

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 2 Had Adam and Eve Eaten from the Tree of Life?

Throughout the history of interpretation, positions varied on whether Adam and Eve had eaten from the tree of life in paradise prior to their fall. If so, the banishment from Eden would mean they were cut off from this source of continued nourishment; if not, the exile would prevent them from taking their first bite of the tree. In the following very brief essay, I make a case that Adam and Eve had already eaten from the tree of life prior to the fall, citing historical precedence for this view among the fathers. Though this view fits best with the overall narrative of creation-fall-redemption presented in *The Fathers on the Future*, it is not essential to its eschatological framework.

But was the tree of life a literal tree and did eating from the tree somehow convey real physical or spiritual regenerative power? Besides some who mistakenly understood the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to refer to the same tree, some early church fathers often understood the trees as strictly allegorical (e.g., Origen of Alexandria) or as conferring physical or physical/spiritual immortality in a sacramental sense—God himself being the source of the power to confer life. Furthermore, Calvin’s much later comments seem to slip into a quasi-docetic direction, which we should avoid:

I know that certain writers restrict the meaning of the expression here used to corporeal life. They suppose such a power of quickening the body to have been in the tree, that it should never languish through age; but I say, they omit what is the chief thing in life, namely, the grace of intelligence; for we must always consider for what end man was formed, and what rule of living was prescribed to him. Certainly, for him to live, was not simply to have a body fresh and lively, but also to excel in the endowments of the soul.¹

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 117–118.

Calvin's other comments on Genesis 2:9—followed by a fair number in the Reformed tradition—that the tree was strictly symbolic or sacramental and that it possessed no physical regenerative power—tends to neglect the fact that Genesis 3:22 suggests it would have been possible for Adam and Eve to continue to eat from the tree and live forever in their fallen state of sin.

In light of this, I proceed with the assumption that, in fact, the Genesis narrative points to an actual tree with actual power provided by God to impart physical incorruptibility to those who partook of its fruit and (apparently) its leaves (Ezek 47:12; Rev 22:2).

That Adam and Eve had, in fact, eaten from the tree of life prior to the fall is a view advanced by both contemporary and ancient interpreters. Redford notes, “Apparently the fruit of the *tree of life* would preserve life as long as one ate of it regularly. Man's sin, however, barred him from the tree of life (Genesis 3:22–24); for the consequences of human beings living forever as sinners would be devastating beyond imagination. Not until the perfect world of Heaven will we again have access to that tree (Revelation 22:2).”² And Kissling concludes, “The tree of life presumably ensured the ongoing life of humanity. By continuing to eat of it, humans would live forever.”³ Thus, many hold that Adam and Eve had eaten from the tree of life prior to succumbing to the temptation of the serpent.⁴ As a consequence of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were then banished from *continuing* to eat from the tree of life; the result, of course, was eventual death.⁵ A plausible case can be made, then, that their extraordinary long lives—and those of their descendants for several generations—was a result of the residual effects of having eaten from the tree of life.

The view that the tree of life had been given for regenerative nourishment and that the first humans had eaten from the tree prior to the fall and exile from paradise has roots in the patristic period. Theophilus of Antioch (c. AD 180) wrote:

And God having placed man in Paradise, as has been said, to till and keep it, commanded him to eat of all the trees,—manifestly of the tree of life also; but only of the tree of knowledge He commanded him not to taste. And God transferred him from the earth, out of which he had been produced, into Paradise, giving him means of advancement, in order that, maturing and becoming perfect, and being even declared a god, he might thus ascend into heaven in possession of immortality. For man had been made a middle nature, neither wholly mortal, nor altogether immortal, but capable of either; so also the place, Paradise,

² Douglas Redford, *The Pentateuch*, vol. 1, Standard Reference Library: Old Testament (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2008), 24.

³ Paul J. Kissling, *Genesis*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2004), 159.

⁴ Cf. also Edwin Good, *Genesis 1–11: Tales of the Earliest World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 44, who notes, “Eating the fruit of the tree of life was never prohibited. Only the tree of knowledge was forbidden. In fact, trees of life are rather frequently found in mythologies of various cultures, and they are mostly not the kind of tree whose fruit eaten once conveys permanent life on the spot. One must be piecing at a tree of life all the time in order to maintain life indefinitely, and Adam and Chavah had clear access to it. But no longer.”

⁵ For the alternate view that Adam and Eve had not, in fact, eaten from the tree of life, see, e.g., Jan Christian Gertz, *Genesis 1–11*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven: Peeters, 2023), 173–74;

was made in respect of beauty intermediate between earth and heaven. (*To Autolytus* 2.24 [ANF 2])

Likewise, in the fifth century, Augustine wrote:

The first man, of the earth earthy, was made a living soul, not a quickening spirit,—which rank was reserved for him as the reward of obedience. And therefore his body, which required meat and drink to satisfy hunger and thirst, and which had no absolute and indestructible immortality, but by means of the tree of life warded off the necessity of dying, and was thus maintained in the flower of youth,—this body, I say, was doubtless not spiritual, but animal; and yet it would not have died but that it provoked God’s threatened vengeance by offending. And though sustenance was not denied him even outside Paradise, yet, being forbidden the tree of life, he was delivered over to the wasting of time, at least in respect of that life which, had he not sinned, he might have retained perpetually in Paradise, though only in an animal body, till such time as it became spiritual in acknowledgment of his obedience. (Augustine, *Civ.* 13.23 [NPNF¹ 2])

Later Augustine concludes, “In Paradise, then, man lived as he desired so long as he desired what God had commanded. He lived in the enjoyment of God, and was good by God’s goodness; he lived without any want, and had it in his power so to live eternally. He had food that he might not hunger, drink that he might not thirst, the tree of life that old age might not waste him” (*Civ.* 14.26 [NPNF¹ 2]). In another text he writes:

For Enoch and Elijah were not reduced to the decrepitude of old age by their long life. But yet I do not believe that they were then changed into that spiritual kind of body, such as is promised in the resurrection, and which the Lord was the first to receive; only they probably do not need those aliments, which by their use minister refreshment to the body; but ever since their translation they so live, as to enjoy such a sufficiency as was provided during the forty days in which Elijah lived on the cruse of water and the cake, without substantial food; or else, if there be any need of such sustenance, they are, it may be, sustained in Paradise in some such way as Adam was, before he brought on himself expulsion therefrom by sinning. And he, as I suppose, was supplied with sustenance against decay from the fruit of the various trees, and from the tree of life with security against old age. (Augustine, *Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 1.3 [iii] [NPNF¹ 5])

Later in the same text Augustine argues:

When the first human beings—the one man Adam, and his wife Eve who came out of him—willed not to obey the commandment which they had received from God, a just and deserved punishment overtook them. The Lord had threatened that, on the day they ate the forbidden fruit, they should surely die. Now, inasmuch as they had received the permission of using for food every tree that grew in Paradise, among which God had planted the tree of life, but had been forbidden to partake of one only tree, which He called the tree of knowledge of good and evil, to signify by this name the consequence of their discovering whether what good they would experience if they kept the prohibition, or what evil if they transgressed it: they are no doubt rightly considered to have abstained from the forbidden food previous to the malignant persuasion of the devil, and to have used all which had been allowed them, and therefore, among all the others, and before all the others, the tree of life. For what could be more absurd than to suppose that they partook of the fruit of other trees, but not of that which had been equally with others granted to them, and which, by its especial virtue, prevented even their animal bodies from undergoing change through the decay of age, and from aging into death, applying this benefit from its own body to the man's body. (Augustine, *Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 2.35 [xxi] [NPNF¹ 5])