

Story #2: “How Much Land does a Man Need?”

Many years ago, there lived an old farmer who wanted to be a landowner—a wealthy landowner. Every time he heard that a piece of property was for sale, he saved his money and bought it. Even though he always enjoyed success, it wasn't long before he would become dissatisfied, longing to have more.

His lust for land took the farmer across the vast country of Russia in search of better deals and larger tracts of land.

Eventually, he heard about a chieftain who controlled a vast amount of virgin farmland in a remote corner of Russia. He also heard that if the chieftain liked you, he would give you large sections of his land for a very small price.

The farmer traveled to meet the chieftain so he could offer him gifts and flattery. Immediately, the chieftain liked the farmer and made him an incredible offer.

“You can have as much of my land as you want, for only 300 rubles.”

“Do you really mean it?” the farmer asked doubtfully.

“Yes. You can begin in the morning if you like. You can have a day's worth of land.”

“A day's worth?”

“Yes, that's how we measure land here. It's the amount you can walk around in one day.”

“How does that work?” the farmer asked, hardly able to contain his glee.

“Just mark the land as you walk. That's all you have to do.”

“I can walk as far as I like?” the farmer asked.

“Certainly. But you must return to the same place from which you begin—before sunset. If you fail to do so, you will lose both the land and your money.”

The farmer agreed and went to bed early. But he tossed and turned all night with anticipation. He used the time to plan how he would run his huge farm. When he finally fell asleep, he had a strange experience. He dreamed the chieftain was the Devil—tempting him with this offer and putting his soul at risk.

When morning came, he wondered for a while why he could not be satisfied with what he already had. But his desire for wealth caused him to push the thought from his mind. He kept his appointment with the chieftain.

The farmer set out from the crest of a small hill. A large oak tree marked his starting line.

He walked and ran all morning. He was forming the first leg of a square of land that would be his gigantic farm. Every time he felt he should stop and walk the second side of the square, he would spot a parcel of land he felt he could not do without. “It would be a shame not to include this pond, or this patch of hardwood trees,” he reasoned.

Eventually, he made himself head in a different direction—to mark the second boundary of his “square.” But this “leg” also brought temptation. “How can I stop now? I can’t be satisfied without this pasture.”

The farmer fought hunger and thirst. His feet became cracked and sore and began to bleed. Suddenly, he became aware of the position of the sun, already halfway between high noon and the horizon. The day was three-quarters spent. When he realized he might have gone too far, he panicked and began his return—sacrificing the symmetry of a perfect square.

“I’d rather die than lose my land,” he said to himself as motivation to continue on through his pain.

Painful hours passed. When the finish line came into view, half the sun was still above the horizon. He ran even faster.

In the last rays of daylight, the farmer took a long breath and ran up the hill to where the chieftain stood waiting. As the farmer dove to the ground, he thought he heard the chieftain laughing. And at that moment, he remembered his dream. He looked up and saw that the chieftain was the devil. It was the last thing he saw.

The farmer’s servant picked up a shovel and began to dig a grave for him to lie in. In the end, as it turns out, six feet of land—from his head to his feet—was all he really needed.

Oh! That’s cruel. Why tell such a terrible story here?

It’s told as an illustration of fleshly appetite out of control. And because the view of God as a party host can result in just such an ugly picture too.

Sure, it’s fun to think about a Party-God who just wants us to be happy and indulge our appetites. But with such a “God,” we might eat until we pop. We need more than all-you-can-eat-cake-and-ice-cream. We also need broccoli, and we need boundaries. It’s unity with Christ that brings happiness and peace of mind—not wealth or the satisfaction of fleshly cravings.