

I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. —Philippians 3:14

It's my first day on the tractor! A crisp morning breeze brushes across the field. Crickets and country silence yield to the roar of the engine. Dropping the plow into the soil, I head out across the field. I look down at the gauges and gearshift, squeeze the cold steel of the steering wheel, and admire the power at my disposal. Finally, I look back to view the results. Instead of the ramrod-straight line, I was expecting, I see what looks like a slithering snake, with more bends and curves than the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

We know better. "Plow with your eye on the fence post," we've been told. By staying focused on a point across the field, a person plowing is assured of a straight line. On the return, I comply, with telling results: The line is straight. The row was messed up only when I didn't have a focus point.

Paul had similar wisdom when he wrote of having his focus on Jesus Christ and the impact it had on him. Not only did he ignore distractions (Phil. 3:8,13), he set the focus (vv.8,14), noted the result (vv.9-11), and observed the pattern it sets for others (vv.16-17).

Like Paul, if we focus on Christ, we will plow a straight path and accomplish God's purpose in our lives.

Lord, help us keep our eyes on You And focused on the task Of bringing glory to Your name By doing what You ask. —Sper

Plowing Field

Luke 9:62 ESV

Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Hosea 10:12 ESV

Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

Jeremiah 4:3 ESV

For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: "Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns.

Luke 17:7 ESV

"Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'?"

Hosea 10:13 ESV

You have plowed iniquity; you have reaped injustice; you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your way and the multitude of your warriors,

Proverbs 20:4 ESV

The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.

Job 4:8 ESV

As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.

Job 1:14 ESV

And there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them,

1 Kings 19:19 ESV

So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yokes of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him.

Deuteronomy 22:10 ESV

You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.

**Break Up Your Fallow Ground,
Your Unplowed Ground**

As New Year's Day approaches, two passages of Scripture challenge me to grow and change in the year to come. Both are spoken by Old Testament prophets to the people of Israel, who had become lazy, sloppy, and disobedient in their service of the Lord.

**"Break up your unplowed ground
and do not sow among thorns.
Circumcise yourselves to the Lord,
circumcise your hearts,
you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem...." (Jeremiah 4:3-4a)**

**"Sow for yourselves righteousness,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unplowed ground;
for it is time to seek the Lord,
until he comes
and showers righteousness on you." (Hosea 10:12)**

These passages have in common the phrase, "Break up your unplowed ground." Just what does it mean for me and you to do that?

The phrase "unplowed ground" (NIV) or "fallow ground" (KJV, NRSV) is the Hebrew noun *nîr*, "the tillable, untilled, or fallow ground."* It is land that could be productive, but for whatever reason has not been broken up, tilled, plowed, and prepared for planting. The prophets speaking the Word of the Lord are commanding the people to break up that land — spiritually! To plow the plowable land that they have. The prophets observe two things about fallow ground:

Fallow ground is unusable, and Fallow ground is unused.

Let's examine each and then see how we can go about breaking up our fallow ground.

Fallow Ground Is Unusable

The unplowed ground won't let a crop grow. It's hard, preventing seeds from penetrating, germinating, and growing to maturity. When it's time to put in the garden we get out the rototiller and turn the soil so that seeds can get into it and let their roots go down deep where moisture can be found.

In our first passage, Jeremiah tells his hearers:

"Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns." (Jeremiah 4:3)

In other words, they were sowing seed, but because they didn't bother to prepare the soil and pull out the thorns, the seed had little effect. They were either lazy or stupid or both.

When you apply this agricultural analogy to spiritual things, what must be done so the soil is ready for planting God's word?

Stumps must be removed. As our forefathers moved West, they began by logging the trees on their land and rooting out the stumps. Have you ever cut down a tree and prepared its trunk for construction or firewood? It's hard work. But removing stumps is even harder. You must dig down and cut each of the main roots with an ax, hatchet, or chainsaw. Then you attach a rope or chain to the stump and pull it out with a team of horses, oxen, truck, or winch. Finally, you pile all the stumps together and burn them as you clear the land.

What's been growing in your heart previously? Hatred, bitterness, lust, greed, hedonism? These must be rooted out so a new crop can be planted. Grain doesn't flourish under the shade of trees. They must be removed so the new crop can grow in the light.

Hardness must be broken up. A plow or rototiller does the hard work of opening up the ground. Yes, you can dig it, one shovel at a time, but that's too slow. You harness some cattle or horses — or horsepower. But many are the farmer without livestock who has harnessed himself up and pulled his plow while his wife or son guided the plow. It takes energy to pull the plow, to guide the plow, to keep the furrows straight so the field can be plowed efficiently.

Where is the hardness in your heart? Where is the unbelief that is lurking in your soul? If you've been hurt in a relationship or by your father or mother, you may have sealed off an area of your life because it's just too painful. But you need to let God break up those old resentments and heal those old hurts. He'll pull the plow, but you must direct it toward those hard places in you that you know must be dealt with.

Sometimes we've been hardened by unbelief. You prayed that a grandparent wouldn't die and your prayer wasn't answered. You've been

out of work or have a chronic illness that has taken its toll on your faith. You've concluded that God doesn't answer prayer — at least for you. That hardness of unbelief must be faced squarely and broken up if God is to plant something new and fruitful in your heart. Heartfelt repentance and confession are one way of plowing deep. When is the last time you were literally on your knees broken before the Lord?

Larger rocks must be dislodged. Sometimes when you're plowing you come upon some large, immovable rocks. If you're serious about putting this field into production, it will require considerable digging, leverage, and horsepower to move the rocks from the field. Yes, it's work, but you'll be glad later that you took the time to do it right.

As you've plowed your heart, have you discovered some big rocks that need to be removed? Can't budge them by yourself? Why don't you talk with your pastor or a mature Christian about the problem? They will have had some experience moving rocks in their own life — every field has them. Instead of being judgmental, you'll probably find they'll be a lot of help.

Thorns must be gathered and burned. When a field goes unplanted for several years it often becomes covered with thorns or other weeds. Here in California, the weed of choice is starthistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*), an Old World thistle that is the scourge of the West. A combination of approaches will eventually conquer star thistle — pulling by hand, mowing when the flowers are only 10% blossomed, and irrigation. One of our neighbors was in her pasture several days last month pulling up starthistle by the roots. Now her pasture is pretty free of it, though she'll need to watch out for newly germinated seeds for the next few years.

What kinds of thorns make the fields of our hearts unproductive? In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus uses thorns in a field to describe the human heart.

"The 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" (Matthew 13:22).

"The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful" (Mark 4:19).

"The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures, and they do not mature" (Luke 8:14).

Depending on your particular plot of land, those thorns may represent sexual temptations and lust, self-indulgence, pride, anger, selfishness, a love of entertainment and recreation, addictions, greed, and other thorns. Each of these chokes the Word. Each has a devastating effect on the crop that God wants to grow in you and me. We must root them out instead of molly-coddling them!

Fallow ground, unplowed, unprepared soil is unusable for any serious crop. God speaks to us that we must "break up" our fallow ground so that it is usable.

Fallow Ground Is Unused

But there's another side to this. Fallow ground is unused ground. You may have many aspects of your life surrendered to God and under cultivation for a crop of righteousness and the fruit of the Spirit. But maybe there's a plot of land — a part of your life — that you've never got around to cultivating, planting, and harvesting. It's there but it's wasted. Perhaps you've put off plowing this particular piece of land because it's too difficult or too painful. Perhaps you can't envision the fruit and grain that can grow there so you've never bothered.

But God is the great Vinedresser. If you'll break up the additional fallow ground in your life, he will extend and enlarge your fruitfulness.

Looking forward to a New Year is a great time to rededicate the tracts of land that comprise our life and put them under cultivation for God. Now is the time to break up these unplowed fields and yield them to his growth. He calls you to this. Will you be obedient? Here is your command and your promise:

***"Sow for yourselves righteousness,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unplowed ground;
for it is time to seek the Lord,
until he comes
and showers righteousness on you." (Hosea 10:12)***