

## QUESTION 15: “GOD, THE GOSPEL . . . AND TREES? (PSALM 1)

9.1.19

### INTRODUCTION

Trees. How in the world can there be a sermon from a question involving trees? I have to be honest — that was my first response. Trees — really? I mean, yes, I said we could ask anything. But trees? Talk about a message with no bite but plenty of bark!

But the fact is, after human beings, no living thing receives more mention in the Scriptures than trees. And, because the Holy Spirit doesn't play “trivial pursuit” or just create Scriptures simply for the sake of taking up space, we maybe might want to pay attention. After all, God created the entire universe, including all the life on planet earth, for the enjoyment of his children, but also for the glory, honor and proclamation of his name. Not exactly something to be taken lightly.

And think about it: Trees actually reflect the arc of mankind's story on earth: paradise made, paradise lost and, finally, paradise found again. After all the wonders of creation, after which God signaled his pleasure with these words from Genesis: ***God saw all that he had made, and it was very good — Genesis 1:31a***, two trees were highlighted in the Garden of Eden: ***The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil — Genesis 2:9***. It was one specific tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that brought about God's first negative command — as in, “Don't do this”: ***“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” — God speaking, Genesis 2:16b-17***. Ultimately, paradise was lost because of the sin that Adam and Eve committed regarding that one tree — and sin thus entered the human race and, in fact, all of God's beautiful created universe.

But it was also a tree that offered redemption, a chance to be cleansed from sin, through the work of Jesus Christ. That “tree” was the cross upon which Jesus died to satisfy God's holiness and justice regarding sin, thus allowing us to have the opportunity to be seen by God as though we had never sinned. That tree signaled something horrific; as the New American Standard version relates what Paul wrote to the Galatian church: ***Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” — Paul, Galatians 3:13 (quoting Deuteronomy 21:23)***.

And it is a tree — again, a tree of life, that will greet us in heaven, when paradise will have been restored: ***Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations — Revelation 22:1-2***, the outcome of a prophecy of Ezekiel, when he said: ***Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing — Ezekiel 47:12***.

Bottom line: The more I started to get into it, the more I realized that the Scriptures, having a great deal to teach us about the life we can know in God through Jesus Christ, makes use of countless things that we see everyday to give us incredibly valuable insights into that life. One of

those ways is how the Holy Spirit uses trees as a picture for how remarkable our lives can be. And one of the great examples of that is Psalm 1. So let's take a look at that now.

## TEXT

*Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither — whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction — Psalm 1.*

## ANALYSIS

OK, so let's look at what this psalm is telling us.

- 1) The psalm starts out with the declaration: “Blessed is the one.” The English does not do this justice. The Hebrew in which this was originally written is much more descriptive: It is a declarative, an exclamation — “Oh wow, how blessed is the one whose life can be summarized like this,” before going on to describe the reason behind that blessed life. “Blessed” is the result of a life being lived in trusting and obeying God. It is not a moment in time, but rather the ongoing reflection of the interpersonal relationship between God and his children. Blessed in this sense occurs in the spiritual realm and, while physical blessings can be known in this life (health, wealth, etc.), the emphasis is the heart experiencing all the blessings of a life lived in synchronization with the Creator.
- 2) Notice the progression of living less “blessed” by affiliating with something other than the law of the Lord (bringing to mind the idea of flirtation moving to dating moving to marriage; the “blessed” make sure they do not:
  - a) “Walk in step” with the wicked (showing harmony and agreement) moving to . . .
  - b) “Stand in the way” that sinners take (stopping and connecting) moving to . . .
  - c) “Sit in the company” of mockers (showing the establishment of relationship).
- 3) As opposed to that lifestyle, the “blessed” find “delight in the law of the Lord.” So what does that mean? Delight: CHEPHETS (khay^-fets) — a noun meaning delight, pleasure, desire, matter. The root idea is to incline toward something. In Psalm 1 it is used to reflect people's delight in God's law and his instruction.
- 4) Then we see that the reason the “blessed” find delight in the law of the Lord is that they meditate on that law. So what does it mean to meditate? Meditate: HAGAH (haw^-gaw) — a verb meaning, literally, to growl, to groan, to sigh, to mutter, to speak; used figuratively to meditate, to ponder. The idea is of mumbling to oneself as one concentrates on something in order to understand it. In the ancient world, reading was done out loud, so meditating meant to read out loud and to consider what one had both read and heard.
- 5) Meditation is the outcome of delighting in the Lord's instruction. So what happens to the person whose life is built on that? According to the psalmist, their life is like a tree planted by streams of water. That tree:
  - a) Yields its fruit in season,
  - b) Has leaves that do not wither, and
  - c) Prospers in whatever it does — spiritually prospers (“blessed”)
  - d) Why? Because they are ROOTED in soil that will last — the law of the Lord!

- B) By contrast, the wicked (those not meditating on the law of the Lord, in which they find NO delight) are like chaff that the wind blows away. “Chaff” is the useless husks of grain such as wheat, which will blow away as a result of the winnowing process; even the lightest wind will carry it away. In biblical times wheat and barley were “winnowed” at the time of harvest. Sheaves were spread on an open hillside. That area was called a “threshing floor.” The sheaves were then trampled, often by oxen, to break up the stalks. The residue was collected and then tossed into the air. The heavy kernels of grain fell to the ground, while the lighter pieces of straw were blown to one side. The chaff, made up of hulls and tiny dust-like particles, was blown completely away. Because it is a waste product, chaff is considered worthless. So what does that picture represent for the wicked? Because their lives are not rooted in the law of the Lord:
- a) They will not stand in judgment, and
  - b) They will not join the assembly of the righteous
  - c) Why? Because they are rooted in nothing; therefore it is impossible for them to thrive.
  - d) Every Christmas I see a real-world example of what that looks like. My in-laws live in St. Paul and, a couple of weeks or so after Christmas, you’ll see all these dead pine trees sitting on the curb, waiting for the city recycle to come and pick them up. Those formerly green Christmas trees are now rust/burnt orange. Why? They lost their food supply (mainly their water) and, without that food source, they died.
- C) Conclusion:
- a) The Lord watches over the way of the righteous
  - b) The way of the wicked leads to destruction.

## APPLICATION

This message today is not going to have anything to do with botany. This focus on trees is simply meant to direct us to some basic, but very important, considerations for how we live our lives. And those considerations begin at a pretty basic level: Where are we planted? The health of any plant, including a tree, begins with the soil into which it is planted. In Psalm 1, it is the tree planted by spiritual water that allows its roots to grow deep and strong — a very similar message to what Myra read in Jeremiah 17: *[The one who trust in the Lord, whose confidence is in him] will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream —Jeremiah 17:8a.* Why is that so important? Because the tree planted by the stream, by a plentiful supply of water, does not need to fear the ebb and flow of weather — not heat or drought — because the water takes care of it and allows it to continue to bear fruit, regardless of the circumstances around it. Those planted in their own strength, determined to meet their own needs, will realize no fruit, and will find difficulty in barely realizing life.

That being said, if our “tree of life” is planted with access to the food/drink we need to meet our needs, then, for our purposes, there are two outcomes of planting a tree that should be naturally expected:

- 1) We expect growth.
  - a) First of all, growth should be expected because of what has happened to somebody who has surrendered to God through Jesus Christ.
    - i) Upon that surrender, Jesus graciously deposits his Holy Spirit into the life of the new believer. It is that Holy Spirit that will now guide the believer’s life — speaking the truth through God’s Word, through prayer, through worship — with the desired outcome of growth and maturity in the faith. Part of that

growth is the new desires that the Spirit places in us; where once upon a time, for instance, the “B” in Bible would have stood for “boring,” now the Spirit makes us crave it, and makes us excited to read it as we realize all that this new life is providing for us through the gracious mercies of God. Our likes and desires now conform to the Holy Spirit’s likes and desires.

- ii) In studying plants, we learn of a botanical process called “phototropism.” Phototropism is the growth of an organism in response to a light stimulus. The light source is a change in the plant’s environment. When stimulated by the light, most plants will grow towards the light source — called both “directional growth” and “positive phototropism,” because the plant is growing toward the light. Remember what the Hebrew word for “delight” means? It means to literally be inclined to something. Psalm 1 uses that word to reflect the sheer joy the people of God find in meditating on his Word. The Holy Spirit implants the light of God into our lives; this in turn impacts us by having us grow spiritually in the direction of the Light. As the apostle John noted: ***[W]hoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God — John 3:21.*** The presence of God is designed to attract the believer into living in ways pleasing to God.
- b) Growth is certainly understood to be the “norm,” the expectation, in the Christian life.
  - i) As Peter mentioned in some of the last written words of his life: ***[G]row in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ — II Peter 3:18a.*** Peter’s expectation is that his audience continues to seek for and experience growth — to the point that he commands it.
  - ii) In fact, the author of Hebrews put up quite a fuss because his audience was NOT experiencing the growth he would have expected. He has been comparing the high priestly office of Jesus and comparing it to the OT high priest Melchizedek but, as he said so clearly: ***We have much to say about it, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand [in the Greek, literally “have become lazy”]. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil — Hebrews 5:11-14.***
- 2) We expect, in the context of this psalm, fruit.
  - a) Bearing fruit is one of the “signatures” of Jesus that he identified to his disciples (the other being loving one another as he loved them — John 13:35): ***“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” — Jesus Christ, John 15:8.***
  - b) In fact, Paul in his letter to the Colossian Christians let them (and us) know everything we do as ambassadors for God is expected to be fruit: ***We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has***

*qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins — Paul, Colossians 1:9b-14.*

And what is God's spiritual "food" for us? To what should we prioritize our access to assure growth, strength and maturing? The very beginning of the church in the book of Acts gives us a great insight into what "God's food" for us is intended to be: *[The believers] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (God's word) and to fellowship (with their fellow believers), to the breaking of bread (communion, remembering the Lord's sacrifice) and to prayer — Acts 2:42.* And unlike a tree, that finds itself wherever it is, we have the opportunity to place ourselves in a place that contains God's word, that provides fellowship, that teaches the ministry of Jesus Christ, and that prays. America stands unique in the history of the church age as a place that has a riches of opportunity for all that spiritual food and drink. The goal? The more we have, the more we want, the more we "delight" in meditating in the feast of all that God has provided for us. Peter said it really well: *Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good — I Peter 2:2-3.*

With that in mind, Psalm 1 gives us a very simple, straightforward checklist of not only how we're living our lives, but upon what our lives are based.

- 1) Where are our lives "rooted?" In other words, there are many things that take our time and attention. But in what "soil" have we planted our lives? How accessible have we made ourselves to the Lord's spiritual water? What is the basis for our outlook, our perspectives, our responses, as we go through our days?
- 2) What brings our lives "delight?" More specifically and to the point, does God's Word bring us joy? Do we delight in spending time in the Scriptures? Do we enjoy Bible reading and Bible study? Is it a centerpiece in our lives?
- 3) What is our relationship to the world? How does that compare to our relationship with God, particularly through his Word?
- 4) Are we growing? Look back at your spiritual life a year ago. How has your life in Christ changed? How has your life deepened and matured? How have you become strengthened in him? Can you even see change?

## CONCLUSION

There is one more major consideration in this message about trees — maybe the most major consideration — and the basis for it goes all the way back to creation. When God brought trees upon the earth on the third day of creation: *Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good — Genesis 1:11-12.*

What's that gotta do with us? Didn't you hear how God wanted the trees to work — "trees bearing fruit with seed according to their kinds?" Don't you get it? Jesus came to earth to plant his life back into his creation. For all those who surrender to that life, he plants the Holy Spirit. What's the goal of the Holy Spirit? To re-create Jesus in his children. Guess what, y'all? We are "Jesus trees." That's the whole point of our continuing life on earth. The Holy Spirit's intention

is to re-create fruit “after its kind” — meaning replicating the life of Jesus. We’re supposed to become “Jesus trees” — growing bigger, stronger and more beautiful in him every day.

That leaves us staring at an incredibly important question: Does God consider our lives “fruit” after his Son’s kind? Are we a reflection of the tree that is Jesus Christ — as any good fruit should be? When people experience us, does that remind them of Jesus? There are some overwhelmingly critical ramifications to that, but it basically boils down to this: We are meant to reflect Jesus Christ — in our words, our actions, our attitudes, our very lives. It’s HIS life in us. What would he say, what would he do, how would he respond — those are the only measures that matter.

Nothing is more important to the life of our church as we move forward. For everything that crosses our path — a hurt to heal, a forgiveness to extend, a burden to share, a load to carry — whatever it is, nothing will mark this church as being more Christ-like than if we are truly becoming his “fruit” — in every way possible.

Does that matter to us? Does that matter to you? Which life do you want to reflect — the fruit of Jesus or the chaff of a wasteland? We can’t have both — so which one do you choose today? Let’s pray!