

Equipped to thrive, not just survive

Are you thriving or surviving? We can appear to be thriving when conditions are in our favour, but we begin to droop and enter survival mode when we encounter periods of dryness in our lives. At one level, this is understandable, but not inevitable. This was brought home to me during a trip to Israel in June 2009.

I saw the most beautiful trees and flowers in Israel that I couldn't name because they were unfamiliar to me. However, one tree I did recognise was the palm tree. I don't know much about palm trees but you don't need a lot of horticultural knowledge to notice the environment in which many of these trees had been planted. While some were in cultivated areas, others were in rows surrounded by open expanses of dry, arid ground, with no other vegetation in sight. I noticed three things about these palm trees that could be relevant to our spiritual lives:

They were growing. Despite the inhospitable conditions around them, growth was still taking place. The same is true for us, too. Whatever our environment, as long as we are alive, we will grow. Sounds good, huh? Problem is, not all growth is healthy. We can grow bitter and cynical as a result of our circumstances, or our love can grow cold. If you're in a dry, barren place right now, how are you responding to this? Are you allowing yourself to grow away from God or are you growing closer to him in love and wholehearted obedience?

They were fruitful. The palm trees that we saw were date palms so, not surprisingly, they produced dates! Even though the trees were surrounded by arid land, they were still fruitful. It's OK for palm trees, perhaps, but what about us? Surely we can't produce good fruit when we're experiencing spiritual, emotional and relational dryness? Too right we can't! This is because we are not meant to be fruit-producers - our task is to be fruit-bearers. And there's a world of difference between the two. In Galatians 5:22 and 23 we read about the fruit of the Spirit. It's his fruit - he's the fruit-producer. How, then, do we become fruit-bearers of what he has produced? Jesus himself provided the answer in the opening verses of John 15. He referred to himself as the vine and we, his followers, as the branches. When a branch is properly connected to its source, it won't *produce* fruit, but it's perfectly positioned to *bear* fruit. Like a branch, we need to hang in there and stay actively connected to Jesus Christ by loving him and willingly following through on what he says - even in the dry places of our lives.

They were watered. Desert conditions and water don't seem to go together, do they? Looking at the vast expanse of dry land surrounding the palms, you might initially think that these were some kind of "super-plants" which had no need of water. Not so! Apparently date palms use around 185 gallons a day in the summer when temperatures are particularly high. Without access to this water, the palms wouldn't be able to survive. How, then, do they get the water they require in the middle of a desert? The answer lies in their root system. Palms have long, fibrous roots that absorb water trapped deep under the sandy soil. Without these deep roots, the palms would be unable to access the subterranean water. There's a transferable principle here, clearly stated in this verse: *"Let your roots grow down into him (Christ) and draw up nourishment from him, so you will grow in faith, strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught..."*¹ And - I just love this: *"the godly will flourish like palm trees..."*²

Want to thrive like a palm tree in the desert? I certainly do!

¹ Colossians 2:7 (NLT)

² Psalm 92:12 (NLT)