

## **Like a tree**

Psalm 1

May 24, 2009

So, what do you think of Sam? Isn't he a beautiful child? Aren't they all beautiful children: Sam and Lucas and Allison? It is truly astonishing to see a human being, complete but so small, so helpless, so new. They grow up so fast -- too fast! It seems just yesterday Jack was that small.

But now, today, Samuel George is that small, that new, that young, just twenty days old! And Lucas Timothy is just twenty days old, and Allison Mae is just eighteen days old. They have their whole lives ahead of them, literally! The lives that will be are now to us still a mystery, a wonder, a story yet to be told.

Who knows what paths they will take? Who knows what choices they will make? Who knows what they will make of their lives and what their lives will make of them? Who knows what the future will bring?

But we do know what we want for them. We want them to listen to the advice of people who are wise and good. We want them to follow the example of people who are successful and good. And we want them to associate with people who are caring and good.

And yet, there's more. There must be more! Any of us would want such things for our children and grandchildren: wise teachers, good role models, upbuilding friendships. Any of us would, inside or outside the church. But we don't baptize our children in hopes of these things. What is it that we as believers, as people of faith, as followers of Jesus, want for our children? With what hopes do we baptize them?

This is my hope: that Sam will grow up like a tree! I hope that Lucas will grow up like a tree, and Allison and Landon and Braeden and Jack. And I hope that you, each one of you, will grow like a tree!

Like a tree ... strong and resilient and beautiful; spreading up and out, boldly showing off the wonder and beauty of God's artistry; standing strong through wind and rain and ice and drought, through good times and bad.

Like a tree ... long-lived and well-rooted, solid and yet adaptive too; adapting, adjusting to conditions as they are, finding a way to live and live well even in unlikely places, roots curling around and under and through the cracks of solid rock; growing slowly and surely, drawing strength from its surroundings,

but giving back, too, providing shade and shelter and nourishment to other living things.

Like a tree ... productive and fruitful and useful and good for the environment!; bearing fruit, providing food and fuel, cleansing and replenishing the atmosphere, preventing erosion and providing cover; existing in harmony with the rest of the larger ecosystem, and essential to the survival and well-being of the larger ecosystem.

What more could I want for my children and my grandchildren -- and for you -- than this? That you grow strong and beautiful, that you live long and well, that you persevere through good times and bad, that you live in harmony with your neighbors and with the earth, that you take in the best of what they have to offer and give back the best you have to offer, that you stand tall and proud as a living emblem of the extraordinary artistry of God?

That you be ... like trees?

*like trees that grow beside a stream,  
that bear fruit at the right time,  
and whose leaves do not dry up ...*

But how does a tree grow? A tree does not grow by listening to advice, good or bad, not by following examples, good or bad, not by getting together with other trees, good or bad! A tree grows by sinking its roots deep, drawing deeply on the resources of soil and water, and opening its face to the sun. Without light, without water, it will wither and die. And you grow the same way!

Listen to the psalm ...

*Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people ...*

By all means, do not take the advice of people who are only looking out for their own interests and not yours. Don't listen to people who are merely trying to use you, to exploit you, for their own gain.

But notice the author of the psalm does not say: *but listen instead to the advice of good people*. You will not grow strong and beautiful, truly wealthy and truly wise, by listening to Oprah or your accountant or your doctor ... or me!

*Happy are those who do not follow the example of sinners ...*

By all means, do not follow the lead of people who don't know where they are going and expect to get there! Don't model your life after people whose own lives are falling apart.

But notice the author of the psalm does not say: *but follow instead the example of good people*. You cannot live your life by living theirs however worthy their lives may be, and you will not find the path to peace by walking in their footsteps.

*Happy are those who do not join those who have no use for God ...*

By all means, do not keep company with scoffers and cynics. Don't make best friends of people who have placed all their trust in their own strength, their own wisdom, and their own capacity for love.

But notice the author of the psalm does not say: *but join instead a community of faithful people*. It does make good sense to surround yourself with people of genuine faith, people who love God, people who make a sincere effort at following Jesus, but strength and beauty and peace and faith are not contagious. They must be made new and made uniquely and made personally in each and every child of God.

Listen to the psalm!

*Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people,  
who do not follow the example of sinners  
or join those who have no use for God.  
Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the Lord,  
and they study it day and night.  
They are like trees that grow beside a stream,  
that bear fruit at the right time,  
and whose leaves do not dry up.  
They succeed in everything they do.*

*Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the Lord ...*

You grow by sinking your roots deep, by drawing deeply on the resources God provides -- the Word written and the living Word -- and by opening your face to the One from whom all light comes. Paul said the same thing:

*Since you have accepted Christ Jesus as Lord, live in union with him.  
Keep your roots deep in him, build your lives in him ...*

*Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the Lord ...*

They find joy, in the law, in the law of the Lord! Why will you find joy there? Well. where do you find joy, not mere pleasure, but joy?

You find joy when you feel connected, not disconnected. When you feel in sync, not out of sync. When you feel that what you are doing has meaning and purpose and value, for someone else, for everyone else! When you feel ... right. When you feel loved. And when you give love -- freely, unselfishly, with no strings, with no conditions, but with ever high expectations, just like God does! And God, only God, can show you the way to that kind of joy!

*Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the Lord,  
and they study it day and night ...*

Does a tree grow by looking at the water? Does a tree grow by visiting the stream a couple times a year or even a couple times a week? No, the tree grows because it is planted by the stream, because its roots draw on its waters continuously -- day and night!

When you build your lives on Jesus, you draw your strength from his strength, you draw your life from his life, you rely on him -- day and night! You can't just be an interested observer or a passive listener to the living Word of God if you want to grow up, if you want to grow wise and beautiful and strong. You can't pay casual attention to a sermon here or there or rub shoulders with God's people once in while and expect to find joy. You must live it, you must live with it, you must live in union with him, all the time, day and night, wherever you are.

Study it! Read it again and again! Memorize it! Pray continuously! Make it, make him, part of you! Make yourself, part of him!

And when you do, you will grow ... like a tree, like a tree that grows beside a stream, and bears fruit at the right time. You will be something to look at! You will be strong and resilient. You will bless those around you, offering them comfort and protection and nourishment and peace.

And you will be the beautiful human being promised in the tiny face of the child you once were ...