

Grace Abounds Much More: The Victory of Christ in Romans 5

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The apostle Paul, in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans, is insistent on there being ‘much more’ in the provision of the gospel than was surrendered by the fall. He uses the phrase πολλῶ μᾶλλον four times in the chapter and ὑπερπερίσσευω once, which alerts us to his perspective on the abundant provision in Christ. This paper will look at this theme in the verses 12 through 21, specifically drawing from the church fathers and their perspectives on this text and on what was lost for the human race by Adam, and what was gained in Christ. Due to the brevity of the paper, it will present only a very distilled sampling of the perspectives of the church fathers.

First of all, let us look at what the church fathers suggest was lost in Adam’s disobedience based on their commentary of Romans 5:12-14. It was interesting to note that, contrary to much current emphasis among conservative preaching and teaching, that death and not sin was perceived by the fathers to be the real enemy of humanity. Sin was the gateway or access point for death to enter, and both needed to be reversed, but death was the true foe. Ambrosiaster says,

“Death is the separation of body and soul. There is another death as well, called the second death, which takes place in Gehenna. We do not suffer this death as a result of Adam’s sin, but his fall makes it possible for us to get it by our own sins...The sentence passed on Adam was that the human body would decompose on earth, but the soul would be bound by the chains of hell (Hades) until it was released.”¹

¹ Gerald L. Bray, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 136

Ambrose says, “Although through one man’s sin death has passed to all men, him whom we do not refuse to acknowledge as the father of the human race we cannot refuse to acknowledge as also the author of death.”² It is a strong accusation to thus lay such a title against Adam, but others concur. Eusebius states, “By man death entered into the world, it was surely essential that the victory over death should be achieved by man as well, and the body of death should be shown to be the body of life...”³. Origen gives us a picture of Adam as a gatekeeper who let the treacherous foe in through the gate,

“...Paul’s description of death and its power may be compared to the entry of a tyrant who wants to usurp the authority of the legitimate ruler and after seizing the entrance to the kingdom by the treachery of the gatekeeper then tries to get public opinion on his side.”⁴

Although Adam may have let the enemy in, Origen’s picture suggests that he would not have been successful unless the ‘public’, Adam’s descendants, were complicit by continuing in sin. Chrysostom agrees with this thought when he says,

“Paul inquires as to how death came into the world and why it prevailed. It came in and prevailed through the sin of one man and continued because all have sinned. Thus once Adam fell, even those who had not eaten of the tree became mortal because of him.”⁵

Next let’s look at the scope of the impact of sin and death, that is, its universal affect. In verses 12 and 18 of our scripture passage, it talks about “all people” being affected. In the last quote, Chrysostom, like the others quoted thus far, points beyond Adam here to the predicament of those that followed. Not only did Adam sin

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 140

⁵ Ibid., p. 136

and by that action introduce death to the world, but both sin and death were passed on. As Theodoret of Cyr puts it,

“...when Adam sinned he became mortal because of it and passed both on to his descendants. Thus death came to all men, in that all sinned. But each person receives the sentence of death not because of the sin of his first ancestor but because of his own sin.”⁶

There is certainly some disagreement around the nature of ‘original sin’, and the personal guilt we carry from it. Augustine would lean heavily in the direction that we will be judged for Adam’s sin. “Everyone, even little children have broken God’s covenant, not indeed in virtue of any personal action but in virtue of mankind’s common origin in that single ancestor in whom all have sinned.”⁷ Others speak of us copying Adam’s sin and being guilty only of what we have done, such as Pelagius⁸, Cyril of Alexander⁹, Theodoret of Cyr (quoted above), or Theodore of Mopsuestia who said, “Death is not just the punishment for one particular sin; it is the punishment for every sin.”¹⁰ However, there seems to be much agreement that we are all tainted with something from Adam, and that something is the cause of our own sinfulness and our own death.

Common metaphors used of this tainting is that of corruption or a disease that has been passed on. Cyril of Alexander says, “Death entered into the first man, and into the beginnings of our race, because of sin, and very soon it had corrupted the entire race.”¹¹, and elsewhere, “For our nature contracted the disease of sin

⁶ Ibid., p. 138

⁷ Ibid., p. 137

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 137-138

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 142

¹¹ Ibid., p. 137

because of the disobedience of one man, that is Adam, and thus many became sinners.”¹² Augustine said every person is born with death, “because he contracts sin from Adam.”¹³

With regards to this disease, then, the Law came not as adequate medicine, as Theodore of Mopsuestia says, “...so far was the law from being the cure for sin that Paul even says that there would not have been sin at all had there been no law...”¹⁴. Rather, as we see in commentaries regarding verse 20 of our passage, the law was the diagnosis of the problem. Cyril of Alexandria says, “The law came as the revealer of our common weakness, so that the human race would appear even more clearly to need the aid of the medicine of Christ.”¹⁵, and Diodore says, “...once [the law] was given it uncovered sin and showed that it was more widespread than people had thought.”¹⁶

Now, in turning finally to the work of Christ to undo the fall of Adam, at least four ways can be observed in the writings of the fathers in which Christ’s work is qualitatively and quantitatively ‘much more’ than our loss in Adam’s disobedience.

First of all, the fall was caused by just one sin, but Christ’s salvific work dealt with many sins. Diodore says,

“It was because of Adam’s sin, although it was only one, that God condemned many, on account of the fact that they copied Adam. But the grace of the Lord was measured not according to that one sin but according to the many sins which all had committed. Thus Christ transformed many sins into righteousness.”¹⁷

¹² Ibid., p. 148

¹³ Ibid., p. 137

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 139

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 150

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 149

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 145

Secondly, the remedy had an effect in the dimension of time that the injury did not, Theodore of Mopsuestia said,

“Adam’s sin brought punishment on all those who came after him, and so they died. But the free gift is different. For not only did it take effect in the case of those who came afterward; it also took away the sins of those who had gone before...”¹⁸

Thirdly, it has effect in another direction in time. Origen says, “Grace abounded all the more, because not only does it absolve us from the sins which we have already committed, it protects us against sinning in the future.”¹⁹

Fourthly, Pelagius says, “Adam was only the model for sin, but Christ both forgave sins freely and gave an example of righteousness.”²⁰

Christ’s work in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection won for us so much more than the reversal of Adam’s failure and even our own compounded failure on top of that. He dealt with sin so that death’s access was closed, and then took care of death as well with a life force that swallowed death altogether.

His victory is beautifully summarized in Chrysostom’s words,

“Paul speaks of an abundance of grace to show that what we have received is not just a medicine sufficient to heal the wound of sin, but also health and beauty and honor, and glory and dignity far transcending our natural state. Each of these in itself would have been enough to do away with death, but when they are all put together in one there is not a trace of death left, nor can any shadow of it be seen, so entirely has it been done away with.”

Thanks be to God!

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 146

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 149

²⁰ Ibid., p. 146

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