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The Problem of Sin and Death

The apostle now emphasises the points he has been making for his readers. He has already said that mankind is going its own godless way and has warned that the result will be destruction unless people choose to follow God's way. He has spelled out why God is angry about the godless and sinful way that people are now living. He has warned both Jews and Gentiles that they must change their ways if they want to escape God's judgements. Now he takes his readers through the Old Testament Scriptures to show that everybody, without exception, has lived in a way which is wrong in the sight of God.¹ This includes every one of us as well.

The apostle strings together a lot of verses to prove a very important point:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one ... Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:10-20).

In this passage (of which only the beginning and the end are shown above) there are many quotations from the Old Testament, mainly from the Psalms, which demonstrate Paul's key teaching.² All through Bible history the inspired writers have declared men and women to be wrong in the

¹ Notice how important the Old Testament is for the apostle as a source of information about the will and purpose of God. It needs to be read and understood just as much as the New Testament.

² This is, in fact, the longest single string of quotations in the whole of the New Testament, which again demonstrates Paul's appreciation of the value of the Old Testament.

sight of God. Everyone has turned aside to do evil. No one does what is good. People speak and say wrong things, so their lives are ruined and miserable because they have disobeyed God's commandments. In the law court of God, if God was to sit as Judge, every one of us would be found "Guilty!"

Don't be too depressed about this. The apostle needs to show that we have a huge problem to face up to before he can be sure that we will take our condition seriously. Remember, it's a bit like going to the doctor – you only go when you know you've got problems. The key problem Paul has identified is not a popular one today. It is the problem of "sin" which will lead inevitably to "death", unless we take immediate avoiding action, with God's help. To demonstrate further Paul's concern about these two problems, look how often he talks about sin and death in this letter:

❖ Sin and Death

*"Therefore, just as **sin** came into the world through one man, and **death** through sin, and so death spread to all men because all **sinned**" (5:12);*

*"Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where **sin** increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:21);*

*"Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of **sin, which leads to death**, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (6:16);*

*"For **the wages of sin is death**, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (6:23);*

*"Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was **sin, producing death in me** through what is good, in order that **sin** might be shown to be **sin**, and through the commandment might become **sinful** beyond measure" (7:13);*

*"For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from **the law of sin and death**" (8:2).*

For the moment, don't worry about what all of these verses mean, we shall come to them in due course. But just notice how important the connection is between "sin" and its partner "death". We *sin* and therefore we *die* – they are *cause* and *effect*. Sin is like an employer who pays us the wages we deserve – death; like a slave master who does with us whatever he chooses; or like a king who reigns over us and then gives us death as an inheritance. It's a pretty grim picture, and that is exactly what the inspired apostle wants us to understand.³

❖ Sin

*"**Sin** came into the world through one man, and **death** through sin" (Romans 5:12).*

That's the way Paul describes what we have already been considering. The first act of wilful disobedience was committed by Adam when Eve suggested to him that he should eat the fruit she had already eaten. We are told that Eve was deceived by the serpent – that she did not know what she was doing when she agreed with his suggestion (see 1 Timothy 2:14). This is why Adam is held responsible for the first act of deliberate disobedience. He was not deceived – he knew what he was doing: breaking God's law and accepting the consequences, whatever they were. God had said that in the day he ate of that fruit he would die, so it was his sin that brought death to the human race.

Sin is an act of rebellion against God: a deliberate refusal to do what God says. This is how the Bible defines it:

"Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (James 4:17).

"Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practises lawlessness; sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4).

"All wrongdoing is sin" (1 John 5:17).

So acts of deliberate disobedience, or the failure to do what God wants, are equally wrong and the Bible uses sev-

³ Notice that this is picture language to help us visualise both Sin and Death, which otherwise are quite difficult things to think about. See Romans 5:14-17 (where death is pictured as a king) and 6:16-17 (where sin is pictured as a slave-master).

eral different words to spell this out. The Bible calls people who disobey God – *sinner*s, *transgressors*, *rebels* or *children of disobedience*. But why is it that all of us slip so easily into sinning? Why do we find it easier to disobey God than to obey Him?

❖ Sinful Nature

When Adam sinned everything changed. Sin is one of the most addictive things in the world and once Adam had sinned it was something he wanted to go on doing.

He was part of a created order that was made “very good”, as we have seen,⁴ but his act of rebellion against God changed things. He could have accepted the law of God and have lived happily under its direction. But instead he chose to disobey and became subject to another ruling principle of life. He accepted the mastery of sin – as though sin was to be the king of his life – and became subject to what Paul calls “*the law of sin and death*” (Romans 5:21; 6:16; 8:2).

In some way his nature was changed by that first wrong act, and that change of nature was passed down to his descendants. This is why Seth was born in Adam’s own likeness, “*after his image*” (Genesis 5:3). This is why the world became so wicked so quickly, before the time of the flood. And this is why our world is in such a godless and heedless state today. We are all born with that condition in which Adam found himself after he had become a sinner. From this it follows that sin is more than just an act, or acts, of disobedience against God. Sin is also a state of being – a condition of mind and heart into which we are born; a state that we now consider perfectly natural.

Everybody since Adam has been born with the feelings and tendencies that we consider natural – that’s what human nature is all about. Everybody is born with a nature which is self-centred and self-serving. Even the best people who ever lived had those tendencies from birth. The challenge for them was to overcome those natural feelings and redirect their lives towards God, and it’s exactly the same challenge that we too face. In a Psalm that revealed his innermost thoughts, King David once said this:

“*I know my transgressions, and **my sin is ever before me**. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what*

⁴ Genesis 1:31.

*is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgement. Behold, **I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me**” (Psalm 51:3-5).*

He meant that from the time of his birth he had possessed a tendency to do wrong actions – to sin. That tendency was an inherent part of his nature. Both Old and New Testaments agree about this. Here are some other statements about the human condition, from other books of the Bible:

“**The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds**” (Jeremiah 17:9,10).

“*Whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled. But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For **out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person***” (Matthew 15:17-20).

“*We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the **desires of the body and the mind**, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind*” (Ephesians 2:3).

“*You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the **futility of their minds**. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their **hardness of heart**. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practise every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ! – assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*” (Ephesians 4:17-24).

This is the sort of exercise you can do for yourself when you become familiar with the Bible. By regular reading, and then noting down verses about a particular topic that you are thinking about, you can soon build up a collection. It's then a matter of stopping and asking what the verses mean. And there is nothing more important to any of us than finding out about our natural condition.

These verses tell us that by nature we are in great difficulty. If sin gets the upper hand and controls our life, we are dead! But if we can find some other way of living and behaving, which makes us right with God, there is hope of something better. In that way we will be able to escape from sin and its deadly effect. It's as critical and as important as that.

❖ “All have Sinned”

We are not to blame in God's sight because we are born with human nature – that's not our fault, it's our misfortune. This is a very important distinction, and one we could easily overlook. By nature we all have thoughts and desires which are the product of what goes on inside our minds or hearts.⁵ Those thoughts tempt us to do wrong, but they are not sinful until we accept them and decide that they are things we want to do. This is how the apostle James describes the way in which sin comes about:

*“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is **lured and enticed by his own desire**. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and **sin when it is fully grown brings forth death**” (James 1:13-15).*

Notice the process that James describes. We are tempted when our natural desires seek to lure and entice us to do or accept something that we know is wrong. At that stage we can choose to resist and kill off the thought – which is how we overcome sin. But if we let the thought grow (and here James uses a word which could equally refer to a child growing inside his or her mother), then the thought becomes a real idea – something we really want to do. This then causes us to carry out the act – and we sin.

⁵ The Bible uses both terms – “mind” and “heart” – to describe our innermost feelings.

But there is another point to consider, the Bible also tells us that the desire to do something bad can be as bad as the bad deed itself. Jesus once said that it is just as bad to decide that you would like to do something wrong as it is to actually do it (Matthew 5:27,28). Both sinful ideas and deeds are fatal – James says that the end-product is death.

Every one of us, in lots of different ways and at many different times in our lives, has done wrong things: things that are against the law of God. Paul was writing about people in the First Century when he said that: “*all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin*” (Romans 3:9), and that “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (3:22). Sadly, this is true of all following centuries too. For in all that time human nature has not changed; we too are made in Adam's image, after his likeness (1Corinthians 15:49). The desire to sin is like a disease which has been passed on from generation to generation, and without a cure we will all die, because of sin. That's why Paul could talk about “*sin*” and “*death*” in the same breath. The one always leads to the other, unless something is done to break the connection.

❖ Is Death the End?

None of this really matters, of course, if death is not such a serious condition. If it is the gateway to another life, if we have an immortal soul, then we can always make up for lost time later on, and try to put our lives right with God when we get there. But what if death really is the end of conscious existence and there is no second chance? What if it's only in this life that we have an opportunity to get everlasting life and, if we neglect this opportunity, we lose out on an eternity of joy in the age to come which God has promised? Again we need to collect a few Bible passages that will help us work out which of these two alternatives is the right one, or if there's something in-between.

We have to start in Eden because that's where the original death sentence was passed on Adam. He was told that his act of rebellion had triggered the sentence that God had warned him about. If he ate, he died; and now he had eaten, so God said:

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in

*pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. **By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return***” (Genesis 3:17-19).

It was a three-fold sentence. From now on:

- 1 *the ground would be cursed;*
- 2 *life would be hard; and*
- 3 *it would end in death – Adam had come from dust and to dust he would return.*

❖ **Made of Dust and Breath**

Adam was a creature made from dust.

“The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7).

Now, when he breathed his last, his body would decompose and all that would be left would be a pile of dust. It’s true that today we aren’t specially created as Adam was. But when we die our bodies will decompose in just the same way. We too, like our ancestors, are destined to become dust when we die. But what about our life, our spirit, our conscious existence, our soul, or whatever we might choose to call it? Is there something else that will survive?

Some Bible versions translate Genesis 2:7 rather differently, suggesting that man became *“a living soul”*. This has led many people to believe that God created man and woman with something special inside them, something that was destined to survive after their death. This line of thought led to the belief that the soul was immortal, and that as everybody had one, nobody could ever really die. Good people would live forever in Heaven after death; bad people would suffer forever in Hell. As this seemed a bit tough on those who were not all that bad, there developed an idea that there could be in-between states as well – called “purgatory” and “limbo”.

If you read all through the Bible, notebook in hand, this is what you will find. There is no mention of an “immortal soul” anywhere in the Bible: it is a man-made idea. The

nearest you can get to that idea is what the serpent said to Eve, when he deceived her with the words: *“You will not surely die”* (Genesis 3:4). Sadly, she was deceived by that lie, and many of her descendants have followed the same line of thinking in later generations.

Adam was made a *“living creature”* (Genesis 2:7), and the very same phrase is used many times about the animals God made. *“Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name”* (2:19). Man’s existence was essentially the same as the animals that God made. What set man and woman apart was that God had made them with a capacity to become spiritual. They could develop characters and personalities that were modelled upon divine beings. So God gave them the companionship of angels, instructed them in heavenly things and encouraged them to take control of themselves and their environment.

They were challenged to choose the things that were best and noblest in life; but when they made their own wrong choices, they lost all that. Banished from the garden, they had to make their own way in life, and it was a much harder way than God would have arranged for them. They had to find a way back into God’s favour and, graciously, God gave them several hundreds of years more in which to live – for Adam was *“930 years, and he died”* (Genesis 5:5), as did all his descendants after him.

❖ **Spirit**

If *“soul”* means “creature”, or sometimes just “life”, what about the idea that we have a *“spirit”* inside us, a spark of the divine, something that will survive us? What was it, for example, that God breathed into Adam that energised and empowered him – the force the Bible calls *“the breath of life”* (Genesis 2:7)?

It’s certainly the case that we can’t exist without the breath of life; if we lose that energising force, we cease to exist. But that’s equally so with the animals. An ancient observer of the human condition once said that *“a living dog is better than a dead lion”* (Ecclesiastes 9:4). Everybody can understand what he meant for there is a huge difference between something which is alive and something which is dead. That life force makes all the difference. It

enables a body to function and when it is gone the body is lifeless.

Life is a gift from God and that means that all living creatures – animal and human alike – are energized by God’s power in some way. The apostle Paul once said that God “gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25), and if God chooses to take that breath away we would die. What if He did that on a wide scale?

*“If he should set his heart to it and gather to himself his spirit and his breath, **all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust**” (Job 34:14,15).*

What would then happen to the spirit – the life force that God had supplied? Scripture gives us that answer as well:

*“... the dust returns to the earth as it was, and **the spirit returns to God who gave it**” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).*

And what of the person who has lost that spirit, that breath of life from God?

*“When his breath departs he returns to the earth; **on that very day his plans perish**” (Psalm 146:4).*

❖ Unconsciousness

The *breath or spirit of life* is not something which is independent of man’s body. It is the Bible’s way of describing the vital force which keeps us alive and which leaves us when we die. This life-force that empowers us while we are alive returns to God at death. We are left lifeless. Every part of us, including our brains, will then be buried in the ground and will begin to decompose; or we will be burned and destroyed at once.

There is no conscious existence left. Our thought processes, our memories and our feelings all end then, as the Bible explains many times. Death is like a dreamless sleep; the end of our consciousness:

*“Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love. For **in death there is no remembrance of you**; in Sheol (in the grave) who will give you praise?” (Psalm 6:5);*

*“Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon (the place of destruction)? Are your wonders known **in the darkness**, or your right-*

*eousness **in the land of forgetfulness?**” (Psalm 88:11,12);*

*“Sheol (the grave) does not thank you; **death does not praise you**; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day” (Isaiah 38:18).*

All this would be fairly grim news if there was no alternative available. It does mean, however, that there is no need to create an elaborate scheme of reward in heaven and punishment in hell, with purgatory in-between. Those are pagan and not Bible ideas anyway. They were added to the original gospel because people were mistaken about the true condition of our existence. When the Bible uses the term “hell” it just means a place of destruction, usually the grave,⁶ and you will never find any promise in the Bible about going to heaven after death. But you will find the Scripture saying of King David, who is described as being really close to God, that:

*“David **slept with his fathers**, and was buried in the city of David” (1 Kings 2:10);*

*“David is **not ascended into the heavens**” (Acts 2:34);*

*“For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, **fell on sleep, and was laid unto his fathers, and saw corruption**” (Acts 13:36).*

❖ Waking Up from Sleep!

However this does not mean that David missed out on a future reward, as we shall see when we think about the things God promised David. The very language used is encouraging, for both Testaments use the term “sleep”, and those who are asleep can be awakened. This is the real promise of God to all His people in every age – that there will come such a time of awakening; the Bible calls it resurrection. There will come a time when God will bring back to consciousness those that He decides to awaken. Not everybody will be restored to consciousness; some people are

⁶ “Hell” is an old English word which simply means ‘a covered place’. Hence it is used in the Bible to describe the grave – the covered place in which people are buried.

dead and gone forever (Jeremiah 51:39,57). But many people will be called back to life:

“Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2).

We will explore more about this promise of resurrection from the dead later, but first there is one more question we need to look at.

❖ Why do we die?

You may feel that you can answer this question already from what we have considered. Sin and Death are closely connected, as we saw; we sin and so we die. But it's not quite as easy as that when you start thinking about it. Lots of people have never even heard about the law of God; they live and die without even knowing there is a Bible, the Word of God. If they don't know God's law, they cannot be formally classed as “sinners”. So why do they die?

They die because they are mortal: we all are. Unless we do something to escape the effects of our natural condition we shall all die, and will cease to exist forever. But Paul says something else as well.

He explains that God has a way of calling everyone to account, whether they have known His law or not. In the second part of Romans chapter 2, he explains that God has given men and women an inbuilt mechanism called “the conscience” which introduces a measure of right and wrong into everybody's life. People have long argued that a bad deed is recognised as such the world over – that there are some universal standards that determine what constitutes good and bad behaviour. Paul calls that the law within them, “written on their hearts”, and says that everybody should respond to these inner feelings and live properly and decently in this life, whether they know the written law of God or not. But, unless they find the gospel of salvation, even people who have lived decently will die because they are mortal, not immortal:

“For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law” (Romans 2:12).

Notice here that the root problem is a lack of knowledge about God and His gracious purpose. Those who “perish” are those who know nothing about “the law” of God. Long

before, the inspired Psalmist had summed up the situation when he declared that: *“Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish” (49:20).*

We do not live forever – and we have no immortal soul that does. Instead the Bible describes us as “mortal”, which means “liable to death”. We are all born with a limited life expectancy which differs depending upon where we live in the world. After due time our body will wear out and we will die, as we say, “of natural causes”. This is something the Bible recognises and records, for it contains the death notices of lots of people. It encourages us to face up to our mortality and do something about it:

“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions” (Romans 6:12);

“For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 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’” (1 Corinthians 15:53,54);

“For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:11).

Being mortal doesn't mean that we will die and never live again. It means that because we are mortal we have to do something about it if we want to become immortal. We are not immortal already. We are dying creatures, at risk of death from the time we are born. Indeed some die at birth, or are stillborn; others die at a very early age, from illness or accident. Some die in distressing and difficult situations; and yet others die in old age, some in very old age. The time factor varies, but the event is the same – we cease to breathe; the life goes out of us; we die.

What happened to Adam is important in helping us to understand our situation. When he sinned:

- 1 He became a mortal, dying creature, so it follows that all his descendants would be mortal too; and
- 2 He had become a sinner and something in his personality changed so that from then on sin would be natural for

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him and his descendants – that’s why we still talk about “human nature”.

- 3 Because sin is so natural for us, we have all copied Adam’s bad example and have become sinners.

*“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man (Adam), and death through sin, and so **death spread to all men because all sinned**” (Romans 5:12).*

Now the size of the human problem is clear – that we are all in danger of dying forever and of missing out on everything that God has in mind for His world and His people. So the apostle Paul explains just what God has done to make an escape plan for humanity. If you want to be in God’s new world, there *is* a way that will enable you to be there.

Things to Read



Isaiah 38, verses 9-19 will give you an insight into the thoughts of a faithful man of God – King Hezekiah – when he was about to die. Notice how he describes life – as something that can easily be lost – and what he says about death.



John 11:1-46 gives an account of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Notice the language that is used throughout and what everyone present believed to be the only solution to the problem of death.

Questions to Think About

- 5.1 King David is described as “asleep” and as seeing “corruption” (1 Kings 2:10; Acts 13:36). From the Psalms, can you find out what faithful men hoped would happen after death? (Psalm 16:8-11; 17:15; 49:12-15; 71:20)
- 5.2 What gives men and women a hope which animals do not have? What do we need to do to realise that hope? (Psalm 49:12,20; Hebrews 11:13,39-40)
- 5.3 What does the word “*soul*” mean when used in the Bible? (Genesis 2:7; 12:5; Exodus 1:5; Leviticus 4:2; Joshua 10:28; 1 Peter 3:20)