

Introduction: This is the most important passage in Romans because it outlines how God accomplishes His holy purposes which are revealed in the fundamentals of the covenant. Romans 5:12-21 gives the big picture that makes sense of everything. Let's remember the context of the preceding chapters.

In Romans 1, Paul has addressed the issue of righteousness, the lack of righteousness and the provision of righteousness, as the very heart of the gospel. This is the gospel of God concerning His Son, who according to the flesh is descended from David, and is demonstrated to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead. The gospel concerns Christ and His work. The focus of the gospel is how we must be right with God.

In Romans 2 and 3, Paul has looked at the human race, both Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, religious and irreligious, moral and immoral. The evidence demands the verdict that is given in holy Scripture that the whole world is condemned before God. There is none righteous, no not one.

In Romans 4, having described our condemnation, Paul next proclaims God's provision, and how righteousness is secured in Jesus by His life, death, and resurrection. The resurrection is the proof of His atoning sacrifice on the cross. Paul then explains how this work of Christ applies to us, not as a wage we earn, but as a gift freely received through faith.

In the first half of Romans 5, verses 1-11, we are reminded of the wonderful blessing of justification. We have peace in the past. We have grace in the present. We have glory in the future. The blessings of justification are further revealed against the challenges of life which include suffering, sinfulness, and security.

How is this gospel possible? We come to the second half of Romans 5, verses 12-21. Here Paul surveys the whole of human history. In order to demonstrate to us the universal impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul uses language and concepts that are familiar to his readers. Here he explains what it means to be "in Christ." By nature, all of us are "in Adam." The basic biblical revelation is that either you are "in Adam" or you are "in Christ." The phrase at the focus of this passage and in verse 19 is "by one man" which is at the heart of the fundamentals of the covenant. To highlight the dynamics of the covenant we emphasize three concepts: Representation (vs. 12-14); Imputation (vs. 15-17); Confirmation (vs. 18-21).

The classic biblical illustration of representation, imputation, and confirmation is the Old Testament contest between David and Goliath recorded in 1 Samuel 17. A huge Philistine army, equipped with chariots (the nuclear weapons of the day) was represented by Goliath, a giant over 9 feet tall. When David, the representative of Israel, stoned and slough Goliath, the victory of David was imputed to the Israelites. The defeat of Goliath was imputed to the Philistines. The result was confirmed with the Philistines fleeing and the Israelites chasing them and plundering their tents. At the moment that David killed Goliath, the Philistine casualty count was one soldier. However, he was their champion, their representative. His defeat was imputed to his army with a violent confirmation. What are the fundamentals of the covenant?

A. REPRESENTATION (vs. 12-14)

The first fundamental is **representation**. Covenant theology correctly understands that God does not deal with people directly, but always through a representative. He is a covenant head who acts on behalf of his people.

An illustration from sporting events is the way we participate in or benefit from the results. When your team wins you say, “We won.” When your team loses you say, “We lost.” If you enjoy following a team, whether they are high school, college, professional, or Olympic, cheering for your team makes you a fan. When your team wins, you provided the encouragement while the actual players excelled in the athletic event. While you didn’t hit the deciding homerun, or catch the winning pass in the end zone, or shoot the game winning 3-point shot, you enjoy the successful results as if you had been one of the victorious players. When the team wins you win.

Another illustration is from our federal government. We have a covenantal or representative arrangement in government. Suppose the American ambassador to France negotiates a mutual defense treaty and then the U.S. Senate ratifies the treaty. If France is attacked then you will defend France by your men and money even though you did not sign the treaty or voted to ratify it in the Senate. When the ambassador, as your federal head, signs a treaty, then you sign it. You are under the authority of the ambassador and he acts on your behalf. He is your federal representative.

Representation is the basis on which we baptize the children of believers. God deals with the children through their parents. The father is the covenant head. He is the representative of his family. Representation is the basis on which we should organize our congregational meetings. The head of the household represents his family. Representation is the basis of the presbytery meeting. The teaching and ruling elders represent the congregation at presbytery meetings.

God deals with us through representatives. Fundamentally, there are only two: Adam and Jesus Christ. All human being who have ever lived either have Adam as their leader or Jesus as their leader. All people are either in Adam or in Christ. If they are in Adam, God deals with them through Adam. If they are in Christ, God deals with them through Christ.

God is a covenant God and He deals with us through these two covenant heads. He deals with us by means of our representative. The Puritan theologian, Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680), gives us a good illustration. He wrote, “Paul speaks of Adam and Christ as if there had never been any more men in the world except these two. And why? Because these two, between them, had all the rest of the sons of men hanging at their girdle.”

In Puritan times a girdle was a leather belt. Think of two great giants with wide leather belts around their waists. On the belts are millions of little hooks. Hanging from each hook is a person. Every person is attached to Adam’s belt or Christ’s belt. There is no other position. There is no other possibility. This is the basic division of humanity. This is your deepest identity. Who you are fundamentally is either in Adam or in Christ. Everything else is subordinate to your connection to your representative. Your gender, your nationality, your personality, your spirituality, everything is dependent on whether you are attached to Adam’s belt or to Christ’s belt.

The whole force of this analogy is based on the real existence of Adam as a single, historic individual. You can not accept the theory of evolution and make it compatible with Paul’s argument. There is no correspondence between Jesus who was a real individual and an Adam who was not a real individual. Paul’s argument depends on Adam being the first created human being.

The first subject in this passage is representation. We can only understand our sin problem by realizing that we are born in Adam. We can only understand our need by realizing that we are attached to Adam's belt. The issue of sin is not merely our personal transgressions and debts. It's not chiefly our failures and mistakes. It is far more fundamentally that we are in Adam. God deals with us through Adam.

Likewise, we can only understand our salvation by realizing that God has disconnected us from Adam and has connected us to Christ. Who we are is no longer in Adam but now we are in Christ. We can only rejoice in our salvation by realizing that a change of representatives has happened to us. It is a fundamental change and an irreversible change in our standing before God. The first fundamental is representation.

B. IMPUTATION (vs. 15-17)

The second fundamental is **imputation**. Imputation is a theological word. We don't often use it otherwise. The Oxford dictionary defines imputation as "to ascribe something to a person by virtue of a similar quality in another person." For example, if you said, "That boy is probably lazy. His father is the laziest man I know." You are imputing laziness to that boy, not because you had observed him to be lazy, but because his father is lazy. You are taking a vice of his father and you are imputing it to his son. Another example, if you said, "That girl is surely thoughtful because her mother is very kind." You are imputing the kindness of the mother to her daughter.

In this passage, everything that Adam was is counted as the character of his people. Everything that Adam did is credited as the action of his people. Similarly, everything that Jesus was is counted as ours. Everything that Jesus did is credited to us.

Adam, as our federal head, was a type of another who was to come. All along God was setting it up so that we would be justified in Christ. There would be another by whose success or failure we would either stand or fall. We would do so by imputation. It is by the imputation of Adam's demerit and condemnation that we are sinners, and it is by the imputation of Christ's merit and righteousness that we are justified. The guilt or innocence of the covenant head is imputed to those who belong to him.

The obedience of Jesus is imputed to us. It is not actually ours, but it is reckoned to us. It is credited to us. It is counted as ours. Imputation means that all that is true of the covenant head, the representative, is imputed to his people. Paul fills out the argument. All people are involved in sin and death. That is obvious. Further, Paul spent three chapters proving this. The issue of sin is obvious. Look around you. Look in your own heart. All people are sinners. All people will die. Why is this? It is because we have all sinned. That is true. We have all sinned. But the reason is deeper. We all sin and we all die because of our covenant head, our representative. It's because of Adam.

Paul makes this important point no fewer than six times in this passage.

Verse 12, "... as through one man sin entered the world ..."

Verse 15, "... by the one man's offense many died ..."

Verse 16, "... judgment which came from one offense ..."

Verse 17, "... by the one man's offense death reigned through the one ..."

Verse 18, "... one man's offense judgment came to all men ..."

Verse 19, "... by one man's disobedience many were made sinners ..."

Paul emphasizes the reality of what happened by one man. When Adam, the giant, fell into sin, we all fell into sin with him because we were connected to him. We fell because he fell.

It is not a coincidence or a fluke that every person has sinned. It is because we have an organic relationship with Adam. We are in him. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* 16 states simply that we “sinned in him and fell with him, in his first transgression.” We sinned in his first transgression. We fell in his first transgression. His sin was counted as ours.

Paul gives the evidence of this truth back in verses 13 and 14. The argument is simple. God gave Adam a clear, definite commandment. God spoke to Adam and warned that if he broke this commandment he would die. Centuries later, God came to Moses. God spoke to Moses. God gave Moses a clear, definite set of commandments. God said that if you break these commandments you will die. We understand why Adam died. God spoke to him. We understand why Moses died. God spoke to him. But in between Adam and Moses thousands and thousands of people died. God hadn’t spoken to them directly. God had not given a commandment to them directly. Yet they all died. Why did they die? The only explanation is that they shared the penalty of Adam’s disobedience. “Nevertheless, death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam ...” (Rom. 5:14). The reason that sin and death are universal in the world is because we are in Adam.

Next, Paul turns to the subject of salvation. Here is one of the most brilliant pieces of reasoning. Paul writes with beauty, symmetry, and exactness. There is salvation, including forgiveness, eternal life, and heaven. How will salvation come? How do we get salvation? Paul’s opponents have been insisting that it comes by our works. If we keep God’s laws, if we obey Him, if we do the best we can, we will be saved. That is what people think today. Natural man thinks that if you are good enough, or if you suffer enough, or if you believe enough, you will go to heaven. The idea is that God examines each person individually. If you do well enough you will pass. If you don’t do well enough you will fail. On the Day of Judgment we get our exam results. Some may pass and some may fail. It is entirely up to you. This is the common deception.

Paul refutes this deception. How were we lost? Were we lost by individual failures? No. We were lost by one man. Because of one man we were lost. How will we be saved? We will be saved exactly the same way we were lost, by one Man. We were lost because of one man. We are saved because of one Man. We were lost because of what Adam did. We are saved because of what Jesus did. We are lost or saved through our representative. The deed of our representative is imputed to those who belong to him.

Paul says in verse 14 that Adam was “a type of Him who was to come.” This rules out completely any idea of salvation by our works, by our lives, or by our good deeds. That contradicts the whole pattern of God’s covenant relationship. Do you see the symmetry? In Adam we disobeyed. In Adam we sinned. In Adam we fell. In Adam we were judged. In Adam we die. And so, in Christ we obeyed. In Christ we live perfect lives. In Christ we paid for sin on the cross. In Christ we were raised from the dead. In Christ we are seated in heaven. In Christ we live forever. All that He is is ours. All that He suffered is ours. All that He did is counted as ours.

Paul expresses this truth in other words in 1 Corinthians 15:22, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.” John Henry Newman (1801-1890) wrote,

*All loving wisdom of our God, when all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.*

The first two fundamental concepts of covenant theology are representation and imputation.

C. CONFIRMATION (vs. 18-21)

The third fundamental is **confirmation**. Paul is a pastor who wants the Roman believers to grasp the gospel. He is not writing abstract theology. He is not trying to show how well he can explain federal or covenant theology. In the first 11 verses of chapter 5 he was concerned about peace with God, assurance of the love of God, and rejoicing in God. Now he wants to establish the conviction, or he wants to confirm, that if you are in Christ your salvation is certain, and that is final.

Look at verses 18 and 19. “Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.” These verses may be the heart of this whole epistle. Paul shows us that in Christ we are part of a new humanity.

He makes this point by a comparison. He reminds us of the utter inevitability of the results of being in Adam. What is the great, universal fact of being connected to Adam by ordinary generation? Death. Everybody is going to die. Is there any possibility of escaping physical death? No, there is not. We were born in Adam. It is certain that we will die.

What does this mean for those who are in Christ? The same absolute certainty applies. What is the great, universal fact of being connected to Christ by spiritual regeneration? Life. Is there any possibility of missing eternal life? No, because we are now in Christ. It is certain that we will live.

Salvation is far bigger than many Christians understand. Salvation is more than forgiveness of sins. Salvation is a radically new change of positions before God. It is a new status or standing with God. It is a total transformation of who you are and how God deals with you. We have been disconnected from Adam and have been connected to Christ. We have a new covenant representative. Previously, all of God's dealings with us were through Adam. Now, all of God's dealings with us are through Jesus. As sin came into the world and thus death spread to all who were united to one man, Adam, even so righteousness came into the world and life spread to all who are united to one man, Jesus.

John Owen (1616-1683) wrote, “Our great problem is not lack of effort, but unacquaintedness with our privileges.” You are in Christ. People ask, “How do I know that I will persevere?” When God saves you He puts you into Christ. John Calvin said that we may not seek the certainty of our salvation anywhere else than in the covenant.

We can look at death and see the certainty of life. Go to any cemetery and every gravestone proves that you must share the experience of your old covenant representative. There is no escape. “It is appointed for men to die” (Heb. 9:27). You must share the experience of your old covenant head. But now, for those who are united to Christ, you have a new covenant head. As sure as your body will die, so sure it is that your body and soul will live forever because you are in Jesus, your new covenant representative. You must share the experience of your new covenant head. As certainly as death came through Adam, so

certainly does life come through Jesus.

This passage reminds us of the enormous chasm between the believer and the unbeliever. It is not a little difference. It is a vast difference. It is not that the believer is a little more religious than the unbeliever or has made a commitment that the unbeliever has not. The difference is the unbeliever is in Adam, but the believer is in Jesus.

If you have not surrendered to Jesus Christ, if you are not committed to Him, you are still in Adam. There is no possibility that you will ever please God by anything in your whole life. It's impossible. You are in Adam. You can try your best, but that doesn't matter. You can try to keep the commandment, but that doesn't matter. You can try to please God, but that doesn't matter. You are in Adam. As long as you are connected to Adam there is absolutely nothing you can do to save yourself, to improve your situation. The only change that is possible is for you to be disconnected from Adam and connected to Jesus.

If you have been loosed from Adam and united to Jesus, it is absolutely certain, it is guaranteed, that by your representative you are credited with perfect righteousness and have eternal life. Nothing you will ever do can change that. You may stumble, but because you are connected to Jesus you cannot fall away. Nothing that happens to you will ever change your union with Christ. It was God's decision, not yours, that made Jesus your covenant representative.

The transfer from Adam to Jesus is irreversible. It cannot be undone. Do you think that God will change His mind? Will He realize one day that you are not worth it? Will God ever disconnect you from Jesus and reconnect you to Adam? That is utterly, eternally, impossible because of the death of the Son of God. His earthly life made full satisfaction for our righteousness, and His accursed death made full payment for our infractions. His resurrection is the certainty of complete salvation for those are united to Christ. You have passed from death to life. Our Lord Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (^{ESV} John 5:24).

Everyone in Christ is equally secure. The weakest believer, the frailest Christian, the most inconsistent disciple, the least gifted follower, is as secure as the greatest saint because certainty has nothing to do with us. Certainty has everything to do with Jesus Christ.

There are two covenant representatives. What each one does is imputed to those who belong to them. Adam's sin made death certain for all who are united to him. Jesus' death made life certain for all who are united to Him. When you are lifted out of Adam and placed into Jesus, everything that is true of Christ is credited to you. So Paul concludes this paragraph by writing, "so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (^{NKJ} Rom. 5:21).

Conclusion: The grand and sovereign plan of God, or the big picture that makes sense of everything, is expressed in this poem by Edmund Clowney (1917-2005):

*Vast the immensity, mirror of majesty,
galaxies spread in a curtain of light;
Lord, your eternity rises in mystery
there where no eye can see, infinite height!*

*Sounds your creative word, forming both star and bird,
 shaping the cosmos to win your delight;
 Order from chaos springs, form that your wisdom brings,
 guiding created things, infinite might!*

*Who can your wisdom scan? Who comprehend your plan?
 How can the mind of man your truth embrace?
 Here does your Word disclose more than your power shows,
 love that to Calv'ry goes, infinite grace!*

*Triune your majesty, triune your love to me,
 fixed from eternity in heav'n above.
 Father, what mystery, in your infinity
 you gave your Son for me, infinite love!*

Who is your representative? What is imputed to you? Do you realize the confirmation of your status before God? Are you still in Adam and so in sin and condemnation? Or, are you now in Christ and so in peace and righteousness? God's design of representation, imputation, and confirmation testify to you that only if you are in Christ are you reconciled with God, righteous by God, and reassured before God. These are the fundamentals of the covenant.

Resources: Edward Donnelly, **By the One Man**, Romans 5:12-21, 09/19/2010, Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church, NI, www.sermonaudio.com
 Sinclair B. Ferguson, **Plentiful Grace**, Romans 5:12-21, 09/25/2016, Associate Presbyterian Church, Scotland, UK, www.sermonaudio.com
 Sinclair B. Ferguson, **First Principles**, Romans 5:12-21, 05/17/2009, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC, www.sermonaudio.com
 Liam Goligher, **A Whole New World**, Romans 5:12-21, 09/26/2021, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA, www.sermonaudio.com
 Richard Phillips, **In Christ Alone**, Romans 5:12-21, 10/29/2017, Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, www.sermonaudio.com

The Book of Psalms for Singing: 25C, 89A, 111A, 111B (Covenant)