

# The wisdom tree (Jeremiah 17:5-10)

## Who can teach us a wiser way of life?

by [Ed Horstmann](#)

February 14, 2025

*To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).*

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Curses! Jeremiah comes down hard on those whose trust lies wholly in human strength, who have turned their backs on the Lord. The prospects for such a life are not promising. Isolation and depletion at best.

Abruptly the tone softens, and prophetic warning shifts gears to the offer of wisdom drawn from the close observation of nature. Curse gives way to blessing. We don't have to wind up like a lonely, parched shrub out in the middle of the desert. We can choose an alternative path that is nourishing for us and fruitful for others. Who can teach us this wiser way of life? A tree.

I think of Jeremiah as a harsh messenger for God, but he seems to have had a soft spot for trees. And here's a lesson from a tree about trust: Stay close to sources of nourishment that make us fruitful. Upon those relationships everything depends. And if making such a connection means relocation, so be it.

In his Hermeneia commentary on Jeremiah, William Holladay suggests that the phrase "planted by water" may mean "transplanted by water." So this tree that Jeremiah has in mind perhaps has been moved—or found a way to move—so that it is close to the water that gives it life. It didn't start out in a nicely hydrated neighborhood; it moved there.

Where do we need to go, or what do we need to do, to soak in the goodness of God? Not just to rest from our work, but to be filled to overflowing with energy for it? What

would it feel like to be as nourished by God as a wisdom tree is nourished by good old H<sub>2</sub>O?

In recent years I have been spiritually hydrated by curiosity conversations. That phrase is also the title of a book by movie producer Brian Grazer. For many years he has set aside time to talk with people who intrigue or inspire him. The resulting curiosity conversations have become a source of joy, friendship, and learning. Following his lead, I keep a list of people I want to learn from, and I reach out to them for conversations. I transplant myself from a place of weariness to a place where I can find fresh faith. And it works! The joy and learning that grow out of these dialogues linger with me long after the talking is done.

Another lesson from Jeremiah's teaching tree: It's defiant. Although this text reads like a cousin to Psalm 1, Holladay points out a significant difference: "Psalm 1:3 . . . describes a tree that is watered, but Jeremiah is describing a tree that expects water, does not get it, yet because of deep rootage manages some leaves and fruit even when water is lacking."

Jeremiah's tree does not wait passively to be watered. It sends out roots like search parties, looking for life-giving water. And when the heat is on, and drought takes over the land, the defiant tree is not anxious. It defiantly bears fruit for those needing food. It is green in all seasons, drought be damned.

Jeremiah could have wrapped things up here, with a nice image of trusting people savoring fruit next to the wisdom tree. But having started with a warning, he ends with one. He changes the subject from the tree to the heart, that fickle organ that can lead us toward the good life or away from it. Jeremiah knew that we can be stubbornly resistant to wisdom. We may not want to transplant ourselves near new ideas, new ways of being more generous with resources and love. So he gives us a heads up. Don't underestimate the heart: It might lead us to water, it might lead us to a diet soda.

Thank you, Jeremiah, for the dose of reality. But mainly for the encouragement to transplant ourselves closer to the waters that fill us with life, so that we can bring life to others.