

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 3, 2016**

A MATTER OF DEATH AND LIFE

Romans 5:12-21

In the flow of the Christian year, we are now on the other side of Easter. It is now after Easter, though our celebration of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is intended to be an ongoing celebration of a never-ending reality, because we serve a risen and living Savior. Of course, in an historical sense, it has been after Easter our entire lives, all of us having been born long after the incarnation, life and ministry, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven of the Lord Jesus. For us, it has always been after Easter. But still we look forward to a promise not yet fulfilled – the promise of one resurrection to eternal life through our risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ and “the power of (His) indestructible life” (Hebrews 7:16).

Even though it is after Easter, there is a sense in which it is always Easter. I love the song that says: “Every morning is Easter morning from now on” (Avery and Marsh). Why? Because “we serve a risen Savior, who’s in the world today.” And we need Him. This world needs Him. Desperately. I came across a cartoon this week showing an empty tomb cut out of rock, with the entrance open, exploding with light, declaring this message: **THE WORLD NEEDS HOPE**. Yes, the world need hope. Everybody needs hope. The hope the world needs – the hope you and I need – for the living of these days can only be found in Jesus, the Savior who died and rose again.

Because He came and lived a sinless life among us, because He suffered and died for us, because He rose again from the dead and made us more than conquerors through His unstoppable love, we have a hope that even death cannot defeat or destroy. Which means it is always Easter for us, and the Christ of the empty tomb is the One true hope of the world.

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Now, today we return to our “Journey on the Romans Road,” focusing our attention on Romans 5:12-21. Please turn to it with me in your Bible or the Pew Bible. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

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You’re familiar, no doubt, with the expression: “A matter of life and death.” It refers to something urgent and serious, a matter of vital importance. One dictionary (macmillandictionary.com) defines it as “a serious or dangerous situation that you must deal with immediately in order to prevent something bad” – or, literally, life-threatening – “from happening.” Finding a cure for cancer or ALS or some other as-of-yet incurable disease is “a matter of life and death.” So is the battle against ISIS and other radical Islamists who are bent on killing Jews, Christians, followers of other religions, and even fellow-Muslims who do not agree with them. It is, literally, “a matter of life and death.”

Sometimes, the expression is used to show that not everything is a matter of life and death. For example: “Please don’t disturb me unless it’s a matter of life and death.” Or (I know some of you may not agree with me on this): “As much as we want them to win, the success of the Redskins is not a matter of life and death.”

What Paul writes about here in Romans 5 is not so much “a matter of life and death” as it is “a matter of death and life.” That is the order in which he presents it. He sets before us both Adam and Jesus, pointing out their respective roles in the history of humankind and the effects of their respective actions. He wants us to see how they are alike and how they are different by showing the contrast between death and life, disobedience and obedience, sin and righteousness, condemnation and justification, guilt and grace.

Through one man, he begins in verse 12 – through Adam, our first ancestor – sin entered the world. Death entered the world as the consequence of sin. And no one was (or is) exempt from death, because we have all sinned. To say it another way, Adam was the door through which sin entered the world, and sin was the door through which death entered (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 150). Or, you might say, Adam’s sin was the opening in the dyke that led to the deluge of human sinfulness. It was the (virus or cancer) that entered at one particular point and has infected every corner and aspect of human life (E. F. Harrison, *Romans*, 61). It all started with Adam and the choice he and Eve made in the Garden.

The fact that Paul focuses on Adam and not Eve should not lead us to believe that Eve was not culpable for her part in the fall of humankind into sin. Both Adam and Eve were equally guilty of disobedience against God. In addition to being a real, historical person, Paul presents Adam as a representative of humankind as a whole. What he did in the Garden (or, what he and Eve did) affected all of humankind. Adam functioned as our “federal head”, (the term used by theologians) meaning that he represented the whole human race in his decision to choose disobedience over obedience to God.

Paul makes the rather staggering but true claim that we all sinned in and with Adam. Death entered the world as the result of sin. It is, as we will see in Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin.” Do we face death because we are sinners who sin as naturally as we breathe? Or is death our destiny because of our connection to Adam and his sin? The answer is: Yes to both. Hard as it is for us with our western mindset of individualism to grasp or embrace the idea of collective solidarity with our family or tribe or nation or race, it was not foreign to the Jews or to many other cultures.

What Paul is saying is that Adam in his sin represented us. His action affected us all. It affected the whole world. And it continues to affect the world today. Death came into the world as a result of Adam’s sin, in which we are all implicated. Our complicity in Adam’s sin is known as the doctrine of original sin. But we are all guilty of our own sin as well.

Do you ever read *The Onion*, the satirical newspaper that publishes all sorts of fake news articles? I think they must treat every day as April Fools’ Day! Several years ago they ran an article with the headline: “World Death Rate Holding Steady at 100 Percent.” The article said:

“World Health Organization officials expressed disappointment Monday at the group’s finding that, despite the enormous efforts of doctors, rescue workers and other medical professionals worldwide, the global death rate remains constant at 100 percent.

“Death, a metabolic affliction causing total shutdown of all life functions, has long been considered humanity’s number one health concern. Responsible for 100 percent of all recorded fatalities worldwide, the condition has no [known] cure.”

WHO General Director Dr. Gernst Bladt is quoted as saying: “I was really hoping, what with all those new (technologies and medical advances), that we might at least make a dent in it this year. Unfortunately, it would appear that the death rate remains constant and total, as it has inviolably since the dawn of time.” I share this with you not to make light of death, but to remind you of the truth that the death rate does remain at 100 percent. It is the destiny of every person in this sin-infected world. What medical science doesn’t recognize is the true, underlying cause of death, which is our sinfulness, going all the way back to Adam and Eve and the first sin in the Garden.

There in the Garden, Adam and Eve had the freedom to choose between disobedience to God and obedience, between good and evil. And you know what? The choice they made to violate the single prohibition God had given them changed everything. It changed *everything!* You know what else? That was not the only tragic choice our first parents made. Their second tragic choice, as Chuck Swindoll (*Insights on Romans*, 120) points out, was to cover themselves in guilt and to run from God’s mercy and grace. Instead of acknowledging their sin and repenting of it, they tried to hide from God. Instead of coming to God to be cleansed of their guilt, they tried to run from God. That didn’t work out so well for them, did it?

Swindoll says: “(You) will never find grace hiding in the bushes” (*Insights*, 121). You’ve got to come out from your hiding place and trust in the mercy and grace of a loving and holy God.

Ray Stedman has said: “As many times as I sin, I cannot out-sin the grace of God” (Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory*, Vol. 1, 164). It’s true. As much as you sin, you cannot out-sin the grace of God. That does not mean you have a license to sin as you please. What it means is that God’s grace in Jesus Christ His Son really is greater than all your sin. Not *some* of it. *All* of it.

We know this because of what Jesus, in contrast to Adam, has done for us and for our salvation. In the case of Adam, his sin led to judgment and condemnation, so that death reigned over the whole human race. In the case of Jesus, however, the free gift of grace brought justification and life to many – to everyone who receives it through faith in Him. Because of Jesus, we who deserve condemnation and death as a result of our connection with Adam in his sin, as well as our own sins, instead receive mercy and grace and life, and are declared righteous and acceptable in God’s sight. Just as the sin of Adam is imputed to us because of our connection with him, so the newness of life that Jesus brings is imputed to us because of our connection to Him in faith.

Listen to Stedman again: “Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden dislodged a pebble that has built into an avalanche of sin and death (that) has swept through our entire race. But ... Jesus has launched an avalanche of grace, and He can amply counteract all that Adam has brought” (Stedman, 165). “An avalanche of grace.” I like that.

In verse 21, Paul speaks of “the reign of grace,” an expression that beautifully sums up the blessings that belong to us in Christ. “For grace,” writes John Stott, “forgives sins through the cross, and bestows on the sinner both righteousness and eternal life. Grace satisfies the thirsty soul and fills the hungry with good things. Grace sanctifies sinners, shaping (us) into the image of Christ. Grace perseveres even with the recalcitrant, determining to complete what it has begun. And one day grace will destroy death and consummate the kingdom. So when we are convinced that “grace reigns,” we will remember that God’s throne is a “throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16), and will come to it boldly to receive mercy and to find grace for every need. And this is all *through Jesus Christ our Lord*, that is, through His death and resurrection” (Stott, 157-158).

It is a matter of death and life. Adam’s sin brought death. And the righteousness of Jesus in His life and death brings life. It all comes back to the death and resurrection, to the mercy and grace, to the power and love, of Jesus Christ our risen and reigning Lord. It is still Easter.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.