THE NEW SHOFAR

I believe the prayers of 30 years ago are not lost. We may not see the results of our labour or sacrifice immediately, but in due time they will produce much fruit. T. B. Joshua

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Self-improvement spiritual farming

Thanks to Doctor Google guiding me towards the best sites, I now have a better idea on how challenging it can be to cultivate trees that produce great fruit. It seems that my lush looking trees that produce little or no fruit have a nitrogen problem. Beautiful looking trees, with an abundant foliage, does not always mean it will have the sweetest fruit.

A great deal more work goes into producing sweet fruit than I had imagined. Orchardists purposefully plant certain weeds around trees and let them grow as much as they want. Why? To get rid of the nitrogen, and if they use the correct weeds, those weeds leave behind a special blend of nutrients that is perfect for fruit growing. Also, when it comes to insecticides, fruit experts have found that other insects are better. Bad bugs are eaten by good bugs. Fertilizers are rarely used, because they cause too much growth too quickly, and therefore produce weak trees and fruit with no flavour.

When fertilizers are used, they are used only in minute quantities. Watering the tree is an art form, following a carefully worked out, highly regimented routine. Trees even need winter. Not freezing cold, but certain trees need between 25 days and 37 days of temperatures below 7 degrees to produce the best fruit. Counterintuitively, orchardists early in the growing season, cut away much of the brand-new fruit. It may seem silly to throw away over half your crop. Why do it? Because it is better to get 50 peaches bursting with juice and flavour than 500 small and sour peaches.

How does this apply to the Christian? Just as a full and lush tree does not necessarily produce the best fruit, so also a person who looks flowery and behaves as though they are spiritually rich. The reality could be that these trees will produce the worst fruit. In Revelation 3:17, Christ warns certain Christians who are rich and wealthy that though they appear to have it all together, they really are poor and destitute. It is not how we appear, or how we act, or how we dress those matters. What matters is our hearts. And this is revealed by the fruit we produce.

Here is another surprise…And those weeds and bugs in our life? That test of your patience? That lack of money? That sickness? That annoying person? A stressful situation at work? The difficult neighbour? God, the orchard expert, allows them to harass the Christian trees for a reason. They strengthen us. They keep the bad bugs of sin out of our hearts. They use up the bad nutrients in the ground where we are planted, and leave better ones behind, like love and patience and joy and longsuffering.

Those times of dryness and times of barren winter are also for our benefit. When it seems like we could use a good spiritual fertilizer or a good watering, God knows what you need to produce the best fruit. He sends people to water our lives, and He calls us to a disciplined schedule of daily watering through His Word so that we can produce the best fruit. And let us not forget the painful process of pruning. God only wants the best

fruit to proceed from us, and sacrificing some of the early fruit will encourage the remainder to grow big and sweet. Most take 5-7 years before they begin producing a good crop of fruit. Discipleship takes time and it requires an ongoing process of feeding, watering, pruning and fertilising.

Just being a good-looking tree is not enough to meet the demands of God. As Jesus remind us, his Father is in the fruit producing business and we are his trees producing his fruit for feeding, some as plums, others as figs, all rich variety of different fruits, all for the world. He wants good fruit, so He goes to great length to make good trees. He factors in the age, the soil type, the sun exposure, the temperature. He waters, prunes, and fertilizes as needed. When Christians become good trees, they naturally begin to produce good fruit.

The fig tree is even more amazing because its fruit appears before anything else. It appears on the tree even before the leaves or flowers do. The fig trees never actually have any visible blossoms. This is because the blossoms are inverted growing and developing inside the fruit. It is pollinated by a tiny wasp known as a Blastophaga. This stinger less insect enters through an opening at the bottom of the fig and pollinates it from the inside.

This is just how we as disciples of Christ produce fruit also. The flowers form on our inside – often where no one can see them – and are pollinated by the Holy Spirit who makes his way into our hearts and from within goes about the fruit producing works. This is one reason why we cannot judge people by outward appearances or behaviours. But we will certainly know them by their words and deeds just as others will understand our true identity if and when we make Christ known by how we speak.

The thorns provide insight into Christ's words also. These thorns of which Jesus is speaking are all over Israel, especially in the Jordan valley. Its branches grow in weird shapes but are very tough and flexible. Surprisingly, thorns look very pretty. They have bright, green, oval leaves but beware those sharp, pointy spikes covering its branches. Because of their toughness, flexibility and painful thorns, this plant makes wonderful fences in the Middle East. For the people of Israel and across Africa, these vines form effective as barb wire at keeping the animals in a certain area and out of others.

Jesus hints that some people are like these thorns. They may grow in weird ways – not physical ways, but maybe they head off on odd, theological tangents. But do not try to correct them, for they are tough and flexible, and those who get too close, get pricked. Nothing hurts them, but they hurt plenty of people with their sharp words. And just like a fence, they often keep people away from Christianity rather than lovingly draw them in.

The bramble bush throws long and strong arching stems across huge tracts of land – often impeding the traveller. When it blossoms, the bramble brings forth rosy flowers that develop red, ripe fruit very similar to our blackberry. Be careful though, along with the fruit and the felt covered leaves, are long prickles and thorns. The leaves have serrated edges cut into fine teeth.

So, the bramble is again like lots of Christians. They have good fruit, but it takes a skilful hand to get any of it. And for the most part, human brambles just impede the traveller and get in the way of the pilgrim more than anything else.