

# LIKE A TREE - ROOTS

## PSALM 1:1-3

My mom believed in artificial Christmas trees. In fact, we had a *silver tree*. It looked like a giant slinky.

But Mom had a color wheel she put behind it, and as the wheel spun the colored cellophane around the light bulb, it painted the tree green, blue, red, and yellow.

It wasn't real authentic, but it was a Christmas tree.

Then one year my dad got the hankering for a real, bonafide, forest-grown, God-created, evergreen tree.

He had to convince Mom we would keep it watered so the needles wouldn't shed on the floor. I'll never forget that Christmas tree. It was six feet tall, green as grass, beautiful, and it's fresh scent filled the house.

In fact, the tree came complete with a root-ball.

And when our Christmas was over that year - Dad permanently retired the tree - *planted it in the yard*.

Not too long ago, I drove by the old home place, and saw our former Christmas tree. The old neighborhood is run down. The house we bought new is in shambles.

The garage my dad built was torn down. There's little sodded grass left in the front yard, *but that tree!...*

That evergreen was still there, and it was huge! That six footer towered forty-five feet - straight and tall.

According to my best guess, it's been forty-some years since Dad planted that Christmas tree in the middle of our yard. Everything around the tree had deteriorated, but that tree itself remained healthy, and strong, and productive... *And our former Christmas tree is a metaphor for what God desires in you and me!*

This world we live in is a dilapidated neighborhood.

Every year the decay increases. If the Lord tarries this world will become darker, more violent, more evil.

Yet in the midst of this fallen world, God wants you and I to grow... to grow stronger, and taller, and more productive... as individual Christians, and as a church.

In fact, we find this same metaphor in Psalm One.

Listen to the psalmist's first three verses... "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."

I don't want to *bark* at you this morning, or *pine* away too much on this – or go too *fir* out on a *limb* - or talk like a *nut* – but no one *leaves* - until we all realize, God wants this church – you and *me* - to be like a *tree!*

The psalmist begins, "Blessed is the man..."

The Hebrew word translated “*blessed*” means “happy and prosperous.” But what makes this word so intriguing is that it’s in the plural. A more literal translation would be, “happy, happy, happy is the man.”

The person with more blessings than he can handle is like a tree. And God wants all of us to be this person.

This past Wednesday I met a Tree Doctor - an arborist. He’s become quite wealthy treating sick trees.

Well, last week, he *treated* a group of pastors and their wives to dinner at his house. He blessed us all...

The Tree Doctor lives on the South Carolina coast, and he told us of the big bucks investors pay for these old, elegant oak trees. They hire him to protect their investment... He injects the trees with steroids, and has an assortment of other remedies to keep trees healthy.

And God too, wants healthy trees. He wants you and I, and this church, to be like a strong and sturdy tree.

When you look closely at this metaphor in Psalm One, you’ll see three concerns... a person’s **roots**, their **shoots**, and their **fruits**. And like a Tree Doctor, God has treatment for each aspect of the tree’s health.

As for **roots**... He wants us **positioned properly**.

As for **shoots**... He wants us **progressing continually**.

As for **fruits**... He wants us **productive annually**.

Healthy followers of Jesus are like a tree - *positioned properly, progressing continually, productive annually*. And this is going to be our topic for each of our One-derful Sundays... *shoots, fruits*, and today, our *roots*...

You don't have to be a Tree Doctor to know the importance of **roots**. Anybody who's ever tried to grow anything in their front yard understands the health of the root system will determine the vitality of the plant.

And Psalm One tells us *the healthy person*, as well as *the healthy church*, belongs to the person who has *properly positioned* their roots for growth. Notice verse 3, the blessed man is **“planted by the rivers of water.”**

You'll find shrubs in the desert, but you'll find the strongest and tallest trees next to a source of water.

The psalmist is telling us, **“the blessed man”** – *the happy, happy, happy person* - is the man, or woman, or family that's strategically positioned themselves next to resources that will cause them to grow and prosper.

Realize, in all arenas **proper positioning** matters.

The success of a business depends on how well it positions itself in the marketplace. It's branding, and price points, and channels of distribution...

A victorious politician is the candidate who was able to properly position himself in the minds of the voters...

And position certainly matters in sports. In basketball the player who gets the rebound isn't necessarily the guy who can jump the highest. It's the player who was in the best position... A football player can be big and fast, but if he's out-of-position he won't make the play.

And likewise in your spiritual life, if you want to grow healthy, you need to plant yourself in the right spot.

The blessed man makes a deliberate decision to position he and his family near godly resources and influences. He or she avoids the way of the wicked, and sinks their roots alongside spiritual nourishment.

If you haven't noticed, the world we live in is not entirely sympathetic to our cause. Watch a few MTV videos, and you'll conclude quickly the producer's goal isn't to raise the standard of righteousness in society.

Perk up your ears in the lunchroom at work and the conversation is not encouraging people to love God.

Hang out in a locker room at the fitness center and the chit-chat isn't likely to enhance pure thoughts.

The Psalmist tells us the blessed man *“walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful.”* Notice, the blessed person is careful about **who they listen to... who they linger with... and who they laugh at...**

Realize this truth, **lives are not shaped by *mysterious forces*. Lives are shaped by *deliberate choices*.**

The *counsel you listen to, the people you linger with, the amusements you laugh at* - all combine to shape what kind of person you and those under your roof will become. How you position your life really does matter!

I don't care how strong you are, if you stand in the middle of a raging river long enough, the current will eventually pull you under. Likewise, *listen to ungodly counsel* and you'll begin to make ungodly choices.

*Entertain yourself with sinful stuff* and you'll eventually lose your appetite for the good and godly.

*Sit in the seat of the scornful* and you'll turn caustic.

I once invited a friend and his family to church. He told me he'd come - but I'll never forget the reason he gave... "Sandy, I really want to expose my girls to the right kinds of influences." *That's a really smart dad!*

Why do you think outfielders move a little left or right with each batter. They have scouting reports on the hitter's tendency that places them in optimum position for where he usually hits the ball... *position matters!*

An employee positions himself for a promotion...

A man who wants to get married positions himself to support a family, and meet the right kind of woman...

And if you're serious about growing spiritually you have to position yourself around the things of God...

*Walk with people who walk with the Lord...*

*Stand with folks who are strong enough to lean on...*

*Hang out with people who are hanging on to God...*

*Listen* to the right counsel - *linger* with the right people - and *laugh* with folks who really have fun.

Don't just go with the flow. Don't just drift with the tides of this world - with what's popular. Toilet paper goes with the flow - not a flourishing, healthy Christian.

A wise person chooses to *properly position* their life.

Understand, a tree is not a bush or an annual. You don't move a tree once it sinks its roots. Plant a tree, and it stays put. That's why before you plant a tree you need to give serious thought to where it belongs.

When you walk out on the back lawn, you'll notice the river birches on the sides. You'll probably camp out under one today, and enjoy its shade. But they haven't always been there. We planted them as baby sprigs.

In fact, we spent hours figuring out where we could position them to best serve us for events like today.

And this is how *the blessed man* thinks - he doesn't act randomly, he considers the best position for his family to gain a sense of belonging and permanence.

Vance Packard once referred to today's America as a "[nation of strangers.](#)" We're a group in which everyone assumes they're the misfit - the square peg in the round hole. Rather than a single minority feeling out of place, everyone sees themselves as outsiders.

*I have no doubt this is how some of you feel at CC...*

You've been coming for months, but you still think of yourself as the new guy or gal. This morning, you were hoping the person in front of you had turned around and struck up a conversation... But even though that person in front of you has also been coming for months they see themselves as the new guy or gal, and they were hoping you would take the time to greet them.

I think sometimes we're a "church of strangers."

A recent Gallup Poll found that four of every ten Americans admit to frequent feelings of "*intense loneliness.*" We are the loneliest people in the world.

I have a book entitled, "**Bowling Alone.**" It notes that bowling in America is up! People love to bowl.

But participation in traditional bowling leagues is down. The reason... *folks are bowling alone.* It's a symptom of the isolation we feel toward one another.

This is why beer commercials don't sale beer - they sale fellowship - community. Nobody ever drinks alone.

There's always with a group of exciting, beautiful, jovial, caring people - having the time of their lives.

The advertisers are playing on our deep-seated "**longing for belonging.**" They just don't show all the hangover symptoms that occur the next morning.

I believe God created the church for such a time as this! If ever there was a people group with the motivation to push beyond our separation, and form meaningful connections with others - it's the Church!

Think about it, our Lord died not only to reconcile us to God, but to reconcile us with one another. Jesus told us in John 13:35, "**By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**"

We don't need a round of Heinekens to enjoy each other. Ephesians 5:18 tells us, "**do not be drunk with wine... but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in**

psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord...”

Believers who are filled with the Holy Spirit will love one another, and go out of their way to build bridges.

This is why a recent Gallup poll caused me to weep.

It revealed that the vast majority of Americans believe you can be a “good Christian” without ever joining or attending a local church... that’s so naive!

That’s like telling a teenager you can be part of the family, but you don’t have to do any chores - and you can come and go as you like. There’s no accountability.

That’s not the way it worked at my house! A family shares responsibilities and spends time together.

Its a sad indictment on the church today that most of us can quote John 3:16, “For God so loved the world...”

But few of us can quote 1 John 3:16, "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."

Think of it, how can we truly belong to Christ, without belonging and connecting to the body of Christ?

In 2 Corinthians 8:5 Paul says of the churches in Macedonia, "they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God." *Did you hear that?*

Their commitment to God was in two-phases. They gave themselves to Jesus, and then to one another.

I know you've given yourself to God, but have you given yourself to a body of believers, to a church?

Have you said in your heart, "This is where God wants me. This is where I belong, and I'm going to give of my time, talents, efforts, and money to this church!"

Many of us have forgotten that the Christian life is more than just *believing*, it also includes *belonging*.

Let me clear up a misconception you might have made about our church. Just because we don't have a formal and institutional membership process doesn't mean we don't value the idea of church membership.

The word "*membership*" is biblical - it's of Christian origin. It's the world that's watered down its meaning.

Today when you hear the word "*membership*" you think of doling out dues - or adhering to silly rituals and traditions (like wearing green jackets) - or signing forms - or even secret handshakes and initiations.

Membership has become synonymous with a dusty ole roll. Yet when the Bible talks about membership its not referring to a legal or an institutional compliance.

The Bible speaks of "*membership*" in organic terms.

Paul writes, "*we are many members, but one body.*" He sees us as functioning organs within a living body.

I read this week that even with modern technology a liver can only survive 16 hours outside of the human body. The best liver transplants occur under 12 hours.

My point is, pluck your liver out of your body and it won't last long before it shrivels up and dies. And the same is true of a Christian ostracized from the church. To live we have to be attached to the rest of the body.

On occasion, I'll receive a letter from one of you.

Several years ago, someone wrote me, "I remember that first Sunday I visited Calvary Chapel. As a new Christian I was in search of a church where I could learn more about God, worship Him, and serve Him.

When I heard you teach I felt the message was especially for me. I had tears of joy through the entire service. I knew God had led me to Calvary Chapel."

This is how you become attached to a church!

Walking an aisle or signing a card, won't guarantee a sense of belonging. It takes God speaking to your heart, "This is where you belong. This is where I want you to drop anchor. You should grow with these folks."

When membership is institutionalized you take the pledge, or perform the function - and it's a done deal.

But when God speaks to your heart, "This is where I want you." It's the first step in an ongoing journey to adapt, and grow, and get to know, and be involved. You haven't just joined a club. You're now part of a family.

*This is what today is for...* we want you to take a next step and deepen your connection with other people.

I like the phrase the psalmist uses for "membership." "Planted by the rivers" is a synonym. We're "planted."

Have you ever planted flowers, or a bush, or a tree?

It's messy and dirty! You dig a hole. You uncover the root ball. You turn over the clay, and add some potting soil. Then you nestle in the roots and pat it all down.

*And you know - you're big boys and girls - this is what happens when you dare to get involved with people. It's messy. Sadly, this is why some of you stay on the fringes. It's easier to stay aloof than be involved.*

Whenever you connect wires with people, sparks will fly. There'll be misunderstandings, you'll brush up against somebody and get dented, or your feelings will get bruised. Conflict occurs - and nobody likes conflict.

Once, the New England Pipe Cleaning Company was hired by the city of Revere, Massachusetts to clean out a clogged sewer line. It was messy work.

But in addition to the normal sludge the workers found sixty-one rings, some vintage coins, expensive silverware, and other treasure that the workers were allowed to keep. Nobody else wanted to clean the stuff.

But the financial bonanza illustrates what happens in church relationships. If you're willing to put up with a little mess you can discover some real treasure!

Did you hear about the porcupine debate...

"Two porcupine friends named Willie and Bill, were talking one day of porcupine ills. Said Willie to Bill, with a sorrowful moan, 'Isn't it sad we all live alone?' 'The animals shun us; I have not a friend. Please tell me, Bill, oh what is our sin?' 'Don't sweat it my friend,' said porcupine Bill. 'It isn't your sin, it's just your sharp quills. We live all alone; that's just how it goes, 'Cause no one wants quills in the end of his nose.'

'I've got it,' said Willie; 'The answer I know. I'd rather have friends, so my quills have to go.' But Bill exclaimed, 'It doesn't make sense. Without your sharp quills you'll have no defense.' Willie thought and he thought, but he couldn't decide, should he give up his quills or save his own hide?

And then in a flash he decided with glee, 'I'll pull out my quills in the trunk of a tree. With all of his might he ran at the trunk, and into the bark went his quills with a thunk! His quills all came out in the trunk of a tree, and Willie exclaimed, 'At last I am free!'

'Free to be eaten,' said Bill in disgust. 'You'll find out real soon there's none you can trust.' But Willie said firmly, 'I must leave my cage. I'd rather risk friendship than die of old age.' Far into the night they debated the matter; live safely alone or make someone fatter!

The porcupine question remains to this day. Is it outreach or safety? Which one do you say?"

Let me tell you with God there is no debate.

Look to Jesus. There was nothing safe about His descent into our world. It was daring and dangerous, and eventually got Him killed. The Son of God loved us enough to become vulnerable, and He expects the same from you and me. We all should put outreach before safety. *The feel of the quills is God's will for us.*

One summer our family vacationed in Northern California, and we visited the famous redwood groves.

Redwoods are the largest trees on earth. All six of us, linking hands together, could only wrap ourselves about half-way around one of those incredible trees.

But the real shocker was to learn that the colossal redwoods have relatively shallow roots. Rather than grow deep, the roots of a redwood reach out. The strength to support a giant redwood comes from the roots of one tree interlocking with roots of other trees.

That's why the redwoods grow in groves... *And Christians are like redwoods.* Our spiritual strength requires the intertwining of our lives with one another.

Have you ever noticed that the NT is full of “one another commands.” Here's a few: “Love one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, greet one another, honor one another, serve one another, admonish one another, accept one another, bear one another's burdens, forgive one another, submit to one another, teach one another, bear with one another, be devoted to one another...” And on and on it goes...

But you can't obey any of these commands without first connecting and forming a relationship *with another*.

If you come to church - then head home - and never try to get involved you'll never be all that God desires.

Often Christians stunt their own growth, and without realizing it, minimize their usefulness, by bailing out too quickly. Church-life invariably causes hurt and pain.

None of us are perfect. We're bound to disappoint. And the tendency when hurt is to run and hide.

For some of us, this means an escape to another church. Christians even jump from church to church...

We posture this as a fault of the modern Christian, but it's as old as the church itself. It's more about our *natural tendencies* than it is our *modern inclinations*.

One 4th century Church father wrote, "If a trial (with other people) comes upon you in the place where you live, do not leave that place when the trial comes.

Wherever you go, you will find that what you are running from is ahead of you. So stay until the trial is over, so that if you end up leaving, no offense will be caused, and you will not bring distress to others who live in the same neighborhood." Don't jump ship!

I like the thought, *you can't outrun a problem when the problem is partly you!* God wants to use the difficulty to change us - if we endure it and not escape.

A 12th century church leader, Anselm of Canterbury, compared a restless believer to a tree that can't thrive because it is "frequently transplanted and disturbed."

Anselm warns us, "If (the Christian) often moves from place to place at his own whim, or remaining in one place is frequently agitated by the hatred of it, (he) never achieves stability with roots of love."

If every time a storm blows in you pull up roots and replant elsewhere, you'll never grow deep, stable roots.

Like a tree, *the blessed man* is "*planted*"... he or she has dug in for the long haul. But they're "*planted BY the rivers of water.*" Notice again, *a close proximity.*

As a tree needs water, the blessed man knows he and his family need spiritual refreshment, so he positions himself as close to the source as he can.

There's not far to go to get a drink of what he needs.

For us, this translates into scheduling activities and creating a lifestyle that revolves

around church, and hanging out with God's people, and studying His Word.

A good place to *be*... is right **by** what you *need*!

And Satan knows this... Why do you think it's so difficult some mornings to get your family to church?

Plan a day at the lake, or an evening at the movies, and the operation runs like clockwork. Everything cooperates. It's a perfect launch, a textbook take-off...

But make your destination a church service, a Bible study, a ministry opportunity - *make an appointment with God* - and all hell will break loose to interfere.

People who don't believe in the devil are those who've never gotten serious about attending a church!

Demons make thwarting your involvement their priority. The kid throws up, the dog gets lost, the car won't start. Everything works to sabotage your efforts.

The enemy tries so hard to distract you, because he knows your connection to the church is so vital!

This is why I said earlier spiritual growth is not the result of *mysterious forces* - but *deliberate choices*.

Our world crowds out what's important with a long parade of the trivial. One day you wake up and you've invested hundreds of hours at the ball park brushing up your kids' batting skills - or you've made sure they make first chair in the HS band - but you've done little to educate them biblically and grow them spiritually.

Hey, I've coached my share of Little League, and it's a worthwhile endeavor, but it's all about balance. And frankly, I'm not sure I always struck the right balance...

I know this, **visit** the park, the gym, the theatre, the school, but get yourself **“planted by the river”** - as near as possible to spiritual refreshment and nourishment.

Over the years I've seen the outcome of those who positioned themselves properly, and those who didn't.

The results weren't often immediate, but they were certainly predictable. Those who sunk their roots in and around the people of God were able to draw on the strength of others - especially in times of difficulty.

Whereas, those who never connected, but drifted - were gobbled up by the stresses of living alone.

You might not need the church right now. *Why hem yourself in so close to the river? Move away...* But in the drought, *and the drought will come*, it's the tree **planted by the river** that not only survives, but thrives.

Over the years, I've seen people desperately looking for a meaningful lifeline, but have nowhere to turn.

They never positioned themselves to receive the help that was available. They never laid down roots.

One Thanksgiving a second grade teacher told her class to draw a picture of that for which they were thankful. Most of the kids drew turkeys and tables of food, but not little Douglas... Douglas drew a hand.

*But who's hand?* The class tried to guess. Some said it was the hand of God. Others said it was the farmer's hand who grows the food, and raises the turkeys.

Finally, little Douglas said sheepishly, **“Teacher, its your hand.”** Tears came to the

teacher's eyes when she recalled how often she had grabbed the timid little child's hand as they walked out to recess. She took for granted the attention she gave Douglas, but he didn't.

Hey, I'm thankful for *your* hand, and *yours*, and *yours*... Over the years, I've been through some storms where I've needed a hand, and I'm thankful for yours.

Often, *your hands* have been *God's hands* to me. But if I had not been in position I might've missed out.

I'll never forget a survey done in a large church where the members were asked, "[Why did you join this church?](#)" Some 93% said it was because of the pastor.

But when pressed, "[What if the pastor leaves? Will you leave the church?](#)" Again, 93% said "[no,](#)" *and the reason why...* "[Because we have friends here.](#)" Notice, the shift in allegiance from *the pastor* to *the friends*.

This is a mark of a healthy church. I've heard it put, "[People aren't looking for a friendly church, as much as they're looking for a few friends at church.](#)" They want to connect. That's what today is for - build connection.

Think about it... the church is the pit-stop on the race to heaven - a reminder of the eternal - it re-calibrates our thoughts toward God - it feeds our soul - and it puts us in touch with people who have the same desires...

Where else can you go to unload a burden and find people who care. *Don't just come and not be involved!*

["The world at its worse needs the church at its best."](#)

If *“the counsel of the ungodly”* gets shoved down your throat... if *“the path of sinners”* crosses your path more often than you'd like... if *“the seat of the scornful”* seems to be another name for the place you work - make sure you're *“planted by the rivers of water!”*

You're not really serious about growing spiritually, if you don't keep yourself in the proper position to grow.

Let me say it once more, *lives are not shaped by mysterious forces, lives are shaped by deliberate choices.* Sink spiritual roots for you and your family.

Make sure that you position yourself for growth.