

What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?

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Probably most Christians who have read the first three chapters of Genesis assume that they know what happened in the Garden of Eden. But there is a problem. It is very difficult to approach this subject without a bias. This is because most theological systems, in order to make their systems work, have made assumptions about what happened in Eden that are not found in the Bible. These assumptions are taught in seminaries and find their way into sermons and Christian books without being challenged. In fact, anyone who does challenge them, even with sound biblical support, runs the risk of being labeled a heretic. Well, I am going to run that risk in this article and, in doing so, pop a few balloons full of hot air theology.

Assumption 1: A Probation Period

Almost all Reformed and many other theologians say that God placed Adam and Eve into the Garden of Eden and gave them a limited period of time—a probationary period—during which they needed to prove themselves by obedience.

These excerpts are from the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Walter A. Elwell, ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984):

Scripture indicates that God placed the first man in the garden under a probationary arrangement whereby his obedience and loyalty to God would be tested.

(s.v. "Fall of Man" by B. A. Demarest)

Having created man in his own image as a free creature with knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, God entered into covenant with Adam that he might bestow upon him further blessing. Called variously the Edenic covenant, the covenant of nature, the covenant of life, or preferably the covenant of works, this pact consisted of (1) a promise of eternal life upon the condition of perfect obedience throughout a probationary period....

(s.v. "Covenant Theology" by M. E. Osterhaven)

Where is the probation period in the Bible? Despite one of these quotes saying, "Scripture indicates that," the probation period is not found in the Bible. The Bible says or implies nothing of the kind; in

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fact, what the Bible says is not even close. The Bible says, "And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:8-9).

Then, after telling us about the geography of Eden, the Bible tells us, "And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. 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 2:15-17). That's it. The Bible says nothing about God telling Adam that he had to prove himself by not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for a day or a week or a month or a year or one hundred years. The Bible simply says that God told Adam not to eat from that one, particular tree. No time was specified or implied. The inescapable conclusion is that the probation idea is the fabrication of the mind of a theologian or theologians who wanted the account of Adam and Eve to match an artificially constructed theological system.

Assumption 2: A Promise of Eternal Life for Obedience

An idea directly related to the assumption concerning the probation period is that God promised Adam eternal life for obedience. Theologians say that if Adam had remaining obedient for his entire probationary period, God would have rewarded him with eternal life. The Westminster Confession of Faith used by Presbyterians, in Chapter VII and Section II, states: "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience." In his commentary on this, Gordon H. Clark writes, "It is also to be noted that the reward of Adam's perfect obedience was to have been eternal life for his posterity as well as for himself" (Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1965] 86).

Where is this in the Bible? Again, it is not found in the Bible at all. God created Adam and Eve as living souls (Genesis 2:7). There is nothing extraordinary about the Hebrew behind this term. It is also used of the animals, such as in Genesis 1:24, where it is translated "living creature." It simply means a creature that lives and breathes. But the Bible elsewhere implies that Adam and Eve were created with a life

that would not have ended unless they sinned. In Genesis 2:17, God warned Adam that if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would die. This could possibly mean that if he did not eat from that tree, he would not die. So, we cannot be certain from this Scripture alone. But Romans 5:12, which is speaking of Adam, tells us that by sinning, Adam introduced death into the world: "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" (see also 1 Corinthians 15:21). So, if Adam had not sinned, he would not have died.

But before he sinned, Adam's life was not the same as eternal life. I know that this might sound contradictory, but please bear with me. Eternal life is spiritual life. It is a gift from God on top of natural life (Romans 6:23). It is the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3). It is in Jesus Christ (1 John 5:11). Unlike Adam and Eve, who died when they sinned, those who have eternal life can *never* perish (John 10:28). Adam's life was merely physical life that, without sin, would not have ended in death. Eternal life, on the other hand, cannot ever end. As I will mention with a little more detail later on in this article, those who have eternal life cannot come under the condemnation of the law. Therefore, they cannot die. That's why Jesus considered the physical death believers must pass through as not really death; He called it sleep (Matthew 9:24; John 11:11). He said that those who live and believe in Him shall never die (John 11:26). There is a large body of Scriptural evidence to support this, so I suggest reading our booklet, *Once Saved, Always Saved?* (also called Book P in the TULIP series available here: http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wohg_010.htm).

Some point to Adam and Eve's relationship with God as evidence that they had eternal life. I agree that Adam and Eve had a relationship with God, but it was physical. They saw and spoke with God in the Garden. But Christians have a spiritual relationship with God; the Holy Spirit is actually dwelling in them (Romans 8:9-11; 1 John 4:13).

So, Adam and Eve were created with lives that would not have ended without sin. But it did not fit the Bible's definition of eternal life. Their life might best be described as perpetual life. Even so, it was not completely perpetual. It was perpetual only under the condition that they not sin. Some who agree that Adam and Eve did not have eternal life use the word immortal to describe the life they had. I also have used this word, but it is still somewhat confusing. Their lives were simply deathless, or conditionally perpetual, because death had not yet been introduced through sin. Without sin, their lives simply would

have gone on as they were. And, as we have seen, the common idea that God promised Adam eternal life for obedience is found nowhere in the Bible. He simply told them they would die if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Assumption 3: Adam and Eve Ate from the Tree of Life

Many theologians hardly even address the tree of life. Of those who do, some assume that Adam and Eve regularly ate from the tree of life before the Fall. For example, on R.C. Sproul's website, we read, "...it is easy to see why the Lord chose to supply life to His people by means of the Tree of Life while they lived in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9). Apparently, immortality was the gift to anyone who regularly ate the fruit of the tree (3:22) and, as one commentator notes, the Tree of Life was also an early means of sacramental communication between God and His people" ("The Tree of Life," <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/tree-life/>).

But what we read above is easily debunked by the Bible. In this case, not only does the Bible not say that Adam ate from the tree of life, the Bible gives clear evidence that he did not eat of it. After Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God said, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken" (Genesis 3:22-23). God was not concerned that Adam would return to the deathless life he had before sinning because that life could obviously be removed, as it was after Adam fell. God was concerned that Adam would gain eternal life, which cannot, by definition, be removed.

So, the life Adam and Eve would have gotten by eating of the tree of life was eternal life. By eating it, they would have gained a life that could not be taken away. After Adam's sin, the only way we can now have eternal life is through Jesus Christ, who has made full atonement for our sin. God did not want Adam to have eternal life while he was still in his sin. That's why God blocked Adam's way to the tree of life.

If Adam had eaten of the tree of life before the Fall, Adam would have had eternal life. But since he died when he ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he obviously had never eaten of the tree of life. He did not, and never did have, eternal life.

We can speculate about "what ifs," such as, What would have happened if Adam had first eaten from the tree of life and then eaten

of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? And, Why did Adam never eat from the tree of life? Personally, I think Adam would not have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil once he ate from the tree of life; and that he did not eat from the tree of life because, having never sinned, he did not see the need and, thus, did not have the will to choose eternal life. But these are only speculations. As far as I know, the answers are not revealed in the Bible. But the Bible does clearly indicate that Adam and Eve did not eat from the tree of life. God kept them from doing so by driving them away from it.

Assumption 4: God Made a Covenant with Adam

This is a very commonly believed assumption that is held by nearly all covenant theologians. We have already seen citations that show this. The teaching is that God told Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that Adam would die if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and that he would gain eternal life if he obeyed. This, theologians say, was a covenant of works—reward for obedience; punishment for disobedience.

In his *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Robert L. Reymond, under the subheading, "The Exegetical Basis for the Presence of a Covenant in Genesis 2," writes for his second point of evidence, "Covenant elements (parties, stipulation, promise, and threat) are present" (2d ed., Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998, 430). Wayne Grudem, in his *Systematic Theology*, says the same thing when he writes that "the essential parts of the covenant are all there—a clear definition of the parties involved, a legally binding set of provisions that stipulates the conditions of their relationship, the promise of blessings for obedience, and the condition for obtaining those blessings" (you can read this online here: <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/covofworks.html>).

But there are some fundamental problems with this view. As we have seen, while God certainly did tell Adam that he would die if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God did not promise a reward for not eating from that tree. Adam would merely have continued as he had been. That is not a reward. Thus, one of the major elements that theologians say needs to be in place for a covenant—a reward for obedience—is not there. All God did was tell Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and that he would die if he disobeyed. That is not a covenant. It is simply a command.

Something else that covenant theologians try to brush aside is the fact that the Bible never says that God's dealing with Adam was a covenant. The one proof text theologians refer to here is Hosea 6:7: "But they like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me." Covenant theologians say that "men" here can also be translated "Adam." True, but it can just as legitimately be "men." The Hebrew word for "Adam" and "man" is the same. And there are other possibilities. Notice that after the semicolon, the verse says, "there have they dealt treacherously..." Where is "there"? One answer is that the Hebrew translated "like men" in the King James Version can very well say "at Adam" (a location in the Jordon Valley), or "at Admah" (one of the cities destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah, see Deuteronomy 29:23 and Hosea 11:8). The bottom line is that this verse is simply too questionable to base such a weighty doctrine as the supposed "Covenant of Works" on it.

The Result of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

Theologians usually and correctly teach that when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they became sinful—totally depraved—and brought sin upon all of their descendents. But almost no theologians teach what the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was.

Let me ask you a question. What is a knowledge of good and evil? In other words, what lets you know what is good and what is evil? That's right, law. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was, or represented, the law. It was the one thing in Adam and Eve's existence in the Garden that has law connected to it. God gave them a commandment, a law, not to eat from that tree. It was the tree of the law. So, when Adam and Eve chose the law, they did so listening to the Serpent (Satan—Revelation 12:9; 20:2) and disobeying God. The next time you hear someone preaching the law, ask yourself who he is representing. By the way, God later gave the Ten Commandments and other laws to Israel to make their sins even more obvious to them (Galatians 3:19; Romans 5:20).

Theologians often talk about the innate moral law that we are all born with. Where did this come from? Most theologians will say that Adam was created with it, that it comes from the image of God in which we are created. In an article about the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, Richard C. Barcellos writes, "The theology of these confessions should now be clear. First,

at creation God wrote Moral Law, the Decalogue, in the hearts of Adam and Eve. Second, all men by creation have this same law written in their hearts. Third, this Moral Law was later written upon tablets of stone by God and delivered to Israel through Moses. Fourth, this law stays in effect for all men even after the Old Covenant has been abolished. And fifth, Christ upholds this law 'as a rule of life' (Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, 19:6.) for his church" ("Seventeenth Century Reformed Confessional Theology on the Natural Law and the Ten Commandments" <http://www.reformedreader.org/ccf/17thcontc.htm>). Barcellos is right that these confessions teach this, but this is certainly not what the Bible teaches.

Other articles on this website address the fact that the Ten Commandments that God gave to Israel at Sinai are not the rule of life for Christians and that they were only a shadow of New Covenant law (see, for example, "Dead to the Law" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/deadtothelaw.htm>, "Gadsby's Questions About the Law" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/gadsbylaw.html>, and "Loosed From the Law" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/loosedlaw.html>). Here I will ask this question: "If Adam and Eve and all men have the moral law of God written on their hearts by virtue of their creation, then what can God in Jeremiah 31:33 (also quoted in Hebrews 10:16) mean when He says, "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and will be their God, and they shall be my people"? Obviously, God was speaking of an event future to Jeremiah and a covenant future to Jeremiah. In Jeremiah's day, this was something God had not yet done. Therefore, natural men who are not in the covenant God has reference to cannot have the law written in their hearts.

These same theologians will often also say that Adam and Eve lived in a state of innocence. They don't seem to see that being created with an innate law and being in a state of innocence is a contradiction. Innocence is to be ignorant of good and evil. This is the state in which Adam was created. Thus, Adam was not created with an innate moral law. He had no law whatsoever until God told him not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The Bible clearly says what happened when Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22). Clearly, before he ate from the tree, Adam did not know good and evil. He lived in what we might say was ignorant bliss. He was truly innocent for he was completely

naïve of any standard of good or evil. Then God gave him one standard: Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why? The implication is because the tree was the law and the law will kill you. After he ate from the tree, he knew good and evil. In eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam chose law as a way of life. People have been doing this ever since. They are born with the knowledge of good and evil that comes from the tree—an innate moral sense of right and wrong.

This moral sense from the tree is not at all the same as having God's law written on their hearts from Creation (something the Bible does not teach). If the image of God in man gave him an innate moral law, then man could have been tested on any of those laws. There would have been no need for God's one test command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Rather than giving him law, I believe that God's creating man in His image gave man rationality, the ability to love, self-awareness, and so on that set him apart from all other creatures. Also, we must also see that the sense of right and wrong that man gained from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a far cry from God writing His law on the hearts of born again Christians under the New Covenant.

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 by the law. 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.

Christians who have the law of the New Covenant written on their hearts, however, do not come under condemnation. God does not tell Christians that if they do not obey they will die. Jesus took away our sin and the penalty we incurred for it, and the law of the New Covenant has no penalty attached to it. Notice, for example, Romans 8:1-3: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh."

The Tree of Life

There was another special and symbolic tree in the Garden. It was the tree of life. As we have seen, Adam did not eat from it. God drove him out of the Garden to prevent his doing so. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was also the tree of law and death. Its opposite was the tree of life. What does the Bible contrast with the law? Grace. The tree of life was the tree of grace. By eating from the tree of life, Adam could have freely and graciously obtained eternal life. Instead, he chose law.

This is the pattern that continues today. Carnal man continues to choose the law over grace, and by doing so, he condemns himself. Even those who think of themselves as respectable Christians are falling for Satan's lie that they will not die if they take the law. But it kills them every time. Only those people to whom God gives a change of mind by being born again eat from the tree of life (Revelation 2:7; 22:14).

Now notice these words of Jesus: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you" (John 6:53). Do you see the connection between eating of Jesus' flesh and having life? The symbols Jesus was using in the context of John 6 were manna and bread. That is because these are the symbols God instituted with the nation of Israel, and Jesus was talking to Jews. But the principle is the same. Eat from the tree of life and live; eat from Jesus and live. What does that make Jesus?

Now read Revelation 2:7: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7). Now read Galatians 3:13: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." How did Jesus redeem us from the curse of the law that is the curse of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? He hung on a tree. In fact, the Bible refers to Jesus' cross as a tree at least five times (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; 1 Peter 2:24).

Next read Colossians 2:13-14: "And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way [Greek *mesou*—"midst"], nailing it to his cross."

Jesus was born under the law (Galatians 4:4) and lived it perfectly (Hebrews 4:15; Romans 5:19). But He took our sins, our transgressions of the law, and went to the Cross. Thus, as Colossians 2:13-14 that we just read says, when Jesus was nailed to the cross, so was the law. I believe that while Jesus was on the cross suffering and working for us, the cross was symbolically the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Just as it killed Adam, it killed Jesus. But, unlike Adam, Jesus did not die for his own sins. He was totally righteous. He died for our sins. When He made atonement for our sins by dying, He took the law away and gave us eternal life. What was the cross then? I suggest that it was symbolically the tree of life, and it is from that tree that sinners today must eat to graciously receive eternal life.

With Jesus in Paradise

A few Scriptures back, I referred to Revelation 2:7, which refers to the tree of life as being in the midst of the Paradise of God. The word Paradise is found only three times in the Bible. From Revelation 2:7, we see that Paradise seems to refer to both the Garden of Eden and heaven. In fact, the Garden may be seen as a type of heaven. In 2 Corinthians 12:4, Paul uses Paradise to refer to a place that someone (probably Paul himself) was temporarily taken to, either bodily or in vision. The only other place in the Bible where the word Paradise is found is in Luke 23:43 when Jesus speaks to one of the robbers that were hanged on either side of Him. The one He speaks to is repentant: "And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

Have you ever wondered why Jesus used such an unusual word as Paradise? Why didn't He simply say "heaven"? I think Jesus wanted the robber and us to learn something. John 19:32-33 tell us that Jesus died before the robbers. As I suggested earlier, when Jesus died, His cross became the tree of life. John 19:41 says, "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid." This does not say, as some translations wrongly render it, that the garden was near where He was crucified. The Greek literally says, "In the location (or spot) where He was crucified, there was a garden."

There was a garden, and in the midst of it were three crosses. On one of those crosses hung Jesus. While He lived, making satisfaction to the law for the sins of all who would believe on Him, His cross was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The other two men were dying for

their own sins while Jesus was dying for others (Luke 23:41). But one of those men became a believer. Then Jesus died, removing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from the midst and replacing it with the tree of life. So, there stood the tree of life with the dead body of Jesus in the midst of that garden. And that garden, with its ugly crosses and blood, became Paradise, and those two men symbolized the entire human race. One was dying and heading for the eternal punishment he deserved according to the law. The other, in physical agony, had been given eternal life and was already that day in Paradise on earth with Jesus next to him as he looked forward to Paradise for eternity.

Dear reader, I hope you will see, as did that robber even physically—creating a typological picture for us—that once we have eaten of the tree of life by taking Jesus to be our Savior, we enter Paradise even now with Jesus at our side as we await our eternal reward!

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Romans 8:18