

Ralph Woodrow
PO Box 21
Palm Springs, CA 92263-0021



“ONLY GOD CAN MAKE A TREE”

*I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree....
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only GOD can make a tree.*

—Alfred J. Kilmer (1886–1918).

Beginning in Genesis and on through to the book of Revelation, **trees** are often mentioned in the Bible (Gen. 1:11; Rev. 22:14). In Psalms, the middle book of the Bible, a godly person is “like a **tree** planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither” (Psa. 1:3).

If we count **tree**-related words like leaf, branch, root, seed, and fruits that grow on trees, literally *hundreds* of biblical references emerge. We shall look at some of these along with information about trees, some of which is not well-known.

Many commonly used sayings are linked with **trees**:

Turn over a new leaf, Get to the root of the matter, Go out on a limb, Barking up the wrong tree, Can’t see the forest for the trees, Money doesn’t grow on trees, Only you can prevent forest fires, Knock on wood, Not out of the woods, An apple a day keeps the doctor away, Sleep like a log, As easy as falling off a log, Deck the halls with boughs of holly, family tree, etc.

More important is what the *biblical* writers said about trees. The righteous flourish “like the palm tree” and “like a cedar in Lebanon” (Psa. 92:12). They are “trees of righteousness” (Isa. 61:3). The blessing of long life is likened to a tree (Isa. 65:22). Wisdom is “a tree of life” (Prov. 3:18). The kingdom of God is like a tiny seed that grows into a huge tree (Matt. 13:31, 32).

When the biblical writers described locations where significant events occurred, they often mentioned **trees**. Adam and Eve hid themselves among the trees of the garden (Gen. 3:8). Abraham was sitting beneath terebinth trees at Mamre when he had the encounter with three heavenly beings (Gen. 18:1 NKJV). Job lived in the land of Uz (meaning a *wooded* place (Job 1:1). It was under a terebinth tree (some translations: oak tree) that an angel spoke to Gideon (Judges 6:11). At a time of discouragement, Elijah sat under a broom tree (some translations: juniper tree), praying that he might die (1 Kings 19:4).

Jesus called to Zacchaeus who had climbed up into a sycamore tree (Luke 19:4). Jesus (supernaturally) saw Nathanael under a fig tree, before he saw him in person (John 1:48). Jesus was among trees on the Mount of Olives when he spoke of the soon-coming destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:3).

At the time of David, trees played a part in an Israelite battle. A directive from the LORD said to wait at a certain place

until they heard “the sound of a *going* in the tops of the **mulberry trees**” (2 Sam. 5:24, KJV). Some have supposed this “going in the mulberry trees” was like hundreds of birds suddenly taking flight at the sound of a loud noise! But the meaning here (see NKJV, etc.) is that there would be a rustling sound in the top of the trees like the marching of an army (cf. 2 Kings 7:6). This would signal the time to **move** out and attack.

I have not heard the song in a long time; but years ago, desiring a real move of God, we would sing:

The move is on, my Lord the move is on (repeat).
I have heard the rustling in the mulberry trees
And I know, I know, I know, the move is on.
Move on brother, move on sister, this is the moving day!

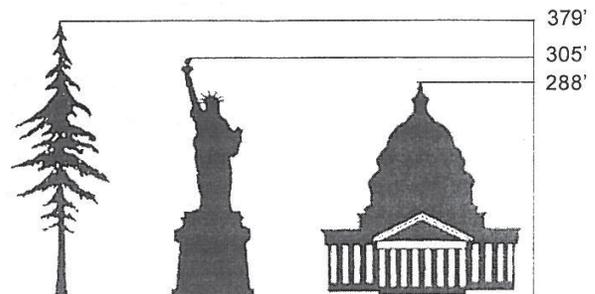
A happy memory from my childhood—I believe it was on my twelfth birthday—my mother and I took a train from Riverside to Los Angeles, and then up the coast to Santa Barbara.



There, very close to the train station, we saw the huge Moreton Bay Fig Tree. Brought from Australia as a seedling in 1876, its trunk measures 41 feet in circumference and its branches span 170 feet. Thousands of people could stand beneath its shade.

The world’s *largest* tree, figured by overall volume, is The General Sherman, located in Sequoia National Park (California). It has been my privilege on a number of occasions to observe this awesome tree. With a trunk circumference of 102 feet, it is wider than some city streets. Its height, at 274 feet, is comparable to a 26-story building!

Taller still, though not as large overall, is another form of Sequoia: The Coast Redwood (in California’s Redwood National Park). At **379** feet, it is believed to be the world’s *tallest* tree.



The name for “Sequoia” trees comes from Sequoyah, an Indian Chief who invented the Cherokee alphabet. Born in 1776 in Tennessee, he lived in several states, but never saw the giant California trees that would later bear his name!

The *oldest* known tree in the world—which has been nicknamed “Methuselah” (cf. Gen. 5:27)—is located in the White Mountains near Bishop (California). Based on the annual ring count from a small core sample, it is **4,700** years old.

The main street in Palm Springs is lined with over a thousand palm trees that were planted years ago. But just south of town, there are 3,000 *native palm* trees in the rugged Indian Canyons. Interestingly, huge **pine** trees also thrive not far away—because of a higher elevation—where temperatures average 30 degrees cooler. Located right at the base of Mount San Jacinto, Palm Springs is 479 feet above sea level. The vertical rise to the 10,804-foot summit is one of the most abrupt elevation changes anywhere in the country.

One can drive “The Palms to the Pines Highway” which—as the name implies—literally goes from **palms to pines**. With its many twists and turns, it was chosen for scenes in the 1963 comedy *It’s a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*. But a faster way to go from palms to pines—in less than 15 minutes—is the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. Upon exiting at the mountain station, one is surrounded by huge sugar pine, ponderosa, jeffrey, and lodgepole pine trees.



It has been pointed out that a few weeks before Easter, the tops of **pine trees** produce yellow shoots. By the time Easter comes, the tallest shoots will often take the form of crosses. While this is nothing on which to build a doctrine, it does fit within the context of interesting tree facts.



Pine trees are mentioned in the Bible (Neh. 8:15; Isa. 60:13), but not as often as **palm trees**. The *first* biblical reference to palm trees was when the Israelites, having left Egypt, “came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and *seventy palm trees*, and they camped there near the water” (Exod. 15:27).

While this is the first reference to palm trees *as such*, the palm is indirectly referred to earlier—in Genesis. The same word from which palm tree is commonly translated, provided the basis for a woman’s name: *Tamar*; the daughter-in-law of Judah (Gen. 38:6). Apparently this was a highly regarded name, for King David’s daughter was also named Tamar, as was his granddaughter (2 Sam. 13:1; 14:27).

Tamar (palm tree) also appears in some place names: Baal-tamar (Judges 20:33), Hazazon-tamar (2 Chron. 20:2), and Tamar, a town near the Dead Sea (Ezek. 47:19). In that same general area, Jericho (believed to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world) was known as “the city of palm trees” (Deut. 34:3; Judges 3:13).

The hills northeast of Palm Springs that extend to the Salton Sea contain numerous palm oases, the most notable being the *thousand palms* oasis. While not as obvious at ground level, a view from the air shows these palm oases run in a line, marking the path of the infamous **San Andreas Fault**. These palms



have long survived the desert heat because the crack in the earth’s surface allowed water to seep upward.

Those who study earthquakes are fault-finders. ☺

In a vast desert, palm trees were a welcome sight to weary travelers, as a place of refuge and life-sustaining water. It is understandable how from early times the palm came to symbolize hope, victory, life! This is probably why the palm was so prominent in the decoration of the Jerusalem Temple. Along with cherubim and flowers, carvings of palm trees were overlaid with gold. *Numerous* verses mention palm trees that were inscribed throughout the Temple—on doors, walls, supports, and gate posts (1 Kings 6; Ezek. 40-41).

Again, as a symbol of victory, when Jesus made his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, people took *palm branches* and went out to meet him. With great rejoicing they shouted, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the King of Israel!” (Matt. 21:8; John 12:13). In another victorious setting, those who follow the Lamb are pictured holding *palm branches* in their hands (Rev. 7:9).

I have known a number of people with the last name Palmer. “Palmer” is derived from a Latin word meaning *palm bearer* and comes down to us from the Middle Ages. A palmer was a Christian who, having visited the Holy Land, brought back a *palm frond* in commemoration of his pilgrimage.

A palm tree at the residence of Deborah—a judge and prophetess—became known as the Palm of Deborah. “She held court under the *Palm of Deborah* between Ramah and Bethel ...the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided” (Judg. 4:4, 5). In this case, a palm tree—no doubt a distinctive landmark—was linked with Deborah’s name.

Apparently *my* name—Woodrow—is **tree** related. Being of English origin, long ago it may have derived from “row of houses by a wood.” Or, I have heard it explained: there may have been a row of trees—perhaps planted along a property line—which in time provided a name for the people who lived

there: Wood-row. As I wrote about this, I was somewhat surprised to see a *Wikipedia* article on the Internet about the *name* Woodrow. It includes a list of people with this last name—an opera singer, sculptor, football player, botanist, artist, army officer, psychologist, songwriter, and—to my surprise:

[Ralph Woodrow](#), Evangelical Christian minister, speaker, and author.

The Song of Solomon likens the feminine form to a tall, slender, graceful palm: “Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit” (Song 7:7, 8 NIV). While such poetic imagery may seem strange to us, a comparison of contemporary literature in that part of the world shows it was not uncommon.

A medal commemorating the A. D. 70 capture of Jerusalem, pictures a weeping Jewish woman and a man with hands tied behind his back, beneath a date palm—a strong indication of the prominence the date palm played in that culture. It is believed that dates may have been man’s earliest cultivated fruit.



In the United States, most of the dates are grown in an area east of Palm Springs, between Indio and the Salton Sea, which is over 200 feet *below* sea level.

Date palms are classified as male and female. Because only female trees bear dates, *many* of these are planted, with only an occasional male tree to insure pollination. Reminiscent of Solomon’s harem of a thousand women, a sign on a *male* date tree at a local date grove designates it as “King Solomon.”

We know that King Solomon was keenly interested in trees. He wrote 3,000 proverbs, 1,005 songs, and “also spoke of **trees**, from the cedar tree of Lebanon even to the hyssop that springs out of the wall” (1 Kings 4:32, 33).

In the Song of Solomon, we read: “I went down to the orchard of **nut trees**.” Depending on translation, the nuts mentioned in the Bible are almonds, pistachio nuts, and walnuts (Gen. 43:11; Song 6:11).

At the time of Solomon, imported wood from the **algum tree** was used to make “harps and stringed instruments.” These must have been of superior quality, for “there were none such as these seen before in the land of Judah”! (2 Chron. 9:10, 11).

Trees still provide wood from which quality musical instruments like pianos, guitars, and violins are made. Yet when we look at one of these musical instruments, we do not normally think: That was once a tree!

Noah built the ark of gopher wood (Gen. 6:14). Some translations say cypress wood. But, either way, it was wood from a **tree**. Later, Noah received a dove holding an olive leaf which also came from a tree (Gen. 8:11).

A different kind of boat was described by Ezekiel—luxury ships in his day had planks from **fir trees** of Senir, masts made from the **cedar trees** of Lebanon, oars made from the **oak trees**

of Bashan, inlaid ivory from Cyprus, and embroidered linen sails from Egypt! (Ezek. 27:5-7).

For thousands of years trees provided wood from which *ships* were made. But, what about an **airplane** made of wood? I am speaking, of course, of the Howard Hughes “Spruce Goose.” Back in the 1940s, it was the largest plane ever built—six times larger than any aircraft at the time. Despite the name “Spruce Goose,” almost the entire aircraft was made from *birch*. I saw it years ago when it was on display in Long Beach, California. It is now in a museum at McMinnville, Oregon.



Sometimes tree-related details go unnoticed. When David confronted Goliath, along with a slingshot, he also held something made from a **tree**: “a *staff* in his hand” (1 Sam. 17:40).

In the Bible, Moses and others are mentioned as having a wooden staff or rod. The rod belonging to Aaron, the brother of Moses, had been cut from an **almond tree**. Considerably later—as a sign that God had chosen him to head the Israelite Priesthood—*his* rod miraculously sprouted! *And* it budded. *And* it blossomed. *And* it produced ripe almonds! (Num. 17:8). It was placed, along with the golden pot of manna and the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone, in the ark of the covenant made from an acacia tree (Heb. 9:4; Exod. 25:10 NKJV).

To illustrate a prophecy that was *soon* to happen, the LORD showed Jeremiah the branch of an **almond tree** and said, “I will *hasten* my word to perform it” (Jer. 1:11, 12). The Hebrew terms provide a striking play on words: “I see a **shaged** [almond tree]; I will **shagad** [hasten] my word to perform it.” The almond tree—because it blossoms early and can bear fruit before other trees—is called a *hastening* tree. In this case, like the almond tree, God would *hasten* his word to perform it.

Jesus spoke of a **mote** in a brother’s eye (Matt. 7:3-5 KJV). The word “mote” is not commonly used today. The NIV says: “Do you look at the **speck of sawdust** in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own?” Having worked in Joseph’s carpenter shop in Nazareth (Mark 6:3), Jesus knew firsthand about planks of wood and sawdust.

In 1910, the expression “hitting the Sawdust Trail” came into use during the Billy Sunday meetings. Because sawdust was used as a ground cover in gospel tents or temporary structures built for evangelistic meetings, going forward to accept Christ became known as “hitting the Sawdust Trail.”

Trees provide a place for birds to live. There “the birds make their nests” and “have their habitation; they *sing* among the branches” (Psa. 104:12, 17; Luke 13:19).

These words about birds singing in the trees brought to mind something I had not thought about in a long time. When

I was a small boy, my mother would sing a sweet little song to me that was probably handed down by her mother:

*Little birdie in the tree, in the tree, in the tree,
Little birdie in the tree, sing a song to Ralphie,
Sing about the roses on the garden wall,
Sing about the flowers growing great and tall,
Little birdie in the tree, sing a song to Ralphie.*

The name of the town *Tappuah* means “a place fruitful in apples” (Josh. 16:8) and other verses mention **apples** (Song 2:3; Joel 1:12). Some believe the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve ate in the garden was an apple. (Even the Latin word “evil”—*malum*—and “apple” are the same word.) But the Bible does not say this. To grow good apples requires a climate with about 1,200 hours a year during which the temperature is below 45 degrees. This does not seem to be the climate of a tropical paradise!

You can always tell a dogwood tree by its bark. ☺

In Genesis we read that trees were to be “pleasant to the sight” (Gen. 2:9). And so it has been over the centuries. Today thousands enjoy the *sight* of the trees with cherry blossoms in Washington DC. Also pleasant to the sight are trees whose leaves turn into bright fall colors, like maples in Vermont (where one in every four trees is a maple) or the lovely quaking aspens in Colorado.

Trees are also beneficial in ways we do *not* see with our eyes. They provide something that is essential for all living things: **oxygen!** They help remove harmful gases like carbon dioxide from the air we breathe. Even charcoal, a tree product, can purify water by filtering out contaminants.

The gifts the wise men presented to the infant Jesus were “gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matt. 2:11). Two of those gifts—frankincense and myrrh—came from **trees**. A cut in the bark allowed sap to ooze out from which the resin was obtained. The lovely fragrance of frankincense and myrrh caused it to be highly regarded (cf. Psa. 45:8; Prov. 7:17; Song 3:6).

By drilling holes into the trunks of maple trees, a sap is obtained from which **Maple syrup** is made.

The “**balm** in Gilead” (Jer. 8:22) was a medicinal salve or ointment provided by **trees** in an area east of the Jordan River.

Widely popular products like **coconut, chocolate, coffee** and **orange juice** come from trees.

Trees provide shade in *hot* weather; in *cold* weather they provide firewood for warmth

The rubber for **tires** comes from trees. Every day the rubber hits the road (literally) on millions of cars and trucks.

Today “oil” causes us to think of **motor** oil, a product pumped from the ground. But in the Bible, oil came from olive **trees**. It was used in lamps (Exod. 27:20; Matt. 25:1) and even as anointing oil in prayer for the sick (James 5:14; Mark 6:13).

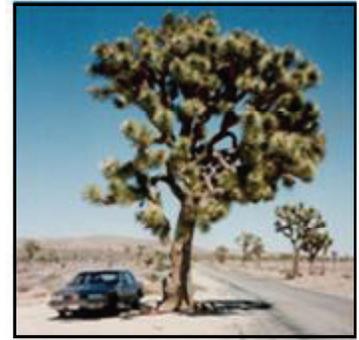
Milk as a dairy product has been around from ancient times. But now an increasing number of people are using “milk” made from **trees**, mainly almonds.

The solvent known as *turpentine* comes from what most translations call the terebinth tree (Isa. 6:13). The Douay Version comes right out and calls it the “turpentine tree”!

Thirty-seven miles from Palm Springs is the town of Yucca Valley which derives its name from the many native yucca trees in that area. The foam in Root Beer is provided by an extract from the yucca.

A few miles further is the entrance to million-acre Joshua Tree National Park.

Among huge rock formations, Joshua trees, as *native* trees, grow here and into a portion of Arizona—but *nowhere else*. The accompanying photo (taken quite a few years ago), shows the size of a Joshua Tree compared to the car I had at that time.



Finally, we should not forget the part a **tree** played in God’s plan of Redemption. Christ “bore our sins in His own body on the *tree*” (1 Peter 2:24, Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29, Galatians 3:13). The word translated “tree” in these five verses is used of “anything made of *wood*.” (The word for a living tree with branches is a different Greek word.) The torture stake (cross) upon which Jesus died was undoubtedly made of wood.

“The Old Rugged Cross” (written by George Bennard in 1912) has been included in a wide range of hymnbooks for over a century. People who have recorded it range from Elvis Presley and George Jones to the Statler Brothers and George Beverly Shea. What I am about to say ties in with this hymn.

I was having a late lunch outdoors at a sandwich shop here in Palm Springs. I spoke to the one other person who was at a nearby table. His name was Don. When the conversation turned to spiritual matters, he told me this interesting story:

Back in the early 1950s he was living in Los Angeles while attending Bible College. One day in a hotel elevator he met an older man who was visiting Los Angeles for a few weeks. When they exchanged names, the other man said his name was George Bennard. This rang a bell for Don! This sounded like the name of the man who wrote “The Old Rugged Cross.” He didn’t suppose this was THE George Bennard—but *it was!*

After this initial meeting, they visited two or three other times and George invited him, if ever back around Reed City, Michigan, to come see him. On a trip east a few years later, Don was not sure if George would remember inviting him. Nevertheless he made contact and was warmly welcomed. A large cross (which was dedicated before Bennard’s death in 1958) serves as a prominent memorial in Reed City.

Finally, be assured, it is not the cross as a wooden object that is important. It is the **Christ** of the cross *and what He accomplished on the cross*. “Christ died for our sins...the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Peter 3:18). “The preaching of the cross is to those who perish foolishness, but to us who are saved **it is the power of God**” (1 Cor. 1:18). —RW

RALPH WOODROW, BOX 21, PALM SPRINGS, CA 92263

Email: ralphwoodrow@earthlink.net