

YOU SHALL SURELY DIE

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In the Garden of Eden, Jehovah delivered one solemn prohibition to man. God commanded Adam saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 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**” (Genesis 2:16-17, emp. added). The tree of the knowledge of good and evil that stood in the midst of the Garden was off limits to Adam and Eve. God prophesied that disobedience on their part would bring death “in the day” it was eaten. However, the Genesis text does not reveal an instantaneous physical death on the part of the first sinners. Adam lived a total of 930 years (Genesis 5:5), and Scripture indicates that most of those occurred after the transgression in the Garden of Eden. Is such consistent with Genesis 2:16-17? Was God mistaken in saying, “in the day that you eat of it [the fruit—EL] you shall surely die”? Why is it that Adam did not drop dead the very day he ate the forbidden fruit?

For Genesis 2:17 to represent a legitimate contradiction, one first would have to assume that the phrase “**in the day**...you shall surely die” must refer to an **immediate** death occurring on the very day a certain transgression has taken place. The available evidence shows, however, that the Hebrew idiom *b^áyôm* (“in the day”) means the **certainty** of death, and not the **immediacy** of it. For example, King Solomon once warned a subversive Shimei: “For it shall be, **on the day** (*b^áyôm*) you go out and cross the Brook Kidron, know for certain you shall surely die; your blood shall be on your own head” (1 Kings 2:37, emp. added). As the next few verses indicate, Shimei could not have been executed on the exact day he crossed the Brook Kidron. Solomon did not call for him until after Shimei had saddled his donkey, went to king Achish at Gath, sought and retrieved his slaves, and returned home (approximately a 50-60 mile round trip). It is logical to conclude that this would have taken more than just one day (especially considering a donkey’s average journey was only about 20 miles a day). It was only after Shimei’s return from Gath that King Solomon reminded him of his promise saying, “Did I not make you swear by the Lord, and warn you, saying, ‘Know for certain that **on the day** you go out and travel anywhere, you shall surely die?’ ” (1 Kings 2:42, emp. added). Solomon understood that even though he executed Shimei sometime after the day he crossed Brook Kidron, it still was proper to refer to it as occurring “on the day.” As Hebrew scholar Victor Hamilton noted, this phrase (in Genesis 2:17, 1 Kings 2:37, 42, and Exodus 10:28ff.) “is underscoring the certainty of death, not its chronology” (1990, *The Book of Genesis*, p. 172). Thus, it is logical to conclude that when God said, “in the day...you shall surely die,” He did not mean Adam would die on the exact day of his transgression, but that his death would be certain if he ate of the forbidden fruit.

A second problem with the skeptic’s assertion that Genesis 2:17 contradicts 5:5 is that it assumes the “death” mentioned in 2:17 is a physical death. The Bible, however, describes three different kinds of “deaths”: (1) a physical death that ends our life on earth (Genesis 35:18); (2) a spiritual death, which is separation from God (Isaiah 59:1-2; Ephesians 2:1); and (3) an eternal death in hell (Revelation 21:8). It seems one cannot be certain which death is indicated by the phrase, “for in the day that you eat of it you will surely die.” Realizing that Adam sinned against the Almighty in the Garden and became “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1; cf. 1

Timothy 5:6), it is possible that the death spoken of in Genesis 2:17 is a spiritual death. If this is the case, the reason Adam did not physically drop dead on the very day of his transgression was because God's prophecy was referring to a spiritual death, not a physical one.

When Adam chose to follow his own desires instead of God's will, he cut himself off from God. Without a doubt, man perished spiritually on that day. But, equally certain is the fact that God's punishment for that sin was a physical death—a death that would occur centuries later. Exactly which death God meant in his prophecy is uncertain. (Perhaps He was referring to both.) Whichever is the case, we can be sure that no contradiction exists.