

No one could accuse Paul of being concise or brief. He takes his time. He goes over it again and again so there is no room for confusion or misunderstanding. So we might be forgiven for laughing out loud when we read these words near the end of Romans 5: "Here it is in a nutshell". When you think about it, there's really not much you can fit in a nutshell, and though Paul tries his best to summarize what he has been trying to say, it's not that simple. Or is it? Okay, so he doesn't actually say, "here it is in a nutshell" though that is the way Eugene Petersen has captured it in his paraphrase of Romans. In the original Greek, verse 18 begins with the equivalent of "so then" or "therefore" and it signals that Paul is going to summarize all he has said previously into these last three verses, thus the "here it is in a nutshell." It makes one wonder why he hasn't done it sooner.

Of course, it isn't that simple after all. In order for us to comprehend the immensity of the gift of life that is offered to us in Jesus, Paul must first take us all the way back to Adam, the first human, our progenitor from whom we have all descended. Paul must first remind us of our inheritance of sin. We remember that story because it is the almost starting point for the story of humankind: how Adam and Eve enjoyed a special relationship in the presence of God until the time when they were tempted by the serpent, and they deliberately disobeyed God, and that was the beginning of sin and the end of innocence. The special, intimate relationship with God had been severed. Adam and Eve had been banished from the sanctity of God's presence in the garden. And it's important for us to grasp that this was not just the beginning of Adam's sin, but now it had infected all who would come after him. Think of it as hereditary. We tend to think of our inheritance, what we receive from parents and grandparents and great grandparents in terms of a windfall – money and property and precious jewelry or special family treasures. Or maybe we think of the genetic factors: how you have the family resemblance: you're a red head or tall like your grandfather or have green eyes like your mother. But sin is also our inheritance and we can trace it all the way back to Adam.

Lent marks the 40 day journey of preparation through prayer and reflection on the life, ministry, suffering and death of Jesus. The 40 days remind us of the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. He had just been baptized in the waters of the Jordan River by cousin John, when he was driven out into the wilderness, and by driven I don't mean that he got there by car. I mean he was compelled. He had to go. He was there for 40 days and nights before the temptations began. And he was hungry as he had fasted that whole time. He had not eaten for 40 days. And then, when he was running on empty, the temptations began. This time, the temptor was not disguised as a serpent as he had been in the garden with Adam. But the temptation is really the same. Did you ever notice that before? In both cases, the temptor uses food as the bait. Food, so fundamental to all of our lives. In the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, the scene reads like an all you can eat buffet of the most beautiful food available and they could help themselves to it all, with the exception of that one fruit hanging from the tree of life. And as it turned out, it is the one thing they cannot resist. Jesus is not in the garden, in fact, he's in the wilderness where there are no all you can eat buffets spread before him and even if there was food available, he has chosen to fast. I mean is it really considered a temptation if you are already full, completely satisfied and someone offers you liver? It wouldn't take much

strength or will power to turn down the liver, now would it? If I had said chocolate cake, it might be a different story. But the point is, Jesus is empty. He is completely empty of everything but God. And the temptor offers him bread. If you had a mother who makes bread like Kirk's mother, you would understand just how strong this temptation must have been. Lately in the Grow group, we've been learning about the difference between temptation and testing and I think it might be helpful for us to understand the difference here. The Bible speaks of both testing and temptation, that God puts us to the test or that the devil tempts us. And here is the difference: when we are being tested, we are being tested on our strength and the testor wants us to pass the test. But when we are being tempted, we are tempted on our weaknesses and the temptor wants us to fail. Jesus is being tempted at a point of extreme weakness; the temptor wants him to fail. And yet, he does not give in. Three times he does not give in – three, of course, is the perfect number in Biblical terms. Like the rest of us, children of Adam, temptation is something Jesus must endure. But unlike Adam, unlike you and I, he does not fail, he does not fall for it. Jesus overcomes the temptation. It's the first step on his way to defeating the death sentence which was handed to us by Adam.

That's what Paul is trying to summarize for us: sin and death have come to us through Adam. But grace and life have come to us through Jesus Christ. It's not a reversal; it's not a complete undoing of everything that had come before. It is not just that Adam's sin turned us all into sinners, each one facing the death sentence and that Jesus sinless and sacrificial life has simply erased what had gone before. Sin and death are still very much our daily reality. But we are short sighted and we often can't see beyond our own temptations and our own small rebellions against God. But as Paul Achteimer has written, "feeling guilty of personal shortcomings is not our deeper problem. We are caught in the deeper effects of the rebellion against God which we simply cannot overcome....when sinners "try harder" they only produce more sin. The deeper element of self-examination is the need to repent of the feeling that by "trying harder" we can effect reconciliation with God...to finally realize we cannot deliver ourselves, no matter how sorry we may feel for the past wrongs and how hard we may try to overcome them in the future."¹ We cannot save ourselves by trying harder. And our personal attempts at trying harder do not address the deeper truth: that we live in a world disfigured by sin. That we, you and I, as individuals, are only small, not completely insignificant but often powerless, factors in a world which includes the Syrian refugee crisis, the famine in the South Sudan, the neglect and mistreatment of native Canadians, a world ruled by corruption, greed, lies and desperate grabs at power. No amount of my personal trying harder will ever overcome these sins. And although we might think of ourselves as evolving and so much more advanced and developed than previous generations, take a look at what is happening around us. Children dying from fentanyl overdoses, a crisis in mental health, men and women acting out as sexual predators. Can a strong economy save us? Can the latest fad diet save us? Or a Hollywood Blockbuster? Can building bigger towers save us? Can technology really save us? Of course not. There is nothing which can save us apart from the gracious gift of God in Jesus.

But the work of Christ, the mercy and grace of Jesus is not just a reversal. Its so much more. Not only is the sin of Adam put in its place, but it is overcome. Not only it is not a death sentence but it is the gift of life. I know what you are thinking: what's the catch? We have become skeptical of the offer of a "free gift." I can feel a little ambivalent about gifts. On the one hand, a gift can be a wonderful, unexpected, undeserved surprise, but on the other hand a gift can feel like a guilt trip or something to be paid back or an obligation or just plain awkward. Does the gift come with an obligation? Obligation, no. Invitation, yes.

What Christ offers us is an invitation. Did you hear the invitation this morning in the words of the prophet Isaiah? Is anyone thirsty? Come. Don't have the money to pay for a drink? Come anyway, it's free. Are you thirsty for grace? Do you long to be forgiven, set free from the sin that tempts you, that takes you as its prisoner? Are you hungry, hungry but nothing seems to satisfy, nothing seems to fill you up? Are you hungry for God? Its no accident that the very thing that the devil used to tempt Jesus, bread, Jesus offers freely to all who are hungry. What the devil has used to tempt him, Jesus offers to give us, here at the table, as a reminder that in him we don't have to sell ourselves for bread. We don't have to fall for the temptation just to try to fill ourselves up. Jesus has bought and paid for the bread. In fact, he has become the bread – the bread of life. Grace invites us to the table, to fill up on the feast which is the mercy and forgiveness and love of God. Grace invites us into life - a life in Jesus, a life through Jesus. From life to life. This is the Lord's Table. All those who are hungry for Him are welcome here.

ⁱ Paul Achtemeier, Interpretation Series, Romans.