

If the Law Has Been Abolished, What Condemns People Today?

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In response to the question posed in the title, I will ask four more questions, and then I will answer all of the questions: In the judgment, what will condemn people who lived after Adam and before Abraham? In the judgment, what will condemn Jews who lived before Moses? In the judgment, what will condemn a person who lived in eastern Asia at the time of Moses? In the judgment, what will condemn a person who lives in a remote part of Mongolia today?

All of these people lived their lives ignorant of the Law that God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai. How can they be judged by a Law that they never even heard of? Of course, if the Law was available to them and they were supposed to know the Law, then their ignorance would be inexcusable. The driver of a car is responsible to know the traffic laws. If he violates one of them and then pleads ignorance, he has no real defense. He was supposed to know the law. But people living before Abraham, even Jews living before Moses, people living in eastern Asia even at the time of Moses, and Mongolians living in remote regions today can all legitimately claim ignorance of the Law as codified by Moses. Yet, those not in Christ will be condemned in the judgment, and by more than one means. But how?

1. Descent from Adam

In Romans 5:12-14, Paul writes, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (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."

God gave the first man a command: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17). Adam and Eve broke that command, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:6). This is what the Romans passage above means when it says that "by one man sin

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entered into the world, and death by sin." Notice that the passage then says, "for that all have sinned." It then goes on to say that "until" (meaning "up until" or "prior to") the Law there was sin in the world, "but sin is not imputed when there is no law." This would appear to be a contradiction. If sin is not imputed or reckoned when there is no law, how could there have been sin before the law? Paul answers, "Nevertheless death [which Romans 6:23 tells us is the wages of sin] reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression."

Adam sinned by transgressing a command of God. But those who descended from him died even though they did not transgress a command of God. Since death is the result of sin, this must mean that God had imputed Adam's sin to his descendents. This is the doctrine of original sin. Notice Romans 5:19: "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." As by Adam's disobedience many became sinners, so by Jesus' obedience many become righteous. But those who do not put their trust in Jesus are still under the sin of Adam and will be condemned by it. In other words, simply because they are human beings, people of all times and in all places are condemned by the sin of Adam.

2. Conscience

Romans 2:12 and 16 state: "For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law...in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men according to my gospel through Jesus Christ." I have used the *English Majority Text Version (EMTV)* here because the King James Version puts a semicolon at the end of verse 12 and capitalizes the beginning of verse 16. This makes it hard to see that verse 16 is just the continuation of verse 12 after Paul's parenthetical statement in verses 13-15.

This passage again speaks of people perishing in the day of God's judgment without law. Clearly, contrary to the assertions of many theologians, people do not need to be bound to Old Covenant law to be condemned at the judgment. Paul is distinguishing between two classes of people—those without law and those with law. The parenthetical statement in verses 13-15 will help us understand that this is not about the imputation of Adam's sin, but about sins people bring on themselves: "(for not the hearers of the law are righteous with God, but the doers of the law shall be justified; for whenever

Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things of the law, these, not having the law, are a law unto themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience witnessing with them, and among themselves their thoughts accuse or even defend them)" (*EMTV*).

Notice that Paul clearly teaches, contrary to what many today teach, that the Gentiles do not have the Law—that is, they do not have the Law of Moses, the Law given to the Jews at Sinai. That Law is not for them; they do not have it, and they cannot be judged by it, unless, as I will explain, they have misguidedly taken it upon themselves. Nevertheless, whenever the Gentiles by nature do the things of the Law, they become a law unto themselves. In doing this, they "show the work of the law written in their hearts." That is, their minds or consciences either approve what they have done or they condemn what they have done. How does this happen?

In the article, "What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/eden.htm>) I show from the Bible that this innate law that all people are born with comes, not as theologians often say, from the image of God in them. I explain that it comes from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When Adam and Eve ate from that tree, they became moral beings like God, knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:22). And because Adam and Eve ate from that tree, their descendents are born with the knowledge of good and evil that comes from the tree—an innate moral sense of right and wrong. But because of the sin and depravity of Adam and Eve and their natural descendents, their sense of good and evil gotten from the tree is warped. Also, all transgress their sense of good and evil, and they are thus condemned, "their conscience witnessing with them, and among themselves their thoughts accuse or even defend them." Because of this, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil may also be called the tree of death, because, just as it brought death to Adam and Eve, it brings death to everyone else.

I believe that this conscience that comes from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil can also be trained or affected by environment. Thus, someone growing up in one culture may not have the very same sense of right and wrong from someone growing up in another culture. Even individuals in the same culture may have some differences—a harder or more tender conscience—due to their own natural makeup and their upbringing.

So, people can be condemned for doing what they believe in their consciences to be wrong. But, for the sinner who puts his trust in Christ, Jesus can even cleanse our conscience: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:22, KJV). Also, in 1 Peter 3:21, Peter relates our salvation by the resurrection of Jesus Christ (pictured in baptism) with "the answer of a good conscience toward God."

Under the Old Covenant, the Jews were bound to obey the Law. By that, they will be judged. That is a third way that people can be condemned, but it is only for the Jews who lived under the Old Covenant. No one else will be judged by that Law, unless they happen to mistakenly believe that they are bound by it. But in that case, God will really judge them by their deeds in regard to their consciences. Of course, there are people today—Jews and Christians—who believe that they must live by the Law of the Old Covenant. In other words, their consciences are formed by their belief that they must obey that Law. Those who are not covered by the blood of Christ will be judged by their consciences, and because their consciences are based on the Law, they will be judged by that Law. On the other hand, anyone in Christ Jesus is under no condemnation (Romans 8:1), has everlasting life, and "is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24).

The Answers to the Questions

Now let's take another look at the questions I posed. In the judgment, what will condemn people who lived after Adam and before Abraham? Jews who lived before Moses? A person who lived in eastern Asia at the time of Moses? A person who lives in a remote part of Mongolia today? In fact, what will condemn anyone who was not a Jew living under the Old Covenant? The answer is the same for all: The sin imputed to them from Adam and the violation of their own consciences.

One more thing. There appears to be a link between all of the ways by which people can be condemned. Adam's sin was that he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This actually imparted to him a knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:22). What is a knowledge of good and evil? What lets you know what is good and what is evil? Law. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was, or represented, law. And what is the source of the innate conscience with which people are born? The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So, yes, people are born with an innate but corrupt knowledge of law, and this is further

molded by their own lives and their environment. Thus, in the end, it is the transgression of law that condemns. "Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4, *EMTV*). This sin is imputed from Adam and we also personally sin when we violate our consciences that have their origins in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And for the Jews under the Old Covenant, they also had a source of sin in the transgression of the Law given at Sinai. But that Law is not at all necessary to condemn sinners. Romans 5:20 tells us, "Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound" (KJV). The word "entered" is translated from the Greek word *pareisēlthen*. It means "came in beside," that is, it came in beside the other forms of condemnation (Adam's sin and our consciences) to add to those transgressions: "Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator" (Galatians 3:19). The *Weymouth New Testament* translates the first part of this verse: "Why then was the Law given? It was imposed later on for the sake of defining sin...." But we must remember that this Law was given only to the Jews (Exodus 34:27-28; Deuteronomy 4:13; 5:3; 9:9). Even then, it was only temporary until the coming of the Seed, Jesus Christ.

So the Bible proves wrong those who say that the Old Covenant Law must still be in force today or there would be no way God could condemn sinners. If the Law has been abolished, what condemns sinners today? What condemns them is the sin imputed to them from Adam and the violation of their own consciences, which form a "law unto themselves."