

# lincolnberean

**DATE:** March 28, 2026  
**SERIES:** The Gospel Is  
**MESSAGE:** The End of Death's Reign  
**PASSAGE:** Romans 5:12-21  
**SPEAKER:** Ryan Harmon

Perhaps you've heard the story of a man named Hiroo Onoda. Hiroo Onoda. Onoda was a soldier for the Japanese army during the Second World War. And in the spring of 1945, he was sent on a mission to an island in the Philippines to hold off the advancing American army. He and others eventually couldn't accomplish that mission. The Americans invaded and overtook that island, and so he and others fled up into the hills, where they hid. They fought to survive, and they would continue, as they were able, they would continue to fight that war.

Now, if you know your World War II history, you might be aware that in September of 1945, the Japanese army unconditionally surrendered. The war was over. A new era had begun. But here's the twist: Onoda wouldn't believe it. He wouldn't believe it. Didn't believe it was true. Thought it was a lie, thought it was propaganda, and so he continued to hide. He continued to fight and struggle to live. He continued to try to resist as he could, and he continued to do that for 30 years. For 30 years, he lived as if he were at war. All the while, the war was over. It's an amazing story.

I'm just so fascinated with his story, but really, when you think about it, it is not just an amazing story, it is an incredibly tragic story, because what it means is that because he refused to believe the war was over, he lived as if he was fighting a war for 30 years. All the while peace was absolutely available. A new era had begun. In time, Japan would become fierce allies of the United States, and yet this man continued to fight.

Thought about that story a lot this week as I was digging into Romans chapter 5, because my pastoral concern is that many of us as Christians, we live the same way. We don't truly comprehend what it means to be caught up, to put our faith, in Jesus Christ. We sing about it, but we struggle to believe it. And so here's the question: do you know, do you believe, that because Jesus is in charge the war is over? That's what we want to talk about tonight.

So open your Bibles with me to Romans chapter 5. We're going to be in verses 12 to 21 this evening, finish out this chapter. Now last week, Mark reminded us that the truth of the gospel, the fact that we are justified by God's grace through faith, that is not merely facts that we are to affirm, that is truth we are to stand in. That should affect everything about our life. We are justified by faith. We were enemies, but now we are friends, and God has brought about reconciliation for us through the cross, and that means that we can stand assured and we can live as people full of peace and hope. The gospel is our peace. The gospel is our hope.

Now as this long explanation of the gospel continues, Paul is going to dig even deeper into the grandeur of it, the greatness of it. And in order to do that, he's going to set in contrast two men—Adam in Christ—two men who represent and whose actions have determined the destiny for everyone who belongs to them. Adam and Christ. So Paul begins with just that in verse 12 of chapter 5. He says:



# lincolnberean

*12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—*

Now, Paul has done this a number of times in our study of Romans in order for us to understand how deep our need was. Because of the universal curse of sin, he has gone all the way back to the beginning of the Bible, to the first pages of scripture, to the story in Genesis. That's just what he does here in verse 12. He says, "just as through the one man." That one man is Adam. He's referring to Adam.

Now, as we move forward, it's important that we understand how he is going to use Adam. As we just began, I said that Adam and his actions, and Christ and his actions, represent and determine the destiny of those who belong to him. So it's important as we as we approach Adam that we understand how Paul is using him. In a very deep way, Adam certainly was an individual, a real human being, the first human being that God came in and formed out of the dust and entered into relationship with him. Adam was a human being, but he was also more than that. Adam, in a very deep and profound way, represented each one of us and all of humanity with him. Adam was a representative figure. The biblical picture is illustrated even by his name, and Eve's name for that matter. Adam's name means literally "humanity" and Eve's name means "life."

Adam, the representative human, whose actions somehow, in some deep way that scholars and theologians debate endlessly—his actions are, in a deep way, our actions. When Adam sinned in a very deep way, we sinned. This is this doctrine of original sin that's difficult to understand, but the Bible clearly lays out as true. So it's important as we move forward that we understand this is Adam's story, absolutely, but it also in a profound way—this is our story. That's going to become quite clear as we consider what we just read in verse 12.

So let's consider Adam's life. Paul says, "just as through the one man." Of course, we know the creation story. God created everything, brought everything into existence. Formed man, formed woman, and then as he formed them, he gave them a mission. He gave them purpose. Do you remember what he said to them? Genesis chapter 1, verse 28. God said, "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." God gave human beings a mission. They were to live in relationship with him, and then, partnered with him, they were to subdue the earth, subdue everything in it. They were to rule over it.

Now, understand, they weren't ever to do that on their own. They were to do that in relationship, deep intimacy, with God. But we all know how the story continues, don't we? Adam rebelled. They disobeyed God, and in that disobedience, in that rebellion, Paul tells us sin entered the world, just as through the one man, sin entered the world. And not just sin, death. Death came with it. Sin of course, always leads to death. It leads to spiritual death, the breaking of relationship with God, no longer tied to the source of life. But it's not only spiritual death, it's also physical death. Sin entered the world, and death came with it. That is Adam and Eve's story, but that's also our story because we were there in a significant way. It is our story. Sin brings death. So Paul said, "and so death spread to all men because all sinned."

Now, Paul has said this over and over again throughout the last four chapters. He's talked about sin—for a number of weeks in a row we've dwelled on sin and the reality of it. But here, Paul didn't just say that we commit sins, he spoke in the past tense in reference to Adam's transgression. He says that we sinned. That is, when Adam sinned, we all sinned because we are in Adam. He's our representative, therefore, we are all also under the curse. Death spread to all because no one is immune from sin. All are sinners, and all are under the curse of sin.



# lincolnberean

See, sin brought about this profound reversal. I think it's so fascinating that Adam and Eve were given marching orders. They were to subdue the earth, rule over it, but in their rebellion, sin inverted everything and sin spread. Sin ruled, in a sense. Sin's mission was to spread ruin and decay and corruption, and it did just that. It spread everywhere. It spread to everyone. It ruined everything, and death came to everyone. Sin spread. That's just what happened.

Now, as Paul continues and we turn to verse 13, we're gonna be very familiar with what he does. He goes on a little theological aside, as Paul is so apt to do. But as he does that, he is going to help us understand the reality of sin even more, especially in relationship to the law. So verse 13, he says:

*13 for until the Law sin was in the world,*

In other words, the law did not introduce sin into the world, it already existed. Before Mount Sinai, before the giving of the law, sin was already there.

*13 for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed where there is no law.*

So the law did not introduce sin, but in the giving of the law, something changed. And here's what changed. In the law, God outlined his heart—his will, his desires—for his people. And when he outlined his will in the law, he did it with specificity, with great detail. Now, prior to the giving of the law, people still sinned. But once the law was given, the opportunity to sin in direct rebellion to what God specifically said, it arose. God clearly communicated, and so with the giving of the law came the opportunity to directly rebel against God's express communication.

So now, those who sinned without knowing the law, they were still guilty. But Paul said sin wasn't imputed to them. That word is an accounting word. It means something like "charged to their account." So imagine they get the bill, and the bill just says "sin." They are a sinner, they have broken God's ways. But before the law, it just said "sin." After the law, it was itemized. You did this, you did this. Sin was "charged" to the account. So, sin existed prior to the law. The law didn't introduce sin, but it did bring sin into close focus, detailed focus. Paul continues. he says:

*14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of him who was to come.*

Sin brings death, and because of the universality of sin, death reigned. Now, that is a sobering idea, a sobering reality. Adam and Eve, they were supposed to subdue, they were supposed to rule. But instead, because of their rebellion, sin and death reigned. Death reigned. Now, "reigned" is a very rare word for Paul. Only uses it ten times in all his letters, but I think it's quite significant that five of those times are in this very text. One more occurrence comes next week in chapter 6. So Paul is saying something very deep here, very deep about what it is to reign and about how sin did reign.

Here's what it is to reign: to reign is to rule. It's to be in charge. Reign is a verb, and the root behind that verb is the one that forms the noun "king" or "kingdom." And what do kings do? They're in charge. They rule. What they say goes. Kingdoms are the realm where a king rules. So what Paul is saying in a very dramatic sense, very significant sense, is that ever since the fall, ever since the trespass of Adam, death has been in charge. Sin and death have been the governing principle for all of those who are in Adam, because Adam sinned and, with Adam, we all sinned. Every human being, therefore, is subject to the tyranny of death's reign. Death ruled, Paul said, in Adam. Frankly put, there is no hope. There is no hope. Adam, the first man, the representative human, the one whose action determined the destiny of all those who belong to him, he failed and let sin and death into the world, and we all were right there with him, and we stand condemned because of sin.



# lincolnberean

But...But Paul continues. Paul continues, he said, Adam was “a type of him who was to come.” Now what does it mean that he was a type? It’s a word that introduces hope. In the Bible, the word “type” means something like “pattern” or “mold.” But it’s a pattern or a mold that God will ultimately fulfill in a more dramatic way, in a better way, in the future. Adam was a type that ultimately pointed, that directed an arrow, towards what God would do in sending his son. He was a type of him who was to come. In other words, Adam is not the end of the story. God’s story continues. Adam’s life pointed towards him who was to come. And when we compare Adam and his decision and his action, and Christ and his action, side by side there is no comparison. Jesus Christ far surpasses. Far surpasses. Verse 15 he says, but:

*15 but the free gift is not like the transgression.*

But the free gift is not like the transgression. Adam and Christ, these two men who represent and determine the destiny of all who belong to them. Both Adam and Christ, they are similar in that they acted definitively and their action had a profound effect. Jesus Christ was obedient, obedient even unto death on the cross, and that is what Paul means when he refers to the free gift. The free gift is not like Adam’s transgression. Jesus acted in obedience; Adam acted in sin. And the results of their two actions couldn’t be more drastically opposed to one another. So he continues, he tells us about the results. End of verse 15, he says:

*15 For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.*

Every time I read this text, I just want to yell “much more!” Much more. It’s a word that means “super abundantly more.” “Overwhelmingly more.” Adam’s action, his transgression, resulted in death for all people. The many died. But in contrast, Paul said, much more, overwhelmingly more, did the obedient and gracious act of the one man, Jesus Christ, cause grace to abound to the many. Grace abounding, just bouncing all over the place! Grace abounding.

Now, for the sake of repetition, Paul said, “the many died,” but we need to understand, when he says many, he means “all.” We know from reading our Bibles, we know from Romans, all sinned. Not “many” sinned, all died because of Adam’s transgression. Through one man’s act in the garden, death came to all. But much more, much more, incomparably more, are the results of Jesus’ obedience on the cross. We’ve sung about them already this evening. Through one man’s act on the cross, grace and life abounded to the many. Through the one came death, through the other came life. But that’s not all. Paul continues, verse 16:

*16 The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned;*

So here’s a second point of contrast.

*16 for on the one hand, the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.*

Adam’s transgression had to be judged and judgment comes when sin is committed. And the judgment and the verdict of the judgment is clear: it is condemnation. Condemnation means a verdict of “guilty.” That’s what comes as a result of Adam’s transgression. But in a complete and utter demonstration of God’s love and grace, the great piling up of transgressions, the sins of all of history, the great piling up the incomparable number of sins—in response to that, God righteously acted in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ act of obedience overcame the incredible amount of sins and it accomplished justification.



# lincolnberean

One action resulted in death for all. Everyone's sin resulted in Jesus' righteous obedience that brings justification. That brings justification. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. One man acted in the garden, it resulted in condemnation. One man acted on the cross, and it brought justification available to all. But that's not all. He continues:

*17 For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ.*

Adam's transgression led to the reign of death. Death was king. Death was in charge. Death ruled. Death was the tyrannical leader and every human being was its subject. But, "much more." Much more. Much more, those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness. Now please hear how he ends this verse. Much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one Jesus Christ. Those who are gifts of God's mercy, Paul says, they will reign in life through one Jesus Christ.

Are you reigning? It's a fascinating verse. One of my favorite verses. I could spend hours thinking about what that means. What's it mean that Paul says, "those who receive the abundance of grace, the gift of righteousness"—that is us in Christ, we will reign in life through one Jesus Christ.

It's an appropriate reflection for us today because it is the eve of Palm Sunday. Mike read from the Gospel of John earlier this evening. Jesus, on that Palm Sunday, came into Jerusalem, came over the Mount of Olives. And as he came, a crowd gathered, and we already read what they said, but I'm going to read it again. This is John 12. "The crowds gathered around him and said, Hosanna." Hosanna means save us, deliver us. "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even, even the king of Israel."

See, the triumphal entry in Palm Sunday is ultimately a royal welcoming party. It's a royal announcement. It was an affirmation that the proper king had finally arrived, and a new reign was about to begin. See—well, the crowds and the text even said it—the crowds and the disciples, they didn't even understand what they were saying or what Jesus is doing, but the reality is still there. What Palm Sunday means is that a new king and a new reign was beginning. And when a new king and a new reign begins, an old reign dies off, goes away. And that's why Paul said, death "reigned" past tense. Death reigned. But much more, those who receive those who have been redeemed, those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness, will reign through the one, Jesus Christ.

What's it mean to reign? What's it mean that Paul says, somehow, in some sense, yes, we will, in the future reign. There is a "not yet" reality to that, but there is an already reigning reality. And we have to think about what that means. It can transform our life. And the place we have to start is, we have to acknowledge what we just affirmed about Palm Sunday, we have to acknowledge Jesus is the king. He's the one who reigns. The only reason we can possibly say, or Paul can say about us, we with him will reign in life is because we are connected to him. If we are united to him, then we join in his victory. We join in his reign.

We need to understand, this is a reality for us, something we need to hold onto and believe and live according to if we are with him, if we are united with him. We live in a new objective reality in which Jesus is the king. He is in charge, and because he's in charge, death is not. Death is not. To be united with him changes our life. Sin no longer has the power it once had when we were in Adam. We are in Christ now. Sin and death are no longer in charge because we now pledge allegiance to the other who is absolutely in charge, Jesus Christ.



# lincolnberean

Now, if we really believe that, deep down, that is something we believe with every ounce of our being, we will be ready to act on it and it will absolutely transform our life. We will no longer live under the condemnation of sin. We've been declared righteous. We will understand sin does not have power over us. That certainly is something that we progressively walk into with Jesus over the course of our life, but we can never let the fact that we grow slowly distract us from the fact that God, through Christ, has broken sin's power. Death reigned. We are no longer bound. We are not condemned.

So here's a question: do you know that and do you believe it? Do you walk through your week knowing you are with the risen king who lives and reigns forever, and because he reigns and you are united with him, you will, in a sense, reign now in life, submitted to King Jesus? If that's something you struggle to believe, trust me when I say you are not alone. There are days where I look in the mirror and I wonder why does it seem as though the reign of death is still in charge in my life? If that is you, I don't want to bring shame or guilt about any of that, I just want to encourage you to take a step this week. To take a step, to reach out to someone, come talk to me, talk to one of our staff, talk to a trusted friend, and just say, "I am struggling to believe that the reign of death has come to an end for me because I am in Christ. Help me. Help me."

Death reigned, but it reigns no longer. Now as we continue in verse 18, Paul is going to summarize his entire argument. He says:

*18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one the many will be made righteous.*

This contrast in stark, stark color. Adam and Christ. Two men, two men who represent and ultimately determine the destiny of all those who are with them, who belong to them. Two men, two acts whose outcomes, who results, couldn't be more different. Adam's transgression, his disobedience, brought condemnation to all and made sinners of all. And in contrast to that, Jesus' righteousness, his act of obedience, brought the possibility of justification and life and righteousness to all.

Now, some hear these verses—this is the way this text is often misused, so I'd like to address it before we conclude. Some use these verses to suggest that what Paul is saying here is that in the same way that in Adam all are guilty of sin and all are under condemnation, Paul said, all will be made righteous. Righteousness there resulted in justification of life to all men, and they use this as an argument to say that everyone ultimately will be saved. But this is one place where it is so helpful for us to always remember when we read our Bibles, we have to read it in context. We can't just cherry pick one or two verses. And Paul throughout Romans has been abundantly clear.

Absolutely, the problem of sin is universal. All have sinned, all have fallen short of the glory of God, and salvation is available to all people through faith, through faith in Christ. Universally available. The doorway is faith, placing your trust in Jesus Christ. That means that conversely, if someone refuses to cling to him, if someone rejects Jesus, if someone does not place their faith in him, then they cannot claim the gifts that come through faith. Adam's actions—condemnation, death. Through Christ—hope and peace, possibility of eternal life with him through faith. The end of death's reign and the reign of Jesus Christ available to all through faith.

Now, Paul in verse 20 returns to the law one more time. He says:

*20 The law came in so that the transgression would increase;*



# lincolnberean

A statement that Paul's Jewish hearers would have been shocked by.

*20 The law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,*

We already talked about how the specificity of the law made God's will quite clear. And when God gives his will with great clarity, that creates opportunity for rebellion directly against God and his expressed will. The more explicit God's rules, the more opportunity there is to explicitly break those rules. And so where there was law, transgression increased. But that's not the end of the story. Adam is no longer the end of the story. Through Christ, grace abounded all the more. Grace abounded all the more.

Now, finally, as this chapter concludes, Paul is going to set the reign of death and the reign of grace through Christ right next to each other so that we might know that in Christ, much more is available. Much more than what's corrupted by Adam's transgression. So verse 21, he says:

*21 so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

So that as sin reigned in death. So far, Paul has talked about death's reign. That's been the way he's described it, but here he says as "sin" reigned. And of course, that makes sense, the two go hand in hand. Sin leads to death, spiritual and physical. And sin and death, they are tyrants, they are dictators. Merciless, bent on destruction. And that was all of our reality apart from Jesus Christ when we were in Adam. That was all of us under the reign of death, and it is an awful tyrannical reign. Hopeless.

It's possible, though, that some people even entered this evening and they are still on the fence with Jesus. They can't decide whether to place their faith in him. And if that is you, I just need to say it honestly, you entered and you are living under the reign of death. But it need not remain that way. It need not remain that way. Because in Christ, the reign of sin and death can be broken, it can become a past tense reality. Sin reigned in death, and we can't stop there. Even so, that grace would reign through righteousness, to eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. As dark as the reign of death was, as dark as the cross seems to us from a human perspective, because of God's abounding grace we can look at Good Friday and we can call it good. We could say what happened there is good, because it's on the cross that God accomplished the victory, and the victory far surpasses the reign of death. The victory on the cross led to the reign of grace through righteousness, through righteousness to eternal life.

Do you know? Do you know and do you believe that a new reign has begun in Christ? Or are you still living as if the reign of death is your reality? See, the tragical tragedy of a Hiroo Onoda is that the war was over, but he didn't believe it. Freedom was available, but he couldn't accept it. His enemies could become his friends, but he didn't trust it. He didn't trust it until 30 years later. His commanding officer, someone in authority, came to him and said "the war is over."

So here, as we anticipate Good Friday, let me just say to you, from the one who has all authority, Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, let me just say to you his words that he said on the cross. There as he suffered on the cross and he breathed his last breath, he said, "it is finished." Debt paid. Forgiveness accomplished. Death defeated. The war is over. The reign of death has come to an end. Let us live in the glory of the reign of grace.

Our Father, we thank you. We thank you for what you accomplished through your son on the cross, that you dealt the final decisive blow to death that we might be free. And we pray that this week,



# lincolnberean

even as we walk through this week, you will help us to glory in the victory of the cross. Let us never take it for granted, we pray. Amen.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE  
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988, 1995  
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.*

*Copyright 2026 Lincoln Berean Church. All rights reserved.*

