

THE TREE OF LIFE AND THE LIFE OF TREES

GROUP BIBLE STUDY

KEY BIBLE PASSAGE

Genesis 1:11-13 & 29-31

“Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. ¹² The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening, and there was morning - the third day. ... ²⁹ Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground - everything that has the breath of life in it - I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning - the sixth day.”

OPENING ACTIVITIES

Choose from the following activities. The aim is to get people outdoors, relaxed, talking, and thinking about trees and the part they play in our lives. Choose one of the first two outdoor activities, and then one or, ideally, both of the indoor activities.

1. TREE-RUBBING (20 minutes, plus walking time)

Resources needed: large pieces of paper; sticky-tape; wax crayons

Take the group out to a local park or large garden where there are trees. Using the sticky-tape, attach paper to the bark of trees, choosing a variety of trees with different textures. The best way of rubbing the crayons is to take the paper wrapping off them and rub lengthways, being careful not to be too firm and tear the paper. Bring them back inside and compare your artwork!

2. LEAF COLLAGE (15 minutes outside; 15 minutes inside)

Resources needed: large piece of paper; pen; glue (PVA or glue sticks)

This activity will only work at the right time of year in some climates! Take the group outside and collect fallen leaves, or leaves off living trees – as many different shapes and colours as possible. Bring the leaves back indoors (or if the weather is good to an outdoor table) and spread out a large piece of paper with a basic tree outline drawn on it. Stick the leaves to make your own group tree – being as artistic as you can.

3. TREES OF LIFE (20 minutes)

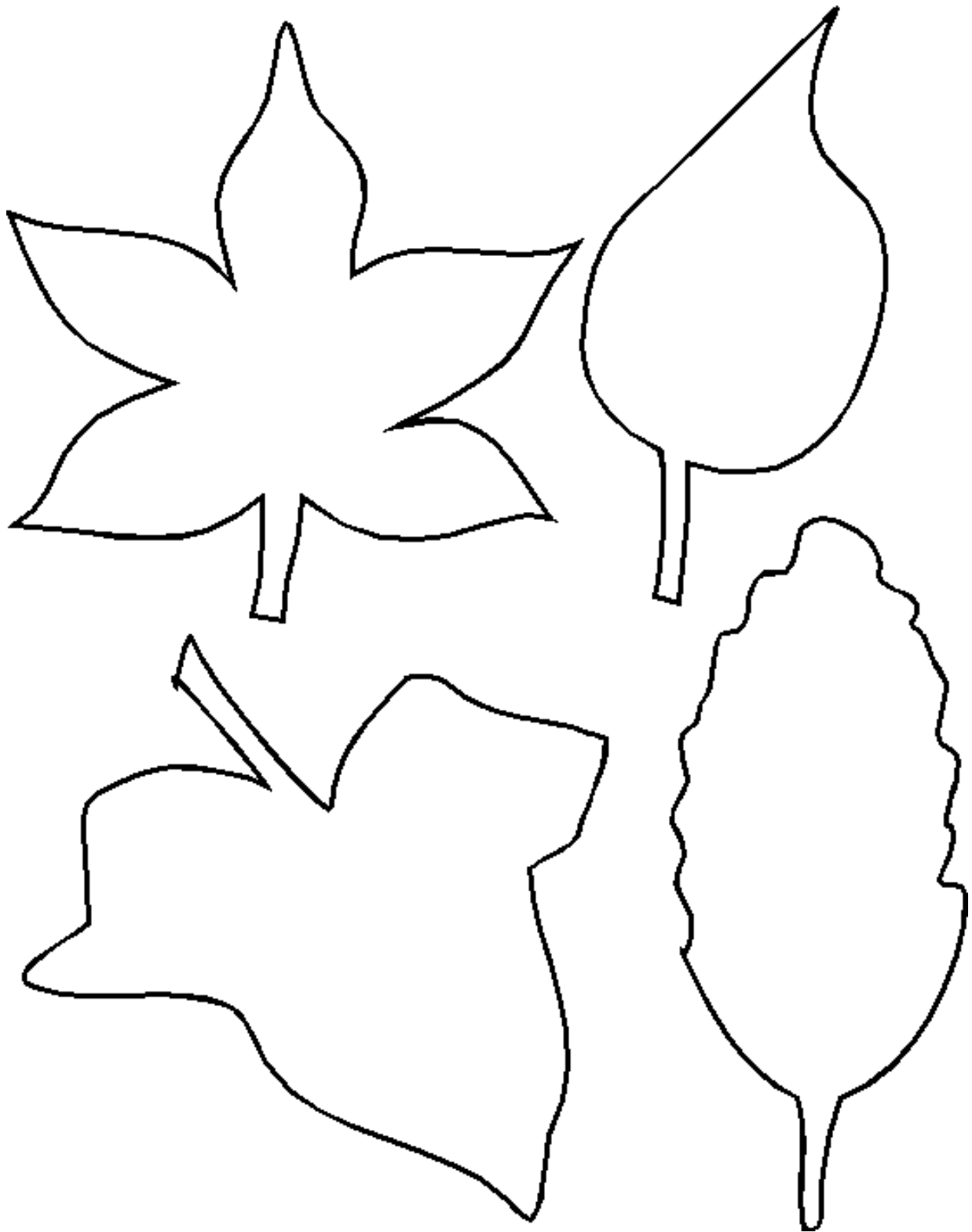
Resources needed: Large piece of paper; leaf outlines (see next sheet) – enough for 4-6 for each person; scissors; pens; glue sticks or blu-tack; coloured pens or pencils.

Get the most artistic member of the group to draw the outline of a large tree on a big piece of paper – ideally the size of a table-top. Give each person some leaf outlines (depending on time, these could be cut out in advance). Have a bit of discussion or ‘brainstorming’ about everything we use trees for in our daily lives ... and each time somebody suggests



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something, get them to write it on a leaf and stick it on the tree. If ideas run low, you could suggest from the following: fuel (charcoal, food, fossil fuels); water (stabilising the climate and encouraging regular rainfall); producing oxygen; absorbing CO₂; tackling climate change; rope / fibre; building materials; stabilising soil; home for wildlife; source of medicines. Keep going round and round until the whole sheet of paper is full of ideas.

4. TREE STORIES (20-30 minutes)

The aim is to get people to share memories of trees they love or remember well, and reflect a bit more deeply on our relationship with trees. If possible start by reading the following story by Ginny Vroblesky who led an A Rocha USA project called 'Listening to our Trees' in Anapolis, Maryland:

Wisdom from an unexpected source.

I had often seen the tree on my morning walks. It was striking in its own way. I had glanced at it with pity, seeing it as an example of the abuse of man – specifically the gas and electric company. It bore the scars of missing branches. Its trunk had been repeatedly cut to below the level of the power lines. Here was the tallest tree of the eastern forest, a tulip tree, stunted, gnarled and misshapen.

This week I stopped to truly consider the tree for the first time. I was surprised to turn around and discover a German shepherd dog laying a stick at my feet. "Does he want me to pick it up," I asked his master who was coming up close behind him. "He wouldn't let you," he replied. "He is just taking a rest. Are you looking at the damaged house", he asked." "No", "I have been wondering what that tree across the street would say to us." "Look at me. I live in spite of the gas and electric company," the man proclaimed. "What about the one over here that fell on the house," I asked. "He grew too big for his own good," he quipped.

I laughed as the man and his dog walked on and then it seemed as though the tree began to speak to my spirit. "How old are you," I asked. "Our heart wood flows at a different rhythm than yours," he responded (at least it seemed to be a he). "We tulip trees can live long – you would say 600 years, but we think in terms of maturity and fruitfulness rather than age. We know that our lives will continue to be fruitful long after we, ourselves are gone."

I had been wondering how young the tree had been when it had first encountered the power lines, but the tree's response turned my thoughts to myself, my own struggle with growing older and questions of my life's value. "What do you mean," I asked.

"Have you never seen a tree that has fallen in the forest? When we leave our place we create a gap in the woods, letting in light to a previously dark spot. New, young trees have the opportunity to grow. All parts of our bodies are valuable. When we fall, tiny organisms come and release the energy that has been trapped in our cells. It goes back into the soil to nourish a new life. Remember, too, that we have been on earth much longer than man. We see things differently."



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“That’s true”, I said. I had read the story of Genesis and also knew the fossil record. This reminded me of other verses in the Bible. “I have heard it said,” I began, that “all the trees of the field clap their hands.” “Ah, yes,” he replied. We trees set our faces towards our Creator. We rejoice when we see his work, whether it is in the provision of the sun or rain or when he keeps his word. We share the earth with you. We face challenges all the time, many that we cannot control, such as leaf borers, disease, just as you do. But we deal with the challenges as they come- we do not add to them by concern for our future or fretting over the past. We know we have value. Of course right now I am annoyed by that pesky English Ivy growing up my trunk. There is nothing I can do about it and if it grows too dense it will smother my light, Oh well.”

“What about the horrible things the gas and electric company did to you,” I demanded. “Look at me,” the tree whispered. “Look at my branches.” And I did. They looked like huge muscular arms. They sprang horizontally from the trunk below the power lines, bent at the elbow and then sent leaders soaring to the sky. The tips of the braches reached as high as any neighboring tree. Their leaves waved in the sun up with those of the Willow Oak across the street. No near by tulip tree was taller than this one.

“I have noticed that the furrows in your bark seem deeper that the other tulip trees your same size.” I observed. “That’s true”, he replied. My life has been challenged in ways theirs has not. “My brothers have had a more delightful place to grow. I might not be as handsome as my peers, but I have fulfilled my task on earth just as well.”

“What task,” I questioned. “Why to reach for the sun and to give life. Don’t you know that I eat light? I gather light particles and from them make food for everyone else. Why, my branches and leaves feed insects, aphids and caterpillars. Some make honeydew from the life I give them. They in turn provide food for other creatures. Without me and my brethren there would be no life on earth. This is a task worth striving for, wouldn’t you agree?”

I certainly would, I thought, to give life must be a wonderful thing. But he went on. “I have been challenged repeatedly, but – look – my flowers are just as lovely and smell as sweet as anyone else’s.

I wondered at him. I had expected bitterness and regret. But he actually seemed to be grateful for the difficulties in his life, for here he stood while some of his peers were gone, toppled by strong winds. His branches had had to spread wide and low. He encircled the power lines. His neighbors had fallen on them. He was confident of his future. He knew that even though he died his value would go on. “What about you?” he asked. “Thank you,” I murmured as I turned thoughtfully away. But there was lightness in my heart that lasted almost the whole day.

- Ask what the author, Ginny Vroblesky, learned, and what we can learn from trees.



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- Encourage people to share their own tree stories, however brief or simple – they may be a childhood memory of tree-climbing or fruit-picking, a tree seen from a window ... or anything!

BIBLE DISCUSSION (40 minutes)

Read: Genesis 1 – the whole chapter - putting the creation of trees and of people in context. It is important that each member of the group can see the passage in order to answer the questions.

Discuss:

- What were the first living things that God made? Is this significant, and if so, how?
- How did God describe the creation of trees and plants (v.12)?
- Why did God say 'very good' after completing the work of creation? Do you think the 'very' applies just to the final part of creation (people) or to 'all that God had made'?
- Who are trees and plants *for* (v.29-30)?
- Does that mean we can do whatever we like with them? Read Colossians 1:15-16 – What does this suggest about who everything, including trees, was ultimately made for?

Watch: VIDEO clip (2 minutes) of Martin Kaonga talking about the importance of trees.

Read: Psalm 1 – the righteous person like a tree rooted in good soil

- In what ways are we like trees? (*Dependence on rain, sun, soil, climate*)
- What can we learn from observing trees, both 'spiritually' and more widely? (*depending on God and his word, importance of roots, adapting to habitat, limits to growth, being part of a community / ecosystem ...*)
- How can we cultivate a greater sense of our daily dependence on trees?

Watch: VIDEO clip (2-3 minutes) downloadable from the A Rocha 'Life of Trees' with Kenyan Christians talking about what trees mean in their lives.

- How can we ensure that trees and plants continue to provide for both people and other creatures?
- How do lifestyles in Western countries link to deforestation in the rest of the world?
- How can we make stronger links so people realise the impact of consumer choices?

Read: Isaiah 55:12-13

- Why does the Bible use language like 'clapping hands' and 'praising the Lord' (Psalm 148) to refer to trees and similar language to refer even to rocks, rivers and mountains?



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- What difference does it make to us if we imagine every part of creation as part of the ‘choir’ praising God together?

CONCLUSION

At the top of a large piece of paper, write: **“How can we look after trees?”** and draw four columns running down the paper, labelled **‘Personal’**, **‘Group / Church’**, **‘Community’**, and **‘Global’**.

Discuss: How can we take trees more seriously? How can we look after them, help them to thrive, recognise our dependence, and enable trees to worship God as they are meant to?

Write practical suggestions in the appropriate column. The following gives some ideas:

Personal	Group / Church	Community	Global
- learn names of local trees	- create guide to churchyard trees	- tree-planting day in local park	- adopt A Rocha tree-planting project
- only buy FSC ¹ approved wood	- purchase only recycled paper	- begin community orchard	- offset travel through Climate Stewards

Prayer: Use the ‘Tree of Life’ (Opening Activity 3) as a basis for short informal ‘thank you’ prayers, and the concluding practical ideas paper for prayers asking for God’s guidance and help in caring for trees locally and globally.

¹ Forestry Stewardship Council

