

The Book of Beginnings – Studies in Genesis

LESSON XVII : GENESIS 2: 15-17 – THIRD PARAGRAPH: ADAM’S TASK IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

“Having interrupted the narrative with the portrayal of the garden, its rivers and related matters, the Bible now reverts to the last point reached in the story prior to this description – the theme of the second half of v. 8. In doing so, Scripture adds certain details (to serve and to guard) in accordance with its usual practice of making first a general statement and setting forth the particulars thereafter.” [Cassuto, 121]

“Here the writer picks up the narrative thread from v 8 by repeating some of the same phraseology, a characteristic device of Hebrew narrative signaling the end of a digression.” [Wenham, 67]

Adam’s Task in the Garden of Eden:

‘¹⁵ Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”’ (Gen 2:15-17 NKJV)

Rabbi Cassuto’s translation (almost identical as NKJV):

v. 15 – The Lord God took / the man

and put him in the garden of Eden / to serve and to guard.

v. 16 – And the Lord God commanded / the man, saying,

“Of every tree of the garden / you may freely eat;

v. 17 – but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil / you shall not eat,

for in the day that you eat of it / you shall surely die.”

v. 15 – ‘The Lord God took the man’ — ‘Man’ is our Hebrew word ‘adām so this could be translated as either ‘The LORD God took the man ...’ or ‘The LORD God took Adam ...’. Looking at the various translations however none translated this using the first man’s name ‘Adam,’ the word ‘man’ is used by all our English translations with very minor exceptions: ‘the human,’ CEB [Common English Bible] and ‘the person,’ CJB [Complete Jewish Bible].

‘and put him in the garden of Eden’ — ‘Put him’ is the Hebrew word *yānāch* meaning ‘to rest,’ i.e., ‘and caused him to rest.’ Compare that with v. 8, ‘The Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put [sûm] the man whom He had formed.’ Rabbi Cassuto says the words are synonymous in this case and both merely signifies ‘and He put him;’ although I would think there would be some significance in the change in terms. Most of our translations have ‘put him’ with a couple English versions reading ‘and he settled him’ (Amplified Bible, Common English Bible, Evangelical Heritage Version, New American Bible Rev Ed); a few read ‘and placed him’ (Christian Standard Bible, Good News Translation, Holman Christian Standard Bible, International Standard Version, Living Bible, NET, New Living Translation); but the Tree of Life Version actually reads ‘and gave him rest in the Garden of Eden’ and Young’s Literal Translation has ‘and causeth him to rest in the garden of Eden.’ “It means ‘placed’ in this passage, but the choice of a

word with overtones of 'rest' is important. The word is [of a different Hebrew form of the word] used in Psalm 95:11 to refer to rest in the Promised Land. Genesis 2:15 thus must have some connection with the biblical teaching of Sabbath rest in the Bible." [Ross, 124]

'to serve and to guard.' — Apparently it was later after the Lord had formed Eve that He gave a broader commission to exercise dominion over the entire creation (1:28, 29).

WHAT DOES 'GUARD' MODIFY? — There is a grammatical issue with the last word 'to keep, to guard.' The word has a feminine pronoun suffix but the word we would assume it modifies, 'garden,' is masculine; therefore it cannot mean 'to dress and keep the garden.' Some believe it refers back to the feminine word 'ground' in v. 8, 'to dress and keep the ground;' but Rabbi Cassuto says this is not acceptable because the noun is too far away from our verse. Most therefore take it as an infinitive (the basic form of a verb without inflection or tense; it is always preceded by the word 'to'; e.g., 'to love, to eat, to run' are all infinitives); thus, 'to serve and to guard.'

What follows is the meaning of these two words, first addressed separately and then as a pair.

'to serve' — The Hebrew word is 'āyad meaning 'to serve, to labor, to work, to till.' It is a very common verb and is often used of **cultivating the soil** (2:5; 3:23; 4:2, 12, etc.) or **other labor** (Isa 19:9) or **service to one another** (29:15; 31:6). The word is commonly used in a religious sense of **serving God** in priestly texts, especially of the tabernacle duties and the Levitical sacrificial service (Exod 3:12; Num 3:7-8; 4:23-24, 26, etc.). The verb and its noun derivative 'service' frequently describe **Levitical duties in tabernacle and temple worship** (Exod 38:21; Num 3:10; 18:6; 1 Chron 24:3, 19; 2 Chron 8:14). ***'It describes the worship and service of the Lord, the highest privilege a person can have.'*** ***Note man was placed in the garden as a servant; he is not only to be served but to serve.*** [Wenham, 67; Mathews, 209; Hamilton, 171; Ross, 124]

'to keep, to guard' — The Hebrew word is shāmar. The basic meaning of this root is 'to exercise great care over' to the point, if necessary, of guarding. The same word is used in the following chapter to describe the cherubs who 'guard' the way to the tree of life (3:24). It is the word used by Cain when he arrogantly replied to the Lord, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (4:9); it is used of shepherds 'keeping the flock' (30:31); it is used of the Lord protecting His people, such as when He spoke to Jacob when he saw the ladder ascending to the heavens, 'Behold, I am with thee and will keep thee.' (28:15, 20); and frequently of 'observing' covenant stipulations (Gen 17:9, 10; 18:19; 26:5; Deut 4:6; 7:12; 29:9). For priestly duties it describes the faithful carrying out of God's instructions (Lev 8:35) and the caretaking of the tabernacle (e.g., Num 1:53; 18:5). [Wenham, 67; Mathews, 209f] ***"There is no thought involved of protecting it from external enemies, of which there were none, but rather that of exercising a careful and loving stewardship over it, keeping it beautiful and orderly, with every component in place and in harmonious relationship with the whole."*** [Morris, 92f]

THE TWO WORDS TOGETHER – 'to serve, to labor' + 'to keep, to guard.' — These two words are often found together, especially in the context of Levitical duties for the tabernacle (Num 3:7-8; 8:26; 18:5-7), thus again suggesting a relationship between Eden and the tabernacle. They have also been found together in ancient Mesopotamian manuscripts to refer to serving the gods (in the case of the pagan teachings, man was created to serve the needs of their various gods rather than the Lord creating man for fellowship and taking care of the needs of man). [Wenham, 67; Mathews, 209f; Waltke, 87] ***"Whatever activity the man was to engage in in the garden***

(and there was no reason to doubt that physical activity was involved), it was described in terms of spiritual service of the Lord.” [Ross, 124]

THE DOCTRINE OF WORK — *“Moses now adds, that the earth was given to man, with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation. Whence it follows, that men were created to employ themselves in some work, and not to lie down in inactivity and idleness. This labour, truly, was pleasant, and full of delight, entirely exempt from all trouble and weariness; since, however, God ordained that man should be exercised in the culture of the ground, he condemned, in his person, all indolent repose. Wherefore, nothing is more contrary to the order of nature, than to consume life in eating, drinking, and sleeping, while in the meantime we propose nothing to ourselves to do.” [Calvin, 125]* *“It should be noted that even before the fall man was expected to work; paradise was not a life of leisured unemployment. Both [the Babylonian creation narrative] Enuma elish and the [Akkadian cosmological creation myth] Atrahasis epic also speak of man being created to work to relieve the gods. But the biblical narrative gives no hint that the creator is shuffling off his load onto man: work is intrinsic to human life.” [Wenham, 67]* *“Here we have the foundation of the doctrine of work. Man was to work even before sin. But the work would not have been stressful work. Adam was to look after the garden. He wouldn’t have had to deal with weeds or thorns, as they didn’t exist until after sin and the curse. The ground wasn’t cursed at this stage, so plants would grow in perfect conditions. We will find that because of sin, work changed to being laborious – hard. After sin, man would have to deal with weeds, thorns, and a cursed ground. Man has always been required to do work. And in the New Testament in a fallen world, we are told, ‘For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat’ (2 Thessalonians 3:10).” [Ham, 106; see also Morris, 92; Waltke, 87; Hamilton, 171; Skinner, 66]*

v. 16 – ‘And the Lord God commanded the man, saying,’ — This is the first time the verb ‘to command’ is used in Scripture, *and assumes man’s freedom to choose and thus his formed moral capacity.*

“Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat;’ — Several items worth noting. **First, the generosity of our God.** “In the garden God gives to Adam ample permission (*any tree*) but only a single prohibition (*but from the tree...*). We shall see in our discussion of ch. 3 that the serpent discreetly avoids any reference to God’s generous permission but magnifies God’s prohibition, which is the reversal of these two verses.” [Hamilton, 172] **Secondly, note the ‘tree of life’ is originally not forbidden to be eaten.** “The meaning of the verse is apparently this: had man remained in his state of simplicity, he could have attained even to immortality, but on account of his disobedience, the Lord God decreed that he should not be able to achieve this state; hence He forbade him then to eat of the tree of life, and expelled him from the garden of Eden, so that he would not transgress this second prohibition even as he had transgressed the first.” [Cassuto, 124] Not only was Adam free to eat of any tree as desired but also from any ‘*herbs, plants, vegetables, etc.*’ (1:29).

NOTE THE UNIQUE POSITION OF MAN IN GOD’S CREATION — *“The man is addressed personally as an individual, ‘thou.’ Unlike all other created life, the human being is endowed with special significance as a ‘person’ in the eyes of his Creator, enjoying a privileged depth of divine-human communion. This is likewise evidenced in the creation narrative, where God spoke to mankind, unlike the creatures, when bestowing his blessing of procreation (1:28). All human life merits respect and protection by virtue of the esteemed position to which God has exalted it.” [Mathews, 210]*

v. 17 – ‘but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,’ — The restriction is blunt and firm. ‘Never eat, you shall not eat’ which resembles the form of the ten commandments. The word ‘not’ being followed by the imperfect is the Hebrew way to state long-standing prohibitions. A motive clause is added, ‘for on the day you do (eat), you will certainly die,’ a characteristic of Hebrew law.

ADAM WAS THE ONLY TRUE ‘FREE MORAL AGENT’ AMONG ALL OF MANKIND —

The command was given, the warning clear, and Adam had a moral choice to make without any prior bias. Of all of mankind, he and he alone is the only true free moral agent to be found; all of his progeny will inherit his inclination towards sin (Rom 3:10-18; 5:12-21; Eph 2:1-3; et. al.).

“Seeing so much evidence of God’s love, Adam should naturally assume that any instruction coming from God would likewise evidence His love, and therefore willingly obey it.... There was every reason (based on love, not fear) for man to conform to God’s command, and no reason to disobey. *If he did disobey, he would be without excuse. Yet he did have a choice, and so was truly a ‘free moral agent’ before God.* This was the simplest imaginable test of man’s attitude toward his Creator. Would he ‘trust and obey’ because he loved the one who had shown such love for him; or would he doubt God’s goodness and resent His control, rejecting and disobeying His word on even such an apparently trivial restriction as one forbidden fruit in a whole paradise of abundant provision?” [Morris, 93] *“[T]he Scripture represents man since the fall as ‘dead through ... trespasses and sins’ (Eph. 2:1), as incapable of true obedience (Rom. 8:7 – ‘not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be’), and as needing to be ‘created in Christ Jesus for good works’ (Eph. 2:10).... Since without love to God no act, emotion, or thought of man can answer the demands of God’s law, the Scripture denies to fallen man all power of himself to know, think, feel, or do aright. His nature therefore needs a new-creation, a resurrection from death, such as God only, by his mighty Spirit, can work; and to this work of God man can contribute nothing, except as power is first given him by God himself.”* [Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: Three Volumes in One* (Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA) 1907, 32nd printing, 1979; page 521f] “The immediate concomitant of the first sin ... was the total depravity of human nature. This contagion of his sin at once spread through the entire man, leaving

no part of his nature untouched, but vitiating every power and faculty of body and soul. This utter corruption of man is clearly taught in Scripture, Gen. 6:5; Ps. 14:3; Rom. 7:18.” [Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids MI) 1938, reprinted 1982; page 225f]

concomitant – adjective: accompanying, especially in a subordinate or incidental way; noun: something that accompanies or is collaterally connected with something else

‘for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’ — Those knowledgeable in Hebrew grammar say this is strongly emphatic. The form is the same as in v. 16 where the same noun is repeated twice, the first being an ‘*infinitive absolute*,’ a form that is most commonly used to ‘*express intensity or certainty of verbal action*.’ In v. 16 the emphasis was on the liberality of God’s provision, ‘*eating, you may eat*’ (or as it is properly translated, ‘*you may freely eat*’); here in v. 17 the emphatic nuance underscores the forewarning of the Lord, ‘*in dying, die*’ (or as it is properly translated, ‘*you shall surely die*.’). **“This is a Hebrew method of intensification, and a notion of certainty is reinforce.”** [Currid, 105; see also Wenham, 67f; Mathews, 211; Gill, 19]

DID ADAM TRULY DIE WHEN HE ATE OF THE TREE? — All the commentators recognize the difficulty of this verse, namely that Adam did not die when he ate of the tree (at least as we would understand death). Various explanations have been given:

'In the day' may be interpreted to mean *'in the time,'* as we saw in v. 4, *'This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.'* While on the whole this is an acceptable explanation, it must still be explained how Adam then went on to live for another nine hundred and thirty years.

'There shall come upon you afflictions cruel as death, the beginning, as it were, of death.' But as will apply to most of these explanations, the words *'you shall die'* must be understood as stated and it is not possible to regard it merely an allusion to severe affliction.

'You shall not attain the measure of life that was originally allotted to you.' But as stated above, the words *'you shall die'* cannot be understood as a mere reduction in the length of Adam's original life span.

'You will be deserving of death, which shall overtake you when I shall will it.' This is the view of Victor Hamilton, who translates v. 17 as *'but from the tree of the knowledge good and evil you shall not eat of it, for as surely as you eat of it you shall die.'* Hamilton explains this as an idiom meaning *'for certain,'* as in 1 Kings 2:37, 42 where Shimei is threatened with death if he were to cross the brook Kidron, which did happen but not on the very day he exited his house. He also says the traditional translation may be retained to mean *'you are doomed to die,'* that is, a deferred penalty. "The verse is concerned not with immediate execution but with ultimate death." [Hamilton, 172] While acceptable, I believe there to be a better explanation.

'You are immortal, but hereafter you shall become mortal.' But there is no indication Adam was immortal as created; in fact, it seems the Lord had provided the tree of life to provide mankind with immortality. Rabbi Cassuto believes this verse means a form of this explanation; i.e., that when Adam ate of the forbidden tree that the Lord decreed that man would never be able to eat from the tree of life and will therefore be unable to achieve immortality. By stating *'you shall die'* the Lord was speaking simply as to a child who would not understand a fuller explanation.

The words *'you shall die'* is here an exaggerated statement, the purpose of which was to restrain man from sinning. But it is not conceivable that the Bible attributes to the Lord something which would not correspond to His true intention; if that be true, how are we to rely on anything the Lord has stated?

The words *'you shall die'* was intended literally, but afterwards the Lord tempered the severity of the judgment because the man repented. But there is no mention of the Lord recognizing Adam's repentance and therefore reducing the punishment. This is the view of John Skinner: "The simplest explanation is that God, having regard to the circumstances of the temptation, changed His purpose and modified the penalty." [Skinner, 67] Again, if that be so, how are we to rely on anything the Lord has stated?

But I believe the simplest explanation is that which we have often heard among those of our Reformed Evangelical circles, namely, that *'Adam died spiritually immediately, then later physically.'* While I believe that explains it all in a nutshell, a look at some more involved explanations might be beneficial:

Allen Ross: *“This concept of death needs thorough study because it is a major theme in Genesis, especially in the early part of the book concerning the spread of sin. **The basic idea seems to be more of alienation or separation rather than cessation or annihilation.** The death predicted here certainly includes physical death, as Genesis 5 attests, but it involves more than just physical death, in view of the struggle in the surrounding context between God’s blessing and cursing. The man, who was created with spiritual capacity and provided with God’s bounty, must therefore live obediently in his service of God, for his life is at stake.”* [Ross, 125]

Henry Morris: *“Rejecting God’s love would necessarily raise a barrier between man and God, and would break the sweet fellowship for which man was created. **Since God was the source of life itself, real life is found only in communion and connection with the divine life. The essence of death (the opposite of life) is therefore separation from God (the opposite of fellowship with God).... The primary warning is undoubtedly that of spiritual death, or separation from God. But this also entails physical death, since God is the source of physical life as well as spiritual life.... Even though he continued functioning biologically for over nine hundred years, he dies both spiritually and (in principle) physically the very day he rejected and disobeyed the word of God.**”* [Morris, 94]

John Gill: *“**Moreover, a spiritual or moral death immediately ensued; he lost his original righteousness, in which he was created; the image of God in him was deformed; the powers and faculties of his soul were corrupted, and he became dead in sins and trespasses; the consequence of which, had it not been for the interposition of a surety and Saviour, who engaged to make satisfaction to law and justice, must have been eternal death, or an everlasting separation from God, to him and all his posterity; for the wages of sin is death, even death eternal, Rom. vi. 23.**”* [Gill, 19]

John Calvin: *“It appears to me, that the definition of this death is to be sought from its opposite; we must, I say, remember from what kind of life man fell. He was, in every respect, happy; his life, therefore, had alike respect to his body and his soul, since in his soul a right judgment and a proper government of the affections prevailed, there also life reigned; in his body there was no defect, wherefore he was wholly free from death. His earthly life truly would have been temporal; yet he would have passed into heaven without death, and without injury. Death, therefore, is now a terror to us; first, because there is a kind of annihilation, as it respects the body; then, because the soul feels the curse of God. **We must also see what is the cause of death, namely, alienation from God. Thence it follows, that under the name of death is comprehended all those miseries in which Adam involved himself by his defection; for as soon as he revolted from God, the fountain of life, he was cast down from his former state, in order that he might perceive the life of man without God to be wretched and lost, and therefore differing nothing from death. Hence the condition of man after his sin is not improperly called both the privation of life, and death.** The miseries and evils both of soul and body, with which man is beset so long as he is on earth, are a kind of entrance into death, till death itself entirely absorbs him; for the Scripture everywhere calls those dead, who, being oppressed by the tyranny of sin and Satan, breathe nothing but their own destruction. Wherefore the question is superfluous, how it was that God threatened death to Adam on the day in which he should touch the fruit, when he long deferred the punishment? For then was Adam consigned to death, and death began its reign in him, until supervening grace should bring a remedy.”* [Calvin, 127f]