

The Theological Necessity Of The Physical Immortality Of The First And The Last Adam

Arthur C. Custance*

*Arthur Custance was a research scientist and head of the physiology laboratory of the Defence Research Board in Ottawa, Canada, until 1970. Now retired, he devotes himself to writing and lecturing.

Romans 5:12 states that “by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men.” If *physical* death is the penalty of sin would a sinless Adam and Eve have lived on and on forever, never experiencing physical death? Would they not then have continued to multiply indefinitely in obedience to Gen 1:28, until the earth was not merely “filled” but veritably overwhelmed with their numbers? In such a situation what alternative could there be but unimaginable overcrowding?

To state the matter in slightly different terms: Did the fall actually introduce physical death as a thing entirely foreign to the experience of an unfallen race previously endowed with a potential for unending continuance, or did it merely shorten life, which was subject to certain natural limitations in any case?

Was the principle of life that Adam and Eve first enjoyed fundamentally altered so that the penalty of sin was the acquisition of mortality itself as something entirely new, or was it simply the imposition of *premature* death, death before the time, a kind of capital punishment? Capital punishment is today imposed on the criminal not as a substitute for living on indefinitely but as curtailment of a life expectancy that has limits imposed by reason of our mortal nature. Was Adam’s penalty a mere shortening of life, a shortening that fell more and more heavily on the descendants of Adam and Eve as the human life span steadily declined?

We thus have two alternatives: (1) the acquisition of mortality as an entirely unnatural concomitant of human life, or (2) premature dying. We have an Adam and Eve who need never have died at all had they not sinned, or we have an Adam and Eve who, having sinned, merely died before their time.

It may be asked whether it is reasonable to suppose that a highly complex creature such as man could possibly enjoy a form of physical life with the potential for unending continuance. Is not death part and parcel of all life, an attendant condition of it? And is not man part of the web of life, experiencing death as a natural process like all other living things?

It is interesting that many who are willing to accept the idea of the inherent immortality of the human soul or spirit, a concept that owes more to Greek philosophers than to Scripture, find it difficult to accept the idea of a once inherent immortality of the human body, a concept that Scripture clearly implies in the Eden story.

This question must therefore be asked: “Is dying always a necessary condition of living?” The answer is not simple and has implications for theology that are sometimes overlooked. We must say both “Yes” and “No.” Death is a necessary condition of living insofar as each species might otherwise multiply out of hand

until no creature would have room to move or find food. In the great chain of being, death is experienced by both plants and animals. But is their death the result of being killed, or is it the result of the inevitable collapse of vital processes in the living cells of each organism? If we merely count numbers of organisms and ignore the size factor, it is found that numerically those that never experience what we call “natural death”—that is, who actually enjoy immortality—far exceed the number of individuals for whom death seems to be natural.

Untold billions of unicellular organisms, such as amoebae, never experience death. The amoeba grows to a critical size and divides into two amoebae of half the size. These two animals then grow to the same critical size and divide again. They leave no corpse; there are no parents to die off and be buried by the offspring. The parents are their own children! The process goes on indefinitely with no signs of senescence or decline in energy. In short, the amoeba is a truly “immortal” creature. Here, then, is potentially unending life that is strictly immortal. These creatures simply do not die unless killed.

But it would be a mistake to suppose this immortality is only because the amoeba is such a “simple” animal. H. S. Jennings spent half his life studying them and wrote a classic volume describing his findings. He concluded:¹

The writer is thoroughly convinced after long study of the behaviour of the amoeba, that if it were a large animal, so as to come within the everyday experience of human beings, its behaviour would at once call forth the attribution to it of states of pleasure and pain, of hunger, desire, and the like, on precisely the same basis as we attribute these things to a dog.

Such microscopic organisms clearly have a mind of their own despite the fact that they are monocellular creatures. Yet they do not experience death as a natural consequence of having the gift of life, save when they are killed by some external agency. Living is quite possible without dying.

But here we have another factor of profound importance. Death *can* be experienced—but not for inherent reasons. Amoebae are at the bottom of the food chain, along with many other microscopic creatures, so that they die by being eaten unless they are fortunate enough to escape. Furthermore, they can be killed by accident—by being poisoned, crushed, dehydrated, starved, burned to death, and so forth. Thus their particular type of physical “immortality” must be defined as (1) the ability to live on indefinitely without dying for inherent reasons, but (2) the

ability also to be killed. Death can be experienced by imposition, but it is in no direct way a condition of their life principle. H. J. Muller wrote as follows: "Natural death is not the expression of an inherent principle of (functioning) protoplasm."²

This observation is by no means limited to unicellular creatures such as amoebae.³ As we move up the scale of life to the more and more complex creatures, we

JETS 21:4 (December 1978) p. 299

seem to find death becoming the expected end for some reason that may or may not be inherent. Most evolutionists see this as nature's way of allowing for advance by removing the older forms in order that the newer forms might have room to live and prosper. But not all students of the higher forms agree that death is natural even in such complex creatures as fish. Sir Edwin Ray Lancaster noted, over eighty years ago, that "fish are not known to get feeble as they grow old, and many fish are known not to get feeble."⁴ He did not consider it appropriate to speak of their dying as "natural death."

That animals die by being killed is obvious and no one will question it, but it is today not firmly established that they would die anyway in due course. Sir Peter Medawar⁵ points out that death is statistically inevitable because the longer an animal lives the greater are the chances of a fatal accident. If an animal could be perfectly protected against all attacks from outside both in its external and its internal environment, there is no knowing how long it might live. Biology simply cannot say for certain why any animal dies. Where the cause of death can be determined, it is almost always the result of some form of attack upon its life-support system either from without or by disease within.

Sir Julian Huxley wrote at some length on plant life in this respect. He said:

We have records of trees of vast age and size, whose death seems only to have been due to an accident, that is to say, to something in the external world and not in the tree itself, and therefore something that could be avoided...

There is nothing in the tree itself which causes its death, merely the long-continued shocks and buffets of the world, preventable things one and all; by which I mean that if one could shelter the tree from storms, keep off its active enemies and provide it with a reasonable amount of food, water and air, we must suppose that it would go on living for ever.⁶

Today it is not difficult to quote many authorities like Korenchevsky, van Weizsacker, Casarett, Zahl, Selye and others who see no inherent reason why even the higher forms of life (including man himself) could not live on for hundreds or possibly thousands of years if the conditions of life were right. Such authorities do not, of course, consider the possibility that in man death is an inescapable penalty of the fall. They see death as perhaps an avoidable accident.

We must conclude from Scripture that Adam and Eve as originally created could indeed have enjoyed a physical immortality such as the amoeba still has. It was, as Augustine so precisely stated it of our first parents, *non impossibile mori sed posse non mori*, not impossible for them to die since they did die in the end—perhaps killed by a slow-acting poison introduced into their bodies from the forbidden fruit. But it was indeed possible for them *not* to die, since we know from Gen 3:22 that had they turned to the tree of life they would somehow have antidoted the poison and "lived forever"—though with a corrupt nature. It is no wonder that they were so summarily expelled from the garden and the way to the tree of life (whose leaves were perhaps therapeutic, Rev 22:2) guarded so particu

JETS 21:4 (December 1978) p. 300

larly by an angel whose sword of death was inescapable (Gen 3:24) "since it turned every way."

Now the concept of an original physical immortality for man is not by any means a new idea borrowed from intimations of modern biology. Rabbinical commentaries recognized it, early Church fathers elaborated on it, and later Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians alike have supported it. All have seen death as a penalty, not a concomitant of life for man. Had Adam and Eve not sinned they would have lived on indefinitely—and their children after them would have preserved this potential. Jewish commentators in Gen. *Rab.* interpreted God's decision as follows:⁷ "I will create man to be the mirror of both [angels and animals], so that when he sins, when he behaves like a beast, death shall overtake him; but if he refrains from sin, he shall be immortal."

Louis Ginsberg gives another excerpt to the same effect: "At the creation of man, it was God's intention that he be free from sin and immortal."⁸ And again: "As long as Adam and Eve remained sinless their married life would have been pure and they would have begotten immortal children."⁹ So there is no doubt how the Jews understood their own Scriptures on this point and how they made a logical extension of that understanding.

It is important to bear in mind that the immortality attached to Adam and Eve did not mean they could not be killed, but only that dying was not inevitable. They could have lived on forever. Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians alike have recognized this fact. Jesuit theologian T. B. Chetwood wrote:

The immortality of Adam is explicitly defined by the Church. The Sixteenth Council of Carthage (418 A.D.), the decrees of which were approved by Pope Zozimus, teaches, "If anyone shall say that Adam was created mortal so that he would have died in the body whether he had sinned or not, let him be anathema." And the same doctrine is affirmed by the decrees of Orange and Trent.

The Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, have very many passages which speak of the "death" which came to us from Adam but there are none plainer than the Book of Genesis which gives the words of God to the pair in the garden. "But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death."¹⁰

Chetwood observes rightly that unless Adam really possessed immortality before he disobeyed, it would have been no real punishment to forfeit it afterwards. As he put it: "Clearly he could not be deprived, by way of punishment, of something which he did not possess."

The Syriac *Apoc. Bar.*, possibly written shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, seems to reflect a view, already noted, that Adam's punishment was merely to die prematurely.¹¹ I do not believe this represents the true situation. By

his sin Adam did not merely shorten his life, but introduced into it a phenomenon entirely foreign to it—namely, senescence and physical death.

The rabbis rather uniformly held that the fall was the reason why man experiences the violent rending asunder of spirit and body so abhorrent to him. As they put it: “Had it not been for the fall, death would not have been so terrible and painful, but a joyful incident in man’s career.” ¹²

They spoke of the present life as originally intended to be a kind of school, a vestibule from which to graduate into eternity. Man, made mature by the training in this life, would in due time have passed happily into the higher life of the next world without a loss of consciousness or contact with loved ones. It would have been a transforming experience, not a terrifying one.

Thus there would have been no problems of overcrowding. Whereas the animals below man seem to have some kind of “programming” of death in order to prevent excessive multiplication, man would not have needed it. The removal of each individual after a certain time required for the perfecting of character would have prevented overpopulation. As each person grew to perfection, he or she would have passed without experiencing death into that spaceless and timeless world in which the question of “overcrowding” would simply be irrelevant.

What Ambrose, Augustine, Tertullian, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and a host of theologians since have recognized as being the original and intended condition of life for Adam and Eve until forfeited by sin has a profound implication for a true understanding of the nature of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. In his role as the last Adam and as the Savior of mankind, he had to share their kind of immortality. It had to be possible for him to die, and yet it also had to be possible for him not to die. Death had to be a possibility, not a necessity by reason of the constitution and condition of his life—a possibility that he might embrace it, but not a necessity, so that he might embrace it voluntarily.

It is clear that if the first Adam, unfallen, need never have died yet could under certain circumstances experience death, the last Adam must be in the same position. Made “after the power of an endless life” (Heb 7:16), Jesus Christ, having reached maturity (i.e., “being made perfect”) by the things he experienced as man (Heb 5:9), appears to have arrived at the point of “graduation” when he ascended the mount of transfiguration and was transformed before three of his disciples (Matt 17:1–9). At that moment he was ready, it seems, to complete his journey through this world, and he might have passed on into the next without experiencing death. Since he was uniquely born so as to escape the entail of the mortogenic factor that appears to be transmitted by the male seed in each generation, as both Luther and Calvin were perceptive enough to recognize,¹³ he was not subject to death by nature. Nor did he ever surrender that potential for endless continuance by an act of disobedience. He had, in fact, perfectly fulfilled the conditions of life under which the OT and NT alike promise just such a deathlessness. Many passages of Scripture promise life as the reward of perfect obedience to the laws of God (e.g., Gal 3:12: “The man that does them shall live in them”; see also Lev 18:5; Neh 9:29; Ezek 18:4, 5, 9; 20:11; Matt 19:17; Luke 10:28; Rom

10:5). All these contain the same promise, though no other man than the first and the last Adam were ever in a position to meet the conditions. The first Adam failed; the last Adam succeeded.

This promise of reward for obedience was clearly never withdrawn. It was in fact essential for the work of the Son of God that it be kept “on the books” as a genuine possibility. This one Man did indeed fulfill the law and the prophets and fully earned the right to life without death, and this one Man by virgin conception escaped the entail of mortality inherited by all other men from Adam. It was therefore appropriate that two witnesses representing the law and the prophet (Moses and Elijah) should bear their testimony (Matt 17:4) to his worthiness. And there followed the thundering voice of God out of heaven confirming their testimony: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (v 5).

But he did not “graduate,” though he had every right. He made a crucial decision, a voluntary decision, and turned back from the glory that was set before him at that moment. Instead he came back down the mount and set his face like a flint to go up to Jerusalem to fulfill the dreadful mission for which he had become man. All that he could promise his puzzled companions at that time was that, although he would die, yet he would rise again!

I am persuaded that this is really what was in the mind of the writer of Heb 12:2 where it is said of Jesus Christ that he is “the author and finisher of our faith, who instead of (*anti*) the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame...” In this context the use of *anti* is surely to signify the quite normal sense of exchange, not causation. The English word “for” may be quite appropriate, provided it is taken to have the same force. In the twenty occurrences of it in the NT where the KJV has consistently used the English “for” it will be seen that thirteen of these have the sense of “in place of” or “instead of.”

It was so understood in Heb 12:2 by certain of the Church fathers (e.g., Gregory of Nazianzen) and by Calvin and Beza. Williams’ *The New Testament in the Language of the People* so renders it, as do Smith and Goodspeed in *An American Translation* and Wuest in *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*. Dana and Mantey observe:

There is conclusive proof now that the dominant meaning of *anti* in the first century (i.e., at the time of the writing of Heb 12:2) was *instead of*... Prof. Whitesall, of Chicago, made a study of *anti* in the Septuagint and found 38 passages where it is rightly translated *instead of* in the Revised Version. Since *anti* is used in two atonement passages in the New Testament (Matt 20:28 and Mark 10:45) such a translation needs careful consideration. ¹⁴

Dana and Mantey note in the LXX the following significant passages: “... offered him up for a burnt offering instead of (*anti*) his son” (Gen 22:13); “let thy servant, I pray thee, abide instead of (*anti*) the lad, a bondservant to my lord” (Gen 44:33); “I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of (*anti*) all the firstborn” (Num 3:12). All these sentences clearly speak of substitution. They also note Matt 2:22, Luke 11:11 and 1 Cor 11:15 as simple cases of substitution, but they raise the interesting question as to whether the same is true in Matt 20:28 and Mark 10:45 which may bear on the universality of the atonement. Dana and Mantey list Heb 12:2 as, in their view, a clear case of

substitution, in which the translation “instead of” would be appropriate.

There is an excellent example in the LXX of Isa 61:3 where the sense of substitution is obvious and where *anti* has been employed: “... to give them beauty instead of (*anti*) ashes, the oil of joy to the mourners, and the garment of praise instead of (*anti*) the spirit of heaviness.”

It is unfortunate that the Hebrew edition of the NT published by the Trinitarian Bible Society has adopted for *anti* (in Heb 12:2) a Hebrew word that can only mislead Jewish readers regarding the fact that the Lord offered himself entirely as a free agent when he endured the cross and despised its shame. This is particularly important in view of the Jewish conviction that a crucified man is cursed of God.

It is clear that fallen man has a certain freedom of choice as to the time of his dying (by committing suicide, for example, or by giving his life for a friend), but we are certainly in no position to choose whether we will die or not. By contrast, this power of choice as to whether Jesus would die or not rested entirely in the Lord’s own hands—as it did in Adam’s. It was this circumstance that made his death unique in that it was truly substitutionary. Whereas we are obedient to death as victims of sin (cf. 2 Chr 33:19), he was not obedient but only “became obedient” in a manner that we are never in a position to do (Phil 2:8).

He did not shorten his life. One cannot “shorten” a life that is potentially endless. He embraced death as something entirely foreign to his physical constitution. This circumstance, so fundamental to his role as Savior, is what makes the nature of Adam’s constitution as originally created so important theologically. For unless the Lord Jesus could voluntarily embrace death he could not be a substitute, and unless his physical constitution was truly representative of Adam’s constitution as unfallen and therefore of man as God made him, he could not be a substitute for man.

It was for this reason that he was sent in the “likeness” (*homoio-ma*, Rom 8:3), not in the “exactitude” (*home-*), of sinful flesh. The difference is only in the *iota*, but it makes all the difference in the world. Only so could he become a second federal Head of a new redeemed race.

¹H. S. Jennings, *Behavior of the Lower Organisms* (Biological Series X; New York: Columbia University, 1915) 336.

²H. J. Muller, “Life,” *Science* 121 (1955) 5.

³The subject is still under debate. L. Hayflick’s original report that cells have a capability for doubling approximately fifty times and then lose their viability is now being severely challenged. See J. L. Man, *Science* 186 (1974) 1105-1107; R. Holliday *et al.*, *Science* 198 (1977) 366-372.

⁴E. R. Lancaster, quoted by A. Comfort, “The Biology of Old Age,” *New Biology* 18 (1955) 19.

⁵P. Medawar, *The Uniqueness of the Individual* (New York: Basic Books, 1957) 37.

⁶J. Huxley, “The Meaning of Death,” *Essays in Popular Science* (London: Penguin, 1938) 105.

⁷L. Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publishing Association of America, 1954), I. 50.

⁸*Ibid.*, 3. 105.

⁹*Ibid.*, 5. 134.

¹⁰T. B. Chetwood, *God and Creation* (New York: Benzinger, 1928) 145.

¹¹F. R. Tennant, *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin* (New York: Schocken, 1988) 244.

¹²L. Ginsberg, *Legends*, 5. 129.

¹³J. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2. xiii.4. For Luther see J. L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Mublenberg, 1946), 1. 230.

¹⁴Dana and Mantey, *A Manual of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957) 100.

current : : uid:1093 (institution)