

FARMING FOR CHRIST

JASON BROWN FOLLOWED GOD FROM PRO FOOTBALL TO THE FARM

by Richard Greene

Sitting atop an old 1968 Allis-Chalmers 190XT tractor in the scorching sun, Jason Brown was bush hogging on his North Carolina farm to clear and prepare it for planting sweet potatoes. Flies and mosquitoes swirled around his head. He swatted at them, unsuccessfully. Soot and dust were so thick, he labored to breathe.

Jason had borrowed the tractor from his father who lived not far up the road. Back in the day, the tractor was a technological marvel, but now in 2014 it was unreliable.

Jason felt defeated. Two years earlier, when he was released from the St. Louis Rams—where he had been the star center with a five-year, \$37.5 million contract—he sensed God calling him to hang up his cleats, move back to North Carolina and become a farmer. Motivated by God's love, he and his wife, Tay, promised God they would call their property First Fruits Farm and would donate the crops to the disadvantaged and impoverished.

Using the proceeds from the sale of their mammoth home in St. Louis,

Jason purchased the sprawling 1,000-acre farm in Franklin County near where he grew up. Tragically, the calamitous economic downturn and other unforeseen events swallowed up their savings and other investments, and as a result, he lacked the funds to purchase the equipment, seed, fuel and other essentials to manage and grow the farm.

For the first time in his life, Jason wondered how he was going to pay the monthly bills, let alone accomplish what God wanted him to do.

With tears streaming down his cheeks, the 6-foot-3-inch, 325-pound former lineman—right there in the middle of the field—yelled toward Heaven: “Lord, I’m out here working for You. I’m not receiving any benefit for this. Why have You forsaken me?”

A prayer he had prayed not long before echoed in his mind: “God, I want to be drawn to You. God, I want to be taken to a place where I call out to You, where I need You.”

For so many years, he had placed his faith in money and neglected to pray. That day, he felt God speaking to his heart to cry out to Him. So he did.

“God, You know I need a tractor,” he prayed with fervor. “I don’t know how You’re going to do it, but I know You’re going to provide it. Lord, may it be one of those nice John Deere tractors, with four-wheel drive, an enclosed cab, air conditioning and enough horsepower to do what I need it to do. I’m going to trust You.”

Word of Jason and Tay’s farm ministry spread, leading to a local and national media blitz. Emails poured in—including one from a gentleman asking if they had any equipment needs. Not knowing who the man was, Jason didn’t answer. But when he emailed again, Jason responded.

When they got together, Jason shared that he had been praying for a tractor. “We can help you with that,” the man said. “You have a big farm, so I’m sure you need a good-sized tractor, something reliable, a John Deere.”

Taken aback, Jason questioned the man about his intentions and expectations. “The Holy Spirit asked me to reach out to you,” the man replied. “The only obligation you have is to continue being obedient to the Holy Spirit the same way I’m being

obedient right now.”

Goose bumps flew up Jason’s arms. The man called the local dealership, negotiated everything, and the tractor was delivered to Jason’s farm with a full tank of fuel.

“This is just one of countless answered prayers showing how awesome God is,” Jason said. “I can’t take credit for any of this. This is not my farm, it’s God’s farm. I’m just His humble steward.”

Jason’s parents both grew up on farms but moved to Washington, D.C., before Jason was born. His older brother, Lunsford Bernard Brown II, and older sister, Dana, were born there. In the early 1980s, frightened by the crack cocaine epidemic, gang violence and drug wars, Jason’s mom moved the family to her hometown of Henderson, N.C. That’s where Jason was born. His dad stayed in D.C., with his federal government job, commuting to the Tar Heel state on weekends, moving back to North Carolina

years later.

The Brown children were dragged to church. “I remember people testifying and praising and worshiping, but I didn’t know what they were talking and singing about,” Jason said.

Bigger than most kids in school, Jason started playing football in the 9th grade, but gave it up in the 10th grade because he wanted to play trombone in the marching band.

“I was a nerdy, geeky kind of guy who was focused on academics,” he said.

Eventually, the football coach convinced him to return to the gridiron so he could pursue a

full-ride college scholarship, which he received from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He majored in interpersonal communications and excelled on the field at center.

Jason met Tay, a student at nearby Duke University, at a party in 2002. “He came up to me and said, ‘Wow, you’re glowing,’” Tay said, laughing. “I thought, *Of all the sappy, silly pick-up lines. Come on.*”

They were married 15 months later. Jason was drafted by the Baltimore Ravens in the fourth round of the 2005 NFL draft. He was traded to St. Louis in 2009.

The next year not only closed a decade, it was the year Jason turned 27. He woke up on the morning of his birthday, looked in the mirror and moaned. His brother, Lunsford, nicknamed Deucey, had enlisted in the Army and was killed in Iraq—at the age of 27. Deucey had been dedicated to serving others. >>



PHOTOGRAPH: JAMIE JONES PHOTOGRAPHY



St. Louis Rams center Jason Brown (60) waits for the snap during a game between the Saint Louis Rams and the Kansas City Chiefs at the Edward Jones Dome in Saint Louis, Missouri.

» “He made an impact,” Jason said. “Here I was a millionaire and living a life of worldly success and selfish entertainment. I wanted to change.”

Sermons and Bible verses from his younger church days began to play in his mind. Verses like 1 John 3:16—“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” and Romans 5:8—“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

“All those seeds planted early in my life in the Bible Belt came back,” Jason said.

Realizing how much God loved him and how far he was from God, he repented of his sins and surrendered his life to Christ. Tay had renewed her relationship with Christ in college.

Sensing the conviction of the Holy Spirit, Jason walked over to the two bars in his house and, one by one, he poured all the unopened bottles of top-shelf liquors and cognacs down the drain. Then he prayed, “God, what can I do moving forward with the gifts, talents, abilities and blessings You’ve given me?”

Following a sermon at his church

one Sunday, again under conviction, he rushed onto the stage to be baptized. “I didn’t have a change of clothes, but I ran up there and said, ‘Me next.’”

Jason continued to pray, fast and read the Bible, particularly the Book of Genesis and the story of Joseph preparing for a famine in Egypt. At the same time, he was drawn to stories online about people in dire need throughout his home state. He prayed, “God, are you leading me to store up food for my family?” He sensed God saying, “I want you to store up food for my people throughout North Carolina.” That’s when Jason knew God wanted him to move back home from St. Louis and become a real-life farmer.


About that time, he was released

from the St. Louis Rams. He had long-term contract offers worth millions from the Carolina Panthers, San Francisco 49ers and Baltimore Ravens. “With each one, the Holy Spirit said, ‘You’re not supposed to be there!’” He turned each one down.

And so it was that God directed Jason and Tay to this Louisburg, N.C., farm of rolling hills, beautiful ponds, lush pasturelands, big white barns and silos, and a spacious farm house, now filled with children: J.W., 11; Naomi, 7; Noah, 6; Kahlan, 4; Tre, 4; Judah, 2; and Olivia, 7 months. Tay, a licensed dentist, homeschools all of them.

To date, the Browns have donated more than 850,000 pounds of produce to local churches, food banks, pantries and soup kitchens. Expansion into commercial canning is on the drawing board, as are youth education programs.

The Browns are cultivating additional acres to increase food production and are planning to enlarge their evangelistic outreach—through concerts, revival services, Biblical literacy programs and a live nativity at Christmas.

The ultimate goal of First Fruits Farm is transformed lives through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. “For what Christ accomplished on the cross, He wants to cleanse, restore and change us,” Tay said. “We can be involved with that, and God can be glorified, whether we have millions of dollars or just one or two.”  ©2018 BGEA

SCRIPTURE QUOTATIONS ARE TAKEN FROM THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW KING JAMES VERSION.

“Here I was a millionaire and living a life of worldly success and selfish entertainment. I wanted to change.”

—former NFL center-turned-farmer Jason Brown