

~Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson~

Romans: Good News for the World
Our Roots: A Matter of Life ...or Death
Romans 5:12-21

~Take a first look~

What makes you, you, and me, me? Three influences that shape who we are have been identified within the assumptions of a Christian World and Life View.

(1) Nature—This refers to our genetic inheritance, what we get from our parents and from the generations before them. God has created us to “reproduce after our kind,” as the book of Genesis says. Much of what we are develops from our natural inheritance.

I—Years ago, we met my brother and his wife at his daughter’s home. At that time, they lived in Simi Valley, California, about 30 miles northwest of Los Angeles. We got to her home a day before anyone else and had a great opportunity to get better acquainted with her and her husband and their (then) 1-year-old son, Nathan (who just got married October 13, 2024). Of course, we had to make all of the usual observations: Can you see the mother in the son? “I don’t know where he got his stubborn streak,” said his mother. Must have been the father’s influence. When I looked into his little cute, fat face, I saw his grandfather, my brother. No doubt, it’s true. We pass on all sorts of things to our children, from the color of their hair and eyes to their height and build to the size of their feet to their facial features. We are all a product of *nature*.

(2) Nurture—This refers to the influences we have as we grow up. We cannot underestimate our experiences while growing up, the people we have watched whose actions have had an impact on us. These all contribute to making us what we are. Think for a moment. What people or events have had the most influence in your life? Maybe they are people who have set a bad example and mistreated you, but who have inspired you in reverse to do better. Maybe they are people who you hope to be like when you grow up. If you have younger people in your life, you can be sure that they are watching.

I—Stephen Freed, the father of a teenage daughter writes, “‘Elizabeth, what will you do if I end up like Granddaddy someday?’

“Watching my father slowly deteriorate from an incurable disease has been a painful process—one that has raised many such difficult questions in my mind. When I posed this particular question to my 15-year-old daughter, her response gave me even more to think about.

“‘I don’t know, Dad,’ she answered after a moment. ‘But I’m watching you to find out.’”¹

I just finished reading Dr. Paul C. Vitz’s insightful book *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*. The last sentence in the book is, “All children want is to love their fathers—and to have fathers who love them in return.”² He develops the compelling thesis that when the Father that should love them in return is either absent, abusive, or unengaged, the child grows up to project the failings of the father toward their concept of God. After all, Jesus taught us to address God as “Our Father ...” (see Matthew 6:9ff). *Nurture* sets us up either to believe and trust in God as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, or it makes it harder to do so.

¹ Stephen E. Freed, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 35, no. 2.

² Paul C. Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999, 2013), p. 198.

(3) Grace—This is a category that the social scientists will leave out if they are not thinking from God's point of view. It is the central aspect of God's approach toward humanity; it is what empowers His initiatives toward us. Without grace, we would have no spiritual ancestry at all. Without His intervention in our lives, we would not know Him at all.

I—Don't forget the experience of an American infantryman. It was 1944, and Bert Frizen was an infantryman on the front lines in Europe. American forces had advanced in the face of intermittent shelling and small-arms fire throughout the morning hours, but now all was quiet. His patrol reached the edge of a wooded area with an open field before them. Unknown to the Americans, a battery of Germans waited in a hedgerow about two hundred yards across the field.

Bert was one of two scouts who moved out into the clearing. Once he was halfway across the field, the remainder of his battalion followed. Suddenly the Germans opened fire, and machine gun fire ripped into both of Bert's legs. The American battalion withdrew into the woods for protection, while a rapid exchange of fire continued.

Bert lay helplessly in a small stream as shots volleyed overhead. There seemed to be no way out. To make matters worse, he now noticed that a German soldier was crawling toward him. Death appeared imminent; he closed his eyes and waited. To his surprise, a considerable period passed without the expected attack, so he ventured opening his eyes again. He was startled to see the German kneeling at his side, smiling. He then noticed that the shooting had stopped. Troops from both sides of the battlefield watched anxiously. Without any verbal exchange, this mysterious German reached down to lift Bert in his arms and proceeded to carry him to the safety of Bert's comrades.

Having accomplished his self-appointed mission, and still without speaking a word, the German soldier turned and walked back across the field to his own troop. No one dared break the silence of this sacred moment. Moments later the cease-fire ended, but not before all those present had witnessed how one man risked everything for his enemy.

Bert's life was saved through the compassion of a man whom he considered his enemy. This courageous act pictures what Jesus did for us.³ This is the story of grace. Jesus, the Son of God, has crawled across the wasteland of this world marred by the moral conflict raging inside every person and has offered us the power of deliverance. Those who receive His offer of grace gain a new inheritance.

Paul calls us to remember our roots, both from a distinctly human and from a distinctly Christian perspective. Consider the contrast between our human ancestry and that which is possible because of what Jesus has done for us.

~Take a closer look at Romans 5:12-21~

I. HUMAN ANCESTRY THROUGH ADAM IS MARKED BY TWO CHARACTERISTICS:

1. Sin—This is defined as missing the mark.

I—C. S. Lewis began his monumental presentation of Christian faith in the book *Mere Christianity* with a simple observation: all humans recognize some sort of moral law; all violate it. This is the universal nature of sin. It began with the first human's willful disobedience; it continues with every choice we make to go against what we know to be right. People know that they should not be petty and critical; they are petty and critical anyway. The story goes on in many other directions.

³ Lynn McAdam, West Germany. *Leadership*, Vol. 17, no. 4.

2. Death—*This is defined as separation, that which occurs unnaturally between body and soul at the end of our physical lives.* Death has been inherited from our first ancestor, Adam. God had told him, “You will surely die,” if he disobeyed the only prohibition in a world of freedom and abundance. Death began on the day he defied God’s intention anyway.

A—Even before the giving of the law, sin was in the world and death was universal.

I—When elderly Adele Gaboury went missing a few years ago, concerned neighbors in Worcester, Massachusetts, informed the police. A brother told police she had gone into a nursing home. Satisfied with that information, Gaboury’s neighbors began watching her property. Michael Crowley noticed her mail, delivered through a slot in the door, piling high.

When he opened the door, hundreds of pieces of mail drifted out. He notified police, and the deliveries were stopped. Gaboury’s next-door neighbor, Eileen Dugan, started paying her grandson \$10 twice a month to mow Gaboury’s lawn. Later Dugan’s son noticed Gaboury’s pipes had frozen, spilling water out the door. The utility company was called to shut off the water.

What no one guessed was that while they’d been trying to help, Gaboury had been inside her home. When police finally investigated the house as a health hazard, they were shocked to find her body. *The Washington Post* (10/27/93) reported that police now believe Gaboury died of natural causes *four years before*.

Vialo Weis makes the application: “The respectable, external appearance of Gaboury’s house had hidden the reality of what was on the inside. Something similar can happen to people: We may appear outwardly proper while spiritually dead. All sorts of religious activity may be happening outside [and we might add, all sorts of humanitarian acts], while the real problem is missed: spiritual death on the inside. We need life, not a tidy facade.”⁴

And we aren’t going to get that life from Adam. In other words, neither nature nor nurture can give us the internal and eternal life that we yearn for. Fortunately, we are not limited as humans to what we get from our human nature and influences.

II. HUMAN ANCESTRY THROUGH JESUS CHRIST IS MARKED BY CONTRAST:

1. Many died by Adam’s sin; many receive the gift of God through the grace of Jesus Christ. [v. 15] The contrast could not be sharper: on the one hand, because of Adam’s sin, death spread to the entire human race; on the other hand, because of Christ’s act of sacrifice—a gift given freely though unearned by those who choose to receive it—life is available, potentially for the whole human race.

A—So, which is true of us: Separation from God and His purposes for our lives because of our roots in Adam, or reunion with God and His purposes of life through Jesus Christ?

I—Several years ago, a relative at the time bought my wife Jeannie and me a DNA test from Ancestry.com. Turns out we are not from Krypton, after all, so we had to put our specially made tights in the back of the closet. 😊 It was interesting to discover some of our family heritage, at least in general. We weren’t really all that surprised. In my case, I was born in Texas, so I am from everywhere. Our ancestors hailed mostly from Northern and Western Europe. Here in Romans 5, Paul is asking us to trace our ancestors further back, back to the beginning of the human race in Adam and Eve. What we find in that ancient story is something

⁴ Vialo Weis, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. *Leadership*, Vol. 15, no. 3.

repeated over and over again in every human life: Born innocent, choosing to turn away from what we know is right and good, and suffering the consequences for it.

2. *Following Adam's sin, judgment and condemnation followed; following Jesus' act of grace, even after many trespasses, righteousness came.* [vv. 16, 18-19] This is the main theme of the book of Romans (see 1:17). The point was this: God does not look at our lives as a teacher looks at a student's test. We can't stand before God if all we are is "above average." The standard is perfection. The only passing grade is 100%. Only Jesus, God's Son, has earned such a score.

To adjust the analogy to Paul's comparison, the only way that we can be acquitted before the court of heaven is through Jesus. He has already served the sentence for our sin. He has already faced death for all of us, and He won over it!

A—What is the basis for our confidence for righteousness before God? Our own efforts? Or, Jesus' righteousness which we have by faith?

I—In Actions Speak Louder Than Words, Herb Miller writes: "Two Kentucky farmers who owned racing stables had developed a keen rivalry. One spring each of them entered a horse in a local steeplechase. Thinking that a professional rider might help him outdo his friend, one of the farmers engaged a crack jockey. The two horses were neck and neck with a large lead over the rest of the pack at the last fence, but suddenly both fell, unseating their riders.

"The professional jockey remounted quickly and rode on to win the race. Returning triumphantly to the paddock, the jockey found the farmer who had hired him fuming with rage.

"'What's the matter?' the jockey asked. 'I won, didn't I?'

"'Oh, yea,' roared the farmer. 'You won all right, but you crossed the finish line on the wrong horse.'

"In his hurry to remount after the fall, the jockey had jumped on his competitor's horse. Success is meaningless unless we are in the right."⁵

When we cross the finish line of life, it will make all the difference which "horse" we are riding. If we try to present our own good deeds and religious practices to God and think that it will be enough, we are in for a sad revelation. We will be riding the wrong horse. If, however, we ride over the line on the righteousness of Christ, we will have won the race.

3. *Death came through Adam; life came through Jesus Christ.* [v. 17] We have already illustrated this point, but notice it again in verse 17.

4. *The law was added to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace increased all the more!*

A—Remember the role of the Law in salvation-history.

I—Here's the analogy. People have inherited sin and death from Adam, but prior to the law's coming they could plead ignorance. Darkness covered the human heart. The law, however, is a giant search light. It penetrates to areas of action that were never considered before. It gets below even the outward behavior and searches the heart. But look, as that searchlight burns brighter, what do we see up on that hill called Golgatha? We see the figure of a man, an innocent and righteous man, about whom the Roman officer in charge of His execution exclaimed, "Surely this man is the Son of God!" Though God has revealed our sin by

⁵ Judy C. Knupke, Newton Lower Falls, Massachusetts. *Leadership*, Vol. 12, no. 4.

His searching law, His revelation has not ended there. That searchlight has turned upon the very act necessary to give us the power over sin and death and set us on the course to righteousness and life.

~Take it home~

I. THE QUESTION IS: WHICH ROOTS ARE OURS?

1. All of our roots go back to Adam. We “all have sinned and keep falling short of, keep lacking, continue staying without the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

2. This doesn't have to be the whole story with us, though. God is offering to adopt us into a new family through Jesus Christ. He is offering to change both our past and our future. He is offering to view the past in the light of the death of Christ. He is offering to view our future in the light of Jesus' act of conquering death.

II. IF WE ARE IN CHRIST, ARE WE CELEBRATING AND SHARING THIS NEW ANCESTRY?