

Jeremiah

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[0 : 00] I'd like to look with you for a few moments this evening at the words which we find in the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah chapter 17, where we have these words at verse 7.

The blessed is the man, and of course the man here includes the woman, who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He and she will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when deep comes, its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

The Bible condemns the use of the graven images in the worship of God, that it provides us with a lot of verbal images, which enable us to understand the message that God has given to us in concrete terms.

And the image of a tree, or the metaphor, or in this case a simile of the tree, is one which occurs in scripture, and is one of the key verbal images that the Lord has given to us.

[1 : 30] The tree is presented as a picture of the people of God. It's presented as an image of what we who follow the Lord Jesus Christ, the profess to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, should be like.

We are to be like a tree.

He's given us his words in a figurative way. He's given us a lot of these figures, these metaphors, these similes, he's given us parables, to help the simplest of us to understand his word.

He speaks to us in verbal pictures. It's a very pictorial form of speaking that we find again and again in scripture.

And so there is a sense that every time we see a tree, we see a parable. And it's important for us to remember that. Each time we see a tree, we see a parable.

[3 : 04] Now it's very difficult for us to do that in practice because we've got so many trees and we become accustomed to trees. But sometimes when we come across perhaps an renewal tree or something happens to a tree which we don't expect, then we are reminded of this image that the Lord has given to us, that we are called to be like trees.

Some years ago, my wife and I had the privilege of visiting Western California and driving up through the state.

And one of the places that we visited was called the Avenue of the Giants. And it's a magnificent forest of sequoia trees, giant redwood groves in Northern California.

Over 50,000 acres of these. You can drive right through this Avenue of Giants. It's 31 miles long and it winds its way through the Humboldt Redwoods State Park, which is perhaps the most outstanding display of these giant trees in the world.

Some of you may well have visited these and have been similarly impressed. And for a Christian to visit here, it's impossible to do so without thinking of a verse like this verse from Jeremiah or the well-known verse from Sam 1, which we will sing at the conclusion of our service.

[4 : 39] Or to think of the vision of the tree of life in the book of Revelation. Now the Bible uses, as I said, the tree as a symbol and a parable.

And I would like to share with you tonight some of the lessons that we can learn simply by looking at the particular redwood tree. And each tree has its own character.

And each tree is a parable with a slightly different nuance. But tonight I would like to share with you the nuances that come from the redwood tree, these giant trees in California.

I think the first lesson that I took away from that visit was the stability of these trees. They are the largest living things in the world.

Larger even than the mighty whale. And perhaps larger than any plant or animal that ever lived on Earth.

[5 : 45] A giant sequoia tree, for example, can weigh as much as six million pounds. Equivalent of the weight of 800 single-deck buses. A single tree can contain sufficient wood to construct 40 timber homes of five rooms each.

They are absolutely massive. And they speak to us of stability. These massive living things which endure for hundreds and sometimes thousands of years exude a sense of permanence.

To illustrate on an enormous scale what Jeremiah associated with much smaller trees and arid climates. A tree like that is the very opposite of the chaff with which the tree is contrasted in Zanon.

The chaff which the wind blows away and it is gone forever. These trees have been there for hundreds and thousands of years.

There is this element of stability. And the extraordinary thing is that these massive trees can grow from a seed that weighs less than a small feather.

[7 : 03] Experts tell us that a redwood seed weighs one eight thousandth of an ounce. I don't think any of us would have scales sufficiently sensitive to measure accurately one of these seeds.

In this sense a redwood seed, a no less than the mustard seed of Jesus' parable, illustrates that sometimes the kingdom of God can begin in ways which appear to be very simple, very small, very humble.

But a small seed can produce a great tree. And so the first lesson that I took away from that visit is the stability that God gives us in his kingdom.

You see, we are like chaff. We are blown this way and blown that way. We lack stability. That we come to Christ and know him as our personal savior.

We are founded on the rock. We are no longer working in quicksands. We've got stability. We've got a firm footing.

[8 : 16] We are based upon a rock. Another figure which occurs very commonly in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, is that God is our rock. And a rock is a picture of shade in the desert, but it's also a picture of stability, a picture of shelter, a picture of refuge.

The second lesson that I brought away from that visit to the California Redwoods is the community which these trees are part of.

They live together. They live in association with one another. They are the tallest piece in the world, strolling at times to the height of a 35-story building.

They're nicknamed God's flag poles because they grow so straight. And one of the secrets of their straightness is that they grow together. They grow in groves.

In that contrast, a single example of other tree species which you can find in the northern California coasts, which are bushy. They grow in groves. Through lack of company and bend over by the prevailing wind.

[9 : 30] Through lack of support. And you know that in this country we can see trees that stand alone. They tend to be bent over. Away from the prevailing wind that normally comes from the west.

But not so these trees in California. Not so the trees in this country that are planted together. They grow straight. Because they support another.

They are part of an ecological community. But what fascinated us when we visited there was that not only do these giant trees form a community in themselves, but they are the main feature of a wider complex community of plants and animals.

Any of which depend on each other for survival. In fact, both the coast redwoods and the sequoia redwoods are known as what Dutchers call climates communities.

Because the trees live in harmony with the surrounding plant and animals so that no new species will naturally come along and replace them.

[10 : 37] Until they have got this inbuilt defence mechanism. An ecological defence mechanism. Because they depend on one another. They defend one another.

They support one another. And again, this is not a picture of the church of God. When the Bible speaks of a tree, it is not simply thinking of an individual tree.

It is thinking of trees together. It is thinking of a tree.

The little finger, the pinky, the thumb are very small parts of the body. But if we pay in these, then the whole body becomes miserable. And that is a picture of the church of God.

And we ought to realise that if we suffer, then other people suffer with us and suffer in fellowship with us. If we suffer because of our own fault, then we are causing unnecessary suffering to others.

[12 : 04] If we suffer for the sake of Christ, not because of our fault, then others are bearing that reproach with us and are supporting us. We are a community. We are bound together in the body of Christ.

Just as the trees are bound together in the forest. And so, these are the first two lessons. Ability with the first one, community with the second.

But the third lesson that I took away was what I called productivity. Easy coastal redwoods grow and multiply thanks to an abundance of moisture.

They require an annual rainfall of between 40 and 100 inches of rain, which is quite a lot of rain. It is more rain than we get in the east coast of Scotland.

But they supplement that with producing their own rain in inverted commas. We are a process called transpiration, which is something like sweating.

[13 : 08] Sweating of the human body. Through transpiration, a single tree can produce as much as 500 gallons of water a day. And that helps to restore the moisture of the soil.

And effectively, when an entire grove of trees transpires, there is a constant drip of water slipping down on you as you walk beneath these trees.

These trees demonstrate the vital dependence of trees upon water. Just as the psalmist stresses in 1st Psalm, as Jeremiah stresses in chapter 17.

Where those who believe in God, those who trust in Him, are dependent upon being close to water.

Now, water was vital in the much drier climate of ancient Israel and modern Palestine of Israel than in Western California or in our Scotland.

[14 : 17] But nevertheless, water is vital to us. And we know already that there is great concern in the south of England about the decreasing water supplies and the prospect of drought in many areas.

We are dependent upon water. And plant life, of all kinds, is dependent upon water. It is a constant source of water that enables trees to be fruitful and urgent.

It reminds us of one of the saints of Jesus that we looked at this morning. That He can give us running water. Living water.

Living water means running water. It is not scale water. It is not battle water. It is running water. It is fresh water. Spring water. It is water that has an inexhaustible source.

And He gives us that. And He says, by living by that water and drawing upon it, drawing upon its nutrients, drawing upon its thirst-quenching properties, that we can indeed honour God and be part of us in our spiritual lives.

[15 : 32] And bear fruit, as the psalmist says in Psalm 1. We call it to bear the fruit of the Spirit. And we can only demonstrate and bear the fruit of the Spirit as we are in contact with this water of life that comes from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Water is vital. And it is that water that we receive from Christ. And it is so important that if we live our lives, that we live our lives close to Christ. That we live near Him.

That we put out our roots, as it were, to draw up all the nutrients that come from the water of life.

That enable us to grow. That enable us to bear fruit. That enables us to be evergreen. We need this water of life that Christ gives us.

A fourth lesson that I took away from that visit to the redwood trees and the sequoia trees in California is the extraordinary capacity they've got for recovery.

[16 : 45] So it's not only stability, community, productivity, but also recovery. Then one of these redwood trees falls as it is cut down, sprouts shoot out from the stump and from the roots.

And some of these shoots themselves, some of these sprouts in time, grow into giant redwood trees. It's not that they grow like a bush, but that some of them actually become trees.

And so if the new tree grows from the same root system as the old, it is essentially the same tree. In some places, some of these redwoods might have been reborn many times, not simply over centuries, but over millennia.

They've got this capacity to recover. Even if they're cut down, they can recover and grow again.

Remember what Isaiah said about a fruit growing from the stump of Jesse, the stump of Israel? It's a prophecy that out of the disaster of ancient Israel, this ancient Israel became a disaster through the idolatry of the kings and of the people.

[18 : 06] Out of that disaster, God brought the Lord Jesus Christ. His ancestors were part of that disaster. that out of that stamp grew the fruit which we identify today with Christ.

And so even if the tree is cut down, there is this, there is this potential, this hope that we have in the Gospel.

That even if our person's life has been destroyed, or appears to be destroyed, if it made a total mess of life, and they feel that they totally failed, and that it is as if the tree is being cut down, or the tree is being cut down and destroyed, what Isaiah reminds us is that that tree can grow again.

But by the grace of God, he can cause a shoot to sprout out of that stump. And so there is a message here for those of us who feel that we're beyond recovery.

Those of us who feel that we may be beyond redemption, know them. Know them in the face of this earth is beyond the redemptive power of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And whether or not you may think your life has been a disaster, God can rescue you from that disaster.

[19 : 27] And God can bring hope and success out of disaster. even if the tree is cut down, shoot, can grow.

Provided we are close to Christ, close to the source of water, close to the source of nutrient. And so this, here we find an echo in the trees of California with Isaiah's parable.

That parable which he offered hope to defeat Israel. A message which comes to us in our personal lives, in our family life, in our life of our congregations, in the life of our churches.

Disaster need not be the end. And that's the message there is hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ even for the persons who have gone furthest away from God.

There is hope. While there is life, there is hope. And this is a wonderful part of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He invites us to become broken, burnt, defeated, however we may feel.

[20 : 50] We invite us to come as we are and to ask him to renew us, to remake us, to cause a shoot to grow out of the stump.

The final lesson that I took away from that visit to California was what I called longevity. The redwoods are among the oldest living things on earth.

Those who know about trees tell us that only the bristlecone pine and the sea of juniper live longer. The coast redwoods can live for 2,200 years and the giant sequoia for half-thousand years.

It's amazing to visit the visitor centres in these redwood parts because there they have got cut, the trees had been cut down or trees had been blown down they have cut through the tree and you can see the wings, multiple wings, one wing representing a year's growth of the tree.

tree. And in some of these huge logs they have marked what size the tree was when Jesus was born or what size the tree was when Columbus discovered America.

[22 : 13] It's funny, you realise just how old these trees are and you realise that these trees were standing long before Jesus was born. There's this tremendous longevity of these trees.

They can live so long, we were told, because they have incredibly faint thick bark. The bark is up to one foot thick, one foot in depth. And that bark contains a substance called tannin.

And tannin is a strong chemical which helps to resist fungi, insects, parasites, and diseases. And in addition, the thickness of the bark, together with the relative absence of resin, makes red woods much more fire resistant than other trees.

Now the Bible occasionally associates human longevity with a tree. Job does that. That it is the fruit of the tree of life in the new Jerusalem which enables those who eat it to live forever.

And in the book of Revelation we read of the tree of life whose fruit is available and those who eat of the fruit will live forever.

[23 : 34] And what God is offering to us is eternal life. He's offering to us life here and now. But he's also offering to us life forever.

Life which is everlasting. life which is eternal. And so God has given us in his creation trees in order to help us to understand his word.

And he invites us as we look at a tree to remember these texts these parables of Jesus which focus on trees focus on growth.

The importance of water the water of life the importance of being transplanted into the kingdom of God. As the tree that Sarno sees in someone is it's a transplanted tree it's been taken out of the wild and brought into a place of irrigation.

There's the water there a stream of water that seems to be irrigation panels. And so the tree is the tree which has been taken out of an arid desert environment and brought into cultivation brought into an irrigated patch.

[25 : 04] And that is a parable of what needs to happen in your life and in my life. We need to be lifted by the gospel out of our separation from God out of our sinfulness and our selfishness and brought into the kingdom of God transplanted you need to be tilted out rocked off and battled you need to be uprooted it's not a question of trying to improve yourself it's not a question of adopting yourself and improve the program the gospel is not more radical than that the word radical is a word which comes from the latin word roots we need to go to the root of the matter and that's what the gospel does the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ can lift us out of our selfishness out of our sinfulness out of our alienation from God and out of our lostness and bring us into his kingdom Paul speaks about being delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of life and that is God's purpose for his people that is God's purpose for the world the word tree in

English comes from the same root as the word truth in English and it is when we become like a tree that is transplanted living waters that go from Christ that we fulfill the true purpose of our creation it is then that we find the true meaning of life it is then that we discover what God's purpose for us is and so tonight through the power of the gospel God is willing this is what he is saying he is willing to lift you he is willing to transplant you he is willing to uproot you and bring you into his kingdom and that living can be painful and often is but he is willing to do it and he is inviting us to ask him to do it he is inviting us to ask him to become the gardener the forester who will come and bring us out of our lostness and bring us into his kingdom and he is willing to do that tonight he can do it for you he can do it for everyone and anyone who cries out to him for help and for salvation and I hope that there may be someone here tonight who wants to cry out despite the fact that it may mean a painful separation despite the fact that it may mean a painful repenting a turning around of our lives in the direction which we live

God is able and God is willing to do that the question I want to leave with you is whether you are willing that he should do it are you willing to ask him to come in with his spade and that group you from your sinfulness from your lostness from your alienation from him and bring you into his garden bring you into his plot bring you into his kingdom he's willing are you let's pray together