

the last word



There's Something Eternal About a Tree

by Jamie Buckingham

Last month, as I was preparing to leave for Israel, a friend asked if I would do something special for him. He wanted me to plant a tree for him in the soil of the Holy Land.

It was such a small act. But to him it signified something lasting. Almost eternal.

The little nation, once described by Ben Gurion as "this magnificent pile of rocks," had been denuded by the Turks many centuries ago. But over the last 31 years, since its independence, Jews and Christians from all over the world have been deliberately planting trees. Slowly the Israeli earth is turning green. With the trees (which give off oxygen) come clouds. With the clouds, rain. And with the rain, more trees.

Planting a tree is such a small act. Yet there is something eternal about it.

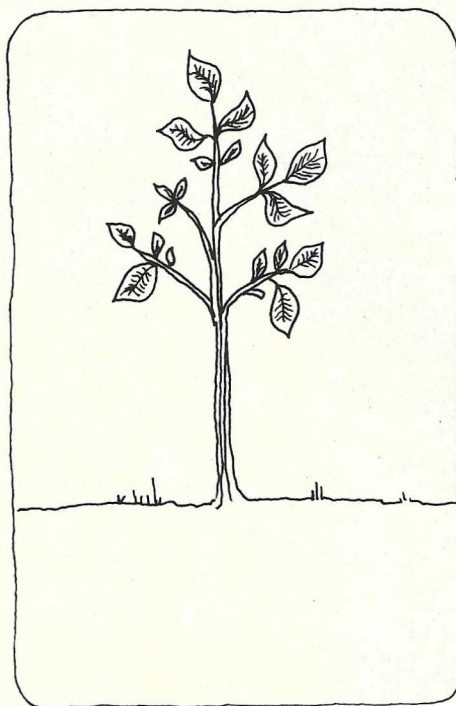
I've been thinking about that this last week. We're vacationing in our little place in the mountains of western North Carolina. Forty years ago, when we first started spending time each year in this little cabin, the mountains were covered with trees. Now, just down the road, the bulldozers are knocking over the stately white pines and oaks, ripping out the maples and poplars, making way for yet another subdivision. I walked down there yesterday. It was sad. People need a place to live. But I hate to see the trees go.

This afternoon I spent more than an hour propping up a tall, spindly red oak which had begun to topple toward the driveway. Its roots had been loosened by the spring rains. I finished the job with a feeling of deep satisfaction. God's command to dress the garden has never been rescinded.

Almost every childhood holds fond memory of a special tree. Perhaps it was a climbing tree, a gnarled oak with a ladder nailed to the trunk and a tree house in the branches. Maybe it was a spreading chestnut with a rope

swung slung from a low branch. Or a locust hanging over a swimming hole, with a rope and tire to swing out over the water. For some it was a weeping willow, gracefully draping a spot of soft romance near a lake.

Then there are the fruit trees: the taste of tart cherries, the smell of orange blossoms, plucking apples, biting into ripe plums or bitter persimmons. Who doesn't grow nostalgic at the smell of pines at Christmas, or remember the rustle of wind in the palms, the fragrance of



magnolias in the summer, or snow on the hemlocks in the front yard? Autumn colors, splashed across the hillside, with the soft scent of smoke in the air, draws us back to childhood—and to God.

Man needs to think—and pray—before destroying a single tree.

Five years ago I was hiding away in this same mountain cabin writing *Into the Glory*, a book about the missionary pilots who fly with the Jungle Aviation and Radio Service. It was early June, and I had been writing in solitary for two weeks, trying to

complete the manuscript before my family joined me. My old and close friend, Al West, editor of *Logos Journal*, flew down from New Jersey to read some of my typed pages and make critical comment. I was glad to see him. Not only was I lonely, but the book needed editorial direction.

Late one afternoon we took a walk in the woods behind the cabin. Deep in the forest, on a hillside overlooking a rippling brook, we discovered a huge white oak that had been felled by lightning. We stood for a long time looking at the giant tree, sprawled like a slain Goliath before David's sling. The hollow stump showed the lightning was not the real reason for its death. The marrow of its life had been destroyed by some kind of disease.

In the evening silence I stooped and dug a tiny white pine from the nearby soil. Al, unusually quiet, knelt by the hollow of the old stump and scooped out the rotting wood with his hands. Gently the two of us, in a sacred act, planted the tiny tree in the crater. New life from old.

In a few short months Al West was dead—at the age of 39—the marrow of his life destroyed by leukemia. Yet even today his spirit lives on. And inspires.

Last night I made a quiet pilgrimage into the woods to see our tree. The forest was alive in the twilight as the trees welcomed me like excited friends at a reunion. Birds sang and flitted from the branches. Squirrels chattered and scampered. A swarm of bees buzzed in a hollow tree, and the wind rustled the leaves of the tall giants, who seemed to clap their hands in recognition of my presence. I felt welcomed. The little white pine, growing strong and sturdy, held itself erect and stood at proud attention for my inspection. It was taking its place in the corporate body—reaching toward heaven.

I touched its trunk. And remembered.

There is something eternal about planting a tree. α