

## “Harvest Sunday”

Based on Psalm 1

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There is something about trees that cause them to be used as a powerful symbol for the human experience, or to symbolize how we want to live our lives. Maybe it's their extensive root system that anchors them in the earth that speaks to our longing to be grounded, or to have a community where we can put down our roots. Maybe it's how they can become hundreds of years old, which resonates with our appreciation for things that are ancient, that endure the test of time. A quick internet search reported to me of a spruce in Sweden that is estimated to be over 9,000 years old. Maybe it is how trees are constantly giving of themselves, a symbol of generosity. They provide shade. They provide shelter and food for animals. The annual fall of the leaves replenishes the soil as the leaves rot and break down. The rustling of the leaves and branches on a summer early afternoon calms our restlessness. Some trees give kids many hours of fun by climbing up the tree, hanging upside down from a branch, or stringing up a tire swing. Trees give us the kindling and wood for roaring campfires or the warm comfort of the fireplace. And now that fall has arrived, the leaves are losing their chlorophyll and revealing their true colors, red, orange and yellow, giving us breathtaking beauty. The annual cycle of a tree demonstrates the seasons of our life: the budding of the leaves in spring like our youth, the fullness of the canopy in the summer like our young adulthood, the falling of the leaves in autumn like our older adulthood, the dormancy of the tree in winter like our death. And then the tree's cycle begins anew. In so many ways, trees evoke in us symbol and meaning.

Trees appear all through the scriptures. In the beginning, in the Garden of Eden there is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. The cedars of Lebanon are often mentioned. Jesus cursed a fig tree that had no fruit. Zacchaeus climbed up a sycamore tree to see Jesus. The tree of life is mentioned several times in the Book of

Revelation. Olive trees and palm trees are mentioned in the psalms. Trees are used as a symbol in many of the prophets. Jeremiah 17:8 sounds a lot like Ps. 1, where we read, “[The one who trusts in God] will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” The one who trusts in God is like a tree planted by the water. They shall not be moved.

So let’s look at how trees are used symbolically in Psalm 1. In verse 3 we read, “[Those who delight in God’s instruction] are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” Let’s break this down.

First of all, let me say something about what I mean by saying that the tree symbol refers to those who delight in God’s instruction. If you go back to vs. 2, it talks about delighting in the law of the Lord. That word “law” is the translation of the Hebrew word Torah. That word means more than just law. It means more broadly “instruction”. And by instruction is meant how to live a righteous life. So it’s intentionally practical and applicable to day to day living. I think it’s good for us to associate Torah with teaching or instruction instead of the more limited term “law”. I mean, verse 2 is talking about people who delight in the Torah and meditate on it day and night. Unless you get excited about reading legal codes, I can’t associate delight with meditating on legalese. What you find in law books is sleep inducing. One of the least popular books in the Bible is Leviticus because of all the legal stuff in there, most of which doesn’t apply to us. So, it just seems to me that for Torah to be something that you and I would want to meditate on day and night and to take delight in, it must be more than a legal code. We can take delight in being always open to what God might be instructing us throughout our day. Maybe in the morning you meditate on the written word of God in the Bible. At night you can spend time meditating on the day you have gone through, asking God the question, “What are you trying to teach me from today’s events?” To me, this seems to be a more

realistic way to live out vs. 2, of delighting in God's instruction and meditating on it day and night.

It's that kind of person, who is open to God's ongoing instruction throughout the day, who is like a tree planted by streams of water. The tree is planted. This implies having roots that go down into the ground. To be planted is to be rooted, stable, resilient. To be planted is to stand fast and to not be moved about. So, to delight in God's instruction is to be planted, rooted in the earth, resilient, stable.

Our lives are constantly changing. We are confronted with new challenges and the need to adjust. Our kids grow up and move out into the world. Our work responsibilities change as we advance in our careers or change careers. Our bodies age and we have to adjust to what we can't do anymore. In all the changes and challenges we have to work through, it is by turning to God's instruction that grounds us and guides us so that we know what to do. The Bible is a constant companion for us all through our lives. Although the Bible doesn't always give us exact answers for what to do in any given situation or challenge, the scriptures do remind us of who we are and how we are to live, as people who love God and one another. Meditating on the scriptures is one way that we can remain grounded as we move through the constant changes of life.

This tree is planted by streams of water. Water is another common symbol throughout scripture, even more so than trees. Streams of water imply water that is fresh and flowing. It is not stagnant or smelly. It is water that is always moving forward and not standing still. Isn't that an interesting contrast to a tree that is firmly rooted in the ground? Trees don't move from where they are planted but living water is constantly moving in one direction, determined by the contours of the land. I wonder what the streams of water are meant to symbolize here?

One way to answer that question is to observe the effects of a tree being planted by streams of water. The tree will yield its fruit in its season. If it's an apple tree, it will yield apples in late summer and early fall. What does it mean for someone who delights in God's instruction to yield fruit in its season? I think it may relate to the old proverb, "You will know a tree by its fruits." In other words, you know what kind of person someone is by their character, their behaviors, the impact they

have on the world. So here I think it means that those who delight in God's instruction will demonstrate in their lives the living out of God's instruction. They will bear good fruit *in season*. It's not immediate. Learning the ways of God takes time. It's something that shapes us, transforms our hearts, gives us insight and understanding of ourselves, others, and the world. It takes time to get things sorted out. And then something comes along that upends our life and we have to sort things out again. But as we stick with it, and keep meditating on God's instruction, slowly but surely we will bear fruit in our lives. We will live a righteous life.

I am thinking of someone I know who I will call John, not his real name. He is someone I have a lot of respect for. He has a lot of wisdom. He is responsive to what people are saying rather than forcing his own agenda. He is patient with others. He gently guides conversations so that the group can come to a consensus on a way forward. He is for me a role model of Christian leadership. He told me once that the way he is now is not how he once was. As a younger man, he could easily lose his temper. He was impatient. He had clarity on what needed done and sought to force his solutions. He may have been right but it bruised people in the process. The way John is now in comparison to how he once was is a demonstration of a life transformed. He is bearing a different kind of fruit than he did when he was a young man. Apple trees will only bear apples. But the fruit we bear can change with time. We can be transformed. That's what meditating on God's instruction over a long period of time can do to a person. In season, good fruit is produced.

The other effect of a tree planted by streams of water is that the leaves don't wither. That makes sense. If a tree is by the water, as long as there is water flowing there is no need for rain. The roots can get all the moisture necessary to thrive.

There is a stereotype of Oklahoma that it is all flat and wide open prairie. That's not true. The geography of Oklahoma isn't all the same. But that description of Oklahoma being flat prairie land is true in some parts of the state. It's on the prairie where trees are rare. I mean tall trees, not the scrawny pine trees scattered about or the stubby blackjack oak trees with those waxy dark green leaves that shimmer with the

reflection of the sunlight off of them. If you look out over the prairie and you see a clump of tall trees, then you know where the water is. There is bound to be a spring, a creek, a stream, some kind of moving water for there to be trees in the Oklahoma prairie. Fresh water is necessary for trees to thrive. And so it is, that those who delight in God's instruction, meditating on it day and night, will thrive. They will not dry up and blow away like chaff.

So what are the streams of water supposed to symbolize? Surely it represents God's instruction. It is instruction that moves with us through our days. It is living water that nourishes our minds, hearts, and souls, no matter what season of life we are in or what challenges and struggles we have to work through. The living water of God's instruction gives us life. It helps us produce good fruit. It helps us thrive even during dry spells, when our lives are not as exciting and inspiring as in previous years. That's what meditating on God's instruction does for us, that no matter what our life circumstance might be, or what season of life we are going through, from the young vitality of the spring time of youth to the long sigh of winter in our elder years, we can thrive and bear good fruit in the midst of it. Our external circumstances won't be able to block us from living a righteous life, a life that gives life to others like a tree does.

So how can you realize this in your life? None of us want to be as the wicked are described in verse 4, as chaff that the wind drives away. We want to be firmly rooted in the earth, near the stream of God's instruction, taking it in and letting that instruction nourish us so that we can bear good fruit, so that we can thrive, so that we can prosper as beloved children of God. By prosperity is not meant having a big house and a fat bank account. It means being prosperous in bearing good fruit, fruit that lasts, that makes a difference, that makes the world better and healthier. So as you think about this symbol of a fruit bearing tree planted by streams of water, what do you need to do? What is the next step you can take so that you are more deeply rooted to the earth and taking in the nourishment of the living water which is God's instruction? Let's take a minute and I invite you to sit with that question. I will then close with prayer.