

The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge



10p

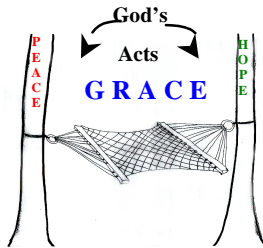
A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> March  
by Mark Ashton

Romans 5:12-21

**A Brief History of Time**

We started this chapter last week and we saw how God acted in history in sending His Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins on the cross and raising Him again to life for us. And from that decisive act in history, Paul argues, all Christian experience flows.

I used an illustration that gained a rather better reception than some I have used recently!



[Fig. 1]

Because God did that then, we have access to His presence; we rejoice even in suffering and we face the future with hope, courage and joy.

But how can one act of one man in history (2,000 years of history away from us now) affect so many people today? How can what He did then, far away and long ago, affect me as an individual in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Paul's answer is to draw an analogy between Jesus Christ and Adam: ***Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned - ... (v 12).*** Notice a dash at this point to indicate that Paul goes off on a parenthesis: he doesn't complete his sentence, or his thought, until he gets down to vv 18-19: ***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.*** That's the nub of the passage. Verses 13-17 cover the parenthesis and then Paul has a further footnote on the law in verse 20 and a summary in verse 21. We're going to look first at this essential bit, the analogy between Adam and Christ, which is the nub of Paul's argument.

**(1) The Analogy between Adam and Christ** (vv 12,18,19)

Paul makes two assumptions:

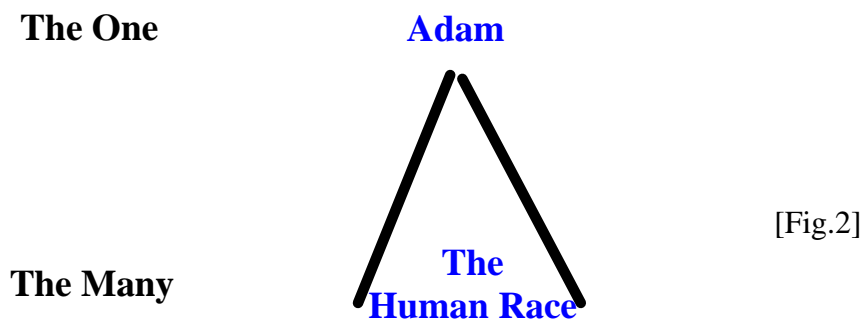
First, he assumes that Adam was a historic individual in just the same way as Jesus Christ was. In other words he is referring to the Fall in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), in verse 12: ***...as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin....***

Second, Paul is assuming that you and I and every human being that has ever lived have entered into an entailment, a consequence, of that Fall, of what happened in that first act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden. We live in a beautiful and natural world, strangely marred by pain, suffering and irrational tragedy. We find in ourselves a deep sense of (and a deep longing for) what is good, and yet a constant tendency towards what is bad. We set off after

truth, goodness, beauty, purity, virtue; and again and again we veer away into selfishness—into just putting No 1 first, pursuing our own ends for our own pleasure and comfort and ease.

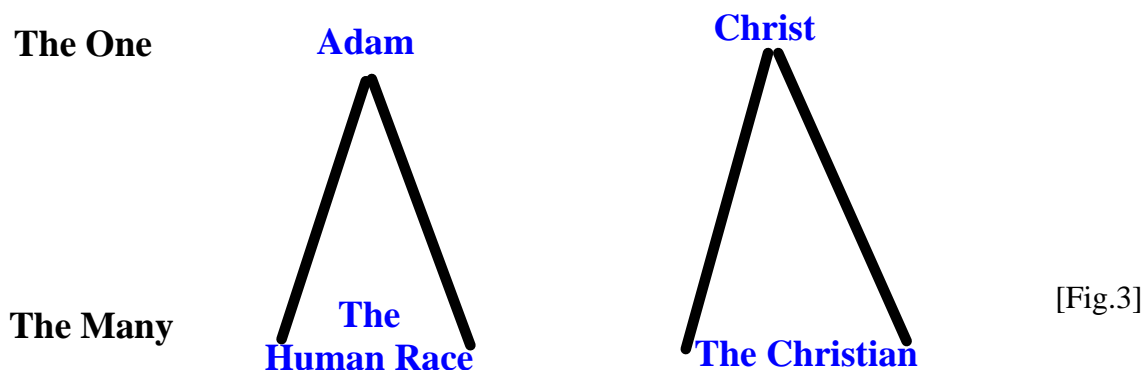
So the suffering in our natural world and the selfish bias in our human hearts are crowned by the awful, illogical barrier of death. We are born into a race that is already separated from God. ***Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.*** Paul isn't trying to prove that: he's assuming that it's a fact of your and my experience. He's assuming that the inheriting of sin and its consequences matches our experience. It isn't that we are not responsible for our own evil. We all know in our hearts that we are, don't we? But there is, nevertheless, an inevitability about that evil, an hereditary selfishness in our genes (that instinct to look after No 1) which the non-Christian has to attribute to the instinct for self-preservation (created in the human race by evolution and natural selection)—which somehow never squares with the fact we feel guilty about it. You and I need a slightly more sophisticated explanation of our experience of evil in this world, I think, than that. I don't seem to be able to stop myself from sinning, and yet I know that I have a moral responsibility for my actions. There is a human solidarity in sin. I belong to the human race in this way. And Paul traces that back to Adam. He repeats the point several times. You can't get away from it in this passage: ***The many died by the trespass of the one man...(v 15); The judgement followed one sin...(v 16); by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man...(v 17); the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men...(v 18) through the disobedience of one the one man the many were made sinners...(v 19)***

Paul is saying that every member of the human race shares a common experience of sin and of separation from God (what he calls death here) traceable to Adam. This doctrine is known as Original Sin and can be portrayed very simply like this: [Fig. 2]



As we shall see, this is more a theological and spiritual truth, than a strictly chronological and historical one. Paul's argument is that the one, Adam, disobeyed God; the many, the human race, are now affected by sin and death.

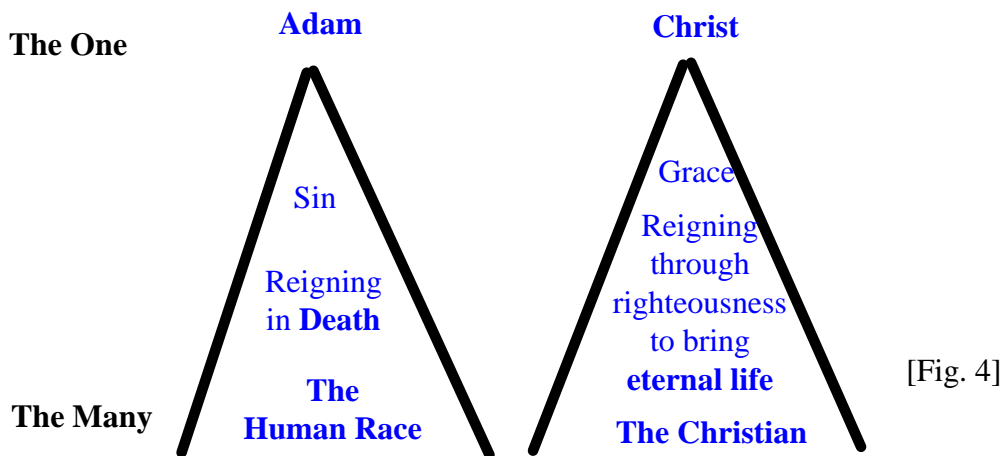
Because we know we have that shared experience, that solidarity is sinfulness that is traced back to one ancestor, so, Paul argues, we can also trace a shared experience back to Christ.



This is the analogy: the one, Adam; the many, the human race. The one, Christ; the many, all those who have believed in Him and received life through Him. ***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 (vv 18-19).*** That's the analogy. But the point of all those verses that come between (vv 13-17) is that there are many more dissimilarities (or contrasts) in this analogy than there are similarities.

## (2) The Dissimilarities between Adam and Christ (vv 15-17)

Although there is this basic analogy, there are so many things that are different: *But the gift* [what Jesus has done for us] *is not like the trespass* [what Adam did]. *For if the many died by the trespass of one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of 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 judgement 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 (vv 15-17).* Verses 18 and 19 continue to pile up the contrasts, and they are summarised in v 21, which says, *...so that, just as sin reigned in death* [the entailment from Adam], *so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* [Fig. 4]



Notice the force of Paul's argument. He is not trying to prove original sin. He is assuming that you and I have no problem with believing the left hand side of our illustration. If you do have a problem can I suggest that you talk to somebody who is really close to you and say, "Do you think I have inherited Adam's sin?" Put it in those terms and they will not know what on earth you are talking about. But if you say, "Do you think I am a perfect person?" then they will have a bit more of a hold on you, I suspect.

Paul says there is no problem understanding what we have inherited from Adam because it is a constant fact of our experience. You see, the one thing that convinces me that I can't really be a Christian—my on-going experience of sin—is actually an illustration to me of how I am saved from sin. Because I have another solidarity with Christ. Because for Paul it is not the case of Adam being central: Christ is the centre, and the Cross is the centre of history—of this Brief History of Time. It is not primarily chronological—it is spiritual. Paul is not saying that no-one could be saved before Christ. Paul is answering the question, remember, "How can that one act at Calvary affect so many people?" There is also in the passage a footnote about the role of the law, so let's consider that –

## (3) The Law (vv 13-14, 20-21)

The Mosaic Law (those first five books of the Bible), summed up in the Ten Commandments, was enormously important for a Jew like Paul. After Adam, you will remember, the Law was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and it's seen as something very, very important. But Paul is concerned that we get it in its right place—which is why after starting on verse 12 he immediately goes off on a digression at verse 13:... *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 the pattern of the one to come.* Law came later. It couldn't prevent sin (it came too late for that) and it couldn't save from sin (it was too weak). But it did reveal sin; it made sin more apparent; it made sin worse: *The law was added so that the trespass might increase (v 20a).*

The Ten Commandments are not like a history exam: 'Attempt any four questions out of ten.' They are not a means by which we can save ourselves: providing us with some sort of a pass mark in moral achievement and behaviour (if we can do well enough against those Ten Commandments, then God will let us into heaven). Rather, they reveal to us the character of God (here is God saying, "This is what I am like in human terms"), and in doing so they make our

rebelling against that character more obvious, more apparent and indeed worse (because we are rebelling with our eyes open).

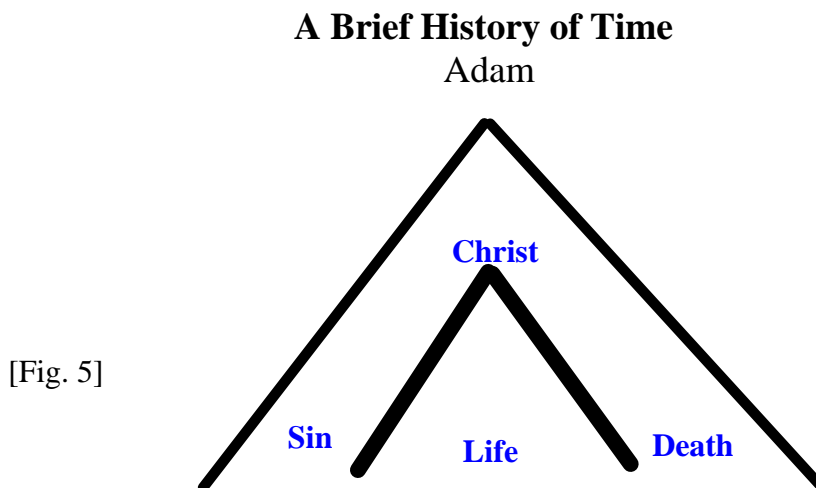
An old lady once objected to the reading of the Ten Commandments in church, because she said, “They put so many ideas in people’s heads”. That’s latching on to what Paul is getting at here. Indeed, there was one Bible printed in 1631 by Robert Barker and Martin Lucas—the king’s printers in London—which omitted the word ‘not’ from the seventh commandment. ‘Thou shalt commit adultery’ was how it read (a type error for which the printers got fined £3,000 by King Charles I, who also insisted on all copies of that Bible being recalled and destroyed. It was known as the Adulterers’ Bible). One past curate of the Round Church tells how, as a small boy, he was on a train journey in France, and noticing a sign on the door which said “Defence de Cracher”, he asked what it meant: ‘Spitting forbidden’. He said it have never occurred to him to spit in a train carriage before, but the moment he knew it was forbidden to do so, his mouth started to salivate!

The Law does actually work in that way: it makes sin more apparent and it makes it worse, because we know what we are doing—even though there was sin before there was the Mosaic Law: *The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more (v 20)*. The Law was like a torch. If we can imagine this building completely dark, as if it were the middle of the night, no light from the street or anything. Say I were to switch on a torch. It would look very bright. If it shone in your eyes it would dazzle you. It would be the one thing in the whole of this place that you would focus on. But now, in the daylight, it hardly looks significant at all. You can see it is still bright, but it is of very little significance compared with the light around us.

The Law shone in a dark world, and was very important. But when Christ came and died for our sins on the cross, the revelation that focuses around that (what we see of the wrath and justice and judgement, as well as the mercy and grace and compassion of God in the Cross) make the Law pale alongside it. So the light of grace shines.

John wrote in his gospel, *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17)*. Paul writes here: *The law was added so 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 (vv 20, 21)*.

So the inheritance I have from Adam (my experience of sin and death) and the Law, point me to the salvation available in Christ. So let’s look at our final summary of all we’ve said:



It starts with Adam; and the situation that follows from Adam being one of sin and death being exacerbated, made worse, made clear, by the coming of the Mosaic Law. But then came Christ—at the centre point of history God stepped in to act, and Jesus died for our sins. And from that flows life—remember this is theological/spiritual, not chronological: Paul is not saying that no-one was saved before Christ. Paul’s argument, remember, is that you and I can be as sure of that life, because of what Christ did, as we are sure in our lives of the sin and death that we’ve experienced all the time, because of what Adam did when he first fell. I have shared in Adam (I know that). I can share in Christ.

(Original sin is not a popular idea, but I want to challenge you with this thought: have you a better explanation for your own experience of evil in your own heart and your experience of corporate, collective evil in the history of the human race? If you have a better way to explain it, I’d love to hear it.)

We know the reality of this experience of inheriting something from Adam within us, this separation from God, this spiritual death. Paul says that that is just a pale reflection of a much greater reality, the reality of grace through Christ: ***...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 (vv 20-21).***

Matthew Henry wrote that there is ‘a much greater power in the second Adam to make us happy than there was in the first to make us miserable.’ Does your sin make you miserable? Then let Christ make you glad! Those two things always go together: if we have no sense of the horror of that outer triangle which is where our moral achievements, our attempts to be good, keep us, then we will probably have little sense of the liberty and joy there is in the free gift of forgiveness inside Christ. Don’t let your solidarity with Adam (awareness of sin) keep you from awareness of solidarity with Christ.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*