

# LIKE A TREE: SHOOTS

## PSALM 1:1-3

I am always amazed at the resiliency of living things.

My house sits on three acres that are mostly forest. I have very little grass to mow... which is a good thing!

My job though, is weed control. I buy gallons and gallons of Roundup to kill the weeds. If you are a weed lover, *sorry!* Every spring I wage war on the weeds!

But that's the problem... *I said, "every spring..."* You'd think at some point the war would be over, but it's not.

A bottle of Roundup promises to "**Kill the Roots.**" *Don't believe it... It's false advertising.* The weeds in my yard keep coming back... It's "**The invasion of the little green things.**" Roundup stunts their progress, but it doesn't stop them. The weeds always keep growing.

*It's hard to kill a weed!* Even when you think they've been permanently nuked, *life finds a way.* The miracle of life keeps rising up and pushing up. Green things like weeds, and grass, and trees are always growing.

It's been asked, "**How tall does a tree grow?**" And the answer, "**As tall as it can!**" All a tree knows to do is grow. Growth is *default mode.* A tree *properly planted* is **progressing continually** - as should all Christians.

In Psalm One, the biblical scribe compares every believer - in fact, he compares you and *me* - to a *tree*.

Let's read again our text, Psalm 1:1-3...

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.

He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.”

Last time, we noted where this tree was **positioned**.

It's planted by the rivers of water. A wise woman or man plants their life - sinks their roots - in a place that's conducive for them to grow. They position themselves by a stream of spiritual nourishment and refreshment.

Healthy Christians are **positioned properly**.

But they're also **progressing continually**. Inspect a tree's branches. You'll find **shoots!** *Roots and shoots...*

Apparently, this tree planted by the river, is strong and vibrant and resilient. It never wilts or withers. It's *evergreen*. It bears fruit seasonally. It grows constantly.

This tree avoids periods of dormancy. Its alive year round. The *sap is always flowing*, the *tree is always growing*. Its **roots** are wiggling their way further into the soil - its **shoots** are preparing to bud - its limbs are often weighted down with delicious, juicy, tasty **fruits**.

Even when the winds howl furiously... and the trunk creaks... even when the branches bear the weight of the snow and ice... this tree continues to grow!

This is God's desire for you and me - not only that we're *positioned properly*, but *progressing continually*.

When we're converted to Christ we become babes in the faith – spiritual infants - but we aren't expected to stay that way. Nowhere in the Bible does it mention pacifiers, or teething toys, or building blocks in heaven.

No! Somewhere between our *coming to Christ* and our *going to heaven* we're suppose to grow up!

I read of a youth group that had the following motto painted on the wall of their meeting room, "*Keep the faith, baby; not the baby faith.*" I like that message!

Ephesians 4:13 in the Phillips translation reads, "*We are not meant to remain as children... but to grow up in every way into Christ...*" My goal for everyone in our fellowship is to see you on a path of consistent growth.

Last time we talked about being connected to fellow believers. *Interlocking our roots will keep us strong.*

But not only should we be *connected*. We also need to be *perfected*. 1 John 2:5 tells us, "*Whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him.*"

Of course, this word "*perfected*" is a scary word.

*"Please, don't tell me God expects perfection!"* I'm too flawed and foolish. There's no way I can be perfect!

Hey, breath easy, take a chill pill - God knows this better than we do. I love Psalm 103:14, “God knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” As long we occupy *fallen bodies* we're prone to *sinful slip-ups*.

Though the terms *per'-fect* and *per-fect'* have the same spelling - they have different definitions.

None of us are or ever will be *perfect*. But God wants each of us involved in the process of being *perfected*.

The word *per-fect'* means “to complete or to finish.”

God hasn't started His work in you to let it go dormant. He wants you to mature and become useful.

As a father, siring kids wasn't the end of my job. I was just getting started. I knew my kids would never be perfect. *After all, look at their dad.* But my goal was to equip them to live successful and fruitful lives for God.

When the time came for them to leave the nest, I wanted them to know how to fly. In that sense I wanted to *per-fect'* them. And this is God's goal for you. He wants to equip you - so you can soar for Jesus' sake.

He works in us to *per-fect'* what He's started.

It's been said, “God judges a man not by the point he's reached, but by the way he's facing; *not by distance, but by direction.*” None of us *will ever be perfect*, but are we in the process of *being perfected*?

Are we open to God - eagerly learning to fly?

Before Paul visited the Thessalonians he explained the purpose of his coming. In 1 Thessalonians 3:10 he said it was to "**perfect what was lacking in their faith.**"

Paul wanted to complete what God had started... round off the rough edges, fill in the missing spaces - help them *fully fulfill* what God intended them to be.

It's been said, "**Christians should not only be counted, they should also be weighed.**" In other words, we can pack the church with people - but in and of itself, that's no big deal - the Ice Capades attract a lot of people - the World Wrestling Federation can draw a crowd - even a new Walmart gets plenty of walk-ups.

The purpose of our church and all churches for that matter, isn't just to attract walk-ups - *it's to turn walk-ups into grown-ups. First, connected; then perfected.*

There's a National Geographic special that shows film footage of the Alaskan bull moose, and the male sparing that goes on during the fall breeding season.

The male Bullwinkles butt heads over and over hoping to prove their dominance. They keep crashing antlers until one set weakens and breaks. The moose with the heftiest body and strongest antlers prevails.

But the battle is actually won in the spring and summer. For the heftiest body and stoutest antlers belong to the moose that eats the healthiest diet.

Preparation and growth in the spring and summer is what determines victory or defeat come the autumn.

And the same is true for you and me. If you live the Christian life you can be sure battles will come. That's a given. But victory or defeat isn't determined in the moment of the battle, *it's being determined right now!*

If you're *bull-headed* and stubborn, and refuse to do those things necessary to grow, then don't be surprised when you're defeated. Spiritual strength and enduring faith are best developed before they're needed!

Are you growing, and being perfected in your faith?

Psalm One provides us a diagram for spiritual growth. "Blessed is the man..." How *supremely happy is the man*, who, according to verse 2, "his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night." Note, what's said of this blessed man...

First, he "*delights.*" His growth is **intentional**.

Second it's **behavioral**. He delights "*in the law.*"

Third, his growth is **devotional** - "*he meditates.*"

And fourth it's **habitual** - it's "*day and night.*"

If you're taking notes, spiritual growth - sprouting shoots - is **intentional, behavioral, devotional, habitual**.

First, realize, spiritual growth is **intentional**.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus begins with a decision.

No one grows by osmosis... You don't become spiritual just hanging out with spiritual people... You don't develop a biblical mindset by toting about a Bible.

And you certainly don't become more godly by merely surrounding yourself with the things of God...

In Haggai 2, the prophet asks the priests of Israel, "If one carries holy meat in his pocket, and with the edge of his garment he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or

any food, will it become holy?" According to the Law of Moses the answer was, "NO." Holiness, godliness, spirituality is non-transferable. It's never contagious.

But then Haggai asked, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" And the answer was, "It will be unclean."

In other words, sin **is** a communicable disease. Evil is contagious - it rubs off on those who linger around it.

Sin is transferable, but not godliness. You don't become holy by touching someone or something that's holy. Spiritual growth is a personal decision. It's not something we stumble into - it's a choice we make...

Psalm One says of the blessed man, "his delight is in the law of the Lord..." The word "*delight*" means to take pleasure, or find joy. It's similar to the term, "rejoice."

To "rejoice in the Lord" is to *take my joy from God*.

There are numerous sources from which we can draw joy - from *the bottle* to *the Bible* - from *the TV* to *a bended knee* - from *the world's party* to *God's glory*.

Thus, "*to delight*" is "*to decide*" - it's to choose to put all my eggs in one basket. It's to depend on Christ to fuel my happiness and shape my expectations. I'm making a commitment to be all that I can be for Jesus.

Once, a teacher asked her kindergarten class, "Boys and girls, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

One little boy said "a fireman," another "a doctor," another "a race car driver" - and on and on it went.

The teacher noticed little Bobby unusually quiet.

She asked, "Bobby, what do you want to be when you grow up?" He said, "*Possible.*" The teacher didn't get it, "Possible? What do you mean by 'possible'?" Bobby replied, "*My mom is always calling me impossible, so when I grow up I want to be possible.*"

Well, it is *possible* that one day, you could be great for God - yes, *even you!* You can grow toward maturity.

You can build a triumphant faith.

You can be a dynamic, effective witness for Jesus.

It's *possible*. You can grow up to be *a possible* - but only if you choose to grow and mature right now!

In 1523, a British animal trainer, John Fitzherbert, made the statement, "The dog must be trained when he is a whelp (or puppy), or else it will not be (trained); for it is hard to make an old dog (find a new scent)."

Fitz's quote morphed into the adage you hear tossed around today, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

*But can you?* Is this old saying truth or myth?

Enter the Discovery Channel's show "*Mythbusters.*" One episode tackled Fitzherbert's famous observation.

A pair of aging Alaskan malamutes were found, Bobo and Cece. They were 7 years old. That's 50 in dog years. Neither of the animals had ever been trained.

Yet in four days the Mythbusters' trainer had taught the dogs to heel, sit, lie down, stay, and shake. Proving once and for all, "*You can teach old dogs new tricks!*"

And if you've read the Bible you knew that already!

*Change is possible.* There is freedom from sin and addictive behavior. You can grow and live differently.

You're not destined to be stuck in your rut forever.

Spiritual growth is *possible*, but it's **intentional!**

As I asked earlier, "**How tall does a tree grow?**"

When you first hear that question you're inclined to ask for more information - "**what kind of tree? what kind of soil? what type of climate?**" But there's an easier answer to "**how tall will a tree grow?**" "*As tall as it can!*"

Everything in nature grows to its maximum potential. Trees, bushes, fruit, grass...  
Wow, does grass grow!

Life is relentless... but there's one exception.

There's one living thing that may or may not grow to its potential... *that's people!*  
Humans make a choice.

And sadly, you can choose to be less than what God desires. This is why, "**spiritual growth is intentional.**"

But it's also **behavioral**. The blessed man delights "**in the law of the Lord.**" The phrase, "**law of the Lord**" is a reference to Scripture, but with a definite emphasis.

He dwells not on the wisdom of the Lord, or the mysteries of the Lord, or the power of the Lord, or the glory of the Lord - but rather on "**the law of the Lord.**"

Laws deal with behavior. Few "laws" monkey with motive. Intentions are too vague - too hard to pin down. Laws are limited to restricting or encouraging behavior.

And this is how we start to grow spiritually. It's very practical. You ask God what He wants you to do and how He wants you to think - and you **just do it!** Step by step you synchronize how you live with what God says.

Faith that *grows* is faith that *goes* by what God says!

When some people think of becoming "*more spiritual*" they assume more mystical, or emotional, or more in touch with their own thoughts and feelings....

They imagine spine-tingling experiences, goose-bump moments, mountain-top highs - but real spiritual growth is far more down-to-earth. It begins when you hear God's Word; then apply it to a real-life situation.

Real spiritual progress is applicational.

*"But Pastor Sandy, that's too hard. Most of the time, I don't feel like obeying and applying the Scriptures. Sometimes I don't even feel like reading the Scriptures. I start to read - then I don't understand. I get bored."*

Sure you do! Its hard to feel like doing something you've never done before. Change doesn't come easy.

Say, you decide it's time to clean up your diet. Eliminate junk food. You're going to eat healthier...

Don't expect a seamless transition from bacon-cheeseburgers to broccoli. It'll take time to cultivate new tastes. I'm actually embarrassed to admit it in public, but over

the last few years I've cultivated a taste for broccoli... *as long as its cooked it in lots of butter.*

But here's my point, it took time.

In the beginning spiritual growth boils down to obeying what God's says. It's practical - behavioral.

I've said it before, but it's true, *"It's easier to act your way into a feeling, than it is to feel your way into an action."* If you only pray, or study the Bible, or serve at church, or worship the Lord, when you feel like - it'll never get done... I'm the pastor, and that's true of me.

Spiritual growth is *intentional and behavioral.*

I may not feel like it, but if I'm determined to step out and do it anyway, feelings will eventually follow. Over time, I'll cultivate a taste for stuff that's good and godly.

There's a false perception among some Christians that spiritual growth is measured by biblical knowledge.

Religious people assume, *"The more Bible I know, then the more I'll grow."* But that's not always the case.

Certainly, the Bible is essential for spiritual growth. Without God's Word we lack the proper nutrients for growth. But just reading the Bible without applying it to my behavior, and living it out in my life, is of little value.

A body builder once appeared on a TV talk show.

The host asked him, "Why did you develop those particular muscles?" The man got out of his chair, and flexed. Muscles rippled from his chest to his calves. The crowd was impressed. Everyone cheered wildly.

But the host asked again, "What do you use those muscles to do?" Once more the body builder jumped up and bulged his biceps. Again the audience roared.

A third time the host asked, "But what is it that you do that requires you to need such massive muscles?"

The body builder never answered. His muscles were more for *flexing*, than *using*. And sadly, the same can be said for many a believer's knowledge of the Bible.

They know a lot, but they don't live what they know.

It doesn't impact their daily existence. Recall James 1:22, "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only..."

Hebrews 5:14 describes those who are of "full age" or "mature" as "those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

Spiritual growth is like physical growth - if all you do is eat and eat and eat you're only going to get fat and flabby. Its exercise that turns the calories into muscle.

And likewise we grow spiritually when we apply what we learn. Here's Ephesians 5:8 from TLB, "Though once your heart was full of darkness, now it is full of light from the Lord, and your behavior should show it!"

Real spiritual growth is always *behavioral*.

And thirdly, it's **devotional**. You cannot grow in the Lord without *spending time with the Lord* and *talking to the Lord*. The blessed man, the happy man, delights in the Law of the Lord, and in His Law **"he meditates."**

Biblical meditation is a form of prayer where we read God's Word, then we speak it back to Him - trusting Him to shine a greater light on what we've just read.

It's like a cow chewing its cud - as we roll the Bible over and over in our minds - the Spirit reveals an application of what we're reading to our heart and lives.

*Biblical meditation* is a far cry from *eastern meditation*... Rather than put your mind in neutral, and rely on rote chants and mantras - the Christian engages his mind, he or she opens their heart, we mull over what God has said, and ask His Spirit to enlighten our understanding with wisdom and revelation.

Rather than bypass our intellect, the Holy Spirit uses the existing hardware to help us grasp God's message.

Remember in the Gospels, how often Jesus took time out from His busy ministry to spend time alone with His Father. Well, if Jesus took that time, how much more do you and I need to schedule talks with God?

Max Lucado describes spending time with God as ascending to the top of a mountain. At the summit the air is cleaner - the view is clearer - there's a solitude you find on the peaks, that you don't find in the streets.

Lucado writes, **"The roar of the marketplace is 'down here' and the perspective of the peak is 'up there'. Joy begins by breathing deep 'up there' before we go crazy 'down here'.** That's exactly what the blessed or happy man realizes. When we're alone with God we find joy.

Once, there was a little girl who was deaf. Whenever her dad was out of town they would talk on the phone.

The conversation went like this, *"Hi, Daddy!"* "Hi, Sarah. I love you." But Sarah couldn't hear her father. Instead, she'd just chatter, *"Daddy, listen to what we did in school today... and on and on she would go..."*

When Sarah paused for a breath, her father would say, *"Honey, I love you,"* but Sarah couldn't hear her father's reply. Finally, little Sarah would just run out of steam. *"Well, I've got to run, Daddy. See ya later."*

And click, she was gone. Sadly, Sarah never heard her father's simple, but vital message... *"I love you."*

And any form of spiritual growth that doesn't include hearing the Father communicate His love to you is shallow and insufficient. Real growth is devotional.

It involves attention, and meditation, and time... and hearing the still, small voice of God say He loves us.

I heard of a pastor who went to the hospital to visit a terminally ill patient. He noticed an empty chair next to the bed. He asked the patient, *"why the empty chair?"*

He said, *"A friend once told me that prayer was as simple as talking to a good friend. So every day I invite Jesus to sit down, and we have a good talk together."*

At first, five minutes of prayer might be hard. But start somewhere... at meals... or try 30 second spurts.

But develop a life of personal devotion, where you deliberately express yourself to God, and then listen for God's Spirit to express His love and will to you.

Spiritual growth is always *devotional*.

And finally, spiritual growth will be **habitual**.

When Moses told Israel to possess the Promised Land, in Deuteronomy 7:22, he promised, "The LORD your God will drive out those nations before you little by little; you will be unable to destroy them at once..."

Notice, the phrase, "*little by little...*"

Total victory didn't occur overnight. Progress came in increments. It was a step here, a victory there - little by little, over time, Israel would take control of the land.

And this is also how we all grow spiritually - it takes time - it's step by step. The progress is measured over months and years - not just days. Our growth is a marathon, not a sprint. We're **progressing continually**.

It always tickled me whenever my kids would wake up in the morning - run and gaze at themselves in the mirror - then straighten their shoulders, and announce proudly, "Dad, I think I grew last night." I'm sure they did, but on a daily basis the growth was imperceptible.

The same is true spiritually. Only after months or years do you realize the progress you actually made.

A snail was inching his way down the center of the street when he was run over by a turtle. When the paramedics arrived they asked, "*What happened?*" The snail replied, "**I don't know. It all happened so fast!**"

Often we get impatient. Spiritual growth seems oh, so slow - but hang in there - you're making progress.

This is why the author of Psalm One says the blessed man meditates "day and night." He builds spiritual habits into his lifestyle, and sticks with them.

At breakfast he starts his day with a bowl of Wheaties and a chapter in the Word... At night before *his head* hits the pillow *his knees* hit the floor... At the bookends of his life - "day and night" - and everywhere in between - he's cultivating habits that help him grow!

And you don't measure the impact of those habits after just "a day and a night." It's "day and night... day and night... day and night." It's stringing together a few months - then years... that's when you see an impact.

The true benefit of spiritual habits is really appreciated over time. One day you wake up and realize you're not the person you use to be. You're a better - more godly - believer. You've really grown.

Before James Garfield was elected president of the US, he was chancellor of Hiram College in Ohio.

A friend of Garfield's, who's son was enrolled in the school, asked if there was any way he could speed up his son's education. Garfield replied, "Sure, but it all depends on what you want to make of your son. When God makes an oak tree it requires a hundred years. When He produces a squash it takes only two months."

A tree grows, but it doesn't go from a seedling to a towering oak overnight. It takes time and consistency.

That's why spiritual growth is **habitual**. It's "**day and night.**" It's making long-term commitments and sticking with them... **Eternal life doesn't need to be rushed.**

Perhaps you've heard of the 21-day rule?

Supposedly, it takes 21 days for a new activity to become a habit. I don't know if its 21 days, or 51 days, or 101 days - the point is don't give up after one week.

Stick with it. You don't reap a crop of corn the day after you sow the seed. You water, and weed, and wait.

This year the Atlanta Braves played 35 games before they played the first game that counted. It's called "**spring training.**" They're professionals, but they drilled, and worked, and prepared. **Practice makes perfected.**

And the same is true in the spiritual life.

The growth of character and integrity God desires to produce in you doesn't come from *dabbling* - it's the result of putting your hand to the plow and pressing on!

Godly growth feeds off momentum, and momentum is the result of doing the right thing again and again.

Blaise Pascal once said it well, "**The strength of a man's virtue is measured by his habitual acts.**"

I've heard it put another way, "**Sow a thought and reap an act. Sow an act and reap a habit. Sow a habit and reap a character. Sow a character and reap a destiny!**" Suffice it to say, spiritual growth is **habitual**.

God wants you and me to be a tree!

Our spiritual **roots** need to be **positioned properly**. And our **shoots** should be **progressing continually**.

Have you made it your goal... *to grow*?

Once, a group of tourists were touring the European countryside. The passengers on this particular bus had taken a interest in the hometowns of famous people.

As they drove through one village a tourist hung his head out of the window, and asked one of the locals, "***Were there any great men born in your village?***"

The fellow answered, "***Nope, only babies.***"

And here's the lesson for us today, great men and women of God - heros of the faith - aren't born, they're made. They're people who made growth their goal.

They sunk their roots, and did what it took to grow.

They realized that growing in Christ is more important than a career, and money, and hobbies, and sports. They realized that spiritual growth is **intentional**, and **behavioral**, and **devotional**, and **habitual**.

2 Peter 1:5 tells us, "***Add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.***"

And why should you be growing and adding these virtues to your faith? Peter tells us, "***For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus.***"

The blessed man knows that *a growing life* becomes *a fruitful life* - thus he makes the commitment to grow.

*He sinks roots, sprouts shoots, and shows fruits.*

Let me repeat the warning, don't wait until the crisis to find the resolve to stand for Christ! Those moments of testing don't produce *chickens* or *champs* - they only reveal which one you are. The time to grow, and bulk up spiritually, is today! You get ready for the crisis now!

The bull moose that prevails grows the stronger, heftier antlers in the springtime - long before the battle.

*So what about you? Don't be bullheaded.*

If you wait for the crisis to arise to concern yourself with spiritual maturity... you've waited too late.

Make growing in Christ your goal today!