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Roots

990-A

Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Though the two trees stood just a few feet apart, they were separated by a five foot wooden fence, for one was planted in the Smith's yard and the other in the Jones' yard. Still, they were close enough to chat a bit about the weather, about the neighborhood and about their own fate as growing trees.

In the Smith's yard stood Alex, the Arizona Ash. He had been planted about three years before and was beginning now to grow into quite a handsome tree. His branches were reaching out in all directions. During the summertime, his leaves had a rich, green luster that spoke of health and stamina.

A few feet away, across the fence in the Jones' yard stood Ozzie the Oak. He had been planted about the same time as Alex, but did not yet look much like a flourishing tree. His bark was healthy but his leaves were few and his branches as yet did not stretch very far toward the sky.

One afternoon, the two trees began to do what people often do. They began to compare themselves with one another. It only stood to reason that Alex, the arrogant Arizona Ash, would be the most boastful. For after all, he had all the makings of a tree worthy of *Better Homes and Gardens*.

"What's with you, Ozzie?" the cocky tree began, "aren't you taking your fertilizer pills? You look anemic, if you ask me. Why, you've been around enough years to be a shady character, but your limbs look like you've been on a starvation diet. Why can't you get with it and look beautiful like me?"

Ozzie was a wise oak. He didn't even bother to answer. He realized he didn't look like much. He realized he didn't give much shade, either. But there was something within him that seemed to give him confidence. You see, Ozzie's owners understood trees. They kept working on developing a healthy root system. They kept fertilizing deep. Every time Ozzie's limbs would start to show some signs of reaching out to touch someone, out would come the old shears and off would go the branches. Again and again, they pruned him. It was embarrassing, to say the least (not to mention painful.) I mean, how's a tree to get any respect if every time he starts to look alive, someone comes along and lops off every sign of his progress?

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But Ozzie felt something going on inside of him. He felt nourishment coming up into his trunk. He felt his roots digging down deeper, deeper and deeper into the rich, fertile soil his owners had prepared for him. He knew he wasn't much to look at now, but somehow, Ozzie felt that *someday* the test would come; and he would be able to stand up under it because, while he wasn't pretty, he was strong, and getting stronger by the day.

The test did come. A treacherous storm invaded the area where the two trees lived. High winds whistled through their branches as they swayed to and fro just struggling to hold on. Heavy rains pelted the ground beneath them, softening the soil and loosening the hold the trees had on the earth below. The winds grew stronger. The rain fell heavier. Alex began to panic. "I'm falling, I'm falling," he cried, "Help! I can feel my roots are coming loose...help me!"

But, of course, it was too late. With a thundering crash, the tree fell to the ground, helpless. He had been beautiful. He was a sight to behold. But most of his beauty was above the ground. When the storms of life blew against him, there were simply not enough roots to hold him.

Years have passed. All we have are memories of Alex. But look back there now. There's Old Ozzie the Oak. Look at the size of his trunk. Look at the breadth of his reach. Look at the color of his leaves. Look at the birds nesting comfortably in his branches. He has weathered storm after storm after storm. He has weathered storms much stronger than the one that felled poor Alex. How did he do it?

Roots! That's right, roots! For a season, his owners sacrificed what people could see above the ground in order to build strength below the ground. They focused not on *immediate fruitfulness*, but on *eventual strength*. They concentrated on building roots. And it worked. It always does.

No, this isn't a lesson on trees. Not exactly. But it is a lesson on roots. It is a lesson on what makes a tree grow strong enough to weather life's storms and, correspondingly, what makes a man or woman grow strong enough to weather life's storms as well. In both cases, it's the same...roots.

We have been listening as God on planet earth turned into a story teller and began to weave for His bewildered followers a series of life-like tales of everyday experiences. He paused at the

outset to warn them that what He was doing was speaking in parables, *stories cast alongside*, a practice He would follow for the rest of His ministry on earth. He began by spinning a story about a farmer, a farmer who was doing what farmers have to do. He was planting seeds into the ground. He was sowing.

But not all of the seed was doing what seed was expected to do. Seed is expected to produce a healthy crop to be harvested. In fact, the Master in this story tells of four things that can happen to seed, and believe it or not, three of them weren't good. Then, just to be sure that His disciples understood the deeper meaning behind the story, Jesus paused to explain word for word, thought for thought, the spiritual significance behind this simple agricultural illustration.

He told them that the seed represented the Word of God. He told them that the sower's job was to sow the seed regardless of the consequences. And He told them that, *no matter how selective the sower tried to be*, some of the seed was going to drift by the side of the road where there was no chance for it to sink into the ground, and *immediately* the birds of the air were going to swoop down and snatch it away. Then He clearly explained that *the seed-snatcher is none other than Satan himself*.

Now we come to His second illustration of seed that did not grow. And from it there are a multitude of truths. Let's once again first read the illustration and then the explanation in order to get the full impact of what Jesus was saying.

¹And some fell on the rocky places, ²where it had not much earth; and it sprouted up at once, as it had no depth of earth, but when the sun rose, it was scorched, and because it had not root ³and lacked moisture, it withered away.

(¹Matthew 13:5; ²Mark 4:5,6; ³Luke 8:6, TLOCIS)¹

That is the part of the story we will be looking at today. Now let's listen as Jesus fills in the blanks and gives the deep, rich, spiritual meaning to this apparently simple story.

²And likewise, ¹he who received seed on the rocky places, this is he who hears the Word and at once receives it gladly; yet he has no root in himself and ³believes and ²continues only a little while. Then later, when adversity arises, or persecution on account of the Word, he is caused to stumble immediately ³and falls away.

(¹Matthew 13; ²Mark 4:5,6; ³Luke 8:13, TLOCIS)

¹ The Life of Christ in Stereo: The Four Gospels Speak in Harmony; by Johnston M. Cheney; © 1969 Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon

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These are, my friends, hard words. But as Jesus lovingly said to the disciples, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” He who has the mind of Christ, listen. God wants to speak to you and to me about the problem of roots. And strangely enough, His message is much like the story of Alex and Ozzie. It’s about quick, exciting growth that has no real substance beneath the surface. And it’s about a storm that’s certain to eventually blow against every tree and against every life. *And it’s about what happens when the wind blows against a life that has no roots.*

Our title is “Roots”. Our outline:

I- Superstars and Steady Freddies

II- God Tried; We Cried

III- Roots

IV- We Interrupt This Program

I- SUPERSTARS AND STEADY FREDDIES

Jesus was addressing a universal problem. It is a problem that seems to have mushroomed in our generation. It is the problem of instant sanctification. It is the problem of surface religiosity versus real spirituality. It is the problem of man’s standards for greatness versus God’s. And, Beloved, they are totally incompatible.

This world we live in longs for superstars. We will make a hero out of anyone from an Olympic gymnast to a 300 pound lineman who scores touchdowns. We idolize performance, and we deify accomplishment. Is it any wonder, then, that the Christian community has bought the lie and brought the lie into its realm of “acceptable theology”? We take young Christians whose worldly accomplishments make them drawing cards and hold them up to the media as spiritual superstars, just daring the devil to let ‘em have it. We violate the principles of elevating a novice to a position of leadership in so many different ways it’s hard to count them.

We are looking so hard for heroes, that we take men who blitz the media and accrue great fortunes doing so and make them to be the great men of God in our era because of their visibility. All the while, faithful men and women are laboring quietly in their prayer closets, going about the work of the Kingdom without recognition and without remuneration, and we forget they exist. We overlook the “steady Freddies” of this world and focus our attention on the superstars. We would rather have a man or woman who can draw a crowd and bend his theology to fit the masses, than we would

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have a man or woman who tells the truth and quietly leaves the results to God. I think we would have ignored Jesus entirely were He to have come in our generation.

The truth of the matter is that God isn't looking for success stories. God is looking for faithful men. God is looking for faithful women. "The eyes of the Lord are running to and fro throughout the whole earth seeking to find a man whose heart is perfect towards Him" (II Chronicles 16:9 paraphrase). That's what God is looking for...men and women with staying power, not drawing power. He is looking for men and women with roots!

II- GOD TRIED; WE CRIED

God has a variety of ways to test us just to see how firmly we're planted. God's method of proving men and thus approving men is not found in their resumes or in the size of their following. It is found in dungeons, in fires and in floods. It is found amidst broken hearts and broken dreams. It is found at gravesides and at bedsides where the shoe-leather reality of a relationship with God has to either be real or it isn't worth its salt. God tests men and women at the level of their ability to receive testing (I Corinthians 10:13). In those tests, He reveals what they are made of. The smaller the tests, the less significant ones, are merely God's plumb lines to see how we would respond to the heavy artillery, were it to come. One of the most powerful verses in all of Scripture is found in Jeremiah 12. I believe every Christian ought to memorize that verse. It says:

If thou hast run with footmen, and they have wearied thee,
then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land
of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then
how wilt thou do in the swelling of the Jordan?

(Jeremiah 12:5)

Do you realize what that verse says? It says, "If you have cratered in the minor traumas of your day-to-day walk with God, then how in the world are you going to handle life's heavy-duty problems? If you crash and burn and shake your fist at God when your car breaks down or your washing machine quits, or the checkbook gets a little thin, or your boss doesn't see things your way, then how will you contend with horses? How will you stand eye-to-eye with death and pain and unexpected tragedy? If watching the game has wearied you, how can you contend on the playing field?"

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And if your faith is so weak that it's shattered over a doctrinal argument or an unfaithful pastor or a church fight, then what will you do at the swelling of the Jordan? What will you do when the enemy leashes his heavy artillery at the end times, and you are called on to suffer for your faith? What will you do when standing for Christ means death? What will you do at the swelling of the Jordan? I'll tell you what you'll do. You'll do just what you did when the car broke down. Or the washer quit. You say, "But I can handle the big tests." Nonsense. The small things are only tests God sends to see how ready you are for the biggies. And if you can't run with the footmen, what in the world makes you think you can contend with horses? Look back on your life. God has been trying you again and again to see what you are made of. If every time God tried, you cried, you simply said to God, "Don't send me into the battle. I can't even handle the maneuvers."

III- ROOTS

Which brings us back to the parable at hand. Jesus now unfolds the saga of shallow ground and shallow roots. He says, "Some of the seed will fall on rocky places." The literal meaning here is not that some of the seed will fall on stone, but this phrase has to do with ground that has only a thin layer of soil on top. Just beneath the surface there lies a crust of rock too heavy for any normal plant to penetrate. No roots can stretch their fingers into the crust and settle there. There is not enough depth for roots.

Nevertheless, the seeds fell there. And lo and behold, immediately there began to be signs of life. Instant results. Isn't that what we're all after? No doubt a crowd gathered around that little tree and began to marvel at its beauty and how quickly it grew. Ah, but then the sun came out. The heat began to penetrate that botanical superstar, and it began to wither. Why? Because it had no roots, that's why. Jesus proceeds to explain.

²And likewise, ¹he who received seed on the rocky places, this is he who hears the Word and at once receives it gladly, yet he has no roots in himself, and ³believes and ²continues only a little while. Then, later, when adversity arises or persecution on account of the Word, he is caused to stumble immediately ³and falls away.

(¹Matthew 13; ²Mark 4:5,6; ³Luke 8:13, TLOCIS)

"When adversity arises...or persecution..." (there you have

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the ingredients of the test), “he is caused to stumble or fall away.” There you have the results of the test. “He has no roots in himself.” There you have the cause of the fall. He was an Alex Arizona Ash tree, who sprouted up quickly and looked like a winner as long as the scorching sun of adversity stayed behind the clouds. But as soon as life got tough, and he had to make a decision or two, either to stand by the Word and face the consequences or to abandon the Word and follow the world, the heat got too heavy and he tossed it all aside.

Now we’re not going to get caught up into a discussion about whether or not this person was ever truly converted or not. I believe the principles apply quite clearly in both cases. Our primary application, however, will center around the ones who truly trust in Christ, but who never let their roots go down far enough to equip them for the storms. So when the storms come (and they always do), these guys and gals give up the fight. They may not renounce their faith; they may just shrug their shoulders and walk away. They have no convictions because they have no roots.

That’s not God’s plan. Listen to Jeremiah 17:

This is what the Lord says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD.

“He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

“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.”

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

“I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.”
(Jeremiah 17:5-10 NIV)

Roots! They make all the difference. The difference between being a bush in the wasteland dwelling in parched places, or an evergreen tree, planted by rivers of water, is that it never stops bearing and never stops being what it is supposed to be...even in

the year of drought.

What are you? Are you a bush in the desert or a tree by the river? You can tell by your roots—not your accomplishments, but by your roots. You can tell not by your visibility in the Christian community, but by your roots. You can tell not by your knowledge of theology, but by your roots. How deep do your roots go? It takes years to develop roots. It takes patient years. It takes years that often are characterized by the absence of attention and the presence of pain. It takes years, often lived in the shadows waiting for God to finish what He wants to do to you before He reveals what it is He wants to do through you. God couldn't use Moses until he had developed roots. He could have been elected president of any denomination in the world or pastored the biggest church in the country before God ever sent him to the desert, but his spirituality was all above the ground. God had to send him away, far away, and leave him there until he developed roots.

Abraham needed roots, and it wasn't easy. Joseph needed roots, and it wasn't easy. No one ever said it would be easy. It wasn't easy for Ozzie the Oak, either. It took years of just standing there. Every time he started to look halfway decent, someone came along and muttered, "This is for your own good," then lopped off everything Ozzie had that made him respectable. It seemed to take forever. But at last, he developed roots.

Do you know how a Christian develops roots? A Christian develops roots just like a tree does. It takes union, nurturing and time. Paul wrote about it in Colossians 2. Kenneth Taylor paraphrases it best. It says this:

And now just as you trusted Christ to save you, trust him, too, for each day's problems; live in vital union with him.

Let your roots grow down into him and draw up nourishment from him. See that you go on growing in the Lord, and become strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught. Let your lives overflow with joy and thanksgiving for all he has done.
(Colossians 2:6,7 TLB)

Paul said concentrate your life on developing a root system. Spend time alone with God...continually. Lay His Word on your heart...continually. Don't squirm for the limelight; quietly stay in the shadow and become the man or woman God wants you to be. Let your roots grow down into Him and draw up nourishment from Him.

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It won't happen overnight. Trees don't grow overnight. And yes, you will encounter a thousand apparent shortcuts. "Quick fixes" they are. "Short-cuts to maturity" they claim to be. Don't believe it. There are no short-cuts to godliness. You must take the time to let your roots grow down into Him and draw up nourishment from Him until your life begins to overflow with thanksgiving for all He has done.

I can promise you one thing. The storms will come. The winds of adversity will blow. The torrents of testing will flow. Again and again you will come to the swelling of the Jordan. Only then will you know whether or not you are succeeding in developing... roots.

IV- WE INTERRUPT THIS PROGRAM

Yes, the storms will come. I can almost promise you that at some point in time the church will be tested on this earth again as it has not been tested since New Testament times. The enemy will invade with a vengeance because he will know that his days are few. You and I may well be called on to stand alone and to stand on the Rock as the raging storm of sin's fury beats upon the house of God. We may be persecuted for our faith. We may be severely persecuted...something most of us have never even imagined, let alone experienced.

God will step into our affluent, comfortable, self-serving worlds and say, "Dear child of Mine, we interrupt this program to bring you a special weather bulletin from eternity. A storm is brewing in the east, a terrifying storm, and it is headed in the direction of the church. There is no time now to prepare for it. You now must simply be the Christian you are. This storm will test the very foundation of your life. If you are like a bush in the desert, your testimony will be worthless. If you are like a tree by the river, I am about to glorify Myself through you in a way you could never have imagined. It all depends, My child, on whether or not you have taken the time to develop...roots."

That is why you and I need to lay aside every other thing we consider important in this life and place at the top of the order of priorities in our lives the process of developing roots. It is tending the inner fire, as one author put it. It is learning to abide. Because, Beloved, if we have run with the footmen and they have wearied us, how can we contend with horses? And if, in the land of peace, where we trusted, they wearied us, what will we do in

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the swelling of the Jordan?

What will we do, indeed?

An Assignment for Deepening our Roots

1- Think about your own life and your experiences as a Christian. Are you becoming an “Alex Arizona Ash” or an “Ozzie Oak”? Is there more surface spirituality than there is abiding reality? If so, go to God and confess your need to “deepen your roots.” Ask Him to lay a burden on your heart so heavy that you cannot rest until you begin to take the necessary steps to look at your life and begin building into your life a consistent, confident walk with Christ.

2- How would you grade your response to adversity? To persecution? Do you assume that if real persecution ever came that you could handle it? If you “run with the footmen and they have wearied thee,” what makes you think that you can “contend with horses”?

3- If the key to handling adversity is abiding and developing roots, what steps can you take personally to assure yourself that five years from now you will be able to look back and see that you have concentrated on the basics, been consistent and have an inner, abiding strength that no one can take from you? List those steps on a piece of paper and then ask someone to help you become accountable to be faithful. It won’t be easy. It will be eternally profitable.

4- Memorize Jeremiah 12:5 and paraphrase it. Put it in your own words. Post it somewhere that you can look at it daily to remind you when life’s “small” tests come that a loving God is simply equipping you by testing you. Begin to pray regularly for Christians in the nations around the world who suffer persecution daily.

5- Memorize Colossians 2:6-7 from the Living Bible. Meditate on each phrase for one day until it has become a part of your life, until “your lives overflow with joy and thanksgiving.”

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