

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3: Romans 5:12-15; Ephesians 2:1-5

How We Got This Way, or Mitochondria Never Forgets.

Adapted from "You Are What He Ate", by Jeff Strite @ SermonCentral.com

Question Seven of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, if God originally created us "good," *From where did our depraved nature come?* That's a good question and one worth answering today. So let's get started.

In the 14th century, in the land we now call Belgium, there was a duke by the name of Raynald III. Grossly overweight Raynald was commonly called by his Latin nickname, Crassus, which means "Fat."

Now, it seems that Raynald had a violent quarrel with his younger brother Edward and Edward was so angry he led a successful revolt against him. But Edward did not kill Raynald. Instead, he built a room around Raynald in the Nieuwkerk castle and he promised his brother he could regain his title and property as soon as he was able to leave the room.

This would not have been difficult for most people since the room had several windows and a door of near normal size, and none was locked or barred. The problem was Raynald's size. To regain his freedom, he needed to lose weight.

But Edward knew his older brother, and each day he sent a variety of delicious foods. Instead of dieting his way out of prison, Raynald grew fatter. When Duke Edward was accused of cruelty, he had a ready answer: "My brother is not a prisoner. He may leave when he so wills."

Raynald stayed in that room for 10 years and wasn't released until after Edward died in battle. By then his health was so ruined that he died within a year... a prisoner to his own appetite. (Thomas Costain's history, "The Three Edwards," cited in Leadership, Spring 84, p. 44)

Yes, Raynald III was a prisoner. Imprisoned by another's actions but kept there by his own. And though he could have left his prison whenever he wished his own weakness kept him imprisoned. Romans five tells us that in a similar way, humanity has been imprisoned by another's actions—Adam—but kept imprisoned by our own. Verse 12 describes our situation this way: *"just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned."*

Ever since the dawn of time, our fear of death has been our prison. A comic once quipped: *"I am not afraid to die. It's just that I can't get up much enthusiasm for it."* In reality, all our lives, humanity has been held in slavery by our fear of death. As the book of Hebrews explains, it is from this double enslavement to sin and death that Jesus came to save us.

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, [Jesus] himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who

has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Singer song writer Randy Newman was being interviewed by a major magazine when the topic of religion came up. Newman answered, *"I think religion is a tremendously powerful force. How else is someone going to face the horror of everything ending?"* But knowing Newman to be an atheist, the reporter shot back: *"So how do you face it?"* Newman replied: *"I don't. I joke around..."*

So, not only can most people NOT get up much enthusiasm for death they downright fear it. If Adam had not sinned... we wouldn't have to worry about death. But with his disobedience Adam imprisoned us all. As verse 19 declares *"...by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners..."*

But where is the fairness in that?

Are we now being held accountable for another's sin? **No.**

Scripture clearly teaches that we are always only held accountable for our own sin. Once the nation of Israel complained that God was punishing them for their parents failures. But God, through the Prophet Ezekiel, quickly set them straight on that matter:

The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, *'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?* As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ...The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own..." (Ezekiel 18:1-2, 20)

In other words, I can't be condemned because of the sins of my parents

I can't "inherit" their punishment.

If my mother robbed a bank, I'm not required to serve her prison term.

If my father killed someone, I'm not considered a murderer, not in the eyes of the law, and **NOT in the eyes of God.**

SINCE I can't be condemned for the sin of my parents, I most certainly can't be condemned for Adam's sin. How then has Adam's sin made me a sinner?

Now, this is where things get interesting.

You could say we inherited the brokenness of sin from Adam and being his heirs we have added to his sin our own.

Understand that you may inherit many things from your family--money, houses, land, but also physical characteristics such as body shape, and personality. Even something as supposedly individual as a smile, can be inherited. One day looking over baby pictures, I was surprised to see Megan and myself wearing identical smiles 😊. We also can inherit disease from our parents. If my parents had arthritis, diabetes, cancer, a bad heart, then I have probably inherited a similar weakness for those problems. I don't have to do anything to bring on such illnesses, I may even work hard to resist them; but being related I am still condemned to struggle with these inherited diseases. And I may die because of them. Our parents pass along to us a much larger genetic inheritance than we ever realized.

This is, in fact, one of the many reasons why tracing one's ancestry has become so popular. You've seen the commercial, *"I always thought we were German, but my DNA test showed that I am actually more Scottish...so I traded in my lederhosen for a kilt.* People are tracing their ancestry to find out just who they really are; what they might have inherited.

And now in another case of science supporting the Bible, DNA researchers have actually traced the origin of all modern humans back to one single mother whom they named **"Mitochondrial Eve."** That's right. Scientists have now proven that all of us are descended from a single woman. And while they are quick to say, not that she was the only woman in existence, but rather that she was the only one from whom all modern humans evolved because all other ancient lines had died out. Perhaps, if they had known their Bibles better they would have named her **Mitochondrial Noah's wife.**

And this brings us to the basis for today's strange sermon title: "Mitochondria Never Forgets." The truth of the matter is, that behind all such legends, all such family tales as Adam and Eve or Noah and the great flood, are kernels of fact, real historical events, which while being clouded over through the shifting eons of culture and language, still speak truths with regards to our modern human condition. And a lot of that history is also recorded in our DNA. When researchers first began mapping the human genome, they thought that our DNA was mostly filled with wasted space and that only a few portions of it actually shaped our inheritance. However, just recently they have discovered how wrong they were. In fact our DNA never forgets a thing. Each time there is a disease fought and won, or some random mutation in our DNA, whether these cause a noticeable physical change or not it is all kept recorded within the coding strands of our DNA to be passed along to the next generation. It was in finding just such a unique mutation, particular to a specific region and time, that caused researchers to track everyone back to Mitochondrial Noah's wife. Mitochondria never forgets.

That is why, while Adam and Eve are just too far back both time-wise and culturally for us to prove or disprove them historically, I do not doubt their existence. I do not doubt

their existence because the Bible, one of the greatest depositories of cultural history, does not doubt their existence. And the Bible pointedly attaches the story of Adam to the story of Jesus; by one came death by the other comes life (Romans 5:12-18). Since I know Jesus to have been both a real human being and God in the flesh, I also trust the Bible's account of the need for Jesus' coming having begun by a real individual human: Adam.

So what the Heidelberg Catechism and Romans five are telling us is that **what Adam did affected our genetic tendency toward the disease called sin. When Adam ate the fruit in the garden, he gave us an appetite for sin.** We did nothing to bring this disease upon ourselves, but we will die because of sin in our lives. We are the unfortunate recipients of a disease that Adam brought into the world.

Now, this is where the illustration breaks down. If sin were merely looked on as a disease, I could claim that my sin was not my fault. It's Adam's fault. God can't condemn me because I couldn't help myself. But that's not how sin works.

As Ezekiel tells us "*The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son....*"

I don't share the GUILT of Adam's sin. AND I can't excuse my sin because Adam opened the door for its effect on my life. But because he infected our gene pool by his sin, both I and you now share Adam's weakness toward selfishness, his appetite to sin, and the tendency to disobey and give myself over to that which would condemn me.

So, as the Catechism teaches, we are born sick from Adam's sin. From our first parents we have inherited a terminal condition known as sin and death.

You might ask then, "How then do I get well?" (I'm glad you asked)

When I become deathly sick, I need radical intervention to get well. I need something to kill the disease that lives within me. A doctor might use chemotherapy or radiation or microwave therapy. He might use a scalpel and cut out the diseased portion from my body. But something has to die in order for me to live.

The Bible tells me that, just in the same way, something (or someone) had to die for me to be healed from Adam's sin. And that someone was Jesus the second Adam, *just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.* (Romans 5:17).

Romans, chapter six, continues with the story of how we are cured from Adam's sin.

all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ...our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. Romans 6:2-7:

When we were baptized into Christ, our old sin-sick self died to the guilt of the past. And when we died to sin we became freed from the condemnation of our sins. *"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."* Romans 6:23

It gets even better than that. Acts 2:38 says that when I repent of my sins and am baptized for the forgiveness of my sins... I receive a gift. What gift does God give me at that point in my life? It is "The gift of the Holy Spirit."

The moment I accept Christ as my Savior, God's Spirit comes to dwell inside of me, baptizing me (spiritually cleansing me), sealing me as now owned by God, and beginning to transform my genetic makeup. The Spirit works within me to heal me of the disease that Adam gave me. And while we never get to the point that we no longer have sin in our lives, we definitely can get it under control through the working of God's Spirit within us. As Paul goes on to explain:

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. Romans 6:12-15

God's Spirit having cured me of the deadly effects of Adam's sin, continues changing my direction away from sinful practices back towards a godly life. As one person noted, ***"Before I came to Christ, I practiced sin and committed acts of righteousness. Now, I practice righteousness and commit acts of sin."***

Having been given new life in Christ, the longer we live in Jesus--and the longer His Spirit works within our lives--the more we will win in our struggle with sin.

This battle with our old sinful self is described very well in a story of an African Christian. As a new convert, he was given a position of trust which he violated by stealing something. When the missionary asked, *"Why did you take something that didn't belong to you?"* The native replied, ***"It wasn't I who stole. It was grandfather in my bones!"*** This was his way of saying it was his old sinful nature that had enticed him.

In time, however, that Christian grew stronger in his faith. When asked, "*How is grandfather in your bones?*" He would reply, "***Well, grandfather isn't dead yet, but he doesn't get around like he used to.***"

Hopefully, this is true for you as well. As we yield to Christ, as we walk with Him daily, then the grandfather in our bones will get weaker.

Remember, it was Adam eating of the fruit of the tree that brought sin and death into the world. So now also what we eat can bring healing and life into ours.

Jesus said, *'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matthew 5:6). 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35).*

As the eighth question of the Catechism teaches us: "*are we so perverted that we are altogether unable to do good and prone to do evil?*"

Yes! [and because of that we will die,] unless we are born again through the Spirit of God.

Amen?