

Interpretive Issues in Romans 5:12

(from “A Survey of Romans,” John Hepp, Jr.)

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— (Romans 5:12, NIV)

Where is the thought of this verse completed? The word “therefore” indicates that verse 12 begins a conclusion to this whole section on justification. The conclusion itself begins with a “just as” (Greek *hōsper*) statement occupying the rest of the verse: “**just as** sin entered...and death...and...death...because...” Although this statement is complex, it gives only one side of a comparison. Normally, it would be completed by a “so also” (Greek *houtōs*) statement, as in 5:19, 21; 6:4, 19. However, the apostle does not immediately give the other side of the comparison. Instead, he pauses in verses 13–14 to prove the first statement. After that, he presents both sides of the comparison in negative terms (vv. 15–17) and finally in positive terms (vv. 18–21). In other words, he uses the whole passage to complete the comparison. It is not unusual for Paul to introduce a thought then wait to complete it. For example, he starts to mention his prayer in Ephesians 3:1 but does not give it until 3:14–19.

What kind of death “entered the world” and “came to all men”? Physical death? Spiritual death? Or both physical and spiritual? Death rules human beings in both aspects: We all die physically and, before salvation, are all “dead in...transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1–2). To determine what death is meant in Romans 5:12, we should look at the original account in Genesis to which it refers. Genesis 2–3 tells about that first sin and its result. And it is clear that the death there is physical but not clear that it is spiritual. Notice three indications.

- The first indication seems ambiguous. The LORD warned Adam before he sinned, “you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (2:17). That could either mean instant spiritual death or the beginning of a physical process.
- The next indication is not ambiguous but decisively physical. The LORD’s curse after Adam sinned definitely focused on man’s body: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground...to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:19).
- The LORD’s further action after the curse also clearly pointed to physical death. “The LORD God banished him from the Garden” because “the man...must not be allowed to...take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (Gen. 3:22–24).

Clearly, then, man was sentenced to die physically, from the time when Adam ate of the forbidden fruit. Possibly spiritual death began at the same time. Yet, the evidence in Genesis, and consequently in Romans 5:12, does not justify separating it from physical death.

Does “death came to all men” refer to extinction? Or will they all nevertheless live forever? Twice we read that “death reigned” over all in Adam (vv. 13, 17). At the least this means that we humans cannot live forever as we are; we are mortal. But will we all live in some other condition? Only if God grants it. He “alone is immortal” (1 Tim. 6:16); only He by nature will continue forever. But He will grant immortality; “our Savior, Messiah Jesus...has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). Believers in Messiah know that they will become immortal when Messiah comes to reign (1 Cor. 15:22–25).

At that time “the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52). It is then that “the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with **immortality**” (said twice in vv. 53–54). That will be the ultimate victory over death (vv. 54–57). It is then that “to those who by persistence in doing good **seek** glory, honor and **immortality**, he will give **eternal life**” (Rom. 2:7).

So God will grant immortality/eternal life to believers. But what about unbelievers, who do not seek immortality from God and will not get eternal life? Will they nevertheless live forever? Many teachers think so. Based on certain New Testament texts (especially Matt. 25:46; Luke 16:23–24; and Rev. 14:9–11), they teach that God will keep all unbelievers alive forever in hell. Obviously, this issue is too big and complicated to study here. It bears on the character of God, the constitution of men, and the meaning of punishment and salvation. It should be studied beginning in Genesis, when God made man. For example:

- “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a **living being**” (Gen. 2:7). Certainly God’s method of creating man is intended to show how special he is. But does it in some way imply that he is immortal? His becoming a “living being” does not; the same term in Hebrew is used for water creatures (1:20) and land creatures (1:24).
- According to Genesis 2–3, Adam had to eat from the tree of life to live forever. Doesn’t that imply what is often called “conditional immortality,” that he would perish if he did not eat from that tree?

Whose sin brings death to every person? “Death came to all men, **because all sinned**” (v. 12). Does this refer to each man’s personal sin? Does God wait to sentence each one to death only after he sins personally? That interpretation would invalidate the argument of the whole passage, which compares the consequences of the single acts of Adam and Messiah. In regard to Adam, the passage repeatedly says this or its equivalent: “the many died **by the trespass of the one man**” (v. 15; see vv. 16, 17, 18, 19). Therefore, it seems that “all sinned” in verse 12 must refer to what they did **in Adam** (corporate sin).

The next two verses (vv. 13–14) verify this interpretation. Beginning with the word “for,” they introduce evidence for the statement in verse 12. Notice what they say about death as a penalty in the period of time between Adam and Moses.

For before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come. (5:13–14)

Under a system of justice there is no penalty for sin unless it breaks a law. Thus, there would be no death unless sinners broke divine laws/commands. Why, then, was that penalty enforced on everybody before the law was given, since most of them had received no commands from God? Not for their personal sins but for Adam’s—who did break a divine command. God did not have

* Several times the New Testament lists personal sins, then says that “those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21; 1 Cor. 6:10; Eph. 5:5). In fact, Ephesians adds that “because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 5:6). Without denying that fact, Romans 6 traces God’s wrath further back, to its original cause.

to wait for each of them—nor for us—to sin personally. We all participated in Adam’s sin and in its penalty.* Reread the same thoughts as expressed by Stifler:

But now the fact is that death reigned, had sovereign, undisputed sway, during all the no-law period from Adam to Moses. In all this long period death came to those who had “not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression”; that is, they had not broken any formal command. Many more irresponsible babies died in the Flood than men. If, then, death is the penalty of some law broken, and these had none, it follows they broke that first law: they sinned in Adam. And the statement “for that all have sinned” means this. The unwritten law noticed in 2:14 cannot be the cause of death, for babes have not even that. All sinned when Adam violated the Word of God. (Stifler, p. 97)

If this principle seems at all unfair, just remember that it also allows us all to be saved through the sacrifice of one Man!

* This principle also explains why even infants and idiots die though they cannot be held accountable for personal sins.