

# PINE TREES DEVOTIONAL

ISAIAH 60: 13

“The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious.”

## EXPERIENCE



Green spires, white steeples, arrow-like they rise into the blue or gray skies pointing our gaze heavenward. Coniferous evergreen trees are both beautiful and majestic. Colloquially, people often refer to all conifers as pine trees. They are named coniferous because they bear cones. When God paints the pines white with snow do you stare, as I do, in awestruck amazement at their lovely appearance? Pine trees are so noble and

stately looking with their tall and upright stature, especially when grouped together in a pine forest. To hike or ski a path through a

dense pine grove is sensational—the sights, smells, and sounds prompt contemplation. These outdoor sanctuaries, approached from a biblical perspective, should point our hearts and minds to meditative worship of our Creator and Savior. Take a hike this month and ponder the many associative connections between pine trees and Christ.

This time of year, many people bring pine trees into their homes (the picture above and below is our tree this year). The tradition of visiting a Christmas tree farm to pick out a special pine is a highlight of the season for many families. Whether artificial or real, families decorating a Christmas tree with lights and ornaments is filled with fun, frustration, and nostalgia. Light strands can be aggravating but the process from field to a fully adorned tree, and the memories evoked by ornaments of Christmas's past are a rich blessing each year. Once completed, a Christmas tree is a glorious sight, and it is rich with symbolic meaning. Take some time this advent season to sit with coffee or cocoa, with your Bible, and soak in the varied ways Christmas (pine) trees help us consider the glory of God.

## CONTEMPLATION

### Shape:

The evergreen conifers of ancient Israel were trees such as the cedar, cypress, Cilician fir, Grecian juniper, and Aleppo pine.<sup>1</sup> Much like our experience with white pines versus spruces, the people of ancient Israel would be familiar with conifer trees that had open crowns at their peaks (like many white pines) versus tapered tops that come to a point (arrow-shaped like spruces or firs). I wonder if, like me, the

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Evans, *God's Trees: Trees, Forests, and Wood in the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Leominster, UK: Day One Publications, 2018), 161-178.

Jews of that time found their thoughts directed heavenward by the pointy tops of pines. The Bible never speaks of the unique conical shape that compels our gaze upward. Yet, the arrow-like quality of pines is prolific, and my emblematic conclusion is profoundly obvious to most observers. Whether we are outdoors in a pine grove or indoors around our Christmas tree, these tapered conifers call us to set our minds on things that are above. If we are paying attention, they remind us to consider the glory, goodness, and uprightness of God and that our lives, like pine trees, should point people to Christ Jesus. Christmas trees, in particular, remind us that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). Not only is the shape of a pine tree symbolic, but the branches are emblematic also. The multi-fingered boughs of fir trees that extend outward to receive sunlight, remind me of upraised palms in worship. For those with eyes to see, pines prompt praise.

### Beauty:

In Isaiah 60, we read of the glory of the conifers from Lebanon, the nation north of Israel. God speaks emphatically of the beauty of his house and how these trees beautify his sanctuary (verses 7 & 13). In the famed forests of Lebanon of biblical times, the conifers grew not only in abundance, but also healthy and large. The Cedars of Lebanon were impressive, particularly in their height and straightness (see 2 Kings 19:23). King Solomon bought the choicest cedars and cypresses to build the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 2:8). God and Solomon both considered these trees beautiful. Cypress wood is fragrant and has a lovely reddish tint—it is beautiful inside and out.<sup>2</sup> Today, we still appreciate the attractive appearance of evergreen conifers. However, the whole point of Isaiah 60:13 is that we might see past

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<sup>2</sup> Winifred Walker, *All the Plants of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979), 62.

the beauty of the temple pine trees to what they symbolize – the glorious beauty of God.

### Aroma:

It is not just the sight of pines that inspires us, they also possess a pleasant smell. What a wonderful smell fills the living room when we first bring our Christmas tree indoors. My hands typically retain the odor of pine well after I have handled the tree because of the pitch that makes my skin sticky. I always wish the fragrance lasted longer. Imagine the pungent odors of cedar inside Solomon's Temple during construction and immediately afterwards. The plentiful resin content of these trees also provides protection against insects and helps preserve the wood's integrity and beauty.

The odiferous resin of evergreen conifers was practical too, it was used to seal ships and wine amphoras, making them watertight.<sup>3</sup> One thinks of how pitch was used to seal Noah's ark and also sealed Moses's basket that floated along the Nile River.<sup>4</sup> The covering of pitch spared lives in both cases and saved Noah's family from judgment. The smell of pine sap can help us recall how God saved his people. We may consider our own salvation that came through the covering of Christ's blood. Like in Hosea 14:1 & 4-8, the fragrance of pine may remind us to prayerfully return to the Lord, seeking his pleasing presence so that we might be the aroma of Christ to all those we come in contact with.

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<sup>3</sup> Lytton John Musselman, *Figs, Dates, Laurel, and Myrrh: Plants of the Bible and the Quran* (Portland: Timber Press, 2007), 223.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

## Evergreen:

“O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree  
How green thy branches ever!  
Thou still art green when summer wanes  
And wintry winds sweep o’er the plains.  
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,  
How green thy branches ever!”<sup>5</sup>

When surrounded by leafless deciduous trees, a lone evergreen tree stands out. Ever lush and green it speaks of life and flourishing, even amid the dead of winter. In Latin, evergreen trees are called sempervirens, meaning ever-living. In Hosea 14:8, God describes himself saying, “I am like an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit.” In pointing to God, evergreen conifers remind us of where we find the abundant life we desperately long for (John 10:10). Pine trees are an ever-present reminder that we receive the gift of everlasting life only in Christ Jesus our Lord.



## PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, we are distracted so easily during the Christmas season from the things that matter most. Give us ears to hear how pine trees speak. They proclaim your glory all year long especially in advent as we gather around them in our homes. Might they prompt us to praise and thank you for the most precious gift of all. We rejoice in Christ Jesus and what he accomplished for us. We praise you specifically for the atoning covering of Christ’s blood and

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.godtube.com/popular-hymns/oh-christmas-tree-o-tannenbaum/>

Our family tree pictured beside the lyrics to “O Christmas Tree” was cut from a local Christmas tree farm. When the winter weather subsides, our family will plant a conifer evergreen or two as a reminder of the preciousness of each tree and the responsibility we have to steward God’s creation well.

for everlasting life! Give us eyes to see beyond earthly beauty this season, for it is just a shadow of your heavenly glory. We wait, we long for your second advent. Come Lord Jesus! Amen.

## CONFIRMATION

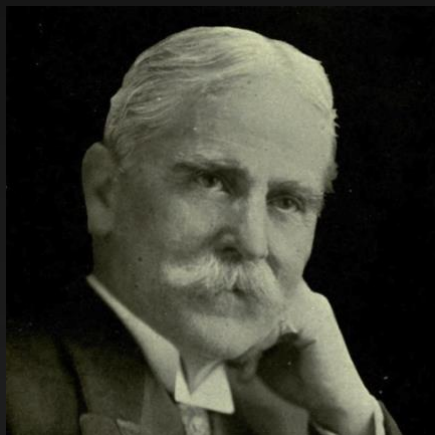
People tend to call many conifer evergreens “pines” when they are not actually pine trees. Much like lots of modern people cannot actually differentiate between firs, junipers, cypresses, cedars, and pines, so in the Scriptures it is extremely difficult to differentiate which Hebrew names are paired with which conifer evergreens. For example, some scholars connect the Hebrew name “berosh” to cypresses and junipers, some to firs, and some to pines.<sup>6</sup> While the Scriptures clearly identify cedars, admittedly, it is difficult to ascertain with certainty what these other conifers were named or how they might be grouped together under one name.

Tree worship is alive and well in America today, as a simple internet search will confirm. There are many people who speak of the spiritual nature of pine trees. I feel compelled to remind readers that followers of Christ believe in the Holy Spirit and trust the Spirit-inspired Word of God. All that is referred to as “spiritual” which is not “Spiritual” (of the Holy Spirit) is connected to who Paul refers to in Ephesians 2:2-3 as, “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived.” Paul says not to walk this path or follow this worldly way. When Christ-followers walk a path through a pine grove, we worship the Creator alone, and we make a sharp distinction between Creator and creation. The story included below helps clarify this truth. Our human roots in tree worship go deep. Ancient Canaanites, Israelites,

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<sup>6</sup> Evans, Musselman, and Walker, all referenced above, vary slightly in their identifications.

and Germanic tribes were all prone to the idolatry of venerating trees too highly, so tread cautiously.



## Henry Van Dyke

### *The First Christmas Tree*

Van Dyke was a Presbyterian minister who was born in Pennsylvania and loved the outdoors.<sup>7</sup> He is best known for writing the hymn, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”, which is a favorite of mine and filled with nature imagery. In 1897 he wrote a piece of

historical fiction about the legend of the Christmas tree, relating the story of a missionary to Germanic tribes in the 8<sup>th</sup> century named Winifred who cut down “Thor’s Oak” and encouraged the people to worship Christ.<sup>8</sup> You can read a portion of this wonderful story below, but I recommend reading more of it via the link in the footnote below.

#### Excerpt from *The First Christmas Tree*:

“‘And here,’ said [Winifred], as his eyes fell on a young fir tree, standing straight and green, with its top pointing toward the stars, amid the divided ruins of the fallen oak, ‘here is the living tree, with no stain of blood upon it, that shall be the sign of your new worship. See how it points to the sky. Call it the tree of the Christ-child. Take it up and carry it to the chieftain’s hall. You shall go no more into the shadows of the forest to keep your feasts with secret rites of shame. You shall keep them at home, with laughter and songs and rites of love. The Thunder-oak has fallen, and I think the day is coming when

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<sup>7</sup> Angie Mosteller, “Christmas: Celebrating the Christian History of Classic Symbols, Songs and Stories”, Holiday Publishing, accessed December 15, 2023, 399-409. [https://celebratingholidays.com/PDF%20Docs/Christmas%20PDF/The\\_First\\_Christmas\\_Tree.pdf](https://celebratingholidays.com/PDF%20Docs/Christmas%20PDF/The_First_Christmas_Tree.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Angie Mosteller, “Christmas”, 402.

there shall not be a home in all Germany where the children are not gathered around the green fir-tree to rejoice in the birth night of Christ.'

So they took the little fir from its place, and carried it in joyous procession to the edge of the glade, and laid it on the sled. The horses tossed their heads and drew their load bravely, as if the new burden had made it lighter.

When they came to the house of Gundhar, he ordered them to throw open the doors of the hall and set the tree in the midst of it. They kindled lights among the branches until it seemed to be tangled full of fireflies. The children encircled it, wondering, and the sweet odor of the balsam filled the house.

Then Winfried stood beside the chair of Gundhar, on the dais at the end of the hall, and told the story of Bethlehem, of the babe in the manger, of the shepherds on the hills, of the host of angels and their midnight song. All the people listened, charmed into stillness.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Angie Mosteller, “Christmas”, 402. [https://celebratingholidays.com/PDF%20Docs/Christmas%20PDF/The First Christmas Tree.pdf](https://celebratingholidays.com/PDF%20Docs/Christmas%20PDF/The%20First%20Christmas%20Tree.pdf)