

The Reign of Death

Brian Carroll / General Adult

Unashamed - A Study of Romans / Romans 5:12–14

Romans 5:12–14 traces the entrance of sin into the world through Adam and the reign of death that followed. Adam's disobedience was not an isolated failure; it brought humanity under a power no one could escape. Even before the law defined and exposed particular transgressions, death reigned from Adam to Moses—evidence that our problem runs deeper than our individual acts of sin. We belong to a fallen humanity whose history, condition, and destiny are bound up with Adam. Yet Paul ends with anticipation: Adam pointed forward to another representative who would establish another humanity and another reign.

Introduction

- If I say "Grim Reaper," you already have a picture in your head.
 - Black robe. Scythe.
 - Probably a skull under the hood.
- And if you grew up watching cartoons like I did, that picture comes with a personality — because the Grim Reaper was never really scary.
 - He was a character.
 - Somebody to outrun.
 - Somebody to trick.
 - Somebody who shows up at the door and gets it slammed in his face.
- Take *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*, not necessarily an Oscar-winning film.
 - Bill & Ted get killed and Death himself shows up to collect them.
 - And what do they do?
 - They challenge him to a game.
 - Chess first. Then Battleship. Then Clue. Then Twister.

- They cheat, they heckle him, they treat the literal embodiment of mortality like an annoying guy at a board game night.
- Death, reduced to comic relief who tags along.
- Or take *The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy*, a Saturday-morning cartoon, aimed at kids.
 - I've never even heard of this show, but the Wikipedia description is one of those sentences that just has to be read.
 - “The series centers around the exploits of Billy, a dimwitted yet happy-go-lucky boy; his friend Mandy, a deadpan, cynical, and cold-hearted girl; and their best-friend-by-obligation Grim, a begrudging Jamaican-accented Reaper who is reluctant to serve the two children. After Billy and Mandy cheated at a limbo match against Grim to save Billy's pet hamster he is enslaved in an unwanted permanent friendship with the children. Grim is miserable in the first days of his servitude, at times taking pleasure at the fantasy of killing them. However, he gradually adapts to the new life and even grows to care for Billy and Mandy, if only somewhat. Despite this, he desires to break free from his servitude.”
 - This show aired for like 6 years. People watched this cartoon enough for them to renew it FOR. SIX. YEARS.
 - An entire generation grew up with death as a character you outsmart before breakfast and forget about by lunch.
- Or think about *The Far Side*.
 - For years, Gary Larson drew the Reaper into one-panel gags.
 - Fumbling to work a doorbell, getting his feelings hurt, two skeletal figures arguing about whether they're doing a good enough job scaring people.
 - No plot, no stakes, just Death, made small enough to fit in a newspaper box next to the crossword.
- Three different decades.

- Three different formats: movie, television, comic strip.
- Same instinct running underneath all of them: we took the most serious thing in the world, and we made him a joke.
- That's not how this figure started out.
- The robe and the scythe didn't begin as a joke.
- The idea that Death is a person has roots in Scripture.
 - The Bible portrays Death as a conqueror in places like [Revelation 6:8](#)
 - Paul treats Death as an enemy in [1 Corinthians 15:26](#)
- Because reaping was an obvious metaphor for human mortality.
 - As grain is cut down indiscriminately at harvest, human lives are cut down by death.
 - The Bible contains several judgment scenes built around harvesting:
 - [Joel 3:13](#): "Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe."
 - [Matthew 13:39](#): "The harvest is the end of the age."
 - [Revelation 14:14–20](#) depicts the earth being reaped with a sharp sickle.
- The image we see today comes from medieval Europe, from the era of the Black Death, when a third of the population was dying and nobody could explain why or stop it.
 - Artists started painting something called the "Dance of Death" - a skeletal figure leading a procession to the grave.
 - And in that procession? Kings. Popes. Peasants. Children.
 - Everybody in line. Nobody exempt.
- And even when we didn't laugh at death, we found another way to defang it: we made it romantic.

- Blue Öyster Cult's classic rock radio staple, *Don't Fear the Reaper*, doesn't play death for laughs.
- It plays it as something closer to a lover's invitation.
- Don't be afraid. Come along. It'll be beautiful.
- That's a different move than Bill and Ted or Billy and Mandy, but it lands in the same place: something to make peace with, something to stop being afraid of, on our own terms.
- Whether we're laughing at death or slow-dancing with it, we've spent decades finding ways to take the sting out of it ourselves.
- Here's the thing - it was never meant to be funny.
 - It certainly wasn't meant to be beaten.
 - It was meant to tell the truth: death doesn't check your rank before it comes for you.
 - Somewhere between the fourteenth century and Saturday morning cartoons, we lost that.
 - We turned a warning into a mascot.
- And I think Paul would tell us we lost something true when we did.
 - Because in [Romans 5:12–14](#), Paul isn't interested in a Grim Reaper you can outsmart.
 - He's not writing a character.
 - He's describing a king.
- Let's turn our attention for our next stop in Romans, chapter 5, beginning in v. 12.

Scripture Reading

Romans 5:12–14 ESV

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

¹³ for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.

¹⁴ Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

- Paul just spent eleven verses telling us what belongs to the justified.
 - Peace with God.
 - Access, by faith, into grace.
 - Hope that doesn't put us to shame.
 - Love poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.
 - And then, strangely, rejoicing, even in sufferings.
 - Because suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope.
 - That's a remarkable list.
 - And Paul caps it off in verse 11: we rejoice in God, through Christ, through whom we've now received reconciliation.
- Received. Past tense. Already done.
 - But "received reconciliation" assumes something.
 - You don't get reconciled to someone you were never at odds with.
 - You don't need peace declared over a war that never happened.
- So verse 11 quietly raises a question verse 12 is about to answer: reconciled from what, exactly?
 - What was the actual state of affairs before any of the fruit of reconciliation was true of us?

- Paul doesn't answer that question by pointing back at your life, or mine, or by tallying up individual sins the way he did back in chapters 1 through 3.
- He goes bigger than that.
- He goes back to the beginning.
- He calls our attention to one man, one singular action.
- And then he traces a single line all the way down to every person who has ever lived.
- Because before you can appreciate what verses 1 through 11 hand you, you need to see clearly what verse 12 says you were handed instead: and let's just say it was more than just a minor setback.
 - It was more consequential than a bad habit.
 - An intruder that got in the door and never left — one that's been reigning, unchallenged, over the entire human race.
- That's where we're headed this morning.
 - Not the case for grace — you just heard that.
 - The case for how bad it was without it.
 - Let's see how sin, and death behind it, actually got in.

Death Invaded (v. 12a)

- When we go back, all the way back, we find ourselves in a Garden called Eden.
 - It was perfect. It was glorious.
 - And it was the model.
 - God gave Adam and Eve a simple commission.

Genesis 1:28 ESV

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the

fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

- That idea of dominion meant that as they fulfilled their commission to be fruitful and multiply that the family would outgrow the Garden.
- So they were to expand and fill the earth, taking the Garden with them as they overflowed the original boundaries of Eden.
- Now, the Garden was perfect, but man’s place in it was precarious
- Augustine, one of the giants in church history, argued that at creation, before the fall, Adam had two abilities.
 - He had what Augustine called the *posse peccare*, the possibility of sinning and the ability to sin.
 - Adam and Eve also had the power to resist temptation and not fall into sin; they had the *posse non peccare*, the power or the ability not to sin.
 - This means they weren’t robots, running a program...they were free moral agents that could choose between obedience and disobedience.
 - That gave them their second ability - *posse mori* and *posse non mori*.
 - That is, they had the ability to die and the ability not to die.
 - They were not incapable of dying.
 - Death was possible, but it was not yet necessary.
 - Had they obeyed the command of God they would not have died.
 - They had the ability to live forever.
- Of course, we know what happened - God’s singular prohibition was broken in [Genesis 3](#).

- The one “thou shall not” was turned into a suggestion, not a command.
- And to use Augustine’s argument, they lost the *posse non peccare* — and the moment they did, they lost the *posse non mori* right along with it.
- Sin and death invaded creation.
 - Adam may have had the ability not to sin and the ability not to die.
 - But his choice opened up a deadly contagion that could not be contained.
- The consequences were swift.
 - Once God confronted Adam and Eve, he took the life of an animal to cover their shame.
 - They were banned from the Garden and were sent out into a cursed creation where violence and death would take hold.
 - Still honoring the Lord’s decree to multiply and fill the earth, their children were born into a world that looked very different from the world experienced before the Fall.
 - And as you know, it didn’t take long for this family to truly taste the horror of what they had done as violence struck right in the heart of their home.
 - Brother turned against brother as Cain spilled his own brother’s blood.
- While violence and bloodshed and disease would come to characterize many of Adam’s descendants, physical death is only a part of the story.
- However, before we move past it, it is wise for us sit with it for a second, because most of you have already felt exactly what Adam and Eve felt standing over their son's body.
 - Here's what this text quietly gives you permission to do: grieve honestly, without apologizing for it.

- We live in a culture, sometimes even a church culture, that rushes past grief.
- "They're in a better place." "God has a plan."
- All of that might be true, and there's a time for it.
- But it can also become a way of skipping past the wound instead of naming it.
- Genesis and Romans agree on something our platitudes sometimes forget: death is not natural.
 - It's not just "part of life."
 - It's an invader. An intruder.
 - A hostile king who took territory that was never his to take.
- That means when you grieve — a parent, a spouse, a child, a friend, a marriage, you're not failing to trust God.
 - You're responding correctly to something genuinely wrong.
 - Jesus himself wept at a grave he was about to empty.
 - If the Son of God didn't rush past grief, you don't have to either.
- So if you're carrying a loss right now, don't let anyone — including the version of you that wants to seem strong — tell you to hurry up and get over it.
 - But, as Jesus' followers, you grieve like someone who knows this king is real.
 - And then — as we'll see before this letter is finished — grieve like someone who knows this king doesn't get the last word.
- Cain and Abel they were only the first casualties.
 - This king didn't stop with one family — he took the whole family tree.

Death Spread (v. 12b-13)

- The end of v. 12 makes it very clear what was taking place as Adam's offspring multiplied - something else was growing as the human race grew.
 - Paul said, "...death spread to all men because all sinned."
 - Returning to Augustine for a moment.
 - We know Adam lost the ability not to sin and the ability not to die.
 - We often say that when we learn a new skill or habit that it becomes SECOND nature.
 - The issue here is that sin actually becomes our FIRST nature.
 - This contagion spreads throughout Adam's bloodline and everyone who would come after him is very, very sick.
 - The corruption runs into the very nature of who we are.
- You fast forward a few generations and the symptoms of this sickness are profound.
 - In fact, [Genesis 6](#) shows us just how prevalent the spread of this sickness actually has been.

Genesis 6:5–6 ESV

⁵ The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

⁶ And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

- Wickedness was great.
- But that is immediately followed up with "every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."
- Look at the certainty and the universality of what is being said there...
 - The wickedness of man - that's not just a handful. That's the whole race.

- Every intention - not most of the intentions. There's not a good intention to be found.
- And that's followed up with "only evil" leaving no room for good.
- And just for sake of clarity - "evil continually"...it never takes a break.
- All of that leads God to say something that many people have struggled with.
 - He regretted making man.
 - How can a perfectly sovereign God have regrets?
 - This is more about God's emotional posture toward human sin - not any kind of regret about the unfolding of his sovereign plan.
 - God wasn't watching the spread of death and saying to himself, "I wish I'd done that differently."
 - But he is certainly grieving the depth of human depravity and the subsequent action that he is going to have to take.
- Verse 13 is often seen as one of Paul's most confusing lines.
 - "For sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law."
 - Here's the objection Paul is anticipating.
 - Someone in Rome — maybe a sharp Jewish believer who knows the Torah well — raises their hand:
 - "Wait a minute. Sin doesn't get 'counted' without a law to break. Moses didn't show up with the Law for another two thousand years. So what happened to everybody living between Adam and Moses? Were they off the hook?"
- It's a fair question.

- If sin needs a law to be chargeable, and there was no formal law yet, you'd expect a loophole — a stretch of human history where sin didn't technically count, and death should have taken a break.
- Paul isn't conceding that loophole.
- He's naming it so he can close it.
- Because here's what actually happened in that gap between Adam and Moses: no Ten Commandments.
 - No Mosaic code. No covenant law given to Israel at Sinai.
 - And death still spread through every generation.
 - That's the evidence Paul is about to bring in verse 14.
 - But he plants it here first: sin doesn't need a law on the books to be real.
 - The Law did not create sin.
 - It identified sin, specified God's commands, and made human rebellion unmistakable.
 - But long before Sinai, sin was already present—and death was the evidence.
- Chuck Swindoll tells a story about his boyhood that makes the point.
 - Like many boys he had a paper route, and like many he didn't particularly enjoy it.
 - When delivering papers he would ride his bicycle across the lawns of homes that had the misfortune of being on a corner.
 - At one particular place he had actually worn a narrow trail across the lawn.
 - It wasn't right, but no one seemed to notice.
 - But one day as he rode up he saw a sign that read, "KEEP OFF THE GRASS. NO BIKES."

- And—you guessed it—he rode right past it anyway on his well-worn trail—right up to the feet of the waiting author.
- As Swindoll put it, “The man shared with me a few things from his heart.”
- Before the sign, he was already damaging someone else’s property.
- But once the sign appeared, there was no ambiguity.
- What had been wrong was now explicitly forbidden, and riding across the lawn became a deliberate violation of a stated command.
- This is the same thing the Law does.
- Even without the written law, the offense is still criminal.
 - That's the world between Adam and Moses.
 - And like an unchecked contagion, death spread, without prejudice.
- But it is important to understand - this is more than just a blemish on the human record.
 - This represents a monumental shift in the very order of creation.
 - What God created was good and mankind was to reign over this new creation as co-regents, extending the visible reign of God over all creation.
 - But instead, a different king took the throne.

Death Reigned (v. 14a)

- Paul said, “Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses...”
 - The word “reign” is the language of royalty.
 - It points to the position of a king and his authority over all of his subjects.
 - This is vitally important as we seek to understand this mess.

- And what is perhaps most important - it all can be traced directly back to a bite of a fruit in a Garden.
 - They saw that it was good for food, it was a delight to the eye, and it would certainly make them wise.
 - Surely taking just a bite would make them just like God.
 - They were so busy trying to have God's power that they missed the glory they already had as they bore his perfect image.
- But as death spread, we see that it spread to all.
 - And instead of mankind taking God's reign to the ends of the earth, mankind took a different king wherever his feet took him.
 - Think about what it actually means for something to "reign."
 - Every human king eventually dies.
 - His reign has a beginning and an end.
 - Someone is crowned, and someday, someone else will be crowned in his place.
 - Not this king.
 - Every person born since Eden has been born already under this reign.
 - No coronation required.
 - No treaty signed. No moment where you could have opted out.
 - You didn't inherit a kingdom : you were born a subject of one, the day you were born into Adam's line.
 - And here's what makes this reign unlike any other in human history: this king never dies.
 - Every other tyrant eventually gets overthrown, grows old, or is buried by his own subjects.
 - But Death doesn't face that problem.

- Death buries every single one of his subjects — and just keeps reigning over the next generation, and the next, and the next.
- From Adam to Moses. From Moses to now. Nobody votes this king out. Nobody outlives him.
- And that's not just those who knew the law.
- Remember, those who had the law had specific do's and do not's.
- When Paul says "even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam", he's talking about those who didn't have the written law.
- Adam had a clear prohibition.
- He violated it with malicious intent.
- But between Adam and Moses there was no written law.
- But let's not forget the argument that Paul has already made throughout Romans.
 - [Romans 2:14–15](#) tells us that even those without God's written law still have his law written on their conscience.
 - Their own thoughts either accusing or excusing them.
 - We break God's revealed law even if we don't have access to God's written law.
 - No one gets a pass. No one falls outside this king's reach.
- Death's universal reign means outward respectability cannot settle anyone's standing before God.
 - The respectable and the reckless alike belong to Adam's fallen humanity.
 - Not obviously wicked.
 - Not headline-worthy sinners.

- Just ordinary people, living ordinary lives, under a reign they couldn't see and probably didn't feel.
- That should reframe how you look at the people around you this week.
 - Think about the people in your life who seem like they don't need what you have.
 - The coworker who's genuinely kind.
 - The neighbor who's a good parent, a good spouse, a good citizen.
 - The family member you love who just seems... fine.
 - Not in crisis. Not obviously lost.
- It's easy to let "they seem fine" quietly become "they're probably fine."
 - But Paul just made an airtight argument proving that's not how this works.
 - Death doesn't only reign over people who look guilty.
 - It reigns over everyone — the respectable and the reckless alike — until something greater interrupts it.
- So ask yourself honestly: is there someone you've gone quiet around, specifically because they don't seem like they "need" the gospel?
 - Someone whose life looks put-together enough that inviting them into this conversation feels almost rude, like you'd be implying something's wrong with them?
 - Something is.
 - It's just not visible from the outside.
 - That's exactly what this text is telling you.
 - Who is that person for you? And what's stopped you from saying something?

- That's the weight of what we've just walked through: everyone you know, everyone you love, everyone who looks fine - all of them living under a reign they can't vote out and can't outlast on their own.
- If no human king can dethrone Death because kings die and Death doesn't, then whoever finally interrupts this reign has to be someone Death itself can't hold.

Death Interrupted (v. 14b)

- Paul ends this argument with a quick statement about Adam.
 - He was "a type of the one who was to come."
 - I'll teach you all a Greek word today - you're going to feel super smart - "Type" translates the Greek word *typos* it means a pattern, a template, a preview.
 - Paul isn't just telling us a fact about ancient history.
 - He's telling us that Adam is a shape — a shape that Someone else was going to fill.
- This may be one of the most important distinctives of Paul's understanding of sin and redemption.
 - Paul sees Adam as a representative for all humanity.
 - His disobedience brought about a universal reign of death — one man, one act, every person under him.
- When Paul says Adam is a type of Christ, he's telling us Jesus was coming to undo what Adam did.
 - Sin entered the world through one man and spread to all people.
 - In the same structure redemption was coming too, through one man with universal reach
- But notice: alike in structure, not alike in effect.
 - What Adam did, he did to us.

- What Christ was coming to do, he was coming to do for us.
- That difference — how one man's act could actually undo another man's ruin — is where we're headed as we finish this chapter next week.
- Remember, every king in history has eventually been buried by his own subjects.
- This one wasn't going to be.
- Because the one who was coming couldn't be held by death.
- He came to interrupt death.

Invitation

- We started this morning with a Grim Reaper you could beat at chess.
- Turns out that was never the real one.
- The real one has reigned over every person born since Eden — not a character, a king.
- Undefeated and unelected
- But Paul has pointed us toward another man, and this man brings another reign.
- A man death itself can't hold.
- One who didn't come to make peace with this reign — he came to end it.
- If you're in Christ this morning: you already know how this story turns.
- The king who buried every other king got buried himself — and didn't stay that way.
- Rest in that. And go find the person you thought of a few minutes ago — the one who looks fine, who doesn't seem like they "need" this — and say something.
- They're under the same reign you were.

- If you're not in Christ: this is the part where I tell you the truth kindly.
 - You are under this king right now, whether you feel it or not.
 - Looking fine doesn't mean you're exempt — Paul just argued that case.
 - But the interruption Paul promised is a person, not a philosophy — Jesus Christ, who lived the life Adam failed to live, died the death Adam's sin required, and rose in a way death couldn't reverse.
- Turning from trying to outrun or outsmart this king on your own, and turning to the only one who's actually beaten him — that's what it means to trust Christ today.
 - The cartoons taught us death is something to escape on our own cleverness.
 - The gospel says you don't have to.
 - Someone already did.