

SESSION 18: LIFE OR DEATH

Genesis 2:15-17

February 18, 2024

In our previous session (vv8-14) God created (“planted”) a garden in Eden, a suitable, beautiful and bountiful dwelling for the first man, Adam. Yahweh populated the garden with every tree that was both beautiful and “good for food” (v9), along with two special trees that He located in “the midst” of the garden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Next Yahweh established a river—He either created the river after the garden, or planted the garden in the path of an existing river—to water and sustain the garden plants and trees, which then branched out into four more rivers, two of which are the Tigris and Euphrates.

Read Genesis 2:15-17.

v15

Then Yahweh God took the man and set him in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. 📖

Verse 15 expands on v8. Here we have the *reason* God set the man in this new garden: to cultivate and keep it.

In our previous study, *Last Things*, I remember questions and discussion about what would be our occupation in the eternal state. Would it be constant, non-stop worship before the throne? Would it be singing, would it be fellowshiping with each other? Just what will we be doing for eternity? Verse 15 may offer us a clue; here in this perfect state of new Creation, before sin enters the picture, man is given work to do. In his “paradise” he will not be idle, but working the soil and managing the garden.

I find it interesting that the Hebrew translated “cultivate” in the LSB and NASB is more literally translated in the NIVs with “work”—as if respective editors suddenly switched places for this verse. For work, toil, even to be in bondage or slavery is what *ob-dah* (aw-VAD) means—a form of the same word used describe the status of Israel in “hard labor” in Egypt.

Matthew Henry

“Man was made *out[side]* of paradise; for, after God had formed him, he put him into the garden: he was made of common clay, not of paradise-dust. He lived out of Eden before he lived in it, that he might see that all the comforts of his paradise-state were owing to God's free grace. He could not plead a tenant-right to the garden, for he was not born upon the premises, nor had any thing but what he received; all boasting was hereby forever excluded.”

“Paradise” is not synonymous with idleness and sloth; “work and duty belong to the perfect state” (Leupold). But we should understand one difference between man’s work in the perfect state and his later fallen state.

Read Genesis 3:17-19.

Because of His rebellion against God, man will remain a tiller of the soil, but now it will be a hard slog. Now, after the Fall, he will have to deal with rocks and weeds, “thorns and thistles” as he ekes out a living, whereas (one can assume) in the perfect state he simply had to “manage” the growing things.

...and keep it.

The Hebrew *shamar* typically means to guard or watch, as a sentry would keep watch on a city or fortress wall. Here, however, it is used in the sense of having charge over, or to look after. No watchful guarding is required in Paradise—not until, that is, sin has encroached, ruining the perfection.

John Sailhamer and a few other commentators take issue with the common translation that implies some measure of labor for the man to sustain the garden. Translating the Hebrew differently, Sailhamer concludes that it should more accurately express, “to worship and to obey.” 📌

Sailhamer’s argument is sound, and other interpreters make the same point. But I believe Keil & Delitzsch express this the best by marrying the two interpretations.

K&D: As nature was created for man, it was his vocation not only to ennoble it by his work, to make it subservient to himself, but also to raise it into the sphere of the spirit and further its glorification. This applied not merely to the soil beyond the limits of paradise, but to the garden itself, which, although the most perfect portion of the terrestrial creation, was nevertheless susceptible of development, and which was allotted to man, in order that by his care and culture he might make it into a transparent mirror of the glory of the Creator. Here too the man was to commence his own spiritual development.

John Sailhamer

“Man is put in the garden to worship God and to obey Him. Man’s life in the garden was to be characterized by worship and obedience; he was a priest, not merely a worker and keeper of the garden.”

According to this viewpoint, we have here the genesis of what the apostle Paul termed our, “service of worship,” and expressed more fully in his letter to the Colossians, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Colossians 3:17). 📖

see also:

1 Corinthians 10:31

Ephesians 6:5-9

In the life of the believer the “spiritual” is never to be detached from the corporeal; for the Christian they are to be one and the same. We are to live—to work, to play, to eat, to rest—as to God. Our whole daily existence is to be offered as a sacrifice of praise and worship to our God.

vv16-17

And Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may surely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat from it; for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

If Genesis were a novel written by man, we would say that these two verses comprise a *foreshadowing* of what will take place in Chapter Three. It does indeed foreshadow the tragedy of Chapter Three, but it also is a worthy and essential commandment of God. His commands are always—*always*—for our good, and here with His first command set down to Adam, God tells the first man that the garden is to be a veritable smorgasbord for him, but there is one tree from which he is *not* to eat: “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

“From any tree of the garden you may surely eat...”

There is nothing wrong with the translation of the Hebrew *kol* as “any” in this portion of the verse, but the ESV and KJVs have it a little better with “every,” which coincides with v1:29 regarding “every plant yielding seed...and every tree...” Same word.

“but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat from it;”

Here is the birth, the inception of free will, of man’s free agency. Were God to create human beings as mere automatons, there would be no need for restrictions (there also would be no true worship); but He did not create us as automatons. While it is true that every believer has been selected by God (Romans 8:30; John 6:44), He grants us all life-choices, so that our faithfulness, our allegiance, our obedience to Him will be by choice—and hence, authentic, from the heart.

As to our previous discussion in class regarding the tree of life, we can only take God at His word. In both Chapters One and Two He states explicitly that *every* plant and tree in the garden is there for the man and woman—except this tree, the tree of knowledge. So we can only conclude from the text that the fruit of the tree of life was available to them as well; v3:22 would seem to indicate that for whatever reason, man and woman did *not* eat from the tree of life.

“...for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

The biblical concept of dying is not the physical extinguishing of breath and life, but separation from God. ❏

Leupold: That separation occurred the very moment, when man by his disobedience broke the bond of love. If physical death ultimately closes the experience, that is not the most serious aspect of the whole affair. The more serious is the inner spiritual separation. ❏

So we might paraphrase this portion of v17 with, *In the day you eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you will no longer be a part of My life.*

I see the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a pivot point—not just for man, but for all of God’s Creation. Turn please to Deuteronomy 30. We could paraphrase these two verses in Chapter Two as God saying, *I’m offering you a choice: life in a bountiful paradise communing with Me, or death.* Even though Yahweh God knows what man’s choice will be, He still leaves it as *his* choice—his decision.

And Yahweh God will offer this choice to man again, this time to the nation of Israel as they are about to cross into the Promised Land. He will command a dramatic illustration of opposing wills: On Mount Gerizim (gher-ee-ZEEM) six tribes from Jacob are arrayed to pronounce the blessings that would be Israel’s if they obey the commandments of Yahweh; on Mount Ebal (ay-BAWL) are arrayed the other six tribes to pronounce the curses that will fall upon them if they do *not* obey Yahweh’s commandments.

What follows in Deuteronomy 27 to 29 is a detailed list of those potential blessings and curses—with heavy emphasis, not surprisingly, on the curses. In Chapter 30 it is assumed that Israel will indeed choose the dark side, as Yahweh explains how He will take them back after their rebellion (vv1-10).

The Hebrew reads, literally, “dying thou shalt die”

Gustav Oehler

“For a fact, after the commission of sin man at once stepped upon the road of death.”

Even so, this will require repentance on their part.

**...[I will do this] when you listen to the voice of Yahweh your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, when you return to Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul.
Deuteronomy 30:10**

He concludes Chapter 30, using language similar to the situation in Genesis Two, by imploring them to “choose life.”

Read Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

Throughout history God has tested the devotion of His people and their leaders. Abraham passed the test on Mt. Moriah; Job passed the test and remained true through tortuous tribulation; King Saul failed his tests repeatedly; Christ Jesus did not waver for a moment through His trials.

Yahweh God planted two trees in the garden, two options for Adam and Eve: life or death.

Paul Kretzmann (1921): This tree was placed there for the exercise of man’s obedience toward God, and the transgression of God’s command would result in man’s becoming mortal, becoming subject to death. From the day that he would eat of this forbidden fruit, the germ of death would enter his body, and his final dissolution would be inevitable. If man had stood this test, he would have been confirmed in his possession of Paradise, and through his eating of the tree of life he would finally have been enabled, without pain and death, to enter into the life of eternity. Death is the consequence of disobedience, of sin.

Adam, with Eve, failed the test miserably, with cataclysmic consequences for both humanity and the earth on which it dwells.

It is unthinkable, but what if the Son of God had failed *His* test? What if He had been persuaded by Satan in the wilderness? What if He had snuck away from Gethsemane, and avoided the cross?

It is unthinkable, but if Jesus had failed His test, then the consequences of the first Adam’s failure would have remained without remedy for all eternity.

There is no better reason than that—that Jesus *did* remain true, to ensure *our* devotion and obedience to Him.

SESSION 18

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v15

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God's Testing

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