

Creation Science Rebuttals

Answers in Genesis Daily Feature

Genesis 2:17 – Death Before Sin

2 May 2007

Review by [Greg Neyman](#)

Answers in Genesis' Daily Feature for 2 May 2007 discussed death before sin, which is a common point of disagreement among creationists.¹ As Terry Mortenson of Answers in Genesis points out, many old earth creationists claim that Adam's sin only brought spiritual death. This is a true statement. However, Mortenson misunderstands the importance of this issue. In typical young earth fashion, it is blown out of proportion. In reality, it does not matter how you interpret this verse. It can also mean physical death, and it still presents no problem for the old earth creationist.

To prove the point that physical death was the intent of the author of Genesis, Mortenson turns to the Hebrew text. Since this discussion of the Hebrew is not important to the matter at hand, there is no need to discuss it. How can I say this? All old earth creationists believe that Adam died. It did not occur immediately after he ate the fruit, but about 930 years later. When Adam sinned, one of the consequences was being kicked out of the Garden of Eden. He no longer had access to the Tree of Life, which Adam required in order to live physically forever. Thus, although he did not drop over dead, the process of death began for him. In this sense, what Mortenson claims is true. The language does seem to indicate that physical death is involved. However, physical death only works within an old earth creationist understanding, as you will see.

Spiritual Death Only?

Yes, many old earth creationists claim that only spiritual death occurred, and you will see this claim many times on this website. However, we also recognize the significance of Adam being kicked out of the Garden, with the consequence that he would no longer have access to the Tree of Life. The point that old earth creationists are making is that although physical death occurred eventually, this is not what is important about Adam's sin. Spiritual death, which leads to separation from God, is the only thing that matters when we consider eternity. Paul says in Romans 8:38–39,

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is clear that even physical death will not keep us from the love of God. Therefore, physical death has no sting. On the other hand, if you are dead spiritually, without the saving blood of Jesus, you can be separated from the love of God when God judges you for your sins.

The key issue, and the reason why young earth creationists attack this topic, is because of animal death before Adam's sin. It is clear from the fossil record that animals died throughout the last few hundred million years of earth's history. It is impossible to come up with a viable young earth scientific model explaining the fossils, so Mortenson and others attempt to use Scriptures to argue their point. The main verse they turn to is Romans 5:12:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—

They look at this verse and claim that all death, including animal death, was a result of the Fall of Man. However, this verse says nothing about animal death. The context of the verse is discussing man, not animals. It says "death spread to all men." It does not say "death spread to all animals." Mortenson states that "In context Paul is clearly speaking of physical death." I agree. But the context also is clearly speaking of mankind, not animals. In short, there is no Scriptural justification to claim that there was no animal death prior to Adam's sin.

The Grandmother Hypothesis

This leads us to a final point to consider. One of the popular claims of young earth ministries is that a grandmother, rocking on her porch and reading her Bible, would read the creation story, and come to the conclusion that the earth was created in six 24-hour days. I agree. Since Mortenson believes Genesis 2:17 indicates physical death, let's apply this "grandmother hypothesis" to it. If you were told that you would die if you ate the fruit, what would you think? You would obviously think of physical death. After all, we are physical beings. The grandmother would have no choice but to conclude that Adam would die physically, and he would die the same day that he ate the fruit. However, Adam and

Eve did not die that day...they died many years later. Did God lie? Of course not. There are only two solutions to this problem, and both favor an old earth interpretation.

First, there is the issue of spiritual death. This is what God meant. Adam and Eve clearly were spiritually dead when they ate the fruit. Such an interpretation eliminates the problem of Adam and Eve not physically dying the instant they ate the forbidden fruit.

The second option is that they did die physically in the same day that they ate the fruit. How can this be? The days of creation were many millions of years long, and God is now in His seventh day of rest. They died during this seventh day of rest, as have all of the people in the Bible, and all of us up until this very instant. Since it is clear from [Hebrews 4](#) that we are still in this seventh day, this argument is solid.

Either way, you end up solving this issue by resorting to an old earth creationist interpretation of the Fall. The young earth "grandmother hypothesis" method of Scripture interpretation does not work on Genesis 2:17.

Interpreting the Bible is not always as simple as grandma would like! We must use every means available to understand it, including the observations of science. He created the scientific laws, and the world we live in, thus they are useful tools to use when interpreting Scripture. A geologic rock layer may not be the equivalent of the Word of God, but it was laid down by the laws that God put into place, therefore it is a valid testimony to how God created the world.

Conclusion

Although old earth creationists frequently claim that only spiritual death happened at the Fall, we fully understand that physical death was an indirect result of the Fall. And since all the verses are in the context of mankind, and do not address the animal kingdom, even if you interpret Genesis 2:17 to include physical death, it makes no difference to the old earth creationist.

¹ *Genesis 2:17--"you shall surely die,"* published at

<http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/2007/05/02/dying-you-shall-die>