

Prayer

We love You, Lord. We love You even when life is hard, for You have already changed us for the better and we trust Your power to do so again and again, according to Your will. If we have sinned, then reveal this to us; and if we have failed to live up to the standards of our faith, then show us how and why this has happened. Then, as we repent, lead us on to love and serve You even more. Receive our prayers, O Lord: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Spend time praising God and not doing anything else. Allow yourself to be led by the Spirit.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about waste in our world.** *Come before the Lord in penitence because of the way that food is waste today.*
- *Pray about the rising tensions in the Middle East*
- *Give thanks to God for the fellowship of those with whom you meet for worship*

Meditation

Do you have to be a gardener to appreciate a garden?
Do you have to be an astronaut to see the depths of space?
Do you have to be a parent to understand a child?
Do you have to be a lover to experience passion?

The Lord has made us each to reach beyond ourselves,
To feel what others feel, and see what others see.
Our spirits have this quality of empathy that reaches out
Beyond our own experience to touch what others feel.

We are all like this because God is like this too;
His very nature reaches out beyond His goodness,
To touch our fallen world with undeserved forgiveness,
To hear our prayers and save us though He has no need to.

Empathically, He longs to draw us to Himself in love,
For He can always do this, and He will never turn away.

Bible passage – Romans 5:12-21

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, death has spread to everyone because all have sinned. ¹³ Now, you say 'before the law was given, sin was in the world, but sin is not relevant where there is no law.' ¹⁴ Nevertheless, I say that death had authority from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the disobedience of Adam (who is a type of the one who was to come).

¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the offence. For if many died because of the disobedience of one man, how much more has the grace of God and the gracious gift of one man Jesus Christ been made generously available for many more. ¹⁶ In addition, the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin, for although the judgment following one sin brought condemnation, the gift of God following many sins has brought acquittal! ¹⁷ So if death reigned through the disobedience of that one man, how much more will they who receive the abundant grace and the free gift of being made right with God, reign in life because of the one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Consequently, just as the result of one sin was condemnation for all, so the result of one man's righteous deed has been righteousness with God and life for all; ¹⁹ and in the same way that many were made sinners by one man's disobedience, many will be made right with God through one man's obedience.

²⁰ Now when the law came, it resulted in more wrongdoing, but as sin increased, grace increased even more! ²¹ Therefore, just as sin ruled through death, grace can now rule through righteousness, which leads to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible Study

Review

This is an extraordinary passage of scripture. On the one hand, it describes some powerful and exciting features of the Gospel message, such as God's free grace. But on the other hand, it is very hard to follow exactly what Paul is trying to say! It is not surprising that people often pick out of the passage those parts they can understand, but avoid the difficult task of working out what Paul says. For example, it is wonderful to read that God's grace is sufficient for all needs (5:20), but it is not easy to work out why he mentions the Law (5:12,13), for example, or follow his threefold comparison between the 'one man' (meaning Adam) and Christ (5:15-17).

Nevertheless, this is a significant passage, so we must struggle with its complexities if we want to appreciate its riches. As we do so, we must keep in mind Paul's writing technique, which was typical of his day and is similar to what we find in many Psalms. In this, a writer makes a point and then says it again slightly differently, either with emphasis or by way of comparison, depending on the point being made. This is an example from Psalm 51:16;

If I were to give a burnt offering you would not be pleased

The sacrifice of a broken spirit and a contrite heart is acceptable to God (Psalm 51:16)

Notice that the Psalm starts with the two ideas of 'sacrifice' and 'what is acceptable to God', and the second line uses these to make the important point that God accepts the true sacrifice of a contrite heart. Now, here in our passage, we can see something similar in verse 17, where the first line leads directly into the second. Paul starts by observing that everything dies in the natural sinful world, which means that death 'reigns'. He then proclaims that through Jesus, God's people 'reign in life', not death, because God's gift is the gift of life!

So if death reigned through the disobedience of that one man,

how much more will they ... reign in life because of one man Jesus Christ (Romans 5:17)

The many treasures of this passage are to be found within each set of parallel sentences, and crucially, we must spot the overall message before we identify the examples used to convey this message, however wonderful they are.

The whole passage holds together as a general explanation of what it means to be made righteous by faith (see 1:16,17), receive God's grace, and have eternal life. This is illustrated in the last verse, which concludes, '*just as sin rules through death, grace can now rule through righteousness, which leads to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*' (5:21). Everything in this passage points to this glorious conclusion, and although we know that this is part of our heritage, this is where it is set out in Scripture.

The first three verses (5:12-14) explain that without Christ, the world is dominated by sin and its consequence, which is death. Indeed, this was true even before God gave the Law, because those who lived before it was given evidently died just as all people die. Those who are made righteous by God through faith therefore escape death's domination, and this is explained next by three 'parallel' sayings about 'the one man' (meaning Adam) and Jesus Christ (5:15-17). Verse 15 says that God's grace in salvation is available for all through Christ, instead of death through our mortal heritage (or as Paul says, 'in Adam'). Verse 16 points out that in Christ, God's people are acquitted of their sins, instead of being judged and condemned. Lastly, verse 17 confirms that Christ has broken the rule of death and the righteous will 'reign in life', which means that they inherit the amazing and abundant gift of eternal life!

To explain this, Paul speaks about the Law, grace, Adam, the origins of sin, God's free gift of salvation, judgement, eternal life, and more! These are all important topics, but the passage is not designed to explain them. Paul uses them to proclaim the glorious truth that in Christ, the righteous have access to God's super-abundant grace into eternity. What more could anyone want!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Justification and righteousness
- Opposition to Paul, and questions asked
- A threefold comparison between Adam and Christ

Going Deeper

This is not a straightforward passage of Scripture to study, and before we can unpick it successfully, there are a number of issues that we must examine and assumptions that we must make. These come first, before we look at the threefold explanation of the death of Jesus by Paul, and how it is developed through the whole passage.

Justification and righteousness

If you read your own version of the Bible, you will find that this passage is full of the words 'justification' and 'righteousness', but these are largely absent from my translation. This is because both 'righteousness' and 'justification' are words that come from the one Greek word 'dikaiousune', which could mean 'a good deed and its consequences' or 'a process of doing something right'; but for which there is no single word in normal English. This is why the church has been saddled with these two words 'righteousness' and 'justification' which are hard to understand and yet are used all the time in church, to the complete bemusement of all who come to it from the outside! My solution to this problem throughout Romans has been to use a single phrase 'being put right with God', which is the closest I can get to what Paul generally means by the use of this word. I hope it helps your understanding of this passage, and indeed the whole of this study of Romans.

The opposition to Paul and questions asked

When Paul wrote his letters, it is highly likely that whole sequences of what he wrote were based upon sermons he preached or arguments he was used to giving to counter things said to him by other people. We saw this in yesterday's study where Paul appeared to be answering the questions 'Why did God send Jesus to die for us when He did?' and 'In what way is Jesus' death unique?' In our passage today, our suspicion about an underlying 'question' is raised by verse 13.

What Paul said in verse 12 was something that many Jews of Jesus' day believed. It was something like what we call 'original sin' (except that this phrase was first used by Augustine, centuries after the life of Christ, and is not found in the Bible!), and expresses the belief that what Adam did in Genesis reflects the general state of affairs in which people are sinful and God is not. Many Jewish documents which go back to those times illustrate the way that more theologically minded Jews, such as the Pharisees and other groups, argued about how Adam could have sinned, not knowing the Laws of Moses. What, really, had he done wrong? The answer was found by trying to identify some 'natural' laws inherent within the first two chapters of Genesis that were later to become part of the laws of Moses recorded in the Old Testament. There is no time here to explore this, but please note the question asked was something like this; 'surely there was sin in the world before the Law was given, but how could people know what it was if they did not have the Law to tell them?'

This was probably a serious point of discussion amongst Jews and Christians of the day, and it is what Paul said in verse 13. Now, we need to be able to know the difference between Paul's writing down of the points he is discussing and the points he wants to make about them. I have therefore placed quotation marks around what I believe to be the 'issue' Paul is discussing here and this helps us understand the text better. In the process of translation it is hard to be sure about these things, however, because there were no punctuation marks in Biblical Greek and each translator has to decide how best to interpret what is said.

In response to the question, Paul does not offer any argument, but says in verse 14 that whatever anyone thinks about sin and the law, it is demonstrably true that death and mortality 'had authority from Adam to Moses'. He then indicates that Adam is a 'type of Christ'; this means that what happened to Adam helps us understand the life and work of Jesus. Interestingly, the phrase 'a type of Christ' is popularly used with reference to a number of Old Testament characters including David and Elisha, but the Bible itself only uses it about Adam.

The threefold comparison.

The first comparison between Adam and Christ (made in verses 15 and 18) is essentially one of scale. God is far bigger than anything He has made, so what He has done in Christ is far bigger and more generous than anything that happens through Adam. This is the why Paul can say that God's grace in Jesus is big enough to embrace the whole world, not just the Jewish situation with its preoccupation with Adam and the law. As far as Paul was concerned, he accepted the theory that what Adam did in sinning was a

demonstration of the generally sinful state of all people, and he declared that what Jesus had done was sufficient to overcome the consequences of sin 'for all' (a phrase that occurs twice in verse 18!).

People often discuss how it is that we can say that everyone has personally sinned. I will not explain it further in this study (this will come later), but we must remember that the Jewish and Biblical notion of 'sin' is wider than we think. It includes not just those particular things that we do wrong, knowingly or unknowingly, but also the generally observable fact that for everyone, whilst we may achieve many of our objectives, we will nevertheless 'miss the mark' in some areas of our lives; in other words, no-one is perfect! This is what the Bible means when it talks about sin as universal, it is part of the mortal nature of our world, which includes the universality of death. What Paul says is that Jesus' death is sufficient to overcome even this innate form of sin, to make us acceptable to God.

The second comparison between Adam and Christ (made in verses 16 and 19/20) is a legal argument and is all about judgement. Putting all three verses together, the sin of Adam brought about God's judgement, which as we know, was separation from the Garden of Eden and the presence of God Himself. Jesus' death, from a legal point of view, has broken this separation because as God's son, and having completed His mission without sin (as is argued elsewhere, e.g. Hebrews 4:15), He was not separated from God at death, but accepted. Those who accept Jesus by faith therefore receive legal 'acquittal' (5:16), which means their relationship with God is restored, and both texts emphasise that the availability of this acquittal is limitless!

The third comparison between Adam and Jesus (made in verses 17 and 21) emphasises the subject of authority. Before Christ, death had final 'authority' over all people through Adam. Now, because of the work of Jesus and the fact that after His death God gave Him new life, the work of Jesus opens up for us who believe in Him the pathway to a fruitful and godly life lived both now (5:17), and in the eternal future (5:21). This happens because of the authority of God over all things, and God's authority over all Creation is greater than sin's authority to bring death to everything that lives.

Application

It is my sincere hope that this explanation of this text will enable you to focus on the main points that Paul makes about the way in which Jesus' death overcomes sin and death and opens up the way for us to be 'right with God' through our faith in Him. Each step of the argument is somewhat theological, but it is understandable. We all succumb to the spiritual forces that are at work in our world, and to this day, these are principally the forces of sin and death. These wreak havoc in human life and society, and they will work their way into the life of God's people, simply because while we still live, none of us has yet escaped the pressures of evil and sin to be found within this sinful world. Moreover, the End of all things has not yet come and so we have not yet found our way to the promised 'eternal life' and our promised heavenly home.

In the meantime, it is extremely helpful for us to take hold of the truths that Paul brings out in this passage. What shines out from the whole passage is the magnificent power and authority of God to accomplish His will of reconciliation with people through Jesus Christ. If we ever suffer from worry about whether Christ has truly overcome death and sin, then this passage is resolute; 'the gracious gift of one man Jesus Christ has been made generously available for many ...' (5:15) This is God's eternal promise to us.

There are many good Christian people who are still inwardly troubled about whether God can really deal with the guilt they carry. The answer is 'yes', and is the same answer God always gives; the more sins are yielded to Christ, the more grace God will show in conquering that sin (5:20)! Also, the consequence of God's gracious work through Jesus is to enable us to live our lives as God Himself intended (5:17,20)! How many times have I heard Christian folk express concern that they are not living the life God has intended for them; they need to hear the full Gospel, which tells them that there is no reason why they cannot! There is no new formula or theology for people to understand, embrace or work at. God's requirements are always the same; turn to His Son Jesus and have faith in Him. All Christians need do is to live according to God's Word and they will find God's path for their lives, in authority and in power. There is no need for any other way, so follow the Gospel truth!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which of the three explanations of God's saving work through Jesus is most helpful to people today?
2. Do Christian people today have a sufficient understanding of the nature of sin? What is missing, and what is needed to get the most from this text?

3. How does this passage help you personally? Discuss your response within your group.

Personal comments by author

It is always worth going back to look at the basics of our faith. If you read this passage of Scripture today and found your eyes glazing over with either confusion or a degree of boredom at Paul's repetitive language, then it may be a good time to take a day or two to spend time with this passage. The same could be said for many passages in Romans, but this one does raise a host of issues from sin to judgement and salvation through reconciliation with God. The fact that the main points are repeated means that Paul has given us a ready means to check our understanding of what he is trying to say!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through this passage of scripture, and see which parts of it jump out at you, and which parts do not. As a discipline, read over those passages that do not make sense, and ask the Lord to help you perceive the truth they contain. Look for those truths that apply to your life.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to accept that sin is relevant, or that sin is a proper description of much that happens in the world today. Ask the Lord to bless the church with discernment to preach the truth to a world that does not believe.*

Final Prayer

Your salvation, Lord God, may be beyond our full comprehension, but it is real and true. So we praise You for Your glorious love and for making it real through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! May we seek to know as much about this as possible; but more than that, may we receive its truth and live by it, throughout our lives: AMEN
