



THE GARDEN

9 WEEK BIBLE STUDY

embrace

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He took some of the seedlings
of the land and put it in fertile
soil. He planted it like a willow
by abundant water.

EZEKIEL 17:5 (NIV)

Fertile Ground

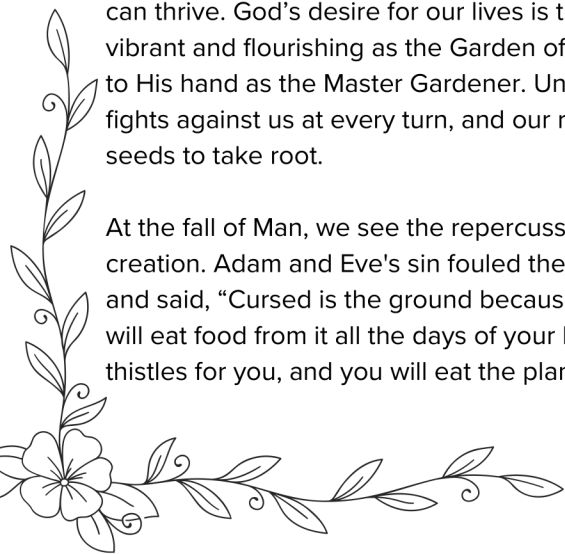
Big Idea

Imagine yourself walking through a busy open market, embracing the hustle of the vendors and the bustle of the crowd. Your senses are saturated with a vibrant array of flowers and plants. The intoxicating aroma compels you to select an assorted bouquet, and fill your basket with foodstuffs from the garden-fresh bounty.

We all love the blessings of an abundant harvest as we enjoy delicious meals and beautiful displays around our dinner table. But have we ever stopped to think about what it takes to get it to our tables? We fail to consider the countless hours of tilling and tending required to prepare the soil for the seed. We enjoy the benefits of months-long labor without stopping to take notice of the sacrifice it demands. In the same way, if we expect to see abundance in our lives, we must be willing to put in the preparation work. The state of the soil will determine the success of the harvest. Good fruit and a bountiful harvest require fertile soil.

Let's examine the process of cultivating fertile ground. The word fertile means to be fruitful, productive, and abundant. We want the garden of our heart to be lush and fecund, a place where the seeds of life and faith can thrive. God's desire for our lives is to produce good fruit, to be as vibrant and flourishing as the Garden of Eden, and to entrust ourselves to His hand as the Master Gardener. Unfortunately, our sinful nature fights against us at every turn, and our rebelliousness makes it hard for seeds to take root.

At the fall of Man, we see the repercussions of sin upon humanity and all creation. Adam and Eve's sin fouled the ground. God spoke to Adam and said, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field."

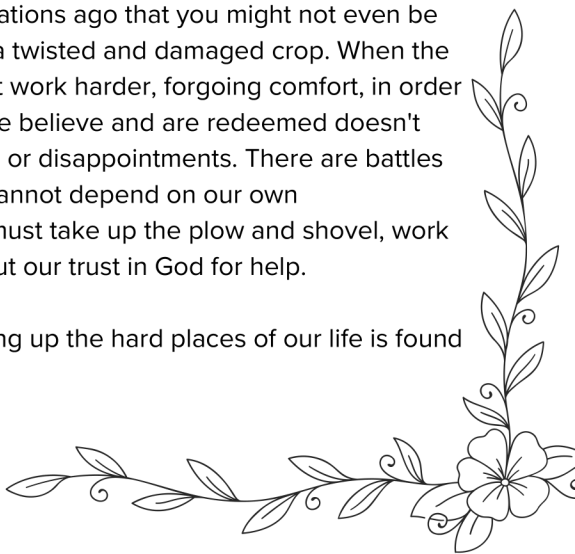


By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:17-19). Where once the garden was filled with fruit and herbs, their disobedience ushered in an onslaught of weeds. What was once a place of tending and stewarding became a place of toil and hardship. This pattern continued when Cain murdered his brother, which brought a curse upon the ground, and it would not produce a crop for him at all.

This is a sobering reminder that our sin impacts the earth itself and echoes throughout the generations. Developing a healthy, fertile heart takes discipline, time and effort, and preparation can be arduous. The process of cultivating land is called *tilling* the soil. This grueling task often involves loosening the crusty top layers of the earth, exposing rocks, sticks and old dead roots which must be painstakingly removed. Despite the hard work, turning up the soil is necessary. We must dig up the dead, destructive things which hinder growth, and break up the hardened areas to allow water and nutrients to flow. So let's dig deeper, and expose the hindrances that might be hiding under the surface. Are there areas of your life that need to be tilled?

Let's pause here and ask God to reveal any sin or hidden motive, and invite Him to examine our innermost being. If you feel like you've been in an endless preparation season, if you feel like you're continually being cultivated and don't see any fruit coming from your life, it could mean that through all the years of tilling, you've actually been toiling, and making matters worse. Perhaps there is a bitter root that was passed down to you from generations ago that you might not even be aware of, which has resulted in a twisted and damaged crop. When the soil of our souls is hard, we must work harder, forgoing comfort, in order to till and weed. Just because we believe and are redeemed doesn't mean we won't meet challenges or disappointments. There are battles we will have to face where we cannot depend on our own understanding or strength. We must take up the plow and shovel, work by the sweat of our brow, and put our trust in God for help.

The key to exposing and breaking up the hard places of our life is found in the power of the Word.

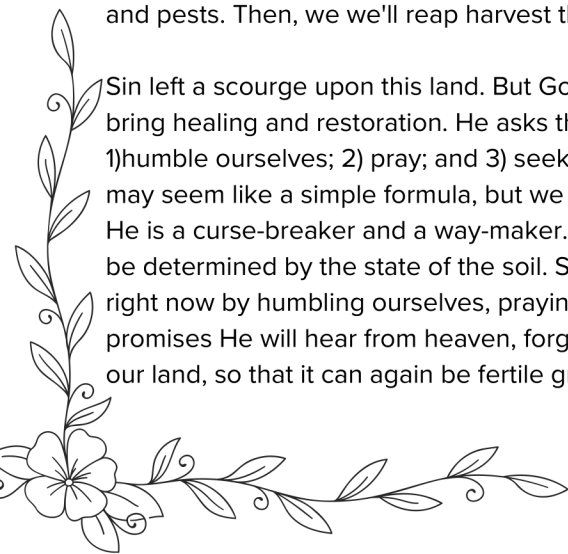


The Word of God is like a double-edged sword, penetrating to our very core, and separating soul from spirit. Like the dry, crusty outer layer of soil, we can become hardened or calloused over time. But when we allow the Word of God to act as the tines of a tiller, it cuts through the hard ground, exposing our innermost thoughts and secret motives. Those are the rocks, sticks and dead roots that need to be removed in order to prepare the soil to bear fruit.

In Mark 4, Jesus tells a well-known parable about a farmer who went out to plant some seed. "As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road, and the birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn't put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled among the weeds and nothing came of it. Some fell on good earth and came up with a flourish, producing a harvest exceeding his wildest dreams." (Mark 4:3-8 MSG).

If we unpack this parable, we see how the Word of God is received and challenged in our lives. The soil Jesus is referring to represents different types of people. But if we dig a little deeper, we might discover that, at one point or another, our own lives bear resemblance to the various types of soil Jesus describes. Perhaps you've experienced a season where the Word of God seemed to only hit the surface of your circumstances, but didn't have a chance to take root. Or maybe there was a trial you faced that shook your faith and caused you to doubt the Lord. We must keep the soil of our hearts fertile, well-watered, nourished with the Word of God, and free of stones, bitter roots, weeds and pests. Then, we will reap harvest that exceeds our wildest dreams.

Sin left a scourge upon this land. But God made a way, and promises to bring healing and restoration. He asks three things of us. That we 1) humble ourselves; 2) pray; and 3) seek His face (2 Chronicles 7:14). It may seem like a simple formula, but we all sin and fall short of His glory. He is a curse-breaker and a way-maker. The success of the harvest will be determined by the state of the soil. So let's start the healing process right now by humbling ourselves, praying and seeking His face. He promises He will hear from heaven, forgive our sin, and bring healing to our land, so that it can again be fertile ground.



Discussion

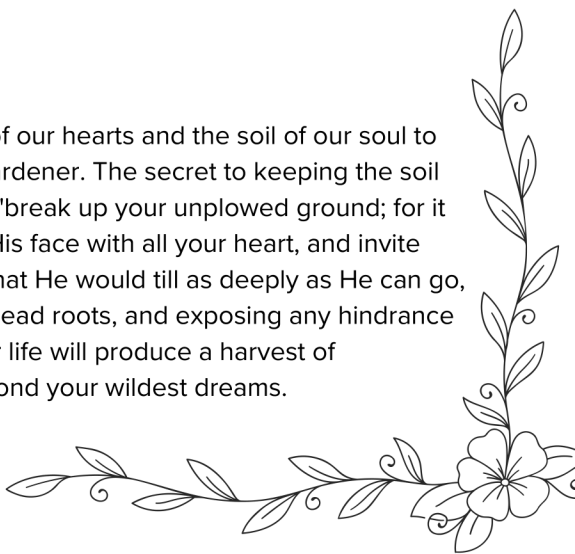
Think back to the Parable of the Sower, and the types of soil Jesus describes. Examine the state of your own soil, and how this analogy applies to your life.

As presented in the lesson, tilling can be a painful process for the soil. Explain why you think it is necessary or not.

Generational residue or curses greatly impact our growth and the health of our soil. Pinpoint a stronghold, past or present, then pray in agreement with others to tear it down.

Takeaway

Today, let's entrust the garden of our hearts and the soil of our soul to the skilled care of the Master Gardener. The secret to keeping the soil fertile is revealed in Hosea 1:12, "break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the Lord." Seek His face with all your heart, and invite Him to dig up everything. Pray that He would till as deeply as He can go, removing the rocks, sticks and dead roots, and exposing any hindrance to your growth. In doing so, your life will produce a harvest of righteousness and blessing beyond your wildest dreams.



The background of the image is a soft-focus photograph of tall, thin grasses with pinkish-red seed heads. A thin, gold-colored border frames the central text area.

Dear Tender-Hearted,

There is hope, dear one. There is no need to feel
helpless if your soil is damaged or hard to till.
I have given you the Holy Spirit to bring healing to
your soil. I will remove your stony, stubborn heart
and give you a heart that is tender and
responsive to Me.
Then, the fertile soil of your heart will sprout forth
good things and great blessings!