

WEEK THREE

THE TREE OF LIFE

"For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters."

GALATIANS 5:13

Last week, we studied the two trees in the Garden of Eden and how they each represented a way of living. We explored how the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and its deadly fruit led to shame and victimization. This week, we will look at the Tree of Life and its ability to set us free from incorrect thoughts about God and ourselves.

If you have weak muscles that you haven't been using correctly, you might begin a weight-training program to grow in strength and skill. As followers of Jesus, we have to build up our faith by reading God's Word, retraining our thought processes to line up with Biblical truth. Just like weight lifters need a spotter to help encourage, challenge, and assist them when the burden is heavy, we need partnership and support in this faith-building process. This Small Group is designed for your leaders and fellow group members to help you learn how to truly live in freedom.

As you progress through this group, you will be able to use Tree of Life thinking as a framework for the way you approach every situation you encounter. Remember that God's commands were never meant to be burdensome. In fact, as you grow close to Him and learn to hear His voice, you will find His heart for you. His divine plan was made for your sake—not for His. He simply wants to protect you from very real danger, and He desires your success.

Write Zephaniah 3:17.

THE FRUIT OF LIVING IN THE TREE OF LIFE

1. The Tree of Life results in fellowship with God.

“Now this is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

JOHN 17:3 NIV

According to Vine’s Bible Dictionary, “know” in this verse is the Greek word *ginosko*, which means to recognize, to understand, or to understand completely. It indicates a relationship. The only way to experience abundant life is by truly knowing the living God. He asked us to love Him, but only after His lavish display of love for us through the sacrifice of Jesus. “God showed how much He loved us by sending His one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through Him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.” (1 John 4:9–10) The Bible says in 1 John 4:19 that the only reason we have any love at all is because He first loved us.

God loved us so much that He sent His Son to die on a cross to make a way for us to be in relationship with Him. The cross represents more than a sacrificial death. It is a promise, a blood covenant, God made with His Son so that we could have confidence that He would never change His mind about His relationship with us (Hebrews 6:17–18). In the Old Testament, God made covenants with man, and man always broke them. This time, God sealed the covenant with the blood of His Son Jesus so that nothing can separate us from His love.

2. Fellowship with God results in innocence— not the other way around.

“They realized they were naked.” (Genesis 3:7 NIV) As we spend time walking with God, listening to His voice, talking to Him, obeying Him, worshipping Him, and enjoying Him, we will notice a transformation taking place, not only on the outside, but on the inside as well. We will become, in a sense, “naked” or transparent and unashamed before Him.

“Nakedness,” in Genesis 3:7, speaks of innocence. Adam and Eve were unaware of any reason to hide anything from God. They had no sin-consciousness. Think of little kids running around with no clothes on after a bath. Absolutely no shame! Childlike innocence is an amazing virtue. Adam and Eve’s nakedness was part of the innocence and simplicity of their lives. Before they sinned, they had nothing to be ashamed of. This is the same concept Jesus was talking about when He said we had to be like little children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 19:14). Children are not technically innocent; they just don’t have any hesitation about them. They are not weighed down by guilt, shame, or burdens.

1 Corinthians 14:20 (NIV) says, “Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.” God wants us to be mature in our thinking, but for the Kingdom of God to work powerfully in you, you must foster a childlike spirit. Childlikeness may look to some like naivety or simple-mindedness, but it is actually a Biblical way to live. Jesus says we should be as shrewd as a snake and as innocent as a dove. (Matthew 10:16) That’s a mysterious and rare combination for the world we live in! Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:27 that “God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise.” Dare to be misunderstood

in your pursuit of relationship with God because only the pure in heart will see Him.

Simple innocence is born out of a friendship with God. It happens when we rest in God. We abide in His favor and presence so that when someone offends us, we can respond with kindness instead of anger. As we are transformed into the image of God, we become less and less affected by the negativity of the world. If we truly live with an innocent spirit, the enemy has no ammunition. If we sin, we know how to receive forgiveness, and if someone offends us, we know how to forgive.

Read Matthew 5:39-44 and Luke 6:27-36. In these passages, Jesus tells us how to live as a child of God in innocence and freedom. Using the Scriptures as a reference, describe what living in innocence looks like.

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3. Innocence is a conduit of God's power.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19 NIV) This is what Jesus said after His great temptation by Satan in the desert. He came out full of the Holy Spirit and power to begin His public ministry. This Scripture says God anointed Jesus to preach good news. What does it

mean to be “anointed” to do something? It means to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit and abide in Jesus, we become free from the works of darkness in our lives. We become vessels of honor useful to God. Innocence keeps our minds and hearts pure, helping us continually recognize our need for God. An attitude of dependence on God is fertile ground for the anointing of the Holy Spirit. As we seek God and submit our lives to Him, He equips us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17).

Rewrite Acts 10:38, replacing Jesus’ name with your name and “Nazareth” with the name of your city. Read it out loud.

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Jesus said in John 15:5 (NIV), “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Innocence and power always produce the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit.

4. Innocence results in freedom.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” (Galatians 5:1 NIV) This is the mystery of godliness: we will sin and fall, but if we sin with the Tree of Life as our perspective, we can easily receive forgiveness and get back up. How quickly we get back up depends on the degree of understanding we have in our hearts of the completeness of God’s forgiveness.

What does Psalm 37:23–24 say happens when the Godly stumble?

When we approach life with an innocent spirit, it changes the way we live and think about every part of our lives. If we attend church in the Tree of Life, we will love everything about it. We will love the pastor, the people, and the worship, because we are focused on the Reason we go to church in the first place. On the other hand, thinking in terms of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil will result in ideas like, “These songs are too long and too loud,” “The preaching is too simple,” “The children are too noisy,” or “No one talked to me.” Approaching life with innocence allows us to see the good things in front of us instead of picking every person, church, or situation apart. Innocence sets us free!

Relationships change in the innocence of the Tree of Life. We no longer hold people to impossible standards; we are quick to extend forgiveness and slow to take offense. Instead of looking for people to

meet our needs, we look for ways to serve others. Because we live for Jesus and His Kingdom, people are no longer able to “take advantage” of us. This is true freedom.

Reading the Bible, praying, and serving others should be sources of life, security, strength, and delight to us. These things should never be religious duties that must be checked off a to-do list. In the innocence of the Tree of Life, we realize these tasks are done out of relationship, not responsibility. Falling in love with Jesus turns the idea of duty into devotion, and it is a beautiful and wonderful thing. Prayer will be powerful and reading the Bible will refresh our spirits when we’re living in the Tree of Life. No more guilt-ridden sittings where we plow through twenty chapters a day because “that’s what Christians do.” Religion says, “Do it or suffer!” Relationship says, “Do it and live!”

Ask yourself: Do I feel completely innocent before God? What would it be like to have true fellowship with God?

“So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to Him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.”

ROMANS 8:1-2

HOW TO LIVE IN THE TREE OF LIFE

Now that we know it is possible to be free from bondage in our thinking, our actions, and our relationships with God and people, let's take a look at some powerful truths that can help us form a firm foundation upon which we can build a life that is both abundant and free. In order to move out of the shadow of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and into the light of Tree of Life living, we must know who Jesus is and who we are because of Him. To help us understand this, we need to "be transformed by the renewing of [our minds]." Romans 12:1-3 (NIV)

Let's take a look at a few truths that will help us live in the Tree of Life.

We must remember that relationship with the Father is essential to living in the Tree of Life. In order to enjoy this right relationship with God, we must receive His extravagant love for us. Romans 5:8 (NIV) says that God expressed His great love for us in this way: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Before we looked for God, He made a way for us to be in relationship with Him. He made the first move.

Because of the finished work of the cross, we are declared righteous before God. Romans 5:1 says: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Many of us have been serving God out of duty or fear—much like a servant. A servant has an obligation to do what is expected. He is required to be faithful or suffer consequences. A son serves because he is a part of the family. A son is faithful because of the love that he has for his father. Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, God now sees us as sons and daughters.

Read Galatians 4:7 and 2 Corinthians 6:18. What does God say about your identity?

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Ask yourself: Do I live my life as a son or as a servant?

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Recognize the two environments where you can live: the Tree of Life or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Knowing that you can choose a Tree of Life response and attitude in every circumstance is crucial to walking in freedom. It is a daily choice to respond with life and Godliness. Throughout the Bible, God compares the fruit of Godly decisions with the fruit of ungodly decisions. It is clearly God's desire that we live a life that produces Godly fruit. We can only do this by choosing to live God's way: in the Tree of Life.

In Matthew 11, Jesus compares His way of living to that of religious Pharisees. The Pharisees were legalistic and self-righteous. Their approach to God was in the strict keeping of all Jewish laws.

Read Matthew 11:28-30, and write out Jesus' response to the heavy burden that comes from trying to keep the law.

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Read Deuteronomy 30:19 (NIV). Moses challenged the Israelites to determine what path they would follow. One path led to life, and the other led to death. He exhorted them, "Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

Ask the Lord to help you to make life-giving decisions every day. Throughout the day, when faced with a difficult decision or situation, pause, examine your motives, and ask Him for wisdom. Though retraining the way we think and respond takes time, we learn and grow in both our successes and our failures. Remember God loves you, and He is for you. Grace was His idea.

*Ask yourself: Do my daily responses and decisions bring life to others?
In what tree do I live?*

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Renew your mind with what the Word of God says is true. Transformation can take place when we know what the Word of God says about our lives. Often, our worldview and past experiences shape our version of truth. We cannot make the Bible line up with what we think is true, but we can decide to align our beliefs with the truth of the Bible. In order to do this, we must consume the Word. Changing our internal truth will change our external responses.

Romans 12:2 (NIV) says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—His good, pleasing, and perfect will.” The pattern of this world will lead to death. God’s will leads to life.

2 Corinthians 10:5 says that every thought should be examined for Godly accuracy. If it does not line up with what the Bible says, we must take it captive and make it obedient to the Word of God. This will become a way of life as we practice putting God’s Word ahead of our feelings and beliefs. In other words, don’t just read the Bible, let it read you.

In Ephesians 4, Paul tells us to let the Holy Spirit renew our thoughts and our attitudes and to put on our new self that has been created in the very likeness of God in righteousness and holiness. These are choices we must intentionally make. We must choose to renew our thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs in God’s Word, and we must choose to put on holiness and righteousness. If we do, we will begin to experience true Tree of Life living!

Read Philippians 4:8 and write out a way to renew your mind.