

# REFORESTING FAITH

What Trees  
Teach Us About the  
Nature of God and His Love for Us



UNCORRECTED  
PROOF

MATTHEW SLEETH, MD

# REFORESTING FAITH

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](https://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

# REFORESTING FAITH

What Trees  
Teach Us About the  
Nature of God and His Love for Us

MATTHEW SLEETH, MD



WATERBROOK

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

## REFORESTING FAITH

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, ESV® Text Edition® (2016), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the King James Version. Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (NRSV) are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

Hardcover ISBN 978-0-7352-9175-1

eBook ISBN 978-0-7352-9176-8

Copyright © 2019 by Matthew Sleeth

Cover design by Kelly L. Howard; cover photo by Connor Limbocker

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

WATERBROOK® and its deer colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sleeth, J. Matthew, 1956- author.

Title: Reforesting faith : what trees teach us about the nature of God and his love for us / Matthew Sleeth.

Description: First edition. | Colorado Springs : WaterBrook, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018037107 | ISBN 9780735291751 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780735291768 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Trees in the Bible. | Bible—Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Trees—Religious aspects—Christianity. | God (Christianity)—Knowableness.

Classification: LCC BS665 .S54 2019 | DDC 220.8/58216—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018037107>

Printed in the United States of America

2019—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

### SPECIAL SALES

Most WaterBrook books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. Custom imprinting or excerpting can also be done to fit special needs. For information, please email [specialmarketscms@penguinrandomhouse.com](mailto:specialmarketscms@penguinrandomhouse.com) or call 1-800-603-7051.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

To Bill and Carol Latimer,  
who have planted a legacy;  
To our children and grandchildren,  
who need us to plant trees;  
And to the One who planted all the trees,  
*soli Deo gloria.*

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](https://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)



Every tree has its enemy,  
few have an advocate.

—J. R. R. TOLKIEN

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](https://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

# Contents

## PART I: Laying the Groundwork

1 What Trees Teach Us . . . . .	3
2 The Bible's Trail of Trees . . . . .	9
3 The Fruit That Changed Everything . . . . .	23

## PART II: Seeds of Faith

4 The Tree of Hospitality . . . . .	43
5 The Wooden Ladder to Heaven. . . . .	55
6 The Bush Afire with God . . . . .	67
7 The Gardener of Israel . . . . .	81
8 The Tree of Hope. . . . .	93
9 Finding Common Ground. . . . .	105

## PART III: Fruit of the Tree

10 The Messiah Tree . . . . .	125
11 Christ, the True Vine . . . . .	143
12 Christ and the Cross. . . . .	161
13 Christ, the Tree of Life . . . . .	177
Epilogue: Bringing Heaven to Earth . . . . .	193
Why I Wrote This Book. . . . .	199
Notes. . . . .	203

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

# REFORESTING FAITH

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](https://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)





## PART I

# Laying the Groundwork

The LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

—GENESIS 2:15–17, KJV

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](https://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)



# What Trees Teach Us

They are like trees  
planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.  
In all that they do, they prosper.

—PSALM 1:3, NRSV

I love trees. I always have. No one told me to love them; I just do. I love looking at them. I love sitting in their shade. I love hearing the sound of wind rustling through their leaves. But what can trees teach us? Specifically, what can trees teach us about the nature of God and his love for us?

Nearly two decades ago, during a difficult season of my life, I began to search for answers to these questions. At the time I did not believe in God. I was trained in the sciences as a physician, and my

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

search eventually led me on a nature walk through the Bible. This book, *Reforesting Faith*, shares what I learned.

Before you embark on this trail with me, be warned: my job, my home, my family, the books I read, even the state I live in and the places I travel have all been completely changed by this journey through the woods.

## GOD'S TREES

Trees grow older, taller, and bigger than anything else on the earth. They have been with us since the beginning of time. We humans owe our very lives to the sap, bark, wood, flowers, and fruit of trees. We are their masters, yet they are our stake in the future.

And trees are beautiful. On the tops of mountains, bending over the sides of rivers, ringing the boreal latitudes, dripping wet with equatorial showers, trees blanket our world.

At night when the air is clear, trees can be seen grouped together at the edge of the forest. Illuminated in silvery moonlight, they appear to have been stopped midsentence. All night long they draw a deep breath, hold it for one count, and then from dawn to dusk exhale life-giving oxygen.

The smell of a pine forest on a hot day, the sound of palms clattering in a tropical breeze, the sight of yellow maple leaves raining down through an autumn sky—these are all evidence of trees giving praise to their Creator.

For those with ears to hear and eyes to see, the enormity of the

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

gift of trees impresses itself upon us anew each day. Only God can make a tree.

## EMBARKING ON THE TRAIL

*Reforesting Faith* is about trees in the Bible. Reading it won't make your credit card debt disappear. It won't make your teeth whiter or your hair shinier. This is not a self-help book. It's about gaining insight into why God placed our great-great-grandparents in a garden of trees and told them to dress and keep them. It will help you understand why George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and other great Christian writers cast the heroes of their stories as the protectors of trees and the bad guys as their enemies.

For the majority of my life, I did not believe in God. That's not the case anymore. In fact, the trees in the Bible are a crucial part of what brought me to faith.

Christianity is the only religion that weaves trees from one end of its sacred text to the other. Every important character and every major event have a tree marking the spot. There is a tree in the first and last chapter of the Bible, in the first psalm, and in the first gospel. Throughout this book we'll look at how the Bible uses trees to reveal spiritual truths about humanity and God. We'll even see how the Bible contains assertions about trees not discovered by science until the modern era.

Christians bring trees indoors once a year to celebrate the birth of their Savior. But many believe that Christians are anti-trees. Why?

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

This is one of the questions *Reforesting Faith* will answer. We'll go on a journey from Genesis to Revelation looking at how God uses

**Every important character and every major event have a tree marking the spot.**



trees in the Bible. And just like in the Bible, it's okay to skip forward to read about Jesus (in part 3) and then come back to chapter 1.

Who was the first person in the Bible to plant trees? Who was the first person in Scripture to deface a tree? Why did Jesus say the kingdom of heaven is like a tree? Why are we told that trees will shout for joy when the Lord returns to judge the earth? Can trees really talk to each other the way they do in the Bible? Why do some people smile when they see a tree blowing in the breeze, while others take no notice? Which has more trees: heaven or hell? These are just a few of the questions you'll be able to answer after reading this book.

## KEY TRAIL MARKERS

God's ways are made tangible in creation. Trees help us understand and see the nature and character of God. Our nature trek through the Bible will focus on several themes:

- God loves trees.
- Like God, trees are in the life business.
- Responsible stewardship is one way we can express our love and respect for God.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

- Planting trees demonstrates love for our neighbors and hope for future generations.
- Trees help us regain our sense of wonder.

We are going to cover a lot of ground together. We will journey to ancient trees that stood witness to major interactions between God and our favorite Bible characters. We will also explore the varied ways God used trees to foretell the coming of the Messiah. Finally, we will see how Jesus and the apostles used the language of trees to share the good news.

Please note that in this book the term *tree* will refer not only to living trees but also to the items that come from trees, such as rods, walking sticks, staffs, wooden ladders, and the cross. We will also include parts of trees, such as fruit, seeds, roots, branches, and leaves. Further, bushes, vines, and other plants will do their part in helping us find God's deeper meaning in the context of the Bible.

## JOIN ME ON THE WALK

Every time our bejeweled planet completes another circle around the sun, God gives every tree on the earth a new ring. Tick goes the clock, and another year goes by. This year will we see the trees? Will we heed the call to protect them? Will we plant the small tree today that the next generation will climb and the following one will find shade under? Will we plant in faith? Will we be called “oaks of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:3)?

Two opposing forces are at war on this planet. One says, “Look

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

to yourself. It's all about you." The other says, "Love God, and love your neighbor." The man who said the latter claimed to be *the* true vine and the tree of life.

*Reforesting Faith* is about what God loves. God loves trees. Join me on a walk through the Bible and be prepared to meet the One who loves trees.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

## The Bible's Trail of Trees

The land produced vegetation—all sorts of seed-bearing plants, and trees with seed-bearing fruit. Their seeds produced plants and trees of the same kind. And God saw that it was good.

—GENESIS 1:12, NLT

Nothing beats the smell of a pine forest on a summer's day. No stillness is like the quiet of ancient redwoods at night. I can't think of a fruit grown on trees that I don't love. Trees look beautiful. They sound beautiful. They taste beautiful.

The first tree I remember was a dogwood that stood at one corner of my parents' front yard. Its limbs cascaded to the ground, forming a hidden playhouse underneath. The bark was rough, the petals silky white, and the berries red and smooth.

Perhaps if I had grown up in the desert, I would wax sentimental about cacti, but I was raised in the rural town of Woodfield,

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)



Maryland. No hamlet ever has been more accurately christened. Woodfield was a place of forests, fertile soil, and pastures. As a youth I walked for miles along the single-lane pathways made by Holstein cows and the twin paths made by the wheels of farm vehicles. I rambled through the woods along the upper branches of the Seneca River. I lived under an open sky and a canopy created by oaks, maples, and tulip poplars. The woods came right up to the fences, which held the trees back from the rolling fields.

In kindergarten I helped plant my first tree. I poured water on the roots of a willow oak beside Woodfield Elementary School. It was the first all-electric school in America. Lady Bird Johnson came to town to admire our school and inspect our growing trees. “Anyone can plant a tree or shrub,” she said, encouraging us—and the nation—to become avid tree planters. The first lady’s hat and gloves and her entourage enchanted me. I still can hear how she drawled the word *shrub*, pronouncing it in a way that seemed to give it more than one syllable. I have been planting trees ever since.

In high school I was enrolled in a vocational-technical program and later worked for seven years as a carpenter. I could spot the crown in a spruce joist, the check of a pine stud, and the bow in a fir two-by-twelve. Ah, to trim out a house with clear pine, poplar, or maple. I was fortunate; construction sites were quieter back in the days before air compressors and pneumatic nail guns. We cut trim with backsaws and a hand miter box. We nailed crown molding with Blue Grass hammers. Nothing is quite as wonderful as building a house made of trees on a dry, breezy, blue autumn day.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

## MEETING MY BETTER THREE-QUARTERS

When I was in my early teens, my family seemed to implode. By the time I was sixteen, I was living on my own and working as a carpenter, and I had long since stopped going to church.

One December day when I was in my early twenties, I went to see about installing a large bay window in a periodontal surgeon's home. The family was Jewish. When their eighteen-year-old daughter walked into the room, her parents' worst nightmare began to unfold. The Jewish girl fell in love with the Gentile carpenter. Two years later Nancy and I married with a maple tree as our chuppah—the canopy we stood beneath for our vows. I brought my foot down on the glass, and we were off. *L'chaim!*

A week later I told Nancy my plan, which was to become a doctor. There was just one problem: school always had been a struggle for me. I'd never taken a class in algebra, chemistry, or biology, and I'd flunked tenth grade. Nonetheless, Nancy told me, "I'm with you—for better or worse."

I went to visit an uncle who had been a college dean. Despite my less than stellar academic record, he believed in me. "You can do this. I'll get you into the university. You have a semester, and the rest is up to you."

Fortunately, the world had changed since I'd been in high school. Though I'm extremely dyslexic, it no longer mattered that I couldn't memorize the multiplication tables. With the advent of the calculator, I could do physics. With a small dictionary ever present, I could

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

write. I worked like a medieval alchemist on the brink of discovery. Two years and six months later I was accepted at three medical schools.

Our son was born at the end of medical school and our daughter during my last year of residency. Afterward we moved to Maine. I worked in a hospital's emergency department. Long shifts and sleepless nights are staples of emergency medicine, but it offers priceless moments: getting hugs from children, holding hands with those who are lonely, seeing a patient get well. I especially loved suturing wounds because it gave me time to hear the stories of my patients' lives.

Nancy and I built a home in Maine, the most forest-filled state in the union. Our children went to Mast Landing School, named after the place where, four centuries earlier, towering trees emblazoned with the king's broad arrow were felled and then floated at high tide to make masts for His Majesty's ships. We planted trees along our street and a small orchard in the backyard. Life sailed along.

Then one February night, while we vacationed on an island off the southwest coast of Florida, my wife and I sat outdoors on a second-floor deck. There were no cars, roads, or people about. Our children were tucked into bed. Constellations marched above us in silence, divided by the Milky Way. A gentle wind blew over the water, and palm trees rustled in the breeze.

In the stillness Nancy turned to me and asked, "What do you think is the biggest problem on the earth?" Her question came out of nowhere, but I gave it some thought.

"The world is dying," I said. "There aren't any elms left on Elm

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

Street or chestnuts on Chestnut Lane. There are no caribou left in Caribou, Maine. The only buffalo left in Buffalo, New York, are the metal statues along the freeway. I don't think humanity can do business as usual for the next hundred years and expect that things are going to turn out all right."

Then Nancy asked a follow-up question: "If the world is dying, what are you going to do about it?"

I had no answer.

## WHEN MY FAITH IN SCIENCE FAILED ME

After we returned home from vacation, life stopped flowing from one good thing to another. The first of a series of tragic events occurred during our annual beach escape with my wife's side of the family. Nancy's brother was swimming in the ocean when he was pulled down by an undertow and drowned. Our kids witnessed the tragedy, and Nancy became depressed. Around the same time a mentally ill patient stalked me and was stopped only when police discovered he had murdered his mother and then hid her body in a closet.

And then came the clear September morning when I got a call from our neighbor. Her son was the same age as ours. She was calling to ask for help telling her son that his father was in the first plane that crashed into the Twin Towers.

The harder I worked to pull things together, the more our lives unraveled. The darkness would not lift. My supply of optimism ran dry.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

In the hospital emergency department, I had seen plenty of bad things happen. But for the first time I woke up to the fact that evil exists in the world.

Evil is not a scientific concept; it does not lend itself to measurement. It is a spiritual concept. Up until that point I had faith only in things that could be quantified, tested, and reproduced. I didn't believe in God. If someone had pressed me about God's existence, I would have pointed to television preachers caught in scandals or the church trial of Galileo. Then I would have rested my case. When a patient would ask about my faith, I'd respond, "I believe in the healing power of third-generation antibiotics."

I'd read every book by authors such as Carl Sagan, David Attenborough, and Stephen J. Gould—all who argued for the power of science. An education in science had given me purpose, freedom, and the ability to help people. But now, with Nancy struggling and tragedy pounding at us from every side, science was failing me. What do you do when you wake up to the fact that evil is real? What do you do about a family in disarray? What do you do about a world that is dying?

Science, as powerful as it is, can't even define evil, much less distinguish between right and wrong. If I was going to find my way out of this dark place, I needed to look in places I'd never looked before. I started with some of the world's sacred texts, reading through the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita. Then I tackled the Koran.

One Sunday morning at the hospital, I found myself with no patients, so I went looking for something to read. On a coffee table, among back issues of *People* and *National Geographic*, I found a

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

Bible. I had never read one. Although we had thousands of books in our home, we didn't own a Bible. So . . . I stole it.

I started reading the book of Matthew. Within a few pages I was presented not with answers but with the Bible's great question: "What say you of Jesus?"

Right away I recognized that Jesus was unlike any person I'd ever met. He was both more human and more godly than anyone I'd known. Although my coming to faith was a process—more like Peter's than Paul's—it soon began transforming every area of my life.

Over the next two years, my son, then my wife, and then my daughter came to believe, as I did, in Jesus as their savior. Jesus does not claim to be a good teacher or a moral leader—although I think anyone with even a passing knowledge of him will allow that he is both. He boldly and unequivocally claims to be the Son of God, saying, "If you've seen me, you've seen God" (see John 14:9). If his assertion is not true, then Jesus is a liar. On the other hand, if Jesus is who he says he is, then he is Lord of all creation. There is no middle ground. We are given only these two choices. My family chose to believe him, to trust him, and to follow him.

## WHAT GOD THINKS ABOUT TREES

The two years following my conversion to Christianity were not easy. I had been practicing medicine for fifteen years. But I finally answered Nancy's second question from our trip to Florida: "What are you going to do about a world that's dying?" I told her I wanted to quit my job as chief of staff and head of the emergency department

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

and spend the rest of my life serving God and helping to save the planet. Concerned about putting food on the table, let alone paying for college for our two teenage kids, Nancy replied, “Honey, are you sure we need to do that much?”

We sold our home, gave away half our possessions, and moved to a house the size of our former garage. Soon after, we started going to a church where the congregation became like family and remain so to this day. The debt of gratitude we owe them is incalculable. The church is a conservative one. It believes that Scripture is the inspired, inerrant Word of God. That’s why we went there. But when I volunteered to plant trees around the church’s grounds, one of the pastors

**God has an  
astounding  
fondness  
for trees.**



said I had the theology of a tree hugger. This was not a compliment. My first reaction to the pastor’s comment was, “Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe God doesn’t care about trees.”

Back then our whole family was new to Christianity. My daughter hadn’t yet married a pastor. My son wasn’t a missionary pediatrician in Africa, and I’d yet to write books on applied theology or preach at more than a thousand colleges and churches around the world. What did I know about the theology of trees?

But ever since I encountered the gospel for the first time in my forties, the Bible has been my compass. So when I was called a tree hugger, I turned to Scripture to get my bearings. I read from Genesis to Revelation, underlining everything the Bible has to say about trees. And here’s what I found: God has an astounding fondness for trees.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

## GOD'S TRAIL OF TREES

Other than God and people, the Bible mentions trees more than any other living thing. There is a tree on the first page of Genesis, in the first psalm, on the first page of the New Testament, and on the last page of Revelation. Every significant theological event in the Bible is marked by a tree. Whether it is the Fall, the Flood, or the overthrow of Pharaoh, every major event in the Bible has a tree, branch, fruit, seed, or some part of a tree marking the spot.

Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser” (John 15:1). The wisdom of the Bible is a tree of life (Proverbs 3:18). We are told to be “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season” (Psalm 1:3, NRSV).

Moreover, every major character in the Bible appears in conjunction with a tree. In the Old Testament, Noah received the olive leaf (Genesis 8:11), Abraham sat under “the oaks of Mamre” (18:1), and Moses stood barefoot in front of the burning bush (Exodus 3:2–5). At first glance Joseph might appear to be an exception, but the Bible tells us that Joseph simply *is* a tree (Genesis 49:22).

The same pattern holds true in the New Testament. Think of Zacchaeus climbing the sycamore fig (Luke 19:1–4), the blind man seeing people as if they were trees walking (Mark 8:24), and the disciples gathering on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39). The apostle Paul asserted that if we have gone for a walk in the woods, we are without excuse for knowing God (Romans 1:20). Paul also wrote that Christians are like branches grafted into Israel's tree trunk, with

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)



roots that help us stand fast and firm no matter what troubles come our way (11:17–18).

Jesus himself declared that the kingdom of heaven is like a tree (Matthew 13:31–32). The only thing that Jesus ever harmed was a

**Other than God and people, the Bible mentions trees more than any other living thing.**



tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20–21), and the only thing that could kill him was a tree. After Jesus was resurrected, he was mistaken for a gardener (John 20:15). This was not a mistake. Jesus is the new Adam who has come to redeem all of crea-

tion. Heaven is a place where the leaves of a tree heal all the nations (Revelation 22:1–2). As if to underscore this forest of metaphors, Jesus’s last “I am” statement is “I am the root and the descendant of David” (Revelation 22:16).

From Genesis to Revelation God has blazed a trail of trees through the Bible. The reason so many people love trees is because we are created in God’s image. God loves trees, and so should we.

## MISSING THE TREES FOR THE FOREST

God put all these trees in the Bible for a reason. He had a world of symbols to choose from, but God decided to use trees to tell the gospel. So why have most people never heard a sermon on trees?

I began a decadelong process of inquiry and research, starting with the oldest Bible on my shelf. It’s a King James study Bible published more than a century ago. The commentary section includes

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

twenty pages on trees and plants, with more than fifty illustrations and four full-page pictures of famous trees in the Bible. All these references and illustrations indicate what the editors in the nineteenth century felt was a balanced approach to studying Scripture.

In contrast, the 2013 edition of the *King James Study Bible* by the same publishing house has not a single page of commentary on trees or plants. The index contains only three tree entries. While minimal, this is better than some other modern study Bibles, which contain none.

In the 1611 King James Version of the Bible, the words *tree*, *leaf*, *branch*, *root*, *fruit*, and *seed* occur 967 times. This tally doesn't include specific tree names, such as palms, terebinths, figs, oaks, sycamores, acacias, willows, brooms, and tamarisks.

A quick look at three modern English translations shows that the same six tree-related words appear hundreds of times less frequently. The tally is 230 fewer times in the English Standard Version (ESV); 267 fewer times in the New International Version (NIV); and 274 fewer times in the New Living Translation (NLT).

Despite trees serving as God's favorite metaphor in Scripture, most people today have never heard a sermon on trees in the Bible. This was not always the case. We have a long history of writers who understood the connection between trees and God. If we reach back more than a thousand years to one of the oldest works of English literature, "The Dream of the Rood," we hear the story of the Crucifixion told from the tree's point of view.

A glance at a few of Charles Spurgeon's sermon titles indicates what people were hearing from the pulpit during the mid- to late

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

1800s. His sermons included “Christ the Tree of Life,” “The Trees in God’s Court,” “The Cedars of Lebanon,” “The Apple Tree in the Woods,” “The Beauty of the Olive Tree,” “The Sound in the Mulberry Trees,” and “The Leafless Tree.” Spurgeon, the “prince of preachers,” had no difficulty seeing both the trees *and* the forest in Scripture.

More recently George MacDonald, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis—three of the most beloved and influential Christian fiction writers of all time—championed trees. Whether it is MacDonald’s picture of heaven in *At the Back of the North Wind*, Tolkien’s tree haven Lothlórien in Middle-earth, or the way trees respond when Aslan is on the move in Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*, each author paints a picture of shalom among the trees. The good guys live under, in, and around trees. They value, protect, and even talk to trees. In contrast, the bad guys, such as Lewis’s Tash and Tolkien’s Sauron, are clear-cutters of trees—even talking trees!

A number of factors point to why trees have gone missing from our faith. But lying at the heart of the explanation is the resurgence of a first-century heresy called dualism. Dualism calls God’s creation evil, assigning merit only to things of the Spirit. Of course, no part of the Bible supports this heresy. And the incarnation of God as a man named Jesus clearly is at odds with this false dichotomy.

The logical conclusion of dualism is that God made himself corrupt simply by taking on the form of matter—human flesh. This leads us to another first-century heresy called docetism—but I digress. One does not have to be a systematic theologian to ask this: “If the spiritual is superior to the material, why did God love the earth

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

so much that he sent his only Son to save it?” The most dangerous consequence of this heresy is that it prevents us from hearing God speak to us through our everyday interactions with his creation.



**Trees are not randomly placed in Scripture. They mark the most important events, including the Creation, the Fall, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. This is not a coincidence. The Bible is one interwoven book, written by one God.**

In fact, if I had to pick one subject other than Jesus to corroborate the inspired origin of the Bible, I'd pick trees. Why? Because while the Bible was written by many people over many centuries, the consistent use of trees points to one Author.

Trees are not randomly placed in Scripture. They mark the most important events, including the Creation, the Fall, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. This is not a coincidence. The Bible is one interwoven book, written by one God.

I love trees. God loves trees. Let's go walking through the Bible looking for trees. Maybe we'll catch a glimpse of the Gardener himself.

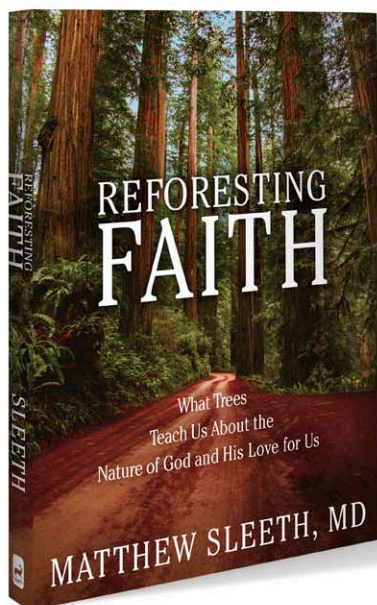
UNCORRECTED PROOF

**SNEAK PEEK**  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at [WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith](http://WMbooks.com/ReforestingFaith)

Continue  
Reading...

Order  
*REFORESTING  
FAITH*  
now!



BUY NOW



WATERBROOK