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Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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The Universal Reign of Death

For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. ([Ro 5:13-14](#))

We now turn from the primary sentence of Paul's discussion of federal headship—both of Adam and of Christ—to the parenthetical explanation that Paul gives in this chapter. If we accept the essential point that Paul makes—that death is the penalty for sin—we put ourselves on a course that avoids countless theological errors when we arrive at our study of salvation, how a person is moved from the federal headship of Adam to the federal headship of Christ. However, we also raise other questions that must be addressed. Many well meaning Christians fiercely advocate and defend the idea of the "age of accountability," a point in a child's maturation at which he/she becomes responsible and accountable to God for personal sins committed. Normally advocates of this idea will set an age around twelve or thirteen as the "age of accountability." If asked to defend their view, they appeal to Jesus' appearance in the temple at the age of twelve ([Lu 2:42](#)). Such an explanation of this passage represents a rather glaring misuse of Scripture, for in no way does this passage or any adjacent verses in any way discuss anyone's moral state or accountability for sins. It rather provides us with the sole narrative of Jesus' inherent righteousness between His birth and the beginning of His public ministry. Interestingly, when God actually imposed judgment against rebellious Israel in the wilderness, His judgment was against all people age twenty or above ([Nu 14:29](#)), not thirteen or fourteen.

I do not advocate either age as presenting a Biblical basis for this well-meaning but ill-founded teaching. The fundamental principle of Biblical interpretation, the "perspicuity of Scripture," the clarity of Scripture, that asserts that God devotes both volume and clarity in Scripture to all doctrines that He views as important for our spiritual health, inherently puts the age of accountability idea under serious doubt.

Based on [Nu 14:29](#), God considers age as He pronounces punishment or judgment against people. We should acknowledge that fact without abandoning Biblical teaching that ignores—rather than teaches—a formal doctrine of the age of accountability.

What does this question have to do with our study verses? I suggest that it has everything to do with them. What is the "similitude of Adam's transgression"? Is it not the sin of an adult human being committing an informed act of sinful rebellion against God and His known moral code? So who were those from Adam to Moses who died, though they had not committed such a sin? I offer the words of Augustus Toplady in a brief treatise that he wrote, "A Short Essay on Original Sin," giving his explanation of this specific verse.

Infants are here designated by the apostle: who have not sinned actually and in their own persons as Adam did, and yet are liable to temporal death. Wherefore, then, do they die? Is not death the wages of sin? Most certainly. And seeing it is incontestibly [sic] clear that not any individual among the numberless millions who have died in infancy was capable of committing actual sin; it follows that they sinned representatively and implicitly in Adam. Else they would not be entitled to that death which is the wages of sin, and to those diseases by which their death is occasioned, and to that pain which most of them experience in dying. ...This is the doctrine of the Church of England....Original sin is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man.⁵¹

Notice that Toplady, a devoted and respected minister in the Church of England throughout his lifetime, affirms his view of our study passage, as well as affirming that his view represented the teaching and belief of the Church of England at the time of his writing. It should be further noted that in this essay Toplady repeatedly and emphatically affirmed that the responsibility for sin's entrance into humanity was attributable to Adam, not to God or to a mysterious divine decree.

Toplady's view of this passage is that those who "*had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression*" refers to infants who, though they committed not a single act of informed and conscious rebellious sin against God, nevertheless died from Adam's banishment from Eden till the Mosaic law was given. By focusing so specifically on this era and on the nature of death during this time, it is obvious that Paul had a rather specific point to make, a point that I believe Toplady correctly uncovers.

What is Paul's primary point? The disease of sin is as universal as the human family! Not even death at a tender age avoids the disease—in fact the disease explains even the question of death at a tender age, not by asserting that infants sin so as to personally bring the sentence of suffering and death upon themselves, but rather that they are conceived and born into the world with the disease of sin already in them and thus its consequences upon them. Those who advocate infant purity (that infants do not inherit Adam's fallen nature or death due to his sin through federal headship) have a far greater problem to explain than those who hold to Paul's teaching in this lesson. How do they explain death, the sentence of sin, being forced upon an "innocent" infant who has not so sinned? They must in effect explain the justice of God in passing an undeserved and unearned sentence upon a supposedly innocent being!

The question of "original sin" and its impact on infants has been debated from earliest Christian history. Most historical accounts of early efforts within the Church of Rome to defend the practice of infant baptism (infant sprinkling) assert that infants are born with some form of inherited sin that—in this aberrant view of baptism is washed away by baptism. Thus Roman attacks against those who rejected their view of infant baptism focus on the false assertion that their critics held to some form of infant damnation by their denial of the rite of baptism to infants.

Many critics of Primitive Baptists historically accused our faith-ancestors of believing in infant damnation because they denied infant purity. Our historical writings clearly document the falsity of the charge. Although not a Primitive Baptist by any stretch, Charles Spurgeon preached a whole sermon affirming his belief in divine mercy in electing and saving dying infants. Our faith-ancestors did not believe in infant damnation; rather they believed that God saves infants in the same way that He saves adults. It should be added here that the strong majority view historically among Primitive Baptists was—and I believe is—that God elects all dying infants, not just some of them, to salvation. However, the basis of their salvation, according to their teaching, is divine mercy, eternal divine election, and the blood of Christ, not infant innocence.

The question of the dying infant's eternal destiny should not be confused with the truth of Paul's teaching here. Clearly the salvation of the infant cannot stand on grounds of purity in light of Paul's teaching in this lesson. I believe that Scripture teaches that infants who die in their infancy are saved, not by personal purity but by divine mercy and divine election. Later in the Roman letter when dealing specifically with God's election (the ninth chapter) Paul will note that God endures "with much longsuffering" the "vessels of wrath" who by sin are fitted for destruction. Although not dealing specifically with the question of infant election—but with the general truth of election—in this context, Paul's careful and inspired choice of words deals with the whole doctrine of election, including the infant. Those who teach that some infants will spend eternity in hell (typically explained by advocates of this idea on the basis of Adam's sin, not the infant's personal sin) must explain how an infant who dies in infancy—especially an infant who was killed by his/her parents prior to birth—tests divine "longsuffering." *Advocates of this doctrine of infant damnation cannot claim Paul—or any other*

inspired writer for that matter—as their friend!

I find it enlightening that every instance in which Scripture assigns specific grounds on which the wicked shall be judged and sentenced to eternal separation from God, bases that sentence on personal sins committed, not on mere nature possessed. I do not question that the corruption of Adam's nature is sufficient to justify a righteous sentence of eternal separation, but I do question the point of an infant being in hell based on specific eschatological passages that deal with eternal judgment, passages that without exception base the final sentence of separation on personal sins committed that deserve the sentence. As just one example, the language of [Mt 25:31-46](#)—"I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat...I was a stranger, and ye took me not in...naked and ye clothed me not, sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not..."—is the language of personal conduct, not the language of federal headship and original sin.

I further observe that the various passages and Biblical analogies dealing with redemption and its eternal blessings affirm that God saves people in one exclusive way, not many. The idea of multiple ways of final salvation is wholly foreign to Scripture. "...so is **every one** that is born of the Spirit." ([Joh 3:8](#); emphasis added) God does not teach us in Scripture that He engaged multiple means or grounds of salvation depending on the dispensation in which the person lived, their exposure to knowledge of Him in the gospel, or on their age at the time of their death. Every one who is born of God—every one who becomes a member of Jesus' spiritual "federal headship," does so in one and the same way, by divine election, mercy, and the redemptive blood of Christ—never on any other basis. If all who die in infancy are saved, as I believe the Scriptures to teach, it is because of God's sovereign choice, based on His electing love, His inexplicable mercy, and the redemptive work of our Lord Jesus Christ, not on any other basis whatever.

Elder Joe Holder