

REJOICING IN GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

In Romans 5, we have been learning that the one clear mark of a true Christian is that he always rejoices. Three times in this chapter we are given reasons for rejoicing, as believers:

First, we rejoice in our spiritual position. Having been justified by faith, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God," {Rom 5:1b-2 NIV}. That is our spiritual position. The moment we believe in the Lord Jesus, we can rejoice in the hope of sharing the glory of God.

Then we are to rejoice in our growing conformity to the character of Christ. This is produced by suffering. Suffering helps us to become like Jesus now. And as we suffer, knowing we are undergirded, protected, and covered over by the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we learn to rejoice in our sufferings.

In Verses 11-21, we learn to rejoice in our great and glorious God. Verse 11:

Not only is this so [Paul has said that twice in this chapter], but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation. {Rom 5:11 NIV}

In my book *Authentic Christianity*, I call this "an unquenchable optimism." Christians always have grounds for rejoicing. No matter what happens, you have a ground for rejoicing. The three kinds of rejoicing described in Romans 5 represent three levels of maturity. They are not necessarily chronological levels, but they are levels of understanding truth and responding to it that reflect a continually growing and deepening maturity.

The third level is rejoicing "in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." Notice again that Paul, as he so frequently does, reminds us that everything that comes to us comes through our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is the way to God. He himself said so: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man [-- no man --] comes to the Father but by me," {cf, John 14:6 KJV}. Therefore, when you see the greatness of Christ, you have seen the greatness of God. It is he who reveals the Father. Remember how John begins his gospel?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. {John 1:1, 1:14 KJV}

That is the way we see God. When we see the greatness of Jesus, we see the greatness of God. When we see and know the love of Jesus, we know the heart of God. Therefore, we are to rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do you do that? How do you see the greatness of Christ? Paul says it is by understanding the reconciliation. If you want to know how great a person is, you look at the record of his achievements. What has he done? >From Verse 12 of Romans 5 to the end of the chapter is a record of the greatness of Christ, his achievement of what Paul calls the reconciliation.

This passage, admittedly, is one of the most theologically important chapters in all of the Bible. It is a very complicated statement, in some ways, and I am going to ask you to follow it very carefully, for it is tremendously important. In this passage is the clearest statement in the Bible on what is called "original sin," that is, the blight that has been passed on to our whole race as the result of the sin of our father Adam. Also, here is the complete answer to those who doubt the historicity of Adam and Eve. There are some who claim

that the first chapters of Genesis are merely legend, or myth, that Adam and Eve were not real people. But this chapter shows that that belief is false. For, all through the passage, Adam, as an individual, is contrasted and compared with the person of the Lord Jesus. This section also lays the groundwork for all that Paul is going to say in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. So it is a very, very important passage.

I have found that, if you get involved in the details of the passage, and it would be easy to do so, it would be possible to preach a month of Sundays on this one section alone. People invariably get lost in the argument and lose the main point the apostle wants to make, which is: The greatness and the glory of the Lord Jesus -- the reason why we can rejoice in God through him. So, instead of dwelling on the argument in detail, I want to summarize it for you.

There are four movements in this section:

1. First, in Verses 12-14, Paul begins with us in Adam, where we start as a human race -- in Adam.
2. Then, Verses 15-17 give us a great parallel of what we are brought to if we are in Christ, as contrasted with what we were in Adam.
3. Then, Verses 18-19 give a brief summary of this truth by this master logician, the Apostle Paul.
4. The chapter closes with a brief explanation of the relationship of the Law to all of this (Verses 20-21).

Let's start with Verse 12, where we begin, in Adam:

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned -- {Rom 5:12 NIV}

My version has a dash here, which means it is an incomplete sentence. I am going to read that verse again to you, because I don't agree with this translation. Notice that Paul starts out by saying "Therefore, just as..." When you get a "just as," you grammarians know that you have got to have an "even so" a little later. Paul is making a comparison here. The Greek text actually has an "even so," but for some reason, the New International Version doesn't translate it, so we'll correct it. (This is the Stedmaniac version, with which you are all familiar.)

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, so also [or, even so] through one man death came to all men, because all sinned. {Rom 5:12 RCS Version}

This is Paul's argument. He starts with two undeniable, indisputable facts: the universality of sin and the universality of death. We can't deny these. Everywhere we look there is evidence upon evidence that what he says is true, that we are victims of the twin evils of sin and death.

There are some who may not accept the idea of sin. There are people today who do not like this word. You can call it anything you like, but the fact remains that there is clear evidence wherever you look in the human race that something has gone wrong with our humanity. You can call it karma, destiny, fate, evolutionary darkness, or whatever -- but it is clearly evident that something is wrong. G. K. Chesterton said, "Whatever else may be said of man, this one thing is clear: He is not what he is capable of being." I think any line of evidence will substantiate that. Some kind of a twist has come in, something that we cannot explain -- a taint, a moral poison that makes us act in irrational ways -- so that even when we know that something is wrong or hurtful, we want to do it.

I don't have to go any further than my own heart to find evidence of that. There are things that I know would destroy me and my family, and yet at times I catch myself wanting badly to do them. And so do you, so don't look so pious! That is what is called "original sin." And it is not only evident in adults. The striking and remarkable thing is that it is found in babies. Sin is there at the beginning of their life, they are born with it as conclusive proof of what Paul is saying here. It is something that has gripped the race.

My two-year-old grandson comes over to our house frequently and tears up the place. It takes us two days to get it back in shape after a visit from him. His mother was telling us the other day that if she says to him,

"Now, eat your food," that's the one thing he doesn't want to do. So she has learned how to make him eat his food: She says, "Now, don't eat your carrots." And he gobbles them up. Anything that is prohibited, that's what he wants to do. Nobody had to teach him that. We've never sent him to school to learn how to disobey. He's only two years old, but he knows how to resist instruction and command; he wants to do what he ought not to do.

I think this universal tendency to evil has been stated most clearly by a totally secular agency. The clearest statement on original sin that I have ever read comes from the report of the Minnesota Crime Commission. In studying humanity, the commission came to this frightening and factual conclusion:

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it -- his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toy, his uncle's watch. Deny him these wants, and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness, which would be murderous, were he not so helpless. He is dirty. He has no morals, no knowledge, no skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free reign to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal, a thief, a killer, a rapist.

This is a clear statement on the universality of sin and of the fact, as Paul says here, that by one man, sin entered the world. And along with sin came death. Everyone acknowledges the universal presence of death in our society. Even babies are starting to die. We look at a newborn child and say, "Here is someone who is starting to live." But it is equally true to say of that child, "Here is someone who is starting to die," because death is at work in that child from the moment of birth. We are born to die. This is the story of our race. We don't need to argue it; it is evident on every side. Later on in this passage Paul says, "Death reigned." Still later on, he says, "Sin reigns." So in these two forces that have been introduced into humanity, we have a pair of royal tyrants who rule over men. King Sin and his evil and cruel queen, Death, who hold in their remorseless hands every human being, without exception.

How did sin and death get control of our race? The apostle answers: through one man. That is the key to this whole section. Again and again Paul rings the changes on that phrase: through one man, by one man. Paul is contrasting two men, actually, Adam and Jesus. But, in either case, what comes to us, comes from one man, either Adam or Jesus.

It was through Adam that sin and death gripped our race. We sin because we are sons and daughters of Adam, and we die because we are sons and daughters of Adam. We don't die for our own sins. Normally, we would die for our own sins, but, as Paul goes on to argue, there are even some -- babies, for instance -- who haven't sinned at all, and yet they still die. Therefore, Paul traces the reign of sin and death back to Adam.

This is the argument of Verses 13-14:

For before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account where there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come. {Rom 5:13-14 NIV}

Paul's argument is simply this: Death is the punishment for breaking a command. In the Garden of Eden, God said to Adam, "Do not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of evil. In the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die," {cf, Gen 2:17}. Adam broke that specific, clear-cut command; he ate of the fruit. That was not merely a little incident, a peccadillo, Adam actually was choosing to be an independent creature and denying his dependence upon the God who made him. It was an act of rebellion; it was an act of idolatry. He was enthroning himself as a god, in the place of God. Those were the implications of his action. Adam broke the command and, as a result, death and sin passed upon all his descendants. Paul is saying that death is the result of breaking a command -- and you need a law in order to be able to break a command.

How many of you have driven down your street for years and never had to stop at a certain intersection because there was nothing that required it. Then one day a stop sign is erected. Now the law has come in. From that time on, to fail to stop at that intersection is to break a command. If you fail to stop, you are subject to a penalty, even though you have been driving through that intersection without stopping for years without

any penalty. But now the law has come in, and thus you break a command if you fail to stop.

In order to have death, Paul says, there had to be a command to break. But people were dying long before the Law was ever given. People died from the time of Adam to Moses, even people who never had a command to break. How could that be, if death is the result of breaking a command? Paul's conclusion is: The whole race actually sinned when Adam sinned. We broke the command in Adam.

At this point, many people say, "Well, that isn't fair! God is punishing us for Adam's sin, and that's not fair!" People who argue that way simply are revealing how little they understand the facts about the nature of our humanity. People who talk that way think of themselves as individuals quite separate from other people when, as a matter of fact, we are tied in together, all a part of one great bundle of life. We share life together. We recognize this fact when we speak of the brotherhood of man, and when we say, "No man is an island." But, at other times, we choose to think that we have a right to stand alone, as though no one else exists. Whether you understand it or not, this passage reveals the fact that when Adam sinned, he plunged the whole race into disaster. We are all born with sin at work in us and, as a result, death is taking its toll. So we sinned in Adam.

The most important phrase in this paragraph is the last one: Adam "was a pattern of the one to come." Through the rest of this passage, the apostle is going to show us how Adam is a kind of picture of Christ; and yet there is a great contrast between the two, as well. So the verses that follow draw both a comparison and a contrast between Adam and Jesus. Let's take these verses one at a time and restate the argument so that we don't get lost in this passage, then we'll move on to the conclusion that the apostle makes.

First, Verse 15:

But the gift is not like the trespass. {Rom 5:15a NIV}

The gift, what every human being is always looking for, is the gift of righteousness, a sense of worth, a sense of significance to life. That is what righteousness means. And it comes as a gift from the Lord Jesus. The trespass is Adam's disobedient act in the Garden of Eden. The gift, Paul says, is not like the trespass.

For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, Adam, 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! {Rom 5:15b NIV}

Paul is saying this: Adam brought a single experience of death to all people. We only die once, don't we? Adam brought that death to us. But Christ brought a repeated and ever-growing experience of life to all that are in him. That is the contrast. We can take life from Jesus a thousand times a day. We can take the gift of worth over and over again. Whenever our spirit feels put down, or crushed, or insignificant, or inadequate, or insecure, we can be renewed, we can take again the gift of life and righteousness from him. So Christ Jesus is greater than Adam; for though the trespass of Adam brought death once, the sacrifice and the death of Jesus brings life a thousand times.

Verse 16:

Again, the gift of God is not like the result of one man's sin. The judgment followed one sin, and brought condemnation. But the gift followed many trespasses, and brought justification. {Rom 5:16 NIV}

Adam's single trespass brought in judgment, i.e., death. Adam trespassed once and brought death to all that were in him. Christ died once and, despite thousands of trespasses, brought justification to all that are in him. That is the contrast. Adam trespassed once and brought death to all. Jesus died once and brought life -- despite thousands of trespasses.

What Paul is saying here is amplified before this in the repeated forgiveness of sin. One trespass brought death; the death of Jesus brought forgiveness for thousands of trespasses. All your life, as many times as you sin, you cannot out-sin the grace of God. No matter how many trespasses are involved in your record, there is

freedom in Christ and forgiveness for all of them.

Now let's look at Verse 17:

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? {Rom 5:17 NIV}

His argument: Adam's transgression permitted sin to reign over the whole race. This is talking about more than just the funeral at the end of your life. True, that funeral happens because of Adam's trespass, but there is more to it than that. Not only does death come to us at the end of our life because of Adam, but it reigns throughout our life because of Adam. Paul is talking about forms of death other than the mere cessation of life.

What is life? Life is love, joy, and excitement. It is vitality, enrichment, power; it is fulfillment in every direction, in every possibility of your being. That is life. Death is the absence of life. Death is emptiness, loneliness, misery, depression, boredom and restlessness. How much of your life is made up of death? A lot of it, right? Some people never seem to have anything but death in their lives. Death reigns because of Adam's transgression.

Paul is saying that Christ's death provides such abundant grace and loving acceptance, which are available again and again and again, that all who are in him can reign in life -- now. You can have life in the midst of all the pressures and circumstances and suffering and troubles. Your spirit can be alive and joyful -- experiencing fulfillment and delight. Life in the midst of death! We reign in life now. Love, joy, peace, glory, and gladness fill our hearts even in the midst of all the heartaches and pressures of life.

Paul is drawing this parallel so that we might see how much more we have in Jesus than we ever had in Adam. What we lost in Adam, we regain in Jesus, plus so much more. Just as a climber on a mountaintop can dislodge a pebble which rolls on and accumulates others until it begins to launch an avalanche that will move the whole side of a mountain, so 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, Paul tells us, Jesus has launched another avalanche of grace, and in him there is ample counteraction against all that Adam has brought.

Verses 18 and 19 are a summary of this truth. First, Verse 18:

Consequently, just as the result of the one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. {Rom 5:18 NIV}

Paul is saying that death, i.e., judgment or condemnation, comes to us not because of our own sins, but because of Adam's. It is a gift from Adam. What a terrible gift it is, isn't it? And thus the acceptance and worth that we need to have, the love that we human beings desperately crave and must have in order to function, is also a gift, a gift from the Lord Jesus Christ. We can have all that we want, anytime we need it.

Verse 19:

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. {Rom 5:19 NIV}

There are some people who claim that we are righteous because God declares us righteous. But here it is stated very plainly that we are made righteous in Jesus Christ. Paul is saying that since we are born in Adam, sin and guilt are not an option with us -- we have no way of choosing. We will sin because that is part of our nature. And so, when we are in Christ, having worth and love is not something that we have to choose to earn -- it is a gift from the Lord Jesus.

In Verses 20-21, the apostle briefly deals with the place of the Law in this matter.

The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace

increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. {Rom 5:20-21 NIV}

Someone might raise the question, "Why then did the Ten Commandments have to be given?" Paul's answer is, "The Ten Commandments never were given to make men do right." That is what we think they were given for, but they were not. They were given to show men how wrong they already are. The commandments actually were given to make men sin more, to increase the trespass. Isn't that strange?

As in the example of my grandson, the Law makes you want to do wrong even more. It increases the trespass.

But a strange thing happens at that point. Paul tells us that the worse we get -- the more we fling ourselves into rebellion and sin and evil that we know to be wrong -- the closer we are to being broken, to coming to the end of ourselves and discovering how foolish and hurtful this whole thing is, and the closer we are to discovering the grace of restoration, cleansing, and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Last night I listened to a tape by Charles Colson, who was called 'the hatchet man of the Nixon Administration.' He was put in the federal penitentiary because of his involvement in some of the things associated with Watergate. On the tape he told of his experience in prison. In that dark and lonely place, crammed in with forty other men, he found a brother in Christ. The two of them met together and began to pray for others in that prison. They didn't know what God could do -- they almost despaired that anything could happen -- but as they began to pray, God began to work. They found that the Spirit of God swept through that prison in a remarkable way, and men were broken. Hardened, violent, brutal men, who had spent their lives in resistance to right and truth and good, and had given themselves over completely to hardness and cynicism and brutality, began to break and to find forgiveness.

Do you know that there is a spiritual awakening going on in our prisons today? I read last week that last year alone, in the Los Angeles County jails 256 prisoners received the Lord. Prisoners are open to Christ because they have allowed the law to drive them into trespass to such a degree that they are ready to hear the gospel. Sometimes this happens without outward rebellion. Sometimes we become frustrated and hard and cynical. When that happens we learn that the grace of God will abound more and more, for the increase of sin only increases the grace of our Lord Jesus.

The point of all this is that the one who breaks through is Jesus. Adam ruins us all. Only Christ can set us free. Sin and death will never loose their filthy hold on us except at the command of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the one to whom we look is the Lord Jesus, the one who broke the terrible death grip on us and set us free -- Jesus, the head of a new race, the beginning of a new humanity. Jesus is Lord. As we see him thus, we discover what the Scriptures say, that the blessed Lord, who broke through death and sin, has come to live within us, to give himself to us, and to infuse us with his strength and purity, his wisdom and power. All that he *is* is available to us. Thus we rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has made for us the reconciliation. When you understand that, you will sing, along with Christina Rossetti, these words:

None other Lamb, None other Name,
None other Hope in heaven or earth or sea,
None other Hiding Place from guilt and shame,
None beside Thee.

My faith burns low, my hope burns low;
Only my heart's desire cries out in me,
By the deep thunder of its want and woe,
Cries out to Thee.

Lord, Thou art life, though I be dead;
Love's Fire Thou art, however cold I be;
Nor heaven have I, nor place to lay my head,
Nor home, but Thee.

Prayer

By your Spirit, Father, we rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ. We rejoice in who he is, and what he has come to do in our wretched, miserable lives. We rejoice because he has broken the shackles of evil and death and sin that held us, and he has set our spirit free and has given us the opportunity to draw from him the grace and mercy we need every day.

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