

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ROMANS

### Living Under Grace (Rom 5-8)

#### ii. Grace Trumps Sin

##### Romans 5:12-21

This is one of the more difficult passages of Paul's letter to the Romans: a series of running contrasts between acts of Adam and the acts of Christ and their respective consequences. N.T. Wright aptly describes it as 'after the measured sentences of the first eleven verses of chapter five, verses 12-21 is like turning from Rembrandt to Picasso.' Much of the language is new to the argument of Romans, and the style changes from the exhortation of vv1-11 to the resumption or argumentation in vv12-21. Moreover, Paul starts something in v12, gets side tracked in verse 13 like most preachers and only resumes the argument in v18. That said, the passage is crucial for a robust understanding of sin. However, sin is no match for the person and work of Christ, depicted as the second Adam.

Paul narrates the sequence of events that thrust sin and death upon the world depicted in Genesis 3. The emphasis is not so much on what Adam did, but the consequences of his actions i.e. sin's entrance into the world. Sin is personified, given human qualities. It is something that "enters" (v12) and "reigns" (v20). Later we learn that it can be "obeyed" and "pays wages" (chap 6) "seizes opportunity", "deceives", "kills", and even "dwells" in people (chap 7). Sin is portrayed as a villain with death his weapon and people his victim. Sin is lethal, producing death for all it touches – spiritual death, then physical death culminating in eternal death.

The question of sin and death has exercised the church since the early centuries of its inception. Pelagius a British monk taught in Rome around 409AD. He held that humanity is free or neutral. Adam was only a bad example which has influenced all of us. Augustine answered Pelagius decisively. He argued very strongly that Adam is our representative: 'We are corporately in Adam', in whom all people sin, hence the term 'original sin'. All of us have inherited a sinful nature, a predisposition to sin, whereby Adam's sin is mediated or imputed to us.

G.K. Chesterton has famously observed, "Original Sin is the only Christian doctrine that is empirically verifiable". A colony of children stranded on an island would not resemble Peter Pan's idyllic 'Never Never Land', rather William Golding's novel, 'Lord of the Flies', where the strongest ruled the weakest with merciless spite. Today playground bullying has morphed into cyber space where bullies use social media to taunt others.

John Milton, the blind poet, speaks of 'Paradise Lost' and 'Paradise Regained' whereby one man's disobedience is overcome by another man's obedience. The story of humanity may be described as the 'Tale of Two Gardens': Eden where Adam said "Not Thy will but mine be done", Gethsemane where Christ said "Not my will but Thine be done". Adam, metaphorically speaking, was the gate keeper of humanity, when he fell, all humanity fell with him. The Great Wall of China was very effective in keeping the enemy at bay. It was never breached. However, on three occasions invaders managed to get through by bribing the gatekeeper. One act of betrayal and treachery led to horrendous consequences for the nation. One act of fateful disobedience on the part of Adam had fatal consequences for all humanity. Likewise, the fable of the scorpion and the frog whereby the sting of the former led to both their death by drowning. Tragically sin is part of our nature, our spiritual DNA.

Fortunately, that is not the whole story. The Christian believer is in Christ, not in Adam. In the words of John Henry Newman's hymn

'O loving wisdom of our God  
when all was sin and shame  
a second Adam to the fight  
and to the rescue came.'

By faith we are in Christ not in Adam. Our location has changed from a prison to paradise, from sinking sand to solid ground, from desert to an oasis. The gospel of grace always checkmates the law of sin and death. The German tennis player Boris Becker said that when he was playing his absolute best at Wimbledon, he could theoretically beat Pete Sampras. But, he also said that if he played his best and Sampras played his best, Sampras would always win, because his best was always better. If sin is Becker then grace is Sampras. Grace will always win.

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Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> August 2017