

What Trees Can Teach Us about God

Isaiah 11: 1 - 3 , John 15: 1-5

I don't know about you, but Fall is definitely my favorite time of year.

I guess it has something to do with the crispness of the air that makes me feel invigorated and the satisfaction I experience when sipping hot apple cider while wearing my favorite sweater.

Maybe Fall heightens my awareness of things to come.

It warns me of changing weather patterns and prompts me to brace for the inevitable task of shoveling snow.

Whatever it is that makes Fall so enjoyable, I can never exclude the phenomenon of the leaves changing color from green to gold, orange, red, and even purple.

It's almost magical, and it's the reason so many of us journey to the UP and other northern places to take in nature's astonishing brilliance.

But guess what?

When we behold that Fall foliage in all its glory, we're witnessing death.

We're taking in the results of death. If it weren't for the leaves dying, we wouldn't be blessed with the amazing kaleidoscope of colors that get splashed across our landscape.

Did you know that the color change has to do with the leaf actually starving itself to death?

Each leaf grows cells that prevent the sap, the tree's food, from getting into it. The sap must pass through the stem of the leaf to get to the leaf, but this is blocked off by the newly produced cells, effectively killing the leaf.

When this happens, the transformation begins.

Chlorophyll, the green and most abundant pigment in leaves which aids in the process of photosynthesis begins to break down causing carotenoids, flavonoids and anthocyanins – other pigments that were always in the leaves - to be revealed.

They were just covered up by the chlorophyll.

The death of the leaves produces the colors we enjoy so much.

probably knew this already, but I wanted to share it with you anyway. I was recently reminded of this annual transformation when I came across 2 Corinthians 4:10. It's a verse that can be, quite frankly, a bit unsettling. Paul writes, *"We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."*

"Carry around in our body the death of Jesus."

At first glance, this sounds morbid.

Who would want to do such a thing?

As protestants, we're somewhat taken aback by the Catholic cross that typically displays Christ still hanging there. It offends our sensibilities, but maybe that's part of the reason it's their preferred symbol – an enduring reminder of the price Christ paid for us.

I know when Paul used the phrase, he was referring to the extreme hardships that he and his companions constantly faced as they sought to spread the Gospel. In the preceding verse he used words like “*crushed, persecuted and struck down*” to describe circumstances that to him must have felt like death.

But I think there’s another purpose behind his using the phrase “*we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus.*”

And it has to do with our motivation to remain faithful to Him and His calling in our lives. Think of it this way:

Christ died for one reason; to rescue us from sin and death, and He did it out of His love for you and me, and of course, His Father.

Remember Jesus’ words to his disciples in the Upper Room?

“*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*”

So, to carry around in my body the death of Jesus is to personally accept and acknowledge and embrace the incredible love Jesus has for me.

Jesus loved me so much he died for me. It’s this fundamental truth of the Gospel that has the power to transform our lives.

Embracing Christ’s death means accepting God’s love, and when we do this, that which was hidden can now be revealed.

This is the second part of the verse: “*We always carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus, **so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.***”

The Greek word for revealed is *phanerosis*. It can mean “to make clear, disclose, make manifest, or display.” Display! Like the brilliant display of colors in the Fall leaves – those same leaves that are in the process of dying.

Isn't this the sole purpose of the church and the Christian's life - to display to the world through our words, actions and deeds the life of Christ?

Well, Paul says the only way we can fulfill our high and holy calling is to “*always carry around in our body the death of Jesus.*”

In so doing, we proclaim God's love, and in the process, display the brilliant and striking colors of a saved, redeemed, and loved life to a world that's desperately seeking love and salvation.

But the changing of the color of leaves by dying so that other things can be revealed is just one thing trees can teach us about God, his ways and his nature.

Trees are also used in the Bible quite regularly to paint a picture of other important life concepts.

For example, in Proverbs 3:18, Solomon describes wisdom as a tree of life and advises each of us to embrace her and lay hold of her.

In return, she will bless us. Now how about that – The Bible give s shout out to the tree huggers!

In Psalm 1, a follower of God is compared to “*a tree that is planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.*”

Trees are also used to describe a righteous person in the Bible:

In Psalm 52:8, the psalmist writes, *“I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God.”* He then goes on to explain why he can make such a daring comparison: *“I trust in God’s unfailing love forever.”*

In a later psalm, two different species of trees are mentioned in the very same sentence: *“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon, planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming the Lord is upright.”*

Did you know that a Cedar of Lebanon can grow 130 feet tall and have a trunk diameter of 8 feet? Not circumference mind you, diameter - and can live for over a thousand years?

No wonder the psalmist uses this species of cedar to symbolize strength, long-life and fruitfulness.

But not all the descriptions of trees and plants in the Bible are pleasant ones.

Sometimes a Biblical writer describes trees being cut down or uprooted. It’s the Bible’s way of reminding us that God’s perfect and holy judgment will someday fall upon the earth in full force. Let me give you two examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the New:

In 12:14, the prophet Jeremiah writes, *“This is what the Lord says, ‘As for all my wicked neighbors who seize the inheritance I gave to my people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands.’”*

In other words, God's judgment will fall upon those who insist on remaining enemies of God and his people.

The New Testament verse I refer to concerning God's judgment comes directly from our Lord's mouth. In Matthew 15:13 Jesus warns, *"Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled out by the roots."*

In this context Jesus is referring to hypocritical false teachers, but logic tells us that we can extend this principle to anyone who resists the light of God's truth and fails to come to Him with a humble spirit.

In closing my message about trees and their symbolic use in the Bible, I must highlight two more examples, or I wouldn't be doing the topic justice.

These two examples highlight two extremely important aspects of God's character / nature.

One has to do with his incredible patience with us.

The other has to do with his immeasurable love toward us and his absolute and complete sacrifice of himself for us.

The first example is a parable that Jesus taught his disciples. It is found in Luke 13: 6 -9 and goes like this:

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So, he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir' the man replied, 'Leave it alone for one more year, and

I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

Can you see God's forbearance and patience towards a humanity whose willful stubbornness and unbelief continually oppose God?

We are the fruitless fig tree if we continue in our unbelief, but God is willing to give us a second chance in hopes that we will come to our senses and bear the fruit of faith.

The Apostle Peter reminds us of God's extreme patience toward us when he writes, *"The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some count slowness; but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance"*

Right now, at this very moment, God is withholding his righteous judgment, allowing us more time to finally come to our senses and follow Him.

My final example that utilizes a tree to paint a picture of God's love toward us is also God's greatest act of love for us. Peter writes about this event in 1 Peter 2:23 - 24, describing bluntly for us Christ's sacrificial death for our sakes, writing ...

"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made not threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds we are healed."

So, now you know how the Bible uses trees to bring to the forefront of our minds life's important and non-negotiable principles:

wisdom and righteousness

patience and sacrificial love.

And finally, one more: Healing and complete restoration:

John the Apostle describes it this way:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb² down the middle of the great street of the city.

*On each side of the river stood **the tree of life**, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And **the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.***

No longer will there be any curse.

The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.

They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.

And they will reign for ever and ever.”

Amen.