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Death Reigns From Adam to Moses

An email note asked me to explain Paul's statement that death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam. I admitted that I had no clear explanation. Through the years I had heard different explanations. However, later consideration of the context brought to light the simplicity of Paul's meaning, in my opinion. I sent the brother a few lines pointing to the explanations that I will try to give in this briefly below. Maybe you reached these conclusions long ago.

Paul's words: *"Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned— sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come"* (Rom. 5:12-14 RSV).

In the early chapters of Romans, Paul sets out to show that all persons who have lived needed the gospel because all were in sin. Adam sinned and brought death because he had a direct command from God which he disobeyed.

Long afterwards God chose a race of people and gave them a code of law through Moses. Law cannot bring life but its violation brought death. All sinned so that death reigned over those under a covenant of law. So death reigned over Adam and Israel.

What about all those living between Adam and Moses? They had no direct command or code of law from God. Where there is no law, there is no violation or consequence. Were they free from sin and death? No, they were sinners also even though they violated no command or code like Adam and Israel violated. How could that be?