

Dr. August Konkell, Proverbs, Session 12,

The Tree of Life, Proverbs 10-15

6-min. Video Overview

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So what if an ancient metaphor could give us a practical blueprint for living a good life, right here and now? That's really the promise of the tree of life in the book of Proverbs. It's an idea that has fascinated people for thousands of years, and in this explainer, we're going to dig in and see what it truly means. Our whole journey starts with this one beautiful, famous line from Proverbs chapter 3. Wisdom is a tree of life to those who take hold of her.

I mean, it's poetic, it's powerful, and it immediately makes you wonder. Now, what does it really mean for something to be a tree of life? Is this just some nice, old-fashioned phrase, or is it a practical guide for building a life that actually has meaning? Let's unpack what the authors of Proverbs were really trying to tell us. Okay, first things first.

To really get this, you have to know that the idea of a sacred tree representing life wasn't just invented by the Israelites. This symbol was everywhere. It was part of a huge cultural conversation happening all across the ancient Near East, and this is where it gets really interesting.

In the Canaanite culture right next door, they had something called the Ashura, which was often a literal, living tree that was worshipped as a symbol of a goddess. Now, the Bible explicitly forbids worshipping the Ashura, but it does something so clever. It takes the idea, this powerful symbol of a life-giving tree, and completely transforms it into a metaphor for wisdom.

And get this, this isn't just a theory. We have archaeology to back it up. There was this famous discovery in the Sinai Peninsula of a pot shard, basically a piece of broken pottery, that shows an Ashura tree and actually connects it with Yahweh, the God of Israel.

It just goes to show how real and powerful this symbol was for people. It wasn't some abstract thought. It was a deeply rooted image of life and vitality.

Alright, so with that background, let's look at the first big way Proverbs uses this metaphor. And it's not just about what you know; it's all about the kind of person you are. So check out this verse in chapter 11.

It says the fruit of righteousness. In other words, the outcome of having a wise and just character is a tree of life. It creates life for everyone around you.

But that second half, the one who saves souls, is wise. Well, that holds a fascinating secret when you look at the original Hebrew. You know, when we hear the word soul in English, our minds usually jump to a Greek concept, the *sukkah*.

It's this idea of an immaterial spirit, something totally separate from our physical bodies that needs to be saved for some kind of afterlife. But the original Hebrew word here is *nephesh*. And *nephesh* is so much more earthy.

It means breath, your throat, your appetite. Sometimes it just means a person or a life. You know, like when someone says 30 souls were lost at sea, they just mean 30 people.

So the proverb wasn't talking about saving some spiritual essence. It was talking about influencing people here in this life. So here's the crucial point.

A wise person, just by being who they are, wins over or captures other people. They influence them towards wisdom and away from foolishness, which the Proverbs see as a path to death. It's about having a real, tangible, lifesaving impact on people right here and now.

But the metaphor doesn't stop there. The tree of life also branches out into two other incredibly powerful, life-giving forces. Having your hopes fulfilled and using healing words.

I mean, how true is this? The scholar whose work this is based on, Dr. Konkel, shared a great personal story about falling in love with his wife, Esther. He said that when she finally agreed to marry him, that fulfilled desire was a tree of life. It just filled him with this incredible encouragement and joy.

It's a feeling we can all relate to, right? When a hope you've held onto for so long finally comes true, it breathes new life into you. And of course, this highlights the dark side of that proverb. When hope is delayed forever or just lost completely, it's devastating.

A person without hope has nothing left to lose. And that is a truly dangerous place to be. So giving hope to someone is a fundamentally life-giving act.

This amazing metaphor also applies to the power of our words. Proverbs 15 kicks off with this piece of what is just profound psychological insight. It's telling us that our words can either pour gasoline on a fire or they can be a source of life and healing.

So Dr. Konkel tells another fantastic story. He was backing up his car and accidentally bumped another car in a parking lot. The other driver came out, and she was furious, just yelling at him.

Now, instead of getting defensive, he just offered a calm, soft answer, acknowledging what happened without getting into a fight. And after a few moments, her anger just fizzled out. She calmed down and drove away.

That is a soft answer in action. And this leads right into another verse from that very same chapter, which says a healing tongue is a tree of life. The right words spoken at the right time can literally heal relationships, de-escalate conflict, and bring everything back to a good place.

They generate life in a situation that could have easily led to destruction. Now, it's really easy to look at all these proverbs and see them as a simple formula for success. You know, do this, get that.

But that's a huge misunderstanding. The book is making a much, much deeper point. The common misconception is that proverbs are transactional.

You do good, you get good. But the deeper truth is that it's all about character formation. The goal isn't just to do the right things to get a reward.

The goal is to be the right kind of person, to internalize these values so your actions just naturally flow from a place of wisdom. And this is absolutely key. Proverbs is realistic.

It knows that life isn't always fair. You can do everything right and still face terrible hardship or injustice. The book isn't offering a guarantee for an easy life.

It's a guide to building a life of value, no matter what your circumstances are. So if it's not about a simple formula for getting rich or having an easy time, what's the endgame here? What is the actual fruit that this tree of life offers? The true reward is about the things that actually last. A good reputation that's a blessing to other people.

A legacy that will be valued long after you're gone. An inner security that's built on wise values that doesn't just disappear when things get tough. At the end of the day, it's about having a positive, life-generating influence on your entire community.

So in the end, the tree of life isn't some mystical object out there somewhere. It's a metaphor for a life that is built on wisdom. And it leaves every single one of us with this really powerful, reflective question that just cuts right to the heart of it all.

What kind of fruit is your life producing for the people around you?