

September 19, 2021
Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
“Planting Perpetual Peaceful Plants”

Psalm 1

1 The truly happy person
doesn't follow wicked advice,
doesn't stand on the road of sinners,
and doesn't sit with the disrespectful.
2 Instead of doing those things,
these persons love the Lord's Instruction,
and they recite God's Instruction day and night!
3 They are like a tree replanted by streams of water,
which bears fruit at just the right time
and whose leaves don't fade.
Whatever they do succeeds.

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4 That's not true for the wicked!
They are like dust that the wind blows away.
5 And that's why the wicked will have no standing in the court of justice—
neither will sinners
in the assembly of the righteous.
6 The Lord is intimately acquainted
with the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked is destroyed.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

13 Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are
good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. 14 However, if you
have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging
and living in ways that deny the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that
comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and
demonic. 16 Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is
disorder and everything that is evil. 17 What of the wisdom from above?
First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy

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and good actions, fair, and genuine. 18 Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts. 4 What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Don't they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives? 2 You long for something you don't have, so you commit murder. You are jealous for something you can't get, so you struggle and fight. You don't have because you don't ask. 3 You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings. 7 Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will run away from you. 8 Come near to God, and he will come near to you.

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What did the tree wear to the pool party?
Swimming trunks!
What did the beaver say to the tree?
It's been nice gnawing you!
How do trees access the internet?
They log on.
What did the tree do when the bank closed?
It started its own branch.
Why did the pine tree get in trouble?
Because it was being knotty.
What kind of tree can fit into your hand?
A palm tree!
Why did the tree need to take a nap?
For rest.
Do you want a brief explanation of an acorn?
In a nutshell, it's an oak tree.
What was the tree's favorite thing about Star Trek?
The Captain's log.

His name was Dean and he was one of the finest gentlemen I have ever known. Probably not a coincidence he was in a special form of the ministry commonly known as...banking! He was a banker who had worked

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his entire career in a small town bank and was known and as far as I could tell...loved by all. Now, My mom and dad raised two boys, a banker and a pastor and they could say, "We have two sons one truly helps people to achieve their dreams and helps them to see the potential they have to become wonderful and productive members of our society...and the other is a pastor!"

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Dean, like my brother, was a banker who truly believed he could help people achieve their dreams...whether those dreams were buying a new car, or a new house, or helping a child go to college. Dean was there helping people and the folks responded with respect and hope. While I was his pastor Dean developed a rare form of bone cancer...they found it during a routine Chiropractor examination (I always respected that Chiropractor for realizing what was going on and referring Dean to a neuro-surgeon.) In fact Dean went straight from the Chiro's office to the ER in Peoria and by the time I got over to see him that next day he had surgery to put on one of those halo devices because they were so concerned he might break his neck since it was so diseased.

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Dean always kept his positive outlook and his sense of humor. We had a men's coffee group that usually met at Hilda's Pantry in Lewistown but when Dean could no longer comfortably get out to go to Hilda's we met in his basement. One day as I was going down the stairs...late as usual...I heard Dean say, "Well our pastor is married to a church member!" And the guys all were laughing. It turns out a pastor in the next town was dating a member of his church and some people were upset about that...Dean was simply pointing out that it was ok for a pastor to be with a church member. And his point was well received!

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Dean ended up going on hospice and even in hospice it was amazing to watch him and to be with him. He was simply a special man who maintained faith, hope, kindness and continued to work for justice even while he was dying. After he had died his wife, children, and I all sat down to talk about his funeral and a scripture just jumped out of the Bible and screamed at me that it was perfect for Dean. That scripture was

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Psalm 1, “The truly happy person
doesn’t follow wicked advice,
doesn’t stand on the road of sinners,
and doesn’t sit with the disrespectful.
2 Instead of doing those things,
these persons love the Lord’s Instruction,
and they recite God’s Instruction day and night!
3 They are like a tree replanted by streams of water,
which bears fruit at just the right time
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Whatever they do succeeds.”

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And when I mentioned Psalm 1 to Dean’s wife...she exclaimed, “That is the EXACT scripture I kept coming back to as well! That fits Dean perfectly!”

By the way...I’m not a big fan of how the Common English translates the first verse of Psalm 1...I don’t like the word happy right there. I get it...but for me to say someone is blessed is much deeper and more Godly than to say they are happy. Obviously blessed people are usually happy people who truly recognize their positive blessings. Yet...I just can’t shake the idea that being blessed is a much deeper and more meaningful thing than just being “happy.” Dean was a fellow who knew he was blessed and he was also a fellow who was absolutely a blessing to many, many others! He was like a tree planted by streams of living water...what he did bore a lot of fruit and his leaves never withered!

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If you listened carefully to the James passage today you heard a similar comparison. In James it says, “Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil. 17 What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. 18 Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.”

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So...if we are wise people...ones who know we are blessed by God and who understand what Godly wisdom and living looks like then we, too, are like trees that bear much fruit and whose leaves never wither...and we are like the seeds that are sown in justice through our peaceful acts. In other words our lives and our ministries bear fruit and help sustain, shelter, protect, and feed others.

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You probably know this but it turns out that trees are important to our lives in many ways. In an article titled, "Why Trees Can Make You Happier," from The Greater Good Magazine, Jill Suttie...she says that the most obvious is their role in producing the oxygen we breathe and sequestering carbon dioxide to help protect our atmosphere; but science suggests trees provide other important benefits, too.

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Probably the most well-researched benefit of nature exposure is that it seems to help decrease our stress, rumination, and anxiety. And much of that research has been conducted in forests.

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In one recent study, 585 young adult Japanese participants reported on their moods after walking for 15 minutes, either in an urban setting or in a forest. The forests and urban centers were in 52 different locations around the country, and about a dozen participants walked in each area. In all cases, the participants walking in a forest experienced less anxiety, hostility, fatigue, confusion, and depressive symptoms, and more vigor, compared to walking in an urban setting. The results were even stronger for people who were more anxious to begin with.

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"The psychological benefits of walking through forests are very significant, and forest environments are expected to have very important roles in promoting mental health in the future," the authors write. Indeed, various other studies suggest that the practice of "forest bathing"— which is deliberately spending time among the trees and it has shown that this can help us deal with the stresses and strains of urban living.

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Study after study has compared the results of spending time looking at urban settings and looking at forest settings...guess which one wins every time in all the positive feelings it produces? It may be that some of these benefits have to do with how forests affect our brains. One study found that people living in proximity to trees had better “amygdala integrity”—meaning, a brain structure better able to handle stressors.

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Besides helping us breathe, being around trees may improve our health in other ways, too. Studies have shown that spending short amounts of time in forests seems to benefit our immune systems. Specifically, one study found that elderly patients suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease experienced decreases in perforin and granzyme B expressions, as well as decreased pro-inflammatory cytokines—all related to better immune function—after they visited forests rather than urban areas. Though it’s not clear exactly why this would be, a prior study suggests that trees may improve immunity thanks to certain aromatic compounds they release.

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Trees also seem to help our heart health. In one study, participants walked in a forest one day and an urban environment another day, and researchers measured how the two walks impacted their bodies. In comparison to the urban environment, walking in trees lowered people’s blood pressure, cortisol levels, pulse rates, and sympathetic nervous system activity (related to stress), while increasing their parasympathetic nervous system activity (related to relaxation). All of these physiological markers are tied to better heart health, suggesting that walking in the woods improves cardiovascular function.

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One study that tried to quantify this health effect concluded that, “having 10 more trees in a city block, on average, improves health perception in ways comparable to an increase in annual personal income of \$10,000 and moving to a neighborhood with \$10,000 higher median income or being 7 years younger.” Clearly, there’s something healing about trees.

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In addition...trees in neighborhoods lead to less crime. In one recent study, researchers looked at crime data for the city of Chicago, computing a

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score for each census tract. Then, they compared that to the percentage of tree canopy cover and park space enclosed in each tract. They found that for every 10 percent increase in tree canopy cover, crime rates went down in several categories. Weirdly...it was found to be more important to have trees than just parks when it came to crime reduction.

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It turns out that trees may make us more generous and trusting as research suggests that nature experiences help us to feel kinder toward others, and many of those studies involve trees. Researchers have found that people were more willing to help someone who'd lost a glove if they had just spent time walking through a park with trees, rather than if they were near the entrance to the park.

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The first Psalm says, "these persons love the Lord's Instruction, and they recite God's Instruction day and night! 3 They are like a tree replanted by streams of water, which bears fruit at just the right time and whose leaves don't fade. Whatever they do succeeds."

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James says, "Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. 14 However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth." People who are planted properly are: "filled with the wisdom from above and it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. 18 Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts."

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It turns out...we need more trees and more folks who sow the seeds of God...in our cities, in our towns, in our world, and in our personal lives as well, you see we need to have more who are planted with their roots in the living streams of God's Word and Spirit. People who are more loving, trusting, kind, generous, forgiving, and less likely to react or over react to stressful situations. In other words...we need to learn from and to be more like the trees...especially the trees that God calls us to be like. And

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we are to continually plant the seeds of peace and justice and rely less and less on our own selfish desires and jealous behaviors.

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And as it says we are also to submit to God and resist the devil, and it turns out then even he will run away from you. We must all as a church and as individuals come near to God, and know that God will come near to us!

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May we as a church always be planted near the living water of God's Spirit and may we continue to sow seeds of justice through our peaceful acts! Amen. ¹

"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" (Jeremiah 17:7-8).

Lincoln's second inaugural address (March 4, 1865), which was delivered just weeks prior to his assassination (April 14, 1865), includes these words in closing: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

¹ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_trees_can_make_you_happier