

TRADING
YOUR PLANS
FOR A
LIFE THAT
MATTERS

Centered

JASON
BROWN

WITH PAUL ASAY

SNEAK
PEEK



SAMPLE
ONLY

UNCORRECTED
PROOF

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WATERBROOK

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Tay,
My crown and worthy of all my love.
Oh, what a blessing you are!
Such a fruitful vine, and our children are your vigorous fruits.
Our family flourishes because of your faithfulness.
More than a helpmate, you are my armor bearer who
oftentimes fearlessly charges into battle.
If only the world could see that you are the real hero and I'm
only a sidekick!

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CHAPTER 1

Stuck

Be careful what you pray for. The thought crept into my mind as I squinted through the cloud of mayflies and mosquitoes buzzing all around me, biting me, sucking me dry.

I was in the middle of my farm in 2014, mowing fields on an ancient tractor that wheezed and growled as I ran over and cut and crushed the stubborn Carolina growth. *Brush hogging*, they call it, and the job's just as tough and ugly as it sounds. The sun beat down on me like a mallet. Sweat ran down my face, turning my shirt as wet as a washcloth. Dust billowed up from the parched ground in angry, empty clouds, the grit coating my clothes, my hat, my skin.

It got inside me too. With each breath, I sucked in Carolina dirt. Every time I blew my nose, black mess came out.

I prayed for this, I thought. I gave up mansions and millions for this. I gave up comfort and luxury and a career that countless kids all over America dream of. *For this*. A kingdom of mosquitoes and dust. And the land, like the mosquitoes, was

slowly sucking me dry.

• • •

Two years earlier, that land looked like heaven to me. To own and run a farm was more than a dream; it was my calling. And I believed in that calling so much that I was willing to throw away a lucrative career in the National Football League to follow it. This was what God wanted me to do: for my wife, Tay, and me to give up our comfortable lives and sink our hands deep into family and faith and the good earth. We followed God's call here, away from a mansion in St. Louis to a broken-down farmhouse in North Carolina and a thousand acres of trees and fishponds and rich, rolling farmland. In October 2012, we bought this little corner of Carolina. And when I stepped onto the property for the first time as its owner with Tay and my oldest son, four-year-old JW, I couldn't contain myself.

"God has blessed us with a place flowing with milk and honey!" I shouted.

JW looked around and frowned. "I don't see any milk," he said, "and I don't see any honey."

I bent beside him, wrapped one arm around him, and pointed with the other to the land we now owned.

"Hey, son," I said. "See those pastures full of green grass?"

He nodded.

"Those pastures can supply food for cows that make the milk we drink. And see all those beautiful wildflowers?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Bees love those wildflowers," I said. "They buzz over to each flower and gather pollen, which they take back to their hives to make honey."

JW smiled. "I get it now, Dad."

He looked over the farm with a bit of wonder on his face. His new home was a living illustration of God's design and provision. On this plot of land, God's greatness and His goodness were on display for *everyone* to see, even a five-year-old on the verge of a strange new chapter in his life. I could see it too. I could *feel* it.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Tay and I prayerfully sought out the kingdom, and the righteousness, of God. And this—this corner of Eden—is what was added to us. A blessing. A gift.

But sometimes even God's most precious, most miraculous gifts come with little asterisks attached. Sunshine is a gift, but too much sun and your crops will wither. Rain is a gift, but too much rain and the crops will be stunted or wash away. Children are gifts as well, but no parent on God's green earth will tell you they're easy to give birth to or easy to raise.

In 2012, Tay and I had our land flowing with milk and honey.

Two years later, we knew it was filled with sweat and tears too.

By that summer, the summer of 2014, Tay and I were pretty much broke. Everything we'd counted on to get First Fruits Farm up and running was gone—evaporated like a puddle of water on a hot, dry summer day. Milk and honey? All I could see was the dust. I couldn't wait for our financial situation to get better. We needed to plant. And though a farm our size needs a really good tractor, I didn't have enough money for even a bad one. So I borrowed a hand-me-down dinosaur of a tractor, a 1968 Allis-Chalmers, from my father.

It should've been in a museum. Maybe it's a miracle the thing ran at all. It was fifteen years older than I was, and it had rolled off the assembly line years before the Beatles broke up. Heck, the Allis-Chalmers company itself went out of business

before I graduated from high school. Sentimental farmers might keep an old warhorse like that running, but typically, fifty-year-old tractors don't do much more than gather cobwebs and sprout rust.

Sometimes when another farmer came to visit or I ran into one in town, I'd try to glean all the wisdom I could from him, and during the conversation, I'd always mention my borrowed tractor.

"I'm hoping I'll be able to make it work for a while," I'd say. "Can I be a successful farmer with a tractor like this?"

Some would shake their heads. Some would laugh. More than one of them said, "Jason, if I had that big farm of yours, I'd go out of business with that tractor."

I'd go out of business with that tractor.

I thought about it as I rode that tractor that hot, dusty day. Acres and acres of brush and dark, dry dirt spread in every direction. Another mosquito bit the back of my neck. The sun felt as strong as a jackhammer. And I knew right then that going out of business was a real possibility. *Possibility?* Some might've looked at our situation and said it was all but guaranteed.

The tractor wasn't going to last forever. It might not last the afternoon. I thought about the money I'd sunk into the farm already. I thought about the money I'd set aside that was supposed to equip and staff the farm—the cash that, through an almost unbelievable string of setbacks, had vanished. I thought about what I could've had if I'd stayed in the NFL: houses and cars and financial security for my kids and my wife and me. I thought about my family and how much they'd already sacrificed to share my dream.

Everyone thought I was crazy when I turned my back on the NFL to follow God and become a farmer. Was I about to show them that they were right?

The field was empty except for me and my tractor and this sea of dust—the dust I’d sacrificed so much for.

No one was within a mile of me. I was all alone.

But not really.

“God!”

I shouted it above the tractor’s wheezes and gasps.

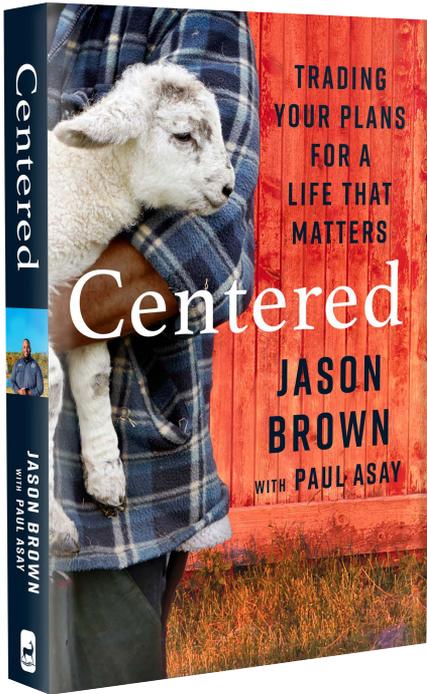
“God! I cried again, turning my face up to the sun and empty sky. “I don’t mind praying to You, but every time I get on this thing, do I have to pray that it starts up?”

No voice from above. The cicadas buzzed, the mosquitoes whined, but I didn’t hear a thing from God.

This is my life now, I thought. This is what I gave up my career and my wealth and my glory for. No playoff runs. No cheering fans. Just me and dirt and mosquitoes. If I’m lucky. If I don’t lose it all. I could feel the tears in my eyes.

I was tired and scared and furious with God. I was close to despair. I cried out in my pain, anger, and desperation. I felt as though He had forsaken me.

I didn’t hear Him, but I knew He was there. I still believed He had an amazing journey ahead of me, just as He’d made the journey behind me. From a big fat kid to an NFL starter to a clueless farmer, God was plotting my path one strange step at a time. And I was just as amazed as anyone about where it would lead.



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