

## **God's Great News for Humanity's Great Problem** *Paul's Letter to the Romans*

### **Jesus is God's New Humanity** *Romans 5:12 – 21*

#### **Introduction: What Our Dreams Require of Us**

As we deepen in our journey in exploring the dreams that refuse to die, I want to both deepen the problem, but at the same time, turn towards hope. The challenge we face is that we have dreams and nightmares about ourselves. For when we dream the dream of love, we aren't just dreaming that love will happen to us from someone else. We are actually dreaming of being a loving person. We aren't just dreaming of feeling like our lives have meaning. We are actually dreaming of living in a way that is really meaningful, objectively speaking. And so when you see it this way, you begin to see that we ourselves are the fundamental problem. We are the obstacles to those dreams. And so while we bear the dreams, we also bear the nightmares.

What is that like? Well, let me tell you about how I dreamed the dream of love. Early during my junior year of college, I went through a very painful breakup with a girl I dated. One reason is that she didn't feel she could emotionally connect with me. And I could kind of understand what she was saying. I was pretty stoic. So for several months, I asked the question, 'Why am I the way I am?' When I saw that I had real emotional needs, I thought that was a sign of weakness. So I asked, 'Why do I do that? What does that get me?' I worked really hard, hard enough to get up at 4:30am everyday during high school swim seasons, and hard enough to get into Stanford. So I got a lot of benefits out of being emotionally shut down: I accomplished a lot! I asked, 'Why do I want so badly to control the respect I get?' The reason: Because I wasn't respected when I was younger. Other kids made fun of me, both my parents were very critical of me, and my dad was an angry man; often I didn't want to be with him because he was so unpredictable. So I had decided that I was going to be an island. I had decided not to need anyone. I was just going to work really hard and be successful. I had said, in a way, especially to my parents, 'I don't want to need you.' The primary way I did that was by being emotionally shut down. I was part of the problem. I dreamed the dream of love, but I was the obstacle to love. It wasn't just that I needed to become more emotional. In fact, as I felt over time that something was melting in me and becoming more in touch with myself, I knew that it helped in some ways, but on the other hand, I was becoming self-centered in yet another way.

#### **Relevance**

Those are just examples of how the dream of love gets invaded by the nightmare of our self-centeredness. Why do we dream this great dream and yet do things that sabotage ourselves? And others? The same is true when it comes to the other dreams. We dream the dream of meaning. Yet again, that dream is invaded by the nightmare of our self-centeredness, too. We long for meaningful adventure, but we settle for safety, for comfort, for a big screen TV that shows us other people's realities, kind of. I know many, many people who sit in their couches and their church buildings knowing that this is not the life they were meant to live. Or we scramble to find something that feels fun in the moment, but we don't look deeper, into what is objectively meaningful. You want to develop into a meaningful person, not just a boring person occasionally doing things that might be meaningful. So the nightmare of our own self-centeredness invades that dream.

And we dream about a more just world. But I don't even have to start on how that dream has been invaded by the nightmare of our self-centeredness. In all these things, what feels more solid is the self-centeredness, the nightmare, the thing that doesn't seem to change. The dreams seem light and fluffy and for dreamers and airheads. Yet if we give in to cynicism and apathy, then how can we reconstruct hope?

#### **Context in Romans:**

The Christian response to this is that there is a new hero who is a new kind of human being, who recovers the dreams and our hope. To explore that, we are going to look into the letter of Paul to the Romans. For those of you who were with us last semester, you will recall that Paul has just finished talking about how Jesus comes to live inside us to live his life out through us. It is built on the logic that if God expressed His love for us while we were His enemies by dying for us in the person of Jesus, how much more will He do for us if we are His children? He will make us His new humanity. Jesus anchors the dreams and the hope even in the face of the nightmare of human evil. The question for us: Why? Why is Jesus of Nazareth the person who anchors our hope and our dreams?

### **The Old Humanity is Fallen: v.12**

Paul begins by examining the old humanity: Adam. Let's start with v.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.' In the biblical story, Adam and Eve were the first human beings created by the good and wise Creator God. They embodied what it meant to be truly human in God's design. Like us, they had dreams of love, meaning, and justice. But very quickly, like us, their dreams were invaded by a nightmare. Like us, they decided to experiment with self-centeredness, or sin, and right away, their marriage relationship suffered as they blamed each other for things. They watched two of their sons grow apart and faced the horror of one killing the other, and running away in exile. And two things entered into history: sin and death.

That is, we began to die spiritually, ethically, and relationally. Therefore we also began to die physically. Paul is not saying that Adam and Eve's fall caused everyone else to mess up. The argument here is that we all sin in the same way Adam and Eve sinned. What's the proof? Well because we all die. God is life; He is the source of life; the source of human evil is relational, it's a turning away from God; that causes our quality of life ethically and relationally to begin dying, and we become dying beings. 'Death spread to all men, because all sinned.' The picture being painted here is that all humanity is like Adam. Adam is the unique source of all humanity, yes, but all humanity is like Adam, especially in our sin.

Illus: For example Adam blamed Eve and then God for his screw up. We do the same thing. So once you start to dislike someone, you tend to see only the things that reinforce your dislike. 'Oh, that person did that again...' or 'Oh, those people...' 'White students at BC are like this.' Or, 'Korean students at BC are like this.' Or, 'the reason why we broke up is because she is this way, or 'he was like this...' Why? It's because you would rather think that your read on people is accurate, rather than admit that you're off. (NEXT SLIDE) There is a recent book called *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives* by Cordelia Fine, a researcher at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at Australian National University. There's another book that reinforces her findings, called *Mistakes Were Made But Not By Me*, by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson. They show how your brain distorts reality in order to protect your ego. 'Never forget,' Fine says, 'that your unconscious is smarter than you, faster than you, and more powerful than you. It may even control you. You will never know all of its secrets.'

Illus: So when it comes to understanding our humanness, we tend to blame everything else for the ways we are screwed up. We blame our parents. We blame Adam and Eve. Our professors. Our friends. Our government. Other countries. Immigrants from other countries. Now while those things may play a role, we tend to not take responsibility for evil onto ourselves seriously. After the TV shows the story of the murderer, on comes the psychologist to explain what this person's childhood was like, and what stresses this person had. And again, sometimes those things play a role, but we tend to make reason for our sin somewhere out there. (NEXT SLIDE) For example, Time magazine essayist Lance Morrow wrote a book called *Evil* after he went out and met people like Saddam Hussein. He researched the evils of Hitler and Stalin. He was expecting to find the devil incarnate. But these people were reasonable on some level, personable, and understandable. So he had a real problem. How do you explain the evils they did? He wound up concluding that evil is like a fungus. It just kind of grows in places mysteriously and unexpectedly. I was disappointed with that, because if that's all evil is, then what the heck can we do about it? Almost nothing. Not only that, there are all these other books and magazines and thinkers trying to understand the same basic issue: Evil (NEXT SLIDE). Why do we suck? Those ways of analyzing our nightmares are superficial because it's a deflection of the problem onto something else or someone else. We choose to.

Illus: The picture of us we're getting is like the picture of humanity in the movie Wall-E. How many of you have seen the movie Wall-E? [In this story, humanity has polluted the planet Earth so badly that we needed to leave in a space ship. We left behind robots called Wall-E's to clean up the earth. And periodically we send back robots called Eve to see if plant life has made a comeback. Meanwhile, human beings are on this ship called the Axiom. In the centuries that have gone by, we have grown fat because we've let machines do all the work. All we do is eat. This is what humanity has become.] Now part of the reason the movie Wall-E is so funny is because there's an element of truth to it. *We are* getting more self-indulgent. In fact, airlines used to require that their pilots, stewards and stewardesses be fairly trim, but they had to give up that standard because they couldn't find enough people. As a culture, we have become self-indulgent, and we have a hard time solving our very real problems. We just leave things behind. We leave broken relationships behind. We leave the poor behind. We leave the poor behind in a mess of garbage. A robot like Wall-E seems more human than we are. Can we reconstruct hope when we are like this?

### **Jesus is God's New Humanity: v.15**

Can Jesus heal humanity itself? That's the claim. Let's look at Romans 5:15, 'But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift [of life, see 6:23] by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.' The contrast is between Adam and Jesus. Adam, like all of us, committed a transgression, a breaking of a boundary. Boy that's an understatement. It's not just that he broke one little rule, but that he turned his whole life to center around himself. He tried to bend all creation around himself and make himself the master of the world and the meaning of the world. We do that, too. That's the problem. Jesus did the opposite. He committed his life to God. He turned his whole life around the love of God. Adam turned away from God and turned our dreams into nightmares. Jesus stepped into the nightmares, in order to reclaim God's dreams for humanity.

There is something Jesus did and gives us that Paul calls a 'gift.' But what gift is that? Because Adam introduced death on all levels to us, Jesus introduced the gift of life [also called the 'gift of righteousness' in this section] on all levels to us. That is, life eternal on all levels: spiritual life with God, ethical life with others, relational love for others, and physical life in ourselves. It's not just long lasting life. It's a different quality of life, the way Jesus himself experiences life, and it comes to us as a gift. Not as something we earn. It's a free gift.

Illus: Now the best way I have of explaining this is to give you a metaphor. Two years ago, I gave a gift to my wife's brother: one of my kidneys. Paul, my brother-in-law, was at a crossroads. Healthy kidneys normally filter out toxins from your bloodstream. Those toxins make your urine yellow. They need to leave your body. But Paul's kidneys weren't filtering those toxins out. So his skin had an unhealthy yellow tinge to it. Being Chinese, he looked especially weird. The lactic acid that your muscles give off when you're sore after a workout was not leaving his body, so he felt tired and sore. Potassium, which we need in small quantities, was building up in his bloodstream, and unfortunately potassium is what is injected into death sentence prisoners in large quantities to send their hearts into cardiac arrest. Paul was in danger of heart failure at age 33. Although dialysis was an option, it wasn't a good one in his case. His dad wasn't eligible because he had had heart surgery before. My wife Ming was an option but she had already delivered each of our two children by C-section, and I felt like that was enough for her. I was the best option. I was 34, so relatively young. And male kidneys are bigger and could filter more blood. So we went to the hospital. I had never had surgery before, so I was nervous. The surgeon had told me what would happen. I would become unconscious. They would turn me on my side. He would make an incision right above my belly button, through my abdominal muscles, or what little I have left after my swimming days. They would put two catheters into my side which had small scissors at the ends. When the surgeon put his hand into my gut, the catheters would snip my left kidney loose, and it would roll right into the surgeon's hand. Then they would stitch me up and put the kidney in Paul's right side, under his own kidney. So, as they sedated me, I thought about all that, and I wondered, 'Am I going to die?!?' I prayed, 'Lord...' and then passed out. Meanwhile they did all that. As soon as the surgeon put the kidney into Paul, it began to filter out the poisons. He peed yellow, as he should. Within 48 hours, his creatinine levels dropped from 13 to 2, and 1.6 is normal. So when I got up and saw Paul, he looked great. His skin color was already looking normal. They didn't cut through much muscle for him, so there wasn't that much incisional pain. It was like getting a new oil filter in your car. He was feeling better than he had felt in many months. But I felt awful. I said, 'Stop the morphine. Give me that vicodin!'

I think that's a good parallel because all of us have a poison in our bodies, a disease called evil or self-centeredness. We need healing from it. We inherit our mortality from Adam and Eve, but we make our morality on our own. The reason why God became a human being named Jesus was to ACQUIRE our disease. Second, it was to have a human body in which to DEVELOP THE ANTIDOTE to the disease. It was in the physical body of Jesus. JESUS CLEANSED THAT HUMANITY OF HUMAN SELF-CENTEREDNESS through his moment by moment choice to never sin. But then God raised Jesus as a fresh, new humanity – a God-drenched humanity – perfectly fused with the love of God. And God made Jesus into a spiritual organ donor. Now, by inviting us to Jesus, God can now give us a gift: a new, cleansed spirit; a new, cleansed heart, the Spirit of a fresh new humanity that is just like Jesus because it actually comes from him.

Let me zoom in on an aspect of Jesus' life. Do you know how crazy hard that is? Since we talked about Adam blaming other people and us blaming other people, let's look at Jesus briefly to see if he blamed other people, just to complete the parallel. As he was being nailed by huge metal Roman spikes to the wood of the cross, Jesus prayed, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Lk.23:46). Jesus never just blamed people, even though he was always truthful, and he called people out. He always welcomed people to himself, and wanted people to come to him. So Jesus resisted pointing the finger. That's a broader theme in Jesus. At certain points in the Gospel

accounts, during the wilderness temptations and the Garden of Gethsemane, we see Jesus struggling with something inside himself, resisting self-centeredness.

We have very little idea how to resist self-centeredness like Jesus did. How many of us have ever stolen something from someone: someone else's makeup, a book, maybe money. Okay, some of us. But it's probably been an inward struggle for all of us in the heart, before it gets to the point of the outward action. What about taking credit for something that you didn't really do? If you ask my wife what portion of the housework she does, she'd probably say 80%. If you ask me what portion I do, I'd probably say 80%. That adds up to 160%. Who's taking the credit here? When you work on group projects, you probably feel the same way. Who did more of the work here? Let's take it deeper. When we sin, the further downstream you go, like actually stealing something, the easier it is to resist doing that. But if you trace the outward action back to the inward heart level from where it comes, and you try to resist the sin there, that's a lot harder. How many of us feel jealous of other people. We all do. The deeper you trace the sin, and try to fight it sooner, the harder it is. Jesus fought it at its source. He never felt jealousy. Not only did he never steal, he never felt jealousy. He fought against self-centeredness earlier than that. He always chose to give himself to God the Father, what we were always meant to do.

That's why when we look at Jesus, at the core of our being, we recognize something about him. He is familiar and yet not. That's because he was living the life we should have lived. He swallowed up self-centeredness to show love. He set aside self-centeredness to live the dream of meaning. And he killed self-centeredness in the humanity that he was wearing in order to carry out the justice of God. He lived the life we should have lived. And he suffered for it. But he cleaned out our self-centeredness the only way it could be done: by killing it. And there was no pain killer he took with that. But he can donate his new life to us. Like an organ donor can donate an organ, he donates his life.

Illus: As a result of having received Jesus' Spirit into myself, I blame people less a lot less than I used to. Since my wife and I got married, we've lived in a low-income, high-crime area in Dorchester, down the red line. Our house has been broken into twice in these last 5 years. The first time our house was broken into, my laptop was stolen. But perhaps the hardest thing for me was that my wife's engagement ring was stolen – the very ring that my grandfather had given to my grandmother; she had given it to me because I'm the only son of an only son. One of the people I suspected of committing this crime was a teenage young man from right next door. He had been to juvie lock-up twice, had gotten kicked off the high school basketball team for using drugs, and had generally not been interested in relationship with us. But last year, this young man committed his life to Jesus, cleaned up his act, and said to me, 'Do you have any extra room in your house? I think it would be good for me to live with you all.' I struggled with that a little bit. I said, 'But Lord, I think he's one of the kids who robbed our house!!!' But Jesus said, 'I have a great deal of love for him, and I'd like to love him through you.' So my wife and I invited him to live in one room in our house, and God has blessed it. That is the life and love of Jesus being poured out through us.

That's why the grace of *God* becomes the grace of the one *man*, Jesus Christ, in this verse. (NEXT SLIDE) First of all, let's define grace. Many of you think of God's grace as if it were simply mercy, His forgiveness for what you did wrong. I think that's why some Christians can talk and talk about grace and not really change in response. But God's grace is bigger than His mercy. The Greek word *charis* is the same word used when the New Testament talks about spiritual gifts, *charisma* (e.g. 1 Cor.12:4): special strengths, powers, that God's Spirit gives us. What's more, God's grace is focused into and honed in Jesus and through Jesus. So God's strength and power is shown in Jesus' strength and power. And he shares that grace with us. That's how we come to share in his new humanity. That is God's grace. We'll explore how exactly that happens in the next message, in Romans 6.

### **Jesus and Our Dreams**

Illus: How does Jesus help us dream the dream of love? Here's our very own Laura to tell us her story. [Story about how a past relationship that was emotionally unhealthy and filled with distrust, jealousy, and lies affected her; in her current relationship, she struggles to not be jealous, suspicious and distrustful. Jesus helps her with that.]

Illus: What about Jesus and the dream of meaning? We can ask the question, 'What good is it, if we don't accomplish something? What does it mean if we try to make an impact but something goes wrong? What happens if I help someone afford a home but then the house burns down and two boys are killed?' I told you last night about the Dr. Paul Farmer, director of Partners in Health, who said 'I have fought the long defeat.' Well, Dr. Farmer is a Catholic Christian. He speaks in churches a lot. He's very diplomatic about his faith because he's a professional fundraiser for Partners in Health, but he drops clues and insights. The phrase 'I have fought the long defeat' is a

quote from his favorite book, *The Lord of the Rings*, written by Tolkien who is also a Christian. Galadriel says it: 'Through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.' And Tolkien himself, in letters, adopted and endorsed the phrase: 'I am a Christian...so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' — though it contains...some samples or glimpses of final victory.' The dream of meaning comes to us because we are meant to be like Jesus, to live like Jesus, to have the incredible compassion and fierce joy that Jesus has. And because God has held up Jesus and said, 'This is what it means to be human, truly human,' and then he gives us the Spirit of Jesus, that Jesus could pour his life and his love out through us.

Illus: Or the dream of justice. When I was in high school, I had a sense of fairness, but I was in love with money. My parents, being pre-1965 Asian immigrants and more working class in their origins, were poorer than some of my other Asian friends, whose parents were post-1965 immigrants, who were more engineers and science people. So I knew I could never spend money the way my friends did. But one day, my mom bought me a Giorgio Armani suit. I was in love with that suit. I thought if I could have a lot of money, I would be important. But Jesus in all his radical generosity has been reshaping me. I still struggle with materialism and fears. But now I love giving. I love living in the inner city. And a few years ago, my friend Gary and I gathered a group of Christians to think together about simplifying our lives and giving more to the global poor. At the end of our twelve meetings, we gave \$40,000 to 5 Christian organizations working for the poor around the world. We wrote a curriculum called Lazarus at the Gate, named for the story that Jesus told in Luke 16 about giving to the poor. And that curriculum has so far been used by 17 other groups in other churches. It has mobilized a total of \$120,000 so far towards global poverty. And you can participate in it, too!

### **Implication for What it Means to Be Human**

#### **Implications for God's Character**

You think that because your life got screwed up somewhere that God is to blame. And you might think this: I suffer; other people suffer; therefore there is no God; or if there is, I'm really mad at him because He sucks.

God is revealed by Jesus. His love for the sinners and prostitutes and traitors is God's love for them. His way of celebrating with people and showing joy is God's way of doing that. His tears at the tomb of Lazarus are God's tears for the dying nature of humanity.

Through Jesus, God has done everything He could, not overriding your choices, but offering you a chance to be fundamentally changed into a new kind of human being. He has always wanted your willing cooperation.