



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Grace Abounded

Romans 5:12-21

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This morning we'll be continuing our study of St. Paul's letter to the Romans as we look at 5:12-21. In our passage today, Paul prepares us for the next three chapters of his letter by giving us a look at the big picture—a story of Creation and humanity from good creation, to rebellion and fall, to redemption by Jesus, to the grace of God poured out abundantly until both creation and humanity are made new. Paul's focus is on grace. Specifically, on the abundance of God's grace, and it's something we need to sit up and hear. Perhaps we've heard so much about grace that we take it for granted and fail to grasp just how "amazing" it is, as John Newton put it. Maybe for some us it's that we just don't grasp what grace really is. For other, thanks to the modern church putting so much focus on the individual and then popular theology putting the Christian hope in terms of a warm, fuzzy vision of pie (or heaven) in the sky when you die, we have an anaemic view of grace. Whatever the case, we need to hear Paul here in Romans and we need to hear the full throated roar of this powerful message of God's grace that, through Jesus and his death and resurrection, has transformed and is still transforming all things. We need to hear the message of grace and not only be transformed ourselves, but we need to begin to see the whole world and ever situation in which we live through the lens of God's transforming grace.

Of course, we can't talk about grace before we talk about sin. This is where Paul starts. Look at verse 12:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death

through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

In the first part of the chapter Paul explained how the death of Jesus, his great act of obedient covenant faithfulness, has dealt with the problem of sin. God's love was revealed on at the cross. Paul gave us assurance: In the death of Jesus, God has done the hard part. We can now have assurance that he will finish what he started. He will eventually, but very certainly set the world to rights and if we have any doubts, he's poured the Holy Spirit into us as a down payment on that day when everything is made new.

But how does it all work? We start with sin and death. Adam has been lurking in the shadows in these first chapters of Romans. Paul now puts him centre-stage. Adam brought sin in to the world. More than that, Paul brings Adam out at this point because Adam reminds us of what humanity has lost. He had something and he gave it up. But what did Adam give up? What did God create humanity for? This is the question we need to get right if we're going to follow Paul from Adam to Jesus. This is what we have to get right if we're going to get the rest of the story right—if we're going to understand what grace is and why God has poured it out on us to overflowing.

Here's what Psalm 8 says about human beings:

You have made [man] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands. (Psalm 8:5-6)

To have dominion over God's good creation, to be God's stewards in this world that he created to be his temple, the place of his presence, that's what we were created for. That's what it means to bear his image. It's not just something we are—or were meant to be—to bear God's image is a

vocation—it's something we do—or were meant to do. The pagans built temples and put carved images of their gods in them to represent his rule in that place. God created the cosmos as his temple and put human beings in its centre to bear his image and to manifest his good, wise, and sovereign rule. That's what we were created to do and God pours out his grace to restore his Creation, to restore his image in us, and to make us his stewards again. We were not created to strum harps for eternity, but to live as Adam did, extending God's wise and good rule over his Creation. But, as we know, Adam rejected that vocation. Rather than serve God, he grasped at becoming god himself. And in his rebellion he—humanity—fell to something lower. We became less than what we were created for. And we dragged all of creation down with us.

One man—Adam—sinned, Paul writes, and introduced sin into the world. Death followed as the natural result. Remember back to Chapter 1, where Paul wrote that our core problem is idolatry. We've turned from God and chosen to serve and worship other things: power, money, sex, creation itself, even ourselves. There was life in the presence of God, but as rebels we have been turned out of his presence. We have lost the life we once had. And lest we try to pin the problem solely on Adam, Paul makes the point here that we have all each contributed to the problem. It may have begun with Adam, but that doesn't let any of us off the hook.

Paul sort of personifies Sin and Death. Imagine him writing about them with a capital "S" and a capital "D". God gave Adam a royal vocation. He was to reign over God's creation. But he rebelled. And his rebellion didn't go as planned. Rather than ending up in control himself, Adam opened the door to the alien powers of Sin and Death. They took over and subjugated both him and Creation, bringing misery, decay, and corruption to all.

Now, Paul cuts himself off after saying that all have sinned. He's realised that he needs to clarify or explain two important things before he goes on. The first is in verses 13 and 14. He's already had quite a bit to say about *torah*, the law given through Moses, and now he anticipates someone asking how people could have sinned before God gave them all those "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not". Paul writes:

for 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 sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

Death—that alien intruder introduced by Adam—it reigned through all those many generations from Adam to Moses and that, in itself, is proof that Sin—that other alien intruder—was present. But, Paul explains, here's the difference between those people before the law was given (and between all the people who still have no knowledge of the law) and the Jews, who knew the law well: it's the difference between "sin" and "trespass". It might seem like Paul is splitting hairs, but he's not. He's going to come back to this in Chapter 7. His point here is that the people from Adam to Moses, even though they didn't have God's specific commandments about what is right and what is wrong, they still sinned. Read Genesis and it's clear that, even without the law, people knew the difference between right and wrong. They sinned and we know that because they died. But they didn't "trespass". For Paul, trespassing is what happens when someone knowingly breaks one of God's commandments. Adam was given one commandment: Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Imagine a "No Trespassing" sign in front of that tree and Adam wilfully

walking right past it. He trespassed. And this links Israel with Adam, because Israel also had God's commands, which she also wilfully trespassed.

Finally, Paul adds that Adam was a type of Jesus, the one who was to come. A "type" or *tupos* was a stamp that was pressed into wax to leave an impression, just as we use "type" to stamp ink on paper when we print books and newspapers—at least as we used to in the pre-digital age. Paul's point is that Adam prefigures the Messiah in the sense that both have established families of people who share their characteristics. Adam is the father of a family of sinners. Jesus is the father of a family of people who share the life of God. We're getting ahead of Paul now, but think of those familiar lines from Romans 8: God has called us "to be conformed to the image of his Son" (8:29)—that's Jesus' family and God sent "his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin" (8:3)—that's Adam's family.

That's Paul's first point of clarification: All are sinners and subject to death, even apart from God's law. Also, a point he'll come back to later, Israel's sin, Israel's *trespass* falls into the same category as Adam's. She had God's law, she chose to break it anyway, and so sin was focused or concentrated in Israel for the whole world to see.

Now, Paul's second point of clarification, which he makes in three different ways. And the basic point is that what Jesus has done is greater than what Adam did. Yes, Adam is a type of Jesus, but there isn't a one-to-one equivalence between them. Jesus didn't just counter Adam with an equal, but opposite force. Look at verses 15-17:

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 by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.

One man created the problem and one man has fixed the problem, but the *charisma*, the free gift that God has given in Jesus is more than a match for the idolatry and sinfulness of the entire human race brought on by Adam. Sin breeds death because that's what sin does. But the gift of God's grace has come into the midst of death and brought new creation. God created life in the first place from nothing. This time he's done something even greater: He's created life out of death itself. In Jesus the Messiah, Paul says, grace has *abounded*. The Greek word Paul uses when he says that grace "abounded" means to go above and beyond or to overflow. The bigger the problem, the more grace God will pour into it. When Jesus says in Revelation, "Behold, I make all things new," this is the power of grace—re-creating life from death. God's new creation is a work of abounding grace.

Paul goes on in verse 16:

And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.

Paul is saying that it isn't just a matter of Jesus getting right what Adam messed up. Adam failed and his failure infected the entire human race. We all stand condemned to death. What Adam did is done. Jesus isn't a "do over". Jesus came into the situation of sin and condemnation we've brought on ourselves and into the corrupt state we've brought on the Creation, and he undid it by his death and resurrection. By God's grace, those who were condemned are now, in Jesus, declared to be in the right—to once again be part of God's family. Jesus restores us to our vocation as God's image-bearers.

And then:

For 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.

This follows from God's verdict that those who are in Jesus are in the right. Adam unwittingly opened the door to Sin and Death, allowing them to reign, but through Jesus the Messiah, we are restored to reign or to rule over God's creation. It's an interesting contrast. If we don't have a good grasp of the big picture, we might expect Paul to say that when the rule of Sin and Death is overthrown, that God—or at least Jesus—would take over as sovereign. But that's not what he writes. Remember Adam's vocation, that he lost it, and that Jesus has come to make right what Adam made a mess of. So Paul writes that the rule of Sin and Death is, by God's grace, replaced by the rule of those who in whom his gift of grace has abounded. We don't reign by ourselves, to be clear. Paul says that we reign through the one man, Jesus the Messiah. We will be restored to our priestly vocation to serve under Jesus, our great High Priest.

In verses 18 and 19, Paul now picks up the line of reasoning where he left off at the end of verse 12:

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

God's gracious gift in Jesus is so much greater than Adam's trespass in all the ways Paul has just outlined, but here he stresses that in this one sense,

the two are perfectly balance. Adam's one trespass brought condemnation on the entire human race. Jesus' one act of righteousness results in justification and life for the entire human race. The scope of Adam's trespass was the entire human race and the scope of Jesus' redeeming death on the cross is the entire human race. To be clear, Paul isn't saying that every human being *will* receive this gift. As he stresses repeatedly, life is only to be found in Jesus *by faith*. But the scope, the efficacy of Jesus death extends to every human being who will repent and take hold of Jesus in faith. And in verse 19, Paul squeezes in an aside to his great theme: The good news of Jesus' death and resurrection reveals the righteousness of God. It's common for people to read into this the idea that Jesus' obedience was to the law and that because of his death and through faith in him, his obedience to the law, his righteousness is credited to us. We who were sinners are credited with his righteousness. But that's not Paul's point in Romans. In fact, in the next verse Paul explains the purpose of the law and that wasn't it. His point is that Jesus was obedient to the saving plan of God. It was a plan that began with Abraham and with Israel, his family, to be a servant of the nations, bringing them God's light. Paul reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy of the servant who would suffer for the sake of his people, dying on their behalf, taking the sins of Israel on himself and giving life back in their place. Jesus has been obedient to that saving plan and in that the righteousness, the covenant faithfulness of God has been revealed.

Now, verse 20. Paul has mentioned the law or *torah* several times. What was its part in the story?

Now the 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 leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

A Jew—at least a Jew who didn't know Jesus—would have said that the law gave the Jews the knowledge and truth they needed to rise above Adam's fall, but Paul responds to that with a powerful, "No!" The law actually did the opposite. The law caused the full sinfulness of sin to be concentrated in Israel. This wasn't a mistake. It was God's purpose all along. This gets back to the distinction Paul made between "sin" and "trespass". Sin is bad, but to really be exposed for what it is, sin has to be held up to an objective standard of holiness. The law does that. The law is like a projector. Imagine sin as a slide or transparency. When held up to the law, the law illuminates and projects it on the wall in big letters for all to see. And this is just what happened in Israel. Adam's trespass was concentrated and exposed for all to see. The *torah* condemned. That's all it could do. Yes, it also provided for forgiveness through sacrifices, but the fact that those sacrifices had to be repeated every time a person sinned only stressed all the more that the law was powerless to deal with sin. It made clear what was right, but the law could not change the heart. And Paul says here that God has done what the law could not. Trespass was increased, sin was concentrated and exposed in Israel, but then, Paul writes, grace "*superabounded*". He's said already that where there was sin, grace abounded—it overflowed. And now he stresses that where *trespass* increased, God's grace did what it does: It superabounded, it over-overflowed. Grace, by its very nature—or we should probably say, because of God's very nature—is always more plentiful than whatever sin or problem it is given to cover or to heal. The *torah* magnified sin. That was God's plan, because where sin was so magnified, he was able to pour out a superabundance of grace, through the death of Jesus on the

cross, to overcome, to heal, and to make new.

Where death reigned, grace overflowed, overcoming death that it might reign in its place through righteousness—through God’s faithfulness to his promises. And the result is “eternal life”. That’s a phrase we always need to be unpacking, because we too often think of it apart from the big story. We think of eternal life as salvation from death and hell and an eternity of disembodied existence in heaven. At least that’s the pop-theology view we see everywhere. But what Paul’s talking about isn’t just eternal life. It’s the life of the age to come. It’s not a life of disembodied existence. It’s the resurrection—it’s what happened to Jesus when his *body* was raised from the tomb. It’s the eternal life that was Adam’s so long as he lived in the presence of God. And it’s the life—the vocation—for which we were created in the first place. Jesus doesn’t save us from death and remove us from the world. That’s not a restoration of our vocation. Jesus died not only to save us, but to make us new and to make all of Creation new as well. As Paul has stated here twice, he has saved us in order to restore us to our vocation of image-bearing—to reign with him over God’s Creation as Adam once did.

Brothers and Sisters, this is the nature of God’s grace: to overcome our sin and to set right what sin and death have corrupted. The nature of grace is to make what was dead live again. The nature of grace is to make all things new. Jesus made it possible when he gave himself as a sacrifice for sin on the cross. And Jesus led the way into God’s new world when he rose from the grave. He has called each of us into that new life. Branwyn has passed through the baptismal waters into that life this morning and joined us. And Jesus had poured into us the gift of the Holy Spirit—a down payment or an earnest on the life of

the age to come—life lived in bodies made new, in a creation set right, once again lived before the face of God and in the presence of the tree of life.

But, Brothers and Sisters, we were never meant to keep God’s grace to ourselves. And we were never meant to think of it as merely a future hope. He has made us channels of his grace today. Consider again our vocation as his image bearers, the priestly stewards of his Creation. The full realisation of God’s new creation lies someday in the future, but our calling today is to live this life of grace in a such way that we lift the veil on the age to come, to give everyone around us a glimpse and a taste of what the world is supposed to be like and who we are supposed to be as human beings. Where sin, decay, and corruption abound, grace abounds all the more. The world is a mess. We see it in our own lives, in the lives of the people around us, in our community, in our nation, in the world. It’s easy to get discouraged. It’s also easy to become smug. We’re different. We know Jesus. We have grace. All those other people don’t. It’s easy to heap judgement on those still subject to sin and death. But that’s not what we’ve been called and equipped to do. We are followers of the one who came, not to condemn, but to redeem. Where sin abounds, grace overflows and, as channels of God’s grace, that overflow of God’s mercy, love, and justice *should* be overflowing out of us. The prophet Habakkuk wrote that one day the glory of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Brothers and Sisters, let that glory be made known as the grace given to us by Jesus and the Spirit superabounds in us, overflowing, making waves, and bringing the transforming grace of Jesus to the world and to the people around us.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we rejected your sovereignty and tried to seize your creation for ourselves, but

where our idolatry and sin abounded, your gift of grace abounded even more. You gave your Son as a sacrifice for the sins of your enemies and then you poured your own Holy Spirit into us, to make us new, to transform us, and to make us holy from the inside out. As we meditate on the cross, give us a sense of the abundance and the power of your grace that we might never take it for granted or underestimate it. And make us faithful stewards of your grace, being ever transformed by it ourselves and then letting it overflow into the world to make the Lord Jesus known to all. We ask this in his name. Amen.