

Was there death before the Fall?



Reader's Note: This response references "**How does the Fall fit into evolutionary history? Were Adam and Eve historical figures?**" and "**At what point in the evolutionary process did humans attain the 'Image of God'?**", both of which are suggested before reading further.

The Importance of the Fall

The Fall, found in [Genesis 3](#), is a central part of Christian belief. In this story, Adam and Eve disobey God's command by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. For their disobedience, God curses Adam and Eve and casts them from the Garden of Eden ([Genesis 3:23](#)). Death is central to the curse, since Adam and Eve had originally been warned that eating from the forbidden tree would surely cause them to die ([Genesis 2:17](#)). But if BioLogos contends God created through evolution, then surely death occurred before the Fall. How then can BioLogos be compatible with scripture?

First, we must clarify where — or when — the Fall fits into evolutionary history. Several interpretive approaches to the Fall exist, two of which consider it an actual historical event. The question of death before the Fall applies only to those interpretations because this question does not arise in an "Everyman" reading of the text. Therefore, this discussion will assume the Fall was a historical

event. Given that assumption, this response addresses the more specific issue of death before that event.

Animal Death Before the Fall

In the standard picture of biological evolution embraced by BioLogos there exists insurmountable evidence of death before the Fall. Humans appear very late in the history of life, so the fossil record clearly shows that many creatures died before humans appeared. In fact, compelling evidence exists that many entire species had already become extinct. Dinosaurs are the most famous example, but there are thousands of others. However, the curse of Genesis 3 was that Adam and Eve, and not animals, should die. Therefore, the animal death that BioLogos acknowledges is entirely compatible with Christian doctrine. It can even be argued that Adam must have been familiar with the reality of animal death, or he would not have understood God's warning. Granting that animal death before the Fall is consistent with Christian doctrine, we consider the question of human death before the Fall.

New Testament Scriptures About the Fall

The significance of death before the Fall depends heavily on our interpretation of God's warning in [Genesis 2:17](#). Several New Testament scriptures illuminate the meaning of this text. In [Romans 5:15-17](#), the Apostle Paul considers the consequences of sinful living:

“For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”¹

In [1st Corinthians 15:21-22](#), Paul writes: “For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.” With these verses in mind, we consider two interpretations of the Genesis narrative of the Fall.

The Fall Results in a Spiritual Death

One interpretation contends Adam and Eve experienced spiritual death as a result of their disobedience. The physical death of humans is thus not a result of the Fall and could therefore have occurred beforehand.

This view notes that God warned Adam and Eve that they would die “in the day that [they] eat from [the tree]” ([Genesis 2:17](#)), and yet they did not experience immediate physical death. Therefore, the death cannot have been physical. Significantly, however, they did experience an immediate spiritual death — their perfect relationship with God was now broken. Spiritual rather than physical death seems to be the clearest meaning of the biblical text in this case.

The New Testament expands this theme, where the spiritual death resulting from Adam’s sin is contrasted with the new spiritual life provided by Jesus’s victory. This is seen most clearly in [Romans 5:15](#), as quoted above. When the entire passage is considered, it seems Paul is comparing the spiritual death resulting from Adam’s sin with the gift of complete life offered by Jesus.

On the other hand, [first Corinthians 15](#) has certainly been interpreted as implying that Adam’s death was indeed physical. By contrasting and comparing Christ and Adam, Paul seems to be highlighting Adam’s fall as the cause of physical death for the whole human race. However, the eternal life that Paul says Christ provides is much more than the mere earthly life we experience now. We are left with the impression that Paul must mean something more than simple physical death. A reasonable reading of Scripture does not demand the conclusion that human physical death was a direct consequence of the Fall.

In this discussion, we emphasize that many Christians believe the Bible is God inspired and thus contains a meaningful human dimension. The belief that the Bible is God dictated — which reduces the human contribution to insignificance — is popularly known as fundamentalism or biblical literalism. In articulating the implications of the former view, where the biblical authors play a meaningful role, we note the apostle Paul, although inspired by God, wrote his letters within the context of his own time and culture. There was a common language, common understanding of both history and the natural world and generally accepted meanings for the words Paul used. If Paul, along with his original audience, knew nothing of the scientific evidence for human death before the Fall, it stands to reason that Paul would believe likewise. If human death did precede the Fall, Paul’s use of Adam’s curse in first Corinthians 15 is still perfectly understandable given his cultural context.

For reasons like this, a healthy interpretation of Scripture must avoid proof texting, or the habit of creating grand theological structures on single verses of Scripture, or even phrases within verses. First Corinthians 15 is the only Scripture that can be taken to directly address Adam’s physical death, and even there it does so only by way of illustration for an entirely different

message: Christ's resurrection brings us new life. To make this single verse into a scientific authority on the history of death in the human race is dangerous and presumptuous, given the massive evidence to the contrary. Christians throughout history have confirmed the Scriptures need not be authoritative on science, natural history or in other areas not pertaining to salvation. Outside knowledge from the natural world informs our understanding of theology as well, as we learned painfully through the Galileo Affair.

A Physical Death

Many people are still inclined, however, to connect physical death to the Fall. After all, Adam's curse concludes with the fate of returning to the dust from which he came ([Genesis 3:19](#)):

"By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return." ²

However, the amount of death in the evolutionary process leading to humans is overwhelming and must be considered. To connect human physical death to the Fall, we must be clear about what it means to be human. It is argued that bearing *God's* image is not a matter of our physical appearance but a matter of our capacity to love both God and others, to have dominion over the Earth and to have moral consciousness. In this way we might distinguish between *Homo sapiens* and the image-bearing creatures that we might call *Homo divinus*. While *Homo sapiens* might have a similar body structure or physical capabilities of *Homo divinus*, the latter exists in God's image.

With this critically important distinction, BioLogos is thus compatible with the belief that part of Adam's curse was the onset of physical death for the human race, because the human race in the full *Imago Dei* really began with Adam. Although many human-like creatures lived and died before the Fall, these *Homo sapiens* did not yet bear the image of God. After the bestowal of God's image, there was no death of *Homo divinus* until after the Fall. As soon as image-bearing humanity fully emerged through God's creative process of evolution, no member of that species experienced death until after the Fall.

The associated story of the Tree of Life also poses interesting questions. For example, if image-bearing human beings did not experience death until after the Fall, was this due to their access to the Tree of Life? Had the first humans not sinned, would they have experienced everlasting life? Or

did the Tree of Life offer a different quality of life rather than actual longevity?

The Scriptures are not explicit on these points. In fact, the Genesis narrative remains provocative and intriguing even after centuries of reflection. There is also an interesting connection between the Fall and the Tree of Life which has not yet been mentioned. After Adam and Eve are cursed for their disobedience, [Genesis 3:22-23](#) reads:

"Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" – therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken." ³

This passage is clear that the gift of everlasting life was lost as a result of the Fall. First, *Homo sapiens* became *Homo divinus* as the result of the gift of free will and a direct relationship with God. *Homo divinus* might have been the first being to have the potential to be immortal and not die. However, whether immortality was a natural part of *Homo divinus* or merely an offer that was extended, *Homo divinus* misused their free will. Part of their subsequent curse was that immortality was withheld, bringing both spiritual and physical death to humankind. This perspective is compatible with the belief that physical death was a result of the Fall.

Conclusion

BioLogos offers an account of the Fall that fits comfortably with a range of reasonable and conventional interpretations of Scripture. There are no scriptural reasons to deny the presence of animal death before humans appeared. And the most reasonable interpretation of Scripture is that the death referred to in Romans and first Corinthians is spiritual death, not physical death. But BioLogos, despite affirming the generally accepted scientific story of origins as God's method of creation, is also compatible with the idea that human death did not occur before the Fall as long as the definition of fully manifest humanness is not granted until Adam appears.

Consulted Experts:

The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Pete Enns](#) in drafting this response.

Notes

1. Romans 5:15-17 (NIV).

2. Genesis 3:19 (NASB).
3. Genesis 3:22-24 (NASB).

Further Reading

Books

- Alexander, Denis. *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* Oxford: Monarch Books, 2008.
 - Lamoureux, Denis. *Evolutionary Creationism: A Christian Approach to Evolution*. Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008.
 - Lamoureux, Denis. *I Love Jesus and I Accept Evolution*. Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009.
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