

REIGN IN LIFE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

Romans 5:12–21

Key Verse: 5:17

“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.”

Have you ever felt helpless? That feeling that, no matter how hard you try, it won’t do any good? In whatever we do, how we think before we start is extremely important.

At this point in Romans, Apostle Paul is preparing to lead us into the next key topic: sanctification (chapters 6–8). If justification by faith is hard to accept, sanctification by faith is even harder. So Paul first confirms for us the fruits of faith we enjoy through Christ: peace, grace, hope, and God’s great love (5:1–11).

Now in 5:12–21, Paul broadens his scope to look at all of human history. He vividly contrasts the spiritual and theological impacts brought by two individuals: Adam and Christ. But why does Paul do this? Because only when we deeply realize who we are in Christ and what that truly means can we begin the process of sanctification in a healthy way.

The core concept here is “the abundance of grace” (verses 15, 17, 20–21). Through faith in Christ, no matter how much sin and death ruled over us in the past, we now together enjoy overflowing grace that leads to eternal life in Jesus. So what does it mean to “reign in life”? How can we be confident that we are such people? And how should we live out this faith practically? May God speak to us through his word today.

First, Paul diagnoses our universal problem (12–14): the spread and reign of death. Let’s read verses 12–14. Paul reminds us of the fact he has already proven (chapters 1–3)—that the whole world is under the power of sin. But here, he clearly points out its root and consequence. Through humanity’s first ancestor Adam, sin and death spread to the whole world, and even now it reigns as king. So our struggle is not merely about a few isolated mistakes we make today. We all have inherited a condition. Sin and death are working in our lives as if they were a ruling king. This explains why, no matter how hard we try in our own strength, we are bound to fail repeatedly—whether we try to overcome inner darkness through sheer willpower and moral discipline, or try to control our lives through personal achievement and success. We try to “reign in life” in our own

way, only to find ourselves swept downstream by the rushing river, exhausted. Paul tells us that no one among us is an exception. Whether a highly moral person or a deeply immoral person, all human beings are floating downstream along the current of Adam. There is no way to escape this current on our own.

Notice how Paul introduces the era before “the law was given” in verse 13. It does not mean there was no sin in that time when there was no law. It simply means people were not very conscious of their sin. As Genesis testifies, we know sin existed because “every intention of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5b). Today, many people also live without God’s law, and because of this, they are unaware of their sin. But just because they do not realize it doesn’t mean there is no sin. All of us can be blind to the reality of it.

Paul also adds that most people at that time did not commit a sin like “the transgression of Adam.” Adam had a specific command from God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). For the people who lived from Adam to Moses, there was no such specific, personal command from God to transgress. Nevertheless, they were clearly committing sin. As Paul previously stated: “they did not honor [God] as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21). And because of the sin they inherited and shared with Adam, they experienced the reign of death. We think we can excuse ourselves with ignorance just because we don’t know what we’re doing wrong. However, every single day and moment, all of us have the sin of not honoring or thanking God. This is precisely why we deserve the penalty of death.

Paul later compares the reign of death to condemnation (16). So he is not speaking merely of physical death, but of condemnation—eternal separation from God—which is even more final than physical death.

Next, Paul makes a sharp contrast (15–16): Adam’s one trespass versus “the free gift” of Jesus. Let’s look back at verse 14. Adam was a “type of the one who was to come,” that is, a pattern of Jesus. In fact, Adam is more of an antithesis of Jesus rather than a pattern. Through his one trespass, this one man Adam caused so many people to die in sin.

But by sending the one man Jesus Christ to this sin-sick world, God did a marvelous thing. God displayed his grace. Paul calls this “the free gift” four times in verses 15–16. He says this gift came “by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ.” God’s grace given to us in Jesus is completely different from what we deserve. We all deserve God’s wrath. But God’s free gift of grace given to us is so abundant that it not only satisfied God’s wrath but completely extinguished it. God’s free gift of grace in Jesus has overflowed to countless believers in history, and it still abounds today.

Paul wants us to truly realize the difference between Adam's trespass and the grace Jesus gave. Let's read verse 16. Adam's single trespass placed countless people under judgment and condemnation. But through the one man Jesus, God gave his free gift, and it came after not only the accumulated trespasses of the whole world but also our own numerous trespasses. And God's free gift brought justification. It completely wipes away our sinful record and brings us into an intimate relationship of love with God.

Then Paul gets to his main point (17): God's promise to us to "reign in life" through faith in Christ. Let's read verse 17. Paul has been repeatedly using the words "much more." In verse 9, verse 10, and verse 15 he says, "...much more"! And now he says it the fourth time: "...much more will those [who believe in Christ]...reign in life" (17). Paul also uses the words "abounded" and "abundance" (15,17,20). With all these words he's describing the grace of God. God's grace is so much more, so undeserved, so abundant, we can't even imagine. This is a new way of thinking. When we turn to Jesus, God doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. His grace is so much more than our numerous trespasses.

God takes us from the destructive, hopeless lineage of Adam and puts us in the healing, hopeful lineage of Jesus. He adopts us to himself as sons and daughters, redeems us through the shed blood of Jesus, forgives all our trespasses, lavishes the riches of his grace on us, gives us a glorious inheritance in Christ, and seals us with the Holy Spirit. We need the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to truly know the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints (Eph. 1:5–18).

Read verse 17 again. This is the result of God's grace in our lives. His grace enables us to "reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ." But what does this mean? It means we have stepped out of Adam's domain full of sin and death and entered Christ's domain full of grace and life. In Christ we experience eternal life right now, at this very moment. We experience complete assurance of salvation. And we can experience God's abounding grace poured into our souls each day. In this grace, Christ reigns within us. Sin and death no longer rule over us. We no longer fear the world or its sinful influence. Instead, we can boldly enter into the sinful world, confident not in ourselves, but in the abounding grace of Jesus that has the power to truly transform people. Ultimately, to "reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ" means that one day we will participate in his eternal victory and glorious reign in his kingdom. And by the power of his grace, he helps us taste victory over our sin and death right now.

Honestly, there are times when we don't feel like conquerors. Sometimes we feel a deep sense of defeat. But by faith in Christ, we are promised eternal

victory. When I first started my life as an intern shepherd, I experienced this. While trying to live as a shepherd, I was fighting fiercely against lustful thoughts inwardly, and I was losing. Even in that state, God used me to bring two promising students to an Easter conference. There, someone snapped a picture of the three of us. I'll never forget that picture. I was sitting in between them. The two students looked healthy and bright. I looked like a sick person. My faith in Jesus at the time was as small as a mustard seed. But by the end of that year, God helped me deeply experience his abounding grace to me in Jesus, which transformed my inner life. On our current journey we may experience the victory of his grace here and there, as mere shadows. But one day, simply because we've tasted his grace, we will share in his glory, his eternal victory.

This confidence in God's grace and its spiritual victory is what prepares us for the fierce spiritual battle of sanctification. If sanctification depended on our own effort, we would soon give up. Or we would degrade into a legalistic pattern of life without the deep heart transformation we need. Sadly, many Christians live that way. But God is offering us a new way of life in Jesus—a victorious life—if we simply hold fast to this amazing grace. God promises that when we receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness in Jesus, we will reign in life. We need to receive this grace, this free gift, and believe this victory. When we do, we are ready to fight the spiritual battle of sanctification in our lives.

Paul then highlights the impact of “one act of righteousness” (18–19). Let's read verse 18. Here, the “one trespass” refers to when Adam ate the fruit God commanded him not to eat. What then is the “one act of righteousness”? It's the event of Jesus dying on the cross. Through this one righteous act, God made justification and life available to all people, of all time and places, who just receive it. This is how God gave us his grace, his free gift of righteousness. By highlighting this one act, Paul is showing how God permanently defeated sin and death, and changed history. It's so easy to fall into gloomy thoughts looking at the darkness of the world around us. But God wants all of us to look at and believe in the one act of righteousness of his Son on the cross. It gives us hope and light in the darkness. It allows us to experience the reign of his grace and life.

Now let's read verse 19. Here Paul shows the power of influence. Adam influenced the entire world to this day with his bad example of disobedience. But Jesus permanently influenced the whole world through his good example of obedience. Obedience is a key concept in Romans. At the beginning of Romans Paul states that we are all called to the obedience of faith (1:5), and Paul repeats this at the very end of Romans (16:26). What is “the obedience of faith”? It is wholeheartedly obeying our living God because of God's grace in Jesus. Jesus the Son rendered such obedience to his Father God. As our Lord, he requires the same wholehearted obedience from us. This obedience not only drives the

process of sanctification in our own lives, but also makes us part of his gracious reign and good influence in the world. When we focus on devoting our lives in obedience to Jesus our Lord, we cannot help but exert a godly influence on those around us, and on countless others we don't even know.

Our obedient faith through Jesus' grace also exerts a good influence within our community. With every act of obedient faith in Jesus, we inspire and encourage one another. When we obey him because of his grace, we build up the weak, and when we become weak, we are encouraged through others who obey him. So this is not a lonely reign that places everyone else beneath us. Together, as one community in Christ, we reign in life. Jesus' grace always leads us to love and serve one another within a Christ-centered community where there is godly obedience to him. We are allowed to belong to such a precious community of good influence not as our right, or as a duty, but only by his grace.

Finally, Paul testifies to the overwhelming power of grace (20–21). Read verse 20. In verse 13, Paul said that even in the era before God gave the law, sin was “indeed in the world”—that is, it was very real. Here in verse 20, he says that after God gave the law, it only “increases the trespass,” meaning our conscious awareness of sin is only heightened. The law doesn't solve our problem of sin. Paul proclaims that the true turning point of God's history is not creation, fall, and the giving of the law, but creation, fall, and the coming of Jesus. With the coming of Jesus, Paul proclaims, “...grace abounded all the more.”

In light of this passage, the sin of Adam spread to all people, whether we realize it or not. Sin leads us not only to physical death but to eternal separation from our loving Creator. As sin increases, death reigns as king. But Paul is confident that the grace of Jesus is far more powerful than the power of sin. The abounding grace of Jesus not only cleanses us from our sin and turns away God's wrath; it restores what sin has destroyed in our lives. His grace is so abounding, it restores us in the knowledge of God and in God's own image. His grace breaks the power of sin within us, something the law could never do. It's his grace that enables us to reign in life with him. Let's read verse 21.

Many of us struggle with feelings of defeat due to circumstances and problems. Especially when looking at our own chronic sins, we feel weighed down and despairing. How can we get up and get out of this spirit of defeat? Let's read verse 17 again. May God help us receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness in our Lord Jesus Christ. In his abounding grace, may God inspire us to live with the obedient faith that makes us spiritual influencers in this dark world.