

THE RIGHTEOUS LIKE THE PALM TREE

(Discourse below by J. A. Bohnet of Allegheny, Pa., 1907 Convention Report Part II, page 138.)

Bro. Bohnet said in substance: Dear Friends: Our text is found in the 92nd Psalm and a portion of the 12th verse, reading: "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree," and a portion of the 35th verse of the 37th Psalm, reading, "The wicked ... spreading himself like a green bay tree."

As we read the Bible and meditate upon a text, I fear many of us do not give the subject sufficient thought. We simply skim over the topic or the sentence, getting only the surface, whereas if we would only dig down deep into the matter, we would get a wealth of meaning from almost any sentence in the precious Word. I know how it was when I was a lad, there were numerous texts of Scripture brought to my mind in my youthful days that I did not get the full sense of until long years afterwards. One of those texts was about the rich man's difficulty to get into heaven, and how much easier it would be for a camel to go through the needle's eye. I did not understand that, because I did not know that the needle's eye is a small gate alongside the large gate in the walls of ancient cities, and therefore my mind was confused, and I thought how impossible it would be for a rich man to enter into heaven at all. But as I understood the facts upon which that statement was based, I of course grasped the meaning in its fullness.

So, too, another text was vividly brought to my attention, and I wondered how it was that our Lord in sending forth His disciples to preach, charged them that they should not greet anyone along the way. I wondered why it was the Lord thus charged the disciples. What harm could there be in pausing sufficiently long to exchange the common courtesy? Surely there would be no harm, but I did not understand the reason. There must surely be a reason, for our Lord did nothing foolishly; there must have been some object in His having given that charge, but not until, from a Jerusalem sheik I got the facts, did I understand the full depth of meaning behind that sentence. It is a custom in the Orient, even to this day, for two people, who are acquainted, when meeting, to take each other by the hand, and take a hearty grasp, and begin to ply each other with questions concerning each other's welfare, their health, business interests, etc., and with each question and with each answer, they bumped their heads together, and the degree of interest they wanted to manifest in having asked that question must be demonstrated by the amount of force put behind that bump. It would be an indication of not having very much concern in the health and welfare of the other if one bumped lightly. And so, in order to impress the other that they were really concerned in asking the question, they put enough force in their bumps to carry the thought home. And then after they had exhausted their questions about each other individually, the questioning must be extended to the members of the family, and then to the relations, and by the time the greeting had terminated, there was

often a headache produced which lasted three or four hours, and it consumed considerable time.

Our Lord knew that the disciples would do justice to the occasion, they would not shirk in this matter, and their heads would come together with such force that naturally they would be rendered unfit for the service for which they were dispatched. He charged them not to greet anyone by the way—not to pause to have this interchange of questions. It is just as proper there today for two persons to pass, not pausing to greet in this way, as for two of the business men of this town to pass without stopping to shake hands; no discourtesy would be shown whatever; therefore it would be perfectly proper for them not to stop to exchange such greetings. But if they commenced it, they must go through with it. We would not understand the reason and the depth of meaning back of that statement, if we were not familiar with the customs, or had some facts outside of the Scriptures.

So it is, I think, with this text, “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.” That text was given to me some years ago as a subject for a testimony meeting. I hardly remember how I managed to get through with that service; I know that I did not do justice to the occasion. So I determined then and there that if that subject were ever mine again, I would familiarize myself sufficiently with the character of the palm tree so that I could do better. This led me to investigate the palm tree and it took years for me to get well enough acquainted with it so I could feel that I had something to offer on the text.

Now, why did God say, “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree?” Why did He not say, like the oak tree? Is it not a grander, more majestic, more vigorous, a hardier and a more beautiful tree than the palm tree? Would not the wide-spreading elm have made a much better illustration of the way in which the righteous shall flourish? Or why did He not select the beech, or the maple, or any of the trees of the forest? Why did He select the palm? There must be some reason there, and it devolves upon us to ascertain for what reason the palm tree was selected. What is there about the palm tree that would command admiration, or draw forth our appreciation? It is apparently the most insignificant of all the trees. You have seen a telegraph pole before there were any wires on it. If we would fasten a little bunch of green at the top, we would have a picture of a palm tree. You have all seen pictures of palm trees. The casual observer would hardly stand and admire the palm tree for its beauty. It is a singular tree. It is different from all other trees, and yet that very characteristic is doubtless one of the reasons why our Lord selected that tree as an illustration of the righteous.

We are said to be a peculiar people. Is not the palm tree peculiar? It stands out distinct from all other trees. It has a peculiar characteristic of its own. So we see, to begin with, there is something about the palm tree that would fit the text—its peculiarity. Just as one passing the palm tree would not consider it much of a tree, nothing to command his

special regard, just so it is with the righteous, the ordinary, casual observer, as he passes by sees nothing in the character of the righteous that appeals to him or her as worthy of commendation, of approval, or respect. It is written of the grandest character the world has ever known, our Lord Jesus Christ, that they hid as it were their faces from Him. He had no beauty in their eyes that they should admire Him; and if they would reject Jesus, the very exemplification of righteousness, much more would they reject any of His followers. But, just as the palm tree has its peculiarities, and is distinct from all other trees, different from each and all, just so is it with the righteous; and we all know as we come in contact with one another that there is a difference; they are not like other people; there is a distinctiveness there; and something that we can appreciate, and that we can admire—a particular love, something to command our respect and admiration, and every other good thing.

The palm tree, too, has a singleness of purpose. It grows straight; it does not grow to the right or to the left, this way or that way, but with singleness of purpose it grows straight, heavenward; so the righteous should be straightforward, with heavenly aspirations, ever striving and seeking for that which is above, setting their affections on that which pertains to the higher relations, instead of those things which are beneath.

We read of men being crooked; we speak of them as being crooks sometimes, but it should not be so with the righteous; they should have integrity, they should be reliable, straight-forward, honest, upright in the sight of men and always looking forward and hastening to something higher, something grander. “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

The palm tree rises above its fellows; it towers above other trees. You have all seen pictures of the palm; it is always the highest object in the picture; so it should be with the righteous; they should rise above the common, they should have proper dignity, ever aspiring to that which is greater, lovelier, more exalting; and like the palm tree lift themselves high above the ordinary, high in the sight of God their Creator. “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

Again, the palm tree is always green; it is an evergreen tree. Does not that set forth the characteristics of the righteous? That would not fit the oak tree, would it? By no means; the oak tree has at least a sense of being dead six months in the year, and it would not do for the righteous to appear to be dead part of the time, but they should be alive all the time. It is said that the oak tree grows for 300 years or thereabouts; then it stands for a period of about 300 years, degenerates, and passes away. But not so with the palm. It has no period in which it reaches a condition of standstill, it is not content with reaching such a condition, but it is always aspiring to reach higher and higher, growing until it begins to go down. So with the righteous; they should not be content with any position to which they may attain in the righteous, heavenly, upward, course, but ever seeking to

grow higher and higher in the sight of God and in the sight of one another—setting their affections on things above, reaching ever onward and upward to a loftier attainment. “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

The palm tree has another characteristic; it casts decidedly the least shadow, and thus does not interfere with the growth of its neighbors; it does not cast any reflection upon any who are seeking to develop, seeking to live, seeking to rise. So, too, with the righteous; they should not cast any reflection upon anyone who is making any progress whatsoever. It is written of our Lord Jesus Christ, “A bruised reed shall He not break, the smoking flax shall He not quench.” He cast no damper on anyone else who was making progress, although He made more progress than anyone else. “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

The palm tree does nothing to hinder the sunlight from coming down or the rain descending upon others that are seeking to prosper. So it should be with those who are righteously inclined. They should, like the palm tree, do everything possible to let in the sunlight of God’s Word, to let down the rain of truth, that others might strive and be benefited by the blessings, and not seek to cast a damper, or any reflection, on others that would retract or retard them in their spiritual development and growth towards this lofty, heavenward attainment. “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

We see more and more, why the Lord selected the palm tree. Again, the palm tree has another peculiarity; it is the softest at the heart of all the trees. So too, it should be with us; we should not be hard-hearted; we should be sympathetic, compassionate, tender, solicitous of the interests of others. Like the palm tree, though, we may have a rough exterior, yet we should have a gentle, kind, loving heart toward all men, doing with our might what our hands find to do to please one another, and to please the Heavenly Father. “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

Again, the palm tree has, in proportion to the size of the tree, the fewest and the smallest roots. The roots of the palm tree resemble very much a beet, or a carrot, or a pointed stick stuck in the ground with little rootlets running off from the main tap. It has the least hold upon the earth. Is not that the characteristic the righteous should possess?—not being interested in getting hold of earthly possessions, but have just as little of earthly possessions as is possible in order to get along. As the palm tree’s vitality, all the strength that it gets out of the earth, is used for its lofty attainments, thus rising ever onward and upward, so it should be with those who are righteously disposed; having comparatively little concern about earthly things, earthly possessions, earthly gains, all the strength they derive from the world in which they are—we are in the world but not of it—should be used towards this upward growing, this upward lifting, rising higher and higher in the sight of God and man. “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

Furthermore, the palm tree will not be easily repressed. It is said that if someone will take a large stone slab, or some hard substance and place it over the spot where a palm tree is planted and endeavoring to grow, it would not deter the palm from its onward course, but it would come up right against that slab, go out to the edge of it and up again. You cannot make it grow in any other direction; it is bound to rise upward, bound to grow heavenward, bound to tower above. So it should be with us. We should not be easily discouraged, whatever the besetment may be, whatever difficulty we may have, and whatever obstacles we have, these should not have the effect of dampening our ardor, or destroying the life we possess, or impairing our progress and growth and spiritual development to any appreciable extent. In spite of all these obstructions and inducements to turn aside, to press ever onward and upward in this straight and narrow way that leads to our heavenly home above, to be in God's favor as His children, not as servants, but as His sons possessing one of the mansions that our Lord declared He would go to prepare, although there are already mansions in the bright realm above. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree."

On the Mariposa trail in California there is a place where a settler built a cabin years ago over a spot where a palm tree sought to establish itself. What did the palm tree do? Did it give up because of the obstacle placed there? Not so. It grew and kept on growing until it came up through the floor and went out through the ceiling, and on through the roof. The cabin stands there today, so far as I know, and also the palm tree rising about eighteen feet above it, and near the middle of the dilapidated hut. Nothing in the way of obstruction or burden placed upon it discouraged or regarded its growth. So it should be with us. Having put our hands to the plow, determined to go on, nothing should daunt us. Let the conditions be what they may be, if we cannot go around them, go through them; if we cannot go through them, climb over them, go under them, or pass them somehow, some way, and keep on in the course marked out as our pathway towards the goal to which we are all striving, the heavenly attainment. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree."

You will remember that we are speaking particularly of the date palm. All commentators and writers of the encyclopedias tell us the date palm is always referred to in Scripture connection. It is a fruit-bearing tree, and surely our heavenly Father would have used nothing here but a tree that bears fruit.

The palm tree does not bear fruit for itself. Neither should we bear fruit simply for ourselves. What do we mean by the fruit? Paul tells us the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, brotherly-kindness, temperance, and all those other kindred qualities, and these we should have in abundance that the ordinary passer-by might be profited, benefited, blessed and helped in his onward course along the straight and narrow path that leads to heaven. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree."

The older the palm tree, the sweeter the fruit. Should not that be true of the Christian? The longer they are established, the longer they are in the way, the sweeter should be the fruit. Naturally so. If we are established for a considerable time, we ought to expect sweeter fruit and in greater abundance, just as with the palm tree.

One can go to the palm tree early and late and get fruit. It has a prolonged fruit bearing period. One can go there, so to speak, in season and out of season, all the time, and get fruit. Its fruit bearing period is not limited to a short space of time. So it should be with those who are righteously inclined. One should be able to go there any time, early and late, in season and out of season, and get an abundance of fruit, and the longer one is established, the longer he has been in this heavenly way, the sweeter should be the fruit. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree."

Another peculiarity: it furnishes all that man needs. Of the trunk, man can build his home and manufacture his furniture, and other useful utensils; out of the strands of the leaves he can make baskets, etc. And out of the fibers of the leaves can be made a substantial cloth closely resembling satin, and the juice exuding from them is said to be very nutritious; and thus the palm tree furnishes the necessaries of life. This would seem to teach that we should be content with such things as we have. We may not have satins and silks and luxuries, but we do have all the things needful, and with these we should be content. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree."

The palm tree generally grows along the edges of the desert. I could not verify this, but I had to take it from writings that, when the dust blows across the desert in sweeping clouds of sand storms, the dust and sand usually accumulate on the limbs and branches of trees; but it is said that one can go up to a palm tree and find comparatively little of this accumulation. What does this teach us? It keeps itself unspotted from the filth of the earth. So it should be with us. We should have purity, and not be contaminated by the evil influences, and by the various winds of doctrines that are wafted about by every breeze, but should keep ourselves unspotted, pure, clean and white, and thus be free from this contaminating influence. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree."

Again, where the palm tree grows another thing has its existence, and this thing is called a tree-killer. It is a poisonous vine, something like our poison ivy. If it gets hold of a tree, it grows close to that tree, hugging the bark closely, and after a while it will entirely surround the tree, something after the style of a grape vine we have seen completely enveloping the tree it grows upon. It clings very closely and shuts out the sunlight, and the tree eventually dies; but the poison vine, the tree-killer, remains and stands there in the shape the tree originally was, the tree having formed it, and the tree inside is dead; the vine has killed it. There is only one tree known that can successfully resist the tree-killer, and that is the palm tree. Now, the righteous should be like the palm tree in that respect surely. Whatever burden may be placed upon them, whatever poisonous besetment, or

poisonous influence, might be in the way, anything that would seek to take the life, in spite of all this, we should keep on in our course. “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

Now we see there was a reason in this statement. The Heavenly Father understood the matter when He said, The righteous should be like the palm tree, should emulate its character; and so let us, dear friends, be of that disposition, of that character, and think of the palm tree with appreciation and admiration.

Now, how about the wicked? Oh, that is a different proposition. I did not have the opportunity to study the bay tree, that I had to study the palm tree, having seen and studied perhaps seventy-five during my recent trip to the Pacific coast; but I did learn something about it. I had two opportunities to study the palm tree, both in California and in Mexico. The two best bay trees I have seen are at the gateway to the Stanford University at Palo Alto, California, although I saw single specimens in the State of Oregon.

One seeing a green bay tree would not have the same feeling as when seeing a palm tree. I venture the assertion that almost anyone looking upon a green bay tree for the first time would be pretty apt to say, I would like to have that tree in my front yard—Oh, what a handsome tree! With its wide-spreading branches, almost touching the ground at its extremity, some of them perhaps touching the ground, with its wealth of foliage, it would not permit the sun to come down through it. How nice it would be to have a hammock stretched under there. But the green bay tree is the opposite of the palm tree. It is a low tree. Compared with the palm tree, it is a mean tree, a tree to be looked down on, yet there is that profession, that spreading of branches and leaves that would command our respect and our admiration, and the general passerby, the ordinary individual, the average worldly person, would regard it as being a most beautiful thing. They would want to be in possession of one of them. But if we would go under a green bay tree and look up into it, our respect would be lessened considerably, for we would find that the limbs are naked, uneven, gnarly, crooked, twisted and devoid of foliage. The foliage is all on the outside, comparatively speaking. All the profession is where it can be seen, making a grand display to the ordinary passer-by—putting as it were, the big apples on top, where they can be seen, making all the show possible with the possessions it has. Is not that the characteristic of the wicked? The wicked spreading like the green bay tree. They make as much show as possible with what they have.

The green bay tree, instead of having a soft heart, has an exceedingly hard heart. It is like the wicked—indifferent, stony-hearted, lacking sympathy. Not like the palm tree, not like the righteous, having consideration, sympathy, and the welfare of others at heart, having love, and so forth, for one another, but having the characteristics of selfishness in its every line.

The green bay tree does not bear fruit, but it makes a pretense at bearing fruit. If we approach a green bay tree, we would find little round balls on it, not regular, but irregular, about the size of an olive, not smooth, but rough. At first thought, we would say, that is a fruit-bearing tree; it looks like it; it makes that bluff, so to speak, but if we take one of those little balls and crack it open, we will find only a seed. What does this mean? The green bay tree is not interested in bearing fruit for somebody else. What looked like fruit was in reality a seed, with the design or intent of spreading its kind, advancing its own family interests—as Brother Russell has often said: “Me and my wife, my son John and his wife; us four and no more.” “The wicked spreading himself like a green bay tree.” We see the reason for using that statement in regard to the wicked. And it does not appear on the surface. If we want to learn anything of God’s Word, we must remember the rule, “Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.” Those things that are worth anything are not found on the surface. You remember it is written of our Lord, He spoke in parables and dark sayings, in order that His meaning might not appear on the surface, but be necessary to dig down deep. If we want anything of value, such as gold, silver, or precious stones, we will not find them on the surface; we will have to dig. It requires sacrifice, it requires effort, in order to obtain, and so it is with the precious things in God’s Word. If we want anything we must dig for it. We can seek and find, knock and it shall be opened. So we do not want to do surface reading and say, “Yes, I know all about it.” Surely if we would read hastily that sentence, “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree,” we would be pretty apt to pass on to the next sentence without understanding very much about it, because we did not go outside the Scriptures and get the facts upon which the statement was based.

Under the two bay trees standing at the entrance of the Palo Alto grounds, previously referred to, there was not a blade of grass or a green shrub of any kind. It was just as bare as an ash-pile. Nothing could grow there. The rain could not come down there, and it was as dry as tinder. Neither could the sunshine come through. So that shows the characteristic of the wicked. They would turn aside the sunlight of God’s Word, turn aside the rain of truth, do everything they can to hinder and retard the growth of others that are striving to go on in the right way. “The wicked spreading like a green bay tree.” How true!

As to the roots of the green bay tree, it seemed like the ground could not hold them all. They would come up out of the ground, then down again, and up again, and I could trace them for 40 and 50 feet from the trunk of the tree—interested in getting worldly possessions, and interested in getting a secure hold upon the earth. While making as big a spread above as possible, in an underhand way reaching out in every conceivable direction to get more. This is mine, that is mine, that belongs to me, I lay claim to that, etc.—interested in getting hold of earthly possessions, earthly property, real estate, etc. Get all you can; keep all you get. The way some of these roots passed along suggested to

my mind the thought that they are not content with what they already have, but are looking for something more.

A gentleman, who understood the nature of the tree, called my attention to the nature of the branches of the trees. He said, just break off one of those branches, and I reached up—and I did not have far to reach—and gave a branch a snap, thinking of course it would drop off like branches usually do. But it did not break off. It was about the size of a lead pencil. I got a firmer grip on it, pulled, then took hold with both hands and pulled, and pulled until I think I shook half of the tree, but I could not break it off. Then I took that branch and tied it into a knot, and then tied it into another knot and drew it tight, then took my knife and cut it off. If you get any of the possessions of the wicked, you will have to work for them. You may get them, but you will have to work for them. They hang on to what they have—that is mine, it belongs to me. It is nothing like the palm tree, handing out its fruit in bunches, big bunches of it—help yourself, take as much as you want, or if you want to pick it off one at a time like grapes or bananas, all right, take it that way. But with the wicked, no—hold on, hang on, says the green bay tree; I have nothing to give; it is mine; it belongs to me; keep all you get, and see if you cannot get some more. “The wicked spreading like a green bay tree.”

In the middle of the burned district in San Francisco, there is a green bay tree about twenty inches in diameter, I should judge, that was burned literally to a charred trunk; the bark was burned off it; and it put forth leaves and grew again. It is a very hard thing to destroy. So with selfishness: it takes a great deal to crush out the life of selfishness. “The wicked spreading like a green bay tree”—they hang on to that precious life they have.

And the same gentleman I spoke of a while ago who told me to break off a branch, said, after I had done so, Now just crush those leaves in your hands. I stripped off some of those that were on the little twig and rubbed them in my hands, and was wondering what would happen, but nothing happened, and I looked up at him somewhat in wonder, and he said, Just smell of your hands. That settled it; it was a sensation very much like that which comes from inhaling very strong ammonia. It was charged with the most disagreeable odor, and in less than five seconds I had a very severe headache. And I suppose I have smelled of those leaves a score or more of times during my trip west, and in every instance I had a headache that lasted from at least five to ten minutes. That carried home to mind the thought, don't rub up against the wicked; don't produce any friction there, don't stroke them the wrong way. If you do, you will wish you had not; you will want to get away from there. “The wicked spreading like a green bay tree.” It is all right enough to go off at a distance and have a certain amount of admiration and regard for the thing, but do not get intimately acquainted with it, to the extent of rubbing up against it very hard, or you will produce a condition that you will want to get away from. We all know how that is.

Now we have on the one hand the characteristics of the bay tree—the wicked spreading like a green bay tree—and on the other hand we have the palm tree, a tree differing very materially from the green bay tree in almost every respect, if not quite so, and yet in its simplicity to be looked up to by us at least with appreciation, with admiration. And I appreciate very much the effort of a little sister who sent me a little drawing which she called a beautiful palm tree. I do not know how old she was, but she was quite young. It represented her endeavor to set forth her appreciation of the palm tree from what I had said about it, and from what she had learned of its characteristics. “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

Now, dear friends, it is for us to determine which of these two trees we wish to emulate. Shall we follow those characteristics that pertain to the green bay tree, or those that pertain to the palm tree? It is up to us, in the language of the day, and I feel sure that all of us here will want to go in that straight, narrow, and heavenward way, rising above the things of the earth, towering above that which is ordinary, and ever striving onward and upward, seeking to attain to the heavenly aspirations.