

Adam Undone

Romans 5:12-21

Faith Presbyterian Church ~ Laura Anderson ~ September 6, 2026



¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— ¹³ sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴ Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

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

¹⁸ Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹ For just 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 But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹ so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:12-21, NRSV)



On May the Fourth back in 2000, likely in an apartment in the Philippines, someone received an email whose subject read, "ILOVEYOU." How intriguing. How potentially romantic. When the email was opened, the body read, "kindly check the attached LOVELETTER coming from me." Aww. Polite, too! Then someone

opened the attachment, and the LoveLetter worm was launched.

The LoveLetter was the first global malware attack, and within 24 hours, the worm had infected over 45 million computers. The worm replicated by attaching itself to every email contact in an infected machine's address book and resending itself. So each email seemed to be coming from someone you knew, someone safe. The trojan was designed to steal internet credentials, and it also overwrote data files with malicious code.

The attack shut down servers all over the world, up to the highest levels of global government, business, education and finance. The worldwide cost to remove the worm and repair the extensive damage it had done was between \$10 and \$15 billion. And all it took was one little click on a computer link to open the door and unleash this disaster.

As we continue in Romans chapter 5 today, Paul paints a picture for us that is, in some ways, analogous to the LoveLetter worm: Adam transgressed God's explicit command to him, and that trespass opened the door for sin and death to exercise dominion on earth. Disaster! But unlike that poor soul who first clicked on the LoveLetter link, Adam wasn't innocent. He knew what God required and he chose to disobey. And his rebellion ushered in disaster. The LoveLetter worm ultimately impacted only about 10 percent of the world's computers. The impact of Adam's sin is 100 percent; no one escapes the shadow it casts.

Now, before we look at today's text, I want to address the question that some of you may be asking yourselves: How is it that Paul is once again talking about sin, no matter how disastrous it is? Is this not exactly what he covered in chapters 1 to 4, where he discussed the depths of human cravenness and depravity, the sins of the Gentiles, the sins of the Jews? So how come we're back here again?

In this section of the text, Paul is looking at sin from a different vantage point. Instead of the 50-foot view,

where he showed us what personal sin looks like in horrid detail, now he is taking us up for the 50,000 foot view so we can see the broader reality of sin across time and space. Here Paul is going to show us something historical and global about sin. And his basic message about sin from this 50,000-foot vantage point is this: It's way worse than you think. But Paul, of course, doesn't stop here. For while it's true that this first Adam, by his transgression, opened the door to the reign of sin and death, Jesus Christ, whom Paul describes elsewhere as both the second Adam and the last Adam, undoes the legacy of Adam by living a sinless life, by suffering death in our place, and by triumphing over the grave through his resurrection. In Christ, says Paul, it becomes way, way better than you think.

Paul is going to develop his argument about Adam and Christ in three steps: First, he introduces Adam and, briefly, Christ (vv. 12-14). Second, he contrasts Adam and Christ (vv. 15-17). Finally, he compares Adam and Christ (vv. 18-21).¹

The introductory section begins with "therefore." This word connects what comes next with what has come before, beginning all the way back in Romans 1:18, where Paul stated that "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people...." As Paul continues to develop his argument here beginning in verse 12, his main point is that the problem of sin is not only a matter of individual sin; it is a human problem that is explained by our relationship to Adam and ultimately made right by our relationship to Jesus Christ in light of his death.

So, what is our relationship with Adam, the first human being? Paul summarizes it in the first part of verse 12. We can sketch it out like this:

Adam transgresses God's command.

As a result,

- a Sin comes in and produces
- b death.
- b₁ All die
- a₁ because all sin.²

One man commits one trespass against God's command. That one trespass opens the door to Sin. Sin gives birth to death. Adam sinned by disobeying God's explicit command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17). That's what a trespass or transgression is for Paul — a violation of God's express command.³ And when Adam sinned, he opened the door to Sin.

Now for Paul, sin is not only something we do. Sin is a Power. Sin is an agent, an active noun. Here and in chapters 6 and 7, Paul says that Sin enters the world (v. 12); Sin exercises dominion (v. 20); Sin pays wages (6:23). Sin seizes opportunities, deceives, kills, works death, and dwells in people (7:8, 11-13, 20). Paul personifies Sin as a nefarious villain that uses death as its primary weapon.

And death isn't just physical. Death is a multifaceted alienation, first and foremost from God. Remember Adam and Eve's shame that moved them to hide from God? (Gen. 3:8) This is our *spiritual death*.

We are also alienated from one another, which we see when Cain kills Abel. This is a *relational death*.

We are also alienated from creation, which bore God's curse in our stead. We labor and toil by the sweat of our brow among thorns and weeds. This is a kind of *experiential death*.

We are alienated from our very selves, unable to do what we know to be right. This is an *existential death*.

And finally, yes, we are alienated from life itself as we face our *physical death*.

This devastating, multifaceted alienation is what Adam unleashes into the world through his trespass. And we know that death continues to exercise dominion — to rule — because everyone dies. Because everyone sins. This is the inheritance that Adam left for us, this is his legacy: Sin and Death that rule and reign in this world, and we are active participants in his legacy of sin that we on our own cannot escape ... because we are Adam's

¹ There are so many ways to organize this passage. Here, I am following John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), 149ff. Don Carson, with The Gospel Coalition, has an interesting outline that reads the whole passage as a story of contrasts: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/sermon/death-through-adam-life-through-christ-romans-5-12-21/>.

² Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 315.

³ Michael Bird, *Romans*, The Story of God Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 181.

offspring. In effect, we *are* Adam.⁴ His sin is our sin. Imputed to us. Entangling us. Ensnaring us. Killing us.

One man. One trespass that sets in motion a cycle of sin and death from which we cannot escape and in which we actively participate. Paul wants us to understand: It's way, way worse than we think.

As Paul winds up his introduction of Adam in verse 14, he gives us the smallest mention of Christ: Adam is a type of the one who was to come. Adam prefigures Christ. Which seems a bit strange, doesn't it? How can a walking disaster like Adam be a type of Christ?

It's almost as if Paul is reading our mind here because in the next section of the letter, he lists a bunch of ways that Adam and Jesus Christ are *not* alike. He begins:

"But the free gift is not like the trespass" (v. 15). By the free gift, Paul is referring here to the Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, which is a work of God's grace. By "free," Paul doesn't mean that Jesus' death had no cost. It did. An extraordinary cost. But he means that Jesus gave his life freely for our sake in obedience to His Father. We did not do anything to compel him to die or to convince him to die or to merit his dying for us. It is a gift offered freely.

So the free gift is not like the trespass. This is a contrast about the *nature* of the actions of Adam and Christ.⁵ Adam's trespass was a deviation from God's path and an act of disobedience against God. Jesus' death was the culmination of a life of obedience to His Father and an act of self-sacrifice. In their nature, the trespass of Adam and the free gift of Christ are diametrically different.

Paul then offers a contrast that focuses on the *immediate effect* of their actions: The effect of Adam's trespass is death, God's judgment and condemnation. The free gift of Jesus Christ brings justification, or being made right with God. The effect of Jesus' action on the cross is an

absolute reversal of the condemnation that followed in the wake of Adam's sin.

Paul also contrasts the *scope* of their actions: Adam's one sin brings condemnation for all. One trespass. Jesus died not only for that one sin; Jesus came into a world full of tombs and bones. A world where transgressions were as numerous as all the grains of sand on the earth. Who would do such a thing? Bible scholar Charles Cranfield puts it this way: "That one single misdeed should be answered by judgment, this is perfectly understandable: that the accumulated sins and guilt of all the ages should be answered by God's free gift, this is the miracle of miracles, utterly beyond human comprehension."⁶

Paul makes one final contrast in verse 17, and it is an unexpected doozie:

"If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

The contrast here is about the *ultimate effect* of the actions of Adam and Christ. Adam's trespass brings the dominion of death. But all who receive God's grace freely offered in Christ's death will exercise dominion in life through Jesus Christ.

Did you catch that? In Adam, we live under the dominion of death. We would expect the next part of the sentence to say, "In Christ, we live under the dominion of life." But look again. Through Christ and by his death, those who receive his grace will themselves exercise dominion in life. Those in Christ will reign in life. Such is the generosity of Jesus. Not only to rescue us from the clutches of sin and death but to empower us to reign through him. And this reign begins as soon as

bears in his own body on the cross the guilt that is ours, and his sinless righteousness is imputed to us. In Christ, we are reborn as God's children and joint heirs in Jesus Christ. Talk about unfair! Christ dies our death – which he did not deserve – and delivers us from death to eternal life with our God and Savior. What grace! Hallelujah! For an overview of original sin, see: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/original-sin/>.

⁵ For the categories of contrast here and of comparison, below (e.g., "nature of their actions"), I am indebted to Stott, 154-58.

⁶ Quoted in Stott, 155.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, TNTC, vol. 6 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1985), 133. The question of exactly *how* we are connected to Adam is the question of original sin. Theologians over the centuries have wrestled with this complex, nuanced, and fascinating question. For us as Reformed Christians, we hold to a Representational view of original sin: Adam, as the first human, is our representational head, and when he sinned, the legal guilt of his sin was imputed to us. His representational failure means that all humans, in Adam, are born with a broken, sinful nature; we inherit his corruption and from birth are alienated spiritually from God. Which sounds unfair. BUT ... the same is true of our status in Christ: As the second and last Adam, Christ's

we receive the gift of his salvation, and it will come to its full expression in the life to come.

Are you hearing this? Because of Christ, it's way, way better than we thought. In Christ, we are transferred from the dominion of death to the dominion of life everlasting. Not only this, but we have dominion in life. Right now.

Are you feeling it? Are you feeling that dominion? Yes? No? Not sure? I get it ... Because it's hard to grasp. It's hard to imagine. Because it doesn't feel as if we are free from death, does it? And in fact, we're not yet free. It's as if we live in the middle of a Venn diagram, caught between the Now and the Not Yet. It can be a hard place to live. We *have* hope in Christ. We *know* God is faithful and true. Yet we still live in a world of tombs and bones, where sin holds sway. Where people we love suffer. Where we suffer. Where sin causes unspeakable harm and hurt, and we feel powerless to make a difference. Where creation, bearing the curse of our sin, rises up as natural disasters and swallows us whole. Where we are still alienated from people we love, and sometimes we are the cause of that alienation.

O, Church, what Paul is trying to help us understand here, with the almost mathematical precision of his language, is that the reality of our life in Christ is a fact, not a feeling. Just as Paul's 50,000-foot view helps us see the dire historical reality of sin, so it also can help us see the divine historical reality of God's grace. Paul is inviting us here to rest in the fact of what Christ accomplished by his death and resurrection. To rest assured in the fact of who and what we became in him when we received his grace. No matter how you are feeling today — whether dimmed by sin or victorious in Christ — Paul's words are true, and they are for you: "Much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ." Grace upon grace!

Let's circle back briefly to that question of how Adam is a type of Christ. Paul makes three comparisons in the last section of this passage, and they are each indicated by the language, "just as..., so...."

Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. Even though the outcomes are a contrast — condemnation vs. justification — Paul is highlighting the parallel between them: one man brings an immediate result that has vast impact.

Now, to clarify, Paul is not advocating a universal salvation here when he writes that Jesus' death results in life for "all." This "all" has to be understood in light of verse 17, where the "all" is qualified as those who receive his free gift.

Next, Paul compares the nature of their actions: "just 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." In Adam's disobedience, we are all constituted as sinners; in Christ's obedience, all who receive his grace are constituted as righteous.

What Paul is emphasizing here is that what the first Adam did, the last Adam — Jesus Christ — has utterly undone. The story of Adam and his offspring is not like some episode of "This Old House," where Jesus walks into humanity's house and says, "This place has good bones. All we need is to raise the counters and strip off the old wallpaper and reupholster great-grandma's couch." No, the weight-bearing beams have been devoured by the termites of sin and death, and the whole thing needs to be rebuilt from the ground up. There's nothing cosmetic, nothing superficial, about the repair of the human heart. It's not a matter of Adam redone. Or even Adam undone. What the first Adam created by his sin, the last Adam crushes beneath his heel (Gen. 3:15). "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17).⁷

And this brings us to Paul's final comparison: "just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Here, Adam disappears from the foreground, and his legacy of sin and death are in view. The comparison lies in the two dominions: the reign of sin through death and the reign of grace through justification that leads to eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

crush us; he draws us into life, he sets us free. As my friend said, the work of sanctification is not a total demo but a renovation to bring to greater brilliance the image of God within each human.

⁷ A friend asked me a question after the sermon that made me realize I could have been much clearer here. What Christ is crushing beneath his heel is the *legacy* of Adam: sin and death and alienation. This is what needs to be utterly rebuilt. But when Christ comes into our lives, he does not

The reign of grace! Eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord! Paul ends on such a victorious note. He signals without shame or embarrassment “the overwhelming superiority of Christ’s work.”⁸ What Adam did, Christ does not merely undo. He reconstitutes it — reconstitutes us — entirely! The personified powers of Sin and Death? They are de-throned and defeated. Paul is so excited about this reign of grace, and how it outlasts and outshines even sin’s increase... He’s so excited about the dominion of grace that he appears to make up a new word: hyper-abound. Through Jesus Christ, grace hyper-abounds in order that God’s plan to put asunder the reign of sin and death might be accomplished. Grace hyper-abounds to us in order that we might step into the reign of Grace through justification in Christ. Grace hyper-abounds and brings to eternal life all who would receive the free gift offered for our sake by Jesus on the cross.

As we now prepare to come down from Paul’s 50,000-foot perspective, we realize that what Paul is helping us to see from this vantage point is ... a love letter. Oh, not the sort that causes worldwide infection of computers, but rather the sort of love letter that cures the infection of sin. Paul helps us see sin the way God sees sin — as universally worthy of judgment and condemnation. But Paul equally helps us see the one remedy: What Adam has done, Christ has undone on the cross. And not in a stingy, meager way. But with hyper-abounding grace that meets us where we are and leads us from the alienation of death into the fullness of life here and now, and eventually into eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

My friends, whether you are contemplating receiving the gift of God’s hyper-abounding grace in Jesus Christ for the first time or whether, as we turn towards the grace of this Table, you are preparing to receive for who knows how many time, I invite you, I urge you, to receive this gift now in Jesus’ name by saying “yes” – Yes to the one who calls us from death to life. Yes to the one who calls us to follow him in joyful obedience. Yes to the only one who can set us free to be all we were created to be in Christ Jesus. Yes! And amen.

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The Next Step

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

The following questions and scriptures are provided for Life Groups and individuals who want to reflect further on today’s message.

1. Read Romans 5:12-21 again. What do you notice? What stands out to you?
2. With reference to Adam, the Fall, and the dominion of sin and death, Paul’s argument is basically this: “It’s way worse than you think.” How so? Take a look at the passage again and name some of the ways that “the one man’s trespass” (v. 18) resulted in disaster for us all.
3. One way to notice the contrasts that Paul is drawing between Adam and Christ is by paying attention to the word “through” as it relates to each of them. Read Romans 5:9-21 and name all that comes “through” Adam and all that comes “through” Jesus Christ. What contrasts do you notice, especially with respect to the nature, scope and effect of their actions?
4. The “free gift” of vv. 15-17 stands in contrast to Adam’s trespass, and it refers to the work of Christ at Calvary—a work of God’s grace. Though costly, the gift was freely offered by Christ through his obedience to the Father. What do we learn about this free gift in vv. 15-17? How have you experienced this free gift in your life, and what difference does it make for you today?
5. It seems a bit odd to compare Adam and Christ, but Paul does this in vv. 18-21. Focusing on the three “just as..., so...” constructions in these verses, what are the similarities that Paul notes? What are the implications of these similarities?
6. By the end of the passage, we see that Adam’s legacy is not merely undone or redone by Christ’s righteousness and God’s super-abundant grace; it is demolished for those who are in Christ. What does this reveal to you about the nature and character of our Triune God? What does this tell us about who we are, by grace, in Christ?

(The material for question 7 got cut from the sermon due to length. So, this can be a “bonus” question if you’d like to tackle it. Read Revelation 7:9 (and Luke 10:2) and this quote from John Calvin, which is also on the front of the bulletin: “If Adam’s fall had the effect of

⁸ Stott, 149.

producing the ruin of many, the grace of God is much more efficacious in benefiting many, since admittedly Christ is much more powerful to save than Adam was to ruin.” Eternal life with Christ will be amply populated! That means that all around us are people who may be a part of the great harvest of Christ’s righteousness. We don’t have to drum up interest or convince anyone; the Holy Spirit is already working an abundant good in those we meet. Given this, take a look at Question 7:)

7. Revelation 7:9 paints a picture of eternity as abundantly populated with the redeemed in Christ. How might this vision motivate believers in our witness to Christ? What is one specific step you can take to

become, with the help of the Holy Spirit, better prepared to share Christ in your day-to-day life? Encourage and pray for one another here.

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Table to Table

Something for Kids and Adults to Consider Together

If someone asked you why you love Jesus,
what would you say?