

Romans 5:12-21

The Revelation of God's Righteousness as Abounding Grace in Christ

The connection between 5:1-11 and this passage could be described in this way: Paul compares Adam and Christ to show that the grace of the second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45) is much greater than the sin of the first Adam, so that the joy (exultation) of 5:11 is proved, maintained and enlarged.

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 12

I translate this verse as follows: "Therefore, as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because of which (i.e. because of the death which had come about) all men sinned..."

This verse is about Adam and his first sin (Genesis 3): in consequence, sin came into the world; and through sin, death, as the punishment for sin; and as a result, death spread to all men, so that a state of death arose: death started to reign as king (5:17,21). All descendants of Adam are dead in sin and trespasses in this state of death (Ephesians 2:1,5; Colossians 2:13). They can do nothing but sin in this state. Hence, the result of sin is death (separation from God) and the result of death (being separated from God) is also sin. Paul does not explain why Adam's first sin had such serious consequences for his descendants. He only states the fact that the consequences of Adam's first fall into sin affect all men after him. This shows that Adam, as head of the human race and of the covenant, occupied a unique position (see Main Thoughts).

Further, it should be noted that the RSV's [and NIV's] "because all men sinned" is incorrect. For that suggests that death came to all men, not only because Adam sinned, but also because all men sinned, thus giving two causes. That is not what it says in the Greek text.

Also, the Greek text does not say, as the RSV does: "*as* sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and *so* death spread to all men..." This translation makes it appear as if the comparison concludes in v. 12. But that is wrong. The word "so" does not refer back to "as", but indicates: in the same way as sin and death came into the world, namely *through one man*, so also *through one man* this death has come to all men after him. The Greek text makes it abundantly clear that the comparison which is begun in v. 12 is not concluded there, but interrupted, to be resumed and finished in v. 18 (see Notes to v. 18).

Some exegetes assume that we should read the last clause of v. 12 as: "through whom (i.e. the man, Adam) all men sinned." The conjunction would then refer

back to "one man." But it makes more sense that it refers back to "death," so that we should read, "in which death (i.e. state of death) all men sinned." Or better still: "because of which state of death all men sinned."

Other commentators add the phrase "in Adam," so that the text reads: "because all men sinned in Adam." Already in the early Christian church this was thought to be supported by Hebrews 7:9ff. which states that Levi, while still in the body of his ancestor, Abraham, paid tithes to King Melchizedek. Similarly, Adam's descendants, while still in his body, supposedly sinned with him. But we should note that while v. 12 does state the fact that the consequences of Adam's sin spread to his descendants, it does not give the reason. The addition of the phrase "in Adam," therefore, alters the meaning of the sentence.

Thus, v. 12 says: the first sin of Adam caused a state of death for all men, as a result of which, and in which, all men sinned. (For more on this, see Main Thoughts).

Verses 13 and 14

These verses aim to prove the foregoing, namely that through the state of death, caused by Adam, all men sinned. We can summarize their contents as follows: "In v. 12 I said that after Adam all men sinned, because through the one man, Adam, sin and death came to all men, and this death reigned as king. This became very clear in the period between Adam and Moses. At the time the law, which would be given on Sinai, did not yet exist, nor was there a probationary command as there was for Adam, so there was no law to be broken. But there was sin, for all men sinned, because death reigned as king and all men in that state of death could do nothing but sin."

The sins of Adam's descendants were different from Adam's first sin, for only Adam's sin had consequences for all his descendants. Between Adam and Moses, all sinned as a result of the state of death in which they found themselves because of Adam's first sin. The conclusion of v. 14 says that Adam was a pattern of the coming Christ. This means that just as Adam's deed had consequences for all his descendants, so also what Christ did has consequences for all those who are his. All through one (Adam) into sin and death, all (namely all believers) through one (Christ) into grace and life. (See Glossary #2 and #32.)

Verses 15-17

In vv. 12-14, the similarity between Adam and Christ is pointed out: all through one, or one for many. The comparison continues by stating that Christ and his grace are much more than Adam and his sin.

The gift of grace is much greater than the trespass. Life is more than death; acquittal is more than conviction; the gift of grace is more than trespass. The negative (sin: destruction and ruin) is less than the positive (grace: restoration and glorification). Verse 16 contains the second contrast: Adam's one trespass

resulted in God's judgment of condemnation, but the grace of Christ covers many trespasses and, thus, is immeasurably more powerful. At the same time we hear in v. 16 that it was God's decree and decision to impute the guilt of Adam's sin to all his descendants. But the reasons and ground for this imputation are not mentioned (see Main Thoughts).

Verses 18 and 19

The apostle is now going to complete and conclude the comparison between Adam and Christ, which was interrupted in v. 12. He now places Adam's act of sin and its consequences beside Christ's act of righteousness and its consequences. It is God's judgment -- God's just conviction and its execution -- that because of Adam's sin his descendants are placed in the state of sin, while afterwards, for Christ's sake, many are placed in the state of righteousness. The "much more" of Christ and his gracious redemption comes to the fore very strongly.

"Were made" (sinners and will be made righteous): as a result of God's judgment.

Verses 20 and 21

In v. 14 Paul spoke about the period between Adam and Moses as one without the Sinaitic law. Now the apostle describes what the coming of the law on Sinai meant for the sin and death of man. The answer is: law came, to increase the trespass. That is, the law exposes sin as a breach of God's commandment, and as the law increases and specifies the rules for life, the trespasses increase, for a law incites sinful man to break it. Hence, the grace of forgiveness had to increase.

In closing, v. 21 once more makes the point: thus, as sin reigned as king in death (or: though death) and thereby got the opportunity to increase in an abundance of personal trespasses, aided by the law, so also grace will reign as king through righteousness to eternal life through Christ.

Finally, death (in all its dimensions) and life (in perfection) are placed side by side in comparison, but in such a way that eternal life is triumphant. Death will yield to incomparable life!

B. Main Thoughts

1. The comparison between the first and the last Adam, to show the superiority of the latter and the abundance of grace through the last Adam, has the theme of "all through one": all were lost through one (Adam), while all were saved through one (Christ); the deed of one affects all in its consequences. This "all through one" goes back to God's decree and counsel. God made Adam the natural head of mankind (as the first of all men), the biological head (in him, "in his body" were all the people to come) and the covenant head

(representative of all men before God). That is why Adam's first act of disobedience had such far-reaching consequences: Adam dragged all his descendants with him in his fall into sin.

2. Paul speaks about God's decree and counsel in this regard. He does not say here, or anywhere, why God decided that Adam's one act of sin would be decisive for all his descendants. The reason why, and the grounds, have not been revealed to us. In fact, Scripture, in reporting God's decree says no more than that God willed it this way.

We might say: because, in Adam, mankind is an "organic" unity, redeemed mankind can in Christ also be a unity: all men included in the one Adam as the head, and all redeemed in the one Christ as Ransom and Mediator. The structure of "all through one" in Adam is the basis of the structure of "all believers through the one Christ."

3. Again and again the question is raised: was it fair for God to impute the guilt of Adam's first sin to all his descendants, even though these descendants did not yet exist and so had no part in Adam's first sin? Surely the children will not be punished for the sins of the parents? (See Deuteronomy 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chronicles 25:4; Ezekiel 18:4,20; 33:10-20; but cf. Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9). Augustine (354-430) and others in the early Christian church already answered that "in Adam" all his descendants were co-sinners, for they were, to apply the expression of Hebrews 7:9, 10, "in Adam's body." If that is so, the ground for the imputation is the co-commission of Adam's first sin. (See Glossary #15.) Is this opinion justified?

We should note that the words "in Adam" are not found in v. 12 and cannot be added either, for they would change the meaning of v. 12. You may only add something to a translation if it indeed clarifies the meaning, but not if it changes the meaning.

Apart from that, the answer that we, the descendants of Adam, co-sinned "in Adam," that is, "as being in Adam's body" appears to be the best answer to the above-mentioned question about the grounds for imputation. Objections can be raised against this answer, but I will not deal with those now.

4. It is sometimes said that according to Romans 5, Christ became the head of the covenant instead of Adam. This is not so. God made a covenant with Adam and his descendants in paradise and after the fall he continued it with the believers and their descendants (their seed; the redemptive-historic concept!). Adam remained the head. Christ joins as Ransom and Mediator. He has to reconcile the parties (God and man). Christ cannot be the head: before the fall, the covenant is the covenant of God's unforfeited grace and

after the fall, the covenant of God's forfeited grace, but no grace can be shown to Christ.

Christ is Ransom and Mediator because he fulfilled God's (creation) covenant (obedience). He did what Adam should have done but failed to do, and he bore the punishment (suffering to reconcile what Adam did wrong). The terms "suffering and obedience" (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 79) are to be preferred to "active" and "passive obedience."

In Romans 5 we do not find a comparison between two covenant heads, rather, between the imputation of guilt and punishment (Adam 1) and the imputation of righteousness and forgiveness (Adam 2); one for many or many through one.

The presupposition of Romans 5:12ff. is that Adam was an actual person and not just a Socratic example devised by Paul to have something to compare with Christ, as Prof. Kuitert claims.¹

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¹ *Ed. Note:* Professor Kuitert is Professor emeritus of Dogmatics at the Free University in Amsterdam, a non-denominational school of theology. Kuitert taught that Scripture is not infallible, that the Creation account is a myth, and not to be taken literally.