

St. Peter Lutheran Church + Modesto, California  
**The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**  
June 23, AD 2002

*Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel*

**Romans 5:12-15**

<sup>12</sup> *Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—* <sup>13</sup> *for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law.* <sup>14</sup> *Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.*

<sup>15</sup> *But the gift is not like the trespass. 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! (NIV)*

### **Getting Life**

“This looks good,” she thought to herself. Such shiny fruit; it fairly cried out to be eaten, to be enjoyed. And what a broadening experience such enjoyment would be—the knowledge of good and evil, the Mighty One had said. How could he want less than the best for his very own? “My husband and I will be like God Himself,” she reflected. “Now, could that be so bad?” The serpent made sense: it would be much better to know both good and evil than to know only good.

“Here, have some.” She handed the juicy pulp to her husband. “This is good stuff.

“By the way, Adam, do you know what He meant by that word—I think it was die?”

(Harold Senkbeil. *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994, page 13)

In this way Lutheran pastor Harold Senkbeil retells the events of Genesis chapter 3. God had created a world for human beings. He gave them life, and not just breath and brainwaves life, but something richer. He gave them a close, spiritual connection to himself, the source of all life.

But then people traded it in—life, I mean. They traded it in for death. Instead of an intimate connection with the God of love, they got a broken relationship with God, who was now justifiably angry with them. Instead of living forever in the presence of God, they now faced banishment, both in the short- and in the eternal long-term.

And ever since, we human beings have been trying to get back this life we lost. We struggle to find something significant. We want our lives filled with things that matter. We want things that will last. Or maybe many of us human beings have already admitted defeat. Maybe we've given up on finding something that really matters or that really lasts. Maybe instead we're obsessed with enjoying things that give us pleasure for a moment but don't mean all that much. “Maybe life is beyond our reach,” we think, “so we'll have to settle for whatever cheap imitations we can find.”

Over the next few weeks, we will be paying particular attention in each Sunday's sermon to the Bible book of Romans. This letter, inspired by the Holy Spirit and written by the Apostle Paul to a group of Christians in Rome, talks about life—real life, life with God, life that matters and life that lasts. It talks about getting life, about living life, about keeping life and about ultimately seeing life. Today, God speaks to us about getting life. He tells us two basic things that we should listen for: first, that we cannot get real life from any human source, and second, that real life comes only from him, as a free gift.

#### **We cannot get life from any human source**

The book of Genesis tells us where life came from. God created it. The book of Genesis also tells us where death came from. It came from human beings, tempted by the devil, who turned on their good Creator and sinned against him. Death is a result of sin.

If you want to do a little simple Bible study this week, try this: open your Bible to Genesis chapter five and read through it. This chapter is a listing of some of the descendants of Adam, the first man. As you read it, you'll notice a few things. First, you'll notice that people had strange names back then (I haven't seen Methuselah on any top-ten baby name lists lately, have you?). You'll notice that near the beginning of time, people lived a long

time. But you will also notice a phrase that keeps popping up in the chapter, right after it says how long Adam's descendants lived. Which phrase am I talking about? "Then he died." Then he died. The phrase rings like a funeral bell tolling over and over.

Now, when you think about it, this is kind of strange. I mean, God gave him a command: "Don't eat the fruit of this particular tree, or you'll die." Adam disobeyed it. So he died.

Fast forward to the time of Moses, who received the Ten Commandments from God. Moses and the Israelites died, and the reasons are obvious. They received direct commands, as Adam had, and they broke them. So they died.

But what about all these people between Adam and Moses, who did not have formal, written-out laws from God, but who died anyway? Why did they die, too?

I was reminded last week of a classic stratagem used by kids against their parents. I'm pretty sure I used it a time or two. Here's how it works: I want to do something that I know Mom doesn't want me to do. I know that if I ask her permission, she'll say no. So what do I do? I just do it without asking! Then, when I get caught, I tell Mom, "But you never said I couldn't do it!"

It doesn't work, does it? It is still possible to anger Mom even when you're not disobeying a direct order.

The people between Adam and the Law of Moses—they didn't have specific, formal commands dictated to them by God. Yet they died. Why? They still displeased God, even though there was no formal tabulation of their sins against God's laws. Paul gives a further explanation: they died because when Adam sinned, he made the whole human race sinful. All people who descended from Adam are considered sinners. We sang it in the hymn: "All mankind fell in Adam's fall. One common sin infects us all. From one to all the curse descends, and over all God's wrath impends." (*Christian Worship* 378:1)

This is bad news. You and I are human beings, descended from Adam. That means you and I are sinful people. Paul writes in another place that we are "by nature objects of wrath." (Ephesians 2:3) Because we are descended from sinful Adam, we too are sinners, and God can't stand sin.

So then, can we get life with God from human beings? Can we make ourselves alive to God? Can we do something to get closer to him, to be at one with him, to get all the blessing he has the power to give? No. We can't. Death reigns over the human race. Not just physical death either, though that's the most visible death we know of, but death of souls.

This is depressing news, no doubt about it. It's something we instinctively take issue with. We want to think that human beings are good on the inside. We desperately want to think that there's some potential here, some possibility that we, as the human race, can somehow turn things around. With each good deed, with each advance in technology, with each inspiring story of the "triumph of the human spirit" we get our hopes up, only to have them dashed by a terror warning or news of a tragedy or a doctor's diagnosis. Each bit of hurt we feel adds to the mountain of evidence that testifies to one dark fact: in human beings there is death.

So here's the bottom line: Life must come from outside of us. Life must come from somewhere and someone else besides us sin-filled people.

### **But God gives us life as a free gift**

I heard a name last week, a name from the past. It was the name of an inventor. He is not famous, but his invention certainly is. I'll give you the name; see if you recognize it: Philo T. Farnsworth. Do you know who he is? Philo T. Farnsworth, many decades ago, had the crazy idea that a person could take moving pictures of someone in one place and broadcast them over the airwaves to a box in someone else's living room far away. Farnsworth's invention? The television.

Philo T. Farnsworth, just one man, has had an incalculable impact on the lives of billions. Can you imagine life without TV?

Back to the Bible. According to Paul, which one man has had an impact on the whole human race? Adam, right? Adam, who was just one person, affected the whole world of people. He sinned; they died.

But there was another one coming, another person. He would be different. He would be a real human being as Adam was, as we are. But at the same time he would be the Son of God. This one who was to come would not sin, ever. He would die, but not because he had to. He would die because he wanted to. He would die in the place of all sinful people. He would endure not only physical death, but a deeper, more horrifying death. He would experience in full measure death to God. God his Father would turn his back on him completely, shut him out. The Father would act as if this person had done what Adam did and what Hitler would do and what we would do

and everything that every sinner ever would do. The Father would curse him as he hung on a cross of wood. And he would die.

Adam, just one person, affected the whole world of people with what he did. But so did the one who came after him. We know this man, the “second Adam” as he is sometimes called, as Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a life of absolute perfection, succeeding in every way to obey God (what Adam failed to do). Jesus died with the sins of the whole world heaped on him. While on the cross, he suffered his Father’s punishment of eternal death. And then, having suffered all that needed to be suffered, he came back to life again.

He came back to life! Remember what Paul wrote about the human race: “death reigned.” But not anymore. Not since Jesus did what he did. Sin killed us. But here’s what God does. God takes your guiltiness, every last drop of it, and places it on his Son. Actually, God did that 2000 years ago. When Jesus died on the cross, he had suffered for your sins already then. But Jesus took away our sins from us. And He takes the flawless life of his Son, and considers it to be our life.

Death killed us. But Jesus destroyed death when he came back to life, rising from the grave. Does death still rule us? Hardly. Jesus killed it. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55-57) Death reigns over us no longer. There’s a new king in town. His name is Life.

Now, why did God do all this? He didn’t have to. He could have let us all suffer and die eternally because we’re sinful children of sinful Adam. He could have kept a ruthlessly accurate record of everything wrong you and I have ever done and shoved it in our faces as he pushed us away from him into hell. But he didn’t. Instead, he considered our sins removed. He considered us perfect people. All because of what Jesus did for us. And now that we’re considered holy and perfect people, we make perfect partners for a holy God. We are no longer God’s enemies. We are reconciled to him. We are close to him. We enjoy every blessing he has to offer, now and forever. We have life. It is a free gift of God.

Why did God do it this way? He just wanted to. I can’t explain why—he just wanted to. He loved us. It was a gift. We can understand why we die, physically and spiritually; we have sinned. But why do we live? Why has God rescued us? God just loved us. Last week we heard Paul say, “*While we were still sinners*, Christ died for us.” This love that we can’t explain, this love that we can’t understand, this love that we certainly can’t earn or deserve—it has a special name: grace.

When we gather here each week, we don’t have to spend our time trying to deny what we know is true. We don’t have to try to get each other to try harder to improve ourselves so that we can maybe get life with God. Instead, we come together and confess that there is death in us. We confess that we are by nature sinful and, added to that, we have sinned in many ways. We confess that death is what we rightly deserve.

But we also rejoice in this fact: in Christ there is life. In ourselves we find sin, and death comes because of sin. In Christ, however, we find forgiveness for every sin, and when there is no sin, there is life with God. In us there is death. In Christ there is life.

What does this mean? Stay close to Jesus Christ. Listen to what he says through his ministers, through his Holy Book. And don’t just listen for advice. Don’t listen for what you can do, as if the secret to getting life lies within your reach. Listen for what God has done. Listen to the good news about how God freely gives life as a gift of his grace. Listen for the good news, for Jesus said, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” (John 6:63) Meet God at his altar where he gives you his body and his blood and the full pardon from God that his body and blood have bought for you. In Jesus Christ is life, now and forever.

When Adam trespassed, when he stepped over the line God had told him not to cross, the human race died. But when Jesus displayed the forgiving grace of God, life broke death’s grip on humankind and brought life. “In him,” the Bible says, “was life, and that life was the light of men.” (John 1:4)

Adam and Eve gave up life with God when they turned their backs on his Word. They lost life and got death. They couldn’t get life back; that was beyond their powers. Would they ever live again? Only if God would have mercy on them and would decide to give it to them as a gift.

That’s what God has done!

He said to them, “You buddied up to Satan when you listened to him over me. You made yourself my enemy. You died. But I’m not going to let that last. I’m going to send someone, one of your offspring, in fact. He is going to destroy death and bring life back to the human race.”

God has made good on his promise. He sent Jesus Christ. For you. For me. For all of humankind. And now, by his grace, we have life—life in Christ. Amen.

We thank you Christ; new life is ours, New life, new hope, new strength, new pow'rs;  
This grace our every way attend Until we reach our journey's end. Amen.  
(*Christian Worship* 378:6)