

# Tree of Life: Real or Metaphor?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | October 31, 2009



*I was wondering if the "Tree of Life" is literal or metaphoric? My question comes from reading Gen. 3, specifically verses 22-24*

*And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." 23 So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. 24 After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.*

*My problem is the idea that if Adam & Eve continued to eat the fruit of the Tree of Life they would "live forever" as sinners. Doesn't this contradict the idea that sin pays its own wage, & eventually leads to death, etc?*

*Thanks in advance. R*

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God created mankind (Adam and Eve) in Eden with “conditional” immortality. In other words, their continued existence depended upon continued harmony with God and the principles God designed life to operate upon. Adam and Eve did not possess within themselves immortality and thus their bodies were subject to the slow process of aging and death. It is my understanding that the Tree of Life provided real physical nurturance of a sort that provided regenerating and vitalizing power to the human body. As long as they had access to the Tree of Life they would not suffer from physical disease or aging.

One possible explanation has to do with our human genetic make up. When the cells of our body reproduce our chromosomes must copy themselves so that the new cells have the necessary genetic information in order to function. With each cell division the ends of the chromosomes, called telomeres, shorten. When the telomeres shorten to a critical degree cell division can no longer take place and ultimately death ensues. It is believed this is one of the keys to aging. One possibility is that the Tree of Life provided enhanced activity of enzymes that protect telomeres and prevent their destruction and dysfunction thus preventing the aging process.

However, even if my current understanding is correct, and a sinner’s access to the Tree of Life prevented physical aging and disease, it would not prevent damage to mind and character. The Tree of Life would not prevent Cain from crushing Abel’s head with a rock, nor the degradation of society because of sin. It would only allow sinners, who wish to abuse themselves and others to avoid natural aging, but not war, nor the suffering of heart and mind which comes as a consequence of sin and being out of harmony with God’s law of love. Thus it would not prevent death from sin, but merely perpetuate the misery and suffering of humanity in sin. Therefore, God in mercy removed the Tree of Life from earth.

Genesis gives us insight into this as we realize that the antediluvians, even though possessing much more vitality because of mankind’s recent access to the Tree of Life, were not prevented from terminating life early by violence and war. How merciful on God’s part that human life has shortened and we do not have Hitler’s and Stalin’s and other despots of history living for 900 years.

We must also remember that all life originate with God, not with a plant - including the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life was merely a vehicle God created to provide ongoing sustenance to the physical bodies of the human race. But God could have provided direct life giving energy from His very presence, if He so desired. We see evidence for this from Moses, who, though 120 years of age when he died, did not die from aging as the Scripture says, “And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated” (Dt 34:7).

Finally, Jesus Christ is now our Tree of Life. He is the “bread which came down from heaven” and all who partake of Him will receive eternal life. First, we experience healing of our hearts, minds and characters through Jesus Christ and His Spirit. And then, when He returns and all is made new we will again eat of the Tree of Life and experience perfect physical health for all eternity in a never ending love relationship with God!