

2020

Plant a Tree ... Grow a Family



Compiled by Greg Ziegler
Bentonville Church of Christ
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Editor's note: *I asked various members of our church family to write articles for me about some aspect of nature (sometimes trees, but could be whatever), a particular episode from their life, where they received a memorable message from God. Enjoy! –Greg Z.*

Robin Benson

1 Corinthians 3:7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4 We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, as is fitting, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which you are enduring.

This season of life has certainly been challenging and unique in a multitude of ways, affecting each family differently. During the first several months of the pandemic, our family fared very well. We have been abundantly blessed with good health, to be able to continue in our jobs and not lose any income as well as to spend more time with our two-year-old son than we would have been able to otherwise. We were full of gratitude then, and still are today.



We have desired for a long time to add to our family, and were overjoyed to find out that our prayers had been answered this fall. Unfortunately, our joy turned to mourning when we lost our baby at the beginning of November. While this has been a difficult path to walk, I cannot adequately express how loved and supported we have felt during this time. God has used his children to love us in tangible ways as they showed up for us, helped sustain us and even helped us grow in our faith. We received cards, food, flowers and other thoughtful gifts as well as texts with scripture, encouraging words and uplifting lyrics. It was difficult to know what we needed as we processed our loss. I quickly realized that what calmed my soul the very most was being outside in God's creation and taking in the beauty of the flowers sent to us--which of course He created! One day I took a walk at Tanyard Creek and it was the most precious time with the Lord. I was reminded over and over of his amazing creation---the rippling water, the moss on the rocks, the squirrel that scampered across a fallen log, birds chirping as they hopped along my path and the leaves falling ever so softly. So many scriptures came to mind as I walked that day.

This experience, while painful, has absolutely helped draw me closer to the Lord. I'm thankful for this situation as I've learned specific ways to love and support others and I pray that the Lord will use me and our family to help those who will face this loss in the future.

The Lord is the creator, the one who makes all things grow. The one that goes before us and comforts us in our times of need. He is making all things new! When I look at a seed I am amazed at the Lord and how creative he was in his design. Something

so small and unimpressive grows into something magnificent and beautiful. It was once said, "To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow." I have so much hope for the future, knowing that the Lord works all things together for our good! My faith is in the Lord, and I pray that this plant will constantly bring your thoughts to the Lord and remind you that he is in control, you are precious to him, and that he will provide everything you ever need.

Rachel Mauldin

Genesis 8:22 As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.

Every year, our family plants a vegetable garden. Over the winter, we enjoy sketching the layout, organizing the planting dates and gathering the shopping list. Then, we have to wait. Wait for the right time to plant, for the weather to cooperate, for the family to have time to help. And every year - all those things align and we have a beautiful garden. It's not always what we planned it to be, but it is always successful in the end.

This year, we had what I would call succession harvesting. We, like most gardeners, spent the first half of the summer awaiting those green tomatoes to begin to begin



to turn red. Our okra seemed stunted most of the growing season. The pumpkins were ripe entirely too early. We fought pests more than ever. We had jungle size zucchini and yellow squash plants. Instead of getting a nice basket with a variety of veggies every couple days, we had weeks' worth of days that we had multiple buckets of just squash, with a couple stragglers of something else. Then the squash would slow down and we'd get loads of cucumbers. Then finally, the waited upon motherload of tomatoes. The thing was, we didn't plan it that way - and honestly given the choice, would have preferred to get a nice little mixed basket every couple days. But in the end, it worked out - maybe even for the better. Each day - the work of collecting, distributing and processing was just enough for one day. If we'd have gotten multiple kinds harvesting at one time - we would have lost good produce because we wouldn't have been able to keep up.

The thing with a plan is that it is our dream of what we'd really like to see. And without a plan - we'd be living in chaos. But God's plan is always better, always bigger and always there. Anymore, we just lay out the plan, tweak it as we go and just stay along for the ride. Our garden may not always come up as we'd like but it is always incredible, rewarding and fruitful. And there's always plenty to share with family and friends.

Andy McCown

"The story of Zacchaeus the Tax Collector is recorded in Luke 19.



Zacchaeus' occupation as a tax collector and the fact that he was a wealthy man made him a sinful man in the eyes of the Pharisees. But Zacchaeus wanted to meet Jesus who was passing through Jericho; however, the Scriptures tell us that he was a short man and couldn't see Jesus over the crowd.

The Scriptures go on to state that he saw a tree, he climbed up on it, and when Jesus saw him, he told him to come down and engaged in a conversation with him. There are many ways to come to Jesus. I didn't have to climb a tree to see Jesus but I had a wonderful, spiritual paternal Grandmother who was my "tree." Through her life and the example she set, I knew growing up that I wanted to be like her. She was my "tree" that allowed me to see Jesus and installed in me early in my life the desire to lead the Christian life and to accept Jesus as my Savior."

"Because of my profession as a City Manager, we moved several times in my career. One of the biggest challenges of

these moves was, of course, having to meet new people and making new friends, However, there was always one thing that made these moves a lot easier and that was the fact that we always had an instant family of Christians to welcome us and make us part of God's family.

Working in the secular world could certainly be difficult and challenging at times but it was very special to know that there was always that Christian family that would instantly become part of our family and make the move a lot easier.

The Scriptures talk frequently about producing good fruit. One of my favorite Scriptures is Galatians 5:22-23. These Scriptures describe the fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. With every move we made, it was a great comfort to my family to know that there were Christians bearing these fruits waiting to welcome us to our new family."

Randy Holman

Linda and I were blessed with a gift of trees by friends in our time of mourning after the loss of my mother in 2004 and of



Linda's dad in 2009. Not only have these trees symbolized our parents continued spiritual presence they are much more. These trees are a reflection of the eternal love of God

reflected in the Tree of Life in *Revelations 22: 2-3*. “...On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” Being blessed with the gift of these trees represent a deeper meaning in our hearts that life is much bigger than our present moments. Their deep roots provide a foundation of faith and the sprawling branches call us to look to heaven and eternity through the legacy that our parents handed down to us, and from us to our children and grandchildren. *Isaiah 61:3* “...They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.”

Walton Hook

My Special Trees (pictured)



Genesis 3:22 – “He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.

Revelation 22:2-3 – On each side of the river stood the tree of life...yielding its fruit every month...no longer will there be any curse.”

I have a yard with many trees...three mature oaks, one huge pine, a very large walnut and several others. There are two trees that are very special.

Just over seventeen years ago my dad died and the elders had a 6' red-leaf redbud planted in my yard in his honor. It is now a mature tree 20-25' tall. In April of this year when my precious Carolyn died the small group that I lead planted a 6' pink dogwood in my yard in her memory. These are special because of who they honor.

If you look at the two trees right now with few or no leaves, they appear dead...just like Carolyn and dad. Come spring they will bloom and put on leaves again.

Satan would have me believe that Carolyn and dad have been defeated by death. It is his lie!! They are safely asleep in Jesus waiting on the glorious resurrection. They will bloom again and live for eternity never to be troubled by death again.

Praise God! The two trees are not just trees...they are a reminder every season of the promise of God. They are the promise of the eternal tree of life waiting for us in the presence of God!

Plant a tree. Remind yourself and your family that Jesus has conquered death and destroyed the curse of sin and Satan.

Jamie Jeter

Some people might think I have life all figured out. Truth be told, I have no clue. Every day I wake up and think of myself as

a seed. Seeds start as a tiny being that is fairly boring in color and hard. What if that seed said “I will grow when I am a beautiful hibiscus and ready to glow



with the sun.” It would not become a hibiscus because it did not take the time to grow where it was planted. Just as that seed did, it is very easy for us to say I will bloom when I am there, yet I am still here. *1 Corinthians 7:24* says “*Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.*” The real success and growth will come when we learn to grow where we are planted. Right here, right now. Just because you do not have a biological family does not mean you cannot grow a family of people to do life with.

Lisa Ziegler

Over the past four years, since Greg’s mom passed away, I have been scanning pictures that were passed down to us so that I can put them on a flash drive and share them with the rest of the family. I came across a picture of Greg’s mom and dad standing in front of the roots of a huge redwood tree that had fallen over on the ground. Now Dad was 6’3”, and those roots were waaaaay over his head, at least triple his height. It got me to thinking about two sets of scriptures in the Bible— *Psalms 1: 1-3* “*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the*

counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers”, and Jeremiah 17:7-8 “But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He 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.”

Both of the men mentioned were blessed because they did two things. One delighted in God’s word----studied, meditated and got his roots deep in the foundation where the water is....a never-failing supply of nourishing, refreshing living water for his soul to produce fruit. The other man trusts in the Lord. When troubled times like COVID or loss of family members or health issues come, this tree does not fear or worry because the roots are deep.



The huge redwood tree had wide roots but they were very shallow, so that tree fell over when a strong wind came along. I asked the question to myself, “Are my roots wide and

shallow or are they by the water reaching for nourishment every day?” “Am I listening to wrong counsel or am I trusting in God’s promises and delighting in Him?” Food for thought.

Ben Treme

Homepoint team - thank you for coordinating an effort to help our families grow spiritually during this tumultuous year. Our family is beyond excited for the visual that is being offered through the tree we will be receiving. It is an excellent reminder that with invested time and energy, something beautiful can result! This is such an easy way to be reminded of our connectedness to Christ. (John 15:1-5) We have found this to be true in the Treme home. Our kids require a huge investment of time and energy. Often, it is exhausting! It is especially hard to continually plant seeds within our children not knowing the outcome of the seeds we are planting! We

trust that God is going to bless the efforts. The tree will be a visual for our family that the Lord makes beautiful things and the more we



stay connected to him the more beautiful we become, inside and out! Again, thank you for this opportunity. We are so excited to be a part of Plant a Tree, Grow a Family!

Chad and Jordan Graham

Consider how the wild flowers grow! So concise, simple, beautiful and powerful. “Do not worry about it and seek God’s Kingdom and it will be given to you.” So many worries in our world today and our family especially is impacted on a daily basis of how we feel we need to take things into our own hands and foolishly think we can get behind the driver’s seat and team up with God to determine our future and adjust God’s plan for us. Between health concerns, change in our daily routine and a lot of questions from our kids that we don’t have the answers to, it’s so hard to sit back, simply seek God’s Kingdom and have faith in Him for these be given to us and more on top of that. Consider how the wild flowers grow!

Luke 12:27-31

“Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do

not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”

Here's our second one. During our time away from NW Arkansas for a year, our family grew a lot spiritually. The relationship between us and Christ is one that requires something from each side and God never lets us down. We found that it's so crucial to remain in Christ at all times and have it become our lifestyle and not just time spent at church. The consequences of each option are substantial. If we do not remain in Christ, we're thrown away! If we remain in Christ we have a prayer relationship with God that knows no bounds. It's incredible everything God can accomplish in us through prayer and all the glory goes to God. Everything God did for us in Tennessee and how He brought us back to Arkansas has changed our lives and our perceptions are all for the glory of God.

John 15:5-8 NIV

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

Lyndsay Wade

As I think about a tree and our family, I'm so grateful for the perfect gardener God is. Jason and I both were blessed to have seeds planted in us when we were younger. Though our family tried their best to water our seeds, they were not perfect gardeners. Sometimes they would remember the water and the sunlight, and then sometimes they would forget. They were humans who struggled with sin just like everyone else (being an adult it's amazing to reflect back and see how human your parents/ grandparents really were). The amazing part is that because God was our ultimate gardener, our spiritual tree never died. He's been weeding us, watering us, giving us sunlight, hope and never ever letting us go (no matter how terrible a tree we have been). That gives me hope for our boys— we will do our best as their parents to grow them, but we know we will make mistakes too! So thankful they have the majestic gardener— God, to carry them through so that even when we do fail as parents, we know God will grow them into beautiful spirit filled trees/men one day.



Mark Conner*Psalm 1:1-3*

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.

When we began looking at scriptures that might relate to the “Planting” message this passage stood out for me. Psalm 1:1-3 is the first passage of scripture I read publicly from the pulpit on a Sunday night service after my baptism. One of my favorite occurrences in the book of Joshua is how they continued to collect and place stones as monuments and memorials of what God had done as they conquered the land. We will place a stone at the foot of the tree we plant with the Psalm 1:1-3 verse on it! Thank you so much for this terrific blessing!



Kristi Conner

Jeremiah 17:7-8

“But blessed is the man who trusts me, GOD, the woman who sticks with GOD. They’re



like trees replanted in Eden putting down roots near the rivers- Never a worry through the hottest of summers, never dropping a leaf, Serene and calm through droughts, bearing fresh fruit every season...” – The Message

I take comfort in knowing that if I keep my trust in GOD, He will sustain me through hard times.

Bobby and Julie Carlson

Dear BCOCC Family,

We hope this note finds you well.

It is easy to see God’s awesome power and the beauty of his creation in the trees and plants that surround us.

Trees and plants naturally seek light, which we know God is the light of the world, and He wants us to be a light to the world.

They send out roots to seek nourishment and build stability to support their growth, like us receiving spiritual nourishment and building our foundation through God’s Word.

Trees and plants can last longer than a lifetime, which serves as a healthy reminder that the decisions we make today can have an impact well past our life here on earth.

Trees and plants can reproduce, as Christians can be influencers in producing other Christians through the way we live our lives.

Our family memories are full of trees and plants. Our family beginning formed in the piney woods of East Texas. As we grew, life took us from the bluebonnet fields of central Texas, to the peanut fields of Alabama, and then to the blooming cactus and mesquite trees found in the deserts of Arizona (three separate times). Most recently, we have established our home among the oaks, maples, and hickories of Northwest Arkansas. Our home is surrounded by some of the world's best mountain

bike trails, outlined with thriving plants and shaded by canopies of mature trees. It is



easy to escape the noise of our busy world to these trails where you can experience the peace and tranquility of God's natural beauty. We planted a small oak tree next to our home in honor of our sweet sister in law, Amy. It reminds us of her life, her strength, and the joy she brought others – Amy's memory is part of this mighty Oak tree.

We hope you see God's awesome power and strength in this tree and may the memories of your home grow along with this tree.

In closing, we leave you with one of our favorite "tree" scriptures...

Jeremiah 17:8

"He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."

May God continue to bless your life.

Bobby & Julie

Jimmy Johnson

1 Corinthians 3:6



*I planted
the seed,
Apollos
watered it,
but God has
been
making it
grow...*

Shell and I

planted a seed by praying and making a decision to adopt a child. As that seed grew, we developed a plan and made a decision to adopt a baby from Russia. From that point on, it became our life goal and over the next year, Shell worked diligently to complete all requirements that an international

adoption entails. We were given a video of our Katie and we soon made two trips to Russia to be able to bring her home. We are now blessed to be the parents of a beautiful young lady that just turned 21 this year.



Mitch Loukota

I have always loved the outdoors and nature. Some of my favorite times spent with Jennifer have been hiking around our

beautiful state and everywhere we travel together, especially in national parks.

We so enjoy the beauty that God created for us. The most beautiful place we have ever been is Yosemite National Park. I remember when we visited wondering how God felt when he made this amazing place. He probably said something like “Wait until they find this place! They are going to LOVE IT!” God’s love and generosity is so easy to see in nature. He does things BIG and they declare His glory!

We serve an awesome God - who is all powerful - and loves us more than anything! The next time you are out in His creation, stop for a few minutes and soak it in. His creation is for us and for our enjoyment!

Cory and Brittany Smith

Jeremiah 17:7-8 (ESV)

*⁷ “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.*

*⁸ He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”*

The year 2020 has been hard for so many of us. The body in Bentonville has experienced job losses, loss of loved ones, financial, spiritual, mental, and emotional hardships, sicknesses...and the list could go on and on. For my family, we have so many things to be thankful for—even in the year 2020. However, we are also struggling with many things (Brittany’s aunt is very ill with cancer, Brittany’s great-grandmother’s health is severely deteriorating, Cory’s father is not in great health, and Carter—our 3rd son—is undergoing further tests to determine root cause issues with his pituitary gland). At times, it has been very challenging for us to put our full trust in our Lord. At times, our anxieties are so great that it can be



difficult to remember that we must cast all our anxiety on Him because he cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7). Verses 7 and 8 of Jeremiah chapter 17 reminds us of God's unfailing love. Verse 7 states that, *"Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord"* (Jer. 17:7, ESV). Verse 8 poignantly refers to "the man" as a *"tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream"...*and, *"does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit"*.

For us, these verses remind us that even in the hard times (i.e. the heat and drought) that God remains faithful to His people. Even in difficult times, that seem unbearable to face, God is still the same God that provides us with so many earthly and eternal blessings. We pray that our family's tree is planted deep in God's unfailing love, and that our tree will never cease to bear fruit, and that our trust is unwaveringly in Him.

Pam Davis

Gen 2: Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that



were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

When God created the Garden of Eden, he made trees an integral part of the beauty and goodness there. He was gracious enough to design trees as a vital part of *our* environment too.

When our family moved here from Western Washington, one of the main things I knew I needed was to live someplace with plenty of trees. A couple of years after we'd settled into our tree-filled property, we lost two big Bradford pear trees. We went to the nursery to buy a new tree, deciding on a 6-foot tall purple ash that was straight and promised pretty fall color. Each year, as the kids headed off to school, we'd pose them in front of the tree and note the growth progress of kids and tree. Our kids are all grown now, but that tree is special because it became part of our recorded history as a family.

Trees have always been special to me. As a kid, if my mom couldn't find me, she knew to look up. I'd most likely be high up in a tree, reading a book. I love the solidity of a broad tree trunk and the beauty of the leaves that come each spring and change and drop each fall. I enjoy watching seedlings take root, grow and become tall. Seeing them blow in the wind and withstand storms parallels the battles we fight in this life. When they are downed in a storm or cut down, I grieve. But I love seeing the beauty that comes from the loss—the warm, crackling fire, the furniture that takes shape under skilled hands. It reminds me of how the storms of life sometimes break and damage us, and beauty comes as that damage

allows us to be transformed into something we wouldn't have been without it.

The opportunity to plant a new tree is something special. There is hope and joy in the thought that something we plant can live and grow and thrive. It's a reminder of God's grace and his

artistry. God

gave us a

huge variety

of trees, in

part just to

allow us to

savor their

beauty. They

are "pleasing

to the eye", and when we watch and listen as they blow in the breeze, they help to settle our minds and draw us to Him.



Regina Keith

Luke 8:11 "This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the Word of God."

Two of my favorite things are to watch flowers and trees grow and to watch children grow and develop. As a child, my parents and my grandmas would give me vegetable seeds and flower seeds to grow, but I struggled to keep the weeds out and the soil cultivated.

In the early '70's as a new Christian and a new mom, I listened for guidance to raise our young son. Joanna Harris taught us ladies on parenting. The best thing I got from it was that discipline was not punishment. (That was a new thought to me.) Discipline is systematic training. So I mentally set goals

and studied on how to put them into place to help grow a boy into a man.



Later as I grew bushes and trees, I found that they needed more than soil and water. They needed pruning for strength and beauty. Pruning and weeding. Those were also God's way of growing me and my

son. Sometimes God used the process of suffering. Setting goals to let God grow us, our family, our children, our grandchildren starts as we first let that seed of God's Word be planted in us.

Countess Hodges

Growing up in a west Texas farming community where foliage was scarce, I often imagined what it would have been like to stroll through the Garden of Edenespecially when I read passages such as *"And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden along with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."* (Genesis 2:9)

One can only imagine the splendor of a garden where life began; however, throughout history the life of a tree has often been used to symbolize the growth of a family --- a tree sprouts from a seed, is firmly rooted in fertile soil, is often

supported in its infancy, and as it grows and branches out, it gives new fruit and life to the next generation.

We often use the metaphor of a tree with roots spreading into the ground to talk about strength, stability, and being grounded. Just as the branches of a tree grow strong and reach upward to the sky, families also are strengthened and grow upward as they work together, play together, and study together for a deeper understanding of God's will.

As you plant a tree and grow a family, be mindful that families, like trees go through the seasons of life. As the current season changes from autumn to winter, your tree will enter a hibernation phase and lose its leaves; however, in the springtime, your tree will slowly wake up, sprout tiny buds and blossom back to life again. Much like the life cycle of a tree, our families can experience seasons of darkness, death, and re-birth. Families that are mindful of this process are more likely to weather the storms that face us during this COVID pandemic and will rejoice in the springtime when their tree, as well as their life, is in full bloom again. So, Plant a Tree.....Grow a Family and rejoice in the process!!

Lori Wood

With the recent loss of both of my parents, Dell and I find ourselves the oldest generation on either side of our family. It is a daunting place to be. In so many ways we often feel like kids ourselves, and when there is danger or difficulty, we still wonder when the grown-ups are going to arrive.

Since moving to our current home, we have lost more than a dozen hundred-foot oaks to wind, ice, age, disease.



I wanted to believe that if they had stood for over a century, they'd last forever, or surely outlive me. Same with my mama and my daddy. I've never known life without them. After those mammoth trees fell each time, I was always surprised to see smaller, more delicate trees beneath them that I

hadn't noticed before. Once the larger, older trees were gone, the younger trees got sunlight and root space to thrive.

While our parents are with us, they provide protection, shelter, boundaries. Once they are gone, they provide something else: opportunity. Responsibility becomes ours and we must step into the light and grow.

But before that happens, older trees prepare us for the transition. Seedlings in the forest survive because of both the protection of older tree canopies, and the sustenance from dead trees. Studies show that an important determinant of seedling success is the density of the canopy above it: older, larger trees that have survived the journey to the top of the forest. The canopy must provide just the right amount of sunlight, not too much and not too little.

And even those older trees who didn't survive as long play their part. Seedlings that germinate on logs provided by their deceased ancestors have a better chance of survival. The logs not only provide important nutrients, but also retain moisture where shallow seedling roots can access it.

Dell's parents have been gone for nearly twenty years. But their foundation of work ethic, generosity, and commitment benefitted us, nourishing our seedling roots as we raised our young family. Now, just as with those shaded younger trees, I am surviving

an empty nest because of the glorious canopy my daddy and my mama provided for me during



their longer lives: courage, faith, resilience, compassion.

And the benefits of that protection can reach far beyond the walls of our own homes and our own families.

An amazing trait of trees was described in the book, *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. Trees can actually send out signs to each other, warning neighbors of infestations. "Signaling" across acres of woodlands. Much like the Body of Christ, they are members of a community, they communicate important messages, they protect each other.

And community is what Christianity has always been about. It's no coincidence, then, that trees play a main role in God's story of loss and redemption, too, from Eden's tree to Calvary's tree. Trees are mentioned in the bible more than any living thing other than man and God Himself. Many faith-marking events in the bible involved a tree or some part of it: a branch, a seed, a bush, even a stump. Trees speak to us of our lives and our place in growing God's kingdom. A tree is a long-term project, like sharing faith. Hoping it takes root, hoping it provides refuge. Not unlike parenting itself.

As I process the loss of my parents and the new role I have, I think of the trees in our yard. I am thankful for those who planted or preserved our trees all those years ago. As I think of my own duty, I renew my commitment to plant a tree that will take a century to grow. One that I can never see a child climb or a family rest beneath. But a tree that, whether in early loss or after towering far above, might provide what our younger trees need to develop and thrive. And someday signal that same legacy of protection and nourishment to others throughout the community.

Melissa Brazile

Lying in bed at 4:00am, something I've become accustomed to in this stage of life, I was thinking about passing out all of these trees & plants on Sunday ...and I thought of this verse.

Jeremiah 17:7-8 – "But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He 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."

This verse popped into my head because it's been plastered on our bathroom mirror for much of the last 6 years. 6 years ago, my husband, Darin, was diagnosed completely out-of-the-blue with a genetic kidney disease. He'd been born with this disease, and it had progressed to Stage 4 kidney failure without him even knowing. There is no cure. And a transplant is the only option.

We had been married 10 years, we had 2 children and our



future seemed bright...until the phone call after his annual physical flipped our life on its head. Ironically, the phone call came the day before Thanksgiving. I was still processing all of the news and information we'd been given within the last 24 hours and that Thanksgiving was a

tough one to feel thankful.

I am an analyzer & a processor. And all the news that continued to hit us as we proceeded to doctor's appointment after doctor's appointment took days, and weeks, and even months and years for me to truly process. I could go in depth into the stages of grief that hit in a time like this, but most of you know it...you've been through your own grief-stricken circumstances.

I wanted to deny it, but the facts were literally bombarding us over and over from doctors.

I wanted to be sad and stay in bed all day and refuse to face the fears ahead.

I wanted to be mad and throw my hands up and have a 2-year-old tantrum that life is not fair.

I wanted the black cloud of sicknesses that now seemed to hover over our family to go away.

It took me awhile to work through each of these phases. And it's still a process of continuing to put it all in God's hands to this day.

We believed our God was bigger than anything we face here on earth, so as long-time Christians, we very naturally called on Him in prayer. We asked the elders of our church to join us in prayer & they anointed Darin with oil and prayed for him like is written in James 5:14-15. I pushed away the doubts and medical facts as best as I could and I tried to believe that God would answer our many prayers.

Yet healing didn't happen.

Months went by. The dark cloud seemed to grow darker and heavier to carry.

I tried to figure out what we were supposed to be learning or what we had done wrong that we needed to fix in order to move past the biggest obstacle we'd ever had to face (and we had faced some difficult things already). I prayed, I talked and listened to my closest people, I journaled, and I poured through scriptures, trying to glean ANY answer I could get from the Lord about how to navigate this completely unforeseen and unchosen path. And I started writing verses that spoke to me. I began to write those verses on paper and then taped them up one by one all over our long bathroom mirror. The year of heat and drought as mentioned in Jeremiah were turning into years of heat and drought, and these verses were the only breath I felt when the breath had been knocked out of me.

During one of those sessions of opening the word and immersing myself in it to try to find another verse that might help get us through this, I stumbled on Jeremiah 17:7-8 (above). It hit me square between



the eyes and immediately got put up on our mirror. It reminded me that we're "blessed" if we put our confidence in GOD. And trust HIM.

I needed that reminder. Because after months of feeling like the world was spinning out of control as we were forced to learn a whole new language about kidney disease, and after struggling to be consistent in the regimented medicinal schedule, and after getting one opinion about treatment from one doctor and then another opinion about treatment from another doctor and wondering why God didn't nudge me into the medical field in college so I was capable of discerning which doctor was right, and after feeling like no matter what Darin ate or what medicines he took or who's advice he took, the numbers continued to decline, and after realizing it must be US that's not figuring something out...WE must have sinned too much in our attempt to follow Him and God was punishing us for a lack of discipline in our lives...After all that spinning, I just felt weary and it hit me.

It hit me that our confidence is not in doctors, it's not in medicine, it's not in our goodness or righteousness, it's not in our ability to figure it all out or to get it all right. It's supposed to be in God and God alone.

I desperately wanted to be that tree. The one that's planted by the water. The one that grows roots toward the stream, toward the living water that gives life. So that no matter the heat or drought that comes, the leaves would always be green and somehow, it would bear fruit. So that somehow, through this journey, someone, somewhere can see God and his power and provision...and know Him more fully...and follow Him because of it.

I was not that tree. I had grown up in a Christian family and had been on my own journey with God for a long time. I'd



thought I was strong in faith. But this journey had shown every crack and weakness my armor had...and there were many.

So, I plastered that verse on my mirror. I looked at it often, and I continue to look at it. I'll keep looking at it until it becomes reality...or until God comes back. Likely it will be the latter.

Now, would you like to know an interesting part

of this story? I've had that verse up on the mirror for 6+ years. But it wasn't until this week when I was encouraged to write about planting a tree and what that might have to do with our spiritual journey that I actually flipped open my Bible and really studied some more of the context around it. Let me tell you what I honestly read today from a Bible that has been in my possession since I was baptized in 1996...from a Bible that was

put together over a century ago from collections of manuscripts dating thousands of years ago.

In verse 8, my footnote says -- the word for “planted” is the same word for “transplanted”. The tree may be planted there...or it may be **TRANSPLANTED** from somewhere else.

TRANSPLANTED?? That’s an interesting choice of words to see in the Bible. We are quite literally waiting for Darin’s **TRANSPLANT** to be scheduled ANY DAY and that’s part of the scripture we’ve had hanging on our mirror this whole time. I never would have cared about that note before...but it jumped right off the page at me this time.

And even more interesting, in verse 10, it reads “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind...”.



Do you know what my footnote says? I kid you not.

Verse 10 – the word for “mind” in this passage is literally the Hebrew word “KIDNEY”. Did you catch that?? **K.I.D.N.E.Y.**

I was brought to this passage years ago and had no idea that the literal translation was that

the **TREES** who have been planted or **TRANSPLANTED** by the water do **NOT FEAR HEAT**, its leaves are **GREEN**, it isn’t worried in a year of **DROUGHT**, it never fails to bear fruit, and the Lord is searching the heart and mind and **KIDNEYS** to reward a man according to his conduct.

It goes on to say “All who forsake you [LORD our living water] will be put to shame....Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for **YOU** are the one I praise.” (v. 10-14).

Sometimes when prayers aren't being answered right away, it's easy to think that God has a lot more important things to do and doesn't care as deeply as we wished He did about the details that seem big in our lives. But on more than one occasion, He has done this. He has revealed to me that He is not silent in caring for me and my people, He is in fact keenly aware of the thoughts we have and journey we're on. So it's my job to trust Him and to have confidence that His will is best. I hope as we plant our trees/plants that they can be a constant reminder for us to stay connected to our source of living water and to have confidence in Him. May He heal us. May He save us. Let's praise Him.

Kurtis Cecil

I would like to tell you about a "sower" of seed, Gary Cleveland, who was called by God, to travel far away from his home to find fertile soil. Gary (originally from Alabama) and his wife Deb (Memphis) graduated from Harding University, and sometime shortly after, along with two other young couples, were called to "plant" a Church of Christ in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in 1976. If you had travelled through Wisconsin in 1976, you would be hard pressed to find any church other than Lutheran, Catholic, and possibly Methodist. They called this church Oakhaven and it was started in a converted



dairy barn, which is why we first walked into this church when we moved to Oshkosh.



Now the other two families eventually moved on to other callings, but the Clevelands remained in Oshkosh, became the cornerstone

to the Church of Christ there. Many people came to know Jesus from Gary's preaching and by his example. I met Gary in 2001, and came to understand that he basically followed the scripture in 1 Corinthians 9:22 *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.* By this I mean that Gary was able to make personal connections with every person he met. He was able to share the Word and helped people, like me, to understand it. In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13), we learn that seed that falls on good soil is the one who both *hears and understands* the word. I truly believe that Gary Cleveland was the only person who could help me to understand what I needed to do to accept Jesus as my savior, and be baptized in the Church of Christ. Gary brought many people to know the Word and understand it, before he was taken to be with the Lord at an early age. I am sure that God had another job for Gary that someday I may come to know.

The plans of God sometimes don't make sense to us. But thanks to God, some people don't think twice when God calls them to plant seed in what seems to us as questionable "soil." God called a man of the south to go to a place with frigid, long, winters and sow seed. Praise God! Thank you for Gary Cleveland!

Greg Ziegler

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

Who is the "he"? The one who doesn't walk listening to the wicked's advice, doesn't find his normal in the sinner's path, and who doesn't sit and scoff at what is true and right. Instead "his delight is in the law of the LORD; and on his law he meditates day and night."

I have loved trees as long as I can remember.

From trees come baseball bats and maple syrup and lumber to build.

Being raised in the Midwest, Fall to me had always been the varied and dynamic colors of mixed hardwoods. When I finally made it to Colorado in midlife, I saw how glorious a landscape could be with only golden quaking aspens and interspersed fingers of black timber.

In my pre-teen years we used to live north of St. Louis in the Alton, IL area. My grandpa and grandma lived in upper Alton, called such because of the hill the area of town was built on just off of the Mississippi River. In their backyard was a HUGE tree of some kind, maybe an oak or an elm, I'm not sure now. Its trunk split a few feet from the ground into two still-massive legs. The split was just high enough to make reaching it and standing in it a real challenge for a kid. Some of my mom's brothers must've been great climbers, because they and my grandpa had hung a swing from a branch in that giant that

must've been at least a hundred feet off the ground (funny how a kid's perspective works). I loved swinging in that tree. The seat was a flat board, undoubtedly contributed by some other tree who wanted to make a kid happy. The "ropes" weren't rope at all. They were something that looked kind of like a super long ace bandage...but thicker and not stretchy. I'm no physics expert, but I know that how high you can swing is limited by three things at least...the length of the swing's ropes, the height of the limb the ropes are tied to, and the courage of the one doing the swinging. Oh yeah, and then there's gravity...which on this particular swing only played a small role.

This swing on this particular tree let this particular kid swing into orbit...and I loved it. It was smooth. It was quiet. And it was high!

It was a key part of what I looked forward to when I'd visit my grandpa and grandma's house. It was a "patriarch among trees."

I'm grateful for that tree that lifted me high. And I'm grateful for the tree-people I've known in life who've sought to lift me above what is base and profane and



common and who've lent themselves to becoming trees established by God, reaching to the sky, and being used by God in the process to elevate all of our existences.