

REAL WORLD GOD 3: TREES AND THE KINGDOM

Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will also take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and set it out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain." (Ezekiel 17:22, NASB)

IF YOU PLAY THE SAME GOLF COURSE REGULARLY, you might sometimes forget that it is a living, growing environment. That may not be as true with the grass beneath your feet, which in some seasons is firmer and closer to golden than it is to green. But the trees that shape the fairways—and sometimes our shots around them—can stand for years without us changing our consideration of them.

And then a signature tree falls down.

A windstorm or blight, or even a massive planned thinning such as was seen at Oakmont Country Club during this year's US Open, can take many trees that are only incidental to a course's character. But let the tree that stands at the corner of dogleg go down or watch a tree that guards one half of a large green die, and now we're talking change. When the towering Monterey pine near the green that forced players on the eighteenth at Pebble Beach to play from the ocean side was lost to disease in 2001, it took six months of planning and preparation and five days of moving to relocate a 465,000-pound replacement from the first hole to take its place. In more ways than one, that's a tall order!

With such life—and sometimes livelihood—in trees, it should be little wonder that Scripture's prophets, including Jesus, referred to trees of all kinds. Also interesting is that Jesus called to the tax collector Zacchaeus, who had climbed a sycamore to see the popular rabbi, saying, "Hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." Here was a man no one wanted to befriend, and Jesus had him come down from the tree so that they might share a meal. The account of Zacchaeus closes with Jesus' famous line: "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

It was the opposite action, when he was lifted up on a tree, as we are wont to speak, by which Jesus did this saving, in an act foreseen by the prophet Ezekiel roughly 600 years before Jesus was born. A "sprig" would be cut from its natural bearings and placed atop a mountain. It was a signature tree, standing tall, and from this tree, the kingdom would grow. Both Ezekiel and Jesus himself spoke of lush branches and many birds coming to nest there. You and I are those birds, if we believe, and we have been blessed with the eminently fruitful tree of salvation.

Opening questions Which trees most define the course where you play? How would the course be changed without them? • Which part of a tree do you think provides a good metaphor for a life of faith?

READING Ezek. 17:22-24; Matt. 13:31-32; John 15:5-8; Jeremiah 17:5-8

The kingdom tree (Ezekiel 17 & Matthew 13)

How impressive is a sprig or a small seed? What can these small things produce in the natural? How did Ezekiel and Jesus latch on to this picture to present a kingdom metaphor?

Fruitfulness (John 15)

What makes a branch fruitful? What do you think Jesus means when he says that his disciples will bear fruit? What is the principal result of fruitfulness (v. 8)?

Like trees (Jeremiah 17)

Who is like the dry bush and who is like the tree in this passage? What are the characteristics of the one like a tree? Referring back to John 15, how can such characteristics be fostered?

Written by Jeff Hopper ©2016 Links Players International. This study is accompanied by a 5-minute video here: <https://youtu.be/l8e0fdY2dg>.