

THE PALM TREE CHRISTIAN

"The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree." Psalm 92:12.

This ninety-second Psalm has been used in Israelitish religious worship for more than three thousand years. It has in it the remarkable expression, "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree." While it is an Old Testament text, yet it is permissible to use it in making a New Testament application. Some very interesting lessons may be drawn from this Old Testament simile.

In the Bible there are approximately one-hundred-ninety references to trees. God's blessed Book is a veritable forest, with trees of every description mentioned upon its pages. It is interesting to note how the Bible begins with the "Tree of Knowledge," central in the garden of Eden, and ends with the account of the "Tree of Life" in the midst of the celestial city. Trees are used of God to teach marvelous lessons. When we see the meaning, and measure the significance of trees and the vital part they play in God's wondrous scheme of nature, we cannot wonder that Solomon, the wisest preacher of antiquity, chose them for the theme of a message.

Trees have speech. They tell us of eternity. The wind blowing through the trees utters a mysterious sound that speaks to us of the passage of time. Each tree has a voice of its own. The oak roars, the elm has a deep and sweet melody, the birch sighs, the willow weeps, and the upstanding pine chants a wondrous cadence, but the palm has a murmur all its own that thrills the listener.

As one looks upon a tree he is impressed by its conspicuousness. It stands out as a commanding object. So we should be conspicuous in the moral landscape, revealing noble specimens of character, living before God in the beauty of holiness, and manifesting right conduct before men.

One can see in a tree an image of piety. Its top is every day lifted toward the sky, and as one looks at it he thinks of the One Who is on creation's throne. As we study the trees we learn the power of gentleness, for how does the tree manage to withstand the tempests of summer and the storms of winter. It does so, not by resistance, but by yielding. It bends and sways before the wind, and its branches are unharmed while its roots go deeper to lay hold upon the unseen foundations.

We appreciate the value of trees. What a barren and desolate place this world would be if it were stripped of trees! Many and fascinating are the lessons to be learned from the trees, and thus it becomes apparent that a tree is more than a thing of ornamentation. Trees have their use in relation to truth, and are interesting and profitable illustrations of Christian experience.

In the tree we see a parable of the life of man. There is the springtime when the leaves are put forth, the summer with its fruitage, and the autumn with its beautiful variety of colors. So man is born, passes through childhood and youth, reaches manhood, and should ripen toward a serene and beautiful old age.

Among the many illustrations employed by the Holy Spirit, we often find trees used as emblems of believers, and by means of this comparison we are taught various aspects of our experiences as believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. God makes the trees speak to us in a very pointed way, not with audible voice, to be sure, but in a manner that none can misunderstand. Especially is this true of the palm tree, which is to engage our attention during this service, and which suggests that type of character that honors God.

Since God has made the palm tree a symbol of the believer, it will be our purpose to discover some of the good things God wants it to say to us as we sit down under its shadow. At least four things are worthy of our consideration and application.

I. A Palm Tree Grows In Uncongenial Soil.

In the East the palm does not grow in the fertile loam, but in the arid sand, where there does not appear to be any moisture to sustain it, and where the scorching sun seems almost certain to destroy it. While it is to be found around the world, it will grow where nothing else will.

God's grace makes it possible for the Christian to live and grow and flourish like the palm tree under any and all conditions. He is independent of his surroundings. It is not necessary for him to have a beautiful garden in which to live in order to be Christlike. He can be godly in ungodly surroundings. He can be pure when everything about him is otherwise.

Enoch walked with God in the midst of a wicked generation. Joseph lived a godly life amid the fleshpots of Egypt. Daniel was a captive in Babylon, but he was not contaminated by the wickedness of that idolatrous land. Though all was barren about him, yet he himself flourished and bore fruit to the glory of God. Obadiah was known for his godliness, even in the days of wicked Ahab and Jezebel. There were saints in Caesar's household in Paul's time. In the language of our Master, they were "in the world", but not "of the world". How blessed it is to live and to grow, independent of earthly conditions!

This world in itself is beautiful, and it teems with monuments of the presence, the power, and the providence of God. But sin is here, and Satan tempts us to pervert its pleasures, its purposes, and its pursuits. The temptations and trials of this life weary and worry us, and render this world a very uncongenial place for righteousness to flourish. A Christian may say: "It is hard to live a Christian life in the midst of the world, in the factory, in the office, or in the place of business." But the palm tree flourishes in the hard place, even where other trees would wither and die. This is a picture of the godly soul. The influences that try the Christian, and threaten him, and attempt to crush him are powerless to do so. By the grace of God they sometimes promote his growth. He grows strong by trial, patient by tribulation, and joyous through suffering.

II. A Palm Tree Grows In A Stately Manner.

1. It is upright.

The palm tree does not lean to the right nor to the left. It always strives heavenward. It is almost impossible to divert it from the straight way. It is symmetrical in its proportions, graceful in its motions as it sways gently in the breeze, and is as erect as a statue. Towering aloft towards the sky, it puts out its feathery branches and graceful leaves to be seen and admired afar off.

So the righteous are upright -- their attitude is upward in faith, prayer, aim, and hope. What right has the Christian to be crooked? In spite of any weight or burden, the Christian ought to be straight or upright.

Unmoved by the scorching and withering blasts of temptations and persecutions, the Christian, sustained by the secret springs of Divine grace, lives and grows in likeness to his Divine Master. How striking is the contrast in the Psalm! The wicked and worldlings are compared to grass, which is at best but of short duration, and which is easily withered; but the emblem of the Christian is the palm tree, which stands for centuries. Since we are a heavenly people, with a heavenly Father, and a heavenly citizenship, and a heavenly hope, it certainly behooves us to live uprightly, like the palm tree.

2. It is beautiful.

It is beautiful with its tall and verdant canopy, and the silvery flashes of its waving plumes. To an Oriental the palm is the queen of trees. Linnaeus said the palm is "the princess of the vegetable world." Humboldt said, "Of all vegetable forms the palm is that to which the prize of beauty has been assigned by the concurrent voice of nations in all ages." Its stately growth and graceful form gives it pre-eminence over all other vegetable growths in the eyes that are accustomed to rest upon it. The palm gracefully rises from the plain, and bears a beautiful crown of leaves and fruits.

Likewise, the Christian should be a person of beauty. I am not referring to physical beauty, but to that beauty which comes from the upper world. Yieldedness to the Spirit of God will mark us with a beauty that comes from neither land nor sea. Observe the distinction between the two "flourishings" -- the flourishing of the wicked, and the flourishing of the righteous. The one is entirely a matter of outward, material good; and the other is primarily a matter of personal character. The wicked may flourish by reason of what he has; and that can be taken from him very easily. The godly man flourishes by reason of what he is; and that can never be taken from him. The figure of beauty given in the palm suggests uprightness, gracefulness, gentleness, fruitfulness, and secret sources of renewal for its life.

3. It is evergreen.

The palm tree is always green, showing a constant life and vigor. It remains the same through all the circling year. So the piety of the righteous is to be so constant that the heat of summer shall not make it languish; and so ardent that the cold of winter shall not make it freeze.

4. It is fruitful.

The palm tree is noted for its fruit, of which it bears an astonishing quantity. This fruit is the staff of life to many among whom it is found. It is noted for its sweetness. God certainly expects the life of the Christian to be filled with fruit.

5. It is useful.

Gibbon tells us that the Hindus, or natives of Syria, claim that the palm has at least three-hundred-sixty uses.

(1) Useful for guidance.

The palm tree is a sure sign of the presence of water. Across the burning sands the caravan, parched with thirst, makes for the cluster of palms seen afar off, for it is known that water is there.

(2) Useful for a shade.

The shade from the palm tree provides shelter and refreshment for the traveller.

(3) Useful as an emblem of victory.

With gladness the people wave the branches of the palms as emblems of victory.

(4) Useful as a fruit.

As Christians, we must see to it that our lives are fruitful -- filled with kind words and good deeds. A palm tree gets other palm trees started. Christians should influence others to become Christians also.

III. A Palm Tree Grows From The Heart.

The growth of the palm tree is dependent upon the heart. It puts on new life on the inside, while the other trees take on new life on the outside, near the bark. They add a new cycle of wood each year, so that their ages can be determined by the layers of wood. The palm tree does not grow in this way. It grows from its heart outward. It has its hardest wood outside and the softest wood is in the center. One can kill the other trees by cutting a girdle around them, but the palm is not killed in this way.

Christianity has to do with the heart. It is inward before it is outward. "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness." It begins on the inside and moves outward. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." We cannot work out our salvation until it has been wrought within. When that has been accomplished, we can then make it manifest. It is utterly impossible to produce the fruits of Christianity apart from the roots of it. The genuine external Christian graces appear only when Christ gets into the heart, and then no outward circumstances can affect that inner life. This is why God is constantly making His appeal to the soul instead of the body. Let us avail ourselves of every means of grace.

IV. A Palm Tree Continues To Bear Fruit, Even In Old Age.

"They shall still bring forth fruit in old age." Psalm 92:14. A palm tree is never on the retired list. It continues to bring forth fruit, even though it lives to be extremely old. There is a proverb in the East to the effect, "The older the tree, the sweeter the fruit."

Too many professed Christians are on the retired list. Too many have gotten to the place where they imagine they have done their share; therefore, some one else can take over the work and carry on. But, just as the palm tree bears fruit to the very end of its life, so should we. Don't grow stale and worthless as a Christian. Rather, become increasingly worthwhile in the service of your Lord and Master. I appeal to you to be A PALM TREE CHRISTIAN, to the praise and glory of His grace. What a blessing you can be to others by living the upright palm tree life!