

# Was there Death before Adam?

by John Ankerberg, Dr. Norman Geisler

Those who hold to the young earth position deny that there could have been death before Adam's fall. They argue that the Bible declares death came only after Adam as a result of his sin: "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" (Rom. 5:12; cf. 8:20-22).

Dr. Geisler responds by saying there are several problems with this argument. First, Romans 5:12 does not say all animals die because of Adam's sin, but only that "all men" die as a consequence. Second, Romans 8 does not say that animal death results from Adam's sin, but only that the "creation was subjected to frustration" as a result of it (v. 20). Third, if Adam ate anything—and he had to eat in order to live—then at least plants had to die before he sinned. Fourth, and finally, the fossil evidence indicates animal death before human death, since people are found only on the top (later) strata, while animals are found in lower (earlier) strata.

Let me add some additional thoughts to what Dr. Geisler has written:

Romans 5:12 says, "Therefore, just as through one man **sin** entered the world, and **death** through **sin**, and thus **death spread to all men**, because **all sinned**." Here we learn:

- 1.) Through Adam's act of rebellion sin entered the world.
- 2.) Death through sin resulted – but to whom?
- 3.) Death spread to **all men**.
- 4.) Death spread to all men because all men sinned.
- 5.) Notice, it doesn't say that death spread to all the animals – it says death spread to **all men**.
- 6.) Further, what kind of death is the Apostle Paul talking about? Remember, the Bible describes five kinds of death:
  - a.) Physical death – death of the body (James 2:26)
  - b.) Spiritual death or separation from God (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 4:18)
  - c.) Eternal death – the second death (Rev. 20:14)
  - d.) Death to the law (Rom. 7:4)
  - e.) Death to sin (Rom. 6:11)

In Romans 5:12, the Apostle is primarily referring to “b” – spiritual death. Genesis 2:15-17 tells us why this is so:

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 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.**”

God specifically told Adam and Eve on the day they would eat the forbidden fruit, “**You shall surely die.**” Did they **physically** die that day? No, they did not. After they sinned, Adam and Eve were still walking around. In fact, Adam lived to be 930 years old. They tilled the ground and had children.

The death specified in Genesis 2 and 3 and by Paul in Romans 5 must be **spiritual death**. When Adam sinned, he instantly “died,” just as God said he would. He remained alive physically, mentally, volitionally and emotionally, but **he died spiritually**. That is, man broke his harmonious fellowship with God and introduced the inclination or the propensity to sin (to place one’s own way above God’s). This is what is called “the Doctrine of Original Sin” (not a particular sin, but the inherent propensity to sin entered the human realm as men became sinners by nature).

In light of this:

1.) The “death through sin” Paul is talking about is not equivalent to physical death. If so, Adam and Eve would have physically died the day they ate of the tree. The Bible is talking primarily about spiritual death resulting from sin.

2.) Only humans have earned the title of “sinners.” Only humans can experience “death through sin.” Animals don’t sin and aren’t called sinners in the Bible. Further, animals are not offered the gift of eternal life if they repent.

3.) The death Adam experienced is carefully qualified by the Apostle Paul in Romans 5:12. He writes: “Death spread to **all men**” – not to all plants and animals – just on human beings.

Also, notice Romans 5:18: “Therefore, as through **one man’s** offense judgment came to **all men**, resulting in condemnation, even so through one man’s righteous act a free gift came to **all men**, resulting in justification of life.” Here, Paul is talking about man’s fall, his spiritual death and separation from God and God’s salvation via Christ’s death to provide salvation to cover the sins of **all men**. They must receive this gift by faith in Christ.

4.) Besides spiritual death, man became mortal, liable to all the miseries of this life and cut off from the possibility of existing physically forever. In other words, as a result of the Fall, God condemned Adam to a limited life span and the certain fact of physical death in the future. God took away access to a tree in the garden that gave Adam and Eve the potential for eternal physical life. How do we know? Scripture tells us this in Genesis 3:22-24:

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**” – therefore, the Lord God sent him out of the

Garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the Garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to **the tree of life**.

Apparently Adam and Eve had the potential for eternal physical life before they sinned and even afterwards. John MacArthur comments in his Study Bible regarding these verses:

God told man that he would surely die if he ate of the forbidden tree. But God's concern may also have been that **man not live forever** in his pitiful, cursed condition. Taken in the broader context of Scripture, driving the man and his wife out of the garden was an act of merciful grace to prevent them from being sustained forever by the tree of life.

Again, before the Fall God made provision for Adam and Eve to sustain their physical life forever; but after they disobeyed God, not only was there immediate spiritual death that came to them, but God pronounced a curse on them and told them they would eventually physically die by cutting them off from the tree of life.

In Genesis 3:17-19 we are told: "Then to Adam He said, 'Because you have heeded the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, "You shall not eat of it," **cursed** is the ground for your sake. In toil you shall eat of it **all the days of your life**. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face ye shall eat bread **till you return to the ground**, for out of it you were taken, for dust you are and **to dust ye shall return**.'"

All Christians believe that when Adam and Eve sinned, it brought immediate spiritual death to them and the certainty of future physical death. Christians also believe that original sin came into existence at this time. Further, Christ is the only provision for man's sinful condition. But the facts do not mandate that Christians hold plant and animal life died only after Adam and Eve sinned.

But how did the Fall affect nature? What is the meaning of Romans 8:20-22, where it states: "For the creation was subjected to frustration (futility) not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that **the whole creation has been groaning** as in the pains of childbirth right up till the present."

The words "futility" or "frustration" refer to the inability to achieve a goal or purpose. All creation is personified to be, as it were, longing for the transformation from the curse and its effects. Because of man's sin God cursed the physical universe and now no part of creation entirely fulfills God's original purpose."

Some interpret this verse to say that Adam's sin ushered into the creation **every kind** of natural decay and **all pain** and **death**. They assume that the law of entropy which describes the decreasing order in the universe, did not take effect until Adam and Eve sinned. Based on this assumption, the time between the universe's creation and Adam and Eve's fall must be brief to explain why the physical evidence shows no period when decay and death were not in operation.

But there are several problems with this interpretation. First, if one holds to the twenty-four-hour-day hypothesis that God took six days to create everything, then according to Romans 8:22, the “whole creation” would include the universe and all the stars. But if so, did the stars not burn after the first day? Physics demands that the stars were burning and that entropy was in effect at that point. If this is the case, then decay was present from the very first day.

As Dr. Hugh Ross has written in *The Genesis Question*:

When we consider that the second thermodynamic law is essential for life’s existence, essential for eating and mobility and countless other activities that most of us agree are enjoyable and good, we see no reason to suggest that the law should be judged as bad. Thermodynamic laws were included when God declared His creation “very good” (Genesis 1:31).

We must be careful, however, not to confuse God’s very good creation with His best creation, or more accurately, His ultimate goal for His creation. In the new creation there will be no thermodynamic laws – no decay, no frustration, no groaning, no grieving (see Revelation 21:1-5). The thermodynamic laws are good, in spite of the “decay,” “frustration,” and “groaning,” because they are part of God’s strategy for preparing His creation to enjoy the blessings and rewards of the new creation.

So, for Adam and Eve, if they did any work in the Garden, then a loss of energy and a certain amount of decay was present. Why? Because work is essential to breathing, circulating blood, contracting muscles and digesting food. These are all virtually life-sustaining processes. Adam was working, tending the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15) before he sinned. Thus, Romans 8:20-22 could not imply that Adam’s sin inaugurated all of the decay process.

When Paul refers to the creation “groaning,” what other effects from the curse is he talking about? It could be that in Genesis 1:28 God commanded man to tend the environment, but because man sinned the environment has been ruined. The human effect on the environment is roughly analogous to the results of sending a two-year-old child to tidy up a closet. Left alone, the closet will become less tidy due to the natural tendency toward decay and disorder. Typically, though, the two-year-old will greatly speed up the decay and disorder process. Isaiah 24:5 describes the devastation of the planet that results from the insubordination of human beings to God. Just as one must wait for the two-year-old child to grow up a little before expecting him to help tidy up a closet, so too the creation waits for the human race to experience the results of God conquering the sin problem.

Even such church fathers as Origen, who lived 185 to 254 A.D., interpreted Romans 8:20-22 to imply that decay has been in effect in the natural world since the creation of the universe. Since Origen preceded by hundreds of years the scientific discovery of the laws of thermodynamics and entropy (which include the principle of decay), it is clear that he did not come up with his interpretation as a result of trying to comply with the modern scientific theories of his day.

Are there other reasons that tell us that physical pain and decay must have existed before the Fall? Yes. In Genesis 3:16 God says to Eve, “I will greatly increase

[or multiply] your pains in childbearing.” He does not say “introduce.” He says, “Increase” or “multiply,” implying there would have been some pain in any case.

As Philip Yancey has so clearly shown in his book, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), some pain is good. It’s good that when I put my hand near fire, the pain warns me of danger. If the pain wasn’t there, I wouldn’t know that my fingers were burning. Pain is God’s way of keeping us from destroying ourselves. Adam and Eve certainly must have had the use of touch and could feel pain in the Garden **before** the Fall. They must have had a nervous system that protected them from any dangers in their environment in the Garden. They must have been able to feel a bee sting, or to get poison ivy, or to be pricked by a thorn. When Adam and Eve sinned, the consequences and risk of pain and decay didn’t begin, they simply increased.

While the sin we human beings commit causes us all naturally to react negatively to decay, work, physical death, pain and suffering, and while ultimately all of this is somehow tied into God’s plan to conquer sin permanently, there is nothing in Scripture that compels us to conclude that none of these entities existed before Adam’s first act of rebellion against God. On the other hand, God’s revelation through nature provides overwhelming evidence that some of these aspects did indeed exist for a long time period previous to God’s creating Adam.

### **The Death of Animals: How Does That Relate to the Atonement?**

Another question that arises is this. If animals died before the Fall, doesn’t this alter the biblical doctrine of Atonement? Some cite Hebrews 9:22, which says, “In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood and **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.**” They interpret this verse to say, “The basis of the gospel message is that God brought in death and bloodshed because of sin. If death and bloodshed of animals (or man) existed before Adam sinned, then the whole basis of atonement – the basis of redemption – is destroyed.”

But this is faulty exegesis. While it is true there is no remission of sin without the shedding of blood, Christ’s blood, it does not necessarily follow that **all** shed blood is for the remission of sin. To say there could have been no bloodshed before sin is to make the same exegetical errors made by those who claim there were no rainstorms or rainbows before the Genesis Flood.

Hebrews 10:1-4 explains that the blood of animal sacrifices **will not take away sin**. The sacrificial killing of animals was a physical picture of the spiritual death caused by sin, which necessitated the death of a substitute to make atonement, as well as a foreshadowing of the ultimate efficacious sacrifice that God Himself would one day provide. Since the penalty for sin is spiritual death, no animal sacrifice could ever atone for sin. The crime is spiritual, thus the atonement had to be made by a spiritual Being.

The spilling of blood before Adam sinned in no way affects or detracts from the doctrine of Atonement. Upholding that central doctrine in no way demands a cre-

ation scenario in which none of God's creatures received a scratch or other blood-letting wound before Adam and Eve sinned. Even in an ideal natural environment, animals would be constantly scratched, pricked, bruised and even killed by accidental events and each other.

2SCStaff0707 Death before Adam