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Romans

For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Romans 5:13

This verse is speaking about the Law of Moses. Prior to that law, there was sin in the world. This sin, as was previously noted, was introduced by Adam's rebellion. From that moment, all born into humanity inherited Adam's sin. Sin was at work and yet because there was no law given, sin wasn't imputed. Does this mean that the people were guiltless? No. The reason is that they inherited Adam's sin. Therefore, they were guilty through Adam.

In addition to this, there is the law of conscience which was explained in Romans 2. As he said there, people "show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them." We stand guilty before God when we violate the natural laws which are instilled in our hearts.

What Paul is speaking of in 5:13 is the specific revelation of the Law of Moses. Violations of this law are not imputed to people who have not been given this law. How can someone be held guilty for a law that doesn't exist? As Paul says, "For until the law, sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law."

If a policeman came up to you and said, "You are under arrest for having a black car," you might wonder what he's talking about. There is no law against having a black car. However, if the legislators at the state capital passed a law which outlawed black cars, then you could be arrested for having a black car. The Law of Moses set down particular rules for a particular set of people. When they broke those laws, they were guilty before the law. Those outside of that law cannot be held guilty for such a law though.

Later in chapter 5, we will see a reason why the law was introduced. Paul elsewhere (such as in Galatians) explains other reasons for the giving of the law. In the end, the law is an important aspect of what God is doing in the stream of human existence, but it is not an end in and of itself. It only points us to something else; something which we desperately need.

Life application: There are different programs going on in the pages of the Bible which are introduced for different reasons and they may apply at certain times, but not at others. It's important to understand when something applies and when it doesn't. If we mix these programs inappropriately, then our understanding of God's work becomes convoluted. The Law of Moses, which was given to Israel, is such a program. It applied at a certain time to a specific group of people. Christ Jesus fulfilled that law on our behalf. Don't reinsert that law now that it has been fulfilled.

Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. Romans 5:14

This verse clarifies a concept which is implicitly stated in the very first chapters of the Bible. That man sinned and death came as a result of sin. The death being spoken of here, and which will become evident by the time 5:21 is reached, is spiritual death. Adam was given a single commandment. He was told that if he broke that law, death would result, "...but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Genesis 2:17

Adam did in fact violate the commandment and yet he continued to live physically for a full 930 years. This implies that what God spoke of was spiritual death and this is the premise that Paul writes from. The physical death that man experiences is a result of the spiritual death that occurred. God, in His wisdom, removed access to the Tree of Life. This is recorded in Genesis 3 - "Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever..."

An eternally alive, but spiritually dead being would be a cosmic calamity. The wickedness of such a being would continue to grow throughout the ages. If man can wreak as much havoc as Hitler or Stalin did in such a few years, imagine the depths of depravity of an eternal, but fallen being!

Paul's comment based on the previous verse is "Nevertheless" - Notwithstanding the fact that sin is not imputed where there is no law, "death reigned from Adam to Moses." Why? Because all people are sons of Adam and have inherited his fallen state. This is true "even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam." In other words, death reigns in all of Adam's race even if they didn't commit the same type of transgression as he did; the fallen state is inherited.

However and despite this sad news, we are given an introduction to Another. Paul says that Adam is "a type of Him who was to come." The Bible is given to us to show the contrast between the two and the remedy which is found in this "second Adam."

Life application: When Jesus said, "No one is good but One, that is, God" He was making an absolute claim. Only God is good. In order to be reconciled to Him, we must share in His goodness. The only way that this is possible is to have that state imputed to us by the merits of another perfectly good being. What is implied then is that if we are reconciled to God through Jesus, then Jesus must be God. Stand firm on the truth of the Bible, even if it is difficult to comprehend.