

In the Balance
Romans 5:12-19

"He started it." You've probably heard that from the backseat or from a distant bedroom. "He started it." If you have a daughter, the variation is, "She started it." Children become more sophisticated as they grow up, but the jostling and blaming continue.

Blaming one another is a human trait; that's why it's recorded in the Bible's story of Adam. In Hebrew, the name, Adam, means "humanity" and the name, Eve, means "life." In Genesis, chapter 3, after Adam eats the fruit, he blames Eve and then goes on to blame God, reminding God that Eve wouldn't be around if God hadn't given her to him. God then confronts Eve and she blames the crafty serpent. Adam as humanity and Eve as life portray how we humans often respond to one another and to God.

In our text in Romans 5, Paul explains the presence of sin in the world by tracing it to Adam. Because of Adam, who embodied humanity, we possess our tendency to sin, to blame others, and then to suffer the consequences for it. Picturing all of humanity in Adam shows the snowballing effect of sin in the world. One person sins and it gains momentum into another person's life. The negative influence spreads and becomes more dangerous and more deeply ingrained in the human species. Sin slithers from one person to the next. It's much more contagious and not as easily handled as a flu pandemic. You might not conceive of sin as the independent power that Paul does, but you have to admit that something like sin has an incredible ability to infect person after person and to replicate itself in worse and worse ways.

The Bible is written in the belief that something is profoundly wrong in human life. You can call it sin, call it brokenness, or just the drifting away from life's original purpose, but it's here, around us and within us, and we look to God to fix it. The psychologist and philosopher, William James, wrote his famous book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, at the turn of the last century. It was enormously influential because it pointed out not just that people have religious experiences, but that people with problems who turn to the spiritual realm often feel as though they've been helped. Our Bible specifically states that something's wrong with humans that needs to be fixed. Something's broken that needs to be put back together, and God wants to help.

Skeptics toss out the Bible's basic insight that something's wrong with our species. They say, "If people would just be nice to one another, we'd all be fine." And why aren't we all just peachy-nice to one another? Paul calls it "sin." It's so basic to humanity that Paul conceives of sin as starting in the first human, Adam. It's not as though the Bible presents Adam like a villain in a movie who wants to destroy all life on the planet. His is more like a drama in which one person's bad choice and his blaming others cause untold suffering to many. If you'd leave the movie world and shift to the health sciences, you can think of Adam's sin as a virus set free by mistake into human life that makes us all sick. The result of this, Paul says, is death.

Sin infects society and individuals. It creeps up into minds, gnaws its way into souls, and demolishes more and more of a person's character and a society's strength. We can look for example at Stephen Arrington. He wrote about his life in the book, *Journey into Darkness: Nowhere to Land*. In the Navy, as a scuba diver, he went from smoking marijuana to selling it, resulting in a Bad Conduct discharge. His life spiraled downward into the criminal underworld until he was finally codefendant in the drug case with the automaker, John DeLorean. Steve Arrington just stumbled along into crime, finally smuggling cocaine from South America. He'd take a step that at the time seemed small, then the next was a little larger. People pressured him, of course, at each step, but sin operated in each decision he made and at each moral intersection where he turned the wrong way.

The modern world tends to act as though we're all perfectly free agents, responsible for ourselves and often responsible only for ourselves. Ancient Israel believed in the solidarity of groups, even all of humanity. In Israel, people believed themselves to be bound in a national community, clan, and family as one personality. Their lives were interdependent. Their interests were a unity. They shared one character. From that perspective you can think of all of humanity as Adam's tribe. We're affected by, and implicated in, Adam's behavior. Today, as we explain human behavior, we're

heavier on the concepts of heredity and environment, but the Bible's view of group solidarity says that our being in the original tribe of Adam predisposes us to who we are and what we do.

Some individuals and even congregations get it into their minds that the Bible's top concept is sin. Paul's explanations about Adam and sin, however, are good news because he always centers us upon God's gracious intervention in our lives. Contrary to frightening people with sin, Paul leads this poor beast, sin, onto the stage and lets it stumble around like an uncoordinated brute, a hulk that's dangerous but wounded and dying right before our eyes. Sin is strong enough to win some battles, but it will lose the war.

Paul doesn't display Adam as a scoundrel and Jesus as a hero, but Adam as a loser and Jesus as the rescuer. Jesus comes to save humanity. Remember, the name Adam means "humanity." Paul says that Adam "is a type of the one who was to come." Without a long explanation of what "type" means, a sloppy description is that Jesus is the other side of the coin. Jesus is the opposite pattern of Adam. One of them ruined life. One restores it. Jesus' death and resurrection reverses the process Adam began. Through Jesus we get new spiritual DNA. We have an altered heredity now. Through Jesus we're born into a new family. We exist in a different environment now. All this happens not just once, but continually, right now, in our Christian life.

You know how a new technology displaces an old one. Who travels on a steam locomotive? Who gets a telegram anymore? Who has a 386 computer? Jesus is displacing sin just as a new technology displaces an old one. We're still in the time when Jesus' new is pushing out Adam's old pattern, but Jesus has begun the process and he'll complete it. Paul puts it, "as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."

How? Well, first it's important to say that Jesus isn't an automatic solution. He's not a chemical antidote and one swig frees us from the poison of sin. He's not a mathematical equation we apply to any problem to get a right answer. He's a person we live with, and it's living with him that patches the central tear in life caused by sin. Adam didn't stay in right relation with God. Jesus did, hanging onto God even as he hung on the cross, clinging to God even when he felt abandoned. That's the difference between Adam and Jesus. Adam separated from God. Jesus stayed tight with God. Jesus puts us back together with God and holds us there.

See the difference? Sin can energize people to action, but it continues to separate people further and further from God. Steve Arrington, sent to prison, is an example of that. Sin paints people into a corner and leaves us there, taking away our alternatives as it destroys our hope. Sin forces people farther and farther out on a limb; then cuts off the limb. People controlled by sin find possibilities shrinking. People who trust Jesus find their world expanding beyond measure and even beyond time.

Jesus settles the basic problem in life that all religions witness to but can't solve. Put Jesus and his grace on one side of the balance and Adam and his sin on the other, and Jesus far outweighs him. Put Jesus on one side of the teeter-totter and sin on the other. Jesus will hold sin safely in the air so it can't get down and hurt anyone else. Jesus is God's "much more" than sin. If people are going to worry about "original sin," a phrase that's not in the Bible, we must look more seriously at God's habitual grace. The grace of our Lord Jesus breaks us out of humanity's sinful habits and brings us back to living with God.

God's grace is always stronger than sin — in the Bible's record and today in our lives. Steve Arrington demonstrates such abundant grace. In prison, he rededicated himself to Christ, especially because of Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship and the Christians who welcomed him into their homes while he was on furlough from prison. When he was released from prison after 31 months, he was hired as a teacher in the College of Oceanography. He speaks to schools and youth groups about the danger of how drugs, ever so slightly at first, slide into your life. But the need for drugs grows and multiplies, and the consequences not only devastate your life but that of others. Free of prison and living for Christ, God's "much more" operates in Steve's life. He's married and has a family. He became the chief diver and expedition leader for the Cousteau Society. The good effects of his life now continue to reverberate and to affect others as he lives and speaks for Jesus Christ.

Sin is strong but doomed. God's grace will be victorious in our lives and in all of human history. God's grace is "much more." The least you can expect in your life with God, the least you can expect in your life with God, is that God has more for you. God has much more to offer us that defeats sin, that conforms us to the image of our risen Lord Jesus, and that leads us into joyful service for God's glory. Amen.