

Do Plants Experience Death?

On the surface this may seem like a silly question. After all, it seems very obvious that plants die. This happens all the time (sometimes in spite of our best efforts to keep those plants alive). However, this creates a theological problem. The Bible teaches that death came into the world through sin:

Romans 5:12: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:”

This means that before Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, there was no death. Yet God gave plants as food to both Adam and the animals:

Genesis 1:29-30: “And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.”

Eating a plant obviously destroys it. Yet we're told that death is an evil thing that God will one day defeat:

1 Corinthians 15:26: “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”

God is clear that death is an enemy. It wasn't a part of the

universe when He originally created it, and it won't be a part of the new Heaven and Earth that He will create after the final day of judgment:

Revelation 21:4: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

This raises a question. If death entered the world because of sin, and if people and animals were given plants for food, then where does that leave us?

In order to answer that question we must go back and revisit our original assumption that plants die. Are plants alive the same way that people and animals are? Do they experience death the way that people and animals do? For that matter, what does the Bible mean when it speaks of death?

It's important to note that the Bible doesn't say that plants die. Instead, over and over and over again, it says that they wither and fade:

Psalm 37:2: “For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.”

Psalm 90:5-6: “Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.”

Psalm 102:4: “My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread.”

Psalm 102:11: “My days are like a shadow that

declineth; and I am withered like grass.”

Psalm 129:6: “Let them be as the grass upon the housetops, which withereth afore it groweth up:”

Isaiah 19:6: “And they shall turn the rivers far away; and the brooks of defence shall be emptied and dried up: the reeds and flags shall wither.”

Isaiah 40:7: “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.”

Jonah 4:7: “But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.”

Matthew 13:6: “And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.”

Matthew 21:19: “And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away.”

Why is there this distinction? It's because plants don't have the breath of life in them. That's what makes a creature alive and able to experience what the Bible refers to as death:

Genesis 2:7: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a

living soul."

Genesis 6:17: "And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die."

Genesis 7:15: "And they went in unto Noah into the ark, two and two of all flesh, wherein is the breath of life."

Genesis 7:22: "All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died."

The Bible has given us a very specific definition of the type of death that didn't originally exist, and which God will one day destroy. Death happens when the spirit leaves the body:

James 2:26: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

This is a critical distinction. Both people and animals have spirits that live on after death:

Ecclesiastes 3:21: "Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?"

However, plants don't possess a spirit. This means they're not alive the same way that people and animals are. If the definition of death is the spirit leaving the body, then plants can never die in that sense because they don't have a spirit at all. They can only wither and fade, which isn't death in the Biblical sense.