

## Romans 5:14-17 In Adam In Christ the contrast

### Introduction

Life is full of contrasts. The differences between, for example, light and darkness or night and day; the apostle Paul here in Romans 5:12-21 hastens to add that although he has introduced Adam and Jesus Christ in this section there is ultimately no comparison between them, rather the contrast is infinitely greater and more marked. The emphasis in Romans 5:15-17 highlights the contrast between them, supremely because Adam brought death to the human race whereas Jesus Christ brought life that is greater than death.

#### 1. The reign of death (Romans 5:14)

(a) The fact of death Genesis 5:5) ...*and then he died*. Adam lived several thousand years ago. Someone might ask what difference it makes to my life that this person Adam sinned or made a wrong choice or choices. In a world where many people struggle to comprehend life in the previous generation, let alone the previous century, it takes a significant effort to realise that there is a context here where all humanity is inescapably joined together 'in Adam'. It didn't look that way immediately after Adam and Eve fell into sin. God had warned Adam (Genesis 2:17) that in the event of his breaking God's law he would die. But it didn't happen at once. There are so many examples in life where people only suffer the consequences of choices years later. A person who dies of a smoking or alcohol-related disease may have no ill effects of the first cigarette or the first drink, or a person who dies of obesity likewise in the first act of over indulgence in food. The proof of the seriousness of Adam's sin is seen not in Genesis 3, the chapter that speaks of the Fall, but in Genesis 5, a chapter that lists the genealogy of Adam. Most people focus on the long ages these individuals lived, the writer of Genesis, by contrast, on the fact that they died. The key phrase in that chapter is *and then he died* (Genesis 5:5). These words were used after the briefest biographical descriptions of Adam's descendants. Each time we sadly gain the news of another family member or friend's death is a reminder that we are 'in Adam', and therefore death comes to us all. However, we need to remember that there are three main possible responses to the reality of death in our midst (J.M. Boice, *Romans*, Vol.2, pp. 572-575 covers this in more detail). Which cultural attitude most closely resembles your own?

(b) A death accepting culture The ancient Greek culture as represented by its most famous philosopher Socrates (469-399BC) modelled this attitude. Socrates had been sentenced to death for his alleged atheism. He had in fact been convicted for denying the existence of the ancient Greek gods. He was convicted of attempted to corrupt the young people of Athens with these views. He was sentenced to die by drinking hemlock, a poison. When the moment came he was surrounded by his students. Many were weeping at the events about to take place, but not Socrates. He made no complaints about his predicament or the degree of justice received in the court –or lack of it. Instead he gave a speech on the subject of immortality, recorded and later published by his disciple Plato. In summary, Socrates taught that the soul is immortal. The only way to achieve immortality is through death, which releases us from the frustrations of our bodily existence here on earth. Socrates may have reasoned and drunk his poison completely calmly, but his supporters wept at the loss of his life. I suspect that few people alive today would follow Socrates in reasoning that on balance it is better to be dead and into the next life without having any clear idea of what that involved.

(c) A death-denying culture This viewpoint is extremely modern and prominent in the last hundred years with the rise of modern medicine that has allowed so many people to live for so long and with such a good quality of life in most cases. Why has this viewpoint become so

popular in recent decades in the Western world? There are three reasons: (i) Psychological the more people hear about death and disasters in the news the more it is denied personally. It is happening to others ‘out there’ but not here, not in my life – death for many people is something they desperately fear but their response is to try and deny its reality. (ii) Cultural our Western societies emphasise youthfulness and vitality. The popularity of gyms, health spas, many of the diet plans and health foods is based for many people on an anonymous slogan used in an advert for a face cream, Oil of Olay: ‘I don’t intend to get old gracefully. I intend to fight it every step of the way.’ (iii) Religious Many Western societies have lost their religious consciousness. These countries historically associated with a Christian world view have departed from it and nature abhors a vacuum. Something has to take its place. The poems and stories read out at funerals in our country increasingly bear the hallmark of this point of view. There are many examples that could be given; here is just one example from a poem by Mary Elizabeth Frye: Do not stand at my grave and weep, I am not there, I do not sleep, I am a thousand winds that blow, I am the Diamond glints on snow, I am the sunlight on ripened grain I am the gentle Autumn rain, When you awaken in the morning’s hush, I am the swift uplifting rush, Of quite birds in circled flight, I am the soft stars that shine at night, Do not stand at my grave and cry, I am not there, **I did not die** [www.funeralhelper.org]. The tragedy is the denial of the brutal painful reality being experienced in the crematorium or graveyard that day because someone has died. They are not ‘in the next room’. They have died and sometimes we struggle to work through to accepting that reality.

(d) A death-defying culture This is the culture represented in the Bible. Job, the Old Testament patriarch declared: *I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth.* <sup>26</sup>*And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God;* <sup>27</sup>*I myself will see him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!* (Job 19:25-27). Paul, in I Corinthians 15, the glorious chapter on the resurrection wrote: *Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed –* <sup>52</sup>*in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* <sup>53</sup>*For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality.* <sup>54</sup>*When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’* <sup>55</sup>*‘Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?’* <sup>56</sup>*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.* <sup>57</sup>*But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (I Corinthians 15:51-57). Why is this worldview the best? Because it is the only one that makes sense out of the reality and significance of death; All die because we sinned ‘in Adam’, but the vast majority of humanity also sins in practice also. ‘In Christ’, by contrast, we are united with one who conquered the power of death through His bodily resurrection, that points to our ultimate triumph in Him. These two gravestone inscriptions contrast the two major worldviews as well as any today. The first epitaph is located in a cemetery in Thurmond, Maryland, of an atheist who declined to be named on his tombstone, but left this inscription: ‘Here lies an atheist, all dressed up and no place to go’. The other the chosen words for Baptist Minister and Civil Rights activist, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty I'm Free at Last", in a graveyard near Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia. I know which sentiments I believe –what about you?

In Romans 5:15-17 there are three listed contrasts between Adam and Christ; there are parallels between them, but the contrasts are even greater. Paul will return to comparisons in the last few verses of this chapter, but here his focus is on how different in significance was the action of the two individuals he is describing here. We may have been condemned as sinners in Adam, but the gift of salvation that is ours through union with Christ is a far greater gift and a more glorious reality than the original blessings Adam had before the fall. He knew God and had a relationship with Him. However, he did not know the full extent of God’s love that would be revealed to us in Jesus. In September 2013 al-Shabab terrorists

from Somalia committed unspeakable acts of evil torturing and killing men, women and children in the Westgate Shopping Centre in Kenya. In the midst of such evil there were some remarkable pictures of a handful of men with handguns trying to get civilians out of the centre. Their brave actions saved many people's lives. The iconic picture, though, was of a shopkeeper from the centre beckoning a little girl maybe around four years old to come over to him. She left the place where she was and went over to him which saved her life. What is particularly significant was that this little white girl worked out that this was a good man whose advice she could follow. He was a black Somali Muslim man like the terrorists, yet he was a shopkeeper and a good man who was horrified at what had been going on before his eyes. A few days later after the lady and all three of her children had got out alive and been reunited with her husband, they met the man who had saved the mother and little girl's lives and had an emotional time together. It is possible that the family had been in the man's shop and purchased goods there on a previous occasion, but the character of the man was only revealed to them in this extreme situation. For the rest of their lives the relationship between them will be special. Exceptional circumstances, thankfully, are not the norm, but in them we learn so much about people. What Jesus did for us on the cross was the most significant action in human history which Paul will point out to us in this section of Romans 5. What is it that he wishes to highlight for us?

## 2. **The nature of their actions was different** (Romans 5:15)

*But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!* (Romans 5:15) In what way is the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ *not like the trespass*? The first sentence in Romans 5:15a: *But the gift is not like the trespass* is clearly a summary sentence that covers what Paul will unpack in the remainder of Romans chapter five. (a) **What Adam did** The trespass of Adam was a fall into sin, a deliberate crossing of God's boundaries. He insisted on going his way, rather than trusting God to guide him in the best pathway for his life. Adam had a clear choice. He could have stayed true to the calling God had entrusted to him. He may like us have had questions he couldn't answer, but on the subjects where God had made clear statements would he do what he had been asked to do or would he rebel against God? From our earliest years each one of us, virtually every day of our lives, has to make choices. The majority of the time it is mundane routine things we have to decide. On a few rare occasions, we have life-changing moments that we know will affect us for years to come. In a positive way saying 'I do' in a marriage ceremony or holding your own new-born child in your arms are two of the good examples; but Adam's transgression to go against God was a wilful conscious choice of dissatisfaction with the goodness of God to him, in yielding to the tempter's voice. This selfish act had negative consequences for humanity. (b) **What Jesus did** By contrast, says Paul, the gift of salvation became ours by a completely different process. It was the opposite of selfishness that Jesus displayed in giving His life for us on the cross. Jesus could have stayed with His father in heaven, yet chose willingly to be born as a baby in Bethlehem and then to model for us a life of God-honouring service for other people. His active obedience as an example for us would have been something amazing and incredibly generous. Yet Jesus' went to the ultimate length to display His love to us in dying on the cross as our substitute, sin-bearer and saviour. Paul, in highlighting the example of Jesus to the Christians at Philippi wrote: *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; <sup>7</sup> rather, **He made Himself** nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, **He humbled Himself** by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!* (Philippians

2:5-8). This was the exact opposite of Adam's choice. The gift was the incredible costly sacrifice from a heart of love in the triune God, Father Son and Holy Spirit who went to this extraordinary length to both be just and to reconcile us to our holy God.

*For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, **how much more** did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!* (Romans 5:15b); actions have consequences. To drive an articulated lorry down the motorway well in excess of the alcohol limit is to risk killing other people; a whole lot more examples could be cited by each one of us. Paul goes on to highlight the consequences of the choices of Adam and Jesus. As a result of Adam's action humanity is born with a bias towards sinful choices. Parents, for example, never have to work at teaching their children to make wrong choices. But sometimes it is a real effort to persuade them to make a good one! It is not just children, we as adults are sorely tempted at times to say wrong words and to do wrong things. Sometimes we fail and have to face the consequences. This is a very real issue. You may be here today struggling with an issue for which you need God's help. If this is the case, there is a promise in the Bible in I Corinthians 10:13 which is so encouraging in this respect: *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* What a wonderful promise to memorise, to claim and to encourage you to be victorious when the pressure is really on you. Adam could and should have avoided his trespass –and so can we when we are tempted. Adam's actions affected humanity –but what about Jesus' choice what impact did it have? How did Paul express it? ***how much more*** did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, ***overflow to the many!*** Can you feel the passion in Paul's words as he gets excited about what Jesus has done to transform lives like his own? One man's selfishness blighted the future for others; by contrast Jesus' extraordinary demonstration of the grace of God has opened up the way to our experiencing the life in its fullness that He offers to us by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Have you reached out by faith to receive this gift of salvation from Jesus? If not, why not today? If you have are you enjoying the fullness of His blessings by entrusting your life fully to Him?

### 3. The immediate effect of their actions was different (Romans 5:16)

<sup>16</sup> *Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: the judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, **but** the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.* (Romans 5:16) This verse begins in a very similar way to the previous one, but Paul now stresses the consequences of the actions of the two men. Of Adam he writes: *the judgment followed one sin and **brought condemnation**...* but in the case of Jesus *the gift followed many trespasses and **brought justification**.* Humanity sinned in and through Adam and required a perfect Saviour to deliver us from the consequences of sin, both Adam's and then our own acts of sin. Romans 3:23 reminds us that: *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* How could God be glorified in this dreadful predicament –a perfect Saviour is the only way! Yet He did it the hard way, enduring all types of temptation along the way to model for us the way to live. This is why the words of Hebrews 4:14-16 are so encouraging: *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.*

<sup>15</sup> *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin.* <sup>16</sup> *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* No wonder the heavenly beings burst out in praise when they recalled the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. John from his extraordinary vision in Revelation 5:9-10 witnessed these words being sung: *And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for*

God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. <sup>10</sup> You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’ Humanity in generations following Adam sinned with increasing abandon contrary to God’s holy standards. The depth of that potential depravity was stated by the apostle in Romans 1:29-31: *They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, **God-haters**, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; <sup>31</sup> they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. <sup>32</sup> Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them.* People of all creeds and none have committed the vilest offences against other human beings; no culture or tradition has been exempt from this tragedy. The appalling events being played out in Syria are an obvious illustration of this human predicament. There are indeed *many trespasses...*, but says Paul, don’t be depressed with the state of the world –or of the challenges you might even find in your own heart and mind at times, take note of what Jesus accomplished... *but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.* God will have the last word! Evil people may appear at times to get away with their misbehaviour, but justice will one day be done- that’s a promise from God. Therefore, in the words Jesus taught His disciples, let us pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10), because that is exactly what will happen one day. Your prayers for this will be answered! Do you need to hear that encouragement today?

#### 4. **The ultimate effect of the two actions was also different** (Romans 5:17)

<sup>17</sup> For **if**, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, **how much more** will those who receive God’s **abundant provision** of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! (Romans 5:17) What is the ultimate effect of the trespass of Adam? It is a world full of cemeteries. From Adam’s time onwards the one certainty of human existence is the fact that one day we will die. If you wished to be morbid you could tick off each day ended as one day less to live! However, Paul wishes to emphasize that Jesus did not merely restore us to the position we were in before Adam fell into sin, but His sacrifice provided for us something greater than Adam lost. God accepts us as His children in His family through our union with Christ; through His sacrifice in our place; through the amazing gift of His righteousness which allows us to enter directly into His presence. Adam and Eve in the garden had fellowship with God but our inheritance is an even greater one. In II Timothy 2:11-12 Paul quoted these words from an even older Christian document: *Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with Him, we will also live with Him; <sup>12</sup> if we endure, we will also reign with Him.* Not only need believers not fear the day when we stand before the Lord, but there are blessings awaiting us far greater than we could ever deserve or expect. I have no idea what that means in detail, but Paul’s reference here to *God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life...* implies something very special. The challenge for you and I is this: if God loves you and me this much, then not only will He provide the very best for us beyond this life, but He will also strengthen us with the resources we need to equip us now for the challenges we face in the here and now. We are ‘in Adam’ by birth, but praise the Lord we, by faith through grace, are in Christ –what a contrast. All glory be to His name Amen.