

#### 4. *You Shall Surely Die*

## You Shall Surely Die

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In his letters Paul uses various types of argument; his most typical form of argument is called *midrash*, which is commonly found in rabbinic literature. *Midrash* is biblical interpretation and the collection of this literature is called *Midrashim*. The arguments found in rabbinic *midrash* take a very loose form of what modern logicians would call a hypothetical syllogism, or an "if/then" argument. "If A is true, then B is true / A is true / then B is true." It must be remembered that a presupposition is always present (whether A or B) underlying the reasoning process, which often paints the conclusion a certain color, other than it's true color.

This rabbinic style of reasoning is present in Paul's argument of Romans 5:12-18, where we see the full affect of his rabbinic thinking. His argument here is rooted in Genesis 2:17, and the presupposition of Paul's argument is the "blessing and curse" motif of the covenant tradition. His argument is as follows: (A) **If** it is the case that God decreed that in the day that Adam sinned he would surely die, (Gen 2:17), (B) **then** the curse of death came into the world by the sin of Adam; the rabbinic presupposition is, "A is true," which means "B is true." The conclusion is, "the curse of death came into the world by the sin of Adam," (the argument Paul is making). This may seem a bit complex but this is the nature of formal argument, whether Greek or rabbinic.

But here someone might say, in diatribe format (i.e. a rejoinder - response following a statement), "Adam did not die the very moment he sinned; in fact, Adam lived to be 930 years old (Gen 5:5), so, is it the case that the curse, 'in the day you eat thereof you shall surely die' was not enforced by God?"

The problem here is that of assuming that a promised curse placed upon someone on “a contingency basis (if/then),” must be enforced immediately in the case of violation; but this is not the case.

Nothing requires the immediate enforcement of the curse of a vow in the Middle Eastern covenant tradition; the curse may be enforced at the will of the violated party, or it may not be enforced at all. There is always the hope of mercy in such a circumstance. If the consequences of the violation are enforced, the one enforcing the punishment is within his rights to do so; if he wishes to show mercy, he is also within his rights to do so; and he is not in default if he does not impose the final effects of the curse immediately.

Harvard law professor, Alan Dershowitz, in his book, *The Genesis of Justice*, argues that Genesis 2-3 is a clear instance of God threatening man with punishment for violation of his will, then failing to keep his word. He titles the first chapter of his book, “God Threatens - and Backs Down,” in which he goes to great lengths to depict God as unfaithful to his words of Gen 2:17. He says,

It is quite remarkable that a holy book, which purports to be a guide to conduct, begins with a clear rule that is immediately disobeyed by Adam, “From the Tree of the Knowing of Good and Evil, you are not to eat from it; for on that day that you eat from it, you must die, yes, die.” [Dershowitz’s translation-mwl].

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Yet when Eve and Adam disobey God’s first prohibition, God does not carry out his explicitly threatened punishment. Indeed, the Bible says that Adam lived 930 years. The disobedient couple and their progeny were punished, but in a way very different from what God had threatened (Dershowitz, *The Genesis of Justice*, pp 30-31).

Professor Dershowitz is working out of the assumption that if God did not impose immediate death on Adam, he was not faithful to his word. He insists that God’s word must be followed in

accordance with the definition of enforcement as interpreted by the legal system of the modern day practice of law as in Dershowitz's cultural setting. Our author appears to feel that it is legitimate to impose the standards of his own culture on a distant culture of another time.

Genesis 2:17 is not under the dictates of a Harvard law professor's requirements for fulfillment; and, no doubt, God would very likely fail Dershowitz's classes at Harvard. In spite of this author's interpretations of God's behavior, God always has, he is now, and he will in the future be faithful to his word; but in his own good time and in his own way. This professor fails to remember that God's longsuffering allowed him to withhold Israel's punishment for centuries before administering it.

God has affirmed this again and again throughout the biblical record. It is the height of faulty reasoning to assume that God would fail in faithfulness to his word at the very beginning of the recorded text of his word, then assert his faithfulness to his word again and again throughout the history of the written tradition of his word. God says in Isaiah 55:11, "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it." So also in Isaiah 40:8, "Surely, the people are grass; the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." In Lamentations 2:17, Jeremiah reminds Israel of God's fulfillment of his word, "*Yahweh* has done what he purposed; he has fulfilled his word which he commanded in days of old. He has thrown down and has not pitied, and he has caused an enemy to rejoice over you; he has exalted the horn of your adversaries." Isaiah warns Israel against assuming that they know what God will do,

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," says Yahweh. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. 10 for as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my*

*word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it (Isa 55:8-11).*

## Ancient Covenants

The nature of "blessings and curses," in ancient Semitic cultures must be interpreted by the traditions of that culture, not a culture centuries removed into the future from the time the ancient words were written down. All the contingencies of the covenant (contract) are to be fulfilled at the discretion of the one who administers the "blessings and curses" vows. In the case of Gen 1-3, this would be God.

This is the nature of the blessings and curses pronounced by God in the giving of the *Torah* of the Mosaic Covenant: Deut 11:26-32; 28:15-19, 45-46; 29:18-28; 30:15-20. All blessings and curses were fulfilled by God at his determination and the fact that he often did not bring swift destruction on those who violated the covenant led many to believe that there would be no consequences resulting from their disobedience. Anyone with an elementary knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures knows that this did not prove to be true.

## The Garden Covenant

Although there is no formal covenant legislation concerning the blessing and curse of the prohibition given to Adam and Eve, in order to understand how the events of Gen 1-3 applied to the sons of Adam, it is necessary to structure it as what we may call, "the Garden Covenant." Ancient covenants, as the Israelites would have understood them, had a very strong oral tradition associated with them; especially, in the Middle East. All five books of Moses; especially, Exodus and Deuteronomy, have the characteristics of this covenant tradition. Essentially, we see contingency contracts or "if/then" statements, as exemplified in Deuteronomy in the blessings and curses vows.

In the Garden Covenant we see blessings: "I will give you possession of the Garden of Eden to keep and care for. You may have access to the fruit of all the trees of the garden with exception of the two trees in the center of the garden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," (Gen 2:15-17). The curse is: "you may not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; if you do eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will surely die."

Covenants are made up of words consisting of vows or promises. If the parties keep the vows the blessings of the covenant will result. If one of the parties does not keep the vows, the consequences of violation result in fulfillment of the curse. In the case of Adam and Eve, they violated the prohibition of God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; thus, they lost the blessing of the possession of the garden and received the curse or vow of death which resulted in expulsion from the garden into the world beyond, with the loss of all the blessings they have been promised in the garden.

What happened to Adam and Eve after they were expelled from the garden? The words of the curse, "you shall surely die" were fulfilled. As may be determined from the history of Adam, the curse was not immediate death but a curse of mortality. Whether Adam and Eve had the hope of immortality is not told us, but God's words of Gen 3:22-24, concerning the possibility of their access to the tree of life leaves one to wonder what would have happened if Adam and Eve had not violated the will of God. Was there a possibility of access to the tree of life? This is one of the major beliefs of Kabbalistic Judaism.

To appreciate the events of the third chapter of Genesis, one must keep in mind the nature of the covenant tradition among the Israelites at the time Moses wrote the Genesis account. The importance of this lies in the fact that the consequence of the sin of Adam became significant to the offspring of Adam in terms of their own responsibility to the covenants made between them and the God who created them and the whole of mankind.

The Sinai Covenant consisted of the same essentials, as did the Garden Covenant. The contingent (“if/then”) nature of God’s word to Adam in Gen 2:15-17 is present in the Sinai Covenant as well (Num 30:2; Deut 28:14; 58). There are blessing and curses (Deut 11:26-32); blessing if one keeps the word of God (Exod 32:29; Deut 28:1-2, 8; 1 Kings 8:55-61); and curses if one does not keep his word (Num 15:31; Deut 27:26; Joshua 1:18; Isaiah 30:12-14; Jer 6:19; 11:1-10; 34:17-20; 44:29). God has always been faithful to his covenant promises (Josh 23:14; Psalms 119:160; Isaiah 40:8; 45:23; 55:11; Lam 2:17; Ezek 12:25), this has not been the case with man.

### The Curse of Death

The assumption that the curse of Adam and Eve was undeservedly passed upon their offspring is a very popular error of interpretation. What happened to Adam and Eve did have consequences for their offspring, but this was because they became mortal and that mortality was passed on to their offspring. It may seem to be that this distinction is only a matter of semantics; but the mortality passed on to the offspring of Adam was not a punishment for a sin they did not commit. Death for the human race is the consequence of the mortality of Adam and Eve, a consequence that would of necessity be passed on to the offspring of mortal parents.

Paul says in Romans 5:12, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned?” But it is mortality of the body of Adamic man that Paul has in his mind. As is the case in 1 Cor 15:42-44, 53-57, Paul speaks of that which is perishable, that which is sown in dishonor and weakness, that which is sown a natural body (*soma psuchikon*), is the human body. It is the death of the body, mortality, that Paul has in mind in Romans 5:12. Death, did come into the world through Adam’s sin; and death as a reality for all men is not due only to the sin of Adam; the sin of Adam was its origin, its continuation for the rest of mankind is the result of their own sin; as Paul says clearly in Rom 5:12, “because all sinned.” This

is a point Paul makes in several places; as he says in Rom 3:9, "For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin," and in verse 23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That sin has enslaved man is affirmed by Paul in Rom 5:21, sin reigns in death, and in 6:1, Paul admonishes the saints not to let sin reign in their bodies. The key to understanding this is found in 2 Peter 2:19, where Peter says, "a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him."

What happens to one's life at death is fairly well clear as concerns the body; it returns to the dust from whence it came, and the spirit returns to God who gave it, as Solomon stated in Eccl 12:7. But what is actually being said here? From our own experiences with death we know the mortal body becomes lifeless at death and eventually experiences corruption, but what happens to the spirit? Beyond these few words from Solomon we are not told what takes place; which is without question, one of the greatest mysteries of life and death. Paul does not address this issue; rather, he takes up what God has done through the redemption that has occurred through the coming of Christ, his own death, and his resurrection from death into new existence. Paul associates man's mortal or adamic existence with the human body; the spirit, however, is capable of experiencing regeneration and freedom from the curse of mortality because of the destruction of mortality (death) in Christ's resurrection from death.

## Human Mortality and Spiritual Death

In all of this we are working from the assumption that the word "death," as used here in Gen 2, is physical death or mortality. There are, however, other views as to how death should be understood in this text. There is the view that the death of Genesis 2:7 is to be understood as "spiritual death," meaning "separation from God?" We may ask whether "spiritual death" is a biblical expression or even a biblical concept? If so, where is it found? In a spiritual death what dies or ceases to be alive? Is it the spirit that dies, which would be the sense of the expression if used as the statement "bodily death" is used in James 2:26, "the body without the spirit is dead." If the body

is dead when separated from the spirit and that is called “bodily death,” then does “spiritual death” imply that the spirit is dead.

There is an interesting concept of the death of man found in C. S. Lewis in his books, *The Divorce of Man*, *The Abolition of Man*, and *The Problem of Pain*. The development of his thoughts on this matter are found throughout his books, but are not presented in one place. A summary of his view is as follows.

Lewis presents the death of the human body as something all human beings experience; however, the death of man as a spiritual being created in the image of God is what Lewis calls the second death, taken from the term found in Rev 20:6, 14; and 21:8. Lewis speaks of the death of the image of God in man, which was given man through the breath of life breathed into man by God making him a living soul (Gen 2:7). Man’s existence on earth is a period during which he develops his humanity to its fullest or he loses his humanity all together. The key to the development of man’s humanity is his ability to stand outside of himself and become a person for others, imitating God in his will for the well-being of that which he created. At death, the person who has lived unto him or herself goes to a sphere of existence where they either glow as luminous beings reflecting the godliness they have developed in their lifetime on earth, or they appear as shadowy beings who have emptied themselves of their humanity through their selfish lives and there is no trace of the image of God left in them. They have become as dead as ashes without the hope of being rekindled; this, according to Lewis, is spiritual death, which is death in the fullest sense of the world. Not only is the outline of the person gone, the shadowy substance within it is gone as well. Truly, the human spirit has died and there is nothing left of him.

It seems that Paul's discussion of death in Romans 5 makes much better sense if understood as human mortality rather than spiritual alienation from God or the death of the spirit. In fact, Paul argues that the justification for the mortality of all of Adam's descendents is found in the fact that all who participate in the choice of Adam (i.e. disbelief of God's word and consequent disobedience) are equally

subject to the curse of death (e. g. Ezekiel 18:4, 20, "the soul that sins, it shall die"). The context of Paul's statement here in no way warrants the conclusion that he is speaking of death as separation from God rather than human mortality.

That man's mortality is the result of Adam's choice is the presupposition underlying Paul's whole line of reasoning in Romans, chapters 3-6. In Romans 5:17-18, he reasons:

*If, because of one man's trespass, **death reigned through that one man**, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness **reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ**. 18: **Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men**. 19: **For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous**. 20: **Law came in to increase the trespass** [to define sin as transgression of the Law]; **but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more**, 21: **so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord**.*

What Paul argues here is that: (1) because of one man's trespass, death (human mortality) has become a reigning power over mankind, (2) one man's trespass led to the mortality of all men, (3) because of one man's sin, many men in a similar manner have become sinners, and (4) sin reigns through death; thus, all men who have sinned are subject to the curse of death. This is Paul's main line of argumentation in Romans 5.

### Those Who Have Not Sinned?

Another question of significance here is that of the cause underlying death for those who have not sinned (e.g. infants, little children, etc). This is a very complex issue, but the answer lies in the fact that all offspring of Adam are born into mortality; i.e., they are amenable to physical death.

The question of cause in the death of the innocent is what led to the doctrine of original sin and imputed guilt, developed by Origen, the late second-century church father from Alexandria, Egypt. In his mind children die because the sin of Adam is imputed or transferred to his offspring. Augustine, a fourth century church father from North Africa added to Origen's doctrine of original sin the idea that all children are conceived in sin through the sexual union of their parents and are consequently born in sin. Neither of these views can be attributed to the NT; they are supposedly the alternative to the view that the innocent die because of their own sins? Infants and children who have not reached the age of accountability cannot be held accountable for what they may have done during the age of innocence. But, is the doctrine of "original sin" the only possibility as to why the innocent die? An obvious answer is that death is the experience of everyman because of their mortality. The body of every man, woman, and child will return to dust at death; but the spirit of man, which bears the image of God, does not experience death; according the words of Eccl 12:7, it returns to God who gave it. We have little insight by means of revelation as to what happens to the spirit of man once it returns to God. Even during the ministry of Jesus only esoteric glimpses are given to this mystery (e.g., Matt 17:3; 22:29-32; Luke 23:42-43, 46; John 20:17).

Physical death results for every member of the human race as a result of the inability of the human body to sustain the life force that makes it a living entity. It is not the case that all persons die because they are sinners; rather, all persons die because they are mortal. It is not sin that was imputed to the offspring of Adam (original sin), but mortality (the consequence of Adam's sin). In the language and imagery of the Hebrew Scriptures death is to be understood as the cessation of life resulting from the separation of the breath or life force (*nephesh/psuche*), from the body. If the term "death" is to be understood differently, it must be redefined for a special purpose or considered understood as a metaphorical usage, which may be determined by the context in which it is used (e.g. we "die" to sin). It is clear that Adam did not actually die on the day he sinned; rather, he became subject to mortality or the demise of his body, which occurred 920 years later. The curse that was set in motion on the day

of his transgression was the curse of mortality; i.e., man became subject to death.

## Conclusion

Paul says in 1 Cor 15:21-22, " For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Death is not the end of the story for those in Christ.

In 1 Cor 15:53-57, Paul continues this thought,

*For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable and this mortal nature must put on immortality. 54: When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55: "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" 56: The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57: But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

We may sum up this discussion with the following: Paul thinks that all this is a part of God's doing in his desire to save the human race, but it must also be remembered that it was all possible because of who Jesus was. He was not just a man who was sinless; he was the very Son of God, who was God in the flesh. What happened in this redemptive drama was not permissible with any other man of God, whether a prophet, king, or priest. God would not subject anyone to this but himself, and in the fullness of time he sent forth his son, who was the very image of God, a very personification of himself in human flesh.

The incarnation of God in the person Jesus of Nazareth is something beyond our ability to grasp, let alone fully appreciate. The **first Adam** was a human being who was made in the image of God (Gen 1:27; 2:7); the **second Adam** was a human being who was the one in whose image man was made (2 Cor 4:4 Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). God had become one of us in order to create us anew; again, in his image,

as revealed in the second Adam, Jesus of Nazareth.

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