

Lessons from Fall

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To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Many of us have had the blessing of witnessing a beautiful transformation over the past several weeks. As summer melts into fall, God's creation has responded. Hot, humid days have succumbed to cool, crisp nights. Lush, green foliage has given way to brilliant, burning red, yellow, and gold shades. Sprawling, leafy canopies that once soaked in abundant sunlight and moisture – providing vital nutrients to its host and welcoming shade to its visitors – are now colorful carpets spread below bare branches.

Watching these changes take place each autumn is something I await with eager anticipation. They usher in a sense of relief and fulfillment. They provide an escape from the oppressive heat of long summer days and harbor expectations of bountiful harvests, tables furnished with the Lord's blessings and provision. They produce scenes and experiences that leave me in awe of our mighty and loving Father. And yet, I believe there is even more beauty to these shifting seasons than what meets the eye. There is more to observe and appreciate about these transformations beyond the stunning scenery or quaint cornucopia centerpieces. There is more to be gleaned from our Creator's masterful design than what we gather from our fields and gardens. There is wisdom and instruction, comfort, and consolation. There is purpose in the process.

As days become shorter and sunlight scarcer, trees and other vegetation respond by reducing their chlorophyll production. For city folk like myself, chlorophyll is a key ingredient in photosynthesis – the process of converting sunlight into energy. It's also the pigment that gives leaves their rich green color. As chlorophyll levels wane, so does the leaf's bright green, giving way to fall's beautiful, blazing colors. On the surface, it may seem as if this transformation from a full, lush tree to one that is naked and bare is simply the result of irresistible and overwhelming attrition, an organism overpowered and beat down by its surroundings – unable to hold on any longer. But there is more to the story. There is a deeper, more purposeful reason for this change. A reason far more important than impressing gawkers like myself. The tree actively adapts and prepares for what is inevitably coming – the changing seasons – a lean and harsh winter. As such, there is a shedding of the ancillary in preference of the primary. Amenities that were once necessary and useful – that served a purpose and were beautiful in their time – must now be put off, at least for a time. The energy required to maintain that once splendid and glorious canopy of green is now needed elsewhere. As the foliage falls and branches become bare, the tree begins focusing its energy on growth that may be less obvious – but certainly no less significant. It's during this time of apparent decline that a tree's root system experiences one of its more rapid growth spurts, a process aided by the insulating layer of freshly fallen leaves. While the visible begins to recede – the invisible is growing and expanding.

There seems to be a lesson or two implanted in our Lord's amazing design. When I'm tempted to cling desperately and futilely to what is destined and designed to fade and fall away – when I'm inclined to lament the sight of bare branches once robed in splendor and vibrance – maybe it's time to reflect on my favorite season. Maybe what I'm observing and experiencing isn't an indication of weakness or frailty. Maybe it's not something to dread or mourn. Maybe it's not a grim resignation to barrenness or futility. It could just be time to focus on something more important and pressing than soaking up the sun. It may be time to concentrate our energy on sending roots down deeper: to expand our understanding of and appreciation for God's word, to strengthen our relationship with the Lord and His people, to solidify our grip on the firm foundation. Doing so may just be what helps us survive dark and difficult days ahead. It may provide the resiliency needed to weather the harsh and bitter environments that inevitably come upon us all. It may even position and prepare us to yield more fruit in our next growing season.

As surely and swiftly as summer has faded to fall – so will life’s seasons come and go. That’s what God’s creation and word tells us. God willing, there will be days of birth and rejuvenation – days of newness and rapid growth. There will be long days in the sun – days of toil, production, and strength. There will be days of relief and bounty – days to sit down and enjoy the fruits of our labors and God’s rich blessings. And there will be days of darkness – quiet days of emptiness and loneliness. But God’s creation and word also teach us there is purpose and beauty in it all. Like Paul (**Philippians 4:12-13**), we can learn to be content in all seasons and circumstances and find our strength is something far deeper than the superficial – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Because Christ was willing to temporarily shed the glory rightfully due Him, to be debased, to lay down His very life for us, and because He rose again – we have hope. I hope that no matter what season we’re in – no matter what we’re experiencing in this life – there is a day coming we shall be raised to die no more. When the mortal puts on immortality and death is swallowed up in victory, we would do well to take a lesson from fall – to shed, and put off, whatever is necessary to lay hold of that hope – and help others do the same.