

Sermons through

Romans

Through One Man

Romans 5:12-14

With Study Questions

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Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned – ¹³ (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. ¹⁴ Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come (Romans 5:12-14).

Introduction

When I add up the number of memorial services I have officiated and attended, it easily extends into the hundreds. It's a common occurrence in these services to open the mic for those who would like to say a few words on behalf of the deceased. This can be a very intimate time to hear significant, funny, nostalgic or heartfelt stories which help us appreciate a loved one from a perspective we didn't have. The open mic can also be philosophically illuminating; especially when the person moves from talking about their friend to giving their perspectives on life and death.

These perspectives can range from profound to humorous to absurd. Over the years I've noticed one very common sentiment given by those seeking to assuage the grief of the occasion – it goes something like this: "Death is a part of life, death is natural." It is not difficult to understand, given our limited observation, where people would arrive at this particular sentiment. Since death happens to everybody, it is supposed, it must be natural. If by natural we mean inevitable, I agree. But if by natural we mean it is necessary to human nature, we err. We have embraced something we should not accept. We become like the house-elves in Harry Potter who are more than happy to accept their roles as unpaid, unappreciated servant/captives.

Death is not natural nor is it necessary to human nature. Adam was human prior to the fall **"wherein life was promised to (him); and in him to his posterity, (Rom. 10:5, Rom. 5:12-20) upon condition of perfect and**

personal obedience. (Gen. 2:17, Gal. 3:10)."¹ Sin and death may be universal, but they are not necessary to humanity and we should not think them natural in accurate or positive way. Death is a curse! Charles Hodges calls death, in the passage before us, "**penal evil, and not a consequence of the original constitution of man.**"² Death is a punishment.

Being careful not to overstep my boundaries, but death can be compared to a sacrament in that points to something – something we are to remember and contemplate.

O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! ⁵ Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath (Psalm 39:4, 5)!

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12).

Pondering the shortness of our days and the inevitability of our futures should bring our minds to wisdom. There is no true wisdom derived from the notion that death is natural. Death is a curse, it is the consequence of sin and it is an enemy of man and Christ.

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:25, 26).

Until this is squarely before us, it will be very difficult to appreciate the glory of this passage.³ At the dawn of man something unspeakably horrifying transpired: shame, conflict, sorrow, pain, sweat, deception – man returning by death to the ground, which is itself cursed (Genesis 3:16-19) only begins to summarize the wreckage of human sorrow emerging from man's initial act of rebellion.

¹ *The Westminster confession of faith*. 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

² *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Charles Hodge. p. 147.

³ By "this passage" I include Romans 5:12-21.

Add to this how Jesus uses one of the most dreadful geographical settings on earth to help us appreciate the eternal consequences of human rebellion as it relates to death eternal. When Jesus warns:

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).

The word for “hell” is Gehenna which was the “Valley of Hinnom” where idolatrous practices were carried out, most notably the unthinkable infant sacrifice associated with the worship of Molech (1 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 19:56; 32:35). The valley, just outside of Jerusalem, was later used for the burning of garbage and the dead bodies of criminals. Physically, spiritually, temporally and eternally death is an enemy and a curse—a “penal evil”—a punishment.

Now the remarkable message in this passage is not that each man’s individual sin deserves death—as true as that is for “**the soul who sins shall die**” (Ezekiel 18:20). This passage focuses on the consequential death which falls upon all due to the sin of Adam. Paul will make that clear in verse 15 where he writes “**by the one man’s offense many died.**” So we read verse 12:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned— (Romans 5:12).

Through One Man

The “**therefore**” ties this verse to what Paul had just stated regarding God’s demonstration of His love for sinners by sending His Son to die for us. That we are justified (counted as righteous) and reconciled (made to be God’s friends) through the death of Christ and the power of His life is the context.

Paul will now begin to compare what happened through Adam to what happens through Christ. So to fully appreciate what is accomplished by Christ, we have to grasp what was lost in Adam; for the work of one (in a very opposite sense) correlates to the work of the other. It is not entirely

uncommon for people to complain that they weren't in the Garden of Eden when Adam ate and fell, so why should we be the recipients of his curse? Of course the same people would never complain that they weren't on the cross next to Jesus, so why should we be the recipients of His blessings? We were neither in the Garden of Eden nor Gethsemane but those two events and those two men have, and will, determine the course of each one's destiny.

Sin Entered

This is clearly seen by what happened through Adam—**“sin entered the world.”** This doesn't mean that sin somehow merely showed up in the world as if it were some unwanted guest making the party uncomfortable while people scurry from room to room seeking to avoid his presence. It means the world, that is all of mankind, became sinners. But the tentacles of the curse extend even further.

In the early 1800s Isaac Watts wrote a hymn which has become a carol commonly sung during Christmas. It's entitled *Joy to the World* and is based upon what God will accomplish through His Son as recorded in Psalm 98. In a clear reference to the fall of man He writes:

**No more let sins and sorrow grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground:**

He then writes of how far the work of Christ will extend:

**He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found**

We will get into the extent of Christ's blessings in a future sermon, but right now we ask just how far does that curse extend? Sin has entered the world. It permeates the created order. How deeply can the curse be found? For some reason it makes me think of the deep ocean where it is said, light can no longer penetrate; pressure so intense that life seems impossible. 25,000 feet below the surface of the ocean is surely immune to

the effects of the fall. But not so! Paul will later write **“the creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of corruption...that the whole creation groans and labors...”** (Romans 8:21, 22).

Sinned in Adam

Sin has entered the world **“and death through sin**, and there is no escaping it. No one gets out alive. **“Death has spread to all men, because all sinned.”** Again, even though it is true that all people have sinned (a point Paul drives home in the first three chapters of this epistle) Paul, I would argue, is still speaking of Adam’s sin, as if to say **“all have sinned in Adam.”** As Hodge explains:

The aorist (sinned) does not mean do sin, nor have sinned, nor are accustomed to sin. It is the simple historical tense, expressing momentary action in past time. All sinned, i.e., sinned in Adam, sinned through or by one man.⁴

A similar point is driven home by Paul in 1 Corinthians:

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:21, 22).

Paul continues.

(For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. ¹⁴ Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come (Romans 5:13, 14).

The Reign of Death

Paul is making a distinction here between the period of time between Adam and Moses and Moses and Christ (or Moses and now). Moses

⁴ *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Charles Hodge. p. 149.

brought the law which revealed man's guilt before God (Romans 7:13). But what Paul is conveying here is that death reigned before the law was given. And though one might argue that God's law always existed, when Paul writes that **"sin is not imputed when there is no law"** he seems to be calling upon another principle which brought the reign of death; and that principle (or action) was the sin of Adam.

What is meant by the words **"those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam?"** Some have held this to refer to infants but the context doesn't seem to admit to that conclusion. It is more likely referring to those who had been given certain and specific commands directly from God. Again, Paul seems to be removing the rest of humanity and their actions from the occasion that ignited the reign of death.

A Type

I have perhaps overly labored the isolation of Adam. But since, as Paul writes, Adam is a **"type of Him who was to come"** i.e. Jesus, it is critical for the distinction to be made. **"Type"** *tupos* is the noun form of the verb which means "to strike" or make an impression by a blow. In a wider sense it means a figure or a form. Adam prefigures Christ. So in the context, what is said of Adam teaches us of Christ. With that in mind we will end with this thought:

Three Imputations

Paul is attaching the entire spectrum of sin and death to the physical father of us all, Adam. It's as if our own sin (though it is real and we are culpable for it) were the fruit or evidence of a plague that hit the human race at dawn of man – but it is not the cause of the plague. The sin of Adam is imputed to the rest of humanity. His sin is reckoned or imputed to you and to me. It is laid to my account in my affiliation with humanity. The event of this destruction happened outside of you and me – the event was the day he ate.

Why is this critical to our faith?

Because there are two other imputations. My sin is reckoned to Christ – charged as it were to His account. And He pays in full the due

penalty, that penalty being hell itself. Jesus (as a man) was not there when I sinned. And He certainly did not join or conspire with me in it. Yet He takes the burden of it as His own to the extent that becomes sin itself (2 Corinthians 5:21).

And that final imputation – that wonderful and inexpressible gift given to those who have found reconciliation with God through Christ – is His righteousness reckoned or imputed to us. We are His body and what belongs to Him belongs to those who believe in Him. We were nowhere near Eden, but neither were we anywhere near Golgotha (the hill where Christ was crucified).

All humanity is attached to the curse of Adam. The universality of sin and death provide endless testimony to this truth. This attachment is by our physical birth. But our attachment to the last Adam – to Christ – is by, what Jesus called, a second birth (John 3:3). It is a birth from above by grace and consequent faith; by faith in who Christ is and what He has done we find forgiveness of sins and become heirs of the riches of heaven.

Questions for Study

1. How have you heard people explain the notion of death? Is death natural? Is it part of life? Is it necessary to human nature? How can death be compared to a sacrament? Explain your answers (pages 2, 3).
2. How does Jesus describe eternal death or hell (page 4)?
3. Have you ever thought it unfair that the sin of Adam should have such an effect upon you? How does that speak to the passage (pages 4, 5)?
4. What does it mean that “sin entered the world?” How far does the curse reach (pages 5, 6)?
5. Why is it important to recognize the curse is a result of Adam’s sin specifically (page 6)?
6. What is a “type” and why is it important (page 7)?
7. What are the three imputations and why is this so critical to our faith (pages 7, 8)?