



## SPIRITUAL TREES: Part 1

Do you know what the largest living thing on earth is? It's the General Sherman, a giant sequoia in California's Sequoia National Park.

This magnificent giant of the forest towers more than 274 feet high, the height of a 27-storey building. At its base, the General Sherman is more than 100 feet around, and its estimated weight is 1,385 tons.

It's an awesome sight to stand there in the forest looking up at a massive tree of that stature. There's something humbling and inspiring about driving or walking through a forest or group of trees.

It's refreshing and invigorating, to stand amid the trunks, drinking in the pure, fresh, fragrant air, listening to the rustle of leaves up above, perhaps the joyful chirping of birds in the branches, and feeling the dry leaves crackling underfoot.

Trees certainly are a glorious example of God's handiwork, and God has quite a lot to say about them in the Bible. For instance, Psalm 92:12 says, "The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon." God here and in many other places in the Bible compares a righteous person to a tree.

Psalm 1 is another comparison between a righteous person and a tree. In Psalm 1:3 David says, "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water."

In what ways is a Christian like a tree? Let's consider some of the things necessary to a tree:

- Water
- Light
- Warmth
- Soil

A basic requirement for the growth of a tree is **water**. Water spells the difference between a desert and a forest. It determines the health and vigour of a tree. A tree planted by a river is in a good location, because its roots can seek out the water, so its leaves do not wither.

What does water symbolise spiritually? Jesus made the answer clear in John 7:37-39, where He portrayed God's Holy Spirit as rivers of living water.

John 7:37-39 <sup>37</sup> "On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. <sup>38</sup> Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." <sup>39</sup> By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."

Notice Isaiah 44:3-4 <sup>3</sup>“For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.  
<sup>4</sup>They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.”

God’s Spirit helps us grow spiritually just as water helps a tree grow physically.

It’s interesting to consider what happens to the water a tree absorbs. Vast quantities of water are taken in by the roots, which spread out in all directions seeking moisture. The water then rises through the tree and is exuded from the leaves in the process known as transpiration. Notice that the tree doesn’t hoard all the moisture for itself. It gives it out through the leaves. This moisture, along with the discharge of oxygen, is what gives the forest atmosphere its fresh, pleasant fragrance.

Similarly, the Holy Spirit should flow into us in great quantities, as we seek it from God, and flow through us and out again as we give help, friendship, Christian love and good works to those around us. How can we make sure we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us? Luke 11:13 tells us we need to ask God to give us His Spirit. We need to ask Him to fill our minds with the Holy Spirit—to soak and saturate our branches and roots with it, so we can constantly grow as a vibrant, vigorous, blossoming tree.

Another factor vital to the growth of a tree is light. Through the process of photosynthesis, the leaves use sunlight to produce growth. You’ve probably noticed how, to better flourish, a leaf turns towards the light. Sometimes whole plants lean over as the leaves attempt to get into a position where they can receive as much sunlight as possible.

What does light symbolise in our Christian lives?

Proverbs 6:23 “For this command is a lamp, this teaching is a light, and correction and instruction are the way to life.”

God’s Word is a light to our lives. We need it for growth. We obtain more of this light through personal Bible study and by listening to sermons, talking with one another, and reading good Christian books.

Psalms 119:105 “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.”

Trees grow so that their every leaf or needle turns to the precise position where it will benefit most from the sunlight streaming down on it. Every leaf strains to capture the maximum amount of light. That’s how we should act spiritually. We should strive for as much understanding of God’s law and God’s Word as possible, taking advantage of any opportunity to gain more insight.

This means setting aside regular, daily time for Bible study, constantly pointing ourselves toward the light of God’s Word. In short, we should hunger and thirst after righteousness (Matthew 5:6), because that is our spiritual food that gives us spiritual growth.

If a plant is kept in a dark room, it soon becomes yellow and sickly and fails to grow. That’s what happens to us spiritually if we don’t take in as much spiritual light as we can. We become spiritually weak. We need to turn our minds toward God’s Word wherever we can—to reach for it and use it to grow spiritually.

Warmth is another factor necessary for growth in a tree. When trees grow in high, mountainous areas near the snow line, they become stunted by the cold. Trees slow down their rate of growth in the winter, but spurt ahead in warmer weather.

Spiritually, we need the warmth of fellowship with other Christians. We can know all about the Bible and doctrines in an academic way, but our growth will be stunted if we don't spend time interacting with others in God's Church, learning from them, helping and sharing our lives with them, enjoying the beautiful, growth-motivating warmth of Christian fellowship.

So a tree needs water, light and warmth. Something else it needs is soil to plant its roots in. What is the soil we should plant our roots in spiritually?

Colossians 2:6-7 <sup>6</sup>“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”

Paul tells us to walk in Christ's way of life, “having the roots of your being firmly planted in Him.” (Weymouth).

The root system of a tree often exceeds, in size and scale, the total mass of the trunk, limbs and leaves that can be seen above the ground. It's not unusual for a tree to have literally miles of roots and rootlets. These roots anchor the tree to the ground and also search out and absorb available nutrients in the soil. We need to be deeply rooted and well-founded spiritually—our houses built on the rock of Jesus Christ, not the sand. (Matthew 7:24-27).

Sometimes you see trees rooted in sheer cliff walls, like some of the pohutukawas around the beach cliffs of Auckland. You wonder how they can survive, but they are strong because their roots are firmly planted, even on the side of a cliff.

So we need to plant our spiritual roots in Jesus Christ and hang on for grim life! When everything around us seems to be crumbling down, if we are planted in the firm foundation of Jesus, we will hold fast.

Some trees are found all together in beautiful forests; but some are all on their own, growing in a windswept barren plain or on top of a hill. So some members live where there is a church, but some are on their own. They can still be alive and growing, though, and bearing fruit for God, being visible and seen by others, and helping others by providing shade, or fruit, dropping cones for use on the fire.

In fact, an interesting thing about trees is that every part of a tree has a benefit, not only for the tree, but for the environment. For instance, the roots not only anchor the tree in the ground, they anchor the soil itself, holding in place against erosion. The trunk and branches provide timber for building and firewood for fuel. The leaves manufacture oxygen—a fantastic benefit to mankind! And of course the tree brings forth fruit and nuts for food for others. And the tree just looks good—aesthetic benefits.

Similarly, we should live in a way that every aspect of our life is beneficial to others. Just like trees help the whole environment, so should we bring happiness, love and comfort to those around us.

One of the things that affect trees is forest fires. In Australia at this time it is summer, and there are some devastating forest fires causing problems. One of the things that can affect trees badly is fire, but in fact fire is good for forests too!

In the Sequoia forest where the General Sherman tree grows, scientists make sure that regular fires are managed there, because frequent fires keep the forest healthy—they clear the ground, enrich the soil and promote fruitfulness. Where there are no fires, the forest becomes dark, diseased, cluttered and tangled so no sequoia seedlings can grow.

Spiritually speaking, fire can be good for us too! Fiery trials can be very beneficial.

1 Peter 1:6-7 “<sup>6</sup>In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. <sup>7</sup>These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

Another passage which describes Christians as trees or plants is in John 15. God prunes us—again by trials—so we bear more fruit. It seems wrong to cut back trees by pruning, in order to produce more. If you want more, why would you cut away what you have?

But good gardeners know that it works, the resulting growth is bigger and better. So God prunes the church, and each of us, in tests and trials, so that we bring forth better growth!

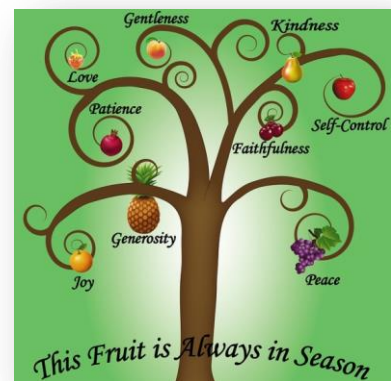
The most important thing about a tree is that it bears good fruit.

John 15:8 “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

John 15:16 “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.”

What are the fruits a spiritual tree produces? The fruits of the Spirit, listed in Galatians 5:22-23. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control. These are the fruits God wants to see us bearing. They show what sort of spiritual trees we are.

We would like the spiritual forest to grow—more trees. Where do new trees come from? The seeds are in the fruit. Our fruit contains seeds of new growth. People see our fruit and want to be Christians too!



Jeremiah 17:7-8 <sup>7</sup>“But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in Him. <sup>8</sup>They 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.”

Let’s be trees whose roots are deeply fixed in Christ, with the water of the Holy Spirit in good supply, basking in the light of God’s Word, thriving in the warmth of fellowship together, standing firm in trials, and bearing lots of fruit!