

RIGHTEOUSNESS SHALL REIGN

by Steve Zeisler

The lyrics of country music are great for expressing sorrow and misery. I was reminded of a venerable country music song as I thought of the issues before us in Romans 5 this week:

"Yesterday is dead and gone,
and tomorrow's out of sight.
And it's sad to be alone,
help me make it through the night.

I don't care what's right or wrong,
I don't try to understand.
Let the devil take tomorrow,
for tonight I need a friend."

The lyricist is saying, "My life is so filled with misery and I'm so lonely and desperate, my only concern is making it through the night." The expression of desperation in those words is not far from the experience of many people, perhaps many of us.

The book of Romans is a powerful treatment of the human problem and the divine solution to it. It calls forth the answer to the question, what has God done to meet us in our need?

In Romans 5 verses 12-21 we are going to be faced with an issue somewhat different than the one that we have read about so far. In the opening chapters, primarily the first three, the subject is guiltiness before God, which most of us resist hearing about. The announcement is that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Paul's assumption is that those who hear those words will be defensive, he destroys every argument that is raised and brings to bear the word of God in the Old Testament to make clear that in fact there are no exceptions.

What Romans 5 verses 12-21 addresses is not defensiveness but human misery. The phrase used three times in this passage is the reign of death. Death reigns in human affairs, and because death reigns we are not only guilty but miserable; we live in anguish and fear. Beyond questions of guilt the singer cries, "I don't care what's right or wrong, I just want to make it through the night."

When we talk about the reign of death, we need to recognize that death in the Bible means more than just the day your body stops working. Death includes lifelessness in our experience-walking around breathing but without purpose or excitement or hope or joy or beauty or love. It is a kind of barrenness in which there is nothing to look forward to, and there is a pain that is carried everywhere. All of that is the reign of death.

In addition, the Scriptures talk about the reign of death as being that which produces terrible behavior in us. In Hebrews 2 we are reminded that it is because human beings fear death that they are subject to slavery to the devil all their lives. We commonly encounter people who are enslaved by compulsive, self-destructive, ruinous behavior in which they hurt themselves and others and can't seem to stop; they make the same mistakes over and over again.

FINDING PERSONAL HOPE IN THE GOOD NEWS

The unspoken question behind these verses in Romans is this: Is the good news in Jesus' death and

resurrection good enough to remove not just my guilty standing before God, but the heartsickness I live with? Can it answer the ache of sorrow and aloneness that I feel? Can it not only declare me right in God's sight but make me right? Can the gospel minister to me so that I can live at a level above the song, "I don't care what's right or wrong...help me make it through the night"? The answer is yes. Let's begin reading at Romans 5:12 to understand how and why that is so:

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men because all sinned-

Most translations of the Bible will indicate that the sentence is broken off there. This is not the cool logic used by Paul to indict the guilty. It's the passionate response of the pastor who cares for the needs of his people and wants very much to say that there is an answer to the problem of misery and anxiety. Verses 13-14:

for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.

Let me stop there and acquaint us with some of the things that Paul has said so far. We see the phrase "death reigned" in verse 14; we're going to see it again in verse 17 and then in verse 21 ("sin reigned in death"). The rule or command of death is the issue before us, and Paul is saying some very important things to help us understand it. Sin entered the world when Adam rebelled against God. You probably know the story in the opening chapters of Genesis-how man was made for the glorious freedom of the knowledge of God; he had intimacy with God and opportunity and life. He was placed in a bountiful garden. God made one restriction that he should obey, and man rebelled against God with his eyes open, knowing exactly what he was doing. The result was that sin entered his experience, and because of that death reigned. Sin is the consort of death, and everywhere there is sin there is death.

But the extraordinary thing that Paul is drawing our attention to here (in verse 12) is not just that Adam's sin affected Adam, but that we all sinned. That doesn't even mean that we all have sinned experientially in our lives, but that we all sinned in Adam somehow, that from God's perspective we were present in Adam even though uncounted numbers of years have intervened between that first man and us. Every one of his descendants was present with him and sinned when he sinned. If you have ever stood between two mirrors, you know that if you cock your head to one side you see an infinite series of reflections as the mirrors keep reflecting each other in smaller and smaller images. That is a bit how I picture what Paul is saying. Adam was the first mirror, but you could see every person that would ever be in Adam stacked up behind him, all of us just like him and participating with him. So we are born into this world already rebels, already having the disease of sin and the reign of death in our experience.

I was talking to someone earlier this morning who said, "I hate that doctrine of original sin!" Well, any thinking person would-no one else got to vote when Adam made that choice. But there are some very important truths that follow from the fact that we sinned in Adam. Among the most important of them is that if we were born this way, then it should occur to us immediately that we can't fix it. Sin is too deep in us, the problem too pervasive. If we want to be free from the reign of death, we must find a champion to act on our behalf and undo what Adam did. If that is true, then we will be searching for a Savior instead of trying to reform ourselves. And a Savior will be provided for those who seek him.

There are some other observations I would like to make about the fact that we sinned in Adam. One of them is has to do with all the arguments that are brought into the world today about multi-culturalism, in which everybody advances their ethnicity or cause or group, or the broad attempt to arrange everybody so that equal advantage is given to all groups. Now, it seems to me that that effort is inevitably going to result in smaller and smaller groups; as soon as some group defines itself versus the rest because it wants equality for itself, then shortly a subgroup within the prior group will define itself the same way and so on, because all of us have the same problem. Finally it comes down to any two people against each other. Adam and Eve's first two sons were born misunderstanding each other, and Cain killed his brother.

Another observation I would make can be summed up in the well-known call to mercy, "There but for the grace of God go I." There are certain people who particularly disgust you and from whom you are most inclined to recoil, because their choices, associations, habits, and lifestyle strike you as particularly bad. However, you must recognize that they are the way they are because they are victimized by the reign of death and enslaved by the fear of death; and you and I experience the reign of death as well. Apart from the grace of God in Christ we are all in Adam and are those of whom the Scriptures say, "Nevertheless, death reigned." Unless something happens to break the reign of death, we are no different from those who repel us.

Lastly I would like us to consider what Paul says about the law in verses 13-14. He is trying to make clear to us that the reign of death does not take place because of any particular thing we do. Adam was given a particular prohibition, and he broke it. But Paul says there was a tremendously long time between Adam and Moses, to whom the law was finally given on Mount Sinai so that we had some clear direction as to what God said was absolutely right and absolutely wrong. Yet it didn't matter that prior to Moses there was no law; death reigned anyway. It reigned not because people were doing specific acts of rebellion, but because they already had the disease when they were born.

Verse 20 will speak of the law again, saying that it was finally added so that the trespass might increase. The law was given to help us see what we couldn't see previously. It's like realizing as you're sitting in a dimly lit restaurant that you have a gravy stain on your tie, only to discover when you go out into the bright sunlight that you have ten gravy stains on your tie. Once the clear light of the law of God shines on the problem of our sin, we realize it's much worse than we ever thought it was. The law increases our awareness of sin. But even without the law death still reigned. (In chapter 7 Paul is going to argue that the law actually exacerbates sin. That is not the point here.)

We live in an age that is much more like the pre-law era than any other age in our nation's history. Fewer and fewer people know what the Bible says. Fewer and fewer have any awareness that there is a personal God who runs this universe and has made himself known. We live like the generations before Moses who didn't know what God had created humanity for his directives concerning human behavior. People are totally ignorant; they are not intentionally disobeying God's law, but are unaware that God has spoken. And yet death still reigns.

That is why we run into so many people with essentially good intentions who are making a horrible mess of things. They really want to be helpful, but in trying to be helpful they are adding to the pain and destruction. Very few people set out to make life worse for everybody around them, but many inadvertently do so. At one end of the political spectrum people advocate freedom, inclusiveness, tolerance, and equality; and in the name of equality they have invited all manner of horrible, sinful behavior into the approved circle, thinking they are doing the right thing. At the other end of the political spectrum people stand for justice, consequences, tradition, and excellence; and without realizing it they are papering over prejudice, mercilessness, and lovelessness, thinking they are standing up for what is right. Because we don't have clear insight as to what God thinks any more, we are acting with our best intentions and are creating more pain, anguish, isolation, and evil. "Nevertheless, whatever else is true, death reigns," is the horrible announcement.

THE TWO HEADS OF HUMANITY

Now, finally, we come to the answer to the question: Does the gospel do us any good in the face of the misery? Let's look at verses 15-17:

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

The key to these verses is to recognize that Paul is distinguishing the two heads of humanity. He says in verse 14 that Adam is the type or pattern of the one to come. Adam is that person in which all of humanity is gathered up. We sinned at his day of rebellion, and we die because death is the consort of sin. However, he is also the pattern of the one other person who is to come. There is someone else who will gather up human beings with him, and he will be the life-giver instead of the death-dealer. There is someone else in whom we can be captured so that we can experience life. There is a Savior who will come for those who are diseased and cannot save themselves.

Now Paul distinguishes the two humanities. What makes the second Adam, the second head of his nation, different from the first? What Christ did outweighs, and overwhelms the problem that Adam set loose in human experience. These are not two equivalent champions who cancel each other out. The grace that we experience in Christ is always greater than sin. However terrible the misery is, the gift of God is indeed overwhelmingly sufficient to answer the needs of our hearts, to give us freedom where there was slavery, to return joy for misery. The second Adam in every way overturns what was done in the first Adam. Let's see how Paul makes that argument.

In verse 15 we are told, "...if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" God the father and God the son incarnate acted to counter death and misery which began in Adam and spread far and wide. Much more did grace overflow to the many victims of the reign of death.

Look at verse 16: "Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification." Adam sinned once at the very headwaters of the stream, and ever since then the pollution of sin and death has spread and spread so that in 1993 AD we live in a world where the trespasses are beyond counting. Everywhere around us we see decay, lives captured in sorrow and hurt, and civilization declining. We see war and starvation, rape and disease.

You may remember how a train overturned a few years ago in Dunsmuir above the Sacramento River and spilled a large quantity of horrible chemicals into the stream. There was a rush to try to stop the spread of the pollution downstream, but it was impossible. Eventually it washed all the way to the sea, killing everything between the site of the spill and the end of the river. Everything was destroyed, and it took years for life to come back. The first hope of the scientists and those who tried to intervene was to somehow go back near the source and bottle it up there before it spread and killed everything. But it was too late; there was no stopping the problem once it was loosed.

The same thing happens with oil spills. A tanker is gouged and the oil begins to spill out, and everybody rushes to the scene. They put booms around it and do everything they can to contain the spill, because if the oil spreads it's going to kill birds, fish, mammals, and plants. But the oil spreads and the problem becomes unmanageable. That is what Paul is saying. Adam's one sin led to many, many trespasses. We live in a world in which there is immeasurable heartsickness, slavery, and misery.

My thirteen-year-old son and I went to see the National Civil War Society re-enact a battle in the Civil War near Felton. The excitement of booming cannons was moderated by sobering statistics we were told; 630,000 people were killed in a nation of only thirty million. There was unbelievable carnage in the four years of that war-brothers fighting brothers and fathers killing sons.

The first fratricide was Cain's murder of his brother Abel, and in every generation since it has grown worse and worse. The capacity of human beings to do terrible things goes unchecked as long as death reigns. Consider the war in Bosnia. Families who raised children in peaceful neighborhoods are now destroying one another to avenge actions taken during the time of the Ottoman Empire and before.

Yet given the huge number of trespasses and sins that have come from the one choice of Adam, the gospel says even so, Jesus' gracious gift accomplishes righteousness. It doesn't matter how big the problem has gotten. What he will do for us is greater than all of that. Verse 17 says, "For if, by the trespass of the one man,

death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ." How much greater is the answer than the problem! Look carefully at what Paul says here. He doesn't say that those who were victimized by the reign of death will be transferred to the reign of life; that is, that they will be reigned over by life. He says that you and I will become royalty-*we* will reign in life. In the circle of life, we ourselves become more significant than we could ever imagine. Having been slaves to sin, we are transformed by grace into royalty. So our life becomes one not just of experiencing life but of reigning, standing on our own feet and experiencing the world as God made it, doing good instead of making it worse. The answer goes much, much beyond the problem. Good news indeed!

We are reminded in verses 18-21 that there are two heads of humanity, and that we are either in Adam or in Christ. All of the other things that distinguish people are in an eternal sense absolutely irrelevant. Are we who we have always been in Adam, or have we received the abundance of grace that comes from the gift offered us in Christ?

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Steve Zeisler
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