

+ Psalm 1 + Be a Tree + 15th Sunday after Pentecost: Back to School Sunday + 9 September 2012 +

In spite of some recent warm temperatures, there's no escaping the fact that we're entering the fall. Crops are being harvested. Football is back in season, and yellow school buses are once again hauling children back to school and bringing them home. Even here at church, we've gone back to school with the start of another year of Sunday School and Bible Study.

Even with all these reminders that we're entering the fall, there is one sign that you can't miss, a sign that usually appears before harvests and football and school. Just look at the trees. The deep green leaves of late summer are changing to reds, oranges, yellows, and browns. When a gusty wind blows by, those leaves now fly off their branches and cover everything. Much like the spring when trees start to bloom, you can't help noticing the trees this time of year in all their autumnal glory before they're left bare for winter.

As we begin another school year today and as we look ahead to another year filled with opportunities to grow in grace and wisdom through the study of God's Word, we find encouragement and direction from Psalm 1. In this text, the Psalmist shows us two paths. One is the path of the believer, one the path of the unbeliever. One leads to eternal life. One leads to eternal death. As the Psalmist takes us down the path of the believer, he offers a very vivid encouragement to live in the Word of God, to spend real time there. In his own unique way, the Psalmist urges you to **BE A TREE**.

Where a tree is planted can make all the difference in its survival. The type of soil and what's near the tree impact how well it grows. The accessibility of sunlight and water can make or break a tree. The location of a tree can mean the difference between surviving, growing, and dying.

The Psalmist describes the perfect location for Christians like you and me. He describes the kind of soil type we need to have, and where we should not be laying down roots. He describes our ideal location as ***"a tree planted by streams of water..."*** So how do you get there? How can you be planted by streams of living water with good, rich soil? Consider the words of the Psalmist, ***"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night."*** The rich soil we need is the Word of God.

Much like a tree needs good soil for deep roots and a steady, dependable supply of life-giving water, you and I need the Word of God. It may not always be obvious, but you need God's Word more than anything else in this life—more than food, clothing, shelter, or an income. You see, that rich soil and life-giving water of the Word gives you more than what your body needs. It gives you what your soul needs—blessings that will last for eternity. Not only that, but the Word of God guides your life and shapes your values and goals. Whatever shapes your thinking will eventually shape your actions. If it's not God's Word, then your sinful nature will take over.

By nature your sinful nature prefers to ***"walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers"***. If you're pouring violent images or vulgarity or immoral content into your mind, sinful thoughts and words and actions will follow. Garbage in—garbage out. If your children's or grandchildren's attitudes about sex and marriage or material wealth are being formed by the values of TV, movies, or the internet, you shouldn't be surprised if trouble is on the horizon. If your "needs" are being determined by the rampant materialism of our society, an unhappy lack of contentment and sinful desire for what is not yours will likely follow. Gradually moving away from God and his Word allows more and more ungodly influence to come into your life—not unlike a tree planted in poor, contaminated soil. The poisons in the soil get into the roots of the tree and eventually destroy it from within, leaving nothing but a dead tree ready to be cut down and thrown on the fire. Over time ungodly influences can kill your Christian faith as they drive you away from God and into the waiting, open arms of those who oppose God and his Word. Sadly when that happens, then you like them are ready to be judged and condemned by the holy God, and like the Psalmist says, you ***"will not stand"***.

...But you and I don't have to be trees planted in poor, contaminated soil. No, the Psalmist tells us, ***"Blessed is the man (or woman)... (Whose) delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water..."*** The Word of God is the perfect soil for a Christian. The Word of God is where you see how wicked and deadly your sinful nature really is. With his holy Law in all its painful harshness, God shows you the reality of setting your roots in the poor, poisonous soil of ungodly influences and the end result of death.

In that same Word of God, however, you meet your Savior, your Lord—the One who has your specific needs in mind. He is the One who plants you in good soil where your roots can grow deep in the ground so the winds of temptation can't blow you over and where you can draw life, nourishment, and comfort from his Word. In that Word of God, you meet Jesus, the Water of life, who constantly pours out his life-giving forgiveness, his spirit-strengthening assurance, and his comfort of life eternal through his Word. In that Word, you see how much he cares for you. In that Word, you see how well Jesus understands what you're going through, what you've dealt with, what

temptations you've faced, when and how you've fallen, and what ungodly influences are trying to poison your firm hold on him. In that Word, you see how that same Jesus took on your human flesh, put himself in your shoes, and lived the perfect life you could not while dying the death you deserved to forgive you for those times when you have fallen prey to sin's temptation. In that Word, you see how Jesus has so lovingly and carefully planted you by streams of living water. Then through that good soil and living water of his Word, he nourishes your soul and helps you to grow in faith so you can resist sin. Being in the Word of God is vital for your survival because of Jesus!

Now when you first plant a tree, you almost always have to water it regularly until it takes root. Depending on the climate, you may have to water it even long after it takes root unless it's near a steady, dependable supply of water. The same is true for you and me, as a wise professor once wrote, ***“Christians cannot expect to resist the values of the world if they devote only one hour of the week to meditation on God’s Word and the other 167 hours of the week to providing for the needs of their bodies and to enjoying worldly entertainment. If we wish to have our whole lives shaped by God’s Word, we must devote more than our Sunday worship hour to that purpose.”***¹ If this hour of worship is all the nourishment your soul gets from God's Word, it will be very difficult for your faith to grow and for your life to be shaped by God's Word. In fact, the chances of your soul succumbing to attack are even greater because your roots stay shallow and you can be more quickly toppled by temptation.

So what does that mean for you and me? It means that you and I need regular Bible study with our fellow Christians. We need to recognize the importance of regular family devotions and personal Bible study. It doesn't have to be every day and it doesn't have to be hours of study, but you and I need real, regular time in God's Word. How else will you be able to withstand the temptations of your sinful nature and the influences of the sinful world around you? Spending real time in God's Word helps you to develop the godly habit of remembering and applying the truths of God's Word when you are confronted with temptations or faced with daily decisions.

Even more so, time in the Word makes the Word your joy and delight. As you meditate on it ***“day and night”***, the Lord blesses you as you grow in the grace and knowledge of your Savior Jesus Christ. You learn what God has to say when it comes to evolution or immorality or temptation. You learn how to resist sin and stand firm, and you become a tree ***“which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither”***, producing rich fruits of faith.

One of my favorite things about this area is the fruit harvest in the fall—specifically the apples. I love going out to a local apple farm and picking pounds and pounds of apples of every kind from Honey Crisps to Empires to Granny Smiths to Radiant Runkles. Each fruit has its own unique taste and texture and purpose. In good seasons, those trees are just loaded with fruit.

Being planted in the good soil and beside the life-giving waters of God's Word has a significant impact on your life. Perhaps you've seen it. Attitudes change. Decisions are made differently. Perspectives are re-focused. As your roots grow strong in the Word of God, as you are nourished by its life-giving waters, you start to bear fruits of faith, fruits like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, contentment, and self-control. Over time with a faith motivated by Christ and guided by his holy Law, you even desire to be a blessing to others—to your family, your spouse, your neighbor, your business, your church, and even your community and society.

In each of your lives, those fruits of faith borne from your connection to the good soil and life-giving waters of God's Word will look different. God has different purposes for them, different ways that he blesses you and blesses others through your fruits of faith. Amazingly, nourished and blessed by Christ through his Word, you may not even realize you're being a blessing to others as you keep growing through his Word. In fact, it may not be until you reach eternity before you see how the Lord used you to bless others.

As the new school year begins with many opportunities to grow in grace through the study of God's Word, I challenge every one of you, young and old, to be a tree this year with God's help, a tree planted by the streams of living water of God's Word and producing rich fruits of faith. Consider the time you spend meditating on God's Word. Could it increase? Could it improve? How can you keep growing richly in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? Besides your Bible, there are plenty of tools available to help you, from story Bibles for the little ones to devotionals like Meditations to plans for reading your Bible. Look for opportunities to study God's Word with others. Don't blow it off as something that's not necessary, but see how vitally important the life-giving waters of God's Word are for your soul and for your eternity. Then as you meditate on the Word day and night, may our gracious Savior provide rich fruits of faith in your life as you become a tree of his planting nourished by his Word. Amen.

¹ John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 1-72*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004. Pg. 120.