

## Sunday@Seven

### SERIES 3 PICTURES FROM THE PSALMS

#### STUDY 1: HE SHALL BE LIKE A TREE

This month we reflect on one of the pictures from the Psalms we looked at in Sunday at Seven: the picture given of the Christian as being *"like a tree planted by rivers of living water, who brings fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither"*.

The first psalm describes the one who trusts in God as a living being, a visible item in the process of growing from seed to fruition. Starting with a humble beginning it proceeds to maturity and fulness. Two features characterise that growth: fruit and food. Fruit is the culmination, the outcome of growing and feeding, the purpose of being. It reminds us of Jesus' words in Matthew 7: 16 that *"by their fruit you shall know them"* and in John 15: *"This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit"*. That sense of fruitfulness is echoed in other psalms, such as 52 where, in contrast to the evildoer, the righteous is seen as *"a green olive tree in the house of God"* or in 92 where *"the righteous flourish like a palm tree" and 'will stay fresh and green'*.

Going beyond the Book of Psalms, other OT references endorse this aspect of fruitfulness. Isaiah says that *"they are the (tree) I have planted for the display of my splendour"* and Jeremiah speaks of a *"tree whose leaves are always green and never fails to bear fruit"*.

But fruitfulness does not come automatically: it is the result of feeding. Jeremiah speaks of the *"tree planted by the water sending out its roots by the stream"*, so that *"it does not fear when heat comes"*. Hosea recognises that *"your fruitfulness comes (only) from Me"*. And that is what Psalm 1 said in relation to the secret of fruitfulness. It depends on NOT walking, standing or sitting in the world of sinfulness, but ON delighting in the *"law of the Lord and meditating on it day and night."* While becoming a Christian is dependent on receiving the Word in the Person of Jesus Christ, growing and being fruitful requires refusing to be engrossed in sin and its environment but constantly feeding on the Bible, the word of God. As Jesus says, *"abide in me and let My words abide in you"*.

If we have neglected that duty and feel our Christian lives barren or unproductive, then Job has encouragement for us. Taking his lesson from a tree, he declares that though it is now withering, nevertheless *"at the scent of water it begins to bud"*. As we 'scent water' through the ministry in St Nicholas, may we also begin to bud again and bear fruit to God's praise.

## STUDY 2' GOD IS OUR ROCK

Two reflections on God is our Rock and our Fortress

The Book of Psalms is a book of experience

Many of these were written in specific circumstances, some of them extreme situations in the ordinary course of living, for example, hiding and running in fear of one's life.

We can identify with Ps 42: 9 - 11 "*Why are you cast down, O my soul and why are you disturbed, disquieted within me?*" In life's experiences questions arise constantly.

Tonight's verses present a picture of God as a Rock or a Fortress

The words that come out from reading these verses are: strength, security, protection, refuge, salvation, something immovable.

Many of the psalms were written by David who certainly proved God to be a Rock and fortress. We can tell from the headings of some psalms that indicate a few of the difficult situations in which David found himself.

Psalm 91: 1,2 is another picture, when it speaks of "*resting in the shadow of the almighty*". We can imagine a rock in a harsh landscaper providing shade and rest.

There is need for times of rest and quiet in the shadow of God our Rock.

Many of the psalms are written about personal experiences, but:

Psalm 46: 7 and Psalm 48:3 speak of Jerusalem. Great as it was, it was the God of Jacob who really was the people's fortress and security. It is God Himself, not walls, that is Zion's defence.

God is a rock to his people now

There is much joy and praise in the psalms, especially to the *rock of our salvation*. Psalm 95: 1,2

There is even a promise for old age. Psalm 92: 12 - 15. xxx quote verses?

Psalms is a book to which people turn to for comfort and encouragement and discover that in every situation in life, God is a rock..

God desires to be and can be our Rock and fortress if we put our trust in Him.

An old hymn puts it so well:

O safe to the Rock that is higher than I  
My soul in its conflict and sorrow would fly;  
So sinful, so weary Thine, Thine, would I be  
Thou blest Rock of Ages I'm hiding in Thee.  
Hiding in Thee, Hiding in Thee  
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee.

Ann Jones

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Thoughts on God as our rock

- .. a rock is strong
- .. it is "greater than I"
- .. it is eternal, "the same yesterday, today and for ever"
- .. it is a good foundation on which to build our lives
- .. it is immovable
- .. it is dependable. God is always there for us
- .. a good anchor in times of trouble

Similarly we can use the picture of a fortress as

- .. a place to flee from the battle and rest in peace and safety
- .. we find protection there from Satan who would draw us away from our faith
- .. we live there in safety as we feed on God's word and strengthen ourselves with prayer
- .. within that fortress we can shelter with others who are engaged in the same "battle" and find fellowship and encouragement from one another

Kathryn Fisher

ADD KATHRYN NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

## STUDY 3: THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

### SHEPHERD

One of the most familiar pictures in the psalms is the picture of the shepherd. We remember Psalm 23 that says: *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."*

Much can be learned from this when we think of all the features of shepherding in the east, not least the fact that the shepherd went before and provided the lead for the sheep to follow. Shepherds would sleep across the doorway of the fold doorway, counting sheep in and out and also to be the human barrier to prevent marauding beasts to attack.

The psalm goes through a progression.

It starts with a picture of provision and comfort. Because God is his shepherd, David has no wants. He looks at his life and remembers that God makes him walk in pleasant places. God leads him by green pastures, God restores his soul, and provides everything that he needs for his sustenance.

That is the picture of Christian life. Jesus said: *"I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."* Those who trust in Christ and His death for them on the cross and provision through the resurrection know what it is to be satisfied. One hymn says:

"Thou O Christ art all I want.  
More than all in Thee I find."

Another older hymn says:

O Christ in Thee my soul has found,  
And found in Thee alone,  
The peace and joy I sought so long;  
That bliss 'til now unknown"

But the next section of the psalm suggests that life is not always easy; there are difficulties ahead. This same shepherd not only makes provision in pleasant days and in green pastures, but He is the one who accompanies the sheep through the valley of death and difficult experiences. Though in this case death is only a shadow, yet his accompaniment and going with us is something that means that there will be no fear because *"you are with me"*. The very comforting words that *"Thy rod and Thy staff will comfort me"* indicate that both support and correction ensure a safe passage through difficult times.

There is a third aspect of this that can be described as victory or overcoming. The walk is not an easy one for there are predators around. There are enemies of the Christian as they walk with God. But in the psalm it says *"you prepare a table for me in the presence of mine enemies, you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."* It is an assurance that in spite of adversity and opposition, God is with us and will give us that particular victory. It was Jesus who said in contexts like these: *"My peace I give to you, not as the world give I to you."* And Paul describes that as *"peace that passeth all understanding (which will) keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*

When we look at other psalms that contain this picture of the shepherd we see two examples. In one, Psalm 28, it is the despair of seeing the wicked succeed. But also God is good to those who trust in Him and from that comes a longing that He would be the shepherd of his people. Psalm 80 cries for restoration. The memory is of a nation that has wandered away from God; the longing is for the Shepherd of Israel - *will you not restore us again?*

That concept of restoration extends in other Old Testament books and in Ezekiel in particular the good shepherd is depicted as the one who gathers scattered sheep and brings them back to the fold. That picture is supplemented by other graphic illustrations of a new heart being given, of dry bones being quickened and becoming alive. And from these restored pieces a sense of the assembly and structure of a temple which is to be inhabited by God himself and from which a river of blessing flows out.

That is the significance of the shepherd: He is the one who restores; He is the one who safeguards the flock. From that experience, blessing would go out to others. It's not just for people to enjoy that security but from their experience benefit ensues to others.

That's a picture of the Christian life and of the ministry of the church. Individuals who come to God find in Him their sufficiency, both in pleasant times and in trouble. But more than that, they are witnesses of a better way, the *more excellent way* offered to others through their Christian witness.