



Sunday, January 17, 2020

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# WEST VALLEY CHURCH OF CHRIST

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## Olive Trees in the Bible (Part 2 of 2)

As in Jotham's fable referenced above, olive trees occasionally are used figuratively or representatively in the Bible. Some of the more obvious figurative uses are in similes. Two times the prophet Isaiah uses the illustration of a harvested olive tree to describe how many people are going to be left after the Lord brings judgment because of sin (Isaiah 17:6; 24:13). However, at roughly the same time (albeit to the northern kingdom of Israel instead of to the southern kingdom to which Isaiah prophesied), the prophet Hosea was promising a future based on repentance in which God would restore the Israelites to glory. He said their beauty would be "as the olive tree" (Hosea 14:6).

Other figurative references are not as straightforward. God once gave Zechariah a vision of two olive trees and later told him he was seeing "the two anointed ones" (Zechariah 4:3, 11). Most likely these anointed ones refer to Zerubbabel (then governor of Judah) and Joshua (then high priest). The vision appears to have been designed to give confidence to the Israelites that Zerubbabel and Joshua were capable leaders and that the plan God was working through them would succeed. The picture from Zechariah's vision is reused in the book of Revelation (Revelation 11:4), and while it is unclear who the two olive trees there represent other than two unnamed witnesses, the picture once again appears to be one of competence and sufficiency.

The above pictures in Zechariah and Revelation perhaps provide some background to the Psalmist's statement: "I am like a green olive tree in the house of God" (Psalm 52:8). The Psalmist is describing himself in contrast to those trusted in their own strength and riches (v.7) and the point seems to be, "While the wicked may seem to be strong, safe, and steadfast, there is no better place to be than to be in the service of God. When I serve God, I am provided for and my life will be fruitful." Such benefits can even be experienced as a family – another Psalm describes the children of the righteous as being "like olive plants round about thy table" (Psalm 128:3).

An olive tree is not an evergreen tree – Habakkuk promised to serve God even if the olive trees failed, which they sometimes did (Habakkuk 3:17-18). While serving God will keep one green, so to speak, failing to do so will be the ruin of one's tree. Job's friend Eliphaz said the wicked would "cast off his flower as the olive" (Job 15:33). Jeremiah later pointed out that really the entire nation of Israel was at one time "a green olive tree" but stated that they lost that position due to sin – their branches were on fire or were already broken off (Jeremiah 11:16).

Later, Paul pictured Christians as branches of an olive tree (Romans 11:16-24). In fact, he stated that God's people have always been an olive tree before Him. In describing the New Testament era, he stated that God removed some of the Jews from being His people, as one removes branches from an olive tree, because of their unbelief. In their place, God brought in the Gentiles – wild (i.e. uncultivated, undomesticated) olive branches were grafted to God's cultivated tree. In the context, Paul's hope was that the cut off branches (Jews) could be part of the tree again as well as that the tree would continue to grow. However, it is clear as a sub-point of that text that to be in Christ is to be in a place of blessing, just as the illustration was sometimes used in the Old Testament.

The question of James is perhaps a good way to end this article: "Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries?" (James 3:12). We've seen how valuable olive trees were to the Israelites and how prominent they were in Israelite history. We've seen how God used them to combat greed and encourage generosity in His people. We've seen that they've been used figuratively to describe one's service to God and that really, serving God is like being a part of a fruitful, green olive tree. So, the question, following James, is this: are we bearing olives or some other fruit in our lives?

