

Food for Thought—Trees

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Jesus made frequent use of object lessons and images—bread, seeds, lilies, water, shepherds, salt, and many more. One image used many times in the Bible is the image of trees. A godly man, we are told, is like a tree planted by the waters. One day, we are told, the trees of the field shall clap their hands (whatever that is, I am so looking forward to seeing it). The kingdom of heaven, Jesus says, is like a tiny seed which grows into a woody plant large enough for birds to nest in. In heaven, there will be a tree of life whose leaves will be for the healing of the nations. Trees are in the Bible from the first book to the last.

Since the Bible describes the God's people as trees planted by the waters, let's take a closer look at the parallels between trees and the Lord's followers.

Trees, for one thing, are a sign of life. In Kentucky, where I live, trees are everywhere. Why? Because the climate here provides plenty of water. We do have droughts (we're having one right now), but in general, we get plenty of water. Our trees are a sign of the prevalence of this source of life, water. In the plains states and in desert country, if you see

trees on the horizon, it's an important sight (especially if you are lost or have been walking a long time), for it almost always means water—a creek, a river, or humans with a well or other means of providing enough water for trees. My husband grew up in a small town in Eastern Oregon, high desert. There, every single tree in town was there because someone cared enough to water the tree every day (except in winter) for 2 to 3 years (that's how long it takes for roots to go down deep enough to find the water table. The very fact that people wanted trees badly enough that they were willing to make that 2-3 year commitment is probably a lesson in itself. Anyhow, in a dry country, seeing a tree is evidence of life-giving water. And in both Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17, the man who is a follower of the Lord is compared not just to a tree, but to a tree planted by the waters. The life of the tree is a sign of the life (water) it's plugged into. Hopefully when people look at us, they get a glimpse of something different, the Lord's life into which we are plugged and which can spring up within us.

Trees are not only an indication of life, they are also a source of many life-giving things. They produce the oxygen we breathe in and remove the toxin of the carbon dioxide we breathe out. Hopefully the Lord will use us to remove toxins from the atmosphere around us—if kindness, humility, truth, wisdom, etc. come out of a person, that lowers the concentration of toxins in the spiritual atmosphere around them. We also need to be vigilant to detoxify for our own sakes. Jesus said we would know whether things were good or bad by seeing what kind of fruit they bear, and that is such a helpful guide. Whether it's what we're watching on TV or simply a thought or attitude we allow to rattle around in our minds over and over, if it's bearing bad fruit (the tv show making us feel slimed or the bad attitude making us unkind to others) we are to recognize those as toxins and stop them.. And the words that come out of us (just like the oxygen released by the tree leaves) should be ones that bring life, encouragement, wisdom, kindness, truth.

Another important work of trees is that of preventing soil erosion. Their roots hold on to the soil, helping to prevent the soil, with its vital nutrients, from blowing away. This not only helps the trees, but also is vital for the earthworms that live in the soil, for the grass that grows from the soil, for

the rabbit who depends the grass and so on. God too calls on us to preserve and share good things—like the householder who brings things out of his treasure house of beauty—things both new and old. God expects us to notice what's good and to hang onto it and show it to and share it with others—wisdom, stories, experiences, beautiful things, both old and new (Matthew 13).

And there are more things that trees do to produce or support life as well. One obvious thing is that they provide food, and taken as a whole, trees give balanced nourishment—essential fats and proteins from nuts and olives, antioxidant vitamins and sugars from their fruits. We too are supposed to be people of balance. Another thing they do is provide shelter—both to the creatures who make their homes in trees and also shelter in the form of shade. And it's very cool that the shade trees provide is a tad cooler than man-made shade. (The leaves on a hot day release some evaporating water, and that process removes a bit of the heat, making the shade of a tree cooler than the shade of a carport or other manmade structure. Some trees are even the source of some medicines (like the quinine that can treat malaria) and spices (like cinnamon). We too are meant to bring healing and pleasantness to those around us.

Another great thing about trees is that they have something to offer in every season. In the summer, they provide shade and shelter. Hopefully we too provide shelter. Can people come to us with their burdens and know we won't make fun of them or won't act like we don't give a flip or won't gossip about them? If so, we are a place of shelter and refuge like the trees in summer.

In the autumn, trees put on a display of beauty which provides encouragement as we face the coming winter (and the maturity of most nuts and many fruits). Fall is also a reminder of God's timing. The reds and oranges, and yellows of autumn are in the leaves all the time, but they only become visible when the tree begins to head toward dormancy for the winter. The lack of chlorophyll (the source of the green color) as this process winds down allows us to see the other colors that were there all along, and God timed this whole process so that we would see the glorious color display when we especially need it, a good cheerful thing as we approach winter. We often can see God's good timing in our lives—perhaps not right when an event is happening, but later we can look back and see that the timing had been good.

Even in winter, trees give us wordless, beautiful messages. The evergreens of course are reminders of life when all may seem bleak. But what about the deciduous trees who lose their leaves? They do something very cool indeed. With the leaves gone, we can see the branches much better. And it is impossible not to see that, overall, trees are pointing to the sky. They point up. Hopefully we too point to the sky, to God.

Spring obviously is the reminder that there is life after death. In the middle of winter it feels like there will never be life again. It feels as if blossoms and leaves were a figment of our imaginations or existed but are now gone forever. Spring every year reminds us that those feelings are incorrect and not to be relied on. Life *will* come after death. Hopefully people can see hope and joy in us (I think of the trees of both fall and spring here); when they do, they are seeing the life that is our source.

And God will use us (if we let Him), as he uses trees, in every season of our lives—not matter how young or how old. For the past couple of years I have worked in a nearby hospital as a sitter, and one of the patients who has impressed me most was an elderly woman who couldn't walk on her own and who could barely speak, but her sweetness was luminous. It shone out of her, and she was completely unaware of it. There is no stage of life in which God will not use us to make an impact on those around us.

Let's look at two scripture passages which compare us to trees.

The first is Jeremiah 17: 7-8, and it says "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose hope is the Lord, for he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; But its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit." This tree bears fruit even in drought because it is planted in the right place—by the waters. Its roots are plugged into a source that doesn't depend on transitory

rain patterns. This passage also makes it clear that we will go through droughts (and all manner of hard times). Jeremiah was often prophesying and telling people about the rough times that were coming. And even in this time period, when Judah's doom was fast approaching, Jeremiah speaks of the followers of the Lord as individuals who will bear great fruit even in the midst of harrowing times (Daniel will be a great living example, and so will others whose names we don't know but whom God knew well). And in this passage, what makes the man like a tree planted by the waters is his hope, his hope in the Lord, not his hope in Judah or anything else.

The other famous passage is in the first Psalm: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the set of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither, and everything he does shall prosper."

One thing about the tree that is planted by the waters is that it was, well, planted. Someone chose that spot. We may not be able to control what year we were born into or what family we were born into, but we do have some control over where we plant ourselves. We can choose to draw near to the scriptures and so many other influences for good. This scripture passage in Psalm 1 sheds light, I think, on things we can do to help ourselves, or sort of plant ourselves, by the rivers of water. Perhaps I should say it tells us about things that will keep us away from the life-giving water.

The passage mentions first what sort of counsel we listen to. Do we really take the perspective Jesus took on the world, or do we just listen to what the world has to say? What does the world say? How about "you gotta look out for number one." That's really bad advice. How about "You only live once!" That is not true, is it? We live twice, and the second time will be much longer than the first. So if we want to be planted by the waters, we need to pay attention and *not* get our counsel from the world.

The passage also speaks of not standing in the way (an old word for *road* or *path*) of sinners. Are we hanging out on Sin Road? I think this is probably talking about the sins that are obvious—adultery, sexting, etc. These are sins which, if we are doing them, we can tell we are doing them. We may come up with excuses for them, but we know we're doing them. We need to not be hanging around on Sin Street.

The third thing this passage mentions is the importance of not sitting in the seat of the scornful. I think this is about the sins that are harder to see but often even more destructive—scorn, pride (there is no scorn without pride), envy, bitterness, etc. Some people are good about not doing things like committing adultery but are terrible at noticing their pride. Others may say, "Well, I'm showing someone porn, but at least I'm not prideful." God warns us against both kinds of sin. He wants us to avoid both kinds and plant ourselves by the waters of life instead. He wants us to be planted in the scriptures, in noticing the beauty of his creation, in hearing other people's stories, and in every good thing we have the opportunity to notice and hold on to.

What about the tail end of the passage—the "everything he does will prosper"? We would perhaps really like it to mean that we'll all have lovely and spacious homes, new cars, 6 figure salaries, etc. But it really mean that. Jesus says that riches make it harder to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19 and Mark 10). He wouldn't wish that on us. Paul warns us as well about riches' propensity to be a handicap or snare (e.g. I Timothy 6). The New Testament doesn't say that no people of the Lord will be rich (some of Jesus's friends were well off—many more weren't), but it does say that being rich shouldn't be our goal. I think "everything he does shall prosper" means that if we are followers of the Lord and are planted by and plugged into His living water, then the things we do will bear good fruit...even in drought and over the long haul.