

What can One Man Do? Romans 5:12-21

It was the cold and gray evening of November 9th 1989, when dozens of East Berliners suddenly showed up at the Bornholmer Strasse border crossing demanding to be let into West Berlin. They had just heard a radio broadcast of Politburo member Gunter Schabowski's earlier – mistaken - announcement to the international media that "*the ruling Communist Party had declared East Germans were free to travel immediately.*"

As more excited East Germans began converging on the border crossing that he commanded, Lt. Col. Harald Jaeger called for guidance from his superiors. But by the time the crowd had grown into the hundreds and even more demanding, it became clear to Jaeger that he would get no guidance (*no superior would take responsibility for ordering the soldiers to shoot*).

Jaeger thought it would not be long before the now thousands of angry East Berliners turned violent against his handful of border guards outside the command post. That's when he decided, shortly after 11 p.m., to give the order, "**Open the gate,**" making the checkpoint at Bornholmer Strasse the very first one to let a couple thousand East Berliners through into West Berlin. In a very real way, this single open gate eventually led to the complete collapse of the Soviet Union. **Never underestimate the power of one.** <http://abcnews.go.com/International/BerlinWall/man-opened-berlin-wall/story?id=8880273&singlePage=true>

And when Wael Ghonim was haunted by the photo of a man he did not know, Khaled Said, who had been beaten to death by Egyptian police. He could have averted his eyes and shrugged off the incident as something he could do nothing about in a country where police brutality was commonplace. Instead he posted the picture on a Facebook page titled, "*We Are All Khaled Said.*" That phrase gave voice a fear that had long gone unspoken among Egyptians: *What happened to Khaled Said could happen to anyone.* The page garnered millions of views, rallied thousands to demonstrations, inspired countless other citizens to find their voices in print, online and out loud. The Egyptian Revolution officially started on Jan. 25, 2011. Seventeen days later, President Hosni Mubarak relinquished power. One man, one message — and, ultimately, a government overturned. <http://www.success.com/mobile/article/the-power-of-one-one-person-one-idea-to-make-a-difference>

Never underestimate the power of one.

Think also of Mahatma Gandhi whose non-violent protests gained independence from British rule for India; or Rosa Parks whose simple refusal to relinquish her seat to white passengers which sparked the Civil rights movement. Of course it works the other way as well; think of Adolf Hitler, Napoleon Bonaparte, Judas. **Never underestimate the power of one.**

Which is what today's portion of Romans is all about. How one man's conscious rebellion doomed the whole world to death until one man's conscious obedience reversed the curse, which will one day literally save the entire planet along with all

those people, including Adam and ever since who have accepted God's offered gift of justification and life.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.
(Romans 5:18)

So let's begin where this section actually begins with Paul's summary declaration of how any person can hope to be saved ...

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; we are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
(Romans 3:23-25)

This verse is the central theme of Paul's entire letter, which he then illustrates by proving that both Abraham and David were also and only saved, not by their righteous living, but by their faith in God's offered gift of forgiveness..

Then chapter five opens with the word "**therefore,**" indicating that Paul expects us to draw the correct conclusion from his arguments that

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. Romans 5:1-2

From there he launches into a joyous explanation of the mechanics of how Jesus' death and return to life saves us from God's wrath and gives us "confident expectation" (hope) of sharing in God's glory ... Because God's love has been poured into and sealed within our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

That was last week's message, now this week Paul shifts to answer another one of those unspoken questions which he is always anticipating. Which is: **What is the legal principle which justifies how one man's "transgression" can lead to condemnation and death for all; and consequently one man's "act of righteousness" can lead to justification and life for all.**

Or to say it another way: **HOW IS IT POSSIBLE THAT GOD CAN ATTRIBUTE THE ACTIONS OF ONE PERSON TO ANOTHER?** The answer is found in the concept of **FEDERAL HEADSHIP.**

Let me explain: "federal headship" is the idea that the actions of one person can represent and thus have benefits or repercussions for all of that person's constituents. In other words; everyone who is under the banner of that one person can be held accountable for that one person's actions. And whether or not you recognized the term "federal headship," you actually do know how it works out in reality.

In ancient times, when armies met to do battle, sometimes rather than enter into massive and costly bloodshed, each army would choose a Champion to fight for their side with the winner of this singular fight being declared the winner of the war. You saw this exemplified in the Greek legend of Achilles. You also saw this exemplified in the battle between David and Goliath.

In modern times you see federal headship in sports, where through the singular actions of a few or just one player – such as the best quarterback of all time – the entire Patriots football team wins and gets to wear Super Bowl rings: even management, staff, and others members who never even walked onto the field.

And in Politics you see it in the fact that the decisions of our President does indeed impact all the citizenry of the United States; even those who want to declare "not my president." Like or not he is. And because of federal headship the actions of our President not only shape our relationship with the rest of the world but also the course of our nation for years to come.

This is concept of Federal headship is also found throughout our Bible. When Israel clamored for a king in order to be like all the nations around them, God through the Prophet Samuel warned Israel

See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the Lord has set a king over you. If you will fear the Lord and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king. 1 Samuel 12:13-15

So the expression is true: "As goes the leader, so goes the nation." Aside from federal headship, there is also a practical application of this truth. Corrupt kings do tend to lead the nation into sin. While Righteous leaders tend to lead the nation toward

righteousness. As exemplified by Solomon and Josiah among the many of Israel's kings who led that nation on a roller coaster of righteousness or rebellion.

But back to the idea of federal headship as it is working in today's text. How do the actions of the first or "last Adam" bring consequences for all who follow the one or the other (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:45-49)? To answer this let's focus on Romans 5:17

If, because of the one man's **trespass, death exercised dominion** through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness **exercise dominion in life** through the one man, Jesus Christ.
Romans 5:17

All commentators of Romans 5:12-21, agree that this passage is describing the concept known as "**original sin**," but in defining just what is original sin and how it is transferred to all the descendants of Adam is where there is much disagreement.

Some say that according to the principle of federal headship, Adam was created as the representative of all humans. Therefore by his act of "consciously violating God's law" to not eat of the tree, Adam's transgression was imputed to all of his heirs. In essence we are all born being held guilty of Adam's sin. In support of this idea, commentators quote David's lament, *Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me* (Psalm 51:5). I not only don't like this idea – it is not fair that I should be held responsible for another's actions – it's not even Biblical. God made a point of telling the Hebrew nation that no child will be punished for the sins of their parents (Ezekial 18:1-4).

Another theory is that somehow Adam's act of rebellion genetically altered the human race so that we inherit an inescapable predisposition to sin. Scripture used to support this theory is Paul's own lament, *I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... it is no longer I that do it but sin that dwells in me* (Romans 5:14-25). And this is perhaps closer to the truth, because we were altered, our personalities were bent with the curse: God said to the woman, *your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you* (Genesis 3:4). So these commentators would say: *I am not a sinner because I sin, I sin because I am a born sinner*. But if that is an unchanging truth about my human nature, then why does the Bible instruct me, as a believer in Jesus Christ, to grow up in my faith, to let the mind of Christ live in me, to be righteous and to "purify myself as God is pure" (1 John 3:3). So, unless you want to say that through faith in Jesus, somehow the Holy Spirit genetically re-modifies you so that you are now no longer forced to sin, why would God command of his children to do what they are

genetically incapable of doing – to no longer sin, but now walk in “newness of life” (Romans 6:1-4).

So let me offer an admittedly personal understanding of what happened when *“because of one man’s trespass, death exercised **dominion**. And how those who through one man then receive the free gift of righteousness exercise **dominion** in life.”* (Romans 5:17).

Dominion is a word with a double meaning, both in identifying the one who has the authority to rule, and geographically the territory which that person rules over. Our Bible is filled with references to this earth as being the territory of the *“ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.”* (Eph. 2:2). And we know that Eve and Adam didn’t dream up this idea of tasting the forbidden fruit on their own, but were led into it by suggestions from the Devil.

Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil;
for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.
The Son of God was revealed for this purpose,
to destroy the works of the devil. 1 John 3:8

So as the Bible describes him, Adam neither invented nor was he even the first being to sin – that happened long before him whenever Satan rebelled. But Adam allowed **sin to come into the world** and death to exercise **dominion** over our world ever since (5:12, 17).

And when you think that one of Satan’s temptations of Jesus was that in exchange for his worship, he, Satan, promised to give Jesus all the “kingdoms of this world” – as if he had the authority to do so (Matt. 4:8-9).

And when you realize that Jesus always talked about “the Kingdom of God” as if it had to come into our world and was carried about on the earth within himself and within his followers (John 3.5, Luke 10:8-9, c.f. also Revelation 12:10 & ff).

So, there are enough Biblical hints that in his role as steward of the planet and as our federal head, that when Adam chose to knowingly transgress against the command of God, he somehow defaulted in his stewardship of the planet, handing authority to Satan, sin, and death over all his heirs to come thereafter.

Which is a condition that God was only able to reverse through his son Jesus, who in assuming federal headship over us humans as the “Last Adam”, and then living a completely righteous life and dying in exchange for us, was able to wrest those who came to him by faith, out from under the **dominion** Satan, sin, and death. So that through Christ we now have **dominion in life** (cf. Matthew 19:27-30, 2 Corinthians 5,

cf. 1 Corinthians 15:45-49). As Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians,

[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son (Colossians 1.13)

Which is why the Bible describes us as being formerly “enslaved to sin” but now having been freed to live by Christ (Romans 6:6 see also Galatians 4.8).

My point is this.

- I do not believe I was born bearing the guilt of Adam’s sin,
- nor that I am born genetically bent by Adam’s sin,
- but that I was born into a world, separated from God and enslaved to sin, under the dominion of Satan. And thus growing up in this dark and evil dominated world, I quickly both fell into a sinful lifestyle and learned of my transgressions of God’s laws – which both ratified my pending death and also exposed me to God’s wrath.
- So even if I could live a saintly life in this world, of which we do know some people who come close to accomplishing such, I would still “fall short of the glory of God,” because I am still a citizen of the wrong kingdom, doomed by my first federal head – Adam – to be forever separated from God; were it not for the person of Jesus Christ through whom I can now return to God, be reconciled, justified, and now live – even here - with the confident hope of “sharing in God’s glory”

As I hear myself speak these thoughts, this all sounds a lot like themes coming out of C.S. Lewis’ Space Trilogy novels (Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, and That Hideous Strength).

But the conclusion you should draw from this theologically deep message, is that were it not for one man – Jesus Christ – no matter how good you lived in this world you would still be a slave of sin and fall short of God’s glory. But as Romans declares:

Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all,
so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners,
so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:18-19

And what should you take home with you?

Never underestimate the power of one, not even yourself!

You are neither the first Adam nor Jesus (the Last Adam), but through Christ you have been freed from the kingdom of death, to now live in fellowship with God, both in this world and the next. And who knows what impact your life will have on friends and future heirs. As Peter tells us (2 Peter 1:3-8)

God's divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus ... through... his precious and very great promises ... **you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature.**

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So never underestimate the power of one.

Remember ...

