden fruit. Mother says to her son, *Bobby, last night there were two pieces of cake in the pantry, now there is only*

*one. How do you explain this? Bobby says: I guess I didn't see the other piece. We can joke about little sins like eating something you were told not to. But what is the bigger picture? It is about governance. It is about authority and the relationship between Creator and created. The choice of Adam was to despise the word of God. That is a big deal and that is all it took. Out of the garden they go. Spiritual death, which is separation from God, descends upon them. The seeds of physical death are planted and start to grow. The context for violence is established and yields murder in chapter four. When human beings try to understand what has gone wrong with the human race, where all our personal and social ills have come from, how people can be so uncaring, the only folks with an explanation are the people of the book. Curiously, they are also the only ones with a solution as well. We are taught in the word that humans turned their back on God and the world grew dark and sad. Sin abounds and death reigns. Various so-called kings come and go. Their reigns are limited and brief. But death remains universal and undefeated and is the heir to every throne. Why does death reign? Because sin reigns. Sin leads to death. God said that from the start. Romans 6:**23** *The wages of sin is death.* In the epistle of James death is even traced back to human lust. James 1:**15** *When lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.**

Brothers, sisters, this is so basic – yes, but I fear we miss it. Maybe we have heard it so much it is lost on us. Sin brings forth death. This is why we, in the church, make a big deal about sin. This is why we hate it. This is why we fight it. This is why we resist it. And all these things make us oddballs. The world looks at us as if we are fools for being so concerned about sin. They don't get it. The really enlightened ones will even say that sin is an ancient, outdated category. Right? Whatever happened to sin? We have moved on past that. But, without a doctrine of sin, you cannot explain the human experience. Not even close. As noted, Genesis 4 records the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Genesis 5 then records the generations of Adam, the genealogies. Here is how it reads Genesis 5:**5** *So all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years, and he died.* **8** *So all the days of Seth were nine hundred and twelve years, and he died.* **9** *All the days of Enosh were nine hundred and five years, and he died.* You seeing a pattern here? A theme? It goes on for seven generations. They didn't all live the same duration, but the stories all ended the same. And it keeps on going. There is nothing that ruins the good time that some of us are having in this world, like a reminder that it will all come crashing to an end. God's word would have us never

forget that. It reminds us that we are like a vapor, like a flower that blooms today and wilts tomorrow. No matter how vigorous you feel right now, you know what is coming. How does that sit with you? I doubt it sits very well. Death just doesn't feel right does it? At best it is a rock in your shoe, a bug in your bed. Until we learn from the gospel how to deal with the impermanence of this life. Until we grasp what is offered by Jesus in the way of righteousness, justification and life that answers to what is passed down from Adam in the way of sin, condemnation and death, we will always be uncomfortable with the idea of death – either death as eternal torment or simply as termination. That is why all that Paul is addressing in Romans is so vital. Our devotion as a church to getting this gospel message, to grasping it with mind and heart is, in part, our way of taking seriously the threat of death and getting ourselves, our friends and our children prepared to face it with peace. And, of course, what the gospel tells us is that the key to dealing with the death problem is dealing with the sin problem which is what Jesus does on our behalf.

Now, there are some things about our passage that can be difficult to understand. Most commentators, in fact, see verses 13-17 as kind of a parenthesis in the apostle's argument. It seems like some potential objections come to his mind and he tries to address them. One he doesn't get into but you and I might, is the role of Eve vis-à-vis Adam in the account of man's fall. Why is Adam the focus and not Eve? Well, because they were not completely the same. That is why. News flash – men and women are different. Adam and Eve were different. Had different roles. Adam was created first. It was to Adam that the commandment came. The point is not that Eve or her daughters are not responsible or have no direct dealings with God. The point is that God quite often holds men responsible for a unique role of leadership and protection and provision. So, men and future men (you boys), God designed you for this burden of responsibility. It is true in the family. It is true in the church. It is your calling and can be your glory. By grace, we can do better than Adam did. We will speak more about federal headship next week. It's an important idea that is far too little understood.

Let's see if we can cover verses 13 and 14, somewhat difficult, before we go today. 13 *For until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.* What's that? Paul is referring to the time in history between the fall of Adam and the giving of the law of God to His people at Mt. Sinai and through Moses. As best we know, generations came and went without the written word of God, without a Ten Commandments. On what basis were these folks judged? Hm.

You will remember please from chapter one that Paul says men who did not have the written word still knew enough about God to be without excuse for their disregard for Him and His will. But the accounting of that sin is different. They are not held responsible for failure to honor parents per se, but they are for their general sinfulness and hostility to God. We can see this from the fact that they all died, which is the judgment for sinners. Paul goes on to say *14 Death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam*. John Macarthur tries to explain it this way. He writes: *We don't die because we do deeds of sin; we die because sin is in us working death*. Paul mentions the idea that death reigns over individuals who did not sin as Adam did. What is in view here? Well – again, these would be people who never heard or read the law of God. God never pointed out a tree to them and said, *don't eat that one*. He did that for Adam and yet Adam rebelled. What came to my mind is the imagined case of a 15-year-old who stays home while the parents are out. When parents come home they find the house a mess because the young man was irresponsible. He didn't treat his parents' home with appropriate respect. Is he liable for punishment? Sure. He knew better than he behaved. But, let's tweak the story a bit. Mom says to the son, *we are going out this evening and whatever you do, don't eat the cake in the fridge, that is for Bible Study tomorrow*. Mom comes home and the cake is half-gone. Uh-oh. Different situation. Both situations involved sin, but the latter involved the violation of a more specific, communicated requirement. When verse 14 speaks of *those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam*, one good way to understand that is just what I am describing. They did not have explicit, clear commandments to which they were reacting. The NLT actually translates it this way **14** *everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did*. There is no particular lesson for us here, because we have the full statement of the law and the gospel and are responsible in a way much like Adam. When you and I disobey, we do so with full knowledge and face full responsibility for our sinful choices.

However, the sinfulness that Paul largely has in view in our passage is the sinfulness that we inherit from our forefather Adam. Even in verse 12 – when it says *death spread to all men, because all sinned*, what is likely in view is not the actual sinful acts committed by the offspring of Adam and Eve. No – the apostle wants us to understand that you and I were guilty in Adam, through Adam. His violation made us sinners because he stood in our place, he was our federal head, our

representative. You have likely heard the term *original sin* and it means that all humans since the garden are born, not only with a corrupt nature, but with an actual guilt inherited from Adam. We are in Adam, partakers of his corruption and guilt. Everyone understands the corruption part. Yes, we are born with a tendency to sin which will show up at some point. But, the word of God says that we are also born guilty, which makes us liable to death. You will notice that even infants, who have never consciously chosen to sin, still die. This is why. Our confession of faith says this. Follow closely: WCF 6:3 *They (referring to Adam and Eve) being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.* “The guilt of this sin was imputed.” Romans 5:13 says that before the giving of the law specific sins were not imputed or counted to sinners. So, why would they die? Why experience judgment? Why need a Savior? Because of the imputation of Adam’s guilt. That was and is enough to bring us under judgment. I want that to sink in a bit. And I hope it prepares you for next Sunday when we will look further at the imputation of Adam’s guilt to all the human race and then, secondly, and gloriously, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to all who believe. Good news is coming. The dark stuff about Adam, sin, condemnation and death is only the context for the explosion of gospel glory that follows.

I close today with a taste of next Sunday – from Horatius Bonar 150 years ago. He wrote: *The first Adam dies, and we die in him; but the second Adam dies, and we live in Him! The first Adam’s grave proclaims only death; the second Adam’s grave announces life... We look into the grave of the one, and we see only darkness, corruption, and death; we look into the grave of the other and we find there only light, incorruption and life for He is risen – risen as our forerunner into the heavenly paradise, the home of the redeemed.* As one of our hymns invites us to do: *Come behold the wondrous mystery, He the perfect Son of Man, in His living, in His suffering never trace nor stain of sin, see the true and better Adam, come to save the hell-bound man.*

We will go all in next time, comparing and contrasting the first Adam and the last Adam. May God give us hearts to say, *Yes Lord!* And walk in the full riches of what we have in Jesus.