

A Tree Planted

***“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 whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.”
—Psalm 1:3***

IN THE PICTORIAL LANGUAGE of the Bible, God often uses trees to represent a group or body of people. For example, an olive tree is used in the New Testament to represent fleshly Israel. It is this illustration that Paul employs in Romans 11, where he shows that the natural descendants of Abraham, as

the seed of promise, are broken off as branches from this tree, and Gentile branches are ingrafted to take their places. In our opening text, however, a tree is used to represent individual servants of God rather than a group. As individuals who have entered into the divine service, we must all be “trees of righteousness.”—Isa. 61:3

The significance of the illustration expressed in our text is enhanced by the explanation that the tree is planted by rivers of water. The Hebrew word translated “rivers” is defined as small channels of water, as in irrigation. This suggests two streams serving to irrigate the tree planted between them. The ancient Israelites were well acquainted with

arid and parched ground, hence the illustration of a tree planted between rivers or small channels of water is a very meaningful illustration of the wondrous way in which God supplies the needs of his faithful people.

There is meaning also in the fact that the tree is “planted.” It is not a wild tree of the fields, but one planted and tended. Thus we are reminded that the people of God are such by divine providence and planning. While it is our privilege to cooperate with the Lord in connection with our becoming his people, yet the Scriptures make it plain that he is the one who is responsible for the planting.—Isa. 61:3

One of the lessons taught by the tree illustration is referred to by Paul in Colossians 2:6,7, where he speaks of those who are walking in the footsteps of Jesus as being “rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith.” As the roots of a tree push themselves downward and absorb the nutrients of the soil, so a Christian takes hold of the great and precious promises of the Word of God, and thereby is nourished and strengthened to withstand the storms of opposition that beat against him. The roots of faith push deep into the knowledge of the divine will and plan, while the tree of character grows upward, developing and maturing the rich fruits of the Holy Spirit of God.

Thus seen, the roots of a tree have two functions; namely, that of taking hold of the ground to support the tree, and serving to absorb the moisture and mineral elements of the ground for the growth of the tree. It is our faith that takes hold of the “ground,” that is, the understanding of God’s Word of Truth, which nourishes and establishes us

as New Creatures. If our faith is small, we will be easily uprooted, and will fail to absorb from the Word of God the necessary nourishment for a healthy growth in grace. Our standing in the Lord, being rooted in him, and our resulting ability to cope with the difficulties of the Christian life, depend upon the measure of our faith. "According to your faith be it unto you," the Scriptures say, and again, "this is the victory [Greek: the means of success] that overcometh the world, even our faith."—Matt 9:29; I John 5:4

WELL ROOTED AND STURDY

While we, as Christians, are growing in character-likeness to our pattern, Christ Jesus, our roots of faith should be reaching ever deeper into the Word of God. If this be true, then we are becoming established and settled. A tree that is well-rooted in the earth is sturdy, unyielding to winds and storms. So it is with those whose faith has been properly established. We should be so fixed, so established in the promises of God's Word that no wind of doctrine can overthrow our faith. (Eph. 4:14) It is not an evidence of Christian virtue to be continually looking around for something new. Such an attitude demonstrates a lack of that necessary faith by which we are rooted and grounded in Christ.

Having once made the truth of God's plan our own, we should not permit ourselves to be moved away from that position. A tree whose roots are not firmly fixed in the earth cannot properly grow. Such a tree is sure to lack in vigor and growth. So with Christians, there can be no healthy Christian growth, nor can there be vigorous spiritual life

unless the soul becomes fixed and settled in the Truth, as it is centered in Christ Jesus.

It is also unwise to indulge in a curiosity as to what this or that new theory may teach. For one who has never known the Truth there might be some justifiable reason for such a course. Indeed, until the Truth is found we cannot but be on the lookout for that which satisfies our longings as nothing else can do. However, if we found the Truth of God's Word and have thoroughly proved it to be such, to go hunting for new pastures in which to feed is unwise. In the plan of God there is an inexhaustible field both for mental and spiritual activity, so there would seem to be no need to seek for an enlarged sphere of thought.

SUNSHINE AND RAIN

A tree does not utilize the same natural elements at all times, as it is not always flooded with sunshine, but needs also the rains and storms for its development. Similarly, the child of God needs varied experiences and sometimes a change of environment to best develop all the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Our Heavenly Father, the Great Husbandman, knows just what experiences each one of his "trees" needs in order to properly grow in stature and strength. (John 15:1; I Cor. 3:9) The amount of sunshine and the amount of rain are governed by him who supplies all of our needs. In his wisdom God knows how to vary the conditions and environment of our spiritual development without disturbing the process of rooting and growth, but strengthening our position with each experience.—II Cor. 9:8-11; Phil. 4:19

How thankful we should be for the assurance of such wise and loving care! If we attempted to choose for ourselves the things most needed for our spiritual growth, we would be almost certain to choose that which would bring spiritual decline, or even worse. How important it is, then, that we humbly and continually submit ourselves to the care of the skillful Husbandman, earnestly cooperating with him, that we may grow and become strong and immovable—firmly established.—I Cor. 15:58; Col. 1:23; I Pet. 5:10

The vigorous growth of a tree, together with the amount of fruitage it bears, is a good indication of the depth and spread of its roots. A tree that is not deeply and firmly grounded cannot bring forth rich, luscious fruit, nor is such a tree able to furnish cool, refreshing shade for man. So the Christian's faith must be deeply grounded in Christ if he is to bear the fruit of the Spirit. The rooting process in the Christian life, as in a literal tree, is unseen, and can be judged only by outward manifestations. If we are truly rooted and grounded in the Truth, that fact will manifest itself more and more by our growing likeness to the image of Christ, who is our pattern and inspiration.—Rom. 8:29; II Cor. 3:18

AN ESTABLISHED CHRISTIAN NOT AN EXTREMIST

It is a mistaken notion sometimes expressed by those not well acquainted with the Word of God, that to be established in faith and doctrine is to be an extremist or intolerant. Indeed, to be superstitiously established in the traditions of men not based upon the teachings of God's Word, would likely lead to such a condition. This is not true,

however, of those who, having studied God's plan and made it their own, tenaciously hold to it because they know it to be firmly founded upon the Word of God. Each day, our faith and character structure is being tested as to what sort it is, and only if we are rooted and grounded in God's Word will we be able to stand this test.

A well-rooted, healthy, and sturdy tree also puts forth leaves and bears fruitage. A tree "planted by rivers of waters," in addition to being strongly rooted and established, bears leaves of outward profession as well as the fruit of the Spirit. If our faith is deeply rooted in the Word of God, we will not only be unyielding against Satan's attacks through winds of false doctrine, but our professions and fruitage will be known to those with whom we come in contact, and they should be able to note the fruit of the Spirit displayed in our daily lives.—I Tim. 6:12; Gal. 5:22,23; Eph. 5:9

FORTITUDE

The Apostle Peter writes, "Add to your faith virtue." (II Pet. 1:5) The word here translated virtue properly means fortitude, or moral excellence. This might suggest that virtue is the first visible manifestation of the fact that the roots of faith are taking hold of the Word of God. Such fortitude, or strength of character, might therefore be well represented by the visible trunk of the tree, and not only enables us to show forth the Truth to others, but also molds our own lives into the image and likeness of Christ.

To start with, we are, as New Creatures, only young plants, as it were. Like the young plants not

yet fully grown and able to withstand the winds and storms, we are prone to sway backward and forward in the face of adversity. Trials, which to the sturdy and more mature Christian seem light, to one less developed appear to be grievous. However, God tempers the storm for each—those new in the Christian way as well as for those more mature. Thus we have the assurance that as long as our faith is resting in the Heavenly Father, he will help us to bear whatever may come of trial or sorrow.

KNOWLEDGE

Peter suggests knowledge as next in order, following virtue. One of the wholesome results when we face opposition to God's Word and to our endeavors to walk the narrow way of righteousness, is that of sending us back again to the Word of God to confirm the reason for the hope that is in us. (I Pet. 3:15) When we try to explain the Gospel message to others, we may find that there are questions put to us which are difficult to answer. This leads us to a more earnest study, sending us to the "rivers of water" to refresh our understanding as well as to satisfy our hearts.

The branches of the tree might well represent this outgrowth of knowledge which will be the result of a strong faith and resolute fortitude. As trees of righteousness, therefore, we should seek to be well-rounded in the knowledge of God's Word. This means that we should not become specialists along any one line of knowledge, but seek to attain and be profited by all that the Bible has for us.

With some, the natural tendency may be to study principally the chronological phases of God's plan. Others may find their liking gratified chiefly in the study of the symbolisms of Revelation. Still others may specialize in trying to unlock all the prophecies of the Bible. Those more devotionally inclined may give most of their efforts to searching out all that the Bible says along these lines. Some, who by nature find it most to their liking to be active in the promulgation of the Gospel message, may spend their available study periods chiefly in finding Scriptures to use in these efforts.

All of these, and many other areas of Scripture, are profitable to us and should be part of our program of Bible study. (II Tim. 3:16,17) However, just as a natural tree would look odd and be far from pleasing to the sight if it contained only one branch protruding in one or another direction, so the Christian whose growth in knowledge is centered principally along only one line of study will not be properly "furnished unto all good works." As a one-branched tree seems out of place in a grove of fully branched trees, so will the Christian who specializes in one aspect of Scripture appear in a congregation of well-developed trees of righteousness.

In reality, all our study of God's Word should be with the primary objectives of attaining a knowledge of God, understanding his will concerning us, and developing a Christlike character. Inasmuch as the Heavenly Father has provided us with all that the Bible contains, we should seek to develop our branches of knowledge most especially along these lines, that we might make our "calling and election sure."—II Pet. 1:10

FRUITAGE

If a tree had no branches, it could bear no fruit. This is true also with respect to trees of righteousness. How could we bear the fruits of the Spirit if we had no knowledge of God revealed to us through his glorious plan of salvation? Yet, while knowledge is important, we must remember that no tree grows just for the purpose of producing branches alone. The branches of a tree are for the eventual bearing of fruit, so the objective of Christian knowledge is the bearing of the fruits and graces of the Spirit. If the sole object of our study of God's Word is to show ourselves "approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed," then the result of our study will be manifested in the growth of the fruitage of Christian character, the sum of which is love.—II Tim. 2:15

With most trees, the leaves appear before there is any fruit to be seen. It is also so with us as trees of righteousness. It is proper that our professions of faith and knowledge should be indicated from the very time that we begin to learn that the Lord is gracious. If they are sincere and from the heart, it will not be long before a more substantial evidence of a knowledge of God in our hearts becomes manifested in the fruitage of Christian character.

What a beautiful illustration of Christian character we thus have in a well-developed tree laden with fruit! How well it illustrates the life of the child of God, full of faith, and courageous in the doing of God's will. Such ones are not afraid to testify about Christ, as illustrated by the leaves of profession, nor do they hide the fact that they are striving to mold their life to conform to the image

of Christ. In such a character there is to be found a well-rounded knowledge of the Bible, a knowledge, moreover, that bears fruit in everyday life.

In a healthy Christian life, even as in the case of a sturdy tree, there is real strength, as illustrated by the trunk and root system. However, if our knowledge of God's Word is no more than merely something to talk about—or merely a profession, as illustrated by the leaves—we are likely to become unstable, moved about with new ideas that come along.

In this entire symbolism, however, no matter how deep-rooted a tree may be in the good soil from which it grows; no matter how sturdy its trunk; irrespective of the health and number of its branches, and the beauty of its leaves; its existence is in vain unless it bears good fruit. With trees of righteousness, we may have a strength of faith and character to resist opposition, a well-rounded knowledge of God's plan, and be eloquent in our professions of the Gospel message. Yet, if we "have not love," our Christianity is in vain.—I Cor. 13:1-3, *Revised Version*

Fruit trees are not grown primarily for their foliage, but for their fruit. If we are, indeed, trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, we have been planted by him in order that his qualities of divine character may be made known to, and bless others, through us. This fruitage, unlike mere profession, is the actual development of Godlikeness in our lives. It is that development of Christian character which renders truly helpful all that we do for others, and which also glorifies God, because it is his likeness operating in our lives.

Love must be the sum total of the motives which prompt all that we say and do, else God will not be pleased with us as trees of righteousness. As cited earlier, Paul writes, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profiteth me nothing."—I Cor. 13:1-3, *RV*

The fruit of a natural tree does not appear full-sized and ripened all at once, so the fruitage of the Christian life is a matter of gradual growth and final ripening. In the case of natural fruit, there is first the bud, then the flower, followed by the small unripe fruit, and finally the mature, luscious product of the tree. So with Christian character, there is a development. The Apostle Peter writes concerning the gradual development of fruitage, telling us to add to our faith "fortitude, and to fortitude knowledge, and to knowledge self-control, and to self-control patience, and to patience piety, and to piety brotherly-kindness, and to brotherly-kindness love."—II Pet. 1:5-7, *The Emphatic Diaglott*

The genuine, fully ripened fruit of the Spirit embodies the same qualities of loving character which our Heavenly Father and his beloved Son, Christ Jesus, possess. For us, this fruitage includes a love for the brethren, a love for righteousness, and a love for all that is in harmony with God. (John 13:34,35; Heb. 1:9; I John 5:2,3) Yet, it is even more than this. Divine love was of a quality

which displayed interest in us while we were yet sinners—a love that went out to the entire estranged world of mankind, a race alienated from God through sin. Indeed, while we were yet sinners, God manifested his love toward us through the gift of his beloved Son to be our Redeemer.—Rom. 5:8; John 3:16,17

As trees of righteousness, we have not borne the rich, fully ripened fruit of love until we, too, can love our enemies, as Jesus did. We must be willing to make sacrifices in order to bless those who, through their ignorance, may be displaying their animosity toward us.—Matt. 5:43-45

SIMULTANEOUS DEVELOPMENT

In comparing trees of righteousness with literal trees, we are to remember that the roots, trunk, branches, leaves, and oftentimes the fruit, develop more or less simultaneously. That is to say, the roots of a tree do not become fully developed, pushing down deeply and laying hold firmly upon the earth, before there is any evidence of the trunk. A short root is followed quickly by a small slender trunk, which shoots out its spindly branches bearing their tender leaves. With some varieties of fruit trees, fruit also appears while they are yet very young. The parallelism of this should be true in the Christian life. If, as trees of righteousness, we develop as we should, the whole tree, including roots, will continue to develop over the course of our Christian life. Thus we should not find ourselves in the position of having a strong faith, but no love, or of making great outward professions, yet lacking stability of character.

We should remember, too, that as we grow and produce fruit, the Great Husbandman, in addition to permitting the winds of opposition and storms of persecution to test and strengthen the fiber of our characters, will prune us. If we show a tendency to shoot out branches of human knowledge on which may develop the fruitage of selfishness, God, in his love, and in his own wise way, may clip those branches, thus demonstrating to us the folly of our ways.—John 15:1,2, *Diaglott*; Heb. 12:5-7

Above all, let us remember that if we are truly trees of righteousness we are in the Lord's hands. Not only was it through his gracious providence that we became "trees," but only by his loving provision and tender care, may we continue to grow and bear fruit. In our opening text, the psalmist declares that God's trees of righteousness will prosper. This is a spiritual prosperity due to the blessing of the Heavenly Father, and which manifests itself in the rich fruitage of love, without which no effort of the Christian can profit anything. Let us, then, continue to look to the Lord, and seek his blessings, guidance, and care in all that we say and do. Thus, as trees of righteousness, we may, indeed, be a glory to the name of our Great Husbandman. ■