

Tilling God's Land

100 Devotions for Christian Farmers

by Scott Skelly

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Introduction

“If a farmer from Old Testament times could have visited an American farm in year 1900, he would have recognized—and had the skill to use—most of the tools he saw: the hoe, the plow, the harrow, the rake. If he were to visit an American farm today, he might think he was on a different planet.”

—Don and Philip Paarlberg,
The Agricultural Revolution of the 20th Century

AS A YOUNG CHILD attending St. Paul’s School in Janesville, Wisconsin, I always became excited when we studied Bible stories that involved farming. My siblings and I were the only farm kids in the school, so I felt somewhat special when we talked about farming. My teachers boosted that feeling by sometimes asking me to verify some farming facts as we studied these Bible stories. Looking back, it seems ironic that I was asked to substantiate farming knowledge such as the foolishness of sheep. My father did not raise sheep, and as a second grader I had probably never even touched a sheep. Yet I went along with it all the same. I soon came to learn that the Bible involved many stories of raising crops, tending animals, and being a farmer.

Today I still sit in church and think about my own farming experiences when the pastor describes farming practices to the members to help a parable make more sense. In the twenty-first century, most churchgoers do not know a whole lot about farming. They may not readily understand some farming comparisons that God uses. As a farmer, though, I feel a sense of connection when God uses these stories to share his message. Just as every Christian can better connect to God because he came to earth as a man through Jesus, I felt a little extra connection to God when I read about farming in the Bible.

Jesus might have been the son of a carpenter, but he only talked about buildings and construction a handful of times. Farming, on the other hand, appears in many of his stories and parables, and it also appears throughout the Old and New Testaments. The Bible describes Jesus as a shepherd and

shares the concern of people in times of drought. Parables talk about sowing and growing crops, and disgruntled farm laborers are compared to sinners. Sheep, rain, seeds, and soil feature prominently throughout the Bible. The first man that God created was given the task of farming. A farmer was tasked as God's agent to save creation from a flood by building an ark. The savior of the universe was even born in a barn.

Unfortunately, the world is full of sin and agriculture is often portrayed in a negative light as well. One farmer was greedy with his harvest and it cost him his life. The world's first agronomist killed his brother because he was jealous. Plagues destroyed the crops of Egypt. When we look at our farms today, we know that life is not always easy. Evil surrounds us, and Christians who are farmers face just as many struggles as those who don't farm.

Farming has changed over the past ten thousand years, yet we can still relate and feel the struggles, pain, and success that the farmers of the Bible experienced. Jesus did not talk about GPS-guided tractors in his parables, but he did talk about herdsmen and planting crops. Gloating about the role of farming in God's word as I did as a child might not be wise, but farmers do have an opportunity to make a special connection to what God is teaching us. We also know that God uses his entire word to speak to us about our daily lives, and as farmers there is definitely an ongoing need for God's support in our agricultural successes and struggles.

I have at times thought how hard it must feel to be a non-Christian farmer. Farming requires so much trust that God will provide good weather, markets, and conditions. I can do everything right in raising my crops until the day of harvest, but a single storm can destroy all my work. I need to trust that God will provide a harvest, and when my harvest is meager I need to trust that God will continue to watch over me during tough times.

As you journey through this book, you will encounter a hundred devotions relating to your role as a farmer. Some will look directly at stories of farming in the Bible. Reflect on the challenges and successes of these farmers, and consider how God works in your life with similar situations. Other devotions are specifically written to support you in your work as a farmer. A

farmer will go through many tough days, but God is always there for support. He also sends us good days, and we need to be thankful for our blessings. As you read these devotions, reflect on how you can better include God in your daily work and life.

May God bless you, your family, and your farm each and every day. Thanks be to God for all that he provides.

A Party for the Cows

Luke 15:4–7

⁴Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” ⁷I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

I HAVE NEVER TENDED sheep, but I remember plenty of times while growing up when the dairy cattle on our farm would escape. Most would not go far, but it always seemed that one would take off and make it about half a mile. For a farmer, a lost animal is a huge deal. I was recently walking through a rural high school when a student answered her cell phone. A teacher approached the student to take away her phone, but she quickly grabbed her coat and ran away yelling, “Sorry, I have a cow standing in the middle of the road!” Smiling, the teacher waived the no-cell-phone rule and let the student go.

I can remember numerous times as a child when we would help the neighbors or they would help us when an animal got out. Suddenly, getting that animal home safely became the most important job for our neighborhood. Sometimes this required people to delay chores or lose sleep, but everyone would jump right in without hesitation.

When believers leave the fold, God wants them back, just as a farmer wants his or her animal back. Sometimes God uses those who are strong in faith to help corral that believer back to faith. We never hosted any parties when our animals were all returned home; we were just mad that the animal broke the fence in the first place. However, God is more forgiving, and he *does* celebrate when his people come back home.

Does that mean that we should intentionally fall away from God so that we can later come back to be welcomed joyfully by him? Of course not! I doubt any farmer would care for an animal more after catching it than if the animal had never run away at all. Lucky for us, God is not like this. God really wants us to be a part of his kingdom. He wants every human to be with him one day in heaven. Every day he rejoices over those who believe in him. When someone falls away, it causes him a lot of pain. So when someone comes back to him, he rejoices in having that believer with him. The bottom line is that God wants all people to believe so that they can join him in heaven one day.

Storms on the Farm

Matthew 14:22–32

²²Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

²⁶When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

²⁷But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” ²⁸“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹“Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

³¹Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” ³²And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

A STORM RECENTLY passed through our area that brought winds in excess of fifty miles per hour for a few days. The meteorologists were all excited that it was the storm of the decade, but to me it just seemed like another really windy few days. However, since it was late October it wreaked havoc on the corn crop.

We were certainly thankful that we had most of our crops in, and the storm did not cause any major structural damages. However, I was frustrated, because combining would be much more difficult for our few remaining acres. As I often find myself doing, I began to ask God why he was sending such bad weather to our farm and making it so difficult for us. It seems that the weather never cooperates. It feels as if we are always in a drought or

getting flooded; that the weather is cold so nothing grows or the heat is scorching the plants.

As farmers, it is easy to be depressed about the weather. This is why we need to trust that God is in control. When the weather is not going our way, prayer is certainly a good thing. But it can be frustrating when, after we call out to God, the weather does not change.

In Matthew 14, we see the disciples battling in a storm of their own. They too were very afraid, and even at a time when they needed to trust Jesus, they did not recognize him. Only when Jesus asked Peter to trust in him did the recognition take place. However, even when he was out of the boat coming to Jesus on the water, the storm did not pass for Peter. His faith was still being tested.

We are going to have storms of our own in life, whether they are physical storms or other problems. Just because we ask God to take them away does not mean that they will immediately be gone. However, even when we are experiencing bad times, God is beside us. The problem might not disappear, but he will stand by our side if we allow him to.

The Seed and the Planter

Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23

³Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹He who has ears, let him hear.”

¹⁸“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. ²²The 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. ²³But 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.”

JESUS TELLS HIS DISCIPLES a parable about a farmer sowing seeds in a field. It is interesting that the farmer in the parable faces some of the same challenges we face today. Let’s imagine that Jesus was telling this parable today:

A farmer went out with his John Deere corn planter to plant his cornfield. As he was planting the seed, some fell on the lane when he turned around at the end of the field, and the birds came and ate it up. Parts of his field had rocky, clumpy, or sandy soil. In those places, seed sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow and warm. But when the sun came up, the corn

plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no roots. Other seed was planted in a patch of thistles that the farmer could never seem to eliminate. The thistles grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed was planted in good soil, where it produced a crop—two hundred bushels to the acre, which was many times more than what was sown.

It certainly is interesting how the parable of the sower is so familiar to us today. But like all parables in the Bible, it is not the story but the meaning that holds value. Verses 18–23 explain the parable:

Seed that falls on the lane cannot grow because it has no soil base to even begin growth. Think of how many people you know who have heard Bible stories, but do not really understand Christianity. You may know others whose seed fell in shallow or sandy soil. Like these seeds, the faith grows fast, but with no base or constant support, it quickly dries up and dies. We have also seen people, or even ourselves, get choked out by the evil of this world. We can see that the thistles and evil around us are wrong, but we continue to live right in the middle of them.

Yet, when we choose the good soil of a life lived for God, we grow exponentially. We continue to grow as time goes on. If we continue to live in Christ throughout our lives, our corn plant will continue to grow until the day our farmer, Jesus, takes us to heaven. Judgment Day will be the ultimate harvest. Is your corn plant growing in the right soil?

This ends the preview of Tilling God's Land.

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