

FAITH LIKE POTATOES

FAITH
LIKE
POTATOES

*The story of a farmer
who risked everything for God*

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with
Jan Greenough and Val Waldeck

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Faith Like Potatoes

“To hell with El Niño!”

I looked out over the vast crowds gathered in King’s Park Rugby Stadium, and I knew I had their full attention.

“To hell with the drought warnings and the fear and the worry! We are not listening to the lies of the devil. We are listening to the promises of God!”

My audience looked at me in stunned silence. They had come to Durban in September 1997 for the Peace Gathering hosted by Shalom Ministries, and they knew weather as only farmers can: they knew it could make or break them.

El Niño comes around every three to seven years. A warm current of water in the Eastern Pacific triggers unusual weather conditions around the world, bringing torrential rain in some places and extended periods of drought in others – Southern Africa in particular. That year all the signs were that El Niño was the strongest for 50 years, and the drought would be correspondingly worse. The newspapers, TV and radio seemed to talk about nothing else. Even the Agricultural Union had succumbed to the current fears.

“Don’t plant expensive crops,” they advised. “Keep your outlay to a minimum. Plant only the crops you know will grow. This is going to be a drought year, so it’s a year to consolidate.”

The audience in front of me knew that. They knew I was a farmer, too, so they could hardly believe that I was serious.

“This year we are going to plant potatoes! We are going back and we’re going to plant all our lands – every square inch of ground – with mealies and dry beans and potatoes. We are going to trust God for our needs!”

That night as I drove home I wondered if I was being rash. “Me and my big mouth,” I thought. “If this isn’t really God’s will, I’m in real trouble this time.” If I was wrong, it could mean the loss of my entire farm. I prayed earnestly: “Guide me, Lord. I need a specific direction from you now.”

Sure enough, the conviction came into my heart: I was to plant ten hectares of potatoes. “OK, Lord, I’ll do it,” I said. “Ten hectares it shall be.” I was filled with determination to believe God whatever the cost. It was all or nothing.

Planting potatoes is a very expensive exercise, as any farmer knows. In addition to the cost of the seed potatoes, there is also the extra fertiliser. When you plant mealies (known as maize or sweetcorn in the UK) you only put down about 350 to 400 kilos of fertiliser per hectare, but potatoes need at least a tonne. The spray programme to keep blight at bay costs about 6,000 Rand (around £500). Add in the cost of labour and you begin to understand that planting

potatoes is a big investment – it isn't what you do when you're being cautious.

My neighbouring farmers were horrified. "Listen, Angus," said one. "I've heard you're planning to put in potatoes. Please don't do it ... it'll be the finish of you. I've seen too many farms go bankrupt. You've been around here for 20 years and we don't want to lose you. Why not try broiler chicks or something else?"

"I have to do it," I replied. "I have to do what God has told me to."

"But you've never planted potatoes before. You've got no experience. You've got no irrigation. The biggest drought in history is on the way. Don't do it!"

I couldn't be persuaded, though it was near the end of the planting season, and I knew it was going to be difficult to find the seed. You actually plant potatoes to get potatoes, and what we eventually found wasn't the best. The bags were so rotten that when we picked them up the seed potatoes fell out, and we saw that shoots had already begun to grow. Still, we bought up everything we could find, and we planted it all. Six lorry-loads of seed potatoes went into those ten hectares of ground.

We planted up the rest of the farm, too, with the mealies and the dry beans, but it was the potatoes that concerned us most – they represented such a big investment. Potatoes need a lot of water, because they are 90 per cent water themselves, and that drought was a real test of my faith. Sometimes it would begin to rain, and our spirits would rise – then it would stop, everything would become dry and dusty, and the devil would accuse me. "You've got yourself in real trouble

now! Where is the money going to come from this year?” He never missed an opportunity to taunt me, and we had to walk by faith every step of the way.

Normally, in a drought year, farmers plant with minimum fertiliser, minimum cost, minimum everything. And of course, they get only a minimum return. One of my neighbours planted only soya beans, a low-input crop requiring little moisture, and a safe bet for a drought year. But he didn't make much profit: soya beans also give the farmer a low return. That makes sense. The Lord says, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (2 Corinthians 9:6).

My friends Jeff, Peter and Dieter, fellow believers and local farmers, knew a lot about potatoes, and they came over every day to check on the crop. Did we baby those potatoes! We sprayed them, we kept them clean, we gave them the Rolls-Royce treatment. Everyone looked on in amazement, but we were trusting God.

Meanwhile, Christians all over the country had heard about my crop and were praying for it. I wondered if I should make a few contingency plans. I had no irrigation equipment so I asked a local farmer to lend me a couple of pipes to attach to my borehole, to give me a chance of getting some extra water. He gave me twelve sprays – not nearly enough to get around ten hectares of land. I was back to relying on God, and he never let us down. Every time the land looked too dry, I would connect the pipes and switch on the sprays – and down would come the rain, so I had to switch off the water and apologise to God! That hap-

pened over and over again: the Lord watched over those plants every inch of the way.

It was the first time I had ever grown potatoes, so I wasn't quite sure what to expect. However, when we began harvesting, the experts told me that I had a bumper crop. Those potatoes were the best in the country. In fact, they were just about the only ones in the country, because most other farmers had been scared off from planting them. There was a general shortage, so we had no trouble selling our miracle potatoes at a good price.

There's a care home for the elderly near my farm, and I often speak there. Every time I visited that year, the old folk wanted to know how the crops were faring. One day I dug up some really big potatoes, washed them and put them in a bag with some mealies. When I finished preaching, I took them out and put them on the table. "This is what Jesus has done," I said. "This is the way he has rewarded our faith. Our God is the God of the impossible, and El Niño has no power like his."

Many of the labourers on our farm were Christians, and they usually had to put up with a great deal of mockery from their friends for standing up for Christ. Now they had an answer. "Where is this El Niño the clever people tell us about every day on the radio?" they asked. "Now you can see for yourself that we serve the living God."

Those potatoes caught the imagination of Christians all over the country. I spoke to a group of black pastors in Magaliesberg one day, and they said, "Every time we eat a potato from now on, we will remember this: 'Without faith it is impossible to please God,

because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Peter Marshall, the great evangelical preacher, once said that we need “faith like potatoes” – plain, simple, real faith that will sustain us in our everyday lives. Whenever I pick up a potato I remember those words. That’s the kind of faith I want. When we have faith and act on it, God will come through for us, no matter what our circumstances. God is King!