

# THE REIGN OF GRACE

## *SERIES: "YOU ARE THE MAN"*

by Steve Zeisler

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We have come to the end of this series of messages considering the purpose and work of God when individuals, especially those who lead a nation, sin with great pride, and confess in brokenness. David's story in 2 Samuel and his prayerful reflection in Psalm 51 have offered us wisdom as an antidote to the bluster and spin emanating from the nation's capital. But I want to step back and ask bigger questions about what we learn from this study about the reality of the human condition that will help, encourage, change, and challenge us.

I thought it might be helpful at the end of the account of David and Bathsheba to turn to a positive story. I thought we could turn now to that story in the Bible in which a man or woman lived a life of reverence, personal happiness, generosity, and moral beauty, leading in an unbroken progression to a crescendo of righteousness.

But there is no such story. I looked from page 1 to the end. There is no one who did it right from the beginning and whose influence was only good. What we have every time in the Bible and in human history is the story of sorrow turned to joy; strength made perfect in weakness; ordinary, lumpy, clay pots getting put to marvelous use by God. There are many good stories in the Bible, and they are all redemption stories.

What other observation can we make from our study of this time in the life of David? Consider that it was three thousand years ago that King David lived. Now, I have had conversations with my children and their friends about what life was like in the 1960s, and they look at me as if I'm from another planet—such remarkably ancient and dusty realities! Consider all the things that have changed over three thousand years: First, there is the volume of knowledge we have about human beings. And since the story about David and Bathsheba is, near its beginning, about sexual sin, consider the information we have that perhaps the ancients didn't have about that aspect of our lives. Consider the knowledge of physiology, brain chemistry, genetics, psychology, and the social dynamics of our sexuality, including studies of power and its effect on sexual choices. Consider what historians and economists and artists and poets have added over three thousand years to our understanding. Consider beyond all that the volume of knowledge in technology that has accrued over three thousand years.

Yet the president of the United States, in the last three years, did exactly the same thing that King David did three thousand years ago. There is not an iota of advance in moral perfection, despite all the things we know now that we didn't know before.

Closer to home, how many of us have children who have made the same mistakes we did? There is no moral advance from our generation to the one after us, no matter what warnings we have issued, what learning we have passed on, what truths we have told. They don't listen and they do the same thing we did, and they suffer the same consequences.

Or even closer to home, how many of us have not said at some time in our life, "I'll never do that again. I've learned my lesson this time. That was really foolish [or humiliating, or awful]." But sure enough, we do it again. Everywhere we look we run into the immutability of human sinfulness. Romans 5:14 has a phrase that succinctly states our problem: "Death reigned."

There is a significant line in the song *Amazing Grace*: "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." (1) In order to have any relief from the reality of the human problem, we first of all have to grow afraid, to face into the real problem, to acknowledge that death does reign, that there is something terribly wrong with us, both as individuals and as a race.

There is a profound description of the problem and the answer to it in Romans 5:17: "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 great contrast there is between two individuals, Adam and Christ. A key to understanding this is to realize that God is not very interested in either our accomplishments or our failures. The ultimate question he asks is, "To what type of humanity do you belong?" There are only two types: those who are in Adam and those who are in Christ. Everything depends on that.

Another thing I would call your attention to in verse 17, and we'll come back to this, is the phrase "much more." We'll find repeated reference to the abundance of what God did in answering the problem.

Finally, there's a statement in verse 17 that righteousness comes as a gift. Acknowledging that this is a gift means that we are required to receive it. We'll talk a bit more about that as well.

## SIN, THE INSOLUBLE PROBLEM

In order to benefit from this word of hope, we need to consider it in context. Let's read Romans 5:12-14:

**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—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.**

This is a complex argument. Even the grammar is difficult. Verse 12 breaks off, and the thought is never completed. Theologians have written many long dissertations on this paragraph alone. However, there are some things that we can clearly say are taught, and we can derive benefit from our inspection of it.

First, sin entered the human heart at a point in time. Specific sins are choices made, actions taken, statements declared, and so on. But sin itself is the principle of rebellion. It is the inclination to love and prefer ourselves over God and every other person. It is the principle of pride, first and foremost, and it entered the human experience in the heart of the very first human. Second, every single human child participated in the entry of sin into our race. Sin applies to everyone.

It says further that when this principle of rebellion entered the human race, death also entered the race, and therefore death reigns. No one escapes physical suffering, emotional hurt, sorrow, or the end of life and the body's decay. Sin and death, and verse 16 adds judgment and condemnation, are universal and immutable. This hard news has to be honestly faced before the good news can be seen to be as good as it is.

Let me make some practical, life-related observations that flow from verses 12-14: First of all, we started out too late to affect the problem. I have a friend who just recently got some bad news about his arteries. He has for a long time been disciplined about diet and exercise, because his father died young of heart failure. So my friend has eaten well, exercised regularly, and done everything he could to make his life turn out differently. Lord willing, it will. But he was recently told that it wouldn't have mattered if he had started years before, even at age five, eating right and exercising, because he has bad genes. The news was bad before he had any opportunity to influence things. Our souls are similar. Once we awaken to the truth and hope for some improvement, we discover that we are starting too late to be right or whole. The problems were established before we began to attend to them.

A second observation is that the language of these verses seems to express a terrible unfairness. Tragedy struck before we ever participated in it so that we were born with this problem. As Americans, we are used to having rights that we can claim. We have good intentions—doesn't that count for something? And there are extenuating circumstances. We deserve a hearing on this matter. We ought to take it to court. The problem is that there is no court that will hear our suit. There's no one we can turn to and ask for redress. No human can do anything about it, and God has already issued his decision in our case: we are guilty.

Finally, there's no place to go. There's no group of people we can join with who don't have the same problem. No change of religion or geography or way of life or clothing or language or anything else is going to make a difference. There's no altered consciousness, no self-improvement campaign, no way to hide from the problem or pretend it's not there.

On Monday Night Football last Monday, the 49ers were playing. At the end of the game Bryant Young was dealt a terrible blow to his lower leg, and it snapped. There were graphic pictures on television of his leg bending the wrong way. Everybody in the room where I was cringed, and after an instant looked away.

But in real life there's no way to turn away from the problem. David drew the same conclusion in Psalm 51 (see [Discovery Paper 4595](#)):

**"Surely I was sinful at birth,  
sinful from the time my mother conceived me."**

He had reflected, "There ought to have been a time in my life when I used to be innocent. If only I could go back to that." He went all the way back, but could find no innocence, no once-beautiful version of himself that he could call to mind and live as if it were still true. As far back as he went, he found a rebel.

Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* movies are stories of time travel. There is a terrible battle happening in the future, and people from both sides keep wanting to come back from the future in order to change the present so that their side will win. The enemies of the hero try to kill him before he can grow up, and help must be sent back in time to prevent it.

Time travel has much to commend it. We wish we could undo the stupid mistakes we've made whose consequences are now flowering. But even if we could, the problem is that we can't go far enough back in time. If we go back three thousand years, we find exactly the same sort of ruler of a nation that we have. There's nowhere to turn. The problem is breathtaking in its insolubility.

The wisest man on earth, King Solomon, drew these conclusions about human life in Ecclesiastes 1:14-18:

"I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

**What is twisted cannot be straightened;  
what is lacking cannot be counted.**

I thought to myself, 'Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.' Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

**For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;  
the more knowledge, the more grief."**

What are we to conclude, if we have any stirring of God in our life, any longing for things to be different? There is no fixing ourselves, because we don't contribute anything good. There is nowhere to turn. All our efforts will fail. We must conclude that we need a Savior. "God help me. I need someone to counter the awful choice of Adam that has led to the awful choices of everybody else. I need some heroic and loving and powerful individual to act on my behalf." And everything the Bible says focuses on that. That's what the rest of our chapter in Romans is about.

## GOD'S MAGNIFICENT GIFT

This passage is a contrast and comparison between the first and the second Adam, between the first man and the last man, between Adam and Christ. Verses 15-21:

**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.**

**Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.**

**The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

As awful as the problem is, so much greater is the answer. As desperate as our need for a Savior is, so much more remarkable is the Savior whom God sends. This is the gift that is worth having, the work of God sending what we need at the time when we need it and when there is no other hope for us.

Look at the series of contrasts. The first speaks of the problem of spreading death; the contrast is an overflowing abundance. Judgment brings condemnation; justification brings life. Many are made sinners; many are made righteous. One is an inevitability; the other is a glorious gift.

There are two other practical observations. The distinction in verse 16 is between a single choice followed by judgment that brought condemnation, and many trespasses followed by the gift that brought justification. When Adam sinned, the effect was like that of an oil spill. At the beginning, creating the problem is easy. Once the oil has spread all over the place, killing wildlife and so on, it is much harder to clean up.

I remember once spilling a gallon of milk down a stairway. You have no idea how much liquid a gallon of milk is! In the container it's easy to move around. But spill it down a stairway, and you've got a day's worth of effort to clean it up.

That's the problem God had with us. At the beginning of sin and death it was easy for one man to infect everyone. How would God redeem everyone? Jesus' job was much harder, because he had to collect sin after it had already started to fester and grow, where consequences were added upon other consequences, and creative ways of sinning led to even more creative ways of sinning, which led to more destructiveness.

Have you thought of your life as having a similar pattern to it? I know a lot of people who have said things like, "If only I had come to Christ when I was seven or eight, before I had made such a mess of things, or before I had become hard of heart, or before I had become frightened and withdrawn, or before I had become decayed, or before I had become established in habitual selfishness-but my life is such a mess now, God can't fix it. The problem is too widespread, too ingrained."

Yet that very feeling of ours is anticipated in Paul's writing. It doesn't matter how many our sins are now. It doesn't matter how far they have spread. The Savior whom God sent has gathered up all the problems. He understands all the reign of death and what it has done to us. He understands what failures we are. He understands the deep things we can't even see in ourselves, and he has worked to reverse them. Much more is the gift powerful, life-changing, valuable than the sin was widespread and ingrained.

Another observation concerns the role of the law. Verse 20 says the law was added so that trespasses might increase. That's a curious statement. Paul refers to the law earlier when he says there was a time between Adam and Moses when there was no law. What the Bible teaches about the law, or the rules God gave us, is fairly complex, and what I'm about to say is not the sum of it all. There is a complex reason for the giving of the rules that operates on a number of levels for us. But one of them is this: God gave the Ten Commandments, say, this series of statements about right and wrong, to increase our experience of wrong. We can go on not knowing we're doing something wrong until somebody says not to do it. Then, painfully, guilt with awareness comes.

But further, we want to take certain actions because we were told not to. Take the old example of the sign that says, "Don't step on the lawn." I didn't even want to step on the lawn. It would never have occurred to me, until somebody put up the sign. Now I want to step on that lawn!

We have had wonderful neighbors on either side of us for a long time. But years ago another set of neighbors lived on one side. They were very difficult people to get along with. They didn't usually mean to be; they were just awkward and self-absorbed and often unpleasant. I remember once thinking, "Jesus said the law is summed up as 'Love God and love your neighbor.' I'm going to love these neighbors." I determined to be loving, but the more I focused on them, the more irritating they became. Determining to love them made me pay more attention to them, and I would find more problems. If I had just been able to ignore them, I would have done better, but now that I felt some responsibility to love them, I resented them more.

That's a lot of what Paul is saying here. We are given God's commands, and that drives us further into despair over our own condition. We need a Savior to act on our behalf.

But look at what verse 20 says: "The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more...." There is a wonderful series of references to the language of abundance in this passage: overflowing gifts, abundant provision, much more did God act. However the reign of death has done its work in our life, whatever the struggle and failure and sadness, God has done more and more to redeem it, to overturn it, to give us life. He has done better than we ever thought. The gift is more valuable than we can conceive of. We lost Eden, and we gained heaven. Eden was beautiful. Heaven is infinitely beautiful. Adam and Eve walked with the Lord in the cool of the evening in the garden of Eden. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit; he has taken up residence in us. Human beings were once the greatest thing God ever created. We are now the element of creation with which God has clothed himself in Christ. We are united with Christ, and will be forever.

The gift that is given, the answer to the problem, the reign of life that replaces the reign of death, is in every respect abundant, overflowing, remarkable. The farther you penetrate it, the better it gets. The more we trust the grace of God, the firmer and stronger and better it is. The more we are honest about our sin and failure and ask for help, the more help we receive, the more love we get in place of failure. The ability to be honest about what our need is and call for help results in help that defies description, finally.

We started by saying that human nature has not changed over three thousand years, and you can go back as many thousand years before that as you want, and observe as far into the future as this race will be given until Christ comes again, and you will not see one iota of moral advance. But all this should do is make us long for and trust God for his answers. We cannot find the answer ourselves. And we are provided a Savior who will meet every need of our heart.

You can't fail so many times that you fall into a category to which the gift of grace doesn't apply; you started out in that category, as we all did, and there is no other category. You're not the one person God will resist because of what you know about yourself that no one else knows. The gift is offered to all of us because God is gracious, not because we deserve it.

But it is a gift. It is something we need to receive, to believe, and to act on. We got into the mess by being born human. The way out is a choice that we have to make. God says "I love you," but we have to hear it, believe it, let him.

Christmas is a great time to think in terms of the gifts of God, not just the gifts that come because people love each other and do things out of force of habit. Consider your own heart: Do you believe that God is as good to you as he says is? Will you let him love you? Or have you stopped valuing at some point what is truly valuable?

## NOTES

1. *Amazing Grace*, text by John Newton.

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