

On the high plains of Northwest Texas there are only two places that trees grow. Trees either have been intentionally planted and watered by human hands around farmhouses and in cities and towns. Or trees grow naturally along river or creek banks.

That's pretty much it. I heard one visitor describe Lubbock as an "oasis of trees" on the otherwise empty plains. Of course, around here we have towns with the descriptive names of Levelland, Brownfield, Plainview, or a little further out, the fabulous Notrees. That says a lot. There's no town around here called "Sherwood Forest" or "Aspen" or "Thousand Oaks."

Trees do not thrive in the wild around here, except those few trees that grow along the edges of creeks and rivers.

If there's ever a Zombie Apocalypse, most of the trees in Lubbock will eventually die off. Only trees planted by water can withstand long dry spells on the Llano Estacado.

Our Psalmist today understands the relationship between trees and water in semi-arid regions. He uses the image of trees and water to describe the relationship we should have with God.

Psalm 1 says,

*1 Happy indeed are they who refuse the way of evil,  
nor walk the road of sinners, nor join the mockers of God.  
2 Joy shall be in the hearts of those who delight in the law of God,  
for they recite the law, they speak it day and night.  
3 They are like green trees that grow by clear flowing waters,  
they bear their fruit in due season,  
their leaves fade not, they prosper.<sup>1</sup>*

The message is clear. The tree's relationship to water gives the tree the ability to withstand hardship. Water gives the tree the ability to thrive and bear fruit.

In the same way, it is our relationship to God which is our source of strength. It is by keeping our roots firmly anchored in God that we live.

But we're not just talking minimal life support. By drawing our nourishment from God, we can grow, and thrive, we can fully become the people we're created to be. We can bear fruit. We can prosper.

And this is not about superficial material prosperity. This is a deeper sort of prospering. This is prospering by being connected to God as the source of life. The happy person, Psalm 1 says, is one who holds on to God, who is rooted in God, who takes nourishment from God's teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: *Presbyterian (USA) Psalter of 1993*

A few centuries later, the Prophet Jeremiah would expand on this image. He says,  
*Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.*

*They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.<sup>2</sup>*

Jeremiah says that a tree planted by water doesn't have to worry about scorching heat, or drought. A tree planted by water sends its roots into continually moist soil. A tree planted by water will stay green. A tree planted by water will bear fruit.

Those who trust in the Lord, reach out and grab hold and take in their life from God. They sink their roots into God and are anchored in God. They will be able to weather times of hardship.

But both Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17 contrast the image of the tree planted by water with another image, a negative image.

Psalm 1 says,  
*4 It is not so for all, not so with evil doers,  
they blow like chaff in the wind.<sup>3</sup>*

They are like dead grass clippings blown away by the wind.

Jeremiah expands that image:

*Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes.<sup>4</sup>*

What a vivid picture. A shrub in the desert. It's exactly opposite the tree planted by the water. When it rains occasionally, a shrub in the desert does just fine. But the rest of the time, it's in trouble.

Desert shrubs do one of two things. Either they bloom quickly and then die, leaving their seeds to wait until it rains again. Or they try to save up as much water as they can and hope they don't run out of water and die while waiting for it to rain again.

The choice is ours in life. We can try to act like desert shrubs. We can rely upon our own resources. We can try to save up as much as we can during good times and hope we have enough to sustain us through rough patches. We can remain small and close to the ground. We can put out spikes and thorns to keep others away. We can try to protect what little we have.

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<sup>2</sup> Jer 17:7-8, NRSV

<sup>3</sup> Translation: *Presbyterian (USA) Psalter of 1993*

<sup>4</sup> Jer 17:5-6, NRSV

Or, we can choose to be like the tree. Instead of hoarding our own small amount of water, we can sink our roots into a never-ending source of life-giving water. We can grow. We can thrive. And we can bear fruit, so that others may benefit from our being there.

The standards of the world tell us to be like the shrub. The world says that we should hoard and protect everything we can get. God has proclaimed that the standards of the world have been turned upside down.

Trust in God, and not in yourself. Send out deep roots into God's living waters.

Dry periods will undoubtedly come. Times of difficulty will undoubtedly come. In 2020 we've had to deal with numerous difficulties, from political instability to pandemic. Many around us are unbalanced and disoriented by these events, and they feel they've been cast adrift.

But scripture tells us to anchor ourselves in the living God. Follow God's teaching. Pray. Worship. Read and meditate on scripture. Share your abundance with others.

That's the way we can remain rooted and stable.

That's the way we can bear fruit.