

Lifelines

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Topic: *Lessons from Elephants and Trees*

The Ebony and Ivory Cooperative

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Life is always interesting, isn't it? We live in a wondrous world, filled with the presence of God. Some days are filled with fragrant flowers, blooming trees, cloudless skies and sunshine, while others are windy, cold, and stormy.

In Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 we read that there is a time for everything, and in verse 11 (CSB) we read concerning God: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also put eternity in their hearts, but no one can discover the work God has done from beginning to end." Thus, God's creation is full of His handiwork, and reveals the greatest designer and engineering in the universe.

Some people believe things happen by chance, yet everything that happens is timely and involves thousands of moving and intersecting elements. Last week, I read a report from Taylor Guitars, asking, "What do guitars and elephants have in common?"

Well, it's a God-thing, although you probably wouldn't ever guess the connection, and neither did I. Ebony is the most frequently used wood for guitar fretboards. It is dense and smooth, so you don't get splinters, and the guitar strings vibrate true and clear. It is rock solid, interacting with metal strings for years without wearing out. This ebony is mostly grown in the forests of Africa, and of course, great efforts are made to preserve these trees for the ecosystem and future generations.

African forest elephants roam the forests of Cameroon. They graze in the forests, and eat the fruit of ebony trees. Some trees grow seed pods that can float in the air, others have seeds in fruit that can be transported by birds or small animals, most often in their excrement. But the seeds of the ebony tree can't be transported by the breeze, birds or small animals. It takes an elephant to do that. The elephants digest the fruit and the seeds come out far from the original tree, and are left behind in new areas, encased in elephant dung.

As the elephant group moves on from grove to grove, some ebony seeds are deposited onto new soil, germinate, and begin new groves of ebony trees. Elephant populations are declining in part because of the decline of the ebony forests. Ebony trees are declining because they need elephants to transport seeds to start new ebony trees. So in order to sustain more elephants, more fruits and trees are needed as food.

A little over a decade ago, Bob Taylor, founder of Taylor Guitars, wanted to start planting new ebony trees so there would always be a supply of ebony. He networked with researchers in Africa and formed "The Ebony Project" with the task of planting more than 10,000 new ebony trees each year. This would provide food for elephants, transport ebony tree seeds, and provide a sustainable symbiosis for both elephants and ebony. The researchers suggested planting other fruit trees also, to increase feeding the declining elephant population as well. It has gone well. In the last ten years, the Project has planted many kinds of fruit trees, including over 40,000 new ebony trees. It is an ebony and ivory renewal cooperative.

All of this points to God at work in His design and creation of the world, and we can learn spiritual truth from physical realities. The following are a couple of insights from ebony and ivory interactions.

Maintaining balance in life and interactions is important. The world is interdependent on many species, and we are all dependent upon God's design. Sometimes it seems that our life gets immersed in dung, and suddenly life really stinks. We may not like what is happening, but there usually is an upside to every letdown. We all need sunshine and rain, difficulties and blessings, always in balance. A healthy, balanced life actually depends upon both. If we never have to carry heavy loads, we lose the strength to carry them when needed. We also all need some blessings to keep us going.

The lives of ebony trees and elephants (ivory) are intertwined, and both need each other. Modern piano keyboards are made with wood, colored plastics, and resins; but in the past, they used ebony for the black keys and ivory for the white keys. We need both the black and white keys to make beautiful music; we need both the dark and light days to grow strong, and this story of ebony tree and elephant dung shows us that even the stinky parts of life can produce something strong, beautiful, and nourishing.

Life is made of difficulties and successes. When life gets tough, engage in living life, find the future and the blessing in even the awful bits, and pray for good fruit to come from it.

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