

Today

March/April 2021

refresh, refocus, renew

STRUGGLING
AND GROWING
IN FAITH



ALSO: TREES IN SCRIPTURE

Dear Friends:

In this life we all suffer. Some of us suffer much more than others do, but we all suffer in some way, shape, or form. The Bible describes and explores the sufferings of many different people. Some of these people suffer as a result of their own actions. Others suffer because of what people do to them. And sometimes suffering seems random.



During this season of Lent, Pastor Jang Ho Park looks at some of the Bible's stories of suffering. And at the very center of this focus, we note that Jesus suffered *for us*. All of these examples of suffering—especially the suffering of Jesus—can give us comfort in our suffering and can spark our love and faith in Christ for the great gift of salvation.

In April, Pastor Julia Prins Vanderveen focuses on the theme of trees in the Bible. Trees are not only a sign of God's magnificence in creation, but they are also featured in many images and stories about God's amazing work for our salvation. In Genesis, trees are important in the story of the Garden of Eden. And Revelation closes with a vision mentioning the tree of life. At the center of Scripture we also find that Jesus was crucified on a tree for our sins. In these ways and more, references to trees can help us reflect in fresh ways on the story of how God saves us.

May God's word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

—Kurt Selles

Today

March/April 2021

refresh, refocus, renew



**"Struggling and
Growing in Faith"**
Jang Ho Park



"Trees in Scripture"
Julia Prins Vanderveen

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Kurt Selles

TODAY (USPS 185-140),
Volume 71, Number 2,
published bimonthly by
ReFrame Ministries, formerly
Back to God Ministries
International, at 1700 28th
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI
49508-1407. Periodicals
postage paid at Grand Rapids,
Michigan, and at additional
mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

Copyright © 2021, Reframe
Ministries. Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture
quotations in this publication
are from The Holy Bible, New
International Version®, NIV®.
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by
permission. All rights reserved
worldwide.

Cover photo: Lightstock



**ReFrame
Ministries**

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

april

Trees in Scripture

Julia Prins Vanderveen

Throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, many major characters and events have trees associated with them. The story of Adam and Eve includes references to the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Abraham lives near the great trees of Mamre and plants a tamarisk tree. Moses meets the Lord at a burning bush. Psalm 1 compares the life of a wise person to a tree beside a stream. Jesus calls Zacchaeus to come down from a sycamore tree. Paul writes that we are like a branch grafted into the tree of Israel, and in the Bible's closing imagery about the eternal city of God, the new Jerusalem, we find a magnificent vision of the tree of life.

As we leaf through the pages of Scripture to ponder how trees connect us with many experiences and promises in our life with God, may we grow in our awareness of God's vast love, may we be solidly rooted in grace and truth, and may our lives bear good fruit for sharing the good news of God's salvation throughout this world.

Julia Prins Vanderveen works and lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband, Trevor, and their three sons. Julia has served as a copastor with Trevor at a church in Vancouver. She is a campus pastor and a humanities teacher at the Vancouver Christian School. Her upbringing on a farm and her deep love of creation has prompted her to notice the many ways the Bible teaches about God's love and purposes through the imagery of trees.

BETRAYAL

Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

—Matthew 26:36

In our story today about Jesus' betrayal, we read that Jesus went to a garden of olive trees, known as Gethsemane. This name literally means "oil press." The Bible mentions that Jesus went there often, for times of rest and prayer (see Luke 21:37; 22:39-40). There Jesus poured out his heart to God. And on this occasion, on the night before he would be crucified, Jesus prayed in anguish, "and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

So in Gethsemane, not only were there olive trees, but the name of this place also becomes richly symbolic when we consider that Jesus, whom we also call the firstfruits of the resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23), was crushed and pressed as he suffered betrayal and death. Just as the pressing of olives produces valuable

olive oil with healthful and medicinal properties, Jesus' pure life was pressed out for us and provides us healing, forgiveness, and new, full life with God.

Spend some time today, alone in God's presence, to pray, pouring out your heart before him and allowing yourself to express the things that weigh heavy on your heart.

Lord Jesus, we know that you found a place of rest and quiet among olive trees to pray. There you also prepared to suffer and die for us, that we could find healing and new life with God. Thank you for pouring out your life for us. In your name, Amen.

A TREE CUT OFF

"If people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"
—Luke 23:31

Today, as we reflect on Jesus' death, some of us will think of the cross on which Jesus died, noting that it was made of wood, cut from a tree. Some may also recall that in his death Jesus fulfilled a prophecy that said, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13, NRSV; see Deuteronomy 21:23). In his death on the cross, Jesus took on himself the whole curse of sin for our sake, so that we can be forgiven and receive new life!

In our reading in Luke today, Jesus also speaks about himself as a tree. He says, "If people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" Here Jesus is describing himself as a live, green tree, and he appears to be challenging people to think what it will be like when the tree is cut off ("dry")—as he soon will be when he has died on the cross. A few words from Isaiah the prophet

may help us to understand this. Isaiah describes the Savior, the Lord's suffering servant, as a shoot that has grown "from the stump of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1), and yet the Savior is later "cut off from the land of the living" because he is punished for the people's sins (Isaiah 53:8).

Though Jesus was cut off for our sake, we can actually be filled with joy, calling this "Good Friday"—because after he suffered, he also saw "the light of life" and rose in victory over death (Isaiah 53:11). Jesus did all of this for our sake so that we can have new life with God forever.

With Jesus, death does not have the last word, because he is the Word of life!

Lord God, we are in awe of all you have done for our salvation. May we praise your name forever. Amen.

SORROWFUL SATURDAY

"We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree."
—Acts 5:29-30, NRSV

The Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday is often called Easter Vigil or Holy Saturday. On this day we reflect in sorrow on the death of Jesus for our sake. Our sins were so serious that, in order to save us, Jesus had to take on suffering so horrible that we cannot really imagine it. But we also look ahead in hope, because we know that on Easter Sunday Jesus rose in victory over death and conquered the grave so that we can have life!

In our reading from Acts today, the apostles of Jesus speak out to the authorities who are persecuting them. The apostles remind the authorities that they had Jesus "killed by hanging him on a tree," a reference to Deuteronomy 21:23, as we noted yesterday (see also Galatians 3:13). These disciples of Jesus are emboldened to speak because they have

confidence and power from the Holy Spirit to speak the truth, saying, "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

Hearing that, the authorities want to kill Jesus' followers, but Gamaliel, a wise teacher, stops them. He gives reasonable advice, and we can be assured that this comes from the wisdom of God, for Gamaliel says, "Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

As we look ahead to Easter, let's remember that nothing, not even death, can stand against the Lord, who loves us.

Lord, fill us with hope and trust in you always. Amen.

THINKING HE WAS THE GARDENER

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him. . . ." —John 20:15

Can you think of a time when you were struggling and you simply needed to know some basic information about what was happening?

At the empty tomb, Mary was upset and confused, and she just needed to know where Jesus was. When "she turned around and saw Jesus standing there," she didn't realize it was him. She thought he was the gardener.

Gardeners or caretakers were probably known to be on-site in a graveyard like that one. I wonder, too, if perhaps John saw something important in this detail and included it as a reminder that Jesus the Savior is also the Creator of the world.

The opening lines of the gospel of John talk about creation and how Jesus, the Word (*Logos*), was actively involved. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He

was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made" (John 1:1-3; see Genesis 1:1-3). And near the end of this gospel account John includes this detail about Jesus as the gardener in the graveyard—perhaps to show that Jesus, who was with God at the beginning of creation, is now alive again and re-creating the world. Jesus has been raised from the dead and is doing a new thing, gently tending to each living creature, bringing about renewal and healing for the entire creation.

When Jesus spoke Mary's name, she knew exactly who he was, and she soon went to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord!"

Risen Lord and Savior, you call us by name and speak comfort and truth to us. Thank you for re-creating us. In your name, Amen.

TREES OF EVERY KIND

God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. —Genesis 2:9

Let's go to the beginning of the Bible to look for other references to trees that can help us understand God's character and work with his people from generation to generation—including us.

God created all kinds of trees that were pleasing to see and good for food. Many of the more than 60,000 species of trees around the world produce food for us and for other creatures, and in so many ways they are "pleasing to the eye." A popular hymn, "How Great Thou Art," includes this line: "When through the woods and forest glades I wander, I hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees. . . . Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee: How great thou art!" Forests and trees are beautiful to look at, and they can prompt us to praise God and to find joy in all that God has made.

Many references to trees in the Bible have significant meaning. Genesis, in particular, has a number of references to trees. We also find that the stories of many of the major characters in Genesis include a reference to a tree. There isn't space or time in these devotions to mention each one—but if you would like to find out, read through the book of Genesis, and you'll see what I mean!

Lord God, our Creator and Savior, we thank you for the spectacular variety and beauty of the trees you have made. When we consider your works and all that you have created, our souls sing for joy. You are powerful and good, and we praise you. Amen.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE GARDEN

In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
—Genesis 2:9

In the school where I serve as a campus pastor and as an English teacher, we talk about metaphors and how important they are in a piece of literature. We also pay attention to imagery used by an author to show meaningful threads throughout a narrative.

The Bible is God's Word to us, revealing to us the grand story of creation, salvation in Christ, and life with God and his people forever. The Bible is also a literary masterpiece, filled with imagery and metaphors that carry through in meaningful threads from beginning to end.

For example, of the many trees described in the Bible, the two here in Genesis 2 are prototypes for other trees mentioned later on: trees that indicate life and fruitfulness, and trees that represent potentials for brokenness and disobedience. The tree of life presented abundant life and intimacy with God,

while the other tree presented consequences connected with choosing and doing wrong.

The tree of life especially prefigures many stories featuring hope, redemption, promise, and comfort, indicating that even from the beginning, people were not left to live here alone but were given a protected place of abundance and well-being. Emphasis is placed on the loving relationship between God and creation, summed up in the rich image of the tree of life—and later we find this tree again in the new heaven and new earth, where we will live with God forever (Revelation 22:1-2).

Lord, thank you for showing us your loving and generous promises in the imagery of the tree of life. Guide us to hope and truly live in you always. Amen.

POSSIBLE CHOICES

"But God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden. . . .'"
—Genesis 3:2

In the garden of Eden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represented the possible choices people could make to do the wrong thing—the opposite of whatever was good, true, and lovely. It's a gut-wrenching type of foreshadowing to see Adam and Eve make the choice to eat from that tree, and this points to all the times when God's people would make sinful decisions in the future. As other stories in the Bible show, some people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes, to satisfy their own appetites and interests, while others trusted in God and obeyed, doing what was right.

One of the challenges we face as we read the Bible is to realize that even though people were created good, they were able to do evil, and even though people can be bad, that doesn't mean they don't have any good in them. For we are all created in God's im-

age, which is good, but every one of us can disobey and sin against God, breaking our relationship with him and with everything around us.

As we will see, sometimes situations are murky and have layers of meaning. However, all the nuances and complexities of sin are finally confronted in Jesus' death for our sake on the cross. Instead of continually experiencing the estrangement brought about by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we are reconciled with God by Jesus' gift of his own life on the tree of the cross. Through his death, Jesus brought us reconciliation, restoration, and renewal.

Lord, we are often tempted to do only as we please. Rescue us from our willful and harmful decisions, and help us to pursue what is good and true. Amen.

NEAR THE GREAT TREES

So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron. . . . There he built an altar to the LORD. —Genesis 13:18

The location of the great trees of Mamre was a renowned place of Canaanite worship where people went to buy and sell goods and to offer all kinds of sacrifices to their gods. There are many stories about these trees and the religious practices there, so it's significant that when Abram went to live near them, he built an altar to acknowledge his relationship with the Lord. Abram did this in the very place where people flocked to worship other gods.

We can imagine that while he lived near the great trees of Mamre, Abram may have been tempted with other possibilities for fulfilling his desires, yet he faithfully served the Lord, who revealed himself as the one who would guide each generation. This was also the place where Abraham (no longer called Abram) received three visitors, one of whom was the Lord

himself. On that occasion, God promised Abraham and Sarah a child in their old age and asked: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (see Genesis 18).

Perhaps you live in or work in, or know of, a place where there's a strong contrast between a self-serving lifestyle and a life that's dedicated to God. Maybe God has called you to live and work in a place where you are challenged every day to remain faithful to his promises—and you need to depend on God's goodness to persevere. In God's strength you can stand firm, and you can share his love with others.

Lord, our God, nothing is too hard for you, so please empower us through your Spirit to live a life that is pure and full of integrity. In the name of Christ, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

PLACE OF WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the LORD, the Eternal God.

—Genesis 21:33

In the center of Freetown, Sierra Leone, an enormous cotton tree (kapok tree) stands as a reminder of liberty and how freed American slaves, when they returned to Africa by way of Nova Scotia, gathered in its shade to worship and pray.

Abraham set up a significant landmark when he planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, which was a new and foreign territory for him. Genesis 21 notes that Abraham lived there in Philistine territory for a long time. And after he formed a treaty with the Philistines in Beersheba, it became a place of worship where he called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God.

The tamarisk is also known as the terebinth tree, which has a cooling effect during the day because it secretes salt and tiny water droplets, creating a fine, cooling mist.

There Abraham called on the name of the Lord, who blessed him. And Abraham became a blessing to others.

Because trees often live for a long time, they can help us remember God's faithfulness. So planting a tree can give us a forward-looking perspective, and it can also bless future generations. Planting a tree can also inspire hope for the future, especially when we know that we will live eternally with God on the new earth someday (Revelation 21-22).

Eternal God, our guide and protector, bring us through whatever situations we live in, and lead us each day to call on your name. May we also be a blessing to the people around us, serving as your faithful witnesses wherever we are. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LITTLE, EXTRAORDINARY THINGS

Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."
—Exodus 3:3

It's not always the big things in our lives that make the most difference. Often it's the little things, such as everyday events and encounters, that shape us deeply and really change our lives. For example, I can think of brief, unplanned conversations with people—some of whom were not even close to me—that made me reflect for a long time about my perspectives and actions.

We know that in some ways Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush was pivotal. But if we take a moment to look at the details, we can appreciate that at first it seemed a rather random occurrence in Moses' everyday life of herding flocks. It wasn't a high profile encounter with the king of Egypt, or an invasion by a foreign army, or even the sight of a massive cedar. It was simply a small bush burning in the desert, and yet it caught Moses' at-

tention because the fire in the bush did not go out.

This became a tree-of-life moment for Moses, because God met with him there and called him to lead his people, the Israelites, out of slavery in Egypt. So it wasn't merely the fire in the bush that made this experience spectacular; it was being in the presence of God and hearing God's call and his promise to be with Moses so that he could do this life-changing thing.

While it is completely up to God to reveal his power and presence to people, it is up to us to pay attention.

Lord, we long to know you, and we want to know your presence in our lives. Help us to be attentive when you reveal yourself to us, and to trust you to guide us. In Jesus, Amen.

WOOD AND WATER

They came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there by the water.

—Exodus 15:27

Our reading in Exodus today comes after the amazing story of how God brought his people through the Red Sea and then defeated their enemies by having them swallowed by the sea (Exodus 14:1-15:21).

The Israelites were now delivered from slavery in Egypt, and God was leading them through a dry desert. The first water they discovered wasn't drinkable until God used a piece of wood, thrown in by Moses, to take away the bitterness.

Then eventually they came to Elim, which means "large trees"—a place of 70 palm trees growing by 12 springs of water. These palms and springs represented the fullness of God's blessing for all his people after a long, hard journey. In the Bible, the numbers 7 and 10 often signify fullness and completion, and we can see that 70 =

7 x 10. Further, the number 12 represents all of God's people, because Israel was made up of 12 tribes, all descended from the 12 sons of Jacob (Israel).

Elim was therefore a place indicating the reliability of God's promises. In the water that refreshed and sustained them, the people could literally taste the sweetness of God's promised care. And in the cooling shade of the palm trees the people found rest and soothing protection from the harsh, desert sun. All of this pointed ahead to abundant blessings still to come in the great unfolding story of God's faithfulness.

Lord God, you are our deliverer and provider, our strength and song. You are our God, and we praise and exalt you. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE BEST YET TO COME

On the lampstand were four cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms. . . .
—Exodus 37:20

My grandmother had a special ring that I loved to look at. It had seven colored gemstones in a long row. To me, they seemed mismatched until I learned that each stone stood for the month in which one of her children was born, and the order of the stones matched the order of their births.

In a way, the temple furnishings described in Exodus may seem similar to that piece of jewelry. Each item was different, having a unique shape and purpose. Most of the pieces were made of acacia wood, probably one of the few types of wood available to the Israelites in the desert as they crafted furnishings for use in the worship of God. Acacia wood was excellent for this purpose because it was very hard and long-lasting. Insects would not eat it, and it would not easily rot or decay. And once it was shaped, the wood was overlaid with pure gold.

Then there was the lampstand, made of solid gold. It may seem rather ornate and random in its design. But with its six branches and its “cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms,” the lampstand resembled an almond tree as it gave light in the darkness. In those ancient times (and in some places still today), almond trees were a symbol of renewal and hope, because they were the first to flower after the months of winter.

So, together, the temple furnishings spoke a message of enduring hope and new life with God, indicating not only that God is faithful and reliable but also that, with him, the best is yet to come.

Lord, thank you for giving us new life now—and for the bright hope of eternity in the life to come. Amen.

RESTRAINT

Do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit.
—Deuteronomy 20:19

In this passage in Deuteronomy we find the Lord giving his people guidelines about going to war. We might wonder why God allowed his people to go to war at all. That is a challenging and unsettling question, but the main point of this passage is that if God's people had to go to war, they were to use restraint and not destroy everything in their path.

This was a revolutionary idea, and unfortunately still today we often see that wherever war takes place, nearly everything in the area is destroyed. So God instituted new ways of doing things that introduced justice for created things, including trees.

People have often reasoned that if they are going to introduce a new order, it's easier in some ways to totally overhaul or bulldoze everything rather than to preserve some elements of the old existing order.

But doing that, according to the guidelines in Deuteronomy, would only cause undue harm and unnecessary damage. If the Israelites put a city under siege and destroyed all its fruit trees, for example, then no one, either in the city or in the advancing army, could benefit from the fruit.

The ethic being outlined here has to do with mercy and compassion, wisdom and restraint. As we view this passage through the lens of Jesus Christ, we recognize that Jesus also calls us to a way of life that shows restraint, mercy, and compassion.

Creator God, we can see that you care for everything you have made. Help us to appreciate the ethic of care you instilled in your people, and enable us to live wisely in the way of Jesus. Amen.

ORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak . . . where . . . Gideon was threshing wheat. . . . —Judges 6:11

It's quite natural to hear a message of news and then wonder whether or not the message is trustworthy. This is as true today as it has ever been, especially when communities and nations are under stress and are often hearing messages that contradict each other.

Gideon, who was approached by the angel of the Lord under an oak tree, was part of a community that was crying out to God and waiting for help. But most of the people were also unfaithful to God (Judges 6:1-10). Even so, God came to their rescue anyway.

Gideon's people needed to be delivered from neighboring enemies who were raiding and ruining their crops. Gideon was threshing grain in a winepress so that he wouldn't be seen by the enemy. It was a desperate situation, so it's understandable that he balked when the angel first

said, "The LORD is with you. . . ." The angel had to assure Gideon that God had the right person at the right address. And the angel worked with Gideon to show him that this message from God could be trusted.

This delightful story about Gideon being called out from under an oak tree draws our attention to the ways in which God sometimes approaches us in the ordinary circumstances of life. God has the authority to call us to participate in his kingdom work, and sometimes he interrupts us in surprising ways. And, in cases like Gideon's, only after we agree to trust in God's plan do we receive the skills and tools that are needed.

Lord, help us to trust you when you call, and to believe that you will equip us for the work you want us to do. In Jesus, Amen.

HOPE FOR A TREE

"At least there is hope for a tree: if it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail."
—Job 14:7

I grew up on a farm in Central Alberta, where poplars, aspens, and birch trees grow along the edges of fields. While there are some big trees, it takes a long time for them to grow, and non-native trees have to be cared for meticulously in order to thrive.

A year ago last winter, temperatures quickly dropped below -35C (-31F) and damaged some of the trees. However, rather than simply cutting down what looked like dead trees in the spring, my parents were hopeful that the trees might recover. And by the middle of summer, many of the damaged trees had new saplings growing around the base of the trunk.

When Job was at his lowest point—after losing his family, his home, and his livelihood—and he wasn't receiving support from his friends, he looked to trees as a sign of resilience. He

lamented that "a man dies and is laid low," but he noted, "At least there is hope for a tree." At that point, Job couldn't see past his sorrow. But awhile later he summoned up a clear statement of faith: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth."

Job then echoed the idea of a stump dying in the soil and yet putting out shoots at the scent of water as he said, "And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. . . . How my heart yearns within me!"

God our Father, summon deep hope in us that one day, even after our flesh has failed, that because of Jesus' resurrection, we too, in our flesh, will see you. In your name we pray. Amen.

AS SOON AS YOU HEAR THE SOUND

"As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the poplar trees, move quickly, because that will mean the LORD has gone out in front of you. . . ."
—2 Samuel 5:23

As I write this, I hear a stand of quaking aspens clattering in the breeze. According to legend, some First Nations people referred to these as the "noisy trees" because of their leaves' loud fluttering in the wind.

David had learned to be a wise warrior because he relied on the Lord to guide him to many victories over the enemies of God's people. In our reading for today, we see that David shows complete trust in God to lead him. On two occasions before engaging in battle, David asks God how he should proceed. In the first situation, God gives David the go-ahead. But in the next situation, God tells David to circle around the enemy and then wait until he hears "the sound of marching in the tops of the poplar trees"—and then he should move quickly because that will mean the Lord has gone ahead to defeat the

enemy. The sound in the trees may well have prevented the enemy from hearing David and his men circling around and advancing behind them.

Today too we can ask God for guidance in all that he calls us to do. And in some ways like David, we will need to look and listen for signs of the Lord's working. Today, with the Lord's Spirit living in our hearts, we can trust that he is guiding us to live as his people and to share his good news of salvation and new life in Christ. Are we looking and listening so that we can follow God's lead?

Spirit of God, we need you to show us where you are working today. Help us to be attentive and obedient, trusting that you will lead us always. In Jesus, Amen.

ACCOMPLISHED AND MATURE

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season. . . .
—Psalm 1:3

When students graduate from high school in British Columbia, they receive a Dogwood Diploma, named after the province's official flowering tree. Many of the local people also refer to graduating as "getting your Dogwood." When I first moved to B.C., I wondered, "Are students really getting a *tree* when they graduate?" It turns out that the diploma is referred to as a dogwood because those trees are in full bloom in the springtime when students graduate. So in this area, the dogwood tree has become a type of metaphor for accomplishment and maturity.

The book of Psalms begins with a picture of accomplishment and maturity in the life of someone who seeks to live faithfully for God. And in this case, the person is compared to *being* a tree, not just receiving one!

The tree at the beginning of Psalms is an echo of the tree of life that we saw in the garden

of Eden. Picture a strong tree with deep roots, well watered and full of healthy fruit and leaves that don't wither. This tree is pleasing to look at, and its fruit gives sustaining, delightful food. It provides shade and a home for birds and other creatures; it purifies the air and stabilizes the streambanks.

This image in Psalm 1 helps us to learn the way of wise living. If we walk in step with the Lord, we become the mature followers God created us all to be. When we voice our praises and sorrows, and when we draw attention to God's beautiful creation and his way to full life forever, we are like a tree planted by streams of water.

Lord, guide us to become everything you intend us to be. Make us fully alive and mature in Christ. Amen.

IS THERE NO HEALING?

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?

—Jeremiah 8:22

Think of a time when you have seen someone you love reject the medicine or treatment that would help to make them well. It's really painful to watch, though sometimes not much can be done except to cry out to God.

That is what Jeremiah is doing in this passage. Jeremiah was a prophet sent by God to call his people to receive the healing that only God could provide. But the people would not turn back to God.

As part of the lament, Jeremiah asks a question full of sadness: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" Even though Jeremiah asks this question, he knows the answer: there is a cure.

The area of Gilead in ancient Israel was famous for its healing balm that came from the local trees. Much of the medicine we use today is also derived from leaves and bark. For

example, aspirin comes from salicylic acid, which is found in willow trees. But Jeremiah is also saying that even though Gilead is full of healing trees, the real healer is God himself.

In an old spiritual hymn, "There Is a Balm in Gilead," the writer reverses Jeremiah's question into a statement, and the conclusion of the song is that not only is there a healing balm, but the balm is the Spirit of God, who revives our souls again.

Lord our God, sometimes we don't know what to do to help the people we love. We see their mistakes, and it breaks our hearts. Help them to turn to you so that they can receive your healing love. We know you are the healer of everything and everyone. In your name we pray. Amen.

LIKE POPLAR TREES

"I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring. . . . They will spring up . . . like poplar trees by flowing streams." —Isaiah 44:23

Western red cedars are common in the temperate rainforest on the western coast of Canada, and they provided the natural resources for the establishment of Vancouver. It's impossible to understand the history of Vancouver without appreciating that it relied heavily on felling centuries-old trees for great profit. Fortunately, a few citizens had the foresight to protect remaining parcels of old-growth forest, or the forest might not be there today.

Cedars, which are mentioned often in the Bible, provided a similar wealth of resources in ancient times and were used to build the temple of God. In Lebanon today these trees are now rigorously protected, and they remain an important part of the area's history. Then, as now, cedars were a symbol of power, resilience, and long life.

We might assume, then, that the Lord's people might be

compared to cedars. But in Isaiah 44, the descendants who have the blessings of the Spirit of God are compared to "poplar trees by flowing streams," while cedars and other valuable trees are described as firewood and material for making idols.

Here the Lord is lamenting that some people go their own way and turn away from the true God. But the Lord also calls the people of Israel (Jacob) to serve him, saying that he has swept away their sins. And he closes with a command to the whole creation, including the forests and their trees, to give thanks for God's compassionate redemption.

Lord, pour out your Spirit on our lives so that we may be like trees by flowing waters, and may we join with all creation in praising you for your saving grace. In Jesus, Amen.

PLEASANT AND GOOD

"Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow."
—Isaiah 55:13

Several passages in Isaiah warn God's people about the destruction that will come upon them because they have rejected the Lord and been unfaithful. And yet, as we find in our passage for today, God also declares that he will reverse the situation and bring about healing and restoration.

When Isaiah writes that the juniper will grow instead of the thornbush, I think of the thorny, invasive plants that grow near our house and are very hard to get rid of. What a gift it would be to have those rooted out for good! Thornbushes and briers make places inhospitable to people and many animals, so to have those harsh plants replaced by junipers and myrtle would be wonderful. This means not only that the situation would be more bearable, but also that the shrubs and trees replacing the unwanted plants would be ed-

ible and medicinal. Junipers and myrtles are beautiful as well as functional: junipers have anti-septic properties, and myrtles provide delicious, nutrient-rich berries and have leaves that can be used for medicine.

Isn't it wonderful to know that our amazing God would replace thorns with shrubs and trees that are both pleasant to the sight and good for food? This demonstrates God's attentive care for his people.

In what ways do you see God at work in your life, replacing thorns and briers with things that are both pleasant and good?

Lord, please root out the thornbushes of discontent, struggle, and strife in our lives. And fill us with healing and nourishment, that we may join with creation in praising you. Amen.

THE FINAL WORD

The LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. —Jonah 1:6

When I was studying in seminary, we had a worship leader who frequently began our time of prayer together with the words, “O God, we thank you that you are God and that we are not.” As a worshiping community, it helped us to recognize that if we were in charge of making decisions with eternal consequences, we couldn’t be relied upon. We are too shortsighted and distracted by our own self-interests.

It’s a good thing that Jonah wasn’t allowed to call all the shots. God had called him to warn Nineveh to repent of their wickedness, but Jonah did not want them to repent. He wanted God to destroy them instead. They were Israel’s enemies, and Jonah did not want God to show compassion toward them. Jonah had not yet learned that God can pursue, forgive, and bless anyone.

The leafy plant that grew might have been a castor-oil shrub that can quickly grow up to 12 feet and bring relief with its broad, shady leaves. But what a strange turn of events it was when God caused the plant to wither!

Jonah’s reactions revealed his own selfish concerns, and God exposed Jonah’s shallowness. Jonah actually cared more about shade from the plant than he cared about the people of Nineveh. The Lord, however, showed mercy and grace.

Aren’t you glad that God is God and that he shows mercy to us too?

Lord our God, you alone can determine the way things should go. Teach us to be conduits of your mercy and grace for others. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

LIFE THROUGH DEATH

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
—Isaiah 11:1

Isaiah was speaking to a culture with conflicted values. In some ways it was like our culture today, in which people might gather for worship but are not really interested in living for God. Many are distracted by wealth, beauty, power, and material things. (See Isaiah 1-2.)

Isaiah's message was uncomfortable for people then, and it still jolts people awake today. God isn't satisfied with people going through the motions of worship and then ignoring his call to do what is just and right in the world. Isaiah's message unveils the depths of God's standards. Through Isaiah God warned the people that their sin would bring consequences: destruction and captivity.

But then later God would also bring restoration. God promised to send a Savior who would lead by doing what is right and just, bringing peace and rest for the nations.

Isaiah uses vivid imagery to describe all of this, and he compares the judgment and redemption of God's people to trees. Big, lofty trees representing power and prestige will be cut down and brought low. But hope will rise again later when a shoot grows from a stump.

The Spirit of God will do this—not on the basis of human power or pride but by wisdom, mercy, and justice. Greatness will come through humility. Life will come through death.

God, we confess that we often think “bigger is better,” and we marvel that you will bring about redemption for all creation—not by a triumphant, overpowering conquest but through the unassuming birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

LOOKING FOR FRUIT

Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit.
—Mark 11:13

This story is baffling, isn't it? It seems that Jesus, who is known for showing love and compassion, gets upset and just destroys an innocent fig tree. And this happens just before Jesus turns over the tables of corrupt moneychangers in the temple. There must be a connection.

In the Old Testament, the imagery of people being able to sit in the shade of their own fig tree was a common symbol of peace (1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10). Fruit-bearing fig trees were also a symbol of blessing for God's people.

But when the people ignored God, the prophets compared them to fig trees that were not bearing good fruit. God's people were supposed to be reaching out, caring for others, and helping with others' needs, but instead they were being selfish, growing rich off the work of others, and taking advantage of systems that were intended to help others.

When a fig tree was in leaf, that usually meant it had fruit already. But Jesus found none. So he cursed it as a sign that God would also bring judgment on his corrupt people. The leaders of God's people had let corruption creep in. They charged high exchange rates and outrageous prices for travelers and needy people who were at the temple to celebrate the Passover holiday.

Jesus was saying to the leaders, "You are only putting on a show. You are nothing but leaves, and you have no fruit!" He wanted the people to provide not only shady leaves but also the sweet, abundant fruit of compassion and justice.

Lord, call us to account when our lives don't bear the fruit of your Spirit. Guide us to live in step with Jesus. Amen.

REMAIN

"Remain in me, as I also remain in you. . . ."

—John 15:4

We have grapevines in our backyard, and we often need to cut back the tendrils—threadlike spirals that help the plant attach to supports while it climbs. When we have cut the tendrils, we notice two things: moisture steadily drips from the vine where we made the cut, and the cut-off tendrils begin to wilt right away.

In our reading for today, Jesus describes something similar. He describes himself as a vine, and he says we are like the vine's branches. This is a way of communicating the intimate connection between us and Christ. He is the source, and whoever remains in him will bear the fruit of his love. But if we do not remain in him, we will be like a branch cut off by the gardener, and we will quickly wither and die.

Jesus gives us this illustration while he is talking about our top priority in living for God in

this world—that is, to love one another as he has loved us, and to share his love with everyone around us. As we do that, we bear good fruit for the world to enjoy—and all of this is for God's glory.

Jesus also says that in this world we will face troubles, but because we remain in him, we need not be afraid. The message is clear: *we* cannot control the outcome of anything, but God is in control—so we don't need to live in fear about what might happen. We can simply remain in him, and we can see what he will do in and through us.

Loving Lord, where would we be without your presence? Thank you for every breath and for every good thing we receive through you. Help us to remain in you. In your name, Amen.

LOVED AND FORGIVEN

[Zacchaeus] ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. —Luke 19:4

Earlier this month, we read about Gideon, who was called out from under a tree to serve God in a special role (Judges 6). In this story, another unlikely man is called—but, in this case, Zacchaeus was up in a tree! This story captures the imaginations of children and adults because of the delightfully humorous picture of a short man clambering up a tree to see over the heads of other people as Jesus passes by.

We should pay attention to the immediate relationship Jesus begins with Zacchaeus. Notice also the muttering of the people who pass judgment on both Zacchaeus and Jesus. Nothing is said about Zacchaeus and Jesus' response to the hostility of the crowd. Instead, we see how Zacchaeus and Jesus demonstrate vulnerability and hospitality and how Jesus makes space for repentance and forgiveness.

How does this story speak to you? Do you identify with Zacchaeus, having done wrong and having often been overlooked? Do you identify with the muttering crowd, who are on the lookout for the mistakes of others? Do you identify with Jesus, who looks over the crowd and sees people for who they really are: found, loved, and celebrated?

For every one of us, everywhere, let's pray that Jesus will look up and call us from our perches and invite us to spend time with him. He will make things right in our lives so that we can extend compassion to anyone we may have misunderstood or taken advantage of along the way.

Lord Jesus, invite us to come and walk with you. Show us how to live as your fully loved and forgiven children. Amen.

PART OF GOD'S FAMILY TREE

You, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others. . . .
—Romans 11:17

In our reading today, the apostle Paul is talking about his own people, Israel, as an olive tree rooted and cultivated by God, and he is speaking to Gentiles, people from all other nations besides Israel.

We all need tangible ways to picture what God is doing with us in the story of salvation, and this passage is like a forest of many images that relate to trees, branches, roots, sap, and grafting to help us understand God's purposes. Although this chapter is rather difficult on some levels, even a basic reading of the verses shows that God is eager to take on the challenge of integrating wild branches with a cultivated rootstock, which is not the usual practice. It's typical to attach a *cultivated* branch to the root of a *wild* tree, because a wild rootstock is usually more hardy and a cultivated branch usually produces more fruit.

But we can see that by reversing the process, God has the power to sustain the weaker root and will also insert weaker branches, which will still, because of his kindness and mercy, result in a vibrant, fruitful tree. God not only includes strong, able people, but he also shows a preference for weak and unlikely candidates. God will even go so far as to graft a broken branch in again.

We don't know why God chooses to gather his people this way, but for all of us who feel weak, disabled, left behind, or inadequate, this passage offers profound hope. God can and will include us in the big story of his never-ending love.

O God, the depths of your wisdom and love amaze us! Thank you for graciously including us in your family tree. To you be the glory forever! Amen.

ROOTED

Just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him. . . . —Colossians 2:6-7

When I professed my faith in Christ and committed my life to him nearly three decades ago, I used this passage as I talked about what Christ's love meant to me personally. Though Paul doesn't refer specifically to trees as he writes to the Colossians, he does borrow the image of being rooted in Christ—and that leads to living a life that is built up, strong, and overflowing with the fruit of gratitude.

The word for “rooted” in this verse is the Greek word *rhizoo*, and this is the root word for our English word “rhizome”—a continuously growing horizontal underground stem that sends up shoots to grow above ground. But the verb in Greek is written in a passive tense, which means that rather than putting the emphasis on the believer to be rooted, the emphasis is on how we are

being rooted by Christ and in him because of his work in us. When we receive Christ, he will render us firm, fixed, and established. And he will cause us to be thoroughly grounded in him.

It changes everything to know that Christ will do this in us and for us as we trust in him. We're invited to continue to receive him and to allow his work in us to continually build us up. This is the mutual and deeply personal communion that we enjoy with Christ: we abide in him, and he abides in us.

Thank you, Lord, for giving us your love, for inviting us to dwell in you and to receive your love so that we may be rooted and built up in you, strengthened in faith and overflowing with thankfulness. Amen.

FORESTS, SPARKS, AND WISE SPEECH

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

—James 3:5

James is a practical person whose writing is full of descriptive, helpful images. In this passage about wise speech, he talks about training horses, steering ships, sparking forest fires, taming animals, testing springs of water, and comparing fruit trees. The variety of images here helps us to explore the importance of wise speech from several angles.

Perhaps you have noticed how even a simple phrase that's out of order or misunderstood in a conversation or on social media can bring a painful and immediate backlash that breaks trust and disrupts relationships. It's like a great forest fire that's ignited by a small but poorly timed spark. Sometimes it may feel safer to say nothing at all in order to steer clear of trouble, but the message in James is that our pure speech is needed to create Christlike community.

Forestry experts will sometimes say that a forest fire can be necessary—to break seed pods open and to feed soil with the nutrients of ashes. Big, difficult conversations can also be necessary at times, but we still need to be wise. Our speech shouldn't be about building up our own reputation as clever critics or about taking sides and being divisive. The only way to know what really needs to be said is to remain rooted and connected to Christ through the Spirit and the Word.

Lord, it can be hard to know what to say sometimes. There's so much controversy and pain in the world, and we don't want to make things worse by saying the wrong thing. Help us to know how and when to speak so that our words can bring peace and healing. Amen.

GOD'S INTIMATE PRESENCE

"To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." —Revelation 2:7

Reading these lines takes us back to the story of Adam and Eve, when they sinned against God and were no longer able to enjoy God's presence in the garden of paradise. Now we are nearly at the end of this magnificent story of God's love for his people—and isn't it amazing that we find the image of the tree of life again?

Even though Genesis and Revelation were written by different people many centuries apart, they use the same image of the tree of life. There are two important things about the tree of life as it is pictured here in Revelation: it was an image that powerfully evoked a longing for eternal life and for the experience of deep healing in God's presence. And the Greek word for "life" here isn't the word *bios*, which refers to biological life; it's the word *zoe*, which refers to all life—physical

and spiritual. The point here is that all life has its source in and flows from God. Our Creator allows the fullness of life to flow freely and shares this gift with all people and all creation.

The tree of life pictured here is the culmination of all the hopes and yearnings of God's people. It is the resolution of all the unfinished stories along the way, the fullness of forgiveness, and the sweetness of the immediate experience of God's intimate presence.

Lord and God, thank you for your gifts of life and love. Though our stories are not yet finished, we know that in your strength we will overcome every struggle and live with you in eternity. Amen.

IMMERSED

On each side of the river stood the tree of life. . . .

—Revelation 22:2

Here we have two very similar pictures of a river flowing from God—and on each side of the river the trees bear fruit every month. The picture in Revelation is a reminder and a completion of Ezekiel's vision of the city called "The Lord Is There," in which the waters of life and the tree of life mingle together.

Notice that the tree of life is not just one tree anymore but many trees on both sides of the river, as if all of the hope-filled moments along the way are gathered together into an orchard of hope, and the people who walk in this garden city are not just sprinkled, and are not merely wading, but are immersed in the presence of God—whole, healed, and gathered around the throne with gratitude and wonder at all that God has done.

The point of all this is to revel in God's presence and to sing out how amazing it is that everything will turn out well in the end.

It might be hard today—really hard for some of us—but even as we prayerfully imagine it now, we begin to experience the joy of heaven as we long to live in the perfect garden city where we are able to know and enjoy God.

May "the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen."

Lord our God, make this vision of hope and peace come alive in us. Sustain us in our everyday lives, and fill us with gratitude and wonder toward that day when we will see you face to face in the new heaven and earth. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

think CHRISTIAN

**A website and podcast
exploring God's sovereignty
over pop culture.**

What does it mean to watch, listen,
and play through the lens of your
Christian faith? At *Think Christian*,
we believe there's "no such thing as
secular."

**Check out the thoughtful
articles and the TC Podcast at
ThinkChristian.net**

Periodicals postage paid at
Grand Rapids, Mich., and at
additional mailing offices.

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Ministries

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407
800-626-3060
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional



RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame Ministries

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

3475 Mainway
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8
905-336-2920
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional