

God's Gift of Trees

Dear Friend,

As I grow older I find myself gaining a deeper appreciation of God's gift of trees. The trees remind me of the need to remain steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of God. Such a reminder is particularly critical as the storms of life are raging around me.

Psalms 1:3 tells us that we are to be "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all they do, they prosper."

As I walk among the trees I see that they are older and taller than anything alive on the earth. There are not only trees in the first and last chapter of the Bible, in the first Psalm and the first gospel, but every important character and every major story in the Bible has a tree mentioned.

Such was the case for Elijah who found himself under a Bloom tree when he was wrestling with his depression.

When I was under my own Bloom Tree feeling sorry for myself, The Holy Spirit showed me that I was supposed to go for a walk among the trees. As I walked among them I thought about how trees are amazing gifts from God. They absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen so that we can breathe. Without trees, topsoil erosion would take place and crops won't grow. Another wonderful thing about trees is that they don't discriminate against whoever is planted next to them. You never hear them screaming or trying to move because there are homeless in the area, or that a low income senior housing project is being built, or students from a poor neighborhood are being sent to their school district.

Thomas Merton the great monk, poet, spiritual writer and social activist writes, "Man can know all about God's creating by examining its phenomenon, by dissecting and experimenting and this is all good, but it is misleading. With this kind of knowledge you don't really know the things you know, you only know about them."

What Merton is saying is that studying trees involves more than just cutting them down and counting the rings in their trunk or evaluating how much wood they have. It involves seeing their flowers, leaves, branches etc., as God reveals himself through the creation of his trees. Merton goes on to say, "The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints. The leaf has its own texture and its own pattern of veins and its own holy shape. Again, sense of the importance, the urgency of being, fully aware, experiencing what is here, not what is given by men, by society, but is given by God and hidden by society."

As I walked among the oak and pine trees instead of sitting under the Bloom Tree feeling sorry for myself, I was reminded by the Holy Spirit to trust God like Louis Zamperini did in the middle of his need. Louis Zamperini, whose story is told in the classical work entitled "Unbroken", refused to give up after his plane went down in the Pacific in May of 1943. For forty seven days Louie was a drift on a raft with two men, one of whom would die after the raft was shot up by Japanese planes, attacked by sharks, and deprived of food and water. In spite of overwhelming odds, Louie refused to give up. Although he did not consider himself a religious man, Louie cried out to God, after days of going without water, "God if you send rain and let us drink, I will dedicate myself to you." For two days after that cry for help it rained. Louie at one point even though he heard the angels singing from the clouds.

When Louie and his remaining companion, Phil saw an island, they believed they were about to be saved from their ordeal. They were deeply mistaken. Instead they were captured by the Japanese. At half their original weight Louie and Phil found themselves on what was known as Execution Island. Later, Phil was transferred to another location while Louie remained on Execution Island for 1 year and 13 days. During the whole time, he along with other POWs lived under the Japanese kill all order meaning that if Japan lost the war, all the POWs would be killed. One miracle here, another miracle there, Louie survived.

When he was finally transferred the last day of Sept 1944, Louie once again found himself thrown into another chamber of hell on earth. There he found himself under the control of a deranged Japanese corporal. As Louie was making his way through this hell, his family did not believe the official government report that he was dead.

Refusing to be thrown under the Bloom Tree of despair, hopeless and unbelief, Louis Zamperini survived one beating after another. His courage and determination to remain unbroken stands in the sharp contrast to the fear that dominates so many today.

As I walked, burdened down with questions about how New Life was going to pay a growing mountain of bills, all of a sudden God's gift of an oak tree was in front of me. As that tree stood firm it was almost like it was shouting at me saying, *"Look at me Larry, I'm older than you are and I'm still standing. I have faced drought in the summertime, cold in winter when I didn't have a leaf on me, but I'm still standing. Why do you keep carrying your burdens from year to year? Turn them loose, God is faithful. He brought you through last year and each year before that and he will take you through this."*

Then I looked up into that big oak tree that stood before me. Its trunk was so wide that I could not come close to wrapping my arms around it. The branches of this oak spread out into the sky, displaying its covering of leaves and providing the shade I was enjoying. Each leaf seemed to be crying out to the heavens and unto me. "God is faithful, God is faithful, just trust and obey."

As long as I saw that tree as an object in a park I couldn't see it as a gift from God. A Wintu Indian once said, "The white people never cared for land or deer or bear. When we Indians kill meat, we eat it all up. When we dig roots, we make little holes...we shake down acorns and pine nuts, we don't chop down trees. We only use dead wood. But the white people plow up the ground, pull up the trees, kill everything. The tree says, "Don't I am sore. Don't hurt me", but they chop it down and cut it up. The spirit of the land hates them... the Indians never hurt anything, but the white people destroy all."

As I continued to walk I came to a huge old mesquite tree. When I saw this tree I was reminded of Jeremiah 17:5-8. The roots of this tree drew water from the unseen underground rivers which allowed it to remain green even in times of drought that Mid America had experienced in the past.

"This is what the Lord says: cursed is the one who trust in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places in the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. 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."

These verses from Jeremiah 17:5-8 were reminding me that like a tree, which continues to stand firm year after year even when the heat is on and the drought is present, I am to also remain faithful and be productive. As verse 8 said, I don't have to be controlled by fear instead I need to produce the fruit of love, joy, peace and kindness.

I was learning that by looking at God's gift of trees, what it is to eat from the tree of life. Revelation 2:7 says, "Whoever has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

Eating from this tree of life involves abiding in the presence and power of God both now and for all eternity. This is possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. It is Jesus who asks, "Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?" (Mark 8:17-18).

Thomas Berry has pointed out that “The religious traditions need to awaken again to the natural world as the primary manifestation of the divine to human intelligence. The very nature and purpose of humans is to experience this intimate presence that comes to us through natural phenomena. Such is the purpose of having eyes and ears and feeling sensitivity and all other senses. We have no inner spiritual development without outer experiences. Immediately when we see a flower, a butterfly, a tree, or when we feel the evening breeze flow over us or wade in a stream of clear water, our natural response is immediate, intuitive, transforming and ecstatic... The difficulty is that the natural world is seen primarily for human use, not as a mode of sacred presence primarily to be communed within wonder, beauty and intimacy.”

David had such a relationship with God and His creation. That’s why in 1 Chronicles 16:30-33, he was able to declare, “Tremble before him, all the earth! The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let them say among the nations, “The Lord reigns!” Let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them! Let the trees of the forest sing; let them sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth.”

As I looked up into God’s gift of a tall pine tree, I noticed that about fifty feet up it started to bend. That tree was firmly anchored, but as the years passed by something caused it to start bending, yet the tree stood firm. Now it was showing me I was to stand steadfast, unmovable always abounding in the Lord. That pine tree through its presence was telling me, “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brother (Larry) stand firm let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:57-58)

This pine tree was teaching me that serving God was not just a fast paced hectic business of going from one crisis to another. I was to spend more time observing the trees and the rest of creation as I sought the creator of all things. I was reminded that seeking God involved daily reading the scriptures, praying and interacting with God’s gift of creation.

Thomas Merton goes on to describe what it is to be in the woods thanking God for His gift of trees. “And now in the woods, I once again revisit the idea of simply staying here, in the woods- with great interior freedom and applying myself to the main business, which has nothing to do with places and does not require a beach of pure, white Caribbean sand, only silence and a curtain of trees. All around us, the steep hills were thick with woods and small gnarled oaks, clinging to the rock. Along the river, the slender poplars rippled with the light of the afternoon and green waters danced on the stones to go out to walk silently in this wood. This is a more important and significant means to understanding at the moment, than a lot of analysis and a lot of reporting on the things ‘of the spirit.’”

Isaiah 55:6-13 tells us how we can hear the mountains and hills burst into song and the trees clap their hands. We read in these verses how by seeking the Lord and trusting in His ways, we will see the thorn bushes of pain in our lives converted into Jupiter trees of strength, power and endurance. In these verses we are told to:

*Go out in joy and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.*

*Instead of the thorn bush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the Lord’s renowned, for an everlasting sign,*

I know from over forty-seven years of experiencing the pressures of ministry that the prayer-less Christian is a defeated Christian. By examining God's gift of trees and their relationship with Him, I am reminded how prayer helps me to be rooted and grounded in my relationship with our Living Lord. That is why Paul says in 1 Thess. 5:17, "Pray without ceasing." Persevering prayer enables us through the resurrection power of Jesus Christ to be more than conquerors. Remember, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man (and woman) avails much" (James 5:17).

I want to encourage you to come out from under the Bloom Tree of despair and walk among God's gift of trees. If you feel like your prayers are just bouncing off the walls around you, take a prayer walk and get a good look at God's gift of trees. Then begin to thank Him for all He has created. As Ps. 150:6 says, "Let all that has breath praise the Lord."

The more we focus on God's gift of big beautiful trees, the smaller our problems will appear. By doing this we will be taking a positive step to shut down much of the pressure that tries to oppress us day and night. Abiding in the promises and power of God's word, along with prayer and praise, will enable us to overcome the pressures of daily living and be "More than conquerors through Him who loves us" (Rom. 8:37).

As we walk among the trees we will embrace the moment and be challenged to stand steadfast in spite of the trials and tribulations. It is remarkable how trees can cause us to seek the Lord. As we see that tree faithfully standing there year after year, we are reminded that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and for that reason we must trust Him as we are rooted and grounded in the promises of the scriptures. When we accept the power of God's word we will go forth with such peace and joy that it will seem that even the branches of the trees will be clapping with praise unto the Lord. As we trust God even the thorn bush of worry will be transformed into an ever green pine that will continue to remain green and full of life even in the mist of the most difficult circumstances.

As God's gift of trees provide shade, fruit, oxygen, and so much more they continue to teach us how to be effective and productive in the work and will of God. Thank God for the gift of trees that show you through their example of steadfastness, His love and faithfulness each and every day.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Larry Rice". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Larry Rice