REIGN IN LIFE

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 wondered about your connection to the past? Today people use the term “genetic mapping” to explain how we inherit certain traits from our ancestors. But whether they were good or bad, we find it hard to believe that who our ancestors were or how they lived has any real impact on our lives today. For example, one of the most noble people I know is distantly related to a pirate. It’s unimaginable! So many people have come to America to break away from their past, to reinvent themselves and forge a new identity, and it’s been happening generation after generation for hundreds of years. But though we may ignore it and make drastic life changes, the past may still be influencing us more than we know. It’s true physically, but it’s also true spiritually. In the first part of chapter 5 Paul showed us how living by faith in Jesus gives us peace, grace, joy and hope. Now in verses 12–21 he compares and contrasts the first man Adam with the “second Adam” Jesus to show us that through faith, we actually enter into a new humanity, a whole new reign of grace and life. Why does Paul write this? What does it mean to us? And how can we actually experience what he’s saying? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Paul has just made a profound and powerful statement. Read verses 9,10. What Jesus did 2,000 years ago can still have an amazing impact on us. Through his shed blood shed he can justify us in the sight of God, washing away all our sins. He can reconcile us from being God’s enemies and make us his friends. What’s more, he can save us from the wrath of God on Judgment Day. But for many people this may seem too good to be true. How can what one man did so long ago have any impact on us today? Paul now begins his answer.

Read verse 12. Paul is referring to when Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden. Ever since that one act by one man, sin and death spread to all people. Over the centuries many people have speculated how this can be. But in our recent experience of the pandemic we can see how just one person’s infection with a virus can spread to so many. So inheriting a sinful nature from our common ancestor Adam somehow seems a lot less abstract, a lot more vivid.

In today’s passage we also notice how Paul emphasizes “one man,” “one trespass” and “one act of righteousness” (12,15,16,17,18,19). Even in our world population of 7.7 billion people, one person really *can* make a difference. Today there’s a word called “influencer” used to describe somebody, usually on social media, who gets others to buy things. There are “nano-influencers” with under 1,000 followers, then there are “mega-influencers,” with over one million. It’s not just about creating markets for products or services and making money. Influencing happens morally, ethically and spiritually. It may not happen as quickly as we’d like, but one person’s good influence can be very powerful. Influence might be for good, but sadly, as Paul illustrates here in verse 12, so often it’s for evil. Whether we realize it or not, if we’re living in Adam, we’re also influencing others to live in Adam; if we’re living by faith in Christ, we may be small, but we’re influencing people, too. Surely Paul was praying for these small house churches in Rome to live out their faith in Jesus and influence the whole world. And it still can happen through us today.

Look at verses 13,14. Here Paul introduces two eras in human history: before God gave his Law through Moses, and afterwards. Paul wrote in 3:20, “…through the law comes knowledge of sin.” Paul teaches us in Romans that God’s law heightens our awareness of sin (7:7,13). But even before God gave his Law people were sinning in so many ways and were clueless about it. And death was “reigning” at that time, meaning everybody was dying, which is evidence that, even before the Law was given, sin was very much “in the world.” People were dying not just physically but spiritually, cut off from God. Look at verse 14 again. Paul says that at that time people’s “sinning was not like the transgression of Adam.” He means they weren’t breaking any specific command of God, like Adam did, but were sinning generally, going against the guidance of their God-given conscience (2:15). Adam’s sinful influence was swaying the whole world to drift away from God. It seems like there was no way out. But Paul says in verse 14b that Adam “was a type of the one who was to come.” It’s like “the great reversal.” Adam influenced the world to sin, but the one to come, Jesus, still influences the world to come back to God.

Paul adds that Jesus’ influence is way more powerful than Adam’s. Read verse 15. Many died through the one man’s trespass. It was God’s justice, his just punishment for sin. But Paul says Jesus brought a “free gift” into the world. What was it? Paul calls this “free gift” “the grace of God.” What a beautiful expression! Paul says it was brought into the world through just one man, Jesus Christ. Jesus brought God’s grace into this world in a very specific way. It wasn’t just that he came into a world full of God’s enemies, but that he came to die in our place and shed his blood for our sin. It’s amazing grace we could never earn or deserve. Paul says here that this grace “abounded for many.” Sin kills, but grace abounds. The famous author John Bunyan who wrote *Pilgrim’s Progess* wrote another book called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners.* It was his spiritual autobiography, which he wrote while serving a 12-year prison sentence for preaching without a license. His point was, God’s grace in Jesus abounds way more than all our sin put together, and it abounds even in the worst human circumstances. God’s free gift of grace in Jesus has a much more powerful influence in the world than human sin ever could. How is it different? Read verse 16. In Adam we all live under condemnation, both God’s, other people’s, and our own. But in Christ’s free gift we’re justified—we’re made right with God, which is all that matters. We’re set free from living under a sense of God’s punishment, from being ashamed of what people think, and from self-condemnation. In this justification through faith in Christ, we find real restoration and our true identity.

Paul’s comparison and contrast of Adam and Christ makes a climax. Read verse 17. What a glorious promise! When we receive God’s abundant grace and free gift of righteousness, he promises that we will “reign in life” through Jesus Christ. What does this mean? In Greek, the word “reign” literally means to become a king or queen. It’s not about gaining human power over others or self-glory through various kinds of games or power grabs. God’s grace to us in Jesus makes us like spiritual kings and queens. Through faith in Christ God elevates us above this sick, evil and dying world and empowers us to live as his noble children in his image. In his abounding grace we can refuse to let sin reign in our mortal bodies so that we obey its evil desires (6:12). In his abounding grace we can be rescued from the law of sin within us, our body subjected to death, and all our wretchedness (7:23–25a). In his abounding grace we can set our minds on spiritual things and be ruled by life and peace (8:5,6). In his abounding grace we can get out of all our fears and experience God’s deep love as our heavenly Father (8:15). In his abounding grace we can become more than conquerors, victorious over any and all the evil powers this world can throw at us (8:37–39). We’re also promised that if we endure all our sufferings in this life by faith, we will reign with Christ forever in his kingdom (2Ti2:12).

So, are we reigning? Or are we just existing, just barely surviving? We can experience reigning in life only as we learn to live by faith in the abounding grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. His grace enables us to shake off all our sin, all our powerlessness, all the negative influences of this world, and to turn around and go into this world as powerful spiritual influencers. Honestly, it’s easy to focus on protecting ourselves from the world. During the pandemic lockdown that’s essentially what we’re doing. But God calls us to so much more than just self-preservation of ourselves and our families. God calls us to reign in Christ, to go out into this sinful world and be influencers for Christ, to show people how God’s grace really does abound in Christ, through our own honest testimony and behavior. So, are we being influenced, or are we being an influencer for Jesus?

Paul repeats his thesis in verse 18. Then he adds something more. Read verse 19. Jesus’ “one act of righteousness” was his obedience to God even unto death on a cross (Php2:8). But it wasn’t just Jesus’ epic story. As we learn to obey Jesus by faith as the real Lord of our lives, we experience God making us righteous, meaning God sanctifying us. Paul will explain more about it in the next few chapters. But here he’s describing that what reigning in life means—it means learning to obey Jesus by faith. Our simple acts of obedience by faith in Jesus become the means by which we live in him and become influencers like him.

Read verses 20,21. Jesus is so much more influential than Adam ever was, or even than law itself. It’s because his grace is able to abound all the more, no matter how much sin increases, no matter how many legalistic ideas we’ve been enslaved by. His grace reigns through his righteousness to lead us to eternal life in him. Paul is telling us that we’re called to live not under the law, but under Jesus’ amazing reign of grace abounding, under his reign of life.

So, what Jesus did for us 2,000 years ago may seem like an irrelevant, distant past. But in fact, it’s a total game changer. Jesus is the most powerful influencer the world has ever known. His abounding grace is able to set us free from the reign of sin and death, justify us and clothe us with his own righteousness. May God help us experience this wonderful reign in life through faith in the abounding grace of our Lord Jesus. Though this world has so many powerful evil influences, may God enable us to overpower it all and be gracious spiritual influencers like our Lord.