

Death Came To All Men Because All Sinned

by Kel Good

Romans Chapter 5 has long been the stronghold passage to prove conclusively the alleged doctrine of original sin. All men have a moral inheritance from Adam which, if not bringing upon them guilt for the original sin in the garden, nonetheless has brought upon them a moral taint which has *inevitably* resulted in their own actual sin and consequential condemnation. The evidence for the concept of a sinful nature, inherited from Adam, is found in Romans 5. This view has historically taken two paths, the Calvinist and the Arminian. To the Calvinist all men sinned *in* Adam. Adam is seen as the federal head of the race, with all men genetically present in his loins, so that what he did we **all** did through him. Thus all men are guilty of the original sin as they sinned *in* Adam. To support this idea, appeal is made to the argument presented in Hebrews 7 in which the writer seeks to demonstrate the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood to the Levitical priesthood by the fact that Abraham offered tithes to Melchizedek. Since Abraham was Levi's forefather and thus Levi's superior, and since the lesser offers tithes to the greater, it is concluded that it is as though Levi himself offered tithes to Melchizedek present in his forefather's loins. In the same way it is argued by the Calvinists that just as what Abraham did was Levi's act, Levi doing it *in* Abraham, even so all men were sinning *in* Adam.

Several points need to be considered. First, there is a big difference between saying someone did a neutral act like paying a tithe which brings no *personal* moral consequence, and saying someone is eternally damnable for an act they were not consciously present to perform. Second, Hebrews 7 does *not* say that Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek. It only says "one might say" he did and this is only on the basis of the fact that Levi came from Abraham, who paid the tithe. The whole argument is based on the idea that Levi is not greater than his forefather, who was not greater than Melchizedek. Thus Levi's priesthood would be the lesser. The argument therefore establishes not that Levi literally paid the tithe but that he being the descendant of the one who paid the tithe is lesser than Melchizedek, since he cannot be greater than his forefather. To make the jump from this loose illustration saying "one might say" Levi paid the tithe, to all men being eternally condemned because they *did* sin in Adam is a brash step and violates all concept of moral accountability, which necessitates consciousness of one's moral obligation.

Is Arminianism Any Better?

Because of the difficulty of this, the Arminian swing of the church says that death came to all men because of their own actual sin. This actual sin came inevitably upon them because Adam's sin tainted the race with a moral sinful nature that is inherited and results in actual sin whenever a person comes to the age of moral consciousness and

accountability. All are condemned for their own actual sin, not for sinning in Adam, but his sin resulted in their sinning inevitably.

Clearly this view does not remove the injustice of the situation but merely pushes it back one step. Men are not accountable for sinning in Adam. This of course would be unjust. They are only accountable for their own actual sin. But all *inevitably* sin because of the nature they inherit from Adam. They still come under condemnation because of Adam's choice. His choice irresistibly produces their personal choice for which they are condemned. So God is really unjust again, for he created the genetic characteristics whereby this sinful nature was passed on to Adam's descendants. A second problem with the Arminian view is that physical death comes upon many who have not actually sinned yet and thus it is hard to explain how this death came upon them because *they* sinned, unless they committed a sin *in* Adam.

Of the two positions, Calvinism appears more consistent to what is actually dealt with in the text. Arminianism seeks to avoid the apparent injustice of the idea that Adam's act could be considered our act but doesn't really avoid the problem, nor does it do justice to the statement that death came to all *because* all sinned. What are we to conclude? Must we concede that Adam's act was a federal act for the whole race? No one can deny that his action has affected the whole race. This is clear from Romans 5. The question is *how*? Did his act *inevitably* bring condemnation to all men? Or did it simply become the occasion of all men's sin, not inevitably but nonetheless sufficiently? Is the death spoken of physical death, or is it another kind of death? If it is physical death, is it strictly physical death, or does it refer to something deeper? These questions need to be dealt with if we are to come to an acceptable conclusion.

The appropriateness of these questions stems from two factors. First, Romans 5 stands alone in being a proof text for the idea of original sin. There are no other passages that make statements of Adam's sin being the cause of all men's sin and consequential condemnation. To build such a fundamental doctrine, with such grave implications for the question of justice, on only one passage of scripture is dangerous to say the least. It demands very careful examination. The second factor is that scripture uses the term "death" in more than one way. To limit the definition one is giving of the term to speak strictly of physical death, without previous justification, is not appropriate. This is especially so when such a limitation puts the justice of God in a very bad light. Our study demands a careful examination of the use of the term death in scripture to see which usage best fits the passage before us.

Three Uses Of The Term Death

Scripture speaks of death in three ways. First of course is physical death. This death *was* the result of Adam's sin. Genesis 3 records that when Adam sinned, God drove him from the garden lest he reach out and eat of the tree of life and live forever. He was told that

from the dust he had come and to the dust he would return. The implication is that what had sustained Adam's physical health and immortality was his partaking of the tree of life, not simply once, but on a regular basis. Revelation²² supports this thought, where this tree is brought into play again for the healing of the nations, bearing crops every month of the year in the eternal state. Because of man's sin, he was denied access any longer to this tree and became subject to mortality. In the eternal state this access is restored. So the first death scripture speaks of is physical death and this did come upon *all* men because of Adam's choice as the federal head of the race. He was the ruler over all the earth and when he rebelled against God, he brought himself and his dominion under the curse of God so that the physical earth and all his physical descendants became subject to mortality by no choice of their own (Romans 8:20-21).

The second death scripture speaks of is spiritual death, to be dead in transgressions and sins (Ephesians²). In Romans⁷ Paul says "when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died." The world is the prisoner of sin, dead in sin according to scripture, and prior to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit men are dead to righteousness, dead in sin. Such a death is a death of choice. It is the committal of the will to self-gratification which choice is sin. All sins flow from this fundamental ruling preference of the will. To choose to serve self is to become dead to righteousness. Until one repents of this voluntary rebellion, one is dead in sin.

The third death scripture speaks of is the second death, eternal death, death in hell. If a person die *in* his sins, not having repented and by faith appropriated the atonement of Jesus Christ for forgiveness, he will go into this eternal place of destruction, the second death.

So these are the three deaths scripture speaks of. And we should also note that they are not always perfectly separated. Often their meanings are overlapped. Sometimes physical death is spoken of as referring to dying *in* sin, and in such a case it also would imply the second death since to die *in* sin is to go to eternal destruction. A few passages should make this combined view clear and reveal its bearing on what Romans⁵ may be referring to.

Physical Death And Eternal Death

I Corinthians¹⁵ speaks of the *physical* resurrection. Paul says as *in* Adam all die (physically) so *in* Christ all will be made alive. At first glance it seems Paul is *only* speaking of physical death and resurrection. But further study reveals he is speaking more specifically of the physical as it refers to the eternal. In verses⁵⁶ and⁵⁷ he says the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law, but God gives us the victory through Jesus Christ. So what Paul is saying is that the Christian, though he dies physically yes, *in* Adam, will be raised to eternal life because sin has been taken care of. What is in view is a *physical* resurrection to eternal life because the sting of death was removed through Christ. It cannot refer simply to physical resurrection because *all* men will be raised

physically. But for the Christian he is *truly* raised for he is raised not to go to the second death but to eternal life, whereas the non-Christian who is also raised goes to destruction.

Hebrews 2:14-15 also describes this connection between physical and eternal death. It says Jesus destroyed the one who held the power of death and set free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. Again in view is the idea that death is only an enemy because of what it means to die *in sin*. But this fear removed, death is of no consequence.

Physical death is seen to be a judgement for sin only insofar as it means the end of opportunity to lay hold of salvation. For the non-Christian physical death is loaded with judgement for sin because the law still condemns the unbeliever. Outside of its implications for eternity physical death itself is *not* the death that comes upon men for their sin. It is the second death that truly comes upon them but physical death is that through which it comes if they haven't made their peace with God.

Physical death was introduced because of Adam's sin and he brought it upon all his posterity. But it only came upon all men as condemnation because of their own sin, which immediately loaded physical death with eternal implications. Physical death came upon all men before they sinned. But the second death, and physical death as it relates to this eternal consideration, came upon *all* men because *all* sinned. And Adam's choice, which brought about the circumstances that have become the occasion of temptation to which all men have *freely* chosen to submit, has resulted in death (eternal) coming upon all men, because *all* sinned.

Thus we would see Romans 5 to read as follows: Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin. Physical death, yes, but also physical death as it relates to the eternal death. In this way physical death as it relates to eternal death came upon all men, because these circumstances have resulted in all men following Adam's example and sinning as well, bringing upon themselves the spiritual implications of the physical death they inherited from Adam.

This explanation is an honest treatment of this passage in light of the scriptural idea of death with its layers of meaning. It also seems to coincide with what Jesus said: "If a man believes in me he will *never* die. And though he were dead, yet shall he live." Jesus makes two apparently contradictory statements. He says we will *never* die, then that if we die, we will live. This can only be harmonised by seeing death as physical and then physical as it relates to the eternal. If a man believes in Christ he will *never* die physically as it relates to eternal death, for the sting of death is removed. Though he does die physically, yet he will live eternally by physical resurrection to eternal life.

In this way the contradictions are taken away concerning the justice of God. A man dies for his own sins. If he never grew to the age of accountability, his physical death does not

indicate he is a sinner by birth and dying because he sinned *in* Adam. He is *not* dying, though he dies. To the same extent a Christian is not dying because he is a sinner; the sting of death is removed. He still physically dies because this condition came upon all the race through Adam, and had come upon the Christian with its eternal implications because of his *own* sins. Through Christ these are forgiven. To suggest his physical death is still punitive is to deny the efficacy of Christ's atonement. Physical death relates to punitive measures only as the spiritual issue is not settled.

Spiritual Death

This all of course is assuming that Romans 5 is referring to physical death. It may in fact only refer to spiritual death. It may be saying simply that Adam died *spiritually* when he sinned and that spiritual death came into the world through his act, but that because of the circumstances Adam's sin brought upon his posterity such spiritual death came upon all men because they also sinned and *became* spiritually dead. In this case Paul is merely showing that Adam's choice brought about the circumstances where all have chosen like Adam and become dead in sin, as he had. This interpretation is probably the better way to read this passage in view of its context. Romans 6:8, which immediately follows this discussion, deals exclusively with being dead *in* sin, or being dead *to* sin by faith in God through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no reason we should even see Paul to be referring to physical or eternal death at all, since this would be an unnecessary diversion from the thrust of Romans 5:8.

Whichever way we choose to look at it, the spiritual issue *is* the central. Whether it is physical death or spiritual death referred to, it has only come upon all men in reference to their sin because of the *spiritual* implications. In no way do we see men guilty for a sin they did not personally, consciously commit, or under any inevitable necessity of sinning. They are justly condemned for their own actions. Adam's sin does have a connection but it is one of being the occasion rather than the cause of men's sin and their consequential experience of death with its spiritual and eternal implications.

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