

*Trees
that
Teach*



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by Brian Johnston

1. *The Valley of the Oak Tree*

"Turning off Highway No.1 toward Bet Shemesh ..." So began the article on the internet. I had typed in the biblical location of the Vale of Elah to see what background information existed on this famous site where David, the shepherd boy, had defeated the giant, Goliath. The immediate response was a series of directions claiming to take me to the very spot!

Further information agreed with what can be found in traditional Bible dictionaries: advising me that the valley gets its name from the Elah tree, a type of oak tree. This large and old Elah tree still remains in the valley where the Elah Brook flows - the very brook famous for supplying the five stones David, the shepherd-boy, took from it in order that he might defeat Goliath with a single stone from his sling.

Pictures, stating they were of Elah's oak tree, flashed up on my computer screen, serving to bring to mind most vividly that the David-against-Goliath contest took place in the 'valley of the tree' - and that David's victory there was associated with a tree.

It's such a wonderful story, so beautifully told in the Bible, that we can do no better than to read it straight from 1 Samuel 17.

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle; and they were

gathered at Socoh which belongs to Judah, and they camped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephesdammim. And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered and camped in the valley of Elah, and drew up in battle array to encounter the Philistines. The Philistines stood on the mountain on one side while Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with the valley between them.

Then a champion came out from the armies of the Philistines named Goliath, from Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a bronze helmet on his head, and he was clothed with scale-armor which weighed five thousand shekels of bronze. He also had bronze greaves on his legs and a bronze javelin slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and the head of his spear weighed six hundred shekels of iron; his shield-carrier also walked before him.

He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel and said to them, "Why do you come out to draw up in battle array? Am I not the Philistine and you servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will become your servants; but if I prevail against him

and kill him, then you shall become our servants and serve us." (1 Samuel 17:1-9)

Not one of the soldiers moved, for none of them relished that challenge! But a mere shepherd-boy who was there on an errand rose to the challenge ...

David said to Saul, "Let no man's heart fail on account of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

Then Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth."

But David said to Saul, "Your servant was tending his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went out after him and attacked him, and rescued it from his mouth; and when he rose up against me, I seized him

by his beard and struck him and killed him. "Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted the armies of the living God." And David said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

And Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you." ...

So David took his stick in his hand and chose for himself five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in the shepherd's bag which he had, even in his pouch, and his sling was in his hand; and he approached the Philistine.

Then the Philistine came on and approached David, with the shield-bearer in front of him. When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him; for he was but a youth, and ruddy, with a handsome appearance. The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine

cursed David by his gods.

The Philistine also said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field."

Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of



the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. "This day the LORD will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. And I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the LORD'S and He will give you into our hands."

Then it happened when the Philistine rose and came and drew near to meet David, that David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. And David put his hand into his bag and took from it a stone and slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead. And the stone sank into his forehead, so that he fell on his face to the ground.

Thus David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone. (1 Samuel 17:32-50)

What courageous faith young David had! How real God was to him! It's said that the bold Scottish preacher John Knox courageously approached the court of Mary, Queen of Scotland, who had set herself against him. His friends advised him to postpone his visit because she was in a particularly angry mood that day. But John Knox wouldn't be dissuaded. His reply to them was: "Why should I be afraid of a queen when I have just spent four hours

with God?" It was like that with David, too. He had spent time with God, so Goliath, giant though he was, was nothing more than a mere man.

As the Bible book of Daniel records, those who know their God do exploits. David stepped out in faith that day and what an exploit was performed! I hope this will be an encouragement to you today if, perhaps, you're facing some gigantic challenge in your own life. Some larger than life issue may be overshadowing you, but take courage from David's example. Step out in human weakness, but with full confidence in God in accordance with his Word. David said: "I come to you in the name of the LORD". The Bible says,

*The name of the Lord is a strong tower,
the righteous run into it and they are saved.*

We don't rely on our own might and our own power, when, like David, we recognize that 'the battle is the Lord's'. When we 'fight the good fight of the faith', he fights for us. David put the army of Israel to shame that day. No-one from the ranks of the trained warriors was prepared to take on Goliath. But this youngster, who had come on an errand to his brothers as they served with the army, didn't see Goliath as an invincible enemy, but he saw him as someone who had defied the God of heaven - not so much the God of the hosts of Israelite warriors, but

the God of the angelic hosts in the armies of heaven. That was David's vision power. How different challenges look to us, when we're able to see them in the way God sees them!

David had been through past experiences with God which now strengthened his faith for this fresh challenge. He spoke to Saul of how he had *killed both the lion and the bear ... And ... said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."* It's good to call to remembrance how God has helped us in the past whenever we're confronted with a new obstacle.

And David's main concern that day wasn't for himself, but for God's reputation. He wasn't in this for personal glory - although it would bring him that - what motivated him was 'that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel'. If it was necessary for him to face Goliath in combat to prove the point, then David was ready. And so, God's power was made perfect in weakness that day. Just as God had reduced the number of soldiers in Gideon's army - so there was no way they could take the credit for God's own work - so God was glorified in David's victory against all the odds, humanly speaking. 'Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts' (Zechariah 4).

And David's victory that day - as we

began by saying today - was connected with a tree, for the Vale of Elah where the contest took place means the 'valley of the tree'. The large and old Elah tree - a type of oak tree - still remains in the valley.

David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, in his 'valley experience' of stooping down from heaven to live on this earth, one day walked with even greater faith and courage to the tree of Calvary to defeat finally and for ever a greater and more awesome adversary, the Devil. And even as David's victory became the people's victory, so the Lord Jesus Christ emerging victorious from the fight through his resurrection on the third day, now shares his victory with us: a victory we can know over sin, death, and Satan's power.

One last point, if I may, as we apply the lesson here to ourselves. The surrounding area was known as 'Ephes Dammim' which is translated as 'the boundary of the blood'. Yes, if we want to be on the winning side ... We need to receive Jesus by faith as our saviour, for he shed his blood on the cross to pay the price of our rebellion. The challenge facing us is this: *"He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life"* (1 John 5:12). Receive by faith God's Son who shed his precious blood for you and step over into eternal life. Have you done that? Have you crossed the boundary of the blood?

2. *A History Book in Lime*

Recently, in South Africa, over 50 people were reported rescued from floodwaters. Among them, a woman who escaped the rising water by climbing into a tree after her car was washed off a bridge. Her car was spotted disappearing into the Bakkens river and the local fire department was alerted. She got out of her car but couldn't get out of the flow of the river. She held on to that tree for more than an hour until help arrived.

When I first came across that story, I couldn't get the thought out of my mind: saved by a tree! She was saved by a tree. I want us to take that as a reminder of the central message of the Bible, for the Bible is a story of two trees. The first was in the Garden of Eden. Adam was told not to eat of one of the trees in that garden, for:

The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die." (Genesis 2:16,17)

A simple command, you say, but it became the vital test of human obedience. Sadly, the very first man failed that test. With his freewill he chose to disobey God. As a result, sin entered the world, just as the apostle

Paul tells us in Romans chapter 5 and verse 12:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

But, thank God, the situation wasn't hopeless. Where Adam failed, Jesus triumphed. When writing to the believers at Corinth, Paul describes Jesus as 'the second man' and the 'last Adam', where he writes:

"The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:45-47)

Adam, the first man, walked in disobedience to that first tree, way back at the start of human history on this planet; Jesus Christ, the second man, the Lord sent down from heaven to be the last Adam, later walked in perfect obedience to the second tree, the tree where he was crucified, outside Jerusalem, 2000 years ago. The disciple, Peter, who in the first Christian sermon (Acts 2:22) had accused the Jews of having caused Jesus to be nailed to the cross, is the same Peter who in his later Bible letter described that cross

as being where:

[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. (1 Peter 2:24 ESV)

I wonder as I speak these words now, if you see yourself and your personal history bound up with that tree where Jesus died 2000 years ago? From the Bible, it's clear God sees Christian believers as those who have died with his Son at the tree of Calvary where Jesus himself died. The exact words found in Romans chapter 6 are these:

Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin. (Romans 6:6)

I'm reminded of this fact whenever I visit a certain village in Belgium - the fact that we who are believers have had our identity as Christians carved out at the tree of Calvary. The village is called Zoersel, and, for eight centuries, it was known as 'the village under the Lime tree'. A huge, old lime tree dominated the village green, and dominated, in fact, the entire life of the village. Marriages, parties and funerals all took place under the village lime tree.

But, by the nineteen seventies, times were changing in Zoersel. Plans were afoot, and the old tree seemed to some, at least, to be standing in the way of progress. Finally, in April 1974 the old lime tree was chopped

down. Many were sad to see it go.

But it made a return! A history book of Zoersel was sculpted in the wood of the tree!

85 life-size figures were carved into the trunk of the old lime tree - figures that represented village life as it once had been: a nun, a miller, the first lady mayor ... Their likenesses are all there. Today, visitors can go into a museum of village life in Zoersel and compare photographs and drawings of these people with the realistic images of them carved in the wood of a large section of the original tree. The history of the village and its citizens can be read in that tree.

But what about you? Is your name written in the history book of the tree of Calvary? The identification of each Christian believer's past life with the tree on which Jesus died is something that's declared in the Bible - in the verse we shared earlier:

Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin (Romans 6:6).

'Our old self crucified with [Jesus]'. That's the 'with' of association, of course. We, as believers, have known identification with the cross of Christ - effective from the time of our conversion - when we first received Jesus Christ by faith as our personal saviour.

Surely that expression 'our old self' is referring to the person we were

before we met Jesus Christ and experienced salvation from sin's penalty through repenting and believing that he, God's Son, died for our sins on the cross (1 Corinthians 15:3). Isn't this the main practical thrust of Romans chapter 6: that we should no longer live as we once did because we're not the person we once were? Praise God: our old self was crucified with Him!

Yes, we deserved to die for our sins - and in a sense, we did ... in the death of Christ. For, Romans chapter 6 goes on to tell us that we have been united with Christ by the reality of our faith and by the symbolism of our water baptism as disciples - so much so that God saw us as actually dying with Jesus Christ.

We've thought of Zoersel, the Belgian village that's no longer the village it once was because the old lime tree that used to be central to village life has been cut down. Life there is no longer the life it once was.

So we should no longer live as once we did because we're not the person we once were. Our former self, the person we once were before we trusted in Christ died to the penalty of our sin and as a result now our sinful nature, or the body of sin as

Paul calls it, has no claim against our new self, our new Christian identity. That's why we're to consider ourselves *to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus*. ... and it's also why we're not to ... *let sin reign in [our] mortal body* (Romans 6:11,12).

It will help us if we picture ourselves like the good folks of Zoersel. Village life goes on in Zoersel today. But it's changed. The village has a new identity, although it still remembers its past because its famous lime tree was raised up again bearing the identity and historical record of its former villagers carved into its trunk.

If you have received Christ, then you have changed too. You're no longer the person you once were. You have a new identity in Christ: you are a new creation in Christ Jesus. But it's good to be reminded, the apostle Paul argues – just like the villagers of Zoersel – that the person we once were is forever identified with a tree. For us, it's the tree where Jesus died.

May I ask you: are you a new creation in Christ? Has your past life been recorded at the tree where Jesus died for you? Where he died to provide you with a new and blameless and perfect Christian identity in his death on the cross?

3. *The Vision of the Man on the Tree*

The news report was about an elderly man driving along without having his car seat-belt fastened. It seems he suffered a heart attack while driving and his car swerved off the road and struck a tree. The force of the impact threw him against the steering wheel with so much force that it restarted his heart and saved his life apparently!

Rather than a tree saving someone's life, there's a story in the Bible about how a tree cost someone their life. The man in question was being pursued while riding his donkey or mule. The mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. And the hair of his head – which he grew to great length - caught fast in the oak, so he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule under him kept going. The man was left in a helpless state, hanging from the tree, and his pursuers were soon able to put him to death. But who was he? Let's find out, for there're lessons we can learn from this memorable incident.

The unfortunate victim was Absalom, a son of Israel's best-loved king - David. But it was his father's loyal supporters who were responsible for putting Absalom to death. Whatever

had happened? Well, Absalom was a proud and ambitious man. For a start, he was proud of his good looks and of his hair which - as we said - he grew to great length. This is how the Bible records it in 2 Samuel 14:25 and 26 ...

Now in all Israel was no one as handsome as Absalom, so highly praised; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no defect in him. When he cut the hair of his head (and it was at the end of every year that he cut it, for it was heavy on him so he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head at 200 shekels by the king's weight.

And he was ambitious too. By making all sorts of promises to anyone who would listen, he stole the support of many of his father's citizens. Eventually, the conspiracy grew so strong that king David and his loyal supporters had to run away from Jerusalem.

This is the subtle way that Absalom spoke to the king, his father David, *"Please let me go and pay my vow which I have vowed to the LORD, in Hebron. For your servant vowed a vow while I was living at Geshur in Aram, saying, 'If the LORD shall indeed bring me back to Jerusalem,*

then I will serve the LORD."

*The king said to him, "Go in peace."
So he arose and went to Hebron.*

*But Absalom sent spies throughout
all the tribes of Israel, saying, "As
soon as you hear the sound of the
trumpet, then you shall say,
'Absalom is king in Hebron.'" ... And
the conspiracy was strong, for the
people increased continually with
Absalom.*

*Then a messenger came to David,
saying, "The hearts of the men of
Israel are with Absalom."*

*David said to all his servants who
were with him at Jerusalem, "Arise
and let us flee, for otherwise none of
us will escape from Absalom. Go in
haste, or he will overtake us quickly
and bring down calamity on us and
strike the city with the edge of the
sword." (2 Samuel 15:7-14)*

Obviously, from this point on, a
battle or showdown was
unavoidable. When it came, the
battle was fought in a heavily
wooded area - but only
after David had given
special instructions to his
generals:

*The king charged Joab
and Abishai and Ittai,
saying, "Deal gently for
my sake with the young
man Absalom." And all
the people heard when
the king charged all the
commanders
concerning Absalom.*

*Then the people went out into the
field against Israel, and the battle
took place in the forest of Ephraim.
The people of Israel were defeated
there before the servants of David,
and the slaughter there that day was
great, 20,000 men. For the battle
there was spread over the whole
countryside, and the forest devoured
more people that day than the sword
devoured.*

*Now Absalom happened to meet the
servants of David. For Absalom was
riding on his mule, and the mule
went under the thick branches of a
great oak. And his head caught fast
in the oak, so he was left hanging
between heaven and earth, while the
mule that was under him kept going.*

*When a certain man saw it, he told
Joab and said, "Behold, I saw
Absalom hanging in an oak."*

*Then Joab ... took three spears in his
hand and thrust them through the*



heart of Absalom while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak ... (2 Samuel 18:5-14)

So Absalom died on the tree for his own sins - for his own rebellion and wrong-doing. He could blame no-one but only himself. What a way to die! To be riding along at full speed one moment, riding his donkey fast under an oak tree with low branches; and then, the very next moment, to have his hair got caught and be dragged off the donkey and left hanging by his hair from the oak tree - an easy target. Yes, it's plain to see that Absalom died on the tree for his own sins - with only himself to blame. But what a contrast that makes with the Lord Jesus Christ who died hanging on a tree for our sins. His disciple Peter wrote in the Bible that Jesus *bore our sins in his body on the tree* (1 Peter 2:24). We'll return to that point soon, but let's read how the story of Absalom's rebellion ends:

Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said [to Joab, David's general], "Please let me run and bring the king news that the LORD has freed him from the hand of his enemies."

But Joab said to him, "You are not the man to carry news this day, but you shall carry news another day; however, you shall carry no news today because the king's son is dead."

Then Joab said to the Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." So the Cushite bowed to Joab and ran.

Now Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said once more to Joab, "But whatever happens, please let me also run after the Cushite."

And Joab said, "Why would you run, my son, since you will have no reward for going?"

"But whatever happens," he said, "I will run."

So he said to him, "Run." Then Ahimaaz ran by way of the plain and passed up the Cushite.

Now David was sitting between the two gates; and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and raised his eyes and looked, and behold, a man running by himself. The watchman called and told the king.

And the king said, "If he is by himself there is good news in his mouth." And he came nearer and nearer.

Then the watchman saw another man running; and the watchman called to the gatekeeper and said, "Behold, another man running by himself."

And the king said, "This one also is bringing good news."

The watchman said, "I think the running of the first one is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok."

And the king said, "This is a good man and comes with good news."

Ahimaaz called and said to the king, "All is well." And he prostrated himself before the king with his face

to the ground. And he said, "Blessed is the LORD your God, who has delivered up the men who lifted their hands against my lord the king."

The king said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?"

And Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent the king's servant, and your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I did not know what it was."

Then the king said, "Turn aside and stand here." So he turned aside and stood still.

Behold, the Cushite arrived, and the Cushite said, "Let my lord the king receive good news, for the LORD has freed you this day from the hand of all those who rose up against you."

Then the king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?"

And the Cushite answered, "Let the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up against you for evil, be as that young man!"

The king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had

died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 18:19-33)

So, in fact, two messengers brought the news of victory to David. But, the first only muttered vaguely about some commotion centred around a tree - while the second had the vision of the man hanging on the tree and was prepared to tell all about it. That was a contrast with the first runner to arrive who had not been prepared to pass on word of the death of the young man on the tree. He only told as much as he felt comfortable with.

Well, now, we've already contrasted Absalom's death on the tree for his own rebellion, with Jesus, the Son of God, dying on the tree for our rebellion. And what a contrast it is! The challenge to us all from this story is this: Do you truly understand the meaning of Jesus' death on the tree just outside the city wall of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago – if you do, will you tell others clearly about it? The question is: what kind of witness will you be? Will you tell people only as much as they want to hear? Or will you tell the whole truth? Will you be faithful to the vision of the man hanging on the tree?

4. *The Story of Sierra Leone*

Have you heard of a tree known as the 'freedom tree'? It should ring a bell if you've ever heard the story of Sierra Leone, one of the countries situated on the west coast of Africa. It was founded as a country for released slaves in the days of the abolition of the slave-trade. If a ship was discovered taking Africans to be slaves on American cotton plantations, it was turned round and brought into the port of Freetown in Sierra Leone.

The area was first settled in 1787 by freed slaves sent from England and Canada. Even today, descendants of the freed slaves - known as Creoles - still play a leading role in the city, even though they are a minority of the population now.

So slaves who had fled the newly-independent USA to England were resettled here by the British Government. When the slaves were disembarked, they were led up some steps known as King Jimmy's Steps. Apparently, the place had itself previously been a slave market, and had been burnt by local tribes under a certain King Jimmy in 1790.

So, slaves who were to be resettled here, once disembarked, were led up King Jimmy's Steps. At the top of the

steps, they were confronted with a giant cotton tree. Since these slaves had been destined for the cotton plantations of North America, that tree at the top of King Jimmy's steps symbolized what would have been their fate.

Of course, it was that tree which became known as the 'freedom tree' because, as the slaves stood before it, their chains were cut from them and they were set free.

I would like to ask you if you have been to the 'freedom tree'? I don't mean the tree in the port of Freetown in Sierra Leone, but whether you have been in faith to the tree where Jesus died, and acknowledged from the depths of your heart that he was dying there for you?

But maybe you've never thought of the tree where Jesus died as being a freedom tree. So, let me make it clear why I'm describing it like that.

Before any person comes to know Jesus Christ, the Bible would describe them as a slave to sin. Here's what the apostle Paul wrote in one of his Bible letters, his letter to Christian friends in Rome, in fact:

But thanks be to God that though

you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed. (Romans 6:17)

The same thing applies to all who are Christians today, of course. The very same can be said of us: we too were once slaves - slaves to sin - before we came to know Jesus Christ, God's Son, and the freedom that's to be found in him, and in him alone.

If we pursue the Bible's analogy with slavery as regards our spiritual condition, then we're made to realize that we're 'sinners by nature and by practice'. We inherit a sinful nature from our parents that's traceable all the way back to the disobedience of the first man, Adam - we're all tainted by the original sin (Romans 5:12). This shows up in our in-born tendency to choose to go our own way. As a result we're all sinners by practice too, and sin spoils our lives: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*, the Bible says (Romans 3:23). This is the spiritual slavery that extends to everyone on the planet.

That's exactly as Jesus himself said when he *answered ... everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin ... if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.* (John 8:34,36)

It must have been a wonderful feeling for those slaves we began this chapter by thinking about, who were once brought into the port of Freetown and then stood before that tree and experienced their chains

being cut from them.

In reality - but at a spiritual level - that's the experience of every true Christian believer on the Lord Jesus Christ. It's just like the old hymn says:

My chains are snapt
The bonds of sin are broken
And I am free!

Everyone who, by faith, has taken their stand before the tree on which Jesus Christ died, that cross of Calvary outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, has been set free from ever having to pay the penalty their sins deserve.

This is the good news of Christianity: that all of us who are spiritual slaves to sin can be made free through Jesus Christ. He's the one *in whom we have redemption* (Ephesians 1:7). The word 'redemption' means 'to redeem ... by paying the price, to let go free on receiving the price ... [it means a] liberation ... by payment of a ransom' (Thayer).

This is the wonderful story of Christianity: that the Lord Jesus came to this earth as man so that he might buy us in the slave market of sin of sin representing the degrading situation into which human disobedience had brought us. Jesus, God's very own Son, died to pay the price we owed, but which we could never pay. He died and paid, with his blood, the price of our freedom.

But this redemption, this freedom from sin's penalty, this forgiveness of

our sins - is not automatic. We must respond to God's loving initiative. And the Bible is very clear about exactly what response God is looking for - in order to make our salvation personally effective for us. God doesn't ask us to pay, for example by works of penance or any religious effort in the hope of earning God's favour. That's simply not possible - besides the full price for our freedom has already been paid at the cross, the freedom tree.

God's own Word, the Bible, plainly says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8,9)

It was all done for the slaves who were once brought into the port of Freetown, and so it must be with us on a spiritual level for us to be freed from the slavery of sin. Everyone who, by faith, has taken their stand before the tree of Golgotha has been freed to serve Jesus instead - freed to willingly give our heartfelt obedience to our great liberator. What was it again that the apostle Paul wrote?

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed (Romans 6:17).

It's interesting wording where it speaks about 'that form of teaching'.

It's equally been translated as a pattern, or mould of teaching to which the believer is committed. This is God's great purpose in giving us our freedom, so that we might be committed to the whole mould of Christian teaching so that it takes shape in our lives - or rather our lives take on its shape!

Think of how hot, molten metal is poured into a mould so that when it cools and becomes solid, it takes on the shape of the mould. We have been set free so that our lives become moulded by the pattern of teaching that's found in the New Testament. The New Testament does more than give us a description of what the very first Christian believers did, it defines the original mould of Christianity which God intended should not be modified – even as the Law was left unmodified during the whole of the Old Testament period.

And what was that original mould of Christianity? Well, the whole view we get of it in the New Testament of our Bibles is consistent with a brief seven step summary found in Acts 2:41,42. We read there of the response of the first Christian disciples, newly set free from the chains of sin – we're told:

1. They received his word (the Gospel: the message of the cross)
2. They were baptized
3. They were added (to those already gathered together in what came to

be on that day the Church of God at Jerusalem)

4. They continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching

5. They continued steadfastly in the fellowship

6. They continued steadfastly in the breaking of the bread

7. They continued steadfastly in the prayers

These seven statements are seven steps, if you like – perhaps we could even call them King Jesus' steps. You may remember how, earlier, we thought about King Jimmy's steps in the port of Freetown in Sierra Leone? I want to leave you with a question today: Are you sure that your chains of sin have been removed? And, if so, have you gone up King Jesus' steps - to fully show your gratitude to him?

5. Growing Firm like the Cedar

Trees grow throughout their lifetime and so should Christians. No doubt this is among the many lessons the Bible could teach us from the subject of trees.

To take another, the common word for 'tree' in Hebrew comes from a word meaning 'to make firm', so a tree is 'that which is made firm'. This certainly makes good sense in Psalm one where it says:

*How blessed is the man who does
not walk in the counsel of the
wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
But his delight is in the law of the
LORD,
And in His law he meditates day
and night.
He will be like a tree firmly planted
by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he
 prospers.
The wicked are not so,
But they are like chaff which the
wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand
in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the
righteous.
For the LORD knows the way of the*

*righteous,
But the way of the wicked will
perish. (Psalm 1:1-6)*

It's tempting for each of us to read that psalm from our own perspective. We tend to picture a tree in our own country. But when it says that the godly 'shall be like a tree' (v.3), we're not meant to imagine what might immediately come to mind with the picture of a tree. For example, someone living in the United Kingdom might think of a willow tree drooping over a river. But what entered the Hebrew mind was the idea of 'firmness', for the main idea here is 'steadfastness'. The righteous man is like a tree which doesn't get uprooted by the wind - someone who is able to stand before God. But, the reader of the first psalm, especially if ... from a forested area, mustn't miss the emotional impact in the image of the tree ... A tree in Palestine, particularly in the southern areas, was something rather special ... An oasis in the desert of southern Palestine was a haven from oppressive heat, a place of rest and refreshment' (TWOT).

I think that opens up a different window on the idea of a righteous person. Because we might confuse the picture in our minds with the

unattractive notion of a self-righteous person or think in terms of a 'holy Joe' who sticks rigidly to the letter of the law – and we wouldn't desire the company of a person like that. But this picture of just how special trees were in the Bible land, and the fact that their existence indicated the presence of water, perhaps an oasis in the desert - a place offering rest and refreshment for the weary - we need to set before us the contrasting notion of the benefit of being found in the company of a truly righteous person, of the type described in the very first psalm.

But, having made these general comments, let's turn our attention now to another psalm, it's Psalm 92 which continues the theme of the righteous person before God being like a tree. It reads:

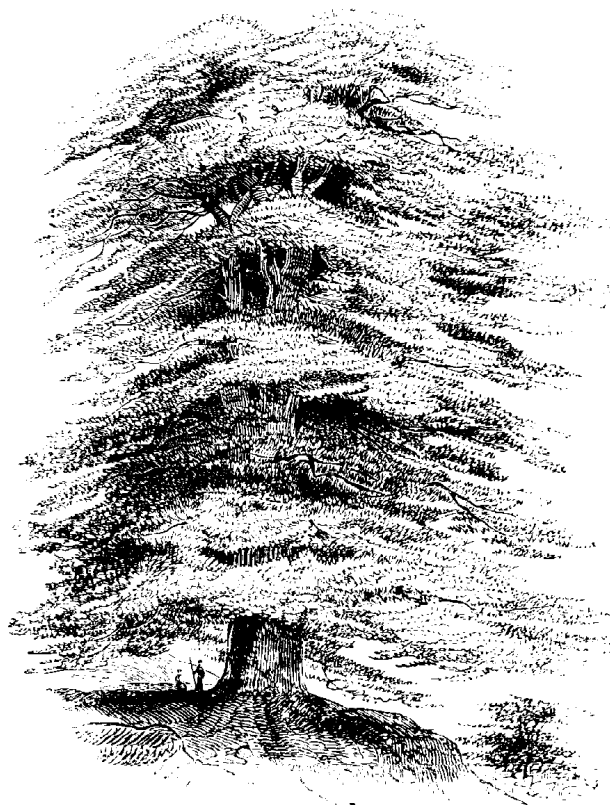
*The righteous ... grow like a cedar
in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of
the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our
God.
They still bear fruit in old age;
they are ever full of sap and green,
to declare that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no
unrighteousness in him (Psalm
92:12-15).*

The cedar tree has been called the 'Prince of the trees of the mountain' - and in particular of Mount Lebanon. These magnificent trees, the cedars of Lebanon, are mentioned 75 times

in the Bible, and we will allow ourselves to touch on the wider Bible context when it seems relevant to the message of this psalm.

We want to think about the special lessons we're intended to draw from this. As we reflect on the psalm, we should be asking: "In what ways are the righteous like the cedars?" It would seem there are three areas of similarity which the psalm draws our attention to: the cedar's growth, where it is located, and its age-related performance.

First, we'll take a look at its growth. One researcher says: 'These noble trees grow amongst the snow, near the highest part of Lebanon and are remarkable for their age and largeness.' He then spoke of how it would take a measure of about twelve metres to go right around the



trunk; while the spread of its branches might be as much as 35 metres. But, it's the height of these trees that the Bible prophet Amos singled out, when he reminded Israel that God had destroyed their enemy before them even though: *his height was like the height of cedars* (Amos 2:9). The height of the cedar tree certainly is impressive. They can reach 40 metres in height. How is the righteous-living believer on the Lord Jesus today able to be like this in his spiritual growth? He or she can attain to great heights – by:

... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into ... Christ. (Ephesians 4:15)

To the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ (v.13).

That's some height to aim for!

Another Bible prophet, this time Hosea, promises that the one who returns to seek God: *shall take root like the trees of Lebanon* (Hosea 14:5). How can the believer today who aims to live righteously be like this? The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians, saying he was: *rejoicing to see ... the stability of [their] faith in Christ ... walk in Him, [he says] having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed* (Colossians 2:5-7). So you see, we're back to our opening thoughts of the firmness and steadfastness that a tree symbolizes. As the Cedars of

Lebanon were resistant to the storms and snows on the high ground, so those whose life pleases God, he can make to withstand the stormy blast of the trials of life. God doesn't promise us a problem-free existence, but offers to give us strength like that of a tree.

That leads us on to think more about the location of the cedar tree. We have thought of its natural location. The same researcher we've already heard from went out to inspect these famous Bible trees, and later wrote: 'The famous cedars of Lebanon are situated on a small [rise] in a valley at the foot of the highest part of the mountain. The land on the mountain side has a sterile aspect, and the trees are more remarkable as they stand all together about fifty of them in one clump, and are the only trees to be seen in this part of Lebanon'; and he added: 'These noble trees grow amongst the snow, near the highest part of Lebanon.' Well, we have compared that fact to those whose life pleases God, and how he enables them to withstand the stormy blast of the trials of life. But cedars were so prized by people that, if they could afford it, they transplanted the cedars to grow in the courtyards of their homes. In the court-yards of these Oriental houses, the trees would be much better sheltered compared to when in their natural environment on the mountain slopes, and so they would be even more likely to bring forth their fruit to perfection in trying seasons.

Remember the reference to this in psalm 92? It says:

*They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.*

Just as cedars decorated God's own house on earth, the Jerusalem temple (see 1 Kings 6:18), it's also God's plan for Christians today to be together as they serve him. Not only is it right for us to obey him in this so as to glorify him with our obedience, but the benefit for us is the extra support it gives us when serving in the company of others in the place of God's choice on earth. It's designed as the best environment for us to be fruit-bearing.



Finally, let's think about the age-related performance of the cedar. In a tribute to the durability of the cedar tree, the ancients had a saying which said that something praiseworthy, something to be admired, was 'worthy of being kept in Cedar'. So these long-lived trees also had a wood that kept well even when cut.

And with long life in view, these were trees that weren't in a hurry - their first cone production began when the tree was 20-40 years old - but still relatively young! The Christian believer whose life is displaying something of the righteous character of God will yield fruit for God, and at maturity will *bear fruit in every good work* (Colossians 1:10) - fruit that will last for all eternity.

One of the remarkable features of the cedar tree is its scent. In the wider Bible context, we read: *his fragrance like Lebanon* (Hosea 14:6). As is well-known, 'the tree has a strong balsamic perfume and hence the whole forest is so perfumed with the fragrance that to walk through it is delightful.' What may not be quite so well-known is the fact that cedar wood remains scented only for the first year after being felled. It's an aspect of the practical righteousness to be seen every Christian's life, that: *God ... leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of [Christ] everywhere* (2 Corinthians 2:14). But if we cease to actively live the life of righteousness, then that fragrance will no longer be able to be detected in our lives, just as the scent of the cedar lasts only a short time once felled.

Let's aim in our righteousness to be like the majestic cedar tree: the prince of the trees of the mountain!

6. *The Princely Palm of the Plain*

A few years ago the seed of an extinct date palm made the news by sprouting after 2,000 years. It became the oldest seed ever known to produce a viable young tree. It was discovered during an archaeological dig at King Herod's palace at Masada, down by the Dead Sea.

This date palm was the tree Greek architects used as a model for their Ionic columns. They designed the columns on the tree's tall (25m), thin (40cm) trunk and curling, bushy top.

The palm tree is the other tree mentioned in Psalm 92 which we were looking at in the previous chapter.

The righteous flourish like the palm tree ...

They are planted in the house of the LORD;

they flourish in the courts of our God.

They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him (Psalm 92:12-15).

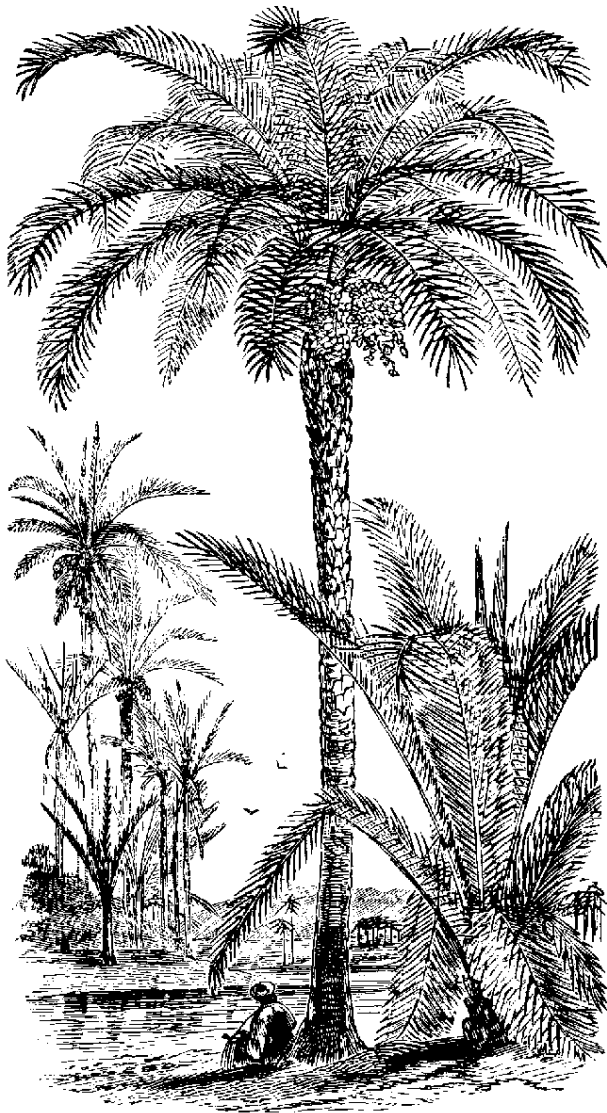
Earlier in the psalm, we read: The wicked 'spring as the grass', but now what a contrast in that the righteous

'flourish like the palm tree'. While the growth of the righteous may not be as rapid, it is, however, long-lasting.

If we picture a noble palm: one that's sending all its strength upward in one bold column growing in the middle of a dry, barren desert; then we can picture the righteous person, the one who lives uprightly; and who in uprightness aims alone at the glory of God. For the righteous person - like the palm tree - is resilient toward outward circumstances. He or she thrives by God's grace where everything else perishes.

There's no more majestic sight than the palm of the oasis, this prince among the trees of the plain. But, what are the main features of the righteous which are found demonstrated by the date-palm?

Well, let's first consider its growth. A palm tree grows upright. It has just the right degree and type of flexibility to allow it to always return to its vertical, upright position, despite any attempt by the wind to mould it into a different shape or angle. When we compare that with the believer on the Lord Jesus Christ today who is living life as guided by the Bible, God's Word of righteousness, perhaps the verses which come to



mind are in Ephesians chapter 4:

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him ... even Christ. (Ephesians 4:14,15)

Just as the palm tree is notable for its perfect uprightness, so righteous persons are upright in heart and life: not blown off course by trends and external influences. Their desires and

affections remain - in the midst of surrounding pressures - directed heavenwards.

It's also remarkable that the palm tree is its rich flowering. No wonder the psalm talks about the righteous flourishing like the palm tree, for it's a tree that really does flourish - it has such a rich flowering. The Bible word 'flourish' means to 'blossom profusely', which seems to capture the rich flowering of the date-palm. At full size, it bears up to 100 Kg of fruit. Now, isn't that a challenge? Is there that evidence of righteousness seen in my life - displayed by the fact I'm bringing forth the fruits of righteousness, to the glory of God. These are spoken of in Philippians chapter 1 and verse 11 when Paul talks of those who have ... *been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

So much for its growth, it's also interesting to look at what palm trees are associated with in the Bible. There's a definite biblical connection with victory. Do you remember the vision which was given to the apostle John in Revelation?

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation

to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?"

I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:9-14)

Like that palm-bearing company in Revelation 7:9 - who will in a day still to come be found to be overcomers in the great time of tribulation under the antichrist - we, too, in the measure our lives are lived out righteously for God, we'll make it plain for all to see that we're more than conquerors through Christ.

So, palm branches were used as emblems of victory. Palm branches are large (6m long by 60 cm wide) greenish or bluish-gray leaves and they form a canopy up to 12m wide on the date-palm tree. The leaves are made up of 30-60cm long leaflets

arranged in V-shape ranking the length of the leaf stem. As well as being waved in victory, we find there were carvings of palm trees in the wood which lined the interior of God's house, at the time when King Solomon's Temple served as God's house on earth at Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 6:29):

Then he carved all the walls of the house round about with carved engravings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers, inner and outer sanctuaries.

If we're going to enjoy anything of the experience of victorious Christian living for the Lord here on this earth, then we'll have to ensure that our lives are righteous. And the inspiring words that talk about Christians being 'more than conquerors' were first spoken to believers on the Lord Jesus in the first century who by their association then with the first churches of God were also identified with God's house at that time - a house which the disciple Peter tells us is now a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). Those in it today, as in the early days, should aim to make it a place of being very evidently led in triumph in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Finally, as we compare the righteous to a date-palm, we ought to think about its long life: its long-lasting, maintained growth - with an evergreen vitality that's resilient to seasonal changes and which even flourishes under a full sun. No matter the circumstances, the Lord can

enable a Christian who's living righteously to so live that their testimony doesn't fade.

May what's true of the date-palm also be true of us as Christians: that we enjoy life-long growth – growth that may often take place in accelerated bursts of growth, or growth spurts - so that it will be true of us, as it is of the tree:

*They still bear fruit in old age;
they are ever full of sap and green,
to declare that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no
unrighteousness in him (Psalm
92:12-15).*

7. Remaining in the Vine

Christ pictures himself as the vine and calls on us to remain in him just like branches in an ordinary vine – so to be alive to the presence of God wherever we are.

When Christ spoke those words at the opening of John chapter 15, *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser,"* he was talking in terms of the potential fruitfulness of our day-to-day relationship with himself. The point is so graphic: apart from the vine, a branch can do nothing but shrivel; and equally, if we live apart from Christ day by day, we can't be what God wants us to be as Christians.

Our lives as Christians are not inevitably going to be fruitful for God. *"Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away (airo) – or lifts up"* (v.2a, NKJVM), the Lord said. One vineyard owner says: "New branches have a tendency to trail down and grow along the ground ... We lift them up and wash them off ... they don't bear fruit down there ... [they] get coated in dust. When it rains, they get muddy and mildewed ..."

Possibly, that's the best way to understand what the Lord's saying here. The same word meaning 'takes away' is often translated as 'lifts up' in our Bibles. And so the picture

becomes this: In the same way as new branches have a natural tendency to head off in less productive directions and require re-directing, so we, at times, need to have our energies channelled in more productive directions.

The Lord Jesus next focused his attention on branches – or believers – who were producing some fruit, when he said: *"Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit"* (v.2b). One Gardening Report my attention was drawn to told me: 'Grapevines can become so dense that the sun cannot reach into the area where fruit should form'. It seems that, left to itself, a grape plant will always favour new growth over more grapes. From a distance, luxurious growth is an impressive achievement, but up close, it makes for a less than impressive harvest. Maybe, like me, you've been saddened to observe an experienced Christian whose life when viewed close-up through the lens of a crisis experience seems to display little evidence of an intimate relationship with Christ.

Is it not, sadly, our human tendency – that we like to keep up appearances, to project an impressive image, to display the leaves of our accomplishments. But

the Lord comes up close, scrutinising our lives, seeking fruit. There's always the real possibility that any one of us can have seasons of abundant foliage but underneath that outward show there's little real fruit for God. This will only be a problem if we don't react to the divine gardener's actions.

And what is that action? The Gardener's action is to cut away unnecessary shoots, because the purpose of the branch is to bear grapes. Gardeners tell us that: "Because of the grape's tendency to grow so vigorously, a lot of wood must be cut away each year." So the dedicated grape-producer has, once again, to go against the plant's natural tendency.

An extract from a Horticultural Bulletin runs like this: 'The ... ability to produce growth increases each year, but without intensive pruning the plant weakens and its crop diminishes ... Mature branches must be pruned hard to achieve maximum yields'. There we have it - the painful reality - also for us as believers: the more mature, the more cutting! But then it's fruit, more fruit and much fruit! The Lord wants us to build that kind of fruitful relationship with himself - and so he uses the testing of our faith - the season of the pruning shears.

If the newer, fruitless branch needs re-directing; then the more mature,

partially fruitful branch needs a reduction (of self). Living 'after the Spirit', and not 'after the flesh' will ensure we have more spiritual fruit, and less branch - less of ourselves - visible.

Still the Lord wasn't finished. He who came that we might have life in all its fullness, added: *"He who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit."* This is the point at which the Lord introduced the vital matter of our 'abiding' or 'remaining' in him as the true vine. In opening today we described the action of abiding as being 'alive to the presence of God in our midst wherever we are'. As David could say in the psalms: *I have set the LORD continually before me* (Psalm 16:8).



Surely abiding is all about the crucial connection which is the meeting of branch and Vine. The branch with the largest, least-obstructed connection will have greatest potential for fruit. The branch is totally dependent on the vine through that point of meeting. Fruitfulness is fundamentally about our relationship with him - if we're abiding, we will be fruitful.

So far, what the Lord has taught us is this: If the newer, fruitless branch needs re-directing ... and the more mature, partially fruitful branch needs reduction, then the branch aspiring to be abundantly fruitful needs to rediscover relationship with him as the primary source of satisfaction in the Christian life. Our energies may be channelled in the right direction, our appetite for worldly things may be reduced, but is there the same dependence as in earlier days? We ought never to think that we can outgrow that need for total dependence on Christ. The Lord emphasizes the point again and again by raising the issue of 'abiding' no less than ten times here in John fifteen.

It's on this matter of abiding - or remaining in Christ - that an interesting thing happens: the responsibility for spiritual fruitfulness in our lives now shifts from the Gardener to the branch itself - yes, it shifts to us. It will take place in the measure we get ourselves out of the way and allow God's Word to get to

work in us. Paul wrote to his Colossian friends and spoke of *the word of truth, the gospel ... bearing fruit and increasing ... in you ... since the day you heard it* (1:6).

When the Lord spoke of 'abiding in him' he twinned that expression with 'his words abiding in us' (John 15:7). It hardly seems possible we can experience the one without the other. Earlier in John's gospel, the Lord Jesus gives us a clear description of what it's like when people fail to allow his words to abide in them. He said to the Jews: *"You do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me."* (John 5:37-39 NKJ)

In complete contrast, the Lord opened up to Emmaus-bound disciples *the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures*. The Holy Spirit will do that, as we come daily to our Bibles in our quiet times. He takes of the things of Christ there and declares them to us (John 16:14). When we experience communion like that regularly, when the Spirit of God enables us to really believe the Bible's testimony about Christ, it's then we hear God's voice behind the sacred page – even as the Bible says 'today if you hear His voice' – and it's then we experience the reality of God's Word abiding in us.

Branch-like intimacy and dependence develops through Bible reading and prayer that changes our desires so that they become His desires: *"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you"* (v.7). For it's then that the longings we express in prayer are found to be in line with God's will, leading us to expect to see answers to our prayers (v.7). And when that praying is in relation to the Lord's work we're engaged in, this links up with fruitfulness for God in our lives (v.5) ... and so our heavenly Father is glorified (v.8).

Actually, this whole subject of abiding in Christ really starts in the previous chapter, John chapter 14 when the Lord said: *"He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him ... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him."* (John 14:21-23).

But the apostle John's last word on this topic of abiding is in his second

letter, later in our Bibles: *Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.* And in case there should be any doubt that the teaching of Christ - the commandments he had left for his disciples to keep - in case there should be any doubt that these were what became known as the apostles' teaching, the very thing that defined the New Testament churches of God, John also said: *Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we [the apostles] have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward* (2 John 1:8-9). Any reward in a future day when we stand before Christ will be adversely affected if there's been a lack of enthusiasm on our part in devoting ourselves to the Apostolic Faith in the same way the first believers did in Acts chapter 2. But the supreme motivation for that kind of devotion is our desire to be found abiding in Christ and being alive to his presence every moment of every day of our lives.

8. Down Among the Myrtle Trees

It's great to get a message of hope when the situation we're in seems bleak. It's even better if while we're taking the problem to the Lord in prayer, we receive an assurance of an answer from the Lord. That was the case with the Bible prophet Zechariah. I think we can safely assume he was a man of prayer. And one day he shares for our encouragement how the Lord answered him. When he shared the same thing with his people at that time, he became a prophet of hope to a discouraged and disappointed people. His story becomes a real reminder to us that our hope, as well as our help, is from the Lord, the Lord God who made the heavens and the earth. There truly is no case too hard for God. Let's draw encouragement from that.

Before we come to answered prayer in the first of Zechariah's visions, we're given an update about the state of the people and God's word of promise to them. We should take that first, following the order of these things that's given in our Bibles, because this word from God will become the basis for answered prayer. That's another thing worth noting, for the way God answers prayer will always be consistent with

what he says to us in his Word. And it serves as a help and guide to our praying at any time if we measure our prayers by God's revealed will in Scripture. So what did the word of God say in Zechariah's day?

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the prophet, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo saying,

"The LORD was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Return to Me," declares the LORD of hosts, "that I may return to you," says the LORD of hosts. Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Return now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds."' But they did not listen or give heed to Me," declares the LORD. Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, overtake your fathers?"

"Then they repented and said, 'As the LORD of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.'"

(Zechariah 1:1-6)

The message was plain. God was ready to return in compassion to his people if they would only return to him, turning away from their evil ways and wrong-doing which had brought God's anger upon them in the first place. God would deal with them in judgement – they'd spent seventy long years in captivity in Babylon – and now he was reminding the exiles who had returned to the land of Israel to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple – encouraging the discouraged builders that he'd do as he'd said – so they should get on with the building despite the opposition they were facing.

I like the suggestion, not only that Zechariah was a man of prayer, but also that he'd a favourite place for prayer, a quiet spot where he could be alone with God. There's mention of just such a place very early in the Old Testament book that bears his name. It was a little hollow where myrtle trees grew. I'm reminded of how the Lord Jesus had a place among the olive trees, a quiet garden on the hillside outside the bustling city, which it seems, was a place he regularly resorted to for prayer. It's there we find him at the time of his arrest. Judas, the betrayer, knew he would find him there, because it was his habit to go there.

Perhaps, there's a place you go to for prayer – some favoured spot in the house or garden where you go to be

alone with God, undistracted from the demands of mundane duties.

Of course, we may be wrong in thinking that Zechariah's favourite place for prayer was down in the hollow where the myrtle trees grew – but what we do know is that it was in this spot that God answered his prayer.

On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the prophet, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo, as follows:

I saw at night, and behold, a man was riding on a red horse, and he



was standing among the myrtle trees which were in the ravine, with red, sorrel and white horses behind him.

Then I said, "My lord, what are these?"

And the angel who was speaking with me said to me, "I will show you what these are."

And the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered and said, "These are those whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth."

So they answered the angel of the LORD who was standing among the myrtle trees and said, "We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth is peaceful and quiet."

Then the angel of the LORD said, "O LORD of hosts, how long will You have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which You have been indignant these seventy years?" The LORD answered the angel who was speaking with me with gracious words, comforting words.

So the angel who was speaking with me said to me, "Proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. "But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster."

'Therefore thus says the LORD, "I will return to Jerusalem with compassion; My house will be built in it," declares the LORD of hosts, "and a measuring line will be stretched

over Jerusalem."

"Again, proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "My cities will again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem."'"
(Zechariah 1:7-17)

I think it's probably helpful for us to keep track of the different people involved in these exchanges. There's the man on the first of these horses down among the myrtle trees; and also among the trees is the angel of the LORD – which is how the Bible describes an appearance of the Lord Jesus in Old Testament times before he became a man. In addition, there's the angel who acts as Zechariah's interpreter in the visions.

Earlier, we said this was God's answer to Zechariah's prayer. But, you might say: the prayer that's answered here is the Lord's own prayer, which he, as the angel of the Lord, makes, asking: "How long, O LORD of hosts, how long will You have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah ...?" I should therefore explain myself – that I would understand that as being entirely consistent with Zechariah's own line in prayer. The people had returned to God, but due to the pressures of the opposition they were facing they had begun to doubt if God really would return to be with them in the temple they were building. If so, why was the rebuilding project proving so difficult? Taking God at his word, the

prophet Zechariah, I take it, had been praying in similar terms to the prayer spoken by the angel of the Lord. The confirmed answer was for Zechariah's assurance: God would indeed return to those who had returned to him.

This is another way I personally have found encouragement through this part of the Bible. If we see this as the Lord himself praying in a way that was consistent with the prophet Zechariah's own personal prayers, then this was God's graphic way of bringing his answer to the prophet's own praying. And what's more, if this is right, it illustrates something that's a definite New Testament teaching – which is that the Lord himself intercedes for us in prayer. Let's hear it from the apostle Paul when writing to the Romans:

Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. (Romans 8:34)

The basic prayer promise here is one we can relate to in many ways at many times: when God promises, "If you return to Me, I'll return to you." Maybe, you haven't yet come to know the Lord Jesus as your personal saviour, not yet having entered into a living relationship with

him by faith – then God's word to you is, "Turn back to Me. Turn from your sin and going your own way, and I'll be found of you." But it may be you've known the Lord for some time, and your heart's grown cold, and his word to you is a word of revival: "Return again to Me."

God is always angry against sin, his nature burns with righteous hatred against it; but he longs to be compassionate to the sinner, the sinner who humbles himself or herself and draws near to God ...

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (James 4:7)

God said:

"But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease." (Zechariah 1:15)

How many are in that state today among the nations! They were at ease in a bad sense, self-complacent without God in their lives. These were the nations who were troubling God's people and hindering God's work. God was not pleased with the state of ease among those nations. But Zechariah, and God's people, could rest in answered prayer, knowing now that God would indeed turn the tide which was against them.

All Scripture quotes are taken from the New American Standard Bible, unless otherwise stated.

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