

God's Good Earth

Dr. Paul Brand, writer of *God's Forever Feast*, lived through all but the first 14 years of the 20th century. During those years, many of them spent as a missionary doctor in India, he was able to witness the hand of the Creator working to heal the disease-wracked bodies of lepers. But because he was also fascinated by birds, plants, and ecology, Dr. Brand was able to observe the Creator's hand at work in the natural world. In this booklet, an excerpt from his book, he draws an extended analogy between the natural gift of good soil and our spiritual growth and nourishment as followers of Christ.

Enjoy this delightful devotional study.

Martin R. De Haan II

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Cover Photo: Jim Erickson

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Printed in USA

Introduction

The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Gen. 2:7).

Dust you are and to dust you will return (Gen. 3:19).

I remember sitting with my mother on the steps of the guest house at a leprosy hospital in India. We were facing east and the sun was rising over the mountains opposite us, flooding us with early light. I was soon to leave India, and Mother had a prophetic sense that she would not see me again. At 95, Mother knew she would not live much longer and was giving me instructions about the way she wanted to be buried: “Don’t let them make a coffin for me,” she pleaded. “Too many trees are being cut down on the hills. There’s no sense in making a box for me to be buried in. It is just a waste of wood. Tell them to wrap me in an old sheet—not a new one—and let them scatter flowers over my body before they lower me into the ground.

“I know they will want to cry, because they love me. But tell them to choose joyful hymns to sing, and hymns of victory. It’s not me that they will be burying, but just my old body. I am going to be with my Lord. I may even be able to see them singing. I shall not be crying, and will not regret to see my body return to the earth. It has been a good body, but it has been getting weak and stiff lately, and it is time to put it away.”

I couldn't reply. We just sat together, holding hands, until the sun became too hot for comfort. We went indoors and had breakfast, and I left the hospital, never to see her again. A month or two later she died. It fell to my beloved student and fellow worker Dr. Ernest Fritschi to fulfill the functions of a son by taking my mother's body up to the mountains and to preside over the arrangements for her burial.

There is something triumphant about the death of a saint. Dust to dust, yes, but it's also the spirit leaping up to report to God about the completion of the great adventure by which one or two hundred pounds of mud have been inspired—inbreathed—to be active and creative in God's service. That transformed mud and clay has been the messenger of God and the instrument of His love for many years.

Hallelujah! God has done it again! He has allowed a mass of lifeless earth to come to life and live and breathe and think and love for years and years of creative activity.

I have returned to the church my father and mother built on those mountains. And I have seen their tombstones which mark the places where, side by side, they returned to dust. I cry because I cannot help it, but I thank God that their life goes on. It goes on in me and in my sister, and in our children who inherited their seed. It also goes on in the lives of those who came to know and love God as a result of their ministry.

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The Wonder Of Soil And Seed

The soil and the seed. The substance and the spirit. The two go together, yet each has its own cycle. The seed carries the life encoded in its nucleus and it must be passed on to the new generation while the old generation is still alive. The flame must not die.

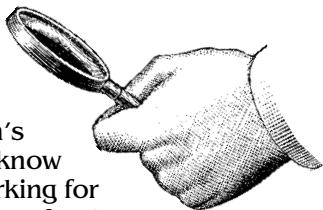


Soil has its own kind of continuity. Soil may rest as mud, inert and lifeless, for centuries. Then at the touch of a seed it becomes something new and alive. It may become part of a fruit and then be eaten and absorbed into the flesh of another living being. A few years later it returns as dust to wait in the ground for the stimulus of a new seed to wake it up so it can share in life again.

Earth and soil are so wonderful in concept and design that it is not surprising that those who live close to the earth, and farm it for food, sometimes develop a mystical sense that soil is life.

When, as a scientist, I begin to feel proud of what has been accomplished by men, I go out into the night and gaze up at the heavens. If it's daytime I go into the old-growth forests of our Pacific Northwest, and look up at the trees. When I tire of bigness, I like to take a hand lens and lie face down exploring a single square yard of garden soil.

I encourage you to do the same. If you want to open up a new horizon of delight, buy a lens and a children's guide on soil. Get to know the worms; they are working for you, helping to grow your food. You may think of termites as enemies. Learn that for every one that eats the wood in a house, there are a thousand that work, patiently reducing fallen trees and twigs to make new soil. Every grain of topsoil has in course of time been enriched by generations of tiny creatures, bacteria, plants, and insects. They have used the soil as a means of life, and then have died, leaving the soil richer than before. Living soil is a community; billions of units of life, preparing soil for growing all the fruits we love to eat.

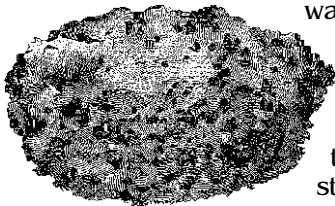


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Against All Odds

My daughter Estelle and her husband and family live on the Big Island of Hawaii. They have a few acres of fruit trees and macadamia nut trees. Their home is in the shadow of Kilauea, the most continuously active volcano in the world. I have looked into the boiling crater of Kilauea and have walked over recent lava flows on the coast.

The ground is hot and cracks reveal the red glow of molten rock flowing on its way to the sea. You can't get close to the actual meeting point of lava and sea, but the clouds of steam from boiling water and the red glow under the sea at the shore can be seen from a distance. There was a bay where I used to swim that is today a stretch of new land.



We know that it is God who created it and who made all things in it to harmonize for good.

The island is growing. Millions of tons of molten rock are pouring out, having been forced up from deep below the ocean floor. Much of it is actively boiling as it emerges, and some is aerated as it is thrown up before it falls to become part of the new earth. Some of it will float, because it is full of air, a kind of foam or sponge of rock.

All these islands have been formed that way. Estelle's house and garden stand on lava rock, and fruit trees grow in cracks. I was a skeptic when I saw the kind of "soil" in which they planned to grow their fruit and nuts; but no longer. The spongy textured rock holds water, and the roots go deep through cracks and reach to layers of soil that were built up 200 years ago by trees and ferns that grew before the last lava flow destroyed the growth, but kept the soil. They tell me that drill-hole samples

show that layers of soil and layers of spongy rock lie atop each other like chocolate layer cake. Those layers tell the story of how the fertile rocks hold water in their cracks and open textured sponge. They show how roots reach layers of soil protected from drying when the sun is hot.

It seems as if all of life is working together to sustain the means of life. It's not surprising that those who don't know God often see the earth itself as a living thing, perhaps a god, because they see every aspect working together for good. We know that it is God who created it and who made all things in it to harmonize for good. He left us a self-sustaining system.

Looking south from Seattle, where we live, I can see Mount Rainier floating above the clouds. I know that it must be standing on the ground, but those foundations often are shrouded in mist. The towering 14,000 feet of mountain challenge the climber, and delight the people who commute to work, who tell each other "Look! Rainier is out today!"

When I was young I would have found it hard to resist the challenge of a climb to the top of Rainier. Today I am content to view the floating peaks, and climb around the lower slopes. I find the most exciting part of the mountain halfway up, or a little higher. There the great trees around the base give way to the smaller scrubby trees of the timberline, and then to flower meadows, and then a

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little higher to that final battleground where life struggles to maintain a foothold in little pockets of soil fighting against the winter blizzards and avalanches, against wind-chill temperatures too low for life.



Against all the odds, when the snow line recedes in early summer, there they are! The exquisite alpine flowers, nodding in triumph that they have survived the chilling frost and wind. They have been buried beneath the snow but are ready to delight all who appreciate them, and invite the summer bees to pollinate. The bees who winter on the lower slopes come up and fertilize the seeds that will be scattered. Most of the seeds will die because few will find one of the few islands of soil that remain.

At such altitudes the cycle of life moves rapidly. There are not many days of sunshine and warmth for all the business of budding, flowering, fruiting, and seeding that must be completed before the first frosts of winter force the plants to withdraw from the chilling winds.

Alpine plants grow on rocks, and the plants that survive do so by clinging to fragments of soil and lichens and by forming anchors that bind the mat of roots to the rough surface of the rock.

Keepers Of The Field

So life goes on, the cycle continues. As God's servants, we have responsibility to assist in

the care of His good earth. We can have an active part in making sure that we—and others—don't interfere with God's plan for sustaining life.

I have a vivid childhood memory of someone who did just that. I was playing with a group of Indian boys in one of the rice paddies near our home in the mountains. Rice needs flooded fields for certain stages of its cultivation, and there was no level ground in the mountains. The hill tribes had developed a method of terracing their fields into the course of a stream so that each field was about a foot higher than the field below, and was quite level, being bordered at its lower edge by a grass-covered dam to hold its water. Little channels were cut at intervals along the dams to allow a trickle of the stream into the field below.

Thus, where the valley was steep, the fields were narrow. They were wide where the slope was shallow. The water from the one stream watered each field in turn, and kept the mud moist enough for rice cultivation. The constant wetness was attractive to frogs and small fish and also to herons who came after the frogs. Not only herons but small boys enjoyed the mud and the frogs, so it happened that my friends and I were having a game of who would be the first to catch three

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frogs. This involved a lot of plunging about in the mud in the corner of one of the fields.

Suddenly the oldest boy called out, "Tata is coming!" and we all scrambled out of the mud. Tata means grandfather, and is used by youngsters as a term of respect to any elderly man. The particular Tata we had seen coming our way was the owner of one of the fields, and was recognized as the keeper of the dams. He was the one who saw to it that nobody got more than his fair share of water when the stream was running dry. We all knew that we had not been careful with the rice seedlings, and we deserved and expected a rebuke.

Tata was very old and stooped over. He found it difficult to look straight forward. He walked slowly and with a cane, but none of us thought of running away or of avoiding his stern words. Old age really carries respect in India. He asked

us what we were doing, and the biggest boy, acting as our spokesman, told him we had been catching frogs.

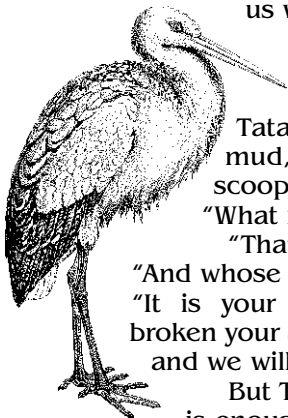
Tata looked at the churned up mud, then stooped over and scooped up a double handful of it. "What is this?" he asked.

"That is mud, Tata," we replied.

"And whose mud is it?"

"It is your mud, Tata, and we have broken your seedlings. We are very sorry, and we will never do it again."

But Tata had more to say. "There is enough mud in my hands to grow



a whole meal of rice for one person. This same mud will grow a meal of rice every year. It has been doing it for my parents and grandparents long before I was born. It will go on growing rice for my grandchildren and their children for many generations."

"Yes, Tata."

Then the old man moved over to the nearest of the water channels across the earthen dam. He pointed to it. "What do you see there?" he asked.

"That is water," replied our spokesman.

For the first time the old man showed his anger. "I'll show you water," he growled, and limped on a few steps to the next channel, where clear water was flowing over the grass. "That is water," he said, and returned to the first channel. "Now tell me what you see there."

"That is mud, Tata," the boy said humbly, "It is muddy water." Then he hurried on to tell Tata what he knew would come next, for he had been exposed to this before. "This is your mud that is running down to the lower field, and it will never grow food for you again, because mud never runs uphill. Once it has gone, it is gone forever."

Tata wanted to make sure we all got the message. Leaning on his staff, he straightened his back as far as he could, so he could look at each one of us. "When you see mud running in the streams of water you know that life is running

"When you see mud running in the streams of water you know that life is running out of the mountains. It will never come back."

out of the mountains. It will never come back.” He turned and began to limp away, softly repeating to himself, “It will never come back.”

That was 70 years ago, but I have never forgotten the lesson I learned that day. It is a universal truth. Even in America, mud never runs uphill. When we see erosion taking away our topsoil, life is flowing away from our homeland. It will never come back . . . it will never come back.

A Losing Battle?

I have also learned to respect the way folk wisdom is passed from generation to generation in lands that have no schools. One of the boys I

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was playing with that day is probably called Tata today, and he is patrolling the paddy fields, striking fear into the hearts of small boys, and making sure that the mud of life stays in the mountains to bear fruit rather than being washed away. We all could use some folk wisdom about how to care for the earth God has given us.

I once went along the crest of the Rocky Mountain National Park with one of the park botanists, who knew every plant by name. He pointed to a clump of tiny flowers growing from a mat of roots and soil that clung

to a rocky face beside the path. The clump was perhaps 18 inches across. "It has probably taken 200 years for that mat of plants to grow to that size," he told us. "Some years they hardly grow at all, or even recede a bit. In a good year it may grow a quarter of an inch."

He adjusted a steel post that carried a strand or two of wire fence that ran beside the path. "We always hope for early snow," he said, "because that keeps them warm and there is a chance to grow. But it is not the blizzards that are their greatest danger; it's people."



He pointed to a family that had climbed over the fence, and were sitting on rocks, eating a picnic lunch. He sighed. "They are not real bad folks, I'm sure," he said. "They just don't understand. They think these fences spoil the view or are just to stop people from picking flowers. One single step by one heavy shoe can destroy 200 years of growth. That one step may also scrape the mat of soil from off the rock, and that place may never grow another plant. In parks like this, with thousands of visitors, we are fighting a losing battle."

What we see in miniature with alpine flowers and on Mount Rainier we see on a massive and tragic scale in Nepal on the slopes of the Himalayan mountains. For thousands of years a sturdy simple people have lived high on those mountain slopes. Most of them live in well-watered valleys between mountain ranges. Over

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the centuries the Nepalese have farmed the valleys and have grown crops on the little ledges where trees have held the soil wherever the slope was shallow enough for their roots to cling.

Today the population has increased, and farming has become more aggressive. There are more cattle and goats to provide milk, and they have to go further afield to graze. More trees are cut for firewood and for homes. The wooded slopes are becoming bare. The soil is suddenly free to move, and it is moving. The rivers that once were clear are now full of mud.

Bangladesh, a country of fertile plains, has always been subject to flooding when the snows are melting on the Himalayas. The monsoon rains and melted snow fill the great rivers of the Ganges and Brahmaputra. In the past few years, and especially last year, the problem reached a new scale. Not only did the rivers overflow, but the flood was mud, not just water. Homes in Bangladesh were filled with mud. People drowned in mud. That mud was Nepali soil. It had grown crops for generations of mountain people, and now it was gone forever. It will never come back, and more is being lost every year.

And there are more people every year depending on the crops that have less soil to grow on. Soil is eroding all over the world, and most of the problem is man-made and preventable. It is one of the great tragedies of all time, and little is being done to halt the loss. It is part of a pattern of mindless disregard for God's earth. We who claim to serve the Creator should be asking ourselves whether we are being good stewards of His great gifts.

Sower Of Spiritual Seed

I feel a bit like Tata. I do not have a farm, but I try to pass on to others the lessons I have learned about soil and water and about our duty to God who left us as stewards of His earth.

I see myself as a farmer of spiritual soil, a sower of spiritual seed. Jesus spoke about making His disciples to become fishers of men, but more often He used the picture of sowers of seed, and talked about good soil and farmers.

Even as God the Creator brought life and the soil together in making the first man, so in the continuity of spiritual life, the seed and the soil have to come together to create new life, and then to continue life and growth by drawing nourishment from the soil as long as life continues.

To illustrate these truths, Jesus told the parable of "The Sower and the Seed." It could be titled "The Parable of the Seed and the Soil" because the

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only variable in the parable was the soil. The seed was the same in each example, and the sower was the same. The fruitfulness resulted from where and into what kind of soil the seed was sown.

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up (Lk. 8:5).



A pathway is never a good place to plant seed. People's feet beat down the soil, smoothing out any crevices into which the seed can fall and germinate. The soil becomes hardened and any seed that falls there will not find that openness necessary for life and growth.

In such situations the devil is quick to snatch the seed away. In a spiritual sense, such people have their hearts hardened. The author of Hebrews pleaded with his readers, "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion" (Heb. 3:7-8). He was referring to the time when the Israelites were offered a chance to enter the Promised Land but turned back because they did not believe God could or would see them through. The prospect of difficulties and battles ahead made them close their minds and harden their hearts to all God had in store for them.

Living seed and sprouting wheat are not willing to share their piece of earth with booted feet.

If the earth is to be a path, it may as well be paved. If it is to be soil, it must allow the seed to take over and draw nourishment and support from it. To accept the seed, soil has to become involved.

In a physical sense there is a choice that has to be made in the use of the land. It may be used as a farm to grow food or it may become a road and be paved for buildings and travel. The priorities of a community are revealed by the choices it makes. Today in America prime farmland is being paved over to make way for roads and cities at a record rate. Two and a half million hectares of crop land were lost to paving and building in the United States in an 8-year period in the 1970s.

Perhaps a similar change is taking place in our mental and spiritual outlooks. Mechanical and commercial development thrives on hard surfaces. Spiritual and personal priorities need a softer soil, one that is vulnerable and open to suggestions and ideas that may require personal involvement.

Jesus looks for open hearts and minds in which to sow His seed. He looks to us, His messengers, to prepare soil by taking time to plow and hoe and soften it before we plant the seed. A good gardener does not trample over the soil he has just planted, and God's gar-

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deners know to be gentle and loving with those who have received a seed.

Used Or Used Up?

Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root (Mt. 13:5-6).

Jesus pointed out how plants grown in shallow soil are dependent on changes in the weather and cannot stand much stress.

A farm is often defined by its size or extent. "For sale: 500-acre farm in southern Iowa. Has been used for corn and soybeans." I would not buy that farm until I knew a lot more about it. The words "has been used" may have many implications. Good soil, farmed by good farmers, can grow food for many generations, as Tata knew well. Iowa had deep, rich topsoil when serious farming started in the last century.

Today more than 50 percent of that topsoil has been lost. Much of it has been carried down the river into the Gulf of Mexico.

As topsoil becomes thinner, crops become more and more dependent on frequent rainfall and on fertilizers. Good farmers today practice the no-till method, which leaves the roots and stalks behind at harvest. They hold the soil that might be lost by plowing and enrich the soil as

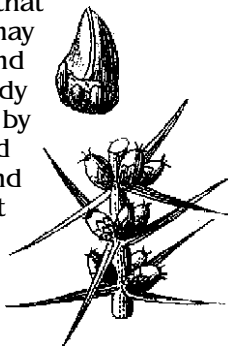
they decay, actually building it up year by year.

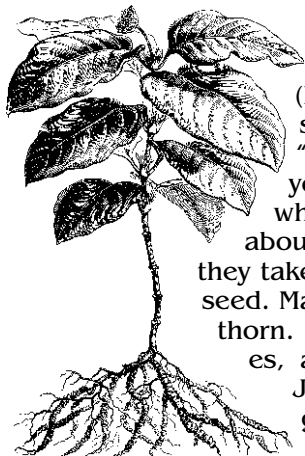
Jesus pointed out how plants grown in shallow soil are dependent on changes in the weather and cannot stand much stress. He left it to us to interpret this according to our observations. If “shallow soil” means the person who has little background knowledge of Scripture or scant experience of Christian fellowship, then we should be careful to follow the planting of the seed with fellowship and instruction in Scripture.

Roots In Competition

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. . . . The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful (Mt. 13:7,22).

This parable doesn't suggest that the thorny soil was bad soil. It may have been excellent—deep and rich and moist. But it was already occupied. It had been colonized by wild thorn bushes. Their roots had penetrated deep into the soil and were consuming the nourishment that the wheat needed. Now they challenged the farmer: “Pull us out at your peril! You will have to grasp us by our thorns. It will be painful!”





Jesus requires that we uproot the thorns and weeds that have laid claim to the soil of our lives, so only good soil is available for the new life that is to take over and colonize our lives.

In another parable Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Mt. 6:24). The farmer might say to this piece of soil, "Choose you this day what you will grow: thorns or wheat." Jesus is specific about the nature of the thorns; they take over and choke the good seed. Matthew said that wealth is a thorn. Luke added "worries, riches, and pleasures." Note that Jesus didn't say that the good seed couldn't survive with that kind of thorn bush. What He said is that the growth didn't mature and was unfruitful.

I've already pointed out that seed is not passive in soil. The soil becomes its servant. The roots from the seed take hold of the grains of soil and use them as anchors. They extract chemical elements from the soil; they draw water from the soil to nourish the plant and to produce fruit. These demands are likely to conflict with similar demands from weeds and thorns, and a good farmer sees to it that there is no real competition.

Jesus is a demanding Lord. His coming into our hearts requires the removal of all competition. He requires that we uproot the thorns and weeds that have laid claim to the soil of our lives, so only good soil is available for the new life that is to take over and colonize our lives. Then, and only then, we shall experience the joy of fruitfulness in His service.

Rich And Fertile Soil

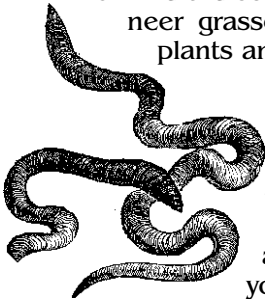
The one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the Word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown (Mt. 13:23).

When Jesus mentioned the three kinds of soil that were not productive, He told us why. He didn't define the nature of the good soil except to say that it produced bountiful crops. Jesus hinted that some soil was better than others when He told the people that some seed produced a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. The difference must have been in the soil.



Since the Bible does not give any clues about grading good soil, I feel free to broaden the parable to include one aspect of soil goodness that has meaning both in farming and in spiritual life. In botany the term *colonize* refers to the way a group of plants or grasses take over a piece of

land. A good example is when sand dunes have been built up by the action of tides and winds. They shift and change shape from year to year. Then seeds of some hardy type of grass may be blown into the area and begin to take root. If rain falls at the right time, and roots have a chance to grow, the grasses may form a colony, and begin to hold the sand together by their interlocking root systems. After a few years the plants change the very nature of the sand and turn it into the beginnings of real soil. At a later stage other less hardy plants may come and take root. What was once poor soil has been transformed into good and fertile soil. Eventually the original pioneer grasses may be forgotten as the plants and trees thrive.

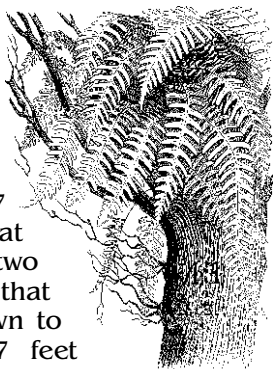


What has been added to the original sand to turn it into soil? The simplified answer is that it is the life and then the death of the pioneer plants. When you study a handful of good, rich soil, you will note the numerous tiny live creatures there. They are busy breaking down fragments of leaves and decaying wood, turning them into still smaller fragments that can be a source of nitrogen and phosphorus and other good things for new living plants.

My home is near the Olympic National Park and the rain forest that clothes the lower slopes of the western mountains. We love to take our grandchildren to see the wonder of the living for-

est. Near the Hoh river there is a row of trees in a straight line. Each one of those giant trees seems to be standing astride, with its legs apart. Each trunk is single, but only from maybe 7 feet above ground. At that point it is supported by two huge root systems, like legs, that spread apart and curve down to reach the ground about 7 feet apart, leaving a tunnel between them. If one looks through the tunnel in the first tree, you can see through the other tunnels in the other trees because they are in a straight line. That clue explains it all.

A hundred years ago or more a giant tree fell in the forest. It died, and lay dead and decaying for many years. Seeds, falling from other giant trees, fell into the cracks of the bark and rooted there, using the dead tree as rich soil. All the materials the old tree had collected over the years, and which had formed the basis of its strength and vitality, were now being made available to the young seedlings growing on what we now call a "nursery log." As the young trees grew, they needed support for their great size, while the dead tree was weak-



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ened by decay. So the young trees sent out roots around the old trunk to reach the ground on either side. Those roots gradually became the whole support of the young trees, while the old tree disintegrated and finally disappeared, becoming one with the soil around it.

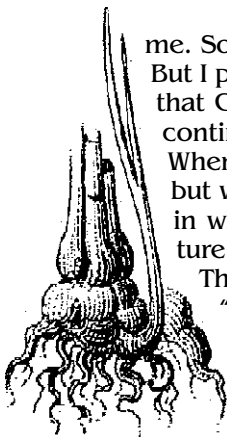
I pray that my life and the principles that God has helped me to live by will continue to influence young lives.

Our children and grandchildren have stood quietly looking through the space where that old tree lay. We cannot see the tree itself, but we can see the way it has helped to shape and give nourishment to the new generation of giant trees, forming a "colonnade" in memory of the nursery log whose substance continues in them.

I look through that space too, but with a different perspective.

My active life is mostly behind me. Soon I will no longer occupy space. But I pray that my life and the principles that God has helped me to live by will continue to influence young lives. When we die we not only leave seed, but we also leave an effect on the soil in which future children grow and future spiritual seed will be nourished. That's one reason the psalmist says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Ps. 116:15).

Good soil is the legacy of pioneer grasses and plants now long

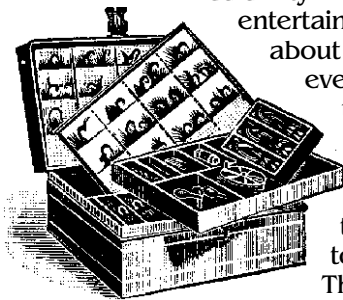


gone. It has been said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it's the soil of the church. The seed is the living Word of God. I am thankful that I grew up surrounded by a godly family who told me stories of Christian pioneers and martyrs. My heroes were those who had given their lives for Christ and the gospel. Thus when the living seed fell into my heart, the soil was well prepared.

A Good Fish Story

The evening newspaper in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, has a weekend magazine that ran a feature for several months titled "The Best Meal I Ever Had." Each week the editor asked a Louisiana celebrity from politics or sports or

entertainment to write a column about the best meal they had ever eaten, concluding with the recipes of the main courses. Eventually he ran out of celebrities and broadened his author pool to include doctors—and picked on me. This is the story I told:



We were in the Kundah mountains of South India on holiday with four children and the Webbs, another family with four children. We vacationed together every year. We loved to hike over the hills and along the rivers, even though the youngest often needed to be carried most of the way. Both fathers enjoyed fishing, and the Billitadahalla river was full of trout. The country was wild and desolate; the only other humans were a boy or two keeping an eye on peaceful herds of buffalo.

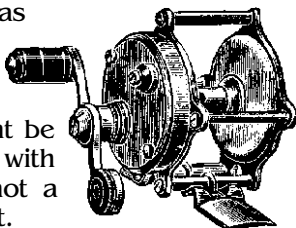
For food we carried only dry bread, and for cooking only a piece of chicken wire and a knife or two. After a stiff morning walk, we arrived at

the river, and the children scattered to collect dry bits of driftwood or dead branches from the forest, while the fathers selected just the right flies to bait their hooks and began to fish. Everyone knew the meal could not begin until eight or nine trout had been caught, but we didn't worry because few knew about the river, and it was full of trout waiting to be caught. Except that day.

The sky was clear and the air still. The sun was high and only the mosquitoes were active. The fish had breakfasted well and were not ready for lunch. We could see them clearly through the unruffled surface of the water, and it was obvious

that they could see us. We went to our favorite pools where we usually caught our best and biggest fish. We crouched behind rocks and cast our lines until our muscles were sore. Our hooks got caught in overhanging branches, and when we reached out to catch the twigs and release the lines, we fell into the river, bruising our shins. We fished a mile or two up-river and then as far down-river. Hours passed, and the children came to inquire about the probability that lunch might be near, only to be sent back with the appalling news that not a single fish had been caught.

**We didn't worry
because few
knew about
the river, and it
was full of
trout waiting
to be caught.
Except that
day.**



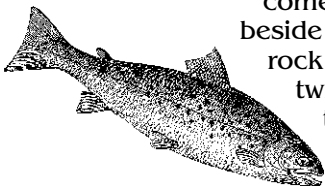
Lunchtime came and went. The fire burned out. The older children tried to comfort the younger ones, and the youngest was crying and chewing on the dry bread. The fathers tried to look confident but knew that their reputation as providers was rapidly being lost. This was *crisis*.

A cloud drifted over the sun. A breeze came up and ruffled the water. Suddenly both our fishing poles bent and lines became taut. We caught fish after fish and landed them on the grass. Excited, our children gathered them up and ran with them to their mothers. Relieved, the mothers split the trout and laid them on the chicken wire over the revived embers of the fire.

Wonderful smells began to drift up the river. Grilled trout were laid on slices of bread, their natural oils serving as butter. The children could scarcely wait to sing grace before biting down on the food they had doubted would ever come.

Finally we fathers arrived, carrying the last trout that would complete the meal. We were sunburned and weary with aching muscles. We were mosquito bitten, bruised, and hungry. But we were welcomed with cheers. We rested beside our families on a great rock under the shade of a twisted old tree and began to eat. We all agreed it was the best meal we had ever tasted. I, for

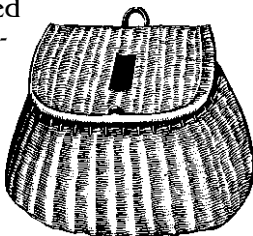
Fresh grilled trout on dry bread tastes good beside any river, anywhere.



one, still declare that it has never been bettered; not in the most expensive restaurant nor by the most famous chef.

Many times since, when I've been to fine restaurants, I have ordered trout, and I'm almost always disappointed. I've wanted to tell the chef I know trout can be more exciting. I even considered offering to demonstrate how to cook it myself.

It was a while before I realized that my expectations were unrealistic. What my subconscious memory was seeking could never be reproduced in a kitchen. No chef has access to the essential sauce that made my special meal unique: hunger, bruises, sunburn, aching muscles, and a sense of near failure transformed into success. Mix those ingredients with the happy faces of family members enjoying each other and contributing toward the shared ecstasy of grilled trout, and you have a memorable meal! (I must add that fresh grilled trout on dry bread tastes good beside any river, anywhere.)



I mentioned that the children could hardly wait to sing grace before biting down on their trout on dry bread; but wait they did, and if we parents had forgotten, the little ones would have reminded us to sing. We had a series of musical graces that each of our families used to sing before every meal. It seemed to us that they had special meaning on picnics in the open country-

side. There we were surrounded with the evidence of God's bounty. On that special day we probably sang Johnny Appleseed's grace:

The Lord is good to me,
And so I thank the Lord,
Who giveth me
The things I need:
The sun and the rain
And the apple seed
The Lord is good to me.

This grace gently reminds us that God is the source of all we need. He is the one who sustains and nourishes us, both physically and spiritually.

We sometimes substituted our own words in place of "apple seed." We may have sung "The sun and the rain and the fish and the bread." Whatever the words, the music rang out from 12 voices, across the river, and echoed back from the hills, "and so we thank the Lord." The singing postponed the eating by just a few minutes, but I have no doubt that it enhanced the flavor of what we ate. It brought wholeness into

each meal. The fare at our meals was not only an array of wholesome foods for our nourishment, it gave us a chance to be together. And it was an invitation to our Lord to take His place at the head of the table.

My family and I sang another grace before meals:

Back of the loaf, the snowy flour.
Back of the flour, the mill.
Back of the mill, the grain and the shower,
The sun, and the Father's will.

This grace gently reminds us that God is the source of all we need. He is the one who sustains and nourishes us, both physically and spiritually.

Biographical note about Dr. Paul Brand:

Paul Brand was born in 1914 in the mountains of India, where his parents were missionaries. He went to London, England, for his education and had his medical and surgical training at London University.

In 1946 Paul and his wife, Margaret, who is also a doctor, went to India, where Paul taught surgery at the Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore. Dr. Brand became the first surgeon in the world to use reconstructive surgery to correct the deformities from leprosy in the hands and feet. His pioneering work led to many honors. He was elected Huntarian Professor of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1952. In 1961 he was honored by Queen Elizabeth with appointment as "Commander of the Order of the British Empire." He was also the recipient of the Distinguished Service Award from the Department of Health and Human Services, United States Public Health Service.

Dr. Brand, 89, died on July 8, 2003, from a brain injury following a fall. He is survived by his wife, 6 children, and 12 grandchildren.

This booklet, *God's Good Earth*, is an excerpt from the book by Dr. Paul Brand, *God's Forever Feast*. Philip Yancey, who collaborated with Dr. Brand on three books, writes this in his introduction to *God's Forever Feast*:

If I had to choose one lesson I have learned from Dr. Brand, it would center on the underlying unity of life. So often in this modern world we compartmentalize. Scientists study the material world; priests and preachers study the spiritual world. Dr. Brand brings those worlds together. He sees the cosmos in a microbe, the Creator in a nerve cell. To him the world reveals God and God illuminates the world. For him, whether as a scientist in a laboratory, a surgeon tending to a patient, or a speaker addressing eight leprosy patients—half of whom are deaf—life is an act of worship. I know that he has only one goal for this book: to give glory to the God he loves and serves.

The book *God's Forever Feast* can be purchased from Discovery House Publishers, a nonprofit affiliate ministry of RBC Ministries. For more information about Discovery House or for a catalog of their biblical resources (books, music, and videotapes), visit them on the Internet at www.dhp.org or write to:

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