

1-1-2012

Three Powers--Death, Sin and the Gift: Romans 5.12-25

Aaron Metcalf
aaronmetcalf@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

Recommended Citation

Metcalf, Aaron (2012) "Three Powers--Death, Sin and the Gift: Romans 5.12-25," *Leaven*: Vol. 20: Iss. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss4/3>

This Sermon is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Three Powers—Death, Sin and the Gift: Romans 5.12–25

AARON METCALF

This is not exactly the easy passage I was hoping I'd get for a Wednesday morning lecture at Pepperdine! It's a little dense, to say the least. It seems like Paul is basically saying that Jesus and Adam are exactly alike except for the fact that they are actually nothing alike. What? Adam and Jesus are similar, but totally different. What? Jesus and Adam are the same, but totally and utterly different. What?

I used to love to play a game with my cousin when I was young in which one of us would take two pieces of thread and tie them together, creating a complex knot. Then the other one would try to untangle the knot. The best way to do this, we discovered, was to work on one piece of thread at a time, follow it through the knot, loosening it up so the thing would unravel. It feels like that's what we need to do here this morning with this text.

The first thread that Paul gives us is the thread of death.

The first time I truly felt the power of death—the first time I discovered that death has reign, has dominion—I was twenty-eight years old. I had already walked through the death process with several people and had done a handful of funerals; I had even lost friends and family, but I had never seen anything like this...

The full power of death was visible in Craig's eyes. The darkness in those eyes seemed forever—blackness without end. Staring into his eyes was like standing deep in a pitch-black cave—no light whatsoever.

I walked up to Craig and Becky's house one late afternoon to be with them because they had just lost their only son, three-year-old Jake, in a terrible accident. I didn't know Craig or Becky before this terrible day, but I knew that they were not believers—they were not members at our church in Washington and didn't attend church anywhere or have any faith to speak of. A relative of theirs went to our church and asked if I would go look in on them.

Becky was on the couch crying. I sat next to her silently. When she looked up I introduced myself and she nodded, she had been told I might come by. The only sounds in the room were the ticking of the clock and Becky's soft cries. The walls were covered with pictures of a beautiful blond-haired, blue-eyed boy; he was laughing in all the pictures. Toys were everywhere. The movie *Cars* was obviously his favorite, as nearly every character lay scattered on the floor.

"Is your husband home?" I asked. We sat in silence a while longer before she raised her head, nodded and called out.

"Craig, come on out!" Becky shouted. "That minister is here who's going to help us figure this stuff out, or whatever." Craig walked out of the bedroom and I immediately lowered my eyes. He walked over to me in an uncontrolled stumble, looking furious and determined. Craig stood over me: smoking, staring and silent.

The house smelled stale and felt cold.

Jake, I later learned, was an unexpected gift in their lives at age forty, when they had him after seven attempts and failures at conceiving a child. "He was all that we had," Becky said and fell into tears. Craig just continued to stare.

The grief that they showed that day was unlike anything I had ever seen before and unlike anything I have seen since. Death. I had no idea how deep and dark death could be and it was visible in his eyes. Craig's eyes—empty, dark.

“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all have sinned” (Rom 5.12).

Paul will soon use the word “reigned,” or in other translations, “exercised dominion.” Death reigned. When you stand face to face with it, as many of us have, you can feel its power, its dominion and its reign. Whether we’re talking about the death of a person, the death of a marriage, the death of a relationship with someone close to us, the death of innocence or the death of...

Death has tremendous power and this power came into the world through disobedience. We know this story of disobedience well, don’t we? Adam. Oh Adam! Adam’s story begins with a trespass. The sin of one man, Adam, first opened the door, letting the power of death into our world through sin.

On the one hand, I feel a bit badly for him. I can imagine him saying, “Oops, so sorry!” All of sin and death, these powers are running free because of him and that must not be much fun. “I just ate a piece of fruit that lady gave me...didn’t mean to do all that!” he might say.

On the other hand, I’m just angry that he opened that door in the first place. I can remember as a kid being angry with Adam every time I got sick. Somehow I got the idea that germs existed because of Adam, and so every time I felt feverish I blamed Adam. (Unless it was a school day—then I was grateful.)

But before we scapegoat Adam, let’s notice that we aren’t exactly innocent in this mess. It’s fun to blame all our problems on someone else, but this time I don’t think we can get away with it. The trespass wasn’t only Adam’s.

We aren’t merely passive recipients of Adam’s actions; we are active participants. Paul moves us quickly into this reality. We don’t just receive sin and death from Adam, like an inheritance, we participate in them and tend to them. We are a part of death’s story.

Without us, without humans, death and sin would not exist. We are conduits for these destructive powers. We are born into sin’s reality and we birth its reality. Fraud, theft, affairs, murder, idolatry, oppression, slavery, wars, abuse, scandals...these exist because we exist. These sins, which all lead to death, have power because we bring them into the world. “All have sinned.”

“All have sinned” means more than just everyone makes a mistake from time to time, which is between them and Jesus. Sin, for Paul is more corporate, much more communal. We tend to see sin as being very private with private consequences, but this simply isn’t the way it works. Actions have consequences and the sins that we participate in contribute to the power of sin, the power of death. These can be subtle and hard to see.

Perhaps we work for a company that doesn’t treat everyone equally. There’s a janitor who doesn’t make enough to support his family; they suffer. He has a daughter with medical needs and he doesn’t work full-time so he receives no benefits, but he makes just enough not to qualify for the needed state assistance and...

Maybe we purchase from companies that do not practice fair trade. The fingers that made our clothes were small and fragile—fingers of children who will die early from breathing in toxins from their work environment.

Perhaps the labels we instinctively give people cause us to see and treat people as less than who they really are in the eyes of God.

“Get a job, you bum.”

“Go back to your own country.”

“Look at the legs on her.”

Maybe we have so fallen in love with screens that we do not nurture real relationships. After all, it’s so much easier to read someone’s status to find out how their divorce is going than to meet them for coffee. And we grow more lonely and depressed and isolated.

Maybe we don’t do anything, and that’s the problem. We sit silent in a board meeting when difficult conversations come up. We fall into apathy and the power of sin grows because we just don’t care enough.

There are some to whom Paul is ministering who have stopped taking sin seriously. They believe that grace just takes care of it, so evil can be ignored; Paul is desperately trying to wake them up to this reality—all have sinned and that’s not ok.

Sin is a power that cannot be ignored and let's stop ignoring that we are part of the problem. Sin feeds off the actions and choices of humans. We have to confess the power exists because of choices people like us make everyday. Death exists because sin exists and sin exists because we exist. Our actions have serious consequences—even the ones we don't do on purpose.

Well, I'm having a great time! Welcome to Malibu! This is why we come out here, right? Who needs golf and beaches when you can have sin and death?

"What did you do in May?"

"I went to Malibu."

"That's must have been wonderful!"

"Not really, some young Portland preacher made me feel terrible for existing." This is just what you wanted, right?

My son, who is five, recently came up to me with a bit of a dilemma. He told me that he's having a hard time deciding if he wants to be a Sith Lord when he grows up, or a Jedi Knight. Kids these days have a lot of pressure on them. He was very troubled by this. I asked him what the problem was— "Well," he said, "Sith Lords can basically do whatever they want to do, but Jedi Knights are pretty much stuck to peacekeeping." Good point. I didn't have much defense for him. So it looks like he is Sith-bound—which is a bummer.

I get it. The power of death, the dark side, can feel overwhelming. The dark side seems to be limitless power and freedom; the reality of that kingdom seems huge and undefeatable—inevitable, even. The reality of death and sin are huge when we hold them up and look at them.

I understand the position that says we might as well just join them or be enveloped by them. I also get the position that tries to completely hide from them. Those who seek to completely close out the reality of death and darkness. Hide from those powers, build a life that's totally separate from them—good luck with that, right?

And that's why I need Romans 5—because here Paul announces a very different way. God does not want us to yield to the power of death or hide from the power of death; rather, as his people God wants us to transform the power of death through the reality of another power altogether—a power that comes through a different story, a power that reverses death and sin.

Paul stands before us today proclaiming an alternative story to death and sin; a story that, through a gift, brings another power into the world. Paul announces a new reign, a new power that offers a reversal to the power of death. "For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, 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 5.15).

Death is a power, but it's not the only power and it's not the most powerful power. In fact, Paul talks about the power of death in the past tense, when compared to the power of life. Death reigned. But there's a new kingdom, a new dominion, a new Lord that is reversing and undoing the reign of the past kingdom. Once the kingdom of God is announced, the kingdom of death becomes a past thing. It might still exist, but it has no reign.

The power of the gift comes through a human, and in this way it's similar to death's story. They are of the same type. Because of Jesus the power of God has been unleashed in this world. Adam brings a trespass; Jesus brings a gift.

And though they come through the same source, a human, they are completely different in every other way. In fact, they are polar opposites, bringing totally different powers into the world.

The trespass brings death; the gift brings life.

The trespass brings sin; the gift brings grace.

The trespass brings condemnation; the gift brings justification.

The trespass brings disobedience; the gift brings obedience.

Paul juxtaposes these images, mentally placing them in two columns to show that though these powers are alike in that they each came from one human they are totally different in what they bring.

Paul announces that though these are both powers, they are not even close in their power. They both exist, but they are in no way equal. They are both realities, but they are not even close in the amount of power that

they have. Though they are alike in how they got in the world and how they get in the world, the amount of power is incomparable.

Though sin and death do have a lot of power, grace and righteousness from God have abundantly more. There's no comparing these two. "Nor can the gift of God compare to the result of one man's sin." They can't even be compared! Paul is comparing the powers of sin and death to the gift of God by showing that they can't actually be compared.

And just like the power of sin and death, the power that comes from life and grace is a power that we are a recipient of and also a participant in. We are not passive recipients, but active participants in the power that comes through Jesus. Life and grace that come through Christ's faithful actions, through the gift of God in Jesus, is life and grace that we participate in and help bring into the world.

I'm worried that we may miss this at times. We have tended to see the life that comes from Jesus as primarily something that we sit back and receive—which we certainly do, but the story does not end there. When we truly receive that life, we become active participants in it and we bring it to a world that is still living in the reality of Adam. When we pass into the life of Jesus—when the power of death become a past tense dominion—we enter a mission that participates in life, grace and justification; a life that spreads the gift. A life that recognizes the gift is not for us alone, the gift is for the world still living in the reality of the trespass.

There is a call in this text, a challenge, to help usher life, grace and justification into the world by announcing a different power. The call is to join the power of God, the gift of God, and witness God bring this power into the world in a real and visible way.

So many people in our world know of the power that comes in the world because of Adam. They see it and they feel it. They are recipients of that power and they are participants of that power. They live it.

The challenge for us, who know the Jesus story, is to announce the power offered through Jesus into the world in a way that is undeniably visible. The invitation is to live that powerful story out in such a way that it is seen and felt and known. We are called to announce the power of Jesus in a world living in the power of Adam.

The temptation is to guard against the powers of sin and death. The temptation is to build walls, fences, churches and practices that help keep those evil forces at bay. In our churches and our families we tend to strive to live a life of light by primarily keeping darkness out.

What if the call is to redeem darkness into light and to turn sin into grace, death into life, by announcing that the power has passed? Paul invites us to be agents of change in the world through being people who, like Jesus, usher in light, grace and life.

Craig's cold, dark, vacant eyes showed the full power of death. His son was dead and there was no hope, no light or life left. The cave-like nature was stunning.

And then the church jumped into the living room and announced the power that comes through a gift. Light cracked into that cave. The church flooded this family with cards, food, visits; such seemingly simple things, deceptively small gestures, that announced a much more powerful reality than death.

We threw them a wonderful memorial ceremony, catering our church to their needs; we fenced off smoking areas outside the building and decorated in a way that would make them feel welcome.

There was power present in Craig's eyes, yes, but I'll tell you this, there was even more power present when a group sang, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine," at the memorial and dared to let light in that dark cave. And light flooded in. You could feel that power of light.

We cannot ignore darkness that exists in eyes like Craig's. This cave-like darkness that carries real power must not be something we hide from or separate from as the church. In fact, we have to dare to sit right in front of it and stare the power of death down, because though it is a power that reigns, we have nothing to fear when we are carrying the power of the story of the gift with us.

My hunch is that the dark corners of this world, the truly difficult situations and circumstances overly frighten us because we have seriously underestimated the power that comes through the gift. We don't belong to a kingdom that will one day be powerful; we belong to a kingdom that is powerful right now. The question is, can we stand with Paul, face to face against the power of death, and announce a new kingdom that names the power of death past tense because it's been transformed through a gift?

Ryan Woods is a church planter in Vancouver, Washington. Like all of us in this room, Ryan is dying. Unlike most of us in this room, Ryan has been given three to six months to live. He is leaving behind a wife and two young children.

Anyone who knows Ryan sees that though he is experiencing death, he is in no way giving over to the power of death. His desire is to tell the story of Jesus even through his own death. I love these words from Ryan's blog: "I still stand behind what I have said. I still believe it. I still believe that death is inevitable for us all, that God never promises to bring healing but to tell a beautiful story in our death whether it is sooner or later, tragic or ordinary."¹

Ryan understands that he belongs to a much bigger power than death. He belongs to a much bigger king. The story he belongs to is the story of life, grace, justification, light—it's a story that is let in through a gift and it's a story that Ryan is letting into the world every chance he gets.

Like a small light in a pitch-dark cave, the light that comes from God penetrates the darkest story. We have to believe there is power in this story. We have to imagine what it looks like, played out. To be able to stand in the face of death—death without a spark of hope—and have no fear because we know the power of sin and death can't compare—they are past tense—with the power that comes from grace and life.

Because one day we will all be in a living room of darkness, or in an ER with more questions than answers, or sitting across from a teenager going through hell, or standing in a difficult board meeting in which decisions are being made that will seriously hurt many people, and in these moments we cannot be afraid to step in knowing that we belong to a story that can't even be compared to death itself. A story of life, grace, redemption, justification, obedience and light. A life that begins with a gift: the gift of Jesus Christ.

AARON METCALF IS THE PREACHING MINISTER OF THE WESTSIDE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN PORTLAND, OREGON (AARONCMETCALF@GMAIL.COM).



1. Musings From The Ground Up, <http://www.grassrootsconspiracy.com/blog/> (accessed October 18, 2012).