

April 23, 2017 by Steve Brandon



Death to Life

Romans 5:12-21

Death to Life (Part 1)
Romans 5:12-21

1. Two Men
2. Two Acts
3. Two Results

After taking a break for a few weeks for Easter, we are back into the book of Romans. Our text this morning begins with verse 12.

Now, before I read the text, I want to warn you that this is probably the most difficult theological passage in the entire book of Romans, if not all of Paul's writings, if not the entire New Testament.

When Peter wrote about Paul's letters, he said that "There are some things in them that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). Some have thought that Peter was thinking about this very passage when he wrote.

So, this morning, I want for you to be prepared to think. Be prepared to think long and hard and deep. However, lest you think that this text is beyond your grasp, let me guarantee you that it is not! Because, the difficulty of this text is not on the surface. The difficulty of the text is in the details, when you begin to plumb the depths of its meaning.

It's a bit like trying to dig a hole on the beach. Anybody can dig in the sand. At first, the sand gives way easily. But soon, when the hole gets a bit deeper, it gets more difficult. Soon, beneath the sand, is some hard clay, which keeps filling with water. And you may even hit bed rock, which makes the digging very difficult.

But there are treasures to be found beneath the surface. One of the things that we don't want to do is miss the treasure.

The good news is that there is sand on the surface. It's quite easy to understand. In fact, I would be that most of the children will go away from my message this morning understanding the text on a surface level just fine.

So let me tell you what the text is about on the surface. Then, we will dig into its depths. And let me tell you that as we dig, there are treasures to be found. In fact, if you embrace this passage, you will leave this place with a deeper understanding of the gospel, but you will leave this place with a greater joy in the gospel than ever before.

OK, here's the surface.

Romans 5:12-21 is about two men, who performed two acts, and obtained two results. I will repeat that. Two men performed two acts and obtained two results.

The men are easy to understand: They are Adam and Jesus. The two acts are easy to understand: Adam sinned and Jesus was sacrificed. The two results are easy to understand: Adam brought death to mankind and Jesus brought life to mankind.

If you understand this, you have understood our passage, and your understanding is entirely sufficient.

Now, you may not know everything about the two men or the two acts or the two results. But if you know enough to understand that Adam's sin plunged mankind into sin and death, and that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross brought mankind out of death and into life, then you know enough to understand this section of Scripture. And you know enough to see the glories of the gospel of Christ. And there is nothing, really, that you lack regarding these verses.

It's a bit like driving a car. You may not understand all of the intricacies of how a combustible engine works. You may not know how the oil lubricates, or how the radiator cools, or how the power brakes slow the car down. But you know enough about how to turn the key, shift the car into drive, and press the accelerator. And that's really all that you need to know to drive the car.

And so also with this passage. You simply need to know that two men performed two acts that had two different results. Adam's sin brought death. Christ's cross brought life.

Indeed, this is the title of my message this morning. "Death to Life."

Lets' read the passage. And let's listen for the two men, the two acts, and the two results. Paul will address these things things over and over and over again.

Romans 5:12-21

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.

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. 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. 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.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 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. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but 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.

My first point is simply this:

1. Two Men

The men are Adam and Jesus. Note in our text of 10 verses, we have 14 references to these men.

The first one comes in verse 12, where Adam is simply mentioned as "one man." In verse 14, he is named. Jesus is mentioned in verse 15 as the other man.

Note what verse 14 says of Adam. He is "a type of the one who was to come."

In other words, Adam was a pattern of what Jesus would be. Not in the sense that Jesus would be like Adam, for indeed, he is more different than he is the same. Nor in the sense that Jesus would do what Adam did, for indeed, they did opposite things. Adam sinned, but Jesus was righteous.

But Adam is a type of Jesus, in the sense that Adam played a crucial role in history for all of mankind. Likewise, Jesus played a crucial role in history for all of mankind.

It all comes back to what they did. Or, as I'm saying in my second point, ...

2. Two Acts

When Paul speaks of the two acts of these two men, he speaks in the broad terms.

When talking about Adam's sin, Paul uses various words: "transgression" (5:14), "trespass" (5:15), "sin" (5:16), "disobedience" (5:19). When Paul refers to the events of Jesus, he uses words like, "act of righteousness" (5:18), and "obedience" (5:19).

Of note here is that Paul speaks of only one act for each man. It's the one trespass (verse 16). It's the one act of righteousness (verse 18). Broadly speaking here, we are talking about what took place in the fall of man, as recorded in Genesis, and what took place during the Passion week of Christ, with his suffering upon the cross.

We now turn to my third point, ...

3. Two Results

Again, we see much the same thing. We see Paul emphasizing over and over again the results of these two acts.

Consider what happened because of Adam's sin. Death spread to all men (verse 12). Death reigned (verse 14). Many Died (verse 15). Judgment brought condemnation (verse 16). Death reigned (verse 17). Condemnation came for all men (18). Many were made sinners (verse 19). Sin increased (verse 20). Sin reigned in death (verse 21).

It's not a pretty sight! It ought to help you to understand the importance of Genesis 3 in understanding our world. Adam's sin was catastrophic on our planet! Romans 8:20, "For the creation was subjected to futility!"

But here's the contrast! Adam's sin brought destruction! Christ's righteousness brought life!

That's why it took the work of another man to reverse the curse! Consider what happened as a result of the work of Christ. The free gift, the grace of God, abounded for many (verse 15). The free gift brought justification (verse 16). The abundance of grace is received (verse 17). The free gift of righteousness reigns (verse 17). Justification and life came (verse 18). Many are made righteous (verse 19). Grace abounded (verse 20). Grace reigns (verse 21). It leads to eternal life (verse 21).

And here's the good news! We don't have to live under the condemnation of Adam, but we can know the justification of Jesus (verse 16). Sin doesn't have to reign in our lives, but we can experience God's grace reigning in our lives (verse 17). We don't have to die in our sins, but we can have eternal life! (verse 21). It comes through Jesus Christ.

And the question really boils down to this: who are you following? Are you following in the ways of Adam? Or, are you following in the ways of Jesus Christ? Are you following in the way of sin? Or, do you know the grace that has come through Jesus Christ?

Paul's main point here is the glories of the gospel! How much better it is! How much better are the ways of Jesus than the ways of Adam.

There's the message of our passage! It's really quite simple.

1. Two Men
2. Two Acts
3. Two Results

But let's not end there. Let's dig deeper than the surface sand. Let's dig into the riches of the passage.

To do so, let's focus upon my third point, because this is where the treasure is!

Let's begin again in verse 12, ...

Romans 5:12

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—

First of all, I want for you to notice the dash at the end of verse 12. Most Bible translations have this dash. It signals a break in thought. It's like a parenthesis, but bigger. And when you work through the logic of the passage, the conclusion of the thought picks up in verse 18. In other words, you would properly read Paul's logic by skipping verses 13-17.

Romans 5:12, 18

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—

...

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

But the question is this. Why did Paul break his thought in verse 12? In other words, what's the purpose of verses 13-17? What was Paul trying to clarify?

Let's look again at verse 12, ...

Romans 5:12

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—

Now, many people tend to read this verse this way: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all [have] sinned—"

In other words, Adam brought sin into the world. And sin brought death. And all of us die. Because all of us sin!

Now, that's very true, but that's not what Paul said in verse 12. He said that "death spread to all men because all sinned." Or, to put some clarification on what Paul wrote, "death spread to all men because all sinned [when Adam sinned]." In other words, we are condemned to death because Adam sinned!

This is precisely what Paul seeks to explain in verses 13 and 14. Look there, ...

Romans 5:13-14

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.

In order to explain verse 12, Paul brings us back into history. He brings us back to the days before Moses. He brings us back to the days before the law was given. And he makes a simple observation: People died in those days. In fact, if you read Genesis 5, you will be met with a genealogy of those who lived after Adam and the repeated phrase comes, "... and he died. ... and he died. ... and he died."

You say, "Why did they die?" They didn't die for their own sins! They died for the sins of Adam!

Verse 13 clearly lays it out, "sin is not counted where there is no law." In other words, any righteous government will not arrest you (or charge you with a crime), unless there is a law on the books. For example, suppose you are in the business of selling hot dogs on the street. And along comes a police officer, and hands you a ticket for operating your business illegally. You say, "Officer, why am I getting this ticket?" He says, "Because it is illegal to sell hot dogs on the street." You say, "I was unaware of that law." He says, "Oh, there is no law. But there should be. Here is your ticket."

Such a police officer is totally unjust! Why? Because he punished you for a law that didn't exist!

And so, likewise, when people died before Moses, they weren't dying because they had broken God's law. For, indeed, his law would come some time later. They were dying because Adam had broken God's law. And they sinned in Adam.

This is often called, "Original sin." This is what the old children's catechism says, "In Adam's fall We sinned all."

That's what Paul says in verse 13, ...

Romans 5:13-14

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.

Now, to our American ears, such things sound totally unfair. Because, we are a country steadfastly devoted to our individualism. Each person will stand and fall on his own merits.

One of our founding documents is profoundly individualistic. In the Declaration of Independence, it is stated that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." We hate the thought that we are in any way affected by the sins of others. We hate the thought that we are in any way responsible for the sins of others.

And yet the Bible, over and over and over again, confronts our individualism and presents us with a view of solidarity. In other words, we are not merely individuals, but we are deeply interconnected with one another. I can't press upon you all enough the importance of embracing this concept.

For instance, take Egypt in the days in which the Israelites were slaves. The Egyptian people faced some pretty horrible things. They experienced the plagues of God upon their land. Water turned to blood (1), frogs were all over the land (2). There were gnats (3) and insects (4) all around. Their livestock died (5). They experienced boils (6) on their bodies, painful enough to prohibit them from going out and about. Hail (7) and locusts (8) destroyed their crops. Darkness (9) fell upon the land. And worst of all, each family experienced the death of their firstborn child! (10)

You say, "Why did they experience such hardship?" Because of their leader; because of Pharaoh's hard heart. As he refused to grant the request of Moses to let the people of Israel go, God unleashed these plagues upon the nation.

Now, think with me. Were each and every individual Egyptian citizen guilty of hardening their heart before the Lord? No. But did each and every individual Egyptian citizen experience the awfulness of these plagues? Yes.

It's because the people of Egypt were in solidarity with their leader, Pharaoh, that they experienced the hardship. Even if, individually, they had a soft heart, willing to give in to Moses' request.

And we know that there were some who had soft hearts. For instance, after the gnats came upon the land, the magicians knew that something incredible was taking place. They couldn't produce gnats through their secret arts (Ex. 8:18). They said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:19). But (we read in Exodus 8:19), "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them." And so, the people suffered. And they suffered greatly, losing their firstborn son in all of their homes.

That's solidarity. That's all over the Bible. It's hard for us to understand as Americans.

This is how God created the world. This is how God deals with us. He often deals with us in solidarity.

This is basic stuff. Michael Horton said, "The concept of solidarity ... is basic to the biblical worldview, however alien to our own." And sometimes the result is very difficult to embrace.

For instance, take the story of Achan. His story is told in Joshua 7. The context of his story is that Israel was charged by God to take the promised land. Jericho was a great success story! The people marched around the wall for seven days. On the seventh day, they blew the trumpets and the wall fell down. Israel came and conquered the city!

The next city to conquer was Ai, a small city. In fact, the city was so small that Joshua sent only a few thousand soldiers to take the city. However, Ai resisted and defeated Israel in battle. "The men of Ai killed about thirty-six [Israelites]" (Joshua 7:5). When Joshua heard this, "Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the Lord until evening" (Joshua 7:6).

Then he prayed to the LORD, seeking to know why they were defeated in battle. Here's what God said, ...

Joshua 7:11-13

"Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies. They turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become devoted for destruction. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you. Get up! Consecrate the people and say, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the Lord, God of Israel, "There are devoted things in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you."'

And so, Joshua gathered the people of Israel, tribe by tribe. He cast lots, and the lot fell on the tribe of Judah (Joshua 7:16). So, he gathered the clans of Judah and cast lots, and the lot fell on the clan of the Zerahites (Joshua 7:17). So, he gathered the clan of the Zerahites, "man by man," and cast lots, and the lot fell on Zabdi (Joshua 7:17). So, he gathered the household of Zabdi and cast lots, and the lot fell on Achan (Joshua 7:18).

Joshua 7:19-21

Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me." And Achan answered Joshua, "Truly I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and

this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I coveted them and took them. And see, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath."

So Joshua sent messengers to his tent and found it exactly as Achan had said (Joshua 7:22). And they brought the evidence to Joshua.

Then we read, ...

Joshua 7:24-26

And Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver and the cloak and the bar of gold, and his sons and daughters and his oxen and donkeys and sheep and his tent and all that he had. And they brought them up to the Valley of Achor. And Joshua said, "Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord brings trouble on you today." And all Israel stoned him with stones. They burned them with fire and stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his burning anger. Therefore, to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor.

Did you catch what happened? Achan sinned by taking the spoil that was under the ban for himself. And so, Joshua brought him and his sons and his daughters and stoned them all.

Achan's children died with Achan because of their solidarity with him. That's how the LORD often deals with us--in solidarity!

There are plenty of further examples in the Bible. When Korah, Dathan, and Ibiam rebelled against the LORD, the earth opened up and swallowed up the three who rebelled along "with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods" (Numbers 16:32).

When David sinned before the Lord by numbering the people, 70,000 men died in the pestilence that followed (2 Sam. 24:15).

When Daniel was rescued from the lion's den, "... the king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces" (Daniel 6:24).

This is exactly what the Lord said in Exodus 34:6-7, ...

Exodus 34:6-7

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

Do you ever wonder why the son of an alcoholic is often an alcoholic? Do you ever wonder why those in poverty tend to remain in poverty? Do you ever wonder why a daughter looks and acts like her mother? Do you ever wonder why a nation suffers because of the poor policies of their leaders? Because we are bound together in solidarity. That's how God has made the world.

Now, in saying all of this, let me be clear. This doesn't absolve us of individual responsibility. Ezekiel 18:4 is clear: the soul that sins will die. God will hold each and every one of us responsible for our own sins.

It's simply that there is something bigger going on. There is another sphere of accountability, beyond your own individual world. Paul says that we are linked with Adam whether we like it or not.

Romans 5:12

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—

There are two views of how this can be:

a. The Realistic View.

This view regards us as being in the loins of Adam, and so, in some sense sinning with him. Those who advocate this view will often quote Hebrews 7:9-10, which says, "And, so to speak, though Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him."

The idea here is that Levi (who was yet to be born) is considered as really participating in the act of Abraham when he paid tithes to Melchizedek, though he was not yet born. This is what some say took place in the garden. We were in the loins of Adam when he sinned. And so, in effect, we sinned with Him. We were there in the garden. Thus, we are responsible for his sin because we too committed the sin.

The second view is called, ...

b. The Representative View.

Those who advocate this view say that we are guilty in that Adam represented us. It's a bit like our government. We don't live in a true democracy. In a true democracy, the entire nation would have the opportunity to vote on every issue. But,

that's not how our government operates. We elect those who will represent us. Our elected representatives go to Springfield and Washington and cast their votes for us. As we have chosen them to represent us, we bear the responsibility for their actions.

It's the same with Adam. He was our representative. We bear the responsibility for his actions. Only, we didn't vote. God appointed Adam as the first man in the garden as our representative. Nevertheless, as he is our representative, we are responsible for his sin.

Now, it is difficult to know exactly which view is right. This is where Romans 5 is particularly difficult. It may be, as some theologians hint^[1], that both of these views "help us to understand different aspects of how Adam's sin was transmitted."^[2] But in a very real sense, we are responsible for Adam's sin.

Now, let me ask you, do you like this? Do you like the fact that one man can plunge the entire human race into sin, where we are all guilty and accountable before God? If you are doubting this, then you may be just on the surface of this passage, and missing the buried treasure.

Because here's the treasure: "Just as one man brought the entire human race into sin and into death., ... one man brought a multitude back to life. Isn't that the entire thrust of our passage this morning? And if you don't think that it is fair for God to condemn us all because of Adam's sin. Then you cannot hold that it is fair for God to forgive any because of Christ's righteousness.

This is the gospel! That Jesus became sin for us in our place. Exactly like Adam failed for us, so also Christ succeeded on our behalf.

If you balk at the idea of being with Adam in the garden, then you must also balk at the idea of being with Christ in His death. But, this is how the Bible speaks. Even before we existed, our sins were placed upon Jesus on the cross. Colossians 2:14 says that our sins were nailed to the cross. The cross existed 2,000 years ago. By now, it has rotted or been burned (though the Roman Catholic Church may contend otherwise). And yet, your sins were nailed to the cross. The way this can be is if we were joined to Christ in some way 2,000 years ago, like we were joined to Adam, thousands of years before that. In Romans 5:8 we read of how Christ died for us, "While we were yet sinners." Christ died 2,000 years ago for us, when we were sinners--long before we were even born.

I want to mention here why it is so important for you not to embrace the theory of evolution. A proper understanding of your salvation is at stake. The argument of Romans 5 necessitates us to believe in a literal Adam, who committed a literal sin, which plunged the human race into literal death. It's important that our sin came to us through one man, because that is how our righteousness comes. It comes through one man! If evolution is true, there were many people evolving from apes into humans around the same time. And the parallel would need to be for us to have many Christs as well to bring us out of the fall. But, there is only one Christ who imputes His righteousness to us. So also, there was only one Adam whose sin was imputed to us!

I also want to show you here of the necessity of the virgin birth. Had Jesus come to earth in the same manner as the rest of us (with an earthly father and an earthly mother), He would have been guilty from day one. And it would have been impossible for Him to be the sinless one to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). But, with the virgin birth, it was possible for Jesus to enter the world apart from the sin of Adam, so that 2 Corinthians 5:21 might be true: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." The virgin birth is far more than a nice Christmas story. It makes it possible for us to have a sinless Savior.

Let's finish this morning looking at verses 15-17. It's where the light shines bright!

Romans 5:15-17

But 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. The 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. For 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.

These verses point out the same thing that verses 18 and 19 did, only they say it in a little different way. Rather than focusing on the similarities between Adam and Christ, these verses point out the differences (as in verses 15-16). These differences bring the gospel into glorious focus. In other words, as dark as the imputation of Adam's sin to us was, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us shines even brighter! Notice the words in verse 15 which makes the act of Christ so much better than the act of Adam, "much more did the grace of God ... abound to the many." Again in verse 17, "much more those who receive the abundance ... will reign in life."

Adam plunged us into sin, and that was bad. But, the restoration was much better. Not only did it put us back to where we started, but it placed us better than we ever were before. Do you love the fact that God's ways include imputation?

I close with a poem that captures the main point of my message this morning.

"By One Man"

By one man, we came to know sin,
Condemned without hope when death entered in.
But by one man, there's freedom again -- He offered the gift of life.

By one man, who would not obey,
Our birthright of joy was taken away.
But by one man, we are righteous today -- He offered the gift of life.

And this gift of life is given through Jesus (life through Jesus),
In the name of Jesus Christ, God's grace abounds to all.

By one man, called Adam, by name,
Our judgment was sealed and covered with shame,
'Til God's own Son, Lord Jesus, He came -- to offer the gift of life.

By one man, who stood in our place,
Redeeming by blood those lost in disgrace,
Now we stand, forgiven by grace -- embracing the gift of life.

He gave us the gift of life -- Lord Jesus, the gift of life.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 23, 2017 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Douglass Moo and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

[2] Chris Brauns, Bound Together, p. 48.