

“Chain Reaction”

Romans Wasn't Read in a Day – part #4

Romans 5:1-11

[book cover] Have you ever read Laura Numeroff's If You Give a Mouse a Cookie book? It describes a chain reaction. The narrator warns a small child, “If you give a mouse a cookie, he'll probably want a glass of milk.” Each action leads to a new request, one after another, until the boy helping the mouse becomes exhausted, and the last request leads to the mouse just wanting another cookie.

[matches] According to the dictionary, a chain reaction is “a series of events, each one causing or influencing the next.”¹ In chemistry, it is a series of reactions where the products keep influencing other reactants. In physics, chain reactions are created when particles produced by fission of one atom cause other atoms to fissure. Controlled chain reactions are possibly good, but runaway reactions are generally bad.

A lot of times, a chain reaction leads to a disaster. Certainly this is true in nuclear physics, where chain reactions can lead to meltdowns. In real life, when we deal with depression, anger, and other unhealthy mental attitudes, we can enter a downward spiral with no end. Hurt people hurt people. Violence leads to more violence. Addictions create more addictions. Brokenness repeats itself, even across generations. As the 1980's rock band The Fixx sang, “One thing leads to another.”

[Bible verse] In the book of James, chapter 1, the writer explains that “each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” (James 1:14-15). Temptation leads to desire leads to sin leads to death. That's a bad kind of chain reaction.

We see this in the story of King David, Uriah, and Bathsheba in 2nd Samuel 11 and 12. The short version is, David saw Uriah's wife, Bathsheba and coveted her. Then he committed adultery with her. Then he lied about it. Finally, David had Uriah killed in an effort to cover up his crime. Coveting led to adultery led to lying lead to killing. The only way this cycle was broken was through the bravery

¹ Wiktionary.org

and compassion of Nathan the prophet, who confronted King David, who finally repented.

[chain or change] The question I am wondering today is, how do we break these bad chain reactions, these downward spirals? How do we start a new chain reaction of blessing? A "change reaction," if you will.

[Verse, cross] I believe Paul gives us the answer in Romans 5. It all starts with God. How did God break the chain of sin? Paul says in verse 6, "at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."

Have you ever wondered why was AD 30 just the right time? Of course, Jesus fulfilled many biblical prophecies in just the right time: being born in the Roman Empire, after the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon, while the second temple still existed in Jerusalem. These were all necessary for the Messiah to come. Yet, I believe when Paul says "the right time," it's not so much about the date, rather, it's about the expectations of the religious people in Jesus' day. Yes, they were expecting a messiah, but they had the wrong expectation. They were looking for a military hero; instead, they got a humble carpenter who became the sacrificial Lamb of God. Ironically, the perfect time for Jesus to come save us was the worst time from our perspective. We didn't have time to make amends. God didn't wait for us to clean up our mess. Jesus came to earth at our lowest point.

[verses] Let's read Romans 5:7 again. "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die." Would you die for a truly good, honorable, righteous person? We know plenty of stories where someone dies protecting their family, their neighbors, their classmates, and even their country. Look at 9/11, first responders, and the military. Good Samaritans, complete strangers, even, in the right circumstances, will save other lives at their own expense. As our stories and movies show us, everyone loves a hero who dies for a good cause. Jesus even said in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

[verse] According to Paul, however, when Jesus died, we were not friends of God. We were enemies by our own selfish rebellion. (5:10) That's why the timing of Jesus' death is so ironic. Read Romans 5:8 again, my favorite line from our communion liturgy: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Jesus didn't die because we deserved his love. It was the opposite. We didn't deserve it. That's why it's called “grace.”

[Siblings] There is a story about a little girl who needed surgery, including a blood transfusion, and she had a very rare blood type. After much testing, her family discovered a match: her younger brother. So they asked him if he was willing to donate his blood to save his sister's life. The boy was quiet for a moment, then said, “Yes.” At the hospital, they hooked him up to the IV. When the procedure was finished, he asked the nurses, “How much longer?” Confused, one of them said, “We're all done.” Then the boy clarified: “How much longer until I die?” The boy thought that by donating his blood, he would die so that his sister could live.

[Jesus] In a way, that's the story of Jesus. He is our ultimate blood donor. Paul says in Romans 5:9, we are “justified by his blood.” Jesus broke the chain reaction of sin with his own life, his own body, with forgiveness. He created a chain of blessing instead. Through Jesus, we see that love leads to forgiveness, which leads to salvation, justification and sanctification.

[verses] How do you react to the pain and disappointment that surround you in life? When someone hurts you, how are you likely to respond? Paul says, there is a chain reaction for our suffering, but it's not what you might expect. In Romans 5:3-4, Paul says, “We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame.” Parents are always talking about how sacrifice builds character. It turns out, they stole that from Paul.

Let's be clear, though. Paul is no masochist. He does not have a “morbid view of life.”² Paul sees suffering in the light of Christ. He is talking about suffering for your faith, which can be both physical and emotional. The ultimate hope of any Christian is that everything that happens to us in life can be used, if we choose, to bring God glory. (Romans 8:23.)

[chain breaking] The answer, then, to breaking the chain reaction of sin and suffering comes down to our response to all the Jesus has done to reconcile

² NIV Study Bible notes, Romans 5:3.

us to God. It is indeed a choice, whether or not we will start a “change reaction,” or perpetuate the brokenness around us.

[rain] There is a children’s book, which sadly I don’t remember the title or the author. The story starts with a man, getting ready to go to work, who is upset because it is raining. I think he forgets his umbrella. In his irritation, he forgets to kiss his wife goodbye. In turn, she burns breakfast, which then causes their son to get mad. Later, he goes outside and yells at the dog, but the dog thinks it’s a game. Soon, the boy is playing and laughing with the dog. The boy returns to the house and helps his mother set the table. At the end of the day, the woman greets her husband at the door with a kiss, and the sun is shining. The dog, in his own way, broke the chain reaction.

How will we break the chain reaction? Allow me to give you some ideas.

[Break the Chain 1] #1 - Admit we need Jesus to overcome our sin. We simply can’t do anything about it on our own. Remember Paul’s statement in Romans 5:1: “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It’s really important that we get this. Paul uses very strong words in In Romans 5:9, saying we are “saved from God’s wrath through [Christ].” God’s wrath is not arbitrary; it is not of human origin. It is his righteous, perfect judgement toward rebellious sinners, and, most importantly, it is saved up for the final judgement at the end of time. If anything, we should rejoice that God’s patience is so great. The point is, God acted first. Christ died for us while we were still sinners.

[Break the Chain 2] #2 - Break the chain reactions in our own life. There are some simple ways, yet they are not easy. Philippians 2:14 says, “Do all things without grumbling or complaining or arguing.” Stop the madness. Get off the crazy train. Colossians 3:8 says, “Rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.” Controlling our tongues is the best tool to breaking the chain reactions.

[Break the Chain 3] And #3 - Expect that the Holy Spirit will sanctify us. Believe God is up to something. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Paul challenges us to look for a greater purpose in our

suffering. He says "rejoice **in** our sufferings, not **because of**."³ Can you believe that what you're going through could actually help someone else come to Jesus? Can you believe that God is not finished with you yet? That hope will break the chain.

[title screen] I am a pastor today, not because I sought this vocation out, but because God used a series of events to lead me here, events I would have never chosen myself. This is not my final destination, either. God still has a plan for me, and for you. Chain reactions don't end, they perpetuate. Where is God leading us next?

Let's pray.

Memory Verse:

Romans 5:5 "...God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit..."

Reflection Questions:

1. When has suffering, pain, irritation, or other annoyances caused you to enter a downward spiral? Whom did it affect?
2. How did sin create a downward spiral on earth? What effects of sin cause chain reactions over generations?
3. How did Jesus break the chain of sin? How did he cause a "change" reaction?
4. When have you observed someone "pay it forward" and create an upward spiral of blessing?
5. According to Paul, suffering can produce perseverance, character, and hope. Have you experienced this truth? When?
6. Why is it important to remember that Christ died "at just the right time...while we were yet sinners"? (Romans 5:6,8)
7. What is God asking you to do today to create a "change reaction" in someone's life?

³ NIV Study Bible notes, Romans 5:3