

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE EPITAPH OF SIN

Genesis 5:1-32

By

Steven J. Cole

February 25, 1996

Copyright, 1996

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from
The New American Standard Bible,
Copyright, The Lockman Foundation

February 25, 1996
Genesis Lesson 13

The Epitaph of Sin Genesis 5:1-32

When asked what he would like his epitaph to read, Johnny Carson quipped, "I'll be right back." He won't be back from the grave, of course. Nobody will. While we all may have differing epitaphs, there is really only one epitaph for the fallen human race: "He died." Genesis 5 shows us that the epitaph of sin is death.

It's a chapter many would be inclined to skip. Perhaps in your Bible reading, you skim these verses, wondering why they are in the Bible. Verses 1-3 tell us why: Moses takes us back to Genesis 1, before the fall, to show that God's original purpose for man, created in His image, is now to be carried out through Adam's line through Seth, not through Cain. But there is a marked difference since the fall: While Adam was created in God's likeness (5:1), he became the father of a son in his own (Adam's) likeness (5:3). While people after the fall retain a vestige of the divine image (Gen. 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9), they also contain the image of their parents, born in sin. God's purpose is now realized through those who by faith are of the line of Adam through Seth, not through Cain.

Adam's descendants through Cain fall under the heading, "Cain went out from the presence of the Lord" (4:16). But even so, they made great progress in many areas. The line of Cain looks impressive on the surface. But it was progress without God, which is not true progress. The descendants of Seth fall under the heading, "Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord" (4:26). With a couple of exceptions, not much is said of these men or their achievements, except that they had children, lived so many years, and died. The line of Seth reminds man of his mortality. But through Enoch, it also shows the hope of eternal life for those who walk with God. Also, it was through the line of Seth that God raised up Noah, and through him came Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and, eventually, Jesus Christ.

Moses wrote these words to the Israelites who were poised to enter and conquer Canaan. They were prone to rebel and return to Egypt or to join the idolatry and immorality of the pagan nations around them. Moses wrote Genesis 4 and 5 to show them that they needed to follow the line of Seth, not the line of Cain. Moses is saying to his people, "As you go into a godless culture that will have many temptations, including the temptation to make progress without God, be careful! Remember that you will die, and that you live in this fallen world by calling upon the name of the Lord, by walking with God."

His words are just as practical for us as they were for ancient Israel. We, too, live in a pagan world that tempts us to forget the shortness of life and join its progress without God. God is saying, "Remember as you live in this glittery world that you will die, and walk with Me."

Because of sin we all must die, but those who walk with God have the hope of eternal life.

1. Because of sin we all must die.

God's word is always true. Satan is a liar. God said, "... in the day that you eat from [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil], you shall surely die" (2:17). Satan said, "You surely shall not die!" (3:4). Chapter 5 shows who was right. God's warning was no idle threat. The repeated phrase, "and he died" sounds like a funeral bell, tolling eight times throughout the chapter (5:5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, and 31). It tells us that ...

A. All must die.

We need to feel the force of God's judgment upon sin. This chapter follows the godly line of Seth, of those who called upon the name of the Lord, not of those who went out from the presence of the Lord. But even so, we read over and over, "and he died, ... and he died." Even though they lived long lives, they died.

We don't like to think about death, especially our own! It used to be more common. Jonathan Edwards, at 19, resolved among other things "to think much, on all occasions, of my dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death." In the Middle Ages it was common for scholars and other men of prominence to

keep a skull on their desk to remind them that they, like the victim, must die. The Latin name for such a skull was a *memento mori*, "a reminder of death" (James Boice, *Genesis* [Zondervan], 1:238). It sounds gruesome to us. But Genesis 5 is God's *memento mori*, His reminder to us that all must die. Why?

B. Sin is the cause of our death.

Death entered the human race through Adam's disobedience. Paul put it, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12). "For the wages of sin is death ..." (Rom. 6:23). When Adam and Eve sinned, instantly they died spiritually--they were separated from God. But also they began to die physically. With them it was a longer process than it is with us, but it was set in motion the minute they sinned. Seth, born in Adam's likeness, inherited a sin nature which he passed on to his descendants. Adam's sin brought death to all.

Critics scoff at the long lives attributed to the patriarchs. While there could be some gaps between the names listed, there is no reason, except an arbitrary bias against the Bible, to doubt the ages given. There is good reason to believe that before the flood, conditions on earth were different than they are now. A cloud canopy could have protected the early human race from the aging process known to be accelerated by the ultraviolet rays of the sun. Also, God is the one who determines the length of man's life (Gen. 6:3; Pss. 90:3, 10; 139:16). If God determined that the early human race live to be 900 to populate the earth rapidly and to advance civilization, and later He shortened that life span to teach us the penalty for sin, who are we to scoff at the historical record?

The point is that sin is the cause of death in the human race. A popular idea promoted in our day is that death is a natural part of life. We are born, move through life, and then we die. Man is just like the animals, going through the life cycle. But that line of reasoning dilutes the reality that death is God's judgment on our sin. Death is not natural. It is a horrible reminder that we have wronged the holy God and that someday we all must stand before Him. We can try to block it out of our minds, we can joke about it, but we are still going to die. The only way to live wisely is to keep in constant focus that whether I have less than 24 hours, or a few

years, it is certain that I am going to die and stand before a holy God. I'd better be ready to meet Him!

If this genealogy just recorded that each man lived, had some children, and died, it would be a bleak picture. But in the middle of this dismal pattern, there is a bright exception: "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (5:24). If that were the only verse in the Bible about Enoch, what actually happened to him might be a mystery. But Hebrews 11:5 makes it plain that "Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death." With Enoch the death bell did not sound. His life shows that ...

2. Those who walk with God have the hope of eternal life.

There are two distinctive things about Enoch: He walked with God (mentioned twice); and, he did not die; God took him.

A. We must walk with God.

(1) *A walk with God is begun by faith.* The world takes note of those who achieve in science or business or entertainment. It makes celebrities of notorious criminals. But God takes note of the person who walks with Him by faith. Hebrews 11:5-6 states, "By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." Enoch believed God; God rewarded him accordingly.

The starting place of a walk with God is to come to Him in faith. You must trust in the sacrifice He has provided for your sin in the Lord Jesus Christ, just as Abel, by faith, offered to God a bloody sacrifice, and was accepted on that basis (Heb. 11:4). You must put off any trust in your own goodness or works and rely solely on Christ's death as the just penalty for your sin.

(2) *A walk with God is helped, but not guaranteed, by a godly family.* The people in this chapter are related to one another, as are the people in chapter 4. The contrast of the two families, Cain and Seth, shows us the importance of godly families. In just seven generations from Adam through Cain we come to the arrogant, violent Lamech. In seven generations from Adam through Seth we find

the godly Enoch and, later, Noah. It's not certain, but Enoch could have begun his 300 year walk with God after the birth of his son, Methuselah (5:22). Often the birth of a child makes us think about the kind of life we're leading and the kind of example we're going to set for our children. God uses that to bring us to repentance. God often works through families to call people to Himself.

There's both good news and bad news in this observation. The good news is that any person can be the start of a godly line that will be used to turn many from their sin. Although you may have come from a godless family, if you will walk with God, your children and grandchildren can have the privilege of being raised in a godly home, where the love of Christ reigns. Of course that means that those of us who have had the privilege of being raised in a Christian home have a great responsibility to carry the torch ourselves and to hand it on to our children.

That leads to the bad news--that it only takes one generation to turn a godly family into a godless one. At the time of the flood (four generations from Enoch), Noah and his sons were the only ones on the face of the earth whom God saw fit to save. Enoch and his descendants had other sons and daughters than those mentioned here by name (5:22, 26, 30). Apparently they followed the way of the world, not the way of the Lord. Consequently they all came under God's judgment in the flood. Matthew Henry notes, "Grace does not run in the blood, but corruption does. A sinner begets a sinner, but a saint does not beget a saint" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Revell], 1:47).

Did you know that the famous writer, Ernest Hemingway, came from a solid Christian family? His parents and both sets of grandparents were evangelical Christians. As a boy he sang in the choir, tithed his allowance, and read through his King James Bible. Yet he rebelled against his upbringing and became notorious for his profligate, godless life. Lonely, bitter, and depressed, he shot himself at age 61. His descendants are thoroughly pagan.

But, thankfully, it can go the other way. Hudson Taylor, founder of the great China Inland Mission, traced his spiritual roots through his mother back to his great-grandfather who was converted from a worldly way of life. Today, Taylor's great-grandson is a prominent missions leader. Millions of souls have been won to

Christ because Taylor's great-grandfather established a Christian home.

What about you? Are you walking with God and raising a godly family who will walk with God? If you are single, I cannot overemphasize the importance of your marrying a mate who will join you wholeheartedly in walking with God and raising up children who walk with God. But even then it is not easy. That leads to a third observation:

(3) *A walk with God is distinct from the crowd.* Enoch stood out in his day. He lived at the same time as the lustful, boastful murderer, Lamech (they are both the seventh generation from Adam). Jude 14-15 records what Enoch prophesied: "Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him." He warned the ungodly of God's coming judgment.

That probably didn't make Enoch the most popular fellow of his day! People like to hear upbeat messages on how they can succeed and be happy. They don't like to be confronted with their ungodly ways. But the closer a man walks with God, the more he realizes how ungodly his own heart is, and how ungodly his own generation is. As he grows in holiness, he stands out as distinct from the crowd.

Thus a walk with God is begun by faith; it is helped, though not guaranteed by a godly family; it is distinct from the crowd. Finally,

(4) *A walk with God is not spectacular.* Can you imagine how we would write the biography in our day of a man who was translated bodily to heaven without dying? We certainly wouldn't title it, "The Man Who Walked With God." We might call it "The Man Who Flew With God." We're so caught up with the sensational and the shallow, but we ignore the things that are truly sensational in God's sight. Walking with God for 300 years in the midst of an ungodly generation is what counts with God.

Walking is a graphic word picture of the spiritual life. It is not the quickest or flashiest way to get someplace. But it's the way God

ordained. Walking is a steady progression over time toward a goal (“Pilgrim’s Progress”). To walk with God means that our lives are going the same direction God is going. We are yielded in obedience to Him.

Walking with God also pictures intimacy and fellowship. Walking with a friend is a time for talking, for getting to know one another better, for sharing the things that are happening in your lives. Walking with God is a daily process of growing more intimate with God as you go through life. Of course you have to do your own walking. Someone else can’t do it for you. You must take the initiative, effort, and time necessary to walk with God. Enoch’s life shows that if we walk with God ...

B. We gain the hope of eternal life.

It’s interesting that the most godly man in this genealogy has by far the shortest life--365 years. (The next shortest is Lamech--777 years.) Walking with God is not a guarantee of a long life on earth; it is a guarantee of eternal life with God. In Enoch, as Calvin points out, there is “an instruction for all the godly, that they should not keep their hope confined within the boundaries of this mortal life” (*Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], 1:232).

Enoch is also a type of those who will be alive at the Lord’s coming and who will be taken directly to heaven without dying. This is the blessed hope of every believer, to be caught up “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:13-17).

Those who do not walk with God do not have the hope of eternal life, but only the fear of judgment. Enoch prophesied of God’s coming judgment, and he did it through more than just his preaching: He named his son Methuselah. The most likely meaning of that name is, “When he is dead, it shall come.” What does that mean? Apparently God revealed to Enoch that He was going to send His judgment upon that godless world. Enoch responded by naming his son, “When he is dead, it shall come.” What would come? God’s judgment! If you figure out the chronology of the ages listed in Genesis 5 (assuming no gaps), you discover that Methuselah died the same year that God sent the flood to destroy the earth.

Do you know why Methuselah lived longer than any other person in recorded history? Because his life is a testimony of the patience and grace of God, who "is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). In the context Peter is discussing the flood and the certainty of God's judgment. Peter is arguing that just as men then scoffed for almost 1,000 years at the fact that judgment had not come, so in the last times men will scoff and say that the Lord is not coming. But, just because judgment is delayed does not mean that it is not certain. Rather, it reveals God's great patience and mercy. Repent before His certain judgment falls!

Conclusion

Years ago a London merchant named Henry Goodear scoffed at the Bible. But one Sunday, just to please his niece, he went to church. The young lady was greatly disappointed when she learned that the pastor's message was based on Genesis 5. As she listened to the boring list of names being read, she wondered why God had permitted the pastor to pick that text on the day her uncle came to church. As they walked home, little did she know that every step of her uncle's feet and every beat of his heart seemed to repeat the gloomy refrain, "And he died! And he died!"

The next day, Goodear could not concentrate on his work. That night he searched for a family Bible and read over those words, "and he died, ... and he died." Goodear thought, "Now I'm living, but someday I too must die, and then where will I spend eternity?" That very night he asked the Lord Jesus to forgive him and make him his child. (Adapted from "Our Daily Bread," Fall, 1978.)

The Bible says that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Don't assume that your date with death will be many years in the future. It could be today. Jesus said, "He who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). That promise is for you to claim today!

Discussion Questions

1. Should we, like Jonathan Edwards, think often about our own death? Is this a biblical focus?
2. What are some further implications of the “walk” metaphor of the spiritual life?
3. Are we guaranteed that if we raise our children properly, they will grow up to follow the Lord? What is the most important ingredient in raising godly children? What is the most difficult aspect of raising godly children?
4. Christians today are too caught up with this world and not caught up enough with the world to come. Agree or disagree?

Copyright 1996, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.