

SERMON TOPIC: A BALANCED LIFE: GROWING DEEP, GROWING STRONG

Scripture: Jeremiah 17:7-8 (New International Version)

⁷ But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. ⁸ He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

THE PARABLE OF THE TREES

There was once a field populated by over twenty trees. They were of varying heights, sizes, species and ages. The younger trees often talked amongst themselves – about what they would like to be when they grew up. Some adored the tallest trees amongst them – they wanted to reach out high towards the skies, and be head and shoulders above the rest. Some of the other young trees wanted to be like those that had the greatest plumages of leaves spread over their tops – those with the thickest display of leaves. The rest of the young trees wanted to be like those trees that grew apart from the rest, along the slopes of the hills – for they admired the special locations they grew in, and longed for such uniqueness.

Then one day, a barrage of extreme weather elements came – first the strong and mighty winds that tore up the tall, thin trees that stood head and shoulders above the rest; followed by hot searing weather that burnt those that stood high on the slopes and received the brunt of the effects, whilst the rest of the trees were saved by the shade they were given by the hills around. Finally a drought hit the entire area and those with thick plumages withered and died.

The survivors were few, and they were the less spectacular of the trees – they were located near the streams, they had not spent their efforts striving to be taller than the rest, nor had they fanned out thick volumes of leaves. Rather, they had focused on spreading their roots towards the streams and drank tremendously, day in and day out such that they could survive the drought in the end.

Jeremiah 17:7-8 speaks of such trees and likens them to that of the Christian life we are called to lead - not an un-realistic, ideal Christian life for us to merely picture, but the standard which God sets for each Christian.

Parallels in the Parable

The parable above speaks of the different categories of people in this world:

- ❑ those who aspire to be ‘tall trees’ – high climbers, seeking to achieve positions of influence and respect amongst fellow men.
- ❑ those who aspire to be ‘thick-volumed trees’ – amassing great possessions in our journey here on earth such as big houses, cars and such other luxuries and material wealth, and
- ❑ those who neither seek to reach high positions nor amass great fortunes but choose to stand out from the rest, whether in terms of looks, style, talent – like the ‘trees on the slope’ – and devote their time towards such pursuits.

WRONGLY ORIENTED CHRISTIAN LIVES

Let’s ask ourselves if we have wrongly oriented our Christian lives and become lost in wrong pursuits.

The bonsai tree is a small ornamental plant that is kept in beautiful pots and looks exactly like a miniature tree. However, I have discovered of late that the Bonsai Tree is not a special tree in terms of genetics, but maintains and preserves its small size simply because of the regular trimming and pruning by its owners. Its roots and crown are trimmed and restricted so that it never reaches its full growth potential.

Many Christians live lives like that; they are nice to look at but are limited in growth, thus resulting in the full potential of their lives not being lived out.

THE JEREMIAH 17 TREE – THE CHRISTIAN STANDARD

A closer look at Jeremiah 17 yields 6 characteristics for us to observe:

- 1) The tree is near the water source – “...like a tree planted by the water ...”
- 2) It actively reaches for the water source – “... that sends out its roots by the stream ...”
- 3) It does not fear heat – “...does not fear when heat comes ...”
- 4) Its leaves are evergreen – “...leaves are always green ...”
- 5) It does not fear drought – “...no worries in a year of drought ...”
- 6) It always bears fruit – “...and never fails to bear fruit.”

In summary, these two verses speak of a life that trusts and depends on God, thereby establishing confidence and stability at all times, even (as pointed out specifically in this text) in the midst of crisis.

a) The Tree is Near the Water Source – “...like a tree planted by the water ...”

This ‘water’ is the source of life for the tree. It needs to replenish this in order to live.

Psalm 46:4 says “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.”

Every big city has a river for e.g., Thebes, Damascus, Nineveh and Babylon. The river sustains the city. However, Jerusalem, the city of God has no actual river. The river that the Psalm refers to is actually God’s continual outpouring of blessings upon His city, which keeps it alive and flourishing. It is this same stream and water that is referred to in Jeremiah 17.

Dependence upon God as our source of replenishment keeps the Christian alive and flourishing.

But how does one become ‘planted alongside God’? It is through the same means we get close to those around us – we learn what their likes and dislikes are, build communication channels with them, and immerse ourselves within their social circle.

In like manner, we immerse ourselves in the things of God that bring us close to Him:

i) Personal Bible Reading

We learn about God & His instructions/guidance for our lives from reading the Bible.

Christians often neglect the reading of the Bible and “opt to fulfill” other areas of the Christian life such as, going to church and listening to sermons as an alternative. However, doing this robs us of something truly valuable and important – the receiving of God’s instructions for our lives **personally**.

Eating pre-chewed food

When we eat, we benefit from the nutrients within the food, but the experience is enhanced by the taste, smell, texture, softness as they enter our mouths. Therefore, if we solely rely on sermons for spiritual fulfillment, for example, it is as if we are only taking food that has been chewed for us, and regurgitated for our consumption. The listener therefore benefits only from the nutrients but does not enjoy the taste and other dimensions of the “eating” experience.

ii) Personal Prayer Life

We build communication channels and find strength to follow His commands for us through prayer.

Christians often embrace prayer in the form of a request list – for God to give us what we want or need - in times of trouble, neglecting it in times of prosperity, and peacefulness. Yet, it is an important resource of replenishment in life – it is foremost – our main means of communication with God.

On listening to God's voice

We get to know God through prayer because it is not a 1-way communication channel. God speaks as well.

Imagine receiving a call from your friend John. From the moment you pick up, he starts rattling off about his day, what troubles he faced and what went well, but before you could even say a word – he hangs up.

We may not realise this but this is how prayer is often conducted thus causing us to either get bored or miss the crux of prayer.

iii) Fellowship with His People

We find support from those who follow the same Lord.

When I was in Junior College – I was in the Arts faculty and we had more girls than guys in our classes then. In fact, we only had 6 guys and the rest of the 20 or so classmates were girls.

One day, we were in the process of performing our annual Fitness tests and were at the station for sit-ups. There was a girl named Dorcas from our class who had managed to do 59 sit-ups in 1 minute.

Needless to say, she became the talking point and everyone was amazed. The boys clustered together and made comments like “Wah amazing – are you sure she’s a girl?”. Then someone said the inevitable – “Hey we cannot lose out to her, ok? At least one of us must beat her mark.”

Next up were the guys and 5 of the boys failed, while I had only managed the usual 45 sit-ups per minute. Now the pride of the men was at stake and they pressurised me to beat her mark.

Everyone was watching – the girls were hoping I would fail and the boys were hoping for a shred of pride.

I did 67 sit-ups that day and never accomplished that feat again.

The lesson learnt here is that being in the company of people striving for the same cause, spurs us on. If not for Dorcas, I would never have considered doing 67 sit ups when 45 was all that was needed for the top score. She had spurred me on to a higher level.

Similarly, in our Christian walk – fellowship makes us strong, as we encourage one another, carry one another and support each other towards a disciplined walk with Christ. It is important and not to be looked upon lightly.

An Experienced Guide Helps!

Have you ever experienced reporting for work in a new place and having a colleague who had been there longer orientate you to your new environment and brief you accordingly?

In the Christian walk, it is always good to have someone more mature than us, spiritually, to take us on our Christian walk – to help watch out for blind spots, and discuss deep spiritual issues with. I have been the beneficiary of such relationships all through my Christian life.

A point to note is that it need not always be the same person throughout your Christian life, as over time we may outgrow our spiritual mentors or leaders.

b) It Actively Reaches For Water Sources – “ .. that sends out its roots by the stream ..”

The 2nd trait that we note about the Christian life is, like the tree reaching for the waters, it is not enough for us to be near/alongside or know where the replenishment source for our lives is. We have to actively thirst for and drink from this source of replenishment.

Isaiah 29.13 says “The Lord says: These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

This verse is quoted later again by Jesus in the New Testament, in Matthew 15.8: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”

Both Old & New Testament texts quoted here refer to people who follow the Lord in empty, ritualistic action – without heartfelt seeking of the Lord, i.e., they perform the actions of the various rituals, but do not, in their hearts, worship or thirst for God.

Focus Dailies

When I wake up every morning, I sit up in bed for a few minutes to gather my senses. Then I reach over to the bedside for my glasses. The moment I put them on, I gain my sense of focused vision and perspective of my surroundings. They are with me from the time I awake until the time I take them off just before sleeping.

The condition of myopia at 600 degrees, coupled with heavy astigmatism on both lenses, has drastically impaired my eyesight. I can hardly see without my glasses. However, if I went without my glasses for over an hour or so, I would get used to the blurred vision. Given another few more hours, I would become so accustomed that I would treat this as normal acceptable vision.

In the same way, if we went about our Christian lives without actively seeking replenishment from our Source, Almighty God through the daily reading of His Word, daily prayer and fellowship with fellow Christians – we will start to convince ourselves that we can grow close to Him without actively pursuing a disciplined Christian lifestyle that is active and not passive.

We have to actively do something about our Christian life – not just sit back, do the minimal and expect it to be healthy!

The same principle applies to exercise and our health as well.

c) It Doesn't Fear Heat & Drought – “..does not fear when heat comes ..” “..no worries in a year of drought ..”

**Its Leaves Are Evergreen & It Is Always Bearing Fruit – “..leaves are always green ..”
“..and never fails to bear fruit.”**

In Jeremiah 15:18, a few chapters before our selected text today – we read of Jeremiah's disappointment in the Lord, when he said: “Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?”

Even the prophet Jeremiah went through times when he doubted his own calling as a prophet and God's reality in his life. He had gone through tough discrimination, mockery by his peers,

and an overpowering status quo – so much so that he had wondered if he was following a lost cause and an inefficient God.

I used to play hockey when I was in college. Hockey is a terrifying sport when you first get exposed to it – with swinging wooden sticks, a very hard ball that can fly off the ground at dangerous heights and speeds, and if we add ‘violent’ teenaged young men to this deadly concoction – it can be rather daunting.

Our college team was not the best team around – and most of us had only been exposed to the sport for a year or more when we joined the team. So during friendly games with other colleges, our coach would always shout “Jangan takut! Tahan dulu!” (don’t be afraid! Hold on for a bit!), whenever one of us got the ball and was in a position to attack. This was because amidst the panic and swinging sticks, we often made bad passes or wasted opportunities to score.

However, as we grew together as a team and hung out together despite our racial differences (3 Chinese boys and the entire male/female team was Malay), we soon overcame our fears and tendency to panic. Whenever we received the ball and got into position to attack, we were more confident and held on, knowing that the others were on their way, even though we were surrounded by opposing players. We would know what to do, where to go, and be there to support the one with the ball. We knew one another well enough to believe in the support that was sure to come even when the situation seemed overwhelming.

The tree, planted by the waters, which has drunk often and abundantly from the stream will in a time of heat and drought be able to weather the difficulty. As it has known and understood the goodness of its source, such threats and discomfort or a seemingly bleak future will not cause it to fear or doubt.

The Jeremiah of chapter 15, is not the Jeremiah of chapter 17 – because he has come to understand and believe in the enduring goodness of God even in the darkness of the current situation.

It is easy to be with the healing Jesus, the preaching Jesus, the merciful Jesus but it takes a REAL disciple to be with the humiliated, crucified Jesus and believe He is still worth following, based upon what we have learnt from and seen about Him in the past history of our lives.

CONCLUSION

Bearing Fruit

We are called as Christians living lives dependent on God – to always bear fruit. That is the final result of a balanced Christian life.

The soaking up of water (as trees planted by the river), replenishment (with roots continually reaching out for thirst of more water), and resilience (display of fearlessness in the face of the threat of elements and dry seasons) – are for a purpose, one that is greater than self-preservation. We are called to bear fruit. Fruit, which when consumed, leaves seeds for the propagation of another tree altogether.

Our Christian lives must yield output – output that moves, influences and changes other lives – otherwise our constant replenishment would be for waste.

What kind of tree do you want to be when you grow up?