

South Woods: Trees Flourishing
Psalm 92
September 14, 2025

As we conclude this series on the church, a series that leaned into tree imagery because of the name South Woods, it might be worth thinking about a tree that grows to the south of us—the gargantuan live oak. The *name* is apt. For one reason, it's gargantuan. The largest one in America is in Louisiana, its trunk boasting a circumference close to 40 feet.¹

But its size isn't the only reason the name is appropriate. Like all trees, the gargantuan *live* oak is, in fact, *alive*. These trees, like *all* trees, are organisms—ones that live for a while. In fact, there's one in Thomasville, Georgia called “The Big Oak” that dates all the way back to the 1680s. That means it stood there, slowly growing, when the Revolutionary War was taking place. It was *still* there—alive—during the war of 1812. It would've been in that Georgia forest when Bach was across the pond writing cello suites and when Napoleon was at Waterloo.² And today, in 2025, it's *still* there. People care about it, visit it, and gawk in front of it, not merely because it's beautiful, or enormous, but because it's *alive*.

Planted long ago, little by little it grew, evergreen and enduring.

Which sounds almost exactly like the description the Psalmist just gave of the righteous. And that's where we'll *end* today's sermon. But the Psalmist lists those tree-like characteristics in a Psalm about worship, which is where we'll *begin*. Note, first:

1. It is good to give thanks (vv. 1–3)

Before we jump into the text, it might be helpful to say a thing or two about the subscript. Because this is the *only* Psalm with the title: “a Song for the Sabbath Day.”³ That means this Psalm was written, not for a once-a-year festival, but for a worshipping people on the regular day of their gathering.⁴ As you know, the Sabbath was not *only* a day of rest, but a day for corporate worship, a day where burdens were lightened, a day intended for delight.⁵

So, as we consider worship today, we *could* think broadly—as in worship is “all of life.” That's true, of course. But today we're considering *primarily* what this Psalm considers, that is, *corporate* worship—that which God's people do together on the day He appointed. George Herbert called this day, “the next world's bud.”⁶ As in, *this* is what will blossom and bear fruit in the world to come.

So, what did the Psalmist write for a worshipping people to consider on the day they worshipped together? Verse 1: **It is good to give thanks to the Lord and to sing praises to Your name, O Most High.** The Psalmist calls *both* of those things—the giving of thanks *and* the singing of praises—“good.” And maybe you say, “of course he does.” In *all* circumstances it's the will of God to give thanks (1 Thess. 5). Or maybe you say, “Of course the Psalmist says this it's good to **sing praises**.” Praise is at the very essence of this book. In fact, the verb itself is the root of the Hebrew word for Psalm.⁷

¹ *The Tree Book: The Stories, Science, and History of Trees*, 191.

² See Andrew Peterson's chapter, “Southern Ents,” in *The God of the Garden*, 27.

³ Jacobson, Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT, 702

⁴ Jacobson, 705.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, TOTC, 366.

⁶ See Jim Scott Orrick, *A Year with George Herbert*, 77.

⁷ Kidner, 367.

So, yes, at first it could sound a bit too obvious, but we might consider what the Psalmist means when he says these things are “good.” First, he’s asserting that this is something that God approves of, even values. Maybe we could rewind our Old Testament to the first page and note how God sized up creation—the heavens, the seas, and the living creatures. God saw that which He made; and He saw that it was *good*. First, it’s in *that* sense that we read verse 1. God sees His people giving thanks and declares it “good.”⁸

But that’s not the *only* sense in which it is good. It’s not *only* good to do it; the Psalmist declares that it’s good *for* you.⁹ If we think carefully about this, we’d say, “Of course this is true. There aren’t *any* commands in the Bible that aren’t also for our good.” But, just to zero in on this verse, it’s worth saying out loud that giving thanks—regardless of the circumstances—and singing praise to God is good *for* you, healthy even.

Again, the Psalmist is speaking *mainly* about the gathering of God’s people. This Psalm is something they were to sing *together* on the day they gathered to worship. These words served to remind them *what* they were to do when they were together. And, as we’re already seeing—and will *soon* see—it’s telling them *why* they did so.

It’s good to give thanks. It’s good to sing praises. Verse 2 goes on to say that it’s good **to declare Your lovingkindness in the morning and Your faithfulness by night**. We’ll consider this to a *greater* degree in verses 4–11, but this means we’re *not* giving thanks or singing praises about whatever we want, but we sing and give thanks for what God has revealed about Himself to us.

Maybe you recognize those two attributes of God—his lovingkindness and His faithfulness. Sometimes lovingkindness is translated “steadfast love.” It’s *all over* the Psalms, 123 times in fact. And often that attribute is tied to His **faithfulness**, or truth.¹⁰

Why are these attributes mentioned so often, and so often together? Because those two are the attributes of God Israel has depended on since God’s rescue of them from Egypt.¹¹ I know it might *feel* this way, but I assure you I’m not forcing this in here because we start Exodus next week. It’s what nearly every good Old Testament commentator makes clear. That is, since Exodus 34, when God revealed Himself as **compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth** (Ex. 34:6), the people of God have repeatedly emphasized and sung about those truths.

So, maybe this focuses us a bit. What we’re to sing about isn’t vague, or abstract. It’s good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to His name, and to declare His lovingkindness and faithfulness. Moses knew something of it. The Psalmist did as well.

Then, years and years later, the Apostle John had these same truths in mind when he wrote, **and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth** (John 1:14). Moses knew something of it. The Psalmist did as well. But this steadfast love—covenant love—is seen most clearly in Christ Himself. “Grace and truth” serve as the New Testament echo—some would say the equivalent—of the lovingkindness and faithfulness Psalm 92 speaks of.¹²

And we’re to declare it, giving thanks for *Him*, singing praises to His name. And, again, *because* of the aim of this particular Psalm, this is something we’re to do together.

⁸ Kidner, 366.

⁹ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 261; Kidner, 366.

¹⁰ Not the *exact* same Hebrew words, but close.

¹¹ Jacobson, 704.

¹² Don Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC, 129.

In one sense, that's the *what* of Psalm 92. And then verse 3 gives us something of the *how*. Verse 3: **With the ten-stringed lute and with the harp, with resounding music upon the lyre.** So, verse 1 said it was good to *sing* praises. Verse 3 “accompanies” that with instruction to sing with musical instruments. Now, let me address a couple things regarding music. First, the use of musical instruments in worship can be abused—no question. And yet, the use of musical instruments in worship is clearly affirmed in the Scriptures. Not only in places like the Psalms, but in those places where the New Testament epistles instruct God's people to sing *those* Psalms (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19).

So, with *that* in mind first, let me quote Luther and then Spurgeon to address some extremes in the discussion on music and worship. First, a quote often attributed to Luther is that “a person who does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God . . . should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of donkeys and the grunting of hogs.” As you know, both Julie's parents and mine live on farms. I've heard that sound. I think you'll prefer music.

Yet, on the other extreme, we ought to be careful in regard to music and worship. How so? Spurgeon wrote, “Fine music without devotion is but a splendid garment upon a corpse.”¹³ So, it's worth saying that even though we're to do *all* things with excellence, God is not *primarily* concerned with the timbre of our voices or the intonation of our instruments. In worship, music is to be done in such a way that it honors the Lord—and that means excellence, but that also means motive, and it also means affection.

As I've mentioned, one of the purposes of this series is to accompany the teaching on the church with teaching on *this* church, and *why* we do the things that *we* do? Why do we sing, and why do we sing as we do? The Scriptures tell us to.

With that in mind, let me say something else about music, in particular about God's instrument—the human voice. When I was in college, I learned that most Western fixed-pitch instruments¹⁴ are tuned to something called *equal temperament*. That means the notes are divided into twelve equal steps. It's a compromise that allows you to play in all the keys, but *never* with perfectly pure intervals in any one of them. So, that means if you tuned a piano¹⁵ only for one key—say E-flat—it would sound a little *out* of tune in some other keys.

Now, when I learned this, my secular music professor explained this as a technical fact. But *then* he said that the human voice isn't bound by this; that is, it's not locked into equal temperament. A singer can adjust each note on the fly, singing perfect intervals and perfect harmony in *every* key. The prof said *that* as if it were nothing significant. I knew better. Because though Steinway and Gibson craft instruments of beauty, they're in second place. The God-made instrument—the human voice—reflects his marvelous creation in a way no human hands can match.

The highest art form on the planet is the redeemed congregation singing praises to its Redeemer together.

So, why might we sing? Because it's good, according to God—and good *for* us. We ought to be a declaring, a singing, and a giving thanks people.

The Psalmist has more *why* for us.

2. It is good to give thanks for God's person and work (vv. 4-11)

Note the word “for” in verse four: **For You, O Lord, have made me glad by what You have done. I will sing for joy at the works of Your hands.**

¹³ Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 117.

¹⁴ Like pianos and guitars.

¹⁵ With perfectly pure ratios, what musicians call “just intonation.”

Why else do we sing? Why might we sing *for joy*, as verse four describes? Because He has made us glad. It's the gladness *He's* created that overflows into our songs of joy.

But how has He made us glad? Verse 4 says it's by what He has done. Or more specifically, **at the works of His hands**. And maybe this morning you say, "I don't *feel* a lot of gladness." If that's you, then, first, listen to how the Psalmist describes gladness, and *then* listen to how He describes the works of God's hand.

Verse 5: **How great are your works, O Lord! Your thoughts are very deep**. So, first, when the Psalmist talks about songs of joy, he doesn't *merely* mean happy, clappy, glib, surfacy, smiley, ditties of joy. His gladness is *rooted* in the wise counsel of God Himself. One man writes, "to look up, in true worship . . . is to be made not only 'glad' but thoughtful, awed by the scale of God's design."¹⁶ To aim for joyful worship does *not* mean we do not *also* aim at being thoughtful.

The Psalmist stands in awe of God's design. So, what is this design? What is it that the Psalmist describes as the work of God's hands, a work that has made him glad? Verse 6: **A senseless man has no knowledge, nor does a stupid man understand this: that when the wicked sprouted up like grass and all who did iniquity flourished, it was only that they might be destroyed forevermore**.

So, just to get right to it: *What* makes him glad? *Why* might we sing?

Because God judges His enemies. Is that where you thought this was going?

In essence, the imagery is that what we observe in this world is misleading. The senseless man—the animal-like brute¹⁷—and the stupid man—the thickhead¹⁸—don't realize this. They don't have the spiritual perception to perceive that though the wicked sprout up, they sprout up like weeds.¹⁹ Those that do iniquity might flourish, *yes*, but they do so **only that they might be destroyed forevermore**.²⁰

Now, in this case, I'm going to make the connection commentaries didn't make. But isn't Pharaoh like this? He rose up. He rose up in power. But didn't that prosperity only serve as a stepping-stone to destruction?²¹ Pharaoh wasn't the first, nor the last. The senseless and stupid man does *not* perceive this iron-clad truth.

Because the Spirit-given perception is clearly stated in verse 9: **But You, O Lord, are on high forever**. Verse 1 already instructed us to sing praise to **Your name, O Most High**. There is no higher Sovereign, no Ruler more mighty, and no King more exalted. The Psalmist glories in this reality. It makes him glad. No matter what's going on around him, his Lord is on high forever. It's not unlike how Psalm 2 introduced the Psalter: **the kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!" He who sits in the heavens laughs** (Ps. 2:2–3).

The nations rage, and the people devise plans in vain. He brooks no rival. Forever, He's unmoved, ruling and reigning. And because of that, we ought to look at—stare *long at*—a couple things. The Psalmist writes, **for, behold, Your enemies, O Lord, for behold, Your enemies will perish**. The Spirit-given perception is not only that God is on high forever, but that wickedness and destruction cannot be separated from one another.²² They go hand-in-hand.

¹⁶ Kidner, 367.

¹⁷ Tremper Longman, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 704.

¹⁸ Motyer, 262.

¹⁹ TEV

²⁰ ESV

²¹ Motyer, 262.

²² Motyer, 262.

The Psalms began just like this. Those that delight in the Law of the Lord are like a tree planted by streams of water. The wicked, however, are *not* so. They're not rooted. They're neither sustained nor nourished. Instead, they're like chaff that a breeze blows away. Or as verse 9 ends, **all who do iniquity will be scattered**. Again, what we observe is misleading—like the weeds that briefly sprout up. The wicked will not endure.

Verse 7 made clear that they are destroyed **forevermore**. Why? Because of what's emphasized in verse 8.²³ He is on high **forever** (v. 8). Because He remains *there*, His enemies perish. And because He remains *there*, His people flourish.

3. **It is good to give thanks for God's person and work on His people's behalf** (vv. 10–15)

Verse 10: **But You have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox; I have been anointed with fresh oil**. As you well know, the Psalmist is a songwriter. He loves his images. He knows we can't *fully* grasp some of the most important truths about our reality without pictures. To just say we're strong doesn't cut it. So, he says we're *like* one of the strongest animals in the known world—the wild ox—an animal with horns *quite* effective, an animal whose power was renowned.²⁴

And with *that* in mind, with a conquering in mind, the righteous are anointed with fresh oil. It's possible that this was an aspect of a victory celebration.²⁵ Why might we assume that? Because of what verse 11 goes on to say: **And my eye has looked exultantly upon my foes, my ears hear of the evildoers who rise up against me**. Why has the Psalmist looked upon his foes exultantly, in triumph?²⁶ Because verse 9 instructed him to, to behold, and then to behold. And *when* he looked upon them, what did he see? When God's enemies are doomed, so are his.²⁷ With the *eyes* and ears of faith, God's victory is ours.

Which is not all that dissimilar from God's people standing on the shore of the Red Sea, blocked by its immensity, understandably assuming that the hooves beating closer and closer would be their doom. And yet *there*, as you recall, though Moses doesn't say **behold, Your enemies will perish**, he says something quite similar: **Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord** (Ex. 14:13).

Again, because He is on high, His enemies perish. And because His enemies are also yours, your enemies perish.

And because of that, God's people flourish. Verse 12: **The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, He will grow like a cedar in Lebanon**. For the second time in this hymnbook, and the second time in *this* series, the Psalmist says that the righteous are like a tree (Ps. 1). But in *this* case, they're like the palm tree, a tree known for flourishing, being full of sap, *even* in arid places (v. 14).²⁸ That's a helpful picture.

The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, and the Psalmist continues: **He will grow like a cedar in Lebanon**, the most majestic tree in the ancient world.²⁹ For these readers, cedars would've been the embodiment of strength,³⁰ often living for hundreds and hundreds of years, both preceding and succeeding their days.

²³ Some would say this is the center of the Psalm, like Motyer, 262.

²⁴ Longman, 705.

²⁵ Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*, 566.

²⁶ Jacobson, 703.

²⁷ Kidner, 368.

²⁸ Ash, 568; *The Tree Book*, 120. Further, as maybe you recall from Matthew's Gospel, palms were often part of celebrations of victory.

²⁹ Ash, 568.

³⁰ Kidner, 369.

With that in mind, that enduring truth in mind, we might contrast the fragility of “grass” back in verse 7 with the stability of the cedar in verse 12. Or in Motyer’s words, contrast “the majestic with the tiny; the durable with the transient.”³¹

Which leads us into verse 13. But here the Psalmist is no longer speaking just of a singular tree, but of a multiplicity of them—a forest, or *Woods*. And he’s speaking of the *place* where these trees have been planted, what we might call the soil of their flourishing. Verse 13: **Planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God.**

Again, this is a song for the worship of God’s people. And I don’t think it’s incidental that he references a *place* constructed for worship. Nor is it incidental that he mentions *these* trees. As you might recall, Solomon’s Temple had walls of cedar. And as you might recall, within that temple were engraved palm trees (1 Kings 6:14; 29).

Now, there’s more significance *there* than we have time for today. But what we can affirm is this: first, these trees—the righteous ones—are planted in a place devoted to the worship of God. And, secondly, it’s in *that* place that they flourish. One man wrote, “The Lord’s children are like trees which do not grow in every soil, are not nourished with every moisture; the place of their planting, growth, and flourishing is in the house of the Lord, where the Word and Spirit of the Lord, joined with the holy ordinances, may be had for food.”³²

These trees are planted alongside one another, in the house of the Lord, and *there* they flourish. Verse 14 goes on to describe them: **They will still yield fruit in old age. They shall still be full of sap and very green.** I found helpful Alec Motyer once again, where he said, “The world’s ambition is to ‘stay young’; the Bible’s is to grow old fruitfully.”³³ The Psalmist points us to this enduring, fruitful, ever-green tree in order to show us that once the work of grace has begun, it continues to grow until the day we die.³⁴

How? How is this so? Because, just like Psalm 1, the word for “planted” actually carries the passive sense of “transplanted.” In other words, it is *not* by nature but by *grace* that they are what they are.³⁵ They’ve been moved, from an arid desert where they might’ve withered, and placed by streams of water. They’ve been *transplanted* so that they might grow like a cedar of Lebanon, flourishing in the courts of our God.

So that by their lives, not only by their lips, they might, verse 15, **declare that the Lord is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.** Said another way, by our vitality we might not only *sing* but *be* to the praise of God’s glory.³⁶

Conclusion

And that’s why you exist. This is why we—the church—exists. Which is why this series on the church *ends* on *this* topic. Because the goal of everything we’ve said prior is *this*. A people are planted for *this* purpose. They’re transplanted by streams of water to be nourished by the Word of God for *this* reason. They grow together, fellowship with one another, and share the gospel with the nations *all* for the purpose of God’s glory—to declare with our lips and our lives His lovingkindness and faithfulness—to worship. And that’s what we aim to do at this meal as well—to give thanks, to praise, and to rejoice in the One who has made us glad.

³¹ Motyer, 262.

³² Ash, quoting E. W. Hengstenberg, 568.

³³ Motyer, 262.

³⁴ Ash, 569.

³⁵ Motyer, 261–262.

³⁶ Kidner, 369.

