

To Reign in Life

by Ray C. Stedman

When I was a student in Dallas Theological Seminary, I remember Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, president of the seminary, saying to us in a theology class that he considered the last half of Romans 5 the supreme test of a man's theology, and, also, that this was the most concentrated summary of the basic truths of Christianity in all the Scriptures. He said that when he was visiting in churches around the country, especially churches of Dallas graduates, he always took occasion, when he was in the pastor's study, to see if the fifth chapter of Romans was well worn in his Bible. While Dr. Chafer was alive, I always kept an index at that place in my Bible – in case he should come to visit me!

Now, this is a very important section – beginning with Verse 12 of Chapter 5 – and yet, if you take it all by itself, without relating to what has gone before, it is very easy to miss the whole point.

You remember, in the first part of this chapter, the Apostle Paul makes the statement that there is more to Christianity than simply believing in Christ and having our sins forgiven and looking forward to going to heaven someday when we die. And yet, there are millions of Christians who go no further in their Christian faith than that very fact.

It is true that we are delivered by faith in the death of Jesus Christ, and our hope of heaven is made sure by that, and we do have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ – all this being accomplished by his death for us upon the cross. But now Paul goes on to declare that Christ, through the Holy Spirit, comes to live in each believer's heart. And, if his death gets us ready for heaven, then his life (indwelling us) is there in order to make us ready for earth – that is, getting us ready to live life now. His death, you see, delivers us from the penalty of sin, but his life (his indwelling risen life) will deliver us from the power of sin over

us in our present experience. His death removes the bitterness of death for us; his life will remove the barrenness of our life for us.

I know that some of you are not afraid to face death because you are Christians, and you know that Christ has already bridged the gulf for you; but some are terribly tired of the weary, fruitless, restless, barren, boredom of life as it is lived from day to day. To learn that perhaps there is something more than this for the Christian, I think, to some of us, seems to be almost too good to be true – yet that is what Paul is telling us!

Now, in this last half of the chapter, he shows us why this must be true. In other words, here is God's provision that every believer in Jesus Christ, without exception, may live in continual, unbroken victory over every evil habit, every impatient spirit, every lustful thought, every discouraging circumstance, and every crushing disappointment in his life. He may enjoy, all the while, the smile of the Lord Jesus and the fellowship of an ungrieved Spirit.

Now we are going to examine this morning why that is true. It begins with a look at what a human life is like apart from Jesus Christ, Verses 12-14: We will call this **the reign of death:**

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned – 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 sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. {Rom 5:12-14 RSV}

The key to this section is the two little words, “death reigned.” This is the clearest statement, I think, in all the Scriptures, that something is obviously wrong with the human race – of which we are all a part. When the Scripture mentions the word “death” here, it means not only physical death, with which we are all so well acquainted, but it means, as well, the emptiness and the meaninglessness of life which we experience even while we are yet alive. In other words, there is much of death in life. You understand what I mean by that, I am sure.

Of course, there are moments, especially in youth, when life is exciting, thrilling, and it is great to be alive. It is a wonderful feeling, and all of life ahead looks interesting and fascinating and challenging. But all of us are aware that these moments pass, and they become farther and farther apart in our experience. And, as we grow older, we experience the fact (though we are reluctant to believe it) that life is becoming more and more characterized by a growing sense of futility and emptiness and meaninglessness. And it ends at last in the grave – the certain, final, pitiless doom of mankind.

Now, this is life apart from Jesus Christ. This is what is going on in the world right around us this morning, and many of us right here in this assembly can testify that this is what life is like to us. We feel a growing awareness of the emptiness of life.

This is why men who seemingly have everything that is supposedly worthwhile and valuable in life sometimes express themselves very forcefully as experiencing nothing but emptiness. Earnest Hemingway, before he died, said,

“I live in a vacuum which is as empty and as lonely as a radio tube when the batteries are dead and there is no current to plug it into.”

And this is why men who are the idols of the literary world like Hemingway, Jack London, and others, who seem to young people to be the very expression of excitement, glamour, and challenge, take their own lives in hopeless despair and emptiness.

This is our inheritance from Adam. This is what we all share, without exception, even little children who cannot choose wrong deliberately, as Adam did. That is what it means in Verse 14: “Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of

Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.”

Adam chose to do wrong deliberately, but there are many who do not choose to do wrong deliberately, such as little children, yet death reigns in their life. It simply means that the life story of every man is also the history of the world. And this is why the opening chapters of Genesis are so eternally meaningful to us when we read them – it is because we ourselves are constantly reproducing these stories.

Have you noticed that? For instance, when you read the story of the temptation of Eve {Gen 3:1-7} you discover that she saw the luscious fruit hanging there, in all its fascination and mystery, and she saw that it was good, and that it was to be desired, and that it would make one wise. She couldn’t resist it. We read that story and we know exactly how she felt because all of us have been there too. We have been fascinated by something that seemed to hold an air of mystery about it that would introduce a new realm of excitement and adventure – if we would just try it.

- We read about the shame of Adam and Eve after their temptation, and their desire to hide from God – and every one of us knows what that means. How many times have we come back from something with self-loathing and disgust in our hearts, and wished that we could find a hole, crawl in, and pull it in after us.
- We read of the jealousy of Cain and the murderous desire that was born in his heart – and all of us know what it means to be envious and to be angry at some remark that is made. We feel the burning of resentment and want to avenge ourselves some way.
- We read of the attempt to build the city of Babel, and we see a whole people set about the task of building a city that would supply all their needs, where they could be completely happy without God. We see such activity going on all around us today, and we are caught up in it ourselves.

Our own story, then, is simply a reproduction of the history of the world.

Now, that is what this passage is saying – we are children of Adam, in other words, and we all wake up sooner or later in some moment of truth to see the self-centeredness of our lives: We see the sheer egoism that dictates all our actions; we know that self is our god; we know that pride is our driving force; and no one had better say “nay.”

Now, this is human life without Jesus Christ. It is evil at the core. Though it can be made to appear good and respectable for awhile, its ultimate end is futility and death. There is not a thing we can do about it – not a thing! This is what Paul calls “the law of sin and death,” {Rom 8:2}. Like the law of entropy in physics, which declares that all things are gradually deteriorating (the universe is slowly running down), so, in our lives, that feeling of emptiness, futility, and meaninglessness comes upon us.

But there is good news as we read on in this brilliant analysis from the pen of the Apostle Paul. In Verses 15-21 Paul shows us what God has provided against this emptiness, in **the reign of life**:

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 in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 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.

Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous. 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 to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. {Rom 5:15-21 RSV}

Now, that sounds very complicated, doesn’t it? But it is really a rather simple contrast between the old life we have from Adam – all of us – and the new life which we may receive continually from Jesus Christ. The old life produces futility, corruption, condemnation, restlessness, and death – and who of us this morning (even these young people here) hasn’t experienced this already? And it manifests itself in lust and in cruelty, in jealousy and in envy, in hate and in sharpness, in resentment and in bitterness, in laziness and, oh, so many other ways.

Now, tell me, do you have to go to school to learn how to do these things properly? Who taught you

- how to be lazy?
- how to be jealous?
- how to be envious?
- how to be greedy, and cruel, and impatient, and bitter?

Do you have to plan these out carefully each morning when you get up? Do you think ahead, and say, “Well, now, in such a situation, I am really going to let my anger go – I’m going to blow my top, and, oh, will I tell him off!”

Do you plan those things? Do you have to try to be jealous, or proud, or lustful? No!

Do you promise sometimes that you will never be good again, and then find yourself breaking your promise without realizing it? Do you? Of course not!

No, you accomplish these, as the old song says, by *doing what comes naturally*. That is all. It is a natural result of the old life that we all have from Adam. We don’t have to try to do these things; it is as easy as living. We all find it easy to be bad.

Now listen! God has found a way – and this is no joke – this is no blind alley – God has found a way to bring that old life to an utter, complete end, and to begin a new life in Jesus Christ. When you learn how to let that wonderful, risen life of Jesus Christ (once lived out through thirty-three years of glorious manhood in old Judea) take over in your life today, you will be good as naturally and easily as you are bad now – in fact, much more so. Listen again to the Scripture: “If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abun-

dance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign ..." Where: In heaven? No, "in life." These shall: "reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ." Thus, it is as easy to love as it is to hate when you discover the life of Christ within. If you are drawing upon that life, it is as easy to forgive as it is to be resentful – just as easy – even easier, Paul declares.

Now, in Verse 20, Paul shows the futility of the way we usually try to correct this problem of being bad – i. e., by the Law, or by the setting up of rules, by signing New Year's resolutions, or by "turning over a new leaf," as we call it. It is all law, no matter what we call it. And Paul says that Law came in to increase the trespass.

Isn't that an amazing thing? That is, when law comes in, when you put yourself under rules, you simply make things worse – you increase the trespass. I remember reading one of Charles Spurgeon's sermons some time ago; he told about spending some time down in a little hut in Italy. When he went into the hut he noticed that the floor was as dirty as he had ever seen a floor in his life. After he had lived there a day or two he could stand it no longer, and he sent for a cleaning woman to come in and scrub the floor. The woman came in and she scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed, but the longer she scrubbed, the worse it got. Finally, he began to investigate and he discovered that there wasn't any floor – there was nothing but the bare ground – and all the efforts of the water to clean it only made it worse!

Now, that is like the Law: The Law is a cleansing agent, and it exists to show us the true situation. You see, if there is nothing but the dirt of our Adamic nature there, the Law can only make it worse. In other words, Law controls the outward effect of evil.

Now, it does have some advantages; later on Paul will show us very fully the advantages of law. Law does control outward wrong so that it makes it possible for human beings to live together. If we didn't have laws, we couldn't exist. We couldn't live on this peninsula together if there were no traffic laws, and other laws, to regulate society. So law has a great advantage. There is nothing wrong with the law, but this is the thing that we must always understand: Law has no ability, none whatsoever, to change the change the heart – to change the desire. It cannot touch what goes on inside, and all the rules of life only increase the frustration and

rebellion with which we face life. And, at best, the Law simply makes you content with outward conformity.

But, now, listen: "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" {Rom 5:20 RSV}, Paul says. That is, if Law does this to you, it is all the more certain that the life of Jesus Christ indwelling you shall create in you a desire to live more and more to the glory of God inwardly. You see, Christ's life is more powerful than Adam's life. That is what the meaning of the "much more" is all the way through, simply because God is greater than man. You cannot control the old Adam inside – neither can I – but Christ can!

Young Phillip Malancthon, Luther's young helper and a theologian during the Reformation, once wrote, after years of struggling to try to behave himself, "Old Adam is too strong for young Phillip." We, too, discover that after awhile. But this is what Paul is telling us so that we might understand that God has cut off this old life completely, and has found a way to cancel it out and to give us instead a new life – a totally different life – from which to draw all our strength.

This life has sometimes been called "the throne life." Coming down from the throne of the universe, where Jesus Christ is seated in power, there is ministered in my heart by the Holy Spirit (given to me by faith in Jesus Christ) a continual flow of the same life that made it possible for Jesus Christ to live and be what he was when he was here 1900 years ago. Within the frame of my life, my body, my spirit, my emotions, and my all, he will live that wonderful life again, in this 20th century, so that men will begin to see, more and more, Jesus Christ walking and living in me.

Perhaps this illustration will help: I have here a glove; it is a very fine glove. It is not even an old glove, for I bought it just recently. It is as good as gloves can be because it is perfectly made, as far as I can tell. Now, suppose I say to that glove, "Now look, glove, I want you to pick up that book." So the glove tries to do it, but it finds itself unable to do so because a glove, by itself, cannot function. That glove is like our own Adamic, human nature. It cannot do what God demands of it – it cannot love its enemies, it cannot pray for those who spitefully use it, it cannot respond with gratitude and thanksgiving to those who misuse it, and abuse it, and persecute it – it cannot!

Haven't you found that true? You cannot do it. You know you should, but you cannot, just like the glove cannot pick up that book.

So you say to me, "You foolish man, do you know what the trouble is? You haven't educated the glove, you haven't instructed it, you haven't told it how to do it." So I say to the glove, "Now look, it is really very simple: All you have to do is bend your fingers around so that you can get your thumb on the under side and the other fingers on the top, and then you can pick up the book. Now do you understand?" So the glove tries to pick up the book with the help of that instruction. Now, obviously, I can lecture the glove for fifteen hours and it will still be as unable to pick up the book as when I started. Education doesn't do it.

Ah, but you know the answer don't you? There is a way by which the glove can easily pick up the book without any difficulty whatever. All I need to do is to insert my life into the glove; that is all. Then it becomes as able to do as I am able to do. This is the truth that Paul is giving us in Romans 5, 6, 7, & 8 – that God has provided a way by which the total, risen life of Jesus Christ is made available to us. When that life fills us, as my hand fills that glove, we can do all that Jesus Christ can do.

Do you believe that?

So the book can be picked up without any difficulty by the glove. It is the glove that is doing it – isn't it? – filled with my life!

This is why Paul could say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me," {cf, Phil 4:13 KJV}. And, if you are a Christian this morning, Jesus Christ has come to indwell your heart, and he is perfectly able to do everything through you that God can ever demand of you – or that life can ever demand of you. As you read the Gospel

record, there never was a time when Jesus was confronted with a situation that he could not handle, even though demands were made upon him that were far and away beyond what we (as natural man) could ever handle. When five thousand people stood before him, and they were hungry and had nothing to eat, was he able to feed them? Of course he was – because of the life of the Father perfectly filled him. So his life is to perfectly fill us.

Now, if you learn the secret of letting him live his live through you, all that I have said this morning (and more) will become gloriously true for you. Does that make your mouth water? It does mine!

In Chapter 6 we will begin to learn how to lay hold of this delivering secret.

I want to ask you to read Chapter 6 over and over again this week. Will you saturate yourselves with it? Then, when we meet again next Lord's Day morning, you will know what I am talking about when we go through this chapter.

Very few Christians live at this level, but it is not because it is too difficult. It is easier to live at this level than it is to live on the level of defeat – that is what Paul declares here. It is because they have never learned what God has said in Romans 6, 7, & 8 – that is why. And, when we learn this, then we discover what it is to live in victory instead of defeat.

All Christians have eternal life, but very few of them have abundant life. But Jesus said,

I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. {John 10:10b KJV}

It is yours for the taking!