

ONE NOMAD'S
AMAZING JOURNEY OF FAITH

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Abraham: One Nomad's Amazing Journey of Faith

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One of the greatest joys and fulfillments of my life is serving as the senior pastor of Stonebriar Community Church, which I founded back in October 1998. I am amazed at the growth, the breadth, the depth, and the strength of this unique body. Only our awesome God could have made possible the many pieces that now shape and sustain this ministry. God—and God alone—deserves all the praise and all the glory.

I am especially grateful for those who faithfully serve as fellow elders. These individuals assist our pastors and staff in keeping everything in proper perspective. They faithfully pray and serve without public applause. They provide helpful oversight without self-serving agendas. And they make wise decisions without hidden or legalistic motives. It is a distinct privilege to serve alongside these men who model what it means to be godly, gracious servant leaders and who love Christ and His people.

With gratitude and deep respect, I dedicate this book to these ten men: Jim Byrd, Ralph Ehren, Jim Goodyear, Jim Gunn, Dave Hammock, Jay Madden, Sam Mathai, Russell Patterson, Steve Raffaele, and Stan Toussaint.

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INTRODUCTION

OLIVER CROMWELL, a seventeenth-century English soldier and statesman, became renowned for his authenticity and transparency. Once, when exasperated with the rigors of politics and annoyed by his peers, he stood before them in Parliament and said, "I would have been glad to have lived under my wood side, to have kept a flock of sheep, rather than undertook such a government as this is."[1] Later, when sitting for a portrait, Cromwell reportedly told the painter, "Mr. Lilly I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me & not Flatter me at all. But remark all these ruffness, pimples warts & everything as you see me. Otherwise I never will pay a farthing for it."[2]

I admire people who are authentic and transparent, and I enjoy biographies that paint historical figures as they really were. Put those two qualities together in a single binding, and I won't be able to put it down. Don't give me the whitewashed version of a person's life. I want people painted as they were, "pimples, warts, and everything."

Scripture doesn't presume to tell fairy tales. It's a book about real life.

That's the way the Bible portrays *all* of its characters. Scripture doesn't presume to tell fairy tales. It's a book about real life, showing real people going through real experiences in a real world. It tells us the unvarnished truth about its heroes, even when that truth proves to be uncomfortable or unappealing. When you see lives portrayed, you get the whole story—no phony-baloney stuff, no airbrushed models. Each of the men and women in the Bible is like Elijah, whom the apostle James described as "a man with a nature like ours" (James 5:17, NASB).

The Bible tells us the stories of these people because we are like them, and their experiences help us understand ourselves, our needs, and our relationships with God. The same can be said of biographies in general, but it's especially true

of biographies about historical figures in Scripture, which may explain why I have written so many of them. I believe a close examination of a person's life—particularly an individual who helped shape our world today—can be one of the best investments of our time when reading. Consequently, there's rarely a time when I'm not reading a biography.

Having read so many biographies, I have discovered that many things in life are cyclical; history repeats itself. I gain wisdom by learning how another person got through a difficult time. How a great man or woman responded to criticism. How an individual, while honored and celebrated, avoided the ego trap of arrogance or conceit.

I have come to realize there are at least four benefits I receive from studying biographies.

A good biography translates truth into life.

Theological discussions can be boring or too theoretical. The truths discussed might be valid, but they can become awfully sterile and abstract. Like plants, theological truths belong in the dirt. Biblical truth thrives in the soil of real life, where it bursts to life, blooms, and bears fruit. One of my mentors, Dr. Howard Hendricks, used to challenge his students with the command "Incarnate the truth." To *incarnate* is to make something become flesh. Don't merely discuss the truth; make the truth become living flesh so that others might be drawn to the Author of truth.

For example, I could preach or write a series on suffering. People would likely listen or read and do their best to stay interested, yet nothing much would change. However, when I wrote a biography on Job, the truth about suffering came to life. Readers connected with this authentic account of suffering, and it resonated with their own experiences. That's because a biography incarnates biblical, theological truth.

A good biography creates a closer kinship with people we have admired from a distance.

When we study the life of a person in the Bible, we feel like we've met a friend. And that friendship can become remarkably intimate. If you read a biography with some imagination, placing yourself into the subject's world, you begin to feel a oneness with him or her—even someone as extraordinary as a

prophet like Elijah or a leader like Moses or a courageous lady like Esther. All of a sudden you feel a kinship with that individual, a friendship filled with respect and gratitude.

A good biography offers stability when we go through similar experiences.

If you're a student of the life of David, you realize you're not alone when you lose your baby. His infant son, still in diapers, died after a short but intense illness. Or maybe you work for an impossible boss—someone emotionally unbalanced who somehow maintains a position of power. In his young-adult years, David served King Saul, who became insanely paranoid and obsessively haunted David's life for more than twelve years. Study David's experiences during the transitional period between the ages of seventeen and thirty, before he took the throne of Israel, and you'll appreciate how to deal with an oppressive superior.

Maybe you have a strained relationship with your mother. So did Esau. His biography will provide insight. Or if you find yourself at odds with a coworker or perhaps another Christian, study the lives of Barnabas and Paul, who stood toe-to-toe on an issue, each refusing to back down. They separated over the disagreement and never worked together again. Sometimes a conflict doesn't reconcile. A study of their lives will help us learn how to disagree as mature Christians.

A good biography helps us maintain a divine perspective on life.

When we rub shoulders with a person in the Scriptures, we gain a much broader view of our circumstances. It's easy for many of us to become worriers, to feel burdened by failure. Study the life of Peter, and you discover a man driven by his own emotions. Impulsive to a fault, he spoke without thinking and leaped without looking—habits that led him to deny his Lord on three separate occasions during the most difficult period of Jesus' life on earth. You'll find encouragement when you see how the Lord restored His fallen friend and how Peter rose above that awful failure.

So why Abraham? What does the life of an ancient nomad have to do with ours?

In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of what some have called "radical atheism," led by authors like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens. They don't simply reject the existence of God; they

aggressively attack belief in God as an evil that must be eradicated. Some worry about where this trend will take our twenty-first-century Western civilization. I *don't* worry. While the movement might be radical, it's certainly nothing new. And besides, I peeked ahead to see how the story of humanity ends. Spoiler alert: God wins.

So, with the issue of victory settled, the question becomes, How do we, as believers in a Creator God, conduct ourselves in a world that does not accept His existence as truth?

If we rewind history back far enough, we discover a time in which virtually no one believed in God. Civilizations worshiped many gods of their own invention, and they concocted extreme superstitions to explain the unexplainable, but they didn't acknowledge the existence of one true Creator of all things. Out of this mass of theologically aimless humanity, one man emerged who began to proclaim what we might call "radical theism." The man we know today as Abraham not only claimed that one true Creator existed and that all other gods did not, but he also staked his entire life on this belief.

Today this man is revered by the majority of the world as the "father of faith."[3] His story is preserved in Genesis, and it tells us much of what we need to know about faith. While each person's faith journey is unique, Abraham blazed a trail for the rest of us; his faith journey tells us about our own. The biography of Abraham has much to teach anyone—even an atheist—who wants to know the one true Creator.

While each person's faith journey is unique, Abraham blazed a trail for the rest of us; his faith journey tells us about our own.

Abraham's story doesn't appear in Genesis until nearly one-quarter of the way through the book. By the time readers meet Abraham, they have learned a great deal about God. So it seems only right that we know something about Him as well. For the sake of time, let me summarize what the Bible reveals about God.

First, the God of the Bible is the only deity in existence. He is not one of many; there is one God and no other. The Bible denies the validity of any religion or philosophy that does not acknowledge God, as described in its pages,

as the sole object of worship. Any god whose description differs from that of the Bible is a fiction and, therefore, does not exist.

Second, as the sole Creator of the universe, He has both the authority and the ability to rule over all of creation, including people. His sovereignty is absolute. And, because He is morally perfect, He is the sole judge of what is right and what is wrong. Consequently, He alone has the qualification and the right to sit in judgment over each person.

Third, God's love for people is infinite. It is without boundaries. His love cannot be measured, because it has no end. He knows all about us, but He loves us still. Nothing He knows about us could make Him love us less, and no matter how great our devotion may grow, He cannot love us more. His love is not only infinite, it is also absolute.

Fourth, God's guidance is unpredictable from a human perspective. He often leads His people into places and circumstances that are surprising because He does not color within the lines drawn by humans. While His character remains consistent, His methods cannot be calculated as if He were a programmed machine.

Fifth, God's blessings upon us are astonishing. While He is just, He frequently offers mercy. He gives us more good things than we merit, and He shields us from many sorrows we deserve. The best word to describe His character, His values, and His methods is *grace*. Furthermore, His grace is unstoppable, even by our rebellious rejection of Him.

With these essential facts in mind, let's begin our examination of Abraham's life in detail. As we follow the patriarch's journey from pagan ignorance to biblical enlightenment, let me challenge you to put yourself in the sandals of this noteworthy nomad. By the time you read the final words of the last chapter, I hope you will have accepted at least three important truths.

First, truly enlightened thinking builds upon the truth that God, as described in the Bible, not only exists but also actively governs His creation (see Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 1:7). When life is viewed through this lens, scientific discoveries become clearer, and the world—with all its chaos and danger—becomes a less frightening place.

Second, the God of the Bible loves you and has been actively involved in your life from the day you were born—and even before. This is true whether or not you recognize His activity or choose to acknowledge Him.

Third, God has a plan for you, and this plan includes blessings greater than your ability to imagine. Many centuries ago, He established a plan to redeem the world from evil, and He has made a place for you in His grand design. This redemptive plan began with His choice of one man, Abraham. Because his story is the archetype for my story, and your story, let's walk in his sandals as we learn about this God who loves us so much.

Chuck Swindoll
JANUARY 2014

CHAPTER 1



GOING . . . NOT KNOWING

IN THE BEGINNING, God created everything—the universe, our sun, this planet—and He populated the earth with plants, fish, birds, animals, and finally humans. And it was good . . . in fact, very good. Everything in creation existed in symbiotic collaboration with everything else. That is, until Adam and his wife, Eve, the first humans, violated their Creator's one and only rule: of all the millions of fruit trees on the earth, do not eat the fruit of one specific tree (see Genesis 2:15-17). When they chose to eat of that tree anyway, despite the Creator's grave warning, everything changed. *Everything.*

Their choice to disobey God was an act of rebellion. They chose to follow their own desires instead of trusting in God's leadership. And their act of rebellion changed how the world operates. Before the Fall, everything had worked according to God's grace, but after that moment, the world quickly

became a place characterized by suffering, disease, pain, selfishness, violence, and death. People were born with Adam's rebellious nature, and within just a few generations, the entire human race became so incorrigibly corrupt that God wiped out all but a handful of lives—Noah and his family (see Genesis 6–9).

Several generations after this new beginning, the human population rebounded, but its moral condition was hardly any better. In fact, by the time of Abraham, humanity was well on its way to becoming incorrigible again. People lived according to their own rules, which according to archaeological data included all kinds of vice and perversion. Instead of seeking to know God, their Creator, they exchanged truth for superstition. They entertained themselves with campfire stories of mythical spirit beings whose activities affected the physical world, they carved idols to represent these imaginary gods, and they then did appalling things to appease them.

God could have turned His back on creation. He could have abandoned humanity to its own self-destructive ignorance. He was not morally compelled to rescue humanity from the evil it created and perpetuated. Even so, God established a plan to redeem the world, beginning with one man. He would make this man a model recipient of saving grace and establish him as the founding father of a new and unique nation. In time, as the plan unfolded, this nation would become the means by which all the world might hear of the one true Creator God and return to Him.

God's redemptive plan began with His choice of a man named Abram.

God's Chosen Man

We know this man by the name Abraham, but he was born Abram. God changed his name at a critical point in the narrative, but for the first 99 of his 175 years, he answered to Abram.

He lived around the end of the Early Bronze Age (circa 2000 BC) in a thriving, bustling, cultured city known as "Ur of the Chaldeans" (Genesis 11:28). The land of the Chaldeans—also known as Mesopotamia—was located in present-day Iraq, which archaeologists and historians call the cradle of civilization because this is where ancient people first gathered into cities and

established societies. “Few periods from ancient history are as well documented by artifacts and inscriptions as is the time of Abraham.”[4] Consequently, we know a lot about this man’s culture, religion, beliefs, and everyday life.

Abram was an ordinary member of his society, no different from his neighbors. Upon his birth, he received a name that means “the father is exalted”—most likely a reference to the deity worshiped by his family. People in ancient Mesopotamia worshiped a pantheon of mythical gods, ruled by the moon god, Sin, whom they regarded as “the lord of heaven” and “the divine creator.”[5] Like his relatives and neighbors, Abram worshiped idols and accepted mythology as truth (see Joshua 24:2). Even so, God appeared specifically to Abram and gave him personalized instructions: “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1).

It is important to note that God didn’t appear to a group of people and then offer a general invitation to follow. We should also observe that Abram didn’t seek out God for a relationship; God approached him. It’s doubtful Abram had even heard of the one true Creator God before that point. By an act of pure grace, God dipped His hand into that idolatrous hole to select Abram out of all people.

Why this particular man? Did Abram turn from the idols of his ancestors and seek God? Did he make himself worthy of divine mercy? Far from it! The Lord chose Abram for reasons known only in heaven. We can say for certain that Abram did nothing to earn or deserve God’s favor. Nevertheless, the Lord appeared to this ignorant, sinful, superstitious idol worshiper and said, “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3).

The Lord chose Abram for reasons known only in heaven. Abram did nothing to earn or deserve God’s favor.

God's call of Abram began with an imperative—a clear command. God told him to leave his country for a land that He would show him . . . sometime later. To receive the promised blessings, Abram had to leave behind everything he relied on for safety and provision—homeland and relatives—and trust that God would honor His commitment. A New Testament writer reflected on his ancestor, stating, "It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8).

Stop and think about that for a moment. Put yourself in Abram's place. You're roughly seventy-five years old, with a wife in her midsixties. You've lived in one place your whole life. You have an established homestead in a familiar city with family and a community you've known since birth. Suddenly, the Lord appears to you in a physical manifestation—whether visual or auditory—you cannot deny as authentically supernatural, and He tells you to pack up and hit the road for an undisclosed destination. Can you imagine Abram's conversations with friends and neighbors?

"Oh, I see you're packing up, Abram."

"Yeah."

"Really? You're leaving town?"

"Yes, we leave in a few days."

"You know, you're not getting any younger. Are you ready to start all over somewhere?"

"Yep, Sarai and I are moving."

"Really? So, where are you going?"

"I don't know."

"You're packing up everything you have, leaving everything familiar, and you have no idea where you're headed? Have you lost your mind?"

Everything within us recoils from making big changes without thorough planning. Most of us need to see where we're jumping before committing to a leap. But God called Abram to obey this call without complete information. Abram didn't know where he was going, so he couldn't trust in a well-thought-out, long-range plan. Nevertheless, the Lord gave Abram *sufficient* information to make a reasonable decision.

When Abram encountered the Lord, he knew that God was real. The awesome splendor of God's presence left him no room for doubt. Moreover, the Lord gave him three specific promises that made obedience worth his trouble. While his neighbors thought he had lost his mind, Abram had good reason to trust in God, even without knowing every detail of the plan.

God's Unconditional Covenant

Different kinds of covenants appear throughout the Old Testament—some between individuals, others between nations. There are also several divine covenants, which are contracts or agreements between God and people. In the Garden of Eden, the Creator established a covenant with Adam and Eve: "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:16-17). Note the promise: "If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die" (verse 17).

A little further in the Scriptures we come to Noah's time, when God said, "I have decided to destroy all living creatures, for they have filled the earth with violence. Yes, I will wipe them all out along with the earth! Build a large boat" (Genesis 6:13-14). When the floodwaters receded, the Lord promised, "I am confirming my covenant with you. Never again will floodwaters kill all living creatures; never again will a flood destroy the earth. . . . I am giving you a sign of my covenant with you and with all living creatures, for all generations to come. I have placed my rainbow in the clouds. It is the sign of my covenant with you and with all the earth" (Genesis 9:11-13).

Some covenants are conditional, meaning that fulfillment by one party depends upon fulfillment by the other. These agreements usually include if/then statements: "If you do your part, then I will do my part." When God settled the Israelites in the Promised Land, He established a conditional covenant with them: "If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully keep all his commands that I am giving you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the world. You will experience all these blessings if you obey the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 28:1-2). Conversely, He said, "But if you refuse to listen to the LORD your God and do not obey all the commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overwhelm you.

. . . The LORD himself will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in everything you do, until at last you are completely destroyed for doing evil and abandoning me" (Deuteronomy 28:15, 20).

An unconditional covenant is a straightforward promise that contains no stipulations. In the Lord's first encounter with Abram, He established an unconditional covenant. He did give the patriarch a command, and Abram had to obey to claim the Lord's blessings. Still, the promises did not contain if/then statements. They were simple declarations:

- "*I will* make you into a great nation" (Genesis 12:2).
- "*I will* bless you and make you famous" (verse 2).
- "*I will* bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt" (verse 3).
- "All the families on earth *will be* blessed through you" (verse 3).

Note also that the covenant includes three major areas of blessing:

- a *national* blessing
- a *personal* blessing
- an *international* blessing

God promised a *national* unconditional blessing. Abram's descendants would be numerous enough to form a large nation. Let us not overlook the fact that God made this pledge to a man in his midseventies! Abram's wife, by then in her midsixties, had not given birth to any children. As a barren couple well past their prime, they had given up hope of having a single child, to say nothing of a whole nation of descendants. Yet the Lord promised, "I will make you into a great nation."

Today we know that God had in mind the nation of Israel, as history tells us that Abraham is the father of the Hebrew people. God made this promise to bless a nation without conditions; He guaranteed its fulfillment without fail. Of course, Abram and Sarai had to wait. They were not yet ready to receive this particular blessing. A twenty-five-year, faith-building journey lay before them.

And when Abram's confidence wavered during those years between the promise and the fulfillment, the Lord reaffirmed His unconditional covenant at least two more times.

When Abram arrived in Canaan, the territory was overrun by the kind of evil that had precipitated the great Flood (see Genesis 6–9). To make matters worse, Abram relinquished part of his land claim to settle a family dispute (see Genesis 13:1-12). The Lord said to Abram, "Look as far as you can see in every direction —north and south, east and west. I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession. And I will give you so many descendants that, like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted!" (verses 14-16).

Years later—still with no child of his own—Abram wondered if perhaps his chief servant, Eliezer, would become his official heir. The Lord soothed the patriarch's fear.

> The LORD said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." Then the LORD took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!" . . .
>
> So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River—the land now occupied by the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites."
>
> GENESIS 15:4-6; 18-21

We don't like waiting, but that's when God does some of His best work on our souls. When I'm forced to wait on God's timing, I change. Sometimes I discover that my request was selfish—not part of God's agenda at all. Other times I find that my level of maturity could not yet bear the blessing God wanted me to enjoy; I had to grow up so I could handle it well. Very often, my circumstances needed to change, or the blessing would have become a burden.

We don't like waiting, but that's when God does some of His best work on our souls.

As we see Abram's faith journey unfold, we'll see why he had to wait so long to receive God's promised blessings.

God promised a *personal* unconditional blessing. This included great wealth as well as personal protection. Later in the story, we're told that "Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold" (Genesis 13:2). He was known for receiving many blessings from God, including "flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cattle, a fortune in silver and gold, and many male and female servants and camels and donkeys" (Genesis 24:35). The people of Canaan referred to him as "an honored prince among us" (Genesis 23:6).

This is a good place to pause and say God does not condemn the wealthy. God reserves the right to bless some with an abundance of money and material possessions, and not bless others in that way. That's His sovereign right. In our materialistic culture, we might accuse God of cruelty for withholding material blessing from some, but God's economy doesn't trade in our currency. Some of His most honored servants haven't had two shekels to rub together, including His own Son. He does promise, however, that temporal poverty for His sake will be richly rewarded in eternity (see Matthew 6:33; Mark 10:29-31).

Abram never apologized for being rich. In fact, God used his riches in wonderful ways, as we will see later.

God promised an *international* unconditional blessing. On top of the national and the personal blessings, God heaped a blessing upon all of humanity: "All the families on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). This refers to all races and nationalities—the whole world. God would bring a blessing to all people through the descendants of Abram, the Hebrew nation.

In His grand plan to redeem the world from sin and evil, God built a nation founded upon one man's faith. This nation would be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6, ESV), responsible for leading the ignorant, superstitious, idol-worshiping nations into a relationship with the one true Creator God. The Lord established the Hebrew people as "a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind" (Isaiah 42:6-7, ESV). He said, "I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). And to help them accomplish this great task, He situated Israel on a little land-bridge nestled between the expansive Arabian Desert and the vast Mediterranean Sea.

Anyone traveling between the great empires of the ancient world—Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon—had to pass through the land promised to Abram's descendants. If Israel remained faithful to their calling, merchants, armies, and vagabonds would see a blessed nation and ask, "Who is this incredible king who makes you so prosperous and secure?" And the Hebrew people could answer, "Our King is the God of Abram! Would you like to know Him?"

ABRAM'S HALFWAY OBEDIENCE	
Genesis 11:31–12:3	**Acts 7:2-4**
One day Terah took his son Abram, his daughter-in-law Sarai (his son Abram's wife), and his grandson Lot (his son Haran's child) and moved away from Ur of the Chaldeans. He was headed for the land of Canaan, but they stopped at Haran and settled there. Terah lived for 205 years and died while still in Haran. The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."	Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham in Mesopotamia before he settled in Haran. God told him, "Leave your native land and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you." So Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran until his father died. Then God brought him here to the land where you now live.

After spending much of his life—perhaps from birth—in Ur of the Chaldeans, Abram was instructed by God to "leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family" and go to a place to be disclosed later. Sadly, he didn't respond with complete obedience; he obeyed only in part. When he left Ur, Abram brought along his father, Terah, and his nephew, Lot. And with them came their households and possessions.

Abram moved in the general direction of Canaan—the land God had promised him—but he traveled no farther than Haran. According to ancient inscriptions, the main trade routes from Damascus, Nineveh, and Carchemish converged in this city. Perhaps lured by material abundance and the opportunity to build wealth, Abram's caravan got sidetracked. More likely, however, another obstacle stood between Abram and complete obedience. The moon god, Sin, whom Abram's family worshiped, had two principal seats of worship: Ur of the Chaldeans and . . . (you guessed it) Haran.

It wouldn't be hard to imagine that Abram's father, a lifelong devotee of the moon god, couldn't tear himself away from the deity's sanctuary in Haran, known to the locals as "house of rejoicing."[6] This is why the Lord instructed Abram to leave his family behind; He knew they would become a perpetual distraction from his calling. When Abram's father decided to linger in Haran, Abram should have bade his father farewell and pressed on to Canaan.

Abram also allowed his nephew, Lot, to tag along, possibly because he felt sorry for the younger man. Lot's father had died some years earlier (see Genesis 11:27-28), and he undoubtedly latched on to Abram for fatherly guidance. Conversely, Abram may have viewed Lot as his potential heir, having no son of his own. As the story progresses, however, Lot proves to be an even greater distraction than Abram's father. Life threatening, in fact.

Your Developing Faith

Genesis 12:4 begins the story of Abram's seedling faith becoming a fully mature, fruit-bearing tree. I am comforted to see that God didn't void His covenant with Abram because he failed to obey fully. Fortunately for Abram—and for us—the Lord doesn't expect anyone to exercise perfect faith. Instead, He meets us where we are and then helps us cultivate increasingly more mature trust in Him. So I don't mind telling you that God isn't finished with me yet. He continues to stretch my faith muscle so that it will become ever stronger with use. And He's doing the same for you.

As you reflect on Abram's faltering start, let me encourage you to examine your own faith journey by asking yourself three penetrating questions.

1. Are you seeking God's will deliberately and passionately?

Of the seven deadly sins, sloth may be the most sinister of all. Deadly passivity can consume our lives, and before we know it, we have nothing to show for our years. But sloth isn't laziness. Sloth has little to do with inactivity. At its core, sloth is disconnecting from what should keep us passionate. Sloth is failing to follow the course set before us by God, failing to fulfill our divine purpose.

I challenge you to pray, "Lord, guide me into Your will, regardless of what change is necessary, regardless of where I must go or what I must do. I want You to know, Lord, I'm available. And I don't want to live outside Your will." Then

be prepared for some uncomfortable answers to your prayer. Faith rarely involves easy choices.

Early in my ministry, several years after I had graduated from seminary, I took a pastorate in a suburb of Boston. Within eighteen months, I realized I was not a good fit at that church. I had sincerely thought this would be my place of ministry for years to come. Furthermore, that little church had spent $1,600 to move my family and me—a small fortune in the mid-1960s. I felt so embarrassed about the possibility of leaving only a couple of years after arriving. I kept saying, "Lord, I want to do Your will, but I don't think this is where I'm supposed to be."

Finally, I talked it over with Cynthia, and she agreed. But we were young and inexperienced; we didn't know what to do. What does a pastor do when he realizes he's not where the Lord wants him? There was nothing wrong with the church and they loved me, but I couldn't shake a sense of restlessness that became increasingly more distracting and burdensome.

I'll never forget visiting Tom, the chair of the elders. He ran a tuxedo shop, and I met him at his store. We walked behind the curtain and sat down in the back room. He said, "What's goin' on?"

Tears filled my eyes. I felt embarrassed and hated to break the news. "Tom, I've got to tell you, I don't think I ought to be here."

Naturally, he asked what anyone would ask. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Nothing's wrong, and you don't think you ought to be here?"

"Right."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know, Tom. I just know I can't stay here."

I'll never forget his gracious response—some of the most wonderful words I'd ever heard. "Chuck, if the Lord doesn't want you here, then we don't either."

He could have said, "Well, you know we spent a lot of money moving you here. We worked hard to set you up in a house. We even put up new wallpaper for you. We've gone to a lot of trouble, and this is how you thank us?" There was none of that shaming stuff. He joined me in submitting to God's leading, even though it didn't make a lot of sense.

That leads us to the second question.

2. If God were to have you leave your comfort zone to take on the challenges of the unfamiliar, how would you respond?

Trusting in God rarely involves easy choices. If every missionary looked for comfort or convenience or familiarity, missions would collapse overnight. Ministries would fold, and charities would close up shop. Every choice to follow God's leading involves sacrifice—at least the sacrifice of our own desires. Do you trust the Lord's character enough to obey Him without having all the details worked out? Are you willing to accept a short-term loss in order to receive divine blessings you cannot yet see?

Every choice to follow God's leading involves sacrifice—at least the sacrifice of our own desires.

3. Are you making obedience too complicated?

If you're discussing your decision with too many people or talking in endless circles, you're making obedience complicated. You're probably falling into one of the following traps:

- You're hoping someone will give you a compelling reason to do something other than what you know in your heart to be God's will.
- You're hoping to find a way to obey without having to face hardship and sacrifice.
- You don't like risk, and you're hoping that God will change His mind if you delay making the decision long enough.
- You're hoping that by talking and waiting, you'll feel good about the decision before having to commit.
- You haven't yet accepted that there's no such thing as a decision without at least some negative consequences.

If you know what God wants you to do, obedience isn't complicated. It may be difficult, but it's not complicated. Stop hoping it will be easy, and give up the search for alternatives. Don't wait any longer for all the details to be worked out. The Lord has given you an opportunity to grow in faith. He wants you to trust in His faithful care and rest in His unfaltering power. The time to obey has come. Now . . .

Go!

CHAPTER 2



WHEN THE FAITHFUL FAIL

A MAN I GREATLY RESPECT as an expositor of the Scriptures and a minister of the gospel once stood before the student body at Dallas Theological Seminary to preach on purity. He began his message by saying, “I carry in my vest pocket a small book that helps me guard my moral integrity. Because I am a minister of the gospel who stands before gatherings of people, I must remain true to my public testimony. But I have lived long enough to realize many start ministry well but do not finish well. Therefore, in this book—which I will never reveal to anyone—I continue to add the names of people who were once strong representatives of Christ but have since fallen, and thereby forfeited their moral authority to lead. This morning I recorded a forty-second name.”

Sometimes the faithful fail. The good and the godly are nonetheless imperfect. The strong can become weak. The powerful and influential invariably stand on feet of clay. Heroes can falter. The mighty sometimes fall. Those we respect can leave us feeling so disheartened that we begin to wonder if anyone can be trusted.

There are at least two reasons we should avoid putting people on a pedestal. First, we set ourselves up for disillusionment because we'll inevitably see flaws in our heroes. Second, pedestals come with expectations no mere human can meet. We don't do the people we admire any favors by placing unrealistic burdens on their shoulders. That's true for people today as well as for our Bible heroes.

The first verses of Genesis 12 portray Abram as a hero, on balance. While it is true that complete obedience came gradually for him, let's give the man credit. Having heard from God, he abandoned his lifelong home, denied his culture, disconnected from his family, left his friends, sacrificed his real estate, and threw away any future he may have planned or hoped for. As a man in his midseventies, he left all behind to go . . . who knows where. He willingly exchanged the familiar for the unfamiliar—a commitment very few septuagenarians would be willing to make. He abandoned the settled, comfortable life of a city dweller to become a nomad, both physically and spiritually. With eyes set on God, he said, in effect, "I'll trust You, God. I'll follow wherever You lead." I find all of that nothing short of admirable.

Abram left the thriving, cultured city of Ur, traveled northwest along the banks of the Euphrates River, and then settled for a time in Haran. After his father, Terah, died, he followed a busy trade route west and then south to the mountain city of Shechem, a bustling trade town that lay between two mountains revered by local religions: Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. This location gave Shechem a long history as a sacred site.

Abram camped beside the oak of Moreh (see Genesis 12:6), which could also be translated, "the tree of teaching." It was most likely a large Tabor oak that served as a prominent landmark. The Hebrew expression suggests it had become a local shrine or place of gathering where teachers spoke to crowds. Historical records indicate that "the Canaanites had shrines in groves of oak trees, and Moreh may have been one of their cult centers."[7] Worshipers of

fertility gods believed that large trees were evidence of the reproductive power associated with the area; they thought one could become more fertile by worshiping there.

As Abram camped near this pagan shrine, God appeared to him again to reaffirm His great redemptive plan. He repeated His earlier promise to give Abram offspring and reminded him that this nation would ultimately become teachers of divine truth to the whole world. He said, in effect, “These people come here to worship gods that do not exist, and they cling to a superstitious hope of becoming fertile. Trust in Me, Abram, and your seed will form a mighty nation.”

Abram responded by building an altar and then offering an animal sacrifice of thanksgiving. Even after he continued on his journey, Canaanites who gathered at the tree of teaching would have immediately noticed his architectural contribution. The new stone altar stood as a monument to one man’s obedience to the one true God. It announced to local residents, “The God of Abram has come to Canaan.”

Abram continued south—and up in elevation—to a place that would later become significant to the nation of Israel. Today we know the place as Jerusalem. There, he constructed another altar. Like the other in Shechem, this monument expressed Abram’s devotion: “Lord, I trust You and I believe in You. I rely on You. I need You. I’m Your servant. Help me along this journey of faith so I may walk with confidence and receive the promises of Your covenant.”

History shows that the sites where Abram constructed altars to God later became major centers of Hebrew worship.

Abram’s Default Response

Having erected a second altar, Abram continued south to the Negev region, which means “dry, parched.” While in this harsh region, Abram faced his first challenge when a severe famine swept the land. The Hebrew word used in Genesis 12:10 means simply “hunger.” The cause could have been drought, diseased crops, a plague of locusts, or simply a failed harvest. This area of the world has always teetered on a delicately balanced ecology. If rains come at the wrong time, crops yield little produce.

As a newcomer, Abram may not have known how frequently food became scarce in this region. Having come from a part of the world known as the Fertile Crescent, he may have expected lush grass for his flocks along with bumper crops of wheat and barley. Compared to the land on the banks of the Euphrates, the Negev looked like a wasteland.

For Abram, this season of hunger represented a major test. The famine carried a sobering unspoken message from the Lord: "In all your praying and altar building, Abram, let Me reveal the true depth of your faith. This difficulty will show how little you trust Me to provide for your needs now that circumstances have turned against you and the only thing you find in abundance is hunger." While God didn't cause the famine, He certainly used it as an instrument in the development of Abram's faith.

You can expect more than one divine test in your own faith journey, but God doesn't use difficult circumstances to find out what we'll do. He doesn't test us to observe our response of faith. He already knows us better than we know ourselves, and He already knows what the future holds. He uses tests to reveal us *to ourselves*! He often uses a test at the beginning of a lesson to show us where we need improvement. A season of learning often follows.

God doesn't use difficult circumstances to find out what we'll do. He already knows what the future holds. He uses tests to reveal us to ourselves!

A divine test usually exposes what might be called our default response to crisis. Everyone has a default response when confronted with a challenge to his or her faith. It starts as a self-preservation reflex. We then learn to cultivate this natural reflex into a strength. In time, we learn to respond to stress with expert agility without even thinking. And before we know it, we have a full-blown coping mechanism that takes over, keeping us from trusting in God. For Abram, it was deception. Lying. He didn't tell untruths to people to cheat them or to gain an unfair advantage. He fibbed to save his own skin. It seemed he had gained an ability to spin believable falsehoods in the past, and in time, he became an expert.

Abram failed his first test when he rushed down to Egypt instead of seeking God's counsel. Until the famine, he had talked to God and built altars to memorialize his relationship with the Almighty. Once the severe famine struck, however, we hear no more prayers; we see no more altars. Rather than seeking God's instruction, Abram made a beeline for where caravan merchants said he could find food in abundance.

F. B. Meyer describes the literary and symbolic meaning of Egypt in biblical literature. Abram's choice of destination has far-reaching theological implications.

> In the figurative language of Scripture, Egypt stands for an alliance with the world. . . . [Abraham] acted simply on his own judgment. He looked at his difficulties and became paralyzed with fear. He grasped at the first means of deliverance that suggested itself, much as a drowning man will catch at a straw. And thus, without taking counsel of his heavenly Protector, Abraham went down into Egypt.
>
> Ah, fatal mistake! But how many make it still. They may be true children of God, and yet, in a moment of panic, they will adopt methods of delivering themselves that, to say the least, are questionable, sowing the seeds of sorrow and disaster to save themselves from some minor embarrassment. . . .
>
> How much better would it have been for Abraham to have thrown the responsibility back on God and to have said, "You brought me here, and You must now bear the whole weight of providing for me and my family. I will stay till I clearly know what You want me to do."[8]

Later in Israel's history, the prophet Isaiah used Egypt to symbolize the nation's faithless response to an invasion crisis. He writes, "What sorrow awaits those who look to Egypt for help, trusting their horses, chariots, and charioteers and depending on the strength of human armies instead of looking to the LORD, the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 31:1). Running to Egypt was not a sinful decision, per se.[9] Like all decisions made without faith, turning to Egypt became a precursor to a moral tumble. And so it was for Abram.

> As he was approaching the border of Egypt, Abram said to his wife, Sarai, "Look, you are a very beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife. Let's kill him; then we can have her!' So please tell them you are my sister. Then they will spare my life and treat me well because of their interest in you."
>
> GENESIS 12:11-13

In case you're feeling superior right about now, thinking you'd never lie the way Abram did in this situation, let me offer a warning from Scripture: "If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience" (1 Corinthians 10:12-13). No one wakes up in the morning and says, "Let's see, today I have a spectacular moral failure planned." More often, our days begin with the best of intentions and then a crisis comes. A challenge to faith arises. Suddenly, the default response takes over, and the brain thinks only in the horizontal plane, ignoring the vertical dimension altogether.

Technically, Abram's lie contained a half truth. Sarai was, in fact, Abram's half sister; they were born of the same father but had different mothers (see Genesis 20:12). By claiming to be Sarai's brother, Abram hoped to leverage local custom to his advantage. He might, indeed, be killed as her husband, but ancient laws made him her guardian as her brother. Anyone interested in taking Sarai as a wife would have approached Abram for marriage arrangements, giving him time to take self-protective action.

Not long after Abram arrived in Egypt, someone called his bluff and his plan backfired. Rather than giving him the wiggle room he had anticipated, his ploy created a hopeless political trap. "When the palace officials saw her, they sang her praises to Pharaoh, their king, and Sarai was taken into his palace. Then Pharaoh gave Abram many gifts because of her—sheep, goats, cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels" (Genesis 12:15-16).

Abram's conscience must have been working overtime. We can imagine his anxiety as he thought about his wife being wooed every evening by one of the world's most powerful kings! Fortunately, ancient marriage rituals included a waiting period long enough to ensure that a bride wasn't already pregnant. So

Sarai lived inside the palace but was isolated from sexual contact by anyone, including the king. Meanwhile, Pharaoh sent Abram numerous wedding gifts in anticipation of the big day.

While Sarai didn't face immediate risk of being violated, imagine how she felt about her husband. His no-faith response—his cowardice—placed her in danger while he lived the high life. While she dwelled among strangers, subjected to unfamiliar rituals and facing an uncertain future, Abram hobnobbed with Egypt's elite class.

God to the Rescue

Where Abram failed to protect his wife, the Lord overwhelmingly succeeded in doing so. He afflicted Pharaoh and his household with plagues (see Genesis 12:17). The Hebrew word means "diseases or infestations." Before night fell, the king suffered a sudden onset of illness. To make matters worse, reports reached him that a strange disease had swept through his harem. His servants stopped working because they were sick in bed.

The polytheistic king acknowledged Abram's God, but not as the one true God. And Pharaoh feared the power of a rival territorial deity. Like most people in his day, he viewed the world through the lens of superstition. This ancient view presumed that the root cause of disease was spiritual, not physical. People treated symptoms with water purification, oils, herbs, and sometimes surgery, but they believed the only way to cure the patient was to discover which god to appease through sacrifice. When Pharaoh's home became afflicted with disease, he appeased his own gods with sacrifices and then, having satisfied them (in his mind), assumed he had offended Abram's God. Somehow he discovered the truth that Sarai already had a husband. She undoubtedly drew his suspicion when she alone did not get sick.

Abram should have been morally superior to the king of Egypt, but Pharaoh burned with righteous indignation and scolded God's man.

> "What have you done to me?" he demanded. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' and allow me to take her as my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and get out of here!" Pharaoh ordered some of his men to escort them, and he sent Abram out of the country, along with his wife and all his possessions.

Pretty sad conclusion. We can't help but wonder what kind of opinion Pharaoh had of Abram's God after that episode. And I wonder the same thing for us today: How many people have yet to embrace the God of the Bible because they continue to live in the shadows created by our moral failures? Pharaoh could have stripped Abram of his possessions and tossed him into a slave pit . . . or a grave. But he did neither. Perhaps it was because he had endured enough of this God's displeasure, but he simply deported the man along with his wife, his ill-gotten gifts, and his small army of relatives and servants.

How many people have yet to embrace the God of the Bible because they continue to live in the shadows created by our moral failures?

Abram departed for Canaan with the gifts he received from Pharaoh, which included livestock and servants (see Genesis 12:16)—among them a servant woman named Hagar.

Abram's Lessons

Obviously, Abram had blown it. He'd faltered in his faith and failed to honor God after receiving heaven's favor. His first real test earned him an F. Fortunately, though, that's not the end of the story. The Lord didn't say, "I made a mistake in choosing Abram; this guy isn't ready for a relationship with Me. I think I'll look for a better subject." On the contrary, God rescued Abram from Pharaoh's wrath and even used the incident to make the patriarch richer. Why? The Lord had made unconditional promises that must be fulfilled. And He didn't utter those promises without full knowledge of Abram's future.

The Lord, with perfect foreknowledge of Abram's good and bad choices, chose him to become an example of genuine faith. This failure didn't shake God's commitment; it merely gave Him an opportunity to help Abram cultivate a trust that would eventually become as solid as stone.

Did you notice that God didn't punish Abram for his failure? In His grace, He blessed Abram despite his lack of trust. Clearly, the Lord's favor on Abram didn't depend upon the man's good behavior. Like

The Lord's favor on Abram didn't depend upon the man's good behavior.

a good parent, God allowed the natural consequences of his child's foolish choices to become a means of instruction. Rather than burying Abram in condemnation and shame, He used this failure as a tool for instruction.

At least five principles emerge from this short account of Abram's wavering faith and default response.

1. Everyone faces famines.

Some famines are severe. They knock your feet out from under you and leave you lying flat on your back, with nowhere to look but up. A doctor's report with the worst possible news. A divorce. The death of a loved one. Unemployment. Bankruptcy. Other famines appear manageable from a human perspective. Either way, these experiences invariably prompt a crisis of faith, challenging you to answer the question, In what do I trust . . . really?

Famines, while destructive and fearsome, can provide an opportunity to take your relationship with God deeper. Find a believer you know to be wise, having retained his or her integrity through hardships. Ask this person to share his or her experiences, and then listen carefully. Discover how faith in God's provision and protection can be strengthened through severe circumstances.

2. Every escape contains a lie.

When we do anything we can to avoid facing our crisis of faith, when we seek escape through our old, familiar methods, we tell ourselves a lie: "I can handle this without God." Our habitual default response—now an unconscious coping strategy—has always worked, so why not again? Why not now? We convince ourselves that with enough ingenuity, guts, and luck, we can survive the famine and dodge much of the pain on our own.

Getting to the truth is like peeling an onion, one layer of lies after another, until we discover at our center a person long forgotten. We've spent our lives escaping tests rather than walking through them by the power of God. And along the way, we justify, rationalize, excuse, and minimize our misdeeds. Lying has become so easy, we don't even think of our rationalizations as lies.

3. Every Abram struggles with a weakness.

This means you. Everyone, including the good and the godly, carries imperfections and flaws. These weaknesses cause us to make unwise choices as well as sinful, selfish choices. Furthermore, these flaws and their associated coping mechanisms undermine our relationship with God. Our default response competes with faith so that we prefer to trust in ourselves rather than rely upon God to protect us and provide for our needs.

More religion isn't the answer. Don't tell me how many hours you spend reading the Bible. Don't tell me how many years you've been a church member. Don't tell me how much theology you know or how many degrees you've earned. None of that can protect you from foolish decisions or the lies you tell yourself. We're all weak, and we need supernatural help. If Abram could fall, soon after building two altars, believe me, you and I can stumble into a moral tumble as well.

4. Every compromise jeopardizes a Sarai.

Whenever we revert to our default response, someone gets hurt . . . including those closest to us. Sarai trusted Abram to lead her well and to keep her safe, but his self-serving scheme made her the newest addition to Pharaoh's harem. As the sun set on that first evening, she must have asked herself, *What on earth am I doing in here? How could he have done this to me?*

Your life consists of relationships arranged in concentric circles. Those living in the closest circles have connected themselves to you, and as a result, they trust you. Your victims might not be aware of the loss you caused them, but they lose nonetheless. There's no such thing as a victimless sin, including the sins you keep private. You may sin in secret, but you never sin alone.

5. Every Egypt has a Pharaoh.

We live among people who do not know our God. They serve the gods of wealth, possessions, power, status, self, and others—there are too many to list. Then they hear someone talking about having a relationship with the one true Creator. Naturally, their curiosity prompts them to observe how this person's life differs from their own. When they see us blindly blundering through life, making unwise or sinful choices, we bring shame to God rather than glory. Furthermore, we confuse the curious. Nobody respects a phony. No one admires hypocrisy.

These principles that Abram learned during his time in Egypt are realistic and relevant for us today. You and I will need them for our own faith journey, especially when a devastating “famine” sweeps unexpectedly into our lives.

CHAPTER 3



A DECISION THAT LED TO A DISASTER

TO THE INFORMED READER, Genesis 13 is *packed* with information. If you don't see it right away, that's because much of the detail lies hidden within cultural references that belong to a Middle Eastern civilization from four thousand years ago. Many twenty-first-century Western readers skim the surface of the text with a yawn, wondering how Abram's story has anything to do with them. As a Bible expositor, I have the task of unpacking those long-forgotten references so you can see as much as possible the breadth and depth of meaning, the way the people of that culture would have.

As we dig into the history, geography, and culture of ancient Canaan, we'll discover a cast of historical figures who were not much different from us today. We wear different clothes, speak a different language, live in different surroundings, but at the foundational level, humans don't really change. These men and women wanted the same things we want today: close family ties, good health, financial security, fulfilling relationships, physical safety, and comfortable surroundings. Like us, they hoped to be a part of something meaningful and to impact the world in a positive way. They experienced many of the hopes, worries, ambitions, jealousies, joys, and sorrows we feel.

That's why God has preserved these stories for four thousand years. These ancient people—long dead now—still have much to teach us.

From Abram, we have already learned that a relationship with God is a journey of faith that begins with a simple acknowledgment that He exists . . . and that He loves us, He has a plan for us that includes great blessing, and He wants us to enjoy a close relationship with Him. We have also learned that faith isn't merely believing that an all-powerful, all-knowing Creator exists; faith is trusting in God as we experience life. Furthermore, we have discovered that faith begins tentatively and imperfectly, and that God will use our experiences to help us grow strong in faith.

Abram faltered during his first crisis, reverting to his default coping strategy—deception—rather than trusting in his Lord. Sometime later, he faced a different crisis: prosperity. Fortunately, this test revealed that Abram's faith had grown.

The Crisis of Prosperity

Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist and historian, wrote, "Adversity is sometimes hard upon a man; but for one man who can stand prosperity, there are a hundred that will stand adversity."[10] Most of us rise to meet adversity with our best character. However, our true character comes out when things go really well. It's easy to become arrogant, self-sustaining, conceited, greedy, and condescending at such times.

Most of us rise to meet adversity with our best character. However, our true character comes out when things go really well.

Abram returned to Canaan with greater wealth than when he first arrived from Ur. Genesis 13:2 describes him as “very rich.” The literal Hebrew expression means “heavy”—he owned plenty of livestock, silver, and gold. Today we would say Abram was loaded. He hadn’t responded well to hardship earlier. How would his integrity hold up under the strain of prosperity? What would this divine test reveal about his true character?

Remember, much of Abram’s wealth had come from Egypt after his failure to trust God and the moral breakdown that followed. How gracious of God to grant him such undeserved riches and to compound his wealth so quickly. Quite likely, these blessings helped Abram return from Egypt genuinely humble despite his incredible prosperity.

> Abram left Egypt and traveled north into the Negev, along with his wife and Lot and all that they owned. (Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold.) From the Negev, they continued traveling by stages toward Bethel, and they pitched their tents between Bethel and Ai, where they had camped before. This was the same place where Abram had built the altar, and there he worshiped the LORD again.
>
> GENESIS 13:1-4

In this part of the story, the narrator makes a point of portraying Abram’s return from Egypt as a backtracking. Up from Egypt, through the barren Negev region, and back to Bethel, where Abram had built his last altar. The name *Bethel* means “house of God.” So Abram came back home, as it were, to the place where he’d last got it right. When he arrived, he worshiped the Lord *again*. That must have been extremely gratifying. With his return from faithlessness complete, he was ready to begin again.

Up to this point in the story, we haven’t heard much about Abram’s nephew, Lot. We learned earlier that Lot’s father died many years before and that Lot had likely latched onto Abram as a surrogate. The Lord had told Abram to leave all his extended family behind, but he didn’t. And it had cost him. Because of his father, Terah, the trek to Canaan had gotten bogged down in Haran. Thus far, however, Lot hadn’t caused any problems.

When Abram prospered, Lot benefited as well: “Lot, who was traveling with Abram, had also become very wealthy with flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cattle, and many tents” (Genesis 13:5). Don’t overlook the specific mention of his many tents. This will be a significant detail later in the story. But prosperity brought its own challenges. Expanding flocks and herds require increasing amounts of food and water. The land may not have fully recovered from the earlier famine, so available resources could not sustain both men’s livestock. Besides that, they had to contend with the existing inhabitants, the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

All the elements necessary for family conflict were stacked like dry kindling just waiting for a match. The sense of entitlement that comes with affluence doesn’t respond well to limited resources. The fear of loss combined with the thrill of acquiring more can become all-consuming, and before long, wealth changes from a blessing to an idol. It was at this point that the vegetation and water became insufficient to feed both men’s livestock, and Abram’s and Lot’s servants began to clash.

Abram could have called Lot to his tent and said, “Look, I’m the adult here and you’re the nephew. It’s been great, but you’ve got to go, young man. Besides, God gave this land to me, not you. So take your flocks and herds and tents, and find your own land somewhere else!” But Abram didn’t do that. We can’t help but be impressed with his response. He chose his words carefully to acknowledge the building tension and to seek a peaceful solution while affirming his love.

> Abram said to Lot, “Let’s not allow this conflict to come between us or our herdsmen. After all, we are close relatives! The whole countryside is open to you. Take your choice of any section of the land you want, and we will separate. If you want the land to the left, then I’ll take the land on the right. If you prefer the land on the right, then I’ll go to the left.”
>
> GENESIS 13:8-9

Abram first affirmed their relationship and expressed his desire to preserve harmony between them. Instead of pulling rank, like a selfish uncle, he became a mentor. In grace, he treated Lot as his equal, appealing to his sense of fair play

rather than dictating terms. He then proposed a solution that put Lot in control of his own fate. This was an unselfish act on Abram's part. I would even go so far as to call it an expression of his growing faith in God.

Think about this for a moment. By giving Lot his choice of territory and accepting whatever was left, Abram gave up control of his future. In giving Lot first choice of land, Abram trusted that God would take care of him regardless of what happened. Let me illustrate with a modern-day example.

Let's say you and a member of your extended family—a nephew or a cousin—own a business together. You own 60 percent; he owns 40 percent. Orders are rolling in and you're operating in the black, but it's taking a toll on your relationship. You're not as close as you once were, and now your families are beginning to quarrel. It's time to separate.

You invite your business partner to breakfast and suggest that the best way to ensure growth is to divide the company. The eastern and western divisions would become independent companies. When you roll out a map of the country and examine the sales figures, it's clear that one division performs far better than the other. As the majority stakeholder, you have the right of first choice, which presents you with an intriguing question: In what or whom do you trust for provision? Do you trust our own business sense, or God, who invites you to trust in Him?

There's nothing inherently wrong with choosing the better territory. It's your right as the senior partner. But your choice reveals what you value and whom you trust.

The Danger of Greed

Abram gave up his right of first choice for the sake of harmony with his nephew. He felt the freedom to do so because he trusted that God would provide for him regardless of the outcome. For comparison, consider Lot's decision-making process.

> Lot took a long look at the fertile plains of the Jordan Valley in the direction of Zoar. The whole area was well watered everywhere, like the garden of the LORD or the beautiful land of Egypt. (This was before the

> LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) Lot chose for himself the whole Jordan Valley to the east of them. He went there with his flocks and servants and parted company with his uncle Abram.
>
> GENESIS 13:10-11

Lot's selection of the most fertile territory reveals his true character. He should have said, "Uncle Abram, I owe you a great debt of gratitude. In fact, I owe you everything! You brought me on this journey when you should have left me in Ur, and today I am a wealthy man because of you. Since you have been so gracious to me, I insist that you take the best land. God will take care of me either way."

But Lot chose greed over gratitude. He chose wealth over family. He chose to trust himself rather than God. Truth be told, most of us are more like Lot than Abram.

Our society encourages greed. I regularly encounter wonderful exceptions, but it's a tragedy that generous people are the exception rather than the rule. We who are blessed with this world's goods too easily forget those who are in need. And we who have less usually envy those who have much. To make matters more confusing, envy makes us believe we're perpetually in the "poor" category.

I frequently interact with wealthy people, and my observations have taught me that the best remedy for the disease of greed is generosity. Generosity goes against our nature, it forces us out of our comfort zones, it prompts us to see the needs of others, and it encourages us to rely upon God's provision. There's nothing wrong with saving for a rainy day; in fact, I wholeheartedly encourage good financial planning. But generous giving will help us keep our desire for acquisition in balance. I like Richard Foster's penetrating advice in his book *Money, Sex and Power*.

The best remedy for the disease of greed is generosity.

> Without question, money has taken on a sacred character in our world, and it would do us good to find ways to defame it, defile it, and trample it under our feet.

> So step on it. Yell at it. Laugh at it. List it way down on the scale of values—certainly far below friendship and cheerful surroundings. And engage in the most profane act of all—give it away.[11]

You may have noticed in the Genesis passage about Lot above that the narrator inserted a parenthetical aside: "This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah" (Genesis 13:10). The original audience for this story would have known about the destruction of these two cities, and they were familiar with the topography of the Jordan River Valley. Before the destruction, this area had enjoyed the kind of fertility found in Egypt along the Nile or in Babylon beside the Euphrates. Today we call the area at the southern end of the Jordan River the Jordan Rift Valley. It's arid, hot, and dusty—not at all suitable for farming without modern irrigation. Where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea, the elevation is almost 1,400 feet below sea level—literally the lowest place on earth.

The story foreshadows trouble for Lot. The point is obvious: Abram's faith proved to be a better long-term decision; Lot's greed would cost him nearly everything. "Abram settled in the land of Canaan, and Lot moved his tents to a place near Sodom and settled among the cities of the plain. But the people of this area were extremely wicked and constantly sinned against the LORD" (Genesis 13:12-13).

Scottish theologian Alexander Whyte writes of this fateful decision:

> Lot's heart was turned to stone. Till with his hard eyes Lot stood up and looked out on the best land and the best water in all the country round, and drove his flocks down into it without a moment's hesitation, or a touch of remorse, or so much as a Thank you. Lot knew quite well both the name and the character of that city lying in the rain and sunshine below. He had often heard his uncle praying and plotting with God with all his might for Sodom. But Lot had no fear. Lot did not care.[12]

As Lot struck camp and began his migration toward Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lord again reassured Abram by reaffirming His promise: "Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession" (Genesis 13:14-15). The Lord assured Abram that in giving up his

claim and choosing to trust in God, Abram wasn't sacrificing anything in the long run. Nothing important, anyway. Perhaps the aging uncle needed this reassurance as he watched his nephew fade into the distance.

Abram responded by relocating to Hebron, where he would spend much of his remaining life. According to historians, this area offered good land: "The soil is relatively fertile, and a variety of fruits (apples, plums, figs, pomegranates, apricots), nuts, and vegetables are grown easily."[13] Not far away, the "oak grove belonging to Mamre" (Genesis 13:18) stood, similar to the fertility shrine of Shechem. Abram put God's stamp on the location by building an altar—yet another stone monument to memorialize his faith in the one true Creator God—his Protector, his Provider. The man's faith rooted deeper as he worshiped among the ancient oaks of Mamre.

Abram's Guide to Decision Making

Abram and Lot represent two different perspectives—opposite paradigms—for making important life decisions. One represents thinking and planning in a two-dimensional space. For Lot, there was no "up." When making his decisions, he didn't consider God as a factor in shaping his future. He made all his calculations based upon the potential influences of nature and humanity, never considering that God might alter the world on his behalf. He looked in the Jordan River Valley and saw only lush, green vegetation for his flocks and rich, wholesome soil for his crops.

Lot failed to consider the potential danger represented by settling among the twin cities that occupied that valley. There was a reason Abram hadn't set up camp near Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot never once asked God for His guidance. From a strictly horizontal perspective, the decision was a no-brainer. Consequently, with greed as his guide, he placed himself, his family, and his future in jeopardy.

Abram, on the other hand, did his thinking and planning from a three-dimensional perspective. In addition to human interaction and the influence of nature, he accounted for the presence of God actively reaching down into creation to protect him, provide for him, guide him, and accomplish His divine plan through him. Whereas Lot presumed to fend for himself, Abram trusted God to act on his behalf. Lot's plans were selfish, limited by his ability to

observe his surroundings and his own capacity for reason. Meanwhile, Abram was sensitive, desiring and seeking the counsel of an omniscient, omnipotent Benefactor.

I can't imagine why anyone would want to ignore that vertical component. It's like trying to navigate without a map—limited to what you can see and hear in your immediate area—when you could have a GPS device feeding you turn-by-turn instructions. Not only can God see everything we cannot, He *wants* to steer us through this dangerous landscape and bring us safely to our destination.

How do you view the world? Are you stuck in the horizontal plane? Or do you account for the vertical dimension by seeking God's counsel? I realize we don't get visitations from God in visual, audible form. But the Lord speaks and leads nonetheless. Before you consider how God communicates, you must—first and foremost—accept that He's there and that He wants to lead you. Do you? If not, then the rest of what I write has little application for you. Like Lot, you're on your own.

If, however, you want to follow God's leading, begin by acknowledging His presence and express, in prayer, your desire to obey Him. In the appendix of this book, you will find a brief explanation of how you can begin a relationship with God. The rest of this chapter assumes you have responded to His invitation to believe, to be rescued from your sins, and to be led by Him.

If, like Abram, you have become a believer and have agreed to follow the guidance of God, you have likely discovered that He doesn't speak to us today in the same way He did with people in the early days of the Old Testament. Back then, He spoke audibly; people heard a literal voice in their ears, and they conversed with the Almighty as they would with any other person. Later He chose prophets to become His messengers, directing them to speak on His behalf or to write down what He wanted to communicate. No guessing, no ambiguity. Just plain, simple, straightforward communication.

This seems like an efficient way for God and man to interact, doesn't it? So why doesn't He appear visibly or speak audibly today? I believe it's because seeing and hearing God in person doesn't usually affect people's capability to obey.

Atheists claim that if they had visible or tangible proof of God's existence, they'd believe, but the evidence of history proves otherwise. The Old Testament —a trustworthy historical document—records many accounts of people who heard God's audible voice or read His written instructions and understood exactly what He wanted . . . *and then went their own way*. Instead of following His clear instructions, they continued doing their own thing. They believed in the existence of the one true Creator God, but they failed to trust Him.

Remember, the definition of faith is not merely belief in the existence of God; faith is trusting in God.

Our biggest problem isn't that we don't see and hear God; it's that *we struggle with doing what He has commanded*! Our eyes and ears work fine. Our hearts? Not really. Consequently, God changed His mode of communication to bypass the senses and go straight to the heart.

Our biggest problem isn't that we don't see and hear God; it's that we struggle with doing what He has commanded!

Today, in the era following Christ's time on earth, God doesn't send messages. He chooses to interact with us in a far more profound, intimate, and wondrous way. Rather than speaking words, He leads us on a journey of faith, in the context of a personal relationship, in order to change our hearts. He uses the Bible, our relationships with other followers, our experiences, and—most crucial of all factors—His indwelling Holy Spirit to transform our hearts and guide us to closer conformity with His way. As we journey through life with God—not unlike our nomadic forebear, Abram—we begin to think as God thinks, we want what He wants, and then we do as He would have us do. This is a fulfillment—on a personal level—of a promise the Lord made in the Old Testament. He said to Jeremiah,

> Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the

> covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.
>
> JEREMIAH 31:31-33, ESV

Always, Never; Forget, Remember

If you are just now beginning your journey with God, that's a lot of theology to digest. But as our study of Abram's life continues, all of this will start to make more sense. For now, let me simplify matters with four simple words: *always*, *never*, *forget*, and *remember*.

Always look beyond the immediate positive benefits of a decision. The positive is usually obvious and can be grasped immediately. We live in a culture driven by a desire for instant gratification. Most of us carry the Internet in our pockets so we can have instant access to anything we want to know. When we see what we want online, we can download it right away or have it delivered to our doorstep before sunset the next day. When we go to the doctor, we hope to find an instant cure in a pill or in some simple procedure. We want what we want *now*, and our preoccupation with instant satisfaction is deadly.

It's time for us to slow down. Instead of asking, "What's in it for me?" or "How happy will she make me?" or "What benefit will I get from this?" we need to think about long-term consequences. What are the drawbacks? What will happen if you wait? In the silence and discomfort and patience of waiting, ask God to show you His way. When He does, go there.

Never underestimate the impact of negative consequences. Take a few moments to reflect on your recent decisions. If you're honest with yourself, you'll discover that the positive benefits were not as good as what you anticipated, and the negative impact was usually worse than expected.

Lot saw how green the valley was, how much water flowed into it, and how good it would be for his livestock. He calculated how much his herds and flocks would grow from good breeding and lush resources. He mentally counted the money he would make by selling to nearby cities, never once considering the impact of this decision on his family.

Forget about pleasing only yourself. I know—it seems like right now that decision would lead to great happiness, prosperity, safety, or contentment. Let me warn you. I've regretted every decision I've made in which I focused only on what benefited me. Self-interested decisions have always resulted in more pain than pleasure. I have always fared better when I followed the advice of the apostle Paul: "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too" (Philippians 2:3-4).

Remember that with greater independence and freedom comes the need for stronger personal discipline. If your decision is likely to compromise your walk with God, it's a bad decision, regardless of the apparent positives. Please remember that! The long-term cost isn't worth it. There's something more important than making more money, advancing your career, finding a new romance, or attending a better school. None of those things will matter if you're disconnected from the Lord. Exercise discipline in seeking God's leading first, and then consider the apparent advantages and disadvantages of a decision.

Begin each decision with this question: Will this enhance my relationship with God? If the answer is yes, you can be sure that safety and provision will be yours (see Matthew 6:33). If the answer is no, don't go one step further!

CHAPTER 4



ABRAM, THE GREATHEARTED

THE BIBLE IS, without doubt, the greatest book ever published. As literature, the Bible is unparalleled for its penetrating stories, beautiful poetry, rich imagery, and profound wisdom. As a history book, it preserves some of the most pivotal moments in the human story, yet it does so without losing touch with the humanity of the people involved. Its unique blend of narrative, poetry, and exposition makes it bluntly informational and ruthlessly practical yet thoroughly interesting. More than any other book, the Bible has stood the test of time. From its beginning, more than three thousand years ago, people have turned to the Scriptures to know their Creator, to learn about themselves, to discern life's mysteries, and to become spiritually wise. And today it remains a perennial bestseller.

Everything in the Bible falls into one of three categories: people, events, and ideas. Stories of people and what happened to them are woven into the fabric of the Scriptures, but these narratives serve a greater purpose than mere biographical facts. They set the stage for great ideas. They help communicate and illustrate great truths. These stories help us bridge the intellectual gap between our temporal, physical realm and the eternal, spiritual realm to which we really belong. These stories of people and events reveal spiritual truths that are unavailable anywhere else. And it is for this reason that thousands of generations have continued to turn to this book, searching its pages and trusting its truths.

Now, as we explore another episode from the story of Abram's life, let's become conscientious readers and take care not to miss the big ideas this account seeks to convey.

Genesis 14 would make an exciting action movie. It contains all the necessary elements of a great story. A riveting plot. Villains. A crisis. A hero. Strategy, swordplay, and acts of daring. A surprising twist and—just as critical to good storytelling—meaningful character development. By the time the crisis resolves, we know these people. We've seen their motivations, we can appreciate their potential for good, we grieve the flaws of some, and we admire the greatness of others. But most important of all, this exciting narrative is a gold mine of great truths.

Chaos in Canaan

We don't know how much time passed between Abram's separation from Lot and the events described in Genesis 14. Months—perhaps years. It was enough time for Abram's company of servants to number at least 318 men, many of whom had families of their own. Genesis 14:14 describes these individuals as "born into his household," which doesn't necessarily mean they were born into Abram's community as babies. This ancient expression meant "not purchased." The narrator makes it clear that these men were servants by choice, not involuntary slaves.

Back in the days before strong *national* governments, people sought safety in numbers. Some became citizens of a city; others asked to live under the protection of powerful men like Abram, offering their personal service in

exchange for the benefits of community. They were not slavishly bound to Abram; they participated in a business arrangement: provision and protection in exchange for loyalty.

Here's why the distinction is important: Abram attracted a large number of loyal followers because he was a wealthy, influential man. His household grew in numbers because people saw how his community enjoyed provision and protection. Many of them came to him asking to be a member of his household. Meanwhile, other powerful men—rulers of cities, usually—grew more powerful through conquest. They raided their neighbors, took their possessions, killed anyone who didn't serve their purposes, and enslaved the survivors. Free citizens of their cities paid taxes and joined their king in warfare, or else they became slaves themselves.

Far from being a slave owner, Abram put his own life on the line to battle what the Old and New Testaments called "menstealers"—kings who raided other cities and took captives to be their slaves (see Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7; 1 Timothy 1:10, KJV).

While Abram lived peaceably in the countryside, a coalition of kings from the east, led by one Kedorlaomer, formed a single army and began raiding Canaan. For a dozen years, the cities of Canaan had served Kedorlaomer as "vassal cities," meaning they paid heavy taxes to him in exchange for protection. According to this arrangement, he guaranteed their safety from any potential marauders. If they failed to pay, however, they would need protection from him!

After twelve years, the kings of five cities in the Jordan River Valley—Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar (also known as Bela)—decided the time had come to stop the extortion. Kedorlaomer used this as an opportunity to teach everyone living in Canaan a painful lesson by brutally sacking all its cities.

Genesis 14:5-11 describes in detail the areas conquered by Kedorlaomer's army, as city after city fell. The reason for all this detail is twofold. First, it illustrates the power of this army, which had gathered incredible momentum by the time they came to the cities in the Jordan River Valley. Second, the area conquered by Kedorlaomer corresponds rather closely to the land God had promised to Abram—an important theological point in this story as it relates to the Lord's covenant with the patriarch of Israel.

Put simply, no one had defeated this army, with the result that Kedorlaomer's kingdom dominated Abram's turf.

Interestingly, none of this appears to have bothered Abram. As far as he was concerned, the land promised by God would eventually come to him regardless of which idol-worshiping king claimed to own it. He didn't involve himself in the intramural skirmishes of Canaan's petty politics or self-serving rulers . . . until their violence affected his family.

When Kedorlaomer's army attacked Sodom and its neighboring cities, a brief battle ensued. During the fighting, many soldiers from Sodom and Gomorrah escaped into the hills, but some of the troops fell into tar pits—places where underground petroleum boils to the surface in the form of sticky goo. Why does the narrative give us this detail? Perhaps to illustrate the incompetence of these two armies. Five armies marched out to meet Kedorlaomer; two fled. Moreover, these general-kings engaged the enemy on their own ground—a distinct tactical advantage. Not only did they fail to use the tar pits against their enemy, they fell victim to their own home turf.

Having routed the defenses of Sodom and Gomorrah, the raiding armies looted the cities and rounded up captives to take home as slaves. Among the captives was Abram's nephew, Lot, along with his household and possessions. Fortunately, someone who remembered Lot's connection to Abram managed to break away from the rest of the POWs, and he got a message to the greathearted patriarch. When the old gentleman heard that his nephew had been taken captive, he responded by mustering a personal army of servants. He didn't hesitate to carry out a rescue mission.

A Greathearted Response

As you will recall, Abram had let Lot choose where to live, and Lot had chosen to set up his camp near Sodom. Someone who isn't greathearted would have leaned back in his rocking chair and said, "Okay, it's time for that young man to learn some hard lessons. He chose where to live and didn't have enough foresight to stay away from trouble, so he'll just have to buck up." Or he could have shrugged and said, "What does that have to do with me? That's Lot's concern. He made his bed; let him lie in it." But we see no petty responses from

Abram. Great people don't judge others for having needs—even troubles they've brought upon themselves. Great people see the crisis of another as a call to action.

Abram rallied 318 trained fighting men from his camp. Since they didn't have a police department to call or a national militia to summon in case of attack, Abram and his growing community had to fight for themselves, so they fashioned weapons and were trained to use them. The expression translated "mobilized" is much more picturesque in Hebrew; it has the connotation of *unsheathing* his trained men. It portrays Abram's servants as a blade that had been forged, sharpened, and polished into a gleaming, razor-sharp instrument of death.

A quick look at a map shows that Abram's men marched more than one hundred miles north to the Phoenician city of Laish (see Judges 18:29), later renamed Dan. This city "guarded a major trading route running between Damascus and Tyre, and was therefore an important commercial center."[14] Kedorlaomer's army probably thought they were home free when they bivouacked in the valley outside the city. They had humiliated their opposition throughout Canaan, so they never suspected a nighttime raid.

Take note of the difference between Abram's military skill and that of Sodom's and Gomorrah's kings. They fought on familiar ground and failed to turn the tar pits into a strategic advantage. Abram and his men fought the same enemy on foreign soil and were vastly outnumbered. But his men were trained—that is, "dedicated, set apart, equipped." To overcome their disadvantage, Abram used cunning and deception. He divided his forces (see Genesis 14:15), with the Hebrew term carrying the idea of distributing and assigning. He undoubtedly attacked the camp from several directions at once to create a panic, and in the confusion, his 318 men routed an army of perhaps thousands and sent them running.

Then, rather than gathering up their recovered prisoners and property and scurrying on home, Abram pursued the army another fifty miles into the mountains past Damascus! If archaeologists have yet to find any ancient inscriptions bearing the name of Kedorlaomer, this is undoubtedly why! Who would keep a record of *this*?

The biblical account doesn't record the reunion of Lot and Abram. We have no idea whether Abram received any thanks for this heroic rescue. (Probably not, knowing Lot!) But greathearted people have little need to be thanked; that's not their motivation. They don't keep a journal with a list titled "Dunces Who Never Said Thank You." You're greathearted when you come to the rescue without calling attention to yourself or expecting to be written up in the paper.

Integrity above Reproach

News of Abram's victory spread quickly. While accompanying Lot and his family back to their camp near Sodom and Gomorrah, two kings came out to greet Abram—two figures who could not have been more different. The king of Sodom traveled north to greet Abram and to escort his citizens the rest of their way home. The king of Salem (which means "peace") also came out to greet the returning hero. Melchizedek, whose name means "king of righteousness," was a "priest of God Most High" (Genesis 14:18). As a priestly act, he brought bread and wine, and served it with a blessing.

> Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
> Creator of heaven and earth.
> And blessed be God Most High,
> who has defeated your enemies for you.
>
> GENESIS 14:19-20

Amen! Without taking anything away from Abram's bravery and greatheartedness, Melchizedek gave all the glory to God for the victory.

We have no indication that Abram and Melchizedek had ever met before or if they would ever see each other again. Abram was not a citizen of any city, and he certainly didn't need the protection of any king. No law of God demanded that he give a gift to Melchizedek; nevertheless, Abram gave a tenth of the recovered spoils to him. He gave this offering not to the king of Salem, as such, but to God through Melchizedek in his capacity as priest. This was the act of a modest man who gave all credit for the victory to the Lord. A smaller man would have said, "I'm glad you heard of my triumph; where's my distinguished service medal? Where's my reward? Where's the feast in my honor?"

While Melchizedek brought a gift of bread and wine to celebrate God's victory, the king of Sodom arrived with a different attitude. He said, in effect, "Thanks for rescuing my subjects. By the way, feel free to keep all the stuff you recovered." To which I say, "Big deal!" First of all, by custom, it would have been Abram's right to keep it anyway. Second, Abram's fighting men had just humiliated the army that had humiliated Sodom. If Abram had decided he wanted to keep the plunder for himself, there was nothing the king of Sodom could have done about it! He was in no position to "let" Abram keep anything.

Even before hearing the king of Sodom's offer, Abram had already decided what to do with the spoils of conquest. Behind him, a caravan stretched for miles bearing all the furniture, clothing, jewelry, pottery, utensils, weapons, and precious metals looted from a dozen cities. The wealth would have been staggering. Even so, he valued his integrity more. He said, "I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich'" (Genesis 14:22-23, ESV).

Abram could have made a legitimate case for accepting the haul as a gift from God. After all, he had 318 eyewitnesses to validate the Lord's miraculous help and to substantiate his rightful claim. But he wanted to leave no question in anyone's mind that he had been blessed by God, not some sleazy king from Sodom. To guard his own honor and to preserve God's reputation, he accepted nothing for himself except reimbursement for expenses. What a magnificent model of greatheartedness, absence of greed, and integrity beyond reproach!

Years ago I served as a pastoral intern with Ray Stedman, who was the pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, for more than forty years. Ray's honesty and integrity made a lasting impression on me, and I patterned many of my personal habits after his.

During one summer while I was serving in Palo Alto, Ray attended a conference in Vermont and stayed at a lovely little bed-and-breakfast. Each morning, he ate breakfast alone and admired the innkeeper's taste in decor, which included a pewter tabletop set: salt and pepper shakers, a sugar bowl, and a creamer.

When he returned to the pulpit at his church, he preached on temptation. During the sermon, he said, "I had a great time while I was away, but I have to confess something. I was sitting at this breakfast table all alone, with no one else around, and I thought, *I'd really like to have this pewter set. There's one on every table, and the owners must have many more of them. If I took one, they'd never know.* But I'm here to tell you that I restrained myself—I didn't give in to that temptation, and I'm so grateful this morning that I don't have to confess to stealing."

The following week, Ray found a beautifully wrapped gift on his desk. He set aside the bright ribbon, tore away the wrapping, and opened the box to find the pewter set he admired. A member of the congregation who had heard the sermon contacted the bed-and-breakfast owners and asked them to send the set to Ray. That next Sunday, he brought the box to the pulpit. He thanked the anonymous giver and said, "What I really wanted to tell you is that I also lusted after the thirty-six-inch color television in my room!" I should add here that no television set arrived a week later.

Even great men and women struggle with temptation. Even wealthy people can be lured by the prospect of more riches. I can't say this for certain, but Abram probably thought of all the good he could do with the vast sum of wealth in his grasp. He could richly reward the loyal servants who had followed him into battle against overwhelming odds. With that much treasure, he could buy a walled city and settle down, trading his nomadic wandering for a safe, permanent home. He knew what he was giving up, yet I don't believe the wealth turned Abram's head. He had learned his lesson after failing the famine test. He would accept blessing from none other than God, whose relationship meant more to him than anything else.

Even great men and women struggle with temptation. Even wealthy people can be lured by the prospect of more riches.

While Abram held this personal conviction, he didn't force others to follow suit. Three local leaders had joined his mission—Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. He didn't turn around and say, "Now, you're not going to take anything, are you?"

Abram restrained his power and relinquished control over the behavior of others, even when their standards conflicted with his own. He said, “Let them take their share.”

True Greatness

Against a backdrop of a chaotic society and seedy characters, Abram emerges as a truly great man. But how do we define greatness? What are some qualities that characterize people we call “great”? Four characteristics come to mind, especially with Abram in view.

First, *genuine unselfishness*. I’ve never met a great person who was selfish. Unselfish people habitually hold everything and everyone loosely. They don’t squeeze the life out of their possessions or relationships by clutching them with obsessive intensity. They cultivate a generosity of heart, a genuine desire to share. They develop an ability to discern what is needed and then give whatever they can.

Second, *self-sacrifice*. Great people possess a willingness to sacrifice their own wants, needs, and comfort for the sake of others. Great individuals overlook differences, and they don’t allow personal prejudices or judgments to keep them from seeking the highest good for others. When you encounter a truly great person, he or she will sacrifice for you despite your differences and even your personal failings.

Third, *an absence of greed*. Great people do not find their motivation in personal gain. The idea of collecting more possessions or acquiring more wealth for its own sake makes no sense to a truly great individual. They don’t ask, “How much will I be paid?” or “What are the benefits to me?” Great people don’t have narcissistic tendencies. On the contrary, they seek ways to benefit others without remuneration. Great people see money as a means to a greater end, a tool for accomplishing a greater good for everyone.

Fourth, *gentleness*. I mean by that a restraint of power. They control themselves rather than attempting to gain control of others. Great people often hold positions of authority and wield significant influence, but they keep a tight rein on their potential to harm others. They don’t play king of the mountain. They don’t pull rank and expect others to fall in line. They give others the

freedom to make mistakes and then turn those situations into teachable moments. At the peak of their power, they attract followers by inspiring them and helping them achieve their full potential.

If I were to boil down all the characteristics of greatness to a single word, it would be *humility*. And Abram had this quality in spades. Though he was incredibly rich and impressively powerful, and was even called by God “my friend” (Isaiah 41:8), he never became overly impressed with himself. He acknowledged his own failings and helped others overcome theirs. Moreover, he dealt righteously with unrighteous people. Perhaps all those magnificent character qualities explain why true greatness is so rare.

If I were to boil down all the characteristics of greatness to a single word, it would be humility.

CHAPTER 5



CAN WE TALK?

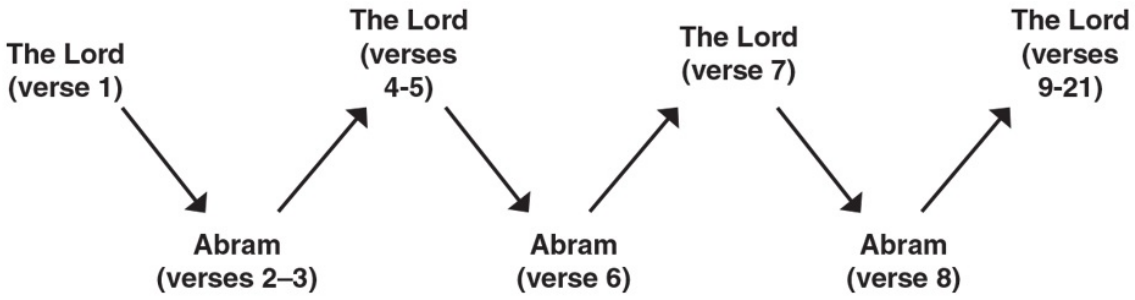
FOR THE NEXT few minutes I want you to think about a close friend of yours. What about your connection with this person makes him or her your friend? What makes your friendship different from a mere acquaintance?

I don't know your specific situation, but I would guess there are several factors. You know each other well—better than you know most other people outside of family. You're comfortable with one another; you are free to be yourself and to talk about personal subjects. You share a bond of trust. You confide in one another. You value this person's opinions and seek his or her counsel on important matters. Because you're committed to each other, you give your friend priority over other people. When your friend has a need, you're there.

I have discovered few treasures more valuable than a true friend.

Of all the billions of people God created, and of all those whom He has called to serve Him in some special way, He referred to Abram—and him alone—as "my friend" (Isaiah 41:8; see also James 2:23). All the factors that define your friendship with another person were present in Abram's friendship with God. Abram's knowledge of God grew more intimate with each encounter and deeper with each test of his faith. He became comfortable in the Lord's presence and gained confidence each time he saw Him or heard from Him. They talked often, and they listened to each other. As time passed, Abram's bond of trust strengthened, especially when he confided his fears.

Compared to the action-packed events recorded in Genesis 14, chapter 15 could appear boring. No invading armies or villainous kidnappings or daring rescues. No swashbuckling, no nighttime ambushes. The text records a quiet conversation between two close friends. It would be dull reading if one of the friends didn't happen to be the almighty Creator of the universe and the other an aging patriarch with no children. Genesis 15 records what Bible scholars refer to as an "interchange."



Direct interchanges between God and individuals don't occur often in Scripture. But in this case, Abram's interchange takes the form of a true dialogue, a back-and-forth conversation between friends. But make no mistake—while the two shared this remarkably free exchange, God didn't become Abram's "buddy." Abram never lost respect for the Lord's awesome, holy omnipotence; after all, he built more than one altar for the purpose of sacrificing to the God he worshiped.

An Exchange with the Almighty

The first three words of chapter 15, “After these things” (ESV), are like speed bumps in the narrative. We dare not drive over them too quickly; the author placed them there for a reason. These words indicate that what happens next is linked to previous events—there is an important connection. After what things? Up to this point, Abram had left his home in Ur of the Chaldeans, he’d failed his “famine test,” he’d survived his ordeal in Egypt, he’d learned from his mistakes, and he’d watched pensively as Lot made his disastrous choice. Most likely, however, “these things” refers to Abram’s recent victory over the coalition army of Kedorlaomer.

While violence and bloodshed are standard fare in entertainment, and movies make it seem easy for action heroes to kill someone and then continue on, in real life the human brain isn’t wired to witness death on a large scale. Military heroes get the job done on the battlefield only to pay a terrible emotional price when they return home. I don’t necessarily mean post-traumatic stress disorder, although many veterans must recover from this wound to their souls. Even those who avoid PTSD have to process what they have endured before they can move on. This often involves a complete reevaluation of life’s purpose and priorities.

Having faced the real possibility of dying on the battlefield, Abram saw how suddenly life can end and, therefore, how quickly God’s promises could die with him. Like any normal person, the patriarch returned from war with big questions on his mind. He was an eighty-five-year-old man with no heir. He needed to hear from his heavenly Father. When the Lord saw His friend struggling, He graciously came to offer help. The Lord’s voice came to Abram in a vision, and He spoke straight to the matter weighing heavily on Abram’s heart. “Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great” (Genesis 15:1). What reassurance!

From our comfortable vantage point, looking back through history, we struggle to understand Abram’s fragile confidence. But Abram didn’t have the advantage of hindsight. He was an old man with a wife well past menopause, and both of them wondered how they were supposed to produce a son. Here’s what Abram said to God:

> O Sovereign LORD, what good are all your blessings when I don’t even have a son? Since you’ve given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. You have given me

no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir.

GENESIS 15:2-3

The phrase *O Sovereign Lord* is unusual because it brings together two of God's names: *Adonai* and *Yahweh*—Master and Lord. This helps soften Abram's challenging yet reasonable question. He says to God, in so many words, "You keep promising blessings, but I'm closer to death than ever before, and I have no blood heir to receive Your covenant promises. Sarai can't get pregnant now, so exactly what reward do You mean?" Abram, trying to make sense of the Lord's promise, theorizes that perhaps his chief of staff, Eliezer, might be the heir God had in mind. That would have been the custom of his culture.

If you could read the Lord's response in the Hebrew language, His denial would blow your hair back. Genesis 15:4 records that he began with an extremely emphatic *no*. He then stressed that Abram's heir would come from his body. In today's terms, He might have said, "Your heir will come from your DNA." Then, to drive the point home, the Lord "took" Abram outside. The verb is active, almost forceful, as though He bodily picked up the man and set him in a clearing under the night sky. "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!" (verse 5).

How many stars can a person in a rural area with twenty-twenty vision see? Too many to count. That's the point. The Lord used the night sky to illustrate the vastness of the nation that will bear Abram's DNA. God could have used sand for an illustration—He could have told Abram to count the grains of sand on the road. Or the blades of grass on the plain, or the grains of wheat in the valley. But He had Abram crane his neck to look straight up into the vast, mysterious, immense universe. If he felt small surveying thousands of balls of fire spanning the heavens from horizon to horizon, then he grasped the Lord's point: "I am God; you're just a tiny speck compared to My universe. Trust Me; I've got your back."

As we say in Texas, "'Nuff said." Without hesitation, Abram "believed the LORD" (Genesis 15:6). The Hebrew term means "to be certain; to trust." Why did God's words settle the matter for Abram? Because no one can argue with the One who made the stars. God's omnipotence makes anything possible, including

the birth of a baby from a postmenopausal woman. Abram didn't claim to know just *how* God would fulfill His covenant; he merely accepted the promise as a foregone conclusion.

At this point in the story, the narrator inserts a simple comment. This one-sentence aside is, in fact, one of the most significant verses in the Bible. God declared Abram righteous (see Genesis 15:6). The Hebrew word means "conformity to an ethical or moral standard." It is used to describe God's morally perfect nature in Psalm 145:17: "The LORD is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His deeds" (NASB).

No one can argue with the One who made the stars. God's omnipotence makes anything possible.

Abram did not suddenly become a morally flawless person. Far from it! Later in the story, Abram sinned in spectacular fashion. Nor did his behavior suddenly conform to God's perfect standard. Nothing inherent about Abram changed at all. God *declared* him righteous. God, acting as the supreme Judge, applied all the rights and privileges of righteousness to Abram despite Abram's own inability to be righteous. The Lord did this because of Abram's faith. God said to him, in effect, "Give Me your spiritual checkbook." And He wrote in the credit column, "Deposited to Abram's moral account: My perfect righteousness."

New Testament writers use this passage to prove that people receive salvation by God's grace through faith (see Romans 4:3, 20-22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). That's why Paul regarded Abraham not only as the father of the Hebrew nation but also as "the spiritual father of those who have faith" (Romans 4:11). Just like Abraham, all those who place their trust in the Lord God "are counted as righteous because of their faith" (verse 11). Paul went on to write,

> Clearly, God's promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was based not on his obedience to God's law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith. If God's promise is only for those who obey the law, then faith is not necessary and the promise is pointless. For the law always brings punishment on those who try to obey it. (The only way to avoid breaking the law is to have no law to break!)
>
> So the promise is received by faith. It is given as a free gift.

ROMANS 4:13-16

Abram expressed his trust in the Lord. But God wasn't finished. Having affirmed His earlier promise to give Abram a son, He went on to provide more specific information about the land He had promised Abram (see Genesis 12:1, 7; 13:15). To ease the man's quivering faith, God formalized His covenant. The Hebrew expression is literally "to cut a covenant." We'll see why as the scene unfolds.

Today our agreements are preserved with ink on paper, validated with signatures, stamped by a notary, stored in a courthouse, and upheld by governments. Not so in ancient cultures. While some in the ancient world could read and write, most common folk could not. Besides that, paper had not yet been invented, so clay tablets were the document of choice. Therefore, average people had to use other methods of recording a contract.

In the case of significant covenants, the parties took part in an elaborate—and somewhat gory—ceremony involving animal sacrifice. In this instance, the Lord instructed Abram, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon" (Genesis 15:9). Abram knew exactly what to do with the animals because he had undoubtedly been a part of similar ceremonies in the past. He cut the animals in half and laid the halves a short distance apart. And then he waited.

> As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him. Then the LORD said to Abram, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. (As for you, you will die in peace and be buried at a ripe old age.) After four generations your descendants will return here to this land."

GENESIS 15:12-16

Abram needed to understand that God's covenant with him and his descendants involved much more than a simple, albeit extensive, real estate deal. His promise of land would eventually affect empires and shape history on a planetary scale. Consequently, the fulfillment would span many generations. To

illustrate, the Lord gave Abram a glimpse of how his heir would become a nation and when his descendants would settle in their land. He even described the four hundred years of Hebrew captivity in Egypt and their great Exodus.

The Lord calmed Abram's worry with the reassurance that he would die in peace after a long and fruitful life. Remember, he had just returned from a harrowing hostage rescue, feeling fortunate to have escaped with his life. Certainly Abram was wondering by now, *Is this how I'm going to spend my life in Canaan? Will I have to fight for every acre of the land I'm promised?*

He asked these questions at the ripe old age of 85, but we know from Genesis 25:7 that he lived to be 175. At this point, the man had ninety more years to live; by Old Testament standards, he hadn't even reached middle age! He still had plenty of life left for raising a son and enjoying peace in the land. He had lots of time to enjoy friendship with God before the end of life, at which time he would "go to his fathers in peace," as the Hebrew expression puts it.

> After the sun went down and darkness fell, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River—the land now occupied by the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites."
>
> GENESIS 15:17-21

The detailed symbolism in this covenant has been lost to history, but archaeology helps explain some of the mystery. Normally this ceremony would have been witnessed by each participant's community. The covenant between the two parties and the terms of their agreement would live in the collective memories of their family members and friends. Who could forget the image of large animals cut in half and laid on either side of a walkway? (This custom gave rise to the Hebrew expression "cut a covenant.") In the ancient Near East, people swearing an oath would call down curses upon themselves should they breach such a significant contract. Walking this sacrificial path may have been a symbolic way of saying, "May the same happen to me if I should fail to hold up my end of the agreement."

As an act of pure grace, God walked the sacrificial pathway, obligating Himself to fulfill His unconditional covenant with Abram. The Lord then revealed a precise description of the covenant land, expressed in terms Abram would have understood. The covenant land shared its western border with Egypt near the Red Sea, with its eastern border defined by the Euphrates River. The territory was marked to the north and the south by ten nations that have long since dissolved, but the historical remains of some of these locations can provide helpful clues. The Hittites lived as far north as the Black Sea in present-day Turkey; the Kenites most likely wandered the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula.

The land marked out by God covers an area much larger than we're accustomed to seeing on historical maps. At the peak of its power under King Solomon, Israel never claimed more than a third of the land area promised by God. But we can be sure God always keeps His promises. Therefore, we can be certain Israel will one day occupy every acre of its promised real estate.

Friendship with God

In the Middle East today, some people refer to Abraham as *Khalil Allah,* which means "friend of God," or simply *El Khalil*, "the friend." He is given this name not because he chose to befriend God—quite the opposite is true—or because his moral goodness won God's heart. He was, after all, an ignorant, superstitious polytheist like his peers when God called him at Ur. Abraham bears this honored title because God granted him all the blessings that go along with friendship, and by faith, he received them.

The apostle Paul writes, "Since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us" (Romans 5:1). In other words, because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has satisfied all the requirements of morality on our behalf, and because He has suffered the consequences of our moral failure, we can legitimately call God our Friend. What is more, we enjoy the same benefits of divine friendship that Abram received. The Lord grants us the same blessings of friendship. I see five at work in this story.

First, *God, our Friend, calms our fears and understands our questions.* That truth goes back to the first verse of this passage: "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great" (Genesis 15:1). Abram

responded not with a thank-you but with two questions, yet the Lord never rebuked him, never lost His patience. God made us, so He knows us better than we know ourselves. He is not threatened or offended by our fears or irritated by our questions. So don't be afraid to ask God questions. Don't entertain fear to the point that you're distracted. The Lord says to us, "I am your God."

Second, *God, our Friend, knows when to bless and when to delay.* The timing of God's blessings is perfect . . . for our good and for His glory. We are shortsighted and impatient, so we want what we want immediately. We hate discomfort, and waiting makes us anxious. Consequently, we begin to wonder if God has forgotten us or turned His back on us. That's usually when we attempt to get our own blessing through illegitimate means and, as a result, commit sin. So don't consider a delay a cancellation.

Don't consider a delay a cancellation.

As our Friend, God wants to give us blessings, but He knows that good things given at the wrong time can cause more harm than good. Abram waited nearly twenty-five years for the first sign of a pregnancy in his wife. Meanwhile, the couple continued to age. He began to seek other alternatives, thinking that maybe he had misunderstood God or that God would renege on His promise. Would his chief of staff, Eliezer, become his heir? As the story unfolds, however, we'll see that God's timing is perfect.

What blessing are you waiting to receive? We're all waiting for something that only God can make happen. Let me encourage you to wait. Express your anxiety to Him in prayer—vent to Him freely; He can take it—but wait. He hasn't canceled the plan; He has merely chosen a better time.

Third, *God, our Friend, wants us to trust Him.* Friendships have trust as their foundation, so God loves it when we believe Him. Throughout the Scriptures, God stands with His arms open wide, saying to His people, "Believe this. Trust Me!" Solomon, having made a multitude of faithless decisions and having suffered the consequences of not waiting on God, gave this fatherly advice to his son:

> Trust in the LORD with all your heart;
>
> do not depend on your own understanding.
>
> Seek his will in all you do,

and he will show you which path to take.
Don't be impressed with your own wisdom.
Instead, fear the LORD and turn away from evil.
Then you will have healing for your body
and strength for your bones.

PROVERBS 3:5-8

The issue of trust is so important to God that when Abram believed, He reckoned his faith to him as righteousness.

Fourth, *God, our Friend, wants us to live without fear.* To reassure us in the midst of confusing circumstances, He gives us guarantees, facts we can know for certain. These assurances give us something to grasp when darkness surrounds. God instructed Abram, "Know for certain . . ." (Genesis 15:13, NASB).

When conditions appear grim, when a situation begins to overwhelm us with doubt, fear, disillusionment, or depression, God wants us to trust in His unchanging character. While circumstances change continually, God does not. It's never dark where God is. He is Light. Our God is ageless and timeless and eternal and holy and pure. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. And He is *for* us, not against us!

Fifth, *God, our Friend, has plans for our good, not our destruction.* Furthermore, our future is as clear to God as our past is to us. He spelled out for Abram his future even to the point of telling him about the Exodus, about the people who would come into the land, and about how the Lord would bring them back out of bondage.

The Lord has your future blessings all planned out, ready to be released when your spirit is mature enough to receive them—and only when the circumstances are right. You may have to endure some growing pains as you complete the life He has prepared for you. But don't think you have to endure the waiting and the anxiousness alone. God, like a good friend, remains interested and available, ready to hear you express your most private thoughts and ready to offer help for today. Like Abram, you can maintain your respect for the Almighty while turning to Him as a friend.

In Peggy Noonan's book *When Character Was King,* one of Ronald Reagan's daughters reflects on her father's relationship with God.

A lot of things he taught me as a child I didn't reject, but I didn't take them on big time until I got much older. He did have something special with God; he talked to God all the time. It didn't mean that he was any more special in God's eyes or that he believed that. We all are special with God. It's not that God's speaking to anybody more than anyone else, it's that some people choose to listen. And talk back. And my father talked to God. That's what I got as a child, I got that he just talked to God all the time. He just had conversations with God.

And that's the way I talked to God when I was a child. My idea of prayer was never that you sit down, clean up your room, clean up your act before you can talk to God. Never. It was always that I knew I could take my mess to God, I knew that I could just get down and talk to God like my father, all the time.

When we'd go horseback riding at the Malibu ranch, just the two of us, I knew the way to get him to talk and to have a conversation was to talk about God. And talk about heaven, ask him about heaven—"What do you think God thinks of this?" "What do you think heaven is like?" If I went to that place we would have these wonderful conversations. . . . And he would just tell me sometimes, "Well I asked God about this and this is what He said back to me."

My father told me that my whole life. You ask God something and He will answer you, He will answer very specifically. Might not be the answer you want to hear, but God will give you an answer. It's why my father felt confidence about the big decisions in his life.[15]

President Reagan got the idea of an interchange with God right. Do you have this kind of interaction with the Lord? Take a break from reading about Him for a while. Get yourself alone and spend some quality time with your heavenly Father, your Savior, your Friend.

CHAPTER 6



RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD

LIFE IS MESSY. No one likes it that way. We do our best to keep life tidy and organized, but as soon as we get everything in order, something happens to make it messy again. Sometimes those messes are the result of a predicament, a no-win scenario in which any choice we make will create a mess. In those situations, the only thing we can do is try to discern which choice will make the smallest mess.

Take, for example, an occupational dilemma. You have a job in Texas. You're fairly well paid. Your family is settled and content. Then you're offered another position that would pay *a lot* more money. It's yours for the taking, except . . . the job requires that you relocate to Nome, Alaska. Now you have to decide between two extremes: –40-degree winters or 110-degree summer days.

Does the increased income offset the difficulty of uprooting your family to start over in a new community? Will the new situation help or hinder your children? You've got yourself a dilemma.

Or what about an academic dilemma? You started a PhD program, and you're excited about the opportunity to learn. But you have small children who need your attention—a lot of it. So what do you do? Pursue the degree knowing that if you postpone it, chances are slim you'll get another chance? Yet you really want to spend time with your kids and be fully present during their formative years.

Or maybe you have faced a romantic dilemma. You're single and not getting any younger. You're dating an individual who would love to marry you, but there are some things about him or her that give you pause. Nothing huge, but significant enough factors to make you uneasy about taking the step of marriage. Should you continue despite your misgivings? Or do you put off an engagement and risk losing the relationship?

At some point almost everyone faces financial dilemmas too. You have a budget to work within. It's tight, but it works. Then you find the perfect house or car or gift, but it's much more expensive than your financial plan allows. Do you dip into your savings? Do you go into debt to buy the item? Or do you stick with that crummy budget and keep looking?

All of us face life dilemmas—and as believers we also face spiritual challenges. Do you keep on waiting and waiting for the Lord to move? Or do you embrace the questionable adage "God helps those who help themselves"? *Why not jump in and take care of things myself?* you think. After all, you're reasonably bright. You've been around the block. You know how to solve this situation. Before long, you're running ahead of God, hoping He'll approve of what you do or at least help you clean up whatever unforeseen messes you encounter.

In a perfect world, no choice makes a mess. No decision has a drawback. We never experience dilemmas because, as the old expression goes, "We can have our cake and eat it too." And it's nonfattening! We wish we didn't have to choose between the lesser of two evils. But we don't live in a perfect world. God remains in control of our world, but life is far from ideal on planet Earth.

Abram's Dilemma

Heroes of the Bible weren't exempt from dilemmas. In fact, many seemed to move from one dilemma to the next. One of the more famous examples for Abram and Sarai was the difficult choice put to them concerning their childlessness. God had promised Abram that his heir would come from his body (see Genesis 15:4, NIV); the boy would carry his DNA. The Lord even sealed His promise with a solemn covenant ceremony (see Genesis 15). But Abram was now advanced in years, and his wife would soon pass through menopause, if she hadn't already.

At this point in Abram's faith journey, the couple had waited for years, but there was still no pregnancy. The predicament became increasingly embarrassing for Abram, because he had surely described his divine encounters to others. Most likely, his community knew about the promised heir. So with each passing day, the question "Any news?" grew tenser.

Finally Sarai got tired of waiting. The pressure to produce a child became too strong, so she devised a way to escape their predicament. Years ago, as you will recall, she and Abram had run to Egypt during a famine. Abram claimed Sarai was his sister to save his own skin, and Pharaoh proposed to marry her. To gain Abram's favor as her supposed brother and guardian, the king gave him "sheep, goats, cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels" (Genesis 12:16). Among the Egyptian servants was a young woman named Hagar. Now, many years later, "Sarai said to Abram, 'The LORD has prevented me from having children. Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her'" (Genesis 16:2).

Take note of Sarai's rationale. She couldn't bear children, but Abram could still "father a nation," regardless of his age. After all, God had said, "You will have a son of your own who will be your heir" (Genesis 15:4). He hadn't stipulated that Sarai would necessarily be the mother. Perhaps waiting any longer wouldn't be wise. If they waited until they were too old, they wouldn't have the energy to rear the boy. Maybe God expected them to *pursue* His promise rather than *wait* for things to happen. What if this was some kind of test to see how much they wanted God's promise?

Abram faced a major dilemma.

Today we have the benefit of knowing how history unfolded, so we can't fully appreciate Abram's dilemma. From our comfortable vantage point, it's easy to see what he should have done. But before we cluck our tongues or deride Abram for trying to fulfill God's promise for Him, think back to your last big blunder. Why did an irrational choice appear so rational in the moment? Think about some of the messes you've made because you allowed your emotions to do your thinking, or because you let your desires put your body on autopilot.

I think it's good that Abram's wife felt the freedom to suggest a creative solution. It says a lot about the closeness of their marriage. Her thinking isn't really that far outside the box; a legal custom of that culture permitted the husband of a childless woman to take her servant as a second wife. One biblical scholar explains it this way: "The child born of that union was regarded as the first wife's child. If the husband said to the slave-wife's son, 'You are my son,' then he was the adopted son and heir."[16]

The biggest problem is that throughout the discussion, no one sought the Lord's input. Sarai didn't pray. Abram didn't sacrifice at one of the altars he'd built. How much better things would have been if Abram had gone out under the stars and said, "Lord, we're getting old, and the wait gets harder with each passing year. Our longing has become almost unbearable. We thought of a way to have a child. We wonder if You approve."

While the custom of the day might have been socially and legally acceptable, God often repudiates social traditions. Besides, this was to be no ordinary birth. This birth, this heir, would become the first step in unfolding a marvelous, divine plan for the world! This was not a time to cut corners or do something half right.

Abram could have responded to Sarai gently by saying, "You know, sweetheart, you get an A for creativity, but real low marks in theology. I appreciate your idea, and even though our community would encourage us to have a child this way, I know it's not right. The Lord knows everything, and He gave me you before He gave me the promise."

Tragically, however, "Abram heard the voice of Sarai" (Genesis 16:2, my translation). "Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife. (This happened ten years after Abram had settled in the land of Canaan.) So Abram had sexual relations with Hagar, and she became pregnant" (verses 3-4).

The biblical record doesn't preserve Abram and Sarai's dinner conversation after Hagar showed signs of conceiving. But I know how rationalization can go. To rationalize is "to devise a self-satisfying but incorrect reason for one's behavior."[17] I imagine the old couple saying, "Isn't it amazing, honey, how the Lord blessed our decision? He never would have allowed Hagar to conceive if He didn't approve." It's easy to find signs of God's approval in anything when we want it badly enough.

Truth and Consequences

The fallout of Abram and Sarai's decision didn't take long to kick in. Hagar's bump hadn't begun to show before she started treating Sarai with contempt (see Genesis 16:4). The Hebrew word for *contempt* means "small, insignificant, trifling, dishonorable." People in the ancient Near East thought of barren women as worthless to society. By their reckoning, childless women consumed valuable resources and contributed nothing to justify their existence. So according to ancient standards, Hagar was worthy of a higher social caste than Sarai since she would bear Abram a son.

When the consequences of sin begin to fall, relationships always suffer. And it can get ugly mighty fast! The plan to have Hagar bear a surrogate son backfired, and rather than bringing joy to the household at last, it caused everyone to start turning against one another.

When the consequences of sin begin to fall, relationships always suffer.

Sarai said to Abram, "This is all your fault! I put my servant into your arms, but now that she's pregnant she treats me with contempt. The LORD will show who's wrong—you or me!" (Genesis 16:5). (So *now* Sarai appeals to the Lord!)

Abram replied, "Look, she is your servant, so deal with her as you see fit" (Genesis 16:6). This was his subtle way of saying, "You came up with the idea. This is the bed you made for yourself, so lie in it!"

All of a sudden, this once harmonious home had become a combat zone. People who once trusted God and waited on His blessing started using His name to call down curses upon one another. Hagar, who used to respect Sarai, began to

feel superior and became insolent. Then, with Abram and Sarai at odds, Sarai found herself abruptly expendable. Hagar couldn't stand the mounting pressure and fled into the wilderness alone. Life was certainly messy in that home!

Cynthia and I have a very dear friend whose daughter married against her parents' advice. Not surprising to her folks, the new husband became abusive. She left to escape the violence, and when he showed signs of improvement, she returned. Eventually the abuse resumed, even worse than before. She left again, and now may have to remain in hiding. Reflecting on this situation prompted me to wonder, *Just how bad does a situation have to be for a woman to risk dying in the wilderness rather than staying under her roof?*

Apparently no one noticed Hagar was missing. Or if someone took notice, no one cared that a frightened, pregnant young woman faced the dangers of the wilderness alone, subject to predators and exposure. Fortunately, though, the Lord cared about her. In most ways, she had become the innocent victim of Abram and Sarai's disobedience. She hadn't asked for any of this. She'd simply been doing her work around the house, and the next thing she knew, she was wearing a wedding veil and marching off to the honeymoon tent of an eighty-five-year-old groom.

> The angel of the LORD found Hagar beside a spring of water in the wilderness, along the road to Shur. The angel said to her, "Hagar, Sarai's servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?"
>
> "I'm running away from my mistress, Sarai," she replied.
>
> The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her authority." Then he added, "I will give you more descendants than you can count."
>
> GENESIS 16:7-10

The road to Shur was a caravan route used by merchants traveling from Canaan to Egypt. The original audience for this story would have recognized this wilderness region as the territory controlled by the descendants of Ishmael—the child Hagar carried (see Genesis 25:18). This helps explain the significance of the angel's message from God. By encouraging Hagar to return to the household

of Abram and Sarai, the angel implied, “God will watch over you and bless you.” And he conveyed to her a covenant similar to Abram’s: “I will give you more descendants than you can count” (Genesis 16:10).

The angel then expanded this blessing to reveal specific details, saying, “You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You are to name him Ishmael (which means ‘God hears’), for the LORD has heard your cry of distress. This son of yours will be a wild man, as untamed as a wild donkey!” (Genesis 16:11-12).

The image of a wild donkey is derogatory in our language and culture, but that was not the case in the ancient Near East. The expression “wild donkey” in Hebrew (*pere*) forms a clever wordplay with another area associated with the Ishmaelites: the wilderness of Paran. Furthermore, the image describes the free life of a tent-dwelling nomad. Sadly, the angel predicted perpetual strife for Hagar’s son. In this way, Ishmael’s life would reflect his origins: an aggressive man born in a hostile home.

Hagar blessed God, who had blessed her, saying, “You are the God who sees me” (Genesis 16:13). To memorialize her encounter with God, she named the spring Beer-lahai-roi, which means “well of the Living One who sees me” (verse 14). She then returned to Abram’s camp, where she gave birth to a son. Abram, having heard about her experience and the promise of God, named the boy Ishmael, as instructed.

Running Ahead

By the time Ishmael arrived, Abram had turned eighty-six. If we skip ahead to read about the birth of Isaac, the true son of Abram’s covenant with God, we’ll see he was one hundred years old then (see Genesis 21:5). Abram and Sarai tried to rush God, attempting to get the Lord on their timetable, but they didn’t receive their blessing for another fourteen long years. Our running ahead doesn’t pressure God to hurry His agenda. When we try to coerce the Lord into giving us what we want, when we want it, He responds, in effect, “You’re not ready. This blessing isn’t good for you right now. You have so much more to learn . . . so trust Me. And don’t expect Me to explain Myself.”

You might find yourself in Abram’s predicament right now, and you’re praying that great American prayer, “Lord, hurry up!” You want answers now; you want His blessing now. You’re convinced you’ve waited long enough.

Waiting is difficult, and you want progress, so your great temptation when the Lord doesn't appear to be doing anything is to get things going yourself. Your predicament has dragged on for too long, and you're tired of it.

If that describes you (if it doesn't now, it will soon!), I have a four-letter word for you: *wait*. The word forms an acrostic of four imperatives that you may find helpful.

***W**alk a little slower.* When you feel the need to hurry God along or to make something happen to advance God's agenda for your life, apply the brakes. It's time to slow your pace, step away from the situation, and devote yourself to a time of solitude and prayer—and perhaps even fasting. Ask some trusted advisers to join you in seeking God's mind—people who have the love and courage to say things you don't like to hear. Then resolve not to hurry things along. More often than not, we regret the things we did, not the things we didn't do.

***A**sk God for increased patience, wisdom, and self-control.* No doubt you have already prayed for this, but the very fact that you're agitated and itching for action says you need to continue asking. Your best decisions occur when your spirit is calm, when confidence in God's sovereign control has displaced your worry, when you're tuned in to the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit. Use prayer as an opportunity to express yourself fully to the Lord. Describe your worry, your fear, your frustration. He already knows everything, of course, but it's a great relationship builder—not to mention amazingly therapeutic.

***I**magine the worst-case scenario that might happen if you waited.* Instead of running ahead, stop and think ahead: *What's the worst possible outcome if I do nothing?* When a situation truly demands action, this question can bring good ideas to the surface. Most often, however, the answer is disappointingly dull. In the case of Abram and Sarai, the worst possible outcome for waiting on pregnancy was more of the status quo.

***T**hink of others who will be impacted by your decision.* Running ahead of God's timing always causes collateral damage. You hurt yourself, which is bad enough. You also cause harm to innocent bystanders. In Abram and Sarai's case, their running ahead changed a young woman's life forever, and a child was born into a tense, divided household.

If you're moving your family *for the wrong reasons*, your spouse must make major life changes to support you, your children lose the stability of their community, you are all forced to start over. Yes, children are resilient, but uprooting and replanting doesn't enhance development; it is traumatic for them. Yes, God can and will use the ordeal for their good, in spite of the upset, but that should be according to *His* design, not your own desires.

If you choose to marry *for the wrong reasons*—for example, because your biological clock is running down or because you're determined to feel less lonely—your eventual heartache will affect everyone in your family. In the beginning, everything might seem great because your future partner wants a wedding, but there are few things in life that cause more collateral damage than a bad marriage.

Think of others who will be unfairly impacted by your decision. Make a list of names, and list beside each one the potential fallout if or when your decision implodes.

V. Raymond Edman, the president of Wheaton College for several decades, wrote a small but profound book titled *The Disciplines of Life*. In it he describes what he calls "the discipline of delay."

> We have been told that God's disappointments are His appointments, that God's delays are not His denials; but do we believe what we hear? Delay, with its apparent destruction of all hope, can be a deep discipline to the soul that would serve the Lord Jesus. We live in a restless, impatient day. We have little time for preparation, and less for meditation and worship. We feel we must be active, energetic, enthusiastic, and humanly effective; and we can't understand why inactivity, weakness, weariness, and seeming uselessness should become our lot.
>
> The discipline of delay is written large in the life of God's people, as we could observe in Abraham's long waiting for the son of promise.[18]

We like things to be fast. When we're at a restaurant, we don't want to wait for a table. When we order something online, we want overnight delivery or an instant download. We like the fast lane. We like the idea of bullet trains. We like fast food. We don't even like missing one panel of a revolving door. Why? Because life is short, and we don't want to waste time waiting. But it is usually

in waiting that God does His best work in us. In that crucible of frustrated longings, the Holy Spirit confronts our darkest lusts, our most selfish cravings, bringing them out of the shadows and then releasing us from slavery to hidden idols.

When we're forced to wait, the Lord helps us acquire an appetite for the blessing to come. Meanwhile, He builds our maturity so that when the fulfillment finally arrives, we are prepared to enjoy His blessing to the fullest. For Abram, the blessing was a son at last. For others throughout history, the blessing was engaging in a calling. Edman explains how the discipline of delay prepared Hudson Taylor for the work that would define his life, the China Inland Mission.

When we're forced to wait, the Lord helps us acquire an appetite for the blessing to come.

> Hudson Taylor knew the testing that tempers the steel of the soul. Invalided, home at twenty-nine after six years of intensive service in China, he settled with his little family in the east end of London. Outside interests lessened; friends began to forget; and five long hidden years were spent in the dreary street of a poor part of London, where the Taylors were "shut up to prayer and patience." From the record of those years it has been written, "Yet, without those hidden years, with all their growth and testing, how could the vision and enthusiasm of youth have been matured for the leadership that was to be?" Faith, faithfulness, devotion, self-sacrifice, unremitting labor, patient, persevering prayer became their portion and power, but more, there is "the deep, prolonged exercise of a soul that is following hard after God . . . the gradual strengthening here, of a man called to walk by faith not by sight; the unutterable confidence of a heart cleaving to God and God alone, which pleases Him as nothing else can." As the years of obscurity progressed, "prayer was the only way by which the burdened heart could obtain any relief"; and when the discipline was complete, there emerged the China Inland Mission, at first only a tiny root, but destined of God to fill the land of China with gospel fruit.[19]

If you're on the cusp of making a decision that troubles your family or friends, stop. Wait. Consider the sovereign hand of God. He doesn't need your help. Heaven is not waiting for you to act. God is able to move you when He's ready.

In every life
There's a pause that is better than onward rush,
Better than hewing or mightiest doing;
'Tis the standing still at Sovereign will.
There's a hush that is better than ardent speech,
Better than sighing or wilderness crying;
'Tis the being still at Sovereign will.
The pause and the hush sing a double song
In unison low and for all time long.
O human soul, God's working plan
Goes on, nor needs the aid of man!
Stand still, and see!
Be still, and know![20]

CHAPTER 7



DEEPENING OUR ROOTS WITH GOD

THIS WORLD has lied to us. To make matters worse, we have believed those lies. While our culture is awash in lies—many of them spun by marketing teams—one particularly insidious lie has turned our lives into a perpetual-motion machine. It goes like this: “Anything worthwhile can be acquired at once.”

Because we hate to wait, we have turned instant gratification into the gold standard of value. We now judge the worth of something by how quickly it can produce results. Speed and efficiency are in; quality is out. When making a purchase, we don’t ask, “How long will it last?” but “How soon can I have it in my hands?” We’ll take cheap and disposable over excellent and durable any day, especially if it means we can have it *now*.

The lie that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once doesn't cause long-term problems when you're shopping for furniture—and it's even less of a problem for the latest electronic gadget. But it will kill your spiritual life. Depth of spiritual maturity does not come quickly; it must be built over time. If greed is the demon of money, if lust is the demon of sex, if pride is the demon of power, then speed is the demon of depth.

One insightful author describes our culture this way: "*World* is an atmosphere, a mood. It is nearly as hard for a sinner to recognize the world's temptations as it is for a fish to discover impurities in the water."[21]

> One aspect of *world* that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. We assume that if something can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently. Our attention spans have been conditioned by thirty-second commercials. Our sense of reality has been flattened by thirty-page abridgements.
>
> It is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to have been born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything, even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness. [22]

Holiness cannot be acquired at once; holiness takes time. Time to be still, and patience to accept the silence of God.

Holiness cannot be acquired at once; holiness takes time.

Divine Silence

Thirteen years passed in silence between chapters 16 and 17 of Genesis. There was no vision. There was no voice. There was no visit. Only silence. Try to imagine complete silence on God's part for thirteen years. "Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. [silence] When Abram was ninety-nine years old . . ." (Genesis 16:16–17:1, ESV). Most readers zoom past that interval of silence to rejoin the action of the patriarch's story. I won't presume to start preaching on what Scripture doesn't say; I merely suggest that we should spend more time reflecting on these lengthy gaps of silence. Without making unfounded assumptions, we can use our imaginations and a few clues from the narrative to see what happened to Abram.

He didn't handle the Lord's earlier silence very well. After God's first appearance in Ur, Abram had been talking rather regularly with Him. More than once, the Lord had appeared to Abram with reassurances. Around his seventy-ninth birthday, he'd met with God after a miraculous victory on the battlefield, but then he heard nothing for another six or seven years. Then when he was eighty-five, he and Sarai decided to implement their own plan.

When his decision to run ahead of God's plan ended in spectacular failure, Abram came to a kind of end. As the expression goes, "he finally came to the end of himself." While his longing for God's promise remained front and center in his mind, he at last surrendered to God's omniscient, sovereign care. In this next encounter with God, Abram posed no questions and made no complaints about his long wait; he merely "fell on his face" (Genesis 17:3, NASB) before his divine Friend.

After thirteen years, the Lord broke the silence with a fresh reintroduction. When He appeared to Abram, He said, "I am El-Shaddai" (Genesis 17:1). *El* is the all-purpose Semitic word for "god," used throughout the ancient Near East in reference to deities of many different religions. *Shaddai* means "almighty" and appears here as a noun. A good paraphrase would be, "I am God . . . specifically, the almighty One." It's the first time the Bible uses this name for God. The phrase appears often after this point, especially in the book of Job (thirty-one of the forty-eight instances in the Old Testament)—a book that tells the story of another man who endured the silence of heaven. This divine name carries the concept of God "overpowering, ever-present, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, faithful, good, and sovereign." The straightforward message God communicated

through this name after a long silence is this: *While I am sometimes silent, I remain in control of your circumstances.* The Lord said, in so many words, "I haven't left; I've been here all along, Abram. Hello again. I'm the almighty One, in case you've forgotten. Because we haven't talked for a while, I have a few things to say to you right away."

"Walk before Me," the Lord told Abram (Genesis 17:1, NASB). The Lord could have chosen any number of verbs of motion: crawl, move, run. He could have said, "Hurry along—make up for lost time." He chose instead the image of placing one foot in front of the other, repetitively and consistently. Walking is an action that carries someone from one place to another—remember, the story of Abram uses a journey motif—and (this is important) it's a sustainable action over the long haul. Sprints cover short distances and leave you exhausted. A marathon demands everything you have to run the race and then requires days of recuperation afterward. But the average person can walk for miles each day and actually gain strength. (In fact, my doctor strongly recommends it!)

Take note of the unusual preposition in God's command. Usually we think of someone walking *with* another. The Hebrew preposition *before* conveys "for, in regard to." We understand that the walking isn't literal; it's an analogy referring to Abram's relationship with God. "Walk in regard to Me, doing the right things repetitively and consistently, day after day, over the long run of your life. Do this as I call the cadence."

Anyone who has served in the military knows the term *cadence* all too well. My first days in a Marine Corps boot camp began before sunrise with strength training and marching. In the Marines, the "almighty" is your drill instructor! The place where you learn to march is called "the grinder," an expansive asphalt surface dedicated to the instruction of marching and close-order drill. For hours, recruits learn the voice of their master and practice walking in step. A single voice keeps dozens of individuals in a company walking together in the same direction. Without the cadence, there is chaos.

The grinder usually has more than one company of recruits marching at the same time. Each company must learn to hear the unique voice of their drill instructor. And trust me—it doesn't take long before you're attuned to that inimitable bark of your drill instructor. In only a few weeks, you're able to detect his voice in any crowd at any time.

In a sense, El-Shaddai commanded Abram, “Walk with Me as I call the cadence.”

This first command led to another: “And be blameless” (Genesis 17:1, NASB). The term *blameless* means “complete, whole, sound, unimpaired, having integrity.” Not sinless—no one can achieve that. The command means remaining morally grounded, even after mistakes. The conjunction *and* implies that being blameless results from walking before God; one is the consequence of the other. To paraphrase, “Keep your eyes fixed on Me, with your ear tuned to My voice and your mind alert to My direction. In the process, Abram, you will discover that you have risen above the shallow superficiality of the world around you.”

While the Lord urged Abram to walk with Him and to be blameless, it should be clear that God wasn’t asking him to do anything new or different. I believe that over the past thirteen years, it had become Abram’s habit to walk with God, becoming increasingly “complete, whole, sound, unimpaired.” The Lord affirmed his faithful walk and encouraged him to continue. In the sustained years of silence, Abram became a man of deep faith.

In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”[23] I challenge you to be on the lookout for deep people. Look carefully. You won’t find an overabundance. Our schools turn out lots of educated people. Top companies find the most intelligent people. Gifted people flock to New York, Hollywood, Las Vegas, and Nashville. But people of depth are rare. Not many people have the foresight or the patience to cultivate spiritually deep roots.

Walking with God

Nearly twenty-five years had passed since the Lord first spoke to Abram in Ur. Since then, his spiritual roots had pushed deep into the soil of faith in his God. At long last, he trusted in the Lord’s promise and rested in His sovereign will. He was now capable of receiving the covenant blessings.

The Lord announced, “I will give My covenant between Me and you” (Genesis 17:2, my literal rendering of the Hebrew). Of course, the agreement wasn’t new; God had “cut” this covenant earlier (see Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18-21).

He merely reconfirmed the covenant as a precursor to announcing that the time had come for the fulfillment of the first part. For Abram to become the father of a multitude of nations, he would need to father a son with Sarai. To memorialize this moment, God gave Abram a new name. His birth name, "exalted father," honored the moon god Abram's father worshiped. His new name, Abraham, means "father of a multitude." When people asked about the significance of his name, he could explain, "I am so named because El-Shaddai made a covenant with me. My descendants, as uncountable as the stars, will become a nation, and they will inherit the land on which we now stand."

The Lord then revealed more details concerning His plan to redeem the world through the nation of Israel. His predictions took the form of several unconditional promises. Five times, the Lord affirmed, "I will . . ." (see Genesis 17:5-8, ESV).

- "I will make you exceedingly fruitful."
- "I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you."
- "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring."
- "I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan."
- "I will be their God."

In this way, God essentially said, "These are the things you can count on. I will do them. They are My responsibility. And Abraham, remember that El-Shaddai is speaking to you. I will see to it that these things take place. Never doubt it, even when you're not hearing from Me or when life appears stagnant. I will never forget to fulfill what I promised."

In Genesis 17:9 (ESV), the phrase "as for you" signals a transition in the speech. The Lord now turned the subject from Himself to focus on Abraham. He had outlined His own part of the covenant and had given Abraham a confirming sign in the form of a new name. Now He gave Abraham a part to play. He was to keep the covenant and teach his descendants to do the same. The Hebrew word for *keep* means "to watch, preserve, have charge of." It's the same term God used in giving Adam the responsibility to tend the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 2:15).

The covenant was unconditional, so Abraham didn't have to do anything to

receive the blessings. The Lord wanted Abraham to keep the covenant by walking with Him, by bringing honor to God through blameless behavior, and by treating the covenant with dignity so that all nations would be inspired to worship the one true Creator. As a sign of this covenant, God wanted each male starting with Abraham to bear a very personal reminder. On the eighth day of a boy's life, his father must circumcise him. In this way, each Hebrew boy would become a son of the covenant.

God didn't give an instruction to "shave your head" or "get a tattoo" or "cut off your little finger." He didn't give the sign as a public declaration; it was to serve as a personal symbol of man's participation in a covenant he neither deserved nor chose to receive. It was given to him by virtue of his being born a descendant of Abraham. The symbolic act of circumcision didn't give the boy salvation; it merely reminded him that God gives grace to the undeserving and that like father Abraham, he must receive it by faith. So from the ancient days of Abraham until now, circumcision has remained the mark of the covenant carried by every obedient Hebrew male.

By the time of Jesus, about two thousand years later, many Jewish theologians believed that circumcision automatically made a boy righteous in God's eyes. The apostle Paul set the record straight: physical circumcision is just a symbol of a man's desire to keep the covenant. Or at least it *should* be. Circumcision cannot replace a personal relationship with God any more than a wedding ring can substitute for a marriage. In our culture, one wears a ring on the third finger of the left hand as a sign of being faithfully married to a spouse. If you're a cheating spouse, your ring is a lie. Likewise, Paul writes that "a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by God's Spirit" (Romans 2:29). Jewish writers called this internal devotion to God circumcision of the heart (see Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6, NASB).

After having discussed His own part of the covenant, and Abraham's, the Lord turned to Sarai's role in the matter. Like her husband, Sarai would receive a new name: Sarah, which means "princess," a fitting name for a woman whose descendants would rule as kings. This announcement led to another: "I will bless

her and give you a son from her! Yes, I will bless her richly, and she will become the mother of many nations. Kings of nations will be among her descendants" (Genesis 17:16).

The idea of Sarah becoming pregnant at the age of ninety took Abraham by surprise. After a brief moment, it dawned on him that God was serious. A centenarian father would have been unusual, but not medically impossible. But Sarah having a baby at ninety would require a miracle. In response, Abraham "fell on his face and laughed" (Genesis 17:17, NASB).

During the Lord's thirteen-year silence, Abraham learned to trust God implicitly. He knew the Lord would bless him with countless descendants, but most likely by this point he assumed it would be through Ishmael's offspring. To clarify this with God, he put the idea before Him in the form of a requested blessing on his son. I would paraphrase his remark this way: "Oh, may Ishmael 'walk before You' as you commanded me, 'be blameless,' and therefore enjoy Your covenant blessing" (Genesis 17:18).

God's reply was emphatic: "No—Sarah, your wife, will give birth to a son for you. You will name him Isaac, and I will confirm my covenant with him and his descendants as an everlasting covenant" (Genesis 17:19).

While Ishmael would not become the bearer of God's covenant blessing to the world, he would not be forgotten. "As for Ishmael, I will bless him also, just as you have asked. I will make him extremely fruitful and multiply his descendants. He will become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (Genesis 17:20).

The Lord commanded Abraham to name his new son Isaac, which means "he laughs." Now whenever Abraham told the story behind Isaac's name, he would have to admit his disbelief. Of course, he would also admit to laughing in unrestrained joy over the miraculous birth of his long-awaited son. Around twelve months later, Abram and Sarai—newly named Abraham and Sarah—welcomed "laughter" into their home.

Growing Deeper

This story of Abraham, preserved by God for our instruction, is an urgent call to slow down, take stock of what's important, connect with the one true Creator, and then determine how we shall now live. Take it from a guy who has been

doing life for well past seventy-five years (or better yet, from Abraham, who lived to be 175!): you won't regret slowing down. In fact, slowing down will help you avoid a lifetime strewn with the litter of regrets. Get alone. Find a way to cut out the noise. *Make* time for meditation. The world has lied to you. You can't get more out of life by going faster, by doing more. On the contrary, it's by slowing down and growing deeper that you begin to receive all that the Lord has in store for you.

If you make the commitment—and make no mistake, it's a choice that demands sacrifice—you will soon receive at least three benefits.

Your discernment will increase. Discernment is "the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure; a power to see what is not evident to the average mind."[24] When life is a blur, we miss all the details that make living worthwhile. Without discernment, we see without observing, we hear without listening, and life becomes a series of experiences without meaning. We are awash in random scenes that do not tell a story. Without discernment, we are, in the words of William Irwin Thompson, "like flies crawling across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: We cannot see what angels and gods lie beneath the threshold of our perceptions. We do not live in reality; we live in our paradigms, our habituated perceptions, our illusions; the illusions we share through culture we call reality, but true historical reality of our condition is invisible to us."[25]

Grow deep in your relationship with God, and you will begin to discern people and, therefore, enjoy a depth in your relationships like never before. You will understand yourself, including your own motivations and flaws, and as you allow the Lord to address them, you will live more sensibly—you will experience more joy and less drama. You'll understand a number of things that are currently mysteries to you.

Your anxiety will decrease. Put simply, when you slow down and go deeper, you will experience less worry. Not because your problems go away. And not merely because you've chosen to involve yourself in fewer activities. Growing deep in your relationship with the Lord allows you to care much less about what other people think, which is a common source of anxiety. You will learn to care *about* others without allowing their opinions to bring you stress.

More important, you will experience less anxiety because you have a divine Advocate looking out for your interests. Impossible odds shrink to nothing before our all-powerful Friend. When we grow deep with Him, we learn to think as He thinks and to make choices He delights in affirming. We release our white-knuckle grip on things that are temporal and fleeting, embracing only what brings true joy, and we learn to hold everything loosely.

When you're in tune with God's leading, anxiety vanishes more quickly than the morning fog.

You will avoid unnecessary tragedy. By slowing down, by taking life step-by-step, by deliberately walking through the journey in tune with the Lord, you will not create consequences that bring you shame or saddle you with grinding regret. Almost without fail, whenever I rush ahead, I regret it later. Even when the way is clear, I overlook details by rushing forward. I miss critical nuances that would have made my decisions even more effective.

The late Billy Rose, a syndicated columnist of yesteryear, wrote a short story that drives home the point for me. It helped me change the way I viewed time, circumstances, the world, and my place in it.

> There was once a fellow who, with his dad, farmed a little piece of land. Several times a year they would load up the old ox-drawn cart with vegetables and go into the nearest city to sell their produce. Except for their name and the patch of ground, father and son had little in common. The old man believed in taking it easy. The boy was usually in a hurry . . . the go-getter type.
>
> One morning bright and early, they hitched up the ox to the loaded cart and started on the long journey. The son figured that if they walked faster, kept going all day and night, they'd make the market by early the next morning. So he kept prodding the ox with a stick, urging the beast to get a move on.
>
> "Take it easy, son," said the old man. "You'll last longer."
>
> "But if we get to market ahead of the others, we'll have a better chance of getting good prices," argued the son.
>
> No reply. Dad just pulled his hat down over his eyes and fell asleep on the seat. Itchy and irritated, the young man kept goading the ox to walk faster. His stubborn pace refused to change.

Four hours and four miles down the road, they came to a little house. The father woke up, smiled, and said, “Here’s your uncle’s place. Let’s stop in and say hello.”

“But we’ve lost an hour already,” complained the hotshot.

“Then a few more minutes won’t matter. My brother and I live so close, yet we see each other so seldom.”

The boy fidgeted and fumed while the two men laughed and talked away almost an hour. On the move again, the man took his turn leading the ox. As they approached a fork in the road, the father led the ox to the right.

“The left is the shorter way,” said the son.

“I know it,” replied the old man, “but this way is so much prettier.”

“Have you no respect for time?” the young man asked impatiently.

“Oh, I respect it very much! That’s why I like to use it to look at beauty and enjoy each moment to the fullest.”

The winding path led through graceful meadows, wildflowers, and along a rippling stream—all of which the young man missed as he churned within, preoccupied and boiling with anxiety. He didn’t even notice how lovely the sunset was that day.

Twilight found them in what looked like a huge, colorful garden. The old man breathed in the aroma, listened to the bubbling brook, and pulled the ox to a halt. “Let’s sleep here,” he sighed.

“This is the last trip I’m taking with you,” snapped his son. “You’re more interested in watching sunsets and smelling flowers than in making money!”

“Why, that is the nicest thing you’ve said in a long time,” smiled the dad. A couple of minutes later he was snoring—as his boy glared back at the stars. The night dragged slowly, the son was restless.

Before sunrise the young man hurriedly shook his father awake. They hitched up and went on. About a mile down the road they happened upon another farmer—a total stranger—trying to pull his cart out of a ditch.

“Let’s give him a hand,” whispered the old man.

“And lose more time?” exploded the son.

“Relax, son . . . you might be in a ditch sometime yourself. We need to help others in need—don’t forget that.” The boy looked away in anger.

It was almost eight o’clock that morning by the time the other cart was back on the road. Suddenly, a great flash split the sky. What sounded like thunder followed. Beyond the hills, the sky grew dark.

“Looks like a big rain in the city,” said the old man.

“If we had hurried, we’d be almost sold out by now,” grumbled his son.

“Take it easy. . . . You’ll last longer. And you’ll enjoy life so much more,” counseled the kind old gentleman.

It was late afternoon by the time they got to the hill overlooking the city. They stopped. They stared down at it for a long, long time. Neither of them said a word. Finally, the young man put his hand on his father’s shoulder and said, “I see what you mean, Dad.”

They turned their cart around and began to roll slowly away from what had once been the city of Hiroshima.[26]

Slow down. Learn to wait on God. Deliberately devote yourself to walking *with* Him instead of making decisions and then expecting Him to ratify your choices. Let Him be your advocate. Let Him remove your anxiety as you lean on Him for everything. Surrender to Him control over every matter; you have little control over them anyway.

Slow down. Grow deep.

CHAPTER 8



ONE OF THOSE UPPER-DOWNER DAYS

ALL OF US have experienced memorable, meaningful days that leave us with sweet memories to savor. Sometimes they're planned, like a wedding day, the first day of a vacation, a birthday or anniversary celebration, or a reunion with family or friends. Other days come like serendipity, bringing completely unexpected delights that no amount of planning could have made possible. I call those "Psalm 16:11 days": "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (ESV).

Those are great days—"up days." Who doesn't want more of *those*?

Then, of course, we've all had days that are bad and sad. We know these days come to every life, but we hope like crazy to avoid them. They steal our joy and leave us disillusioned. They press onto our brains memories we don't want but can't forget. They leave in their wake wounds that never quite heal. I call them "Job 14:1 days": "Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble" (ESV).

The strangest days of all are those that lift us way up and then bring us crashing down, all within a twelve-hour span. I call them "upper-downer days." Dizzying and surreal, we might mistake them for a dream, except that they leave in their wake consequences we can neither deny nor ignore—as much as we might like to. No one is immune; everyone will experience these upper-downer days at some point. Even those who walk closest with God.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of the great Christian voices of the Victorian era, described these days in his fine work *Lectures to My Students*. In a chapter titled "The Minister's Fainting Fits," he writes, "Excess of joy or excitement must be paid for by subsequent depressions."

> The times most favourable to fits of depression, so far as I have experienced, may be summed up in a brief catalogue. First among them I must mention *the hour of great success*. When at last a long-cherished desire is fulfilled, when God has been glorified greatly by our means, and a great triumph achieved, then we are apt to faint.
>
> Such was my experience when I first became a pastor in London. My success appalled me; and the thought of the career which it seemed to open up, so far from elating me, cast me into the lowest depth, out of which I uttered my *miserere* and found no room for a *gloria in excelsis*. Who was I that I should continue to lead so great a multitude?[27]

Upper-downer days. No one is immune. Not preachers. Not even parents. Imagine you were the parents who received this letter from their daughter away at college.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Just thought I'd drop you a note to clue you in on my plans. I've fallen in love with a guy called Jim. He quit high school after grade eleven to get married. About a year ago he got a divorce.

We've been going together for two months and we plan to get married in the fall. Until then, I've decided to move into his apartment (I think I might be pregnant).

At any rate, I dropped out of school last week, although I'd like to finish college sometime in the future.

On the next page, she continued,

Mom and Dad, I just want you to know that everything I've written so far in this letter is false. NONE of it is true. But it IS true that I got a C– in French and flunked math. And it IS true I'm going to need some more money for my tuition payments.

Whatever kind of day you are experiencing, it helps to put things in perspective sometimes.

Raising Abraham

Genesis 18 describes one of the most extreme upper-downer days ever experienced. And it happened to—of course—Abraham.

A few days earlier—or perhaps a few weeks at most—the Lord had appeared to Abraham to at last announce the fulfillment of his promise. Sarah would give birth to a son. Along with a series of promises concerning their descendants, the patriarch-in-waiting had received a new name, as did his lifelong mate. At first he'd laughed at the thought of his ninety-year-old wife bulging at the tummy and then nursing a baby. When he'd returned to his tent that night, he'd said little if anything about his most recent encounter with God. If the promise was true, she would find out on her own soon enough.

Abraham set up camp near Hebron, on the land of his longtime friend Mamre. Years earlier, he'd built an altar there (see Genesis 13:18), and it was in this place he first learned of Lot's kidnapping (see Genesis 14:12-13). The Jordan River Valley, then a vast, well-watered pasture occupied by Sodom and

Gomorrah, lay a day's journey down the foothills to the east. While Abraham sat in the shade of his tent, three men approached. Or, rather, they seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Abraham responded by immediately running out to greet them with a bow. While bowing was—and still is—the ancient equivalent of a Western handshake, his actions indicated that he recognized something special about these visitors. He "bowed himself to the earth" (Genesis 18:2, ESV), a rare display of honor not usually given to strangers. He addressed the obvious leader as "my lord" in the same way we would call someone "sir." Abraham then extended hospitality to the men, saying, "If it pleases you, stop here for a while. Rest in the shade of this tree while water is brought to wash your feet. And since you've honored your servant with this visit, let me prepare some food to refresh you before you continue on your journey" (Genesis 18:3-5).

People of the ancient Near East extended hospitality to strangers as both a sacred duty and a personal honor. Abraham said, in so many words, "Please do me the honor of letting me make you comfortable." When they accepted, he and Sarah immediately went to work. They didn't send servants to do everything; they prepared a lavish meal with their own hands. Abraham slaughtered a choice calf from the herd and prepared it along with milk and fresh cheese. Sarah used "three measures" of flour (roughly five gallons) to make bread—enough either to feed the entire camp or to send off the men well supplied.

While the men ate, they asked, "Where is Sarah, your wife?"

This must have rocked Abraham back on his heels. First, how did complete strangers know his wife's name? It's possible they had heard about the famous rescuer of Sodom and Gomorrah, the legendary commando leader who had humiliated the fearsome Kedorlaomer. And in the tales about Abraham, neighbors might have also mentioned his wife. But the strangers called her Sarah, not Sarai. Only God and Abraham knew about her name change.

Perhaps with a chill running down his spine, Abraham replied simply, "She's inside the tent." Notably, he said nothing more. People who have grown deep spiritually know when to stop talking and when to listen. They have also learned how to recognize pivotal, life-altering moments as they occur, not merely when

the repercussions start to kick in. Abraham knew for certain by now that these were no ordinary travelers; the men dining in his camp must be messengers of God, although the concept of angels would not have entered his mind.

Thanks to Renaissance art and popular culture, we're trained to imagine angels as pasty-faced men or women in white robes, with giant bird wings and halos. Sometimes they play harps while sitting on clouds. But the Bible presents them as mysterious emissaries of the spirit realm, created by God (not dearly departed loved ones who are given a set of wings) to carry out His instructions—usually to carry a message. The Hebrew word is *malach,* which means "messenger, envoy." While angels are spirit beings, like their Maker, they can take physical form. In this case, they appeared as humans. Not mere apparitions—they could be touched, they talked, and they ate and drank.

Abraham would not have known about angels. He had never encountered them before, although Hagar had (see Genesis 16:7). He knew only that these messengers represented God's interests and possessed divine knowledge.

One of the men said, "I will return to you about this time next year, and your wife, Sarah, will have a son!" (Genesis 18:10). His words reminded Abraham of those spoken earlier by God. "My covenant will be confirmed with Isaac, who will be born to you and Sarah about this time next year" (Genesis 17:21). This time, however, Abraham didn't laugh. But Sarah, eavesdropping from behind the tent flap, couldn't suppress a chuckle.

She knew about God's covenant with Abraham. He had undoubtedly told her everything when they'd moved from Ur and had shared about his many encounters with God over the past several years. She'd even tried to help advance God's plan with her suggestion that Abraham produce an heir through Hagar. But now, for the first time, she was hearing the plan from God with her own ears. And "she laughed within herself" (literally rendered), thinking, "How could a worn-out woman like me enjoy such pleasure, especially when my master—my husband—is also so old?" (Genesis 18:12).

Put in today's terms, she thought, *I'm no spring chicken; I'm more like a dying hen. And he's no Italian stallion anymore. Everything hurts . . . and what doesn't hurt, doesn't work!*

The Hebrews used the term for "worn out" to describe clothes that had become shabby. The wilderness can be tough on clothes. Think of a garment that is ragged and dusty, with colors faded by sunlight, spots where the fabric has worn thin, holes that have been darned, and edges that are now frayed. People don't make new clothes from worn-out cloth; they use it for cleaning rags. That's how Sarah thought of herself. Too old, too ragged to be worthy of "such pleasure." This colorful Hebrew word for pleasure describes something that is a rare, exclusive luxury not available to most people.

At ninety, Sarah saw the idea of becoming pregnant as unthinkable. The delights of motherhood simply don't come to ninety-year-old women. It is true that ninety years marked the three-quarter mark in her long life span—she lived to see 127—but her body could not have been prepared for morning sickness, fatigue, swollen ankles, and stretch marks. Not to mention all of that culminating in the painful marathon we call childbirth.

Throughout the story, the narrator has subtly and gradually revealed clues about Abraham's three visitors. At first they appear as random travelers who happened upon his camp (see Genesis 18:2). Abraham's extra effort to extend hospitality suggests he recognized something special in them, but we see nothing significant until the meal was served. When they demonstrated intimate knowledge shared only between Abraham and God, we learn that they are envoys of heaven, more than mere humans.

After Sarah laughed *to herself* and expressed *inward* doubt, one of the men spoke. In the words of the narrator, "*The Lord said* to Abraham . . ." (Genesis 18:13, emphasis mine). We now know that one of the men was none other than God Himself, appearing in human form. Most evangelical Christian theologians regard this as an appearance of God the Son before His birth on earth as the man Jesus. The Old Testament doesn't say this outright, but the clues add up. The Lord said—not the angels—"Why did Sarah laugh? Why did she say, 'Can an old woman like me have a baby?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son" (Genesis 18:13-14).

By the way, in the New Testament, a heavenly messenger appeared to a young, unmarried, virgin girl in Nazareth to announce that she would bear a son who would be the promised Messiah. She said, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin" (Luke 1:34). After explaining that she would conceive miraculously by

the Holy Spirit's power, he gave her a sign to encourage her belief: "Your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For *nothing is impossible with God*" (Luke 1:36-37, emphasis mine).

Sarah didn't fully comprehend what had just happened. She didn't have the personal encounters with God that Abraham had experienced. He recognized the men as divine messengers with supernatural abilities and knowledge. So Sarah denied laughing. She denied her inward doubting. But the messenger—the Lord—knew the truth. He didn't stick around to discuss it, though. He had other, graver business to attend.

Taking Down Sodom

The men departed toward the east. They would journey from Hebron roughly twenty miles down the foothills to the lush Jordan River Valley, where the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah lay. Abraham walked with the men part of the way as a courtesy.

In telling this story, the narrator uses a literary device called a soliloquy. Actors know the term well. It's when a character onstage shares with the audience his or her internal thoughts or motivations. Sometimes a character standing in a crowd will turn aside to speak his or her inner monologue aloud. The audience accepts the illusion that the other characters can't hear this character. The man now revealed to be God offers this soliloquy for our benefit.

> "Should I hide my plan from Abraham?" the LORD asked. "For Abraham will certainly become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. I have singled him out so that he will direct his sons and their families to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just. Then I will do for Abraham all that I have promised."
>
> GENESIS 18:17-19

Of course, God doesn't literally have internal dialogues with Himself the way we do. Presenting the Almighty in this human manner is another literary technique called anthropomorphism. It portrays God, an infinite and indescribable Being, in human terms that help us understand Him better. In this

case, the narrator allows us to see God's motivation for including Abraham in His plans to address the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord said, in effect, "I have chosen Abraham and his descendants to be My human representatives before all the other people of the world. To equip him for the job, I need to give him insider's knowledge on what I'm doing and why. The way I deal with Sodom and Gomorrah will be his first official lesson as My human assistant."

Based on His decision to include Abraham in His plans, the Lord engaged the patriarch in a dialogue. God knew from the beginning what He would do. He's omniscient; He knows future events before they occur. The narrator of the story makes this plain during Abraham's earlier dialogue with the men. They see future events in sharp detail. They hear the inner thoughts of others with crystal clarity. And, in addition to being omniscient, God is sovereign. He didn't need Abraham's permission before pronouncing judgment on these evil cities. He dialogued with Abraham so that His chosen man would see the reasonableness of His actions. "The LORD told Abraham, 'I have heard a great outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah, because their sin is so flagrant. I am going down to see if their actions are as wicked as I have heard. If not, I want to know'" (Genesis 18:20-21).

Again, take note of the anthropomorphism and keep in mind God's purpose in dialoguing with Abraham. Also, never suppose that words are placed in the Bible to fill up space or simply to finish a sentence. Every word has a purpose. Every adverb. Every preposition. Every verb. Every noun.

The first term that attracts my attention is *outcry*. The Hebrew term describes a "cry for help in time of distress. . . . The word is used almost exclusively in reference to a cry from a disturbed heart, in need of some kind of help. The cry is not in summons of another, but an expression of the need felt. Most frequently, the cry is directed to God."[28] This is the same word used by the Lord when He confronted Cain after Cain murdered Abel: "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" (Genesis 4:10). Later, it would be used to describe the Israelites' suffering under the bondage of Egypt (see Exodus 2:24; 3:7).

The context here suggests that the cry heard by God comes *against* the evil cities, not from them. Because sin and evil always have victims, it's reasonable to assume that the outcry comes from those being harmed by Sodom and

Gomorrah. The cries don't have to be spoken directly to God. The groanings of deep sorrow and the anguished shrieks of terror reach the ears of God nonetheless. The outcries of the wounded may be shielded from our hearing or remain locked in the souls of sin's victims, but they are never withheld from God's ears.

God is omnipresent, meaning that He is present everywhere in the universe, at all times. He is omniscient—all-knowing. He never learns anything. He doesn't need to go anywhere to gather information. Yet He chose to come down to earth from heaven, and He elected to wear the skin of humanity to confront the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. He did this for our benefit, not His own. By coming in the form of a man, God sent a message to Abraham . . . and to us. His message might sound something like this: "I made the world perfect, yet humans have twisted My creation into something grotesque. I could abandon all of you to the filth of your sin and let you consume yourselves in your own depravity, but I love you. I hear your anguished cries. Know that I am with you, among you, and I am at work to redeem you from this evil."

God doesn't need to go anywhere to gather information. Yet He chose to come down to earth from heaven, and He elected to wear the skin of humanity.

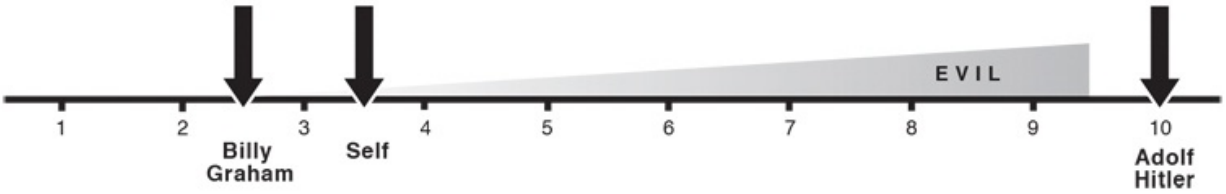
> The other men turned and headed toward Sodom, but the LORD remained with Abraham. Abraham approached him and said, "Will you sweep away both the righteous and the wicked? Suppose you find fifty righteous people living there in the city—will you still sweep it away and not spare it for their sakes? Surely you wouldn't do such a thing, destroying the righteous along with the wicked. Why, you would be treating the righteous and the wicked exactly the same! Surely you wouldn't do that! Should not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?"
>
> GENESIS 18:22-25

The utter depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah had become infamous; everyone in Canaan and beyond knew what went on there. To put their immorality in perspective, consider this: the polytheistic, superstitious cultures of that day—many of them practicing temple prostitution and child sacrifice as

part of their fertility rites—looked down on these cities as debauched! Because the entire southern end of the Jordan River Valley had been corrupted by the twin capitols of sin, Abraham had elected to live in the arid hill country rather than pasture his livestock anywhere near them.

Abraham wasn't concerned about the evil people living in Sodom and Gomorrah; they deserved their fate. But he worried about what might happen to the innocent people living among them. What about the people who didn't participate in the sins of the cities but were too foolish to leave or were constrained by circumstances beyond their control? Such people included Lot and his family. What about the innocent living among the guilty?

The patriarch's pleading illustrates the difference between how we, as humans, define the problem of evil and how God sees the matter. We measure evil on a sliding scale. *Hey, I make "mistakes" sometimes, but I'm not as bad as so-and-so; he cheats on his taxes and runs around on his wife. And I've never killed anyone, so . . .*



If you're like most people, you draw the conclusion that no one's perfect but that some people are better examples of morality than you. Many people think of Billy Graham as an example of a very moral person, while Hitler is the very personification of evil. You see yourself as less than perfect, but not really as "evil" either. So when you say, "I think God should wipe out all evil," what you really mean is "God should wipe out all evil *that's worse than me*."

But God doesn't define *righteous* the same way we do. Righteous means morally perfect, without sin—without even the desire to do something bad. In God's eyes, *none* are righteous (see Psalm 14:1-3). So, when Abraham asked, "Suppose you find fifty righteous people living there in the city—will you still sweep it away and not spare it for their sakes?" (Genesis 18:24), the Lord agreed. "If I find fifty righteous people in Sodom, I will spare the entire city for their sake" (verse 26). But by His definition of righteous, none lived in Sodom, Gomorrah, the valley, or any place on earth!

Abraham probably thought, *The Lord agreed too quickly; perhaps I should have set the bar lower.* "Since I have begun, let me speak further to my Lord, even though I am but dust and ashes. Suppose there are only forty-five righteous people rather than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" To which God responded, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five righteous people there" (Genesis 18:27-28).

The difference between Abraham's concept of righteousness and God's becomes clearer as he continued to bargain for divine mercy. The conversation would be funny if the stakes had not been so grave. Abraham whittled down the number to a mere ten people, but he dared not go lower. And the Lord agreed: "I will not destroy it for the sake of the ten" (Genesis 18:32).

As Abraham turned to go home, he might have run a quick tally in his head: *Lot and Mrs. Lot are two. His two daughters and their fiancés bring the total to six. Lot's a pretty wealthy man; he has become richer since buying a house inside Sodom's city limits. Surely he has at least four upright servants. If not, there has to be at least one other righteous household down there. What's ten people among so many in the two cities and the surrounding area? Surely God will spare the valley now. Maybe? Hopefully?*

Meanwhile, God turned to give Sodom and Gomorrah His full attention.

Principles for Today

There are times when I'm reading the Scriptures in my study, replaying the scenes in my mind, and I get a chill up my back. That's what happens when I imagine the scene recorded in Genesis 18. It's frightening. The people in these cities carried on with their sin as if nothing else mattered, unaware that God had reached the end of His patience with them. God's love is infinite and His grace is free, but His mercy has an expiration date. He is a God of compassion *and* justice. Don't lose sight of that reality, or you'll see only one to the exclusion of the other. Some Christians, perhaps disillusioned by evil in the world, see only the judgment of God. Others see only the love of God.

Please don't misunderstand the living God. Cynics will tell you that He takes delight in punishing sin and throwing people into hell. The fact is, He wants no one to perish; He longs for everyone to repent of their sin, ask His forgiveness,

and receive His grace. He wants all people to trust in Him and, like Abraham, have their faith counted to them as righteousness (see Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3). This includes you.

If you haven't already, take time to read "How to Begin a Relationship with God" in the appendix. If you have already received God's gift of eternal life, if you have been granted God's grace through faith, I want to offer four principles taken directly from Abraham's experience on this upper-downer day.

First, *be aware that some people you encounter may be angels*. Don't laugh. If you believe in God, and if you believe what's written in His Book, you have to take this seriously. The New Testament states plainly, "Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!" (Hebrews 13:1-2).

I won't belabor this point with anecdotal proofs or regale you with spooky tales to convince you. And don't go looking for angels; that's not the point of this principle. Here's the point: treat everyone like he or she is a representative of heaven.

Second, *be confident that nothing is too difficult for the Lord*. Life threatens to distract you with limitations, while God wants you to think in terms of possibilities. Abraham and Sarah once thought God's promise would never be fulfilled because the laws of physics and medicine said no. The One who did wondrous things for Abraham and Sarah is the One who loves you as His own child. And this truth still holds: nothing is too difficult for Him! As you keep that in mind, your attitude toward life will change, and the difficulties you face will seem less daunting.

Third, *remain sensitive to the Lord*. This will strengthen your walk and give you discernment. Remaining sensitive to His leading will allow you to trust Him when He does things you don't understand.

The One who did wondrous things for Abraham and Sarah is the One who loves you as His own child.

Fourth, *be passionate in prayer*. As you talk to God, prayer will soften your heart. When I meet someone who has a hard heart, I know that that person is not a person of prayer. There's something about praying that softens the soil of our

souls, keeping us in tune with God’s perspective, which is always compassionate, realistic, hopeful, wise, and full of grace.

CHAPTER 9



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PRAY?

I'LL NEVER FORGET the first prayer I ever heard. It came from my mother. Though it consisted of only nine words in all, it left a lasting impression on me as a child: "God help you if you ever do that again." That was the prayer. Nine simple but significant words.

Thankfully, I later learned a better way to pray. When I got to Dallas Seminary, I took a semester-long course that was devoted to the subject of prayer, and I gained an appreciation for this all-important yet mysterious spiritual discipline. Like many people, I first approached prayer simplistically. Ask God for what you want. If you ask Him correctly or impress Him

sufficiently, He just might grant your request. Or not. Who really knows? But as I learned more about prayer, I discovered that much of my thinking had been clouded by misunderstandings prevalent in popular culture.

When you start from scratch and observe Scripture closely, prayer isn't at all confusing. It's profound but not complicated. To keep things simple, let me start by replacing my mother's nine words with nine other words—convicting words—from the Bible: "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2, ESV). This becomes even more convicting when you change the pronouns to the first person. Read this aloud:

I do not have, because I do not ask.

Embrace that truth. Let it sink in. We have more to learn, but coming to terms with that statement is our first step toward understanding the mystery of prayer. Here's a second truth that's just as convicting as the first: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3, NASB).

The truth often hurts. I do not have because I do not ask. And often when I do ask, I ask with wrong motives. God wants to grant our requests, but we make it impossible for Him to do so when we ask for things that contradict His righteous, loving character. What would you do if your child asked for something that would cause him or her harm? Love for your child would demand that you deny his or her request. Sadly, you and I put these kinds of requests to God regularly.

The Anatomy of a Petition

Prayers of petition—that is, prayers containing a request of God—have two basic parts: the petition and the motive. These form the *what* and the *why* of the prayer, which yield four possible responses from God.

1. He can say yes to our petition but no to our motive.

In Numbers 11, the once-enslaved Hebrews had left Egypt and were making their way to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses. A couple of years had passed since that great Exodus, so the excitement of freedom had worn off. They were hot, tired, bored, and weary of traveling, and they had grown absolutely sick of eating manna several times a day. God gave them this

miraculous supply of nourishment to keep them from starving in the wilderness, but eating the same food at every meal had become tedious. Manna for breakfast, lunch, and supper. Roasted, toasted, boiled, broiled, poached, baked, and fried. Sliced, diced, hashed, chopped, tossed, rolled, and raw. No matter what they did, every meal tasted the same. And so they sent Moses to God with their complaint.

> The foreign rabble who were traveling with the Israelites began to crave the good things of Egypt. And the people of Israel also began to complain. "Oh, for some meat!" they exclaimed. "We remember the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic we wanted. But now our appetites are gone. All we ever see is this manna!"
>
> NUMBERS 11:4-6

The Lord answered their petition. He promised to give them meat in the form of quail. His verbal response, however, condemned their ungrateful complaining. Moses, speaking on God's behalf, said to the people, "It won't be for just a day or two, or for five or ten or even twenty. You will eat it for a whole month until you gag and are sick of it. For you have rejected the LORD, who is here among you, and you have whined to him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" (Numbers 11:19-20).

The Lord arranged to have endless waves of quail fly near the camp for miles in every direction. The birds flew just a few feet off the ground, so the people were able to catch them by the hundreds. They spent all day and night gathering quail for meals. But that wasn't the end of the story: "While they were gorging themselves on the meat—while it was still in their mouths—the anger of the LORD blazed against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague" (Numbers 11:33). Why? Because of their rotten attitude. Ingratitude. They were selfish, shortsighted, gluttonous, slave-minded people who prized their full stomachs over the sweet taste of freedom. One of my mentors, Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, once said, "It takes a heavenly appetite to enjoy a heavenly food."

God granted the people's petition but chastised them for their motive. He gave them the *what* of their prayer in overabundance to correct the improper *why*. If He deems it the best way to teach us as well, we can expect the same

treatment.

Maybe you're single and you want to be married. Maybe you've been married but for whatever reason you're no longer with your spouse. After spending yet another Friday night on your own, you're feeling lonely. You go home to a table set for one. The bed in which you sleep has a cold pillow beside you. If the loneliness becomes too much to bear, you might think, *Okay, Lord, anybody will do. Just anybody.* Suddenly the next guy or girl you meet is Mr. or Ms. Wonderful, and in no time at all, you're married.

You got your petition despite the poor motive. Wise people choose a mate carefully and then plan a wedding when it becomes clear that their walk with God would be more effective married than single. Wise people see singleness as the default status and then demand that the prospect of marriage justify such a radical change. People who don't approach marriage in this way invariably experience regret—and often end up single again.

Maybe you're sick of living paycheck to paycheck, barely getting by, and you're determined to make your million. So that becomes your prayer. "Lord, I pray that You will give me a boatload of money." Not long after you collect on your petition, you discover that it has brought you more stress and less happiness. You realize you will never recover the time, energy, and resources you invested that could have been better spent. You received a yes to your petition yet were chastised for your selfish motive.

2. He can say no to our petition but yes to our motive.

In Genesis 18, Abraham begged the Lord not to destroy the righteous with the unrighteous. Why? What motivated Abraham to pray? He thought of Lot, Lot's wife, and their two daughters. Interestingly, he thought of them as righteous. Abraham wanted to deter the justice due Sodom and Gomorrah—despite the outcry of their victims—all for the sake of his loved ones.

Observe the Lord's response:

> At dawn the next morning the angels became insistent. "Hurry," they said to Lot. "Take your wife and your two daughters who are here. Get out right now, or you will be swept away in the destruction of the city!"

> When Lot still hesitated, the angels seized his hand and the hands of his wife and two daughters and rushed them to safety outside the city, for the LORD was merciful.
>
> GENESIS 19:15-16

God honored the motive of Abraham's petition without granting his specific request. And that can happen to us as well. Some years ago, I came across the poetic testimony of an unknown Confederate soldier who received a no to every petition and a yes to every motive.

I asked God for strength that I might achieve.
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked God for health that I might do greater things.
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy.
I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing I asked for
but everything I had hoped for . . .

Almost despite myself
my unspoken prayers were answered.

I'm among all men most richly blessed.[29]

At times we, too, will see that God honors the motives of our prayer but denies the specific petition in order to give us something better.

3. He can say yes to our petition and yes to our motive.

Of course, we *love* it when God says yes to both. Our prayers and our desires meet at the intersection of God's will, and the joy is indescribable.

The Old Testament prophet Elijah lived during a dark time in the history of Israel. The king and queen worshiped the storm god, Baal, and prohibited the worship of the one true Creator. The priests of Baal filled the countryside with false information and led the people of God into idolatry, which grieved Elijah's heart. To expose them as false prophets of superstition, he issued a challenge. He proposed a test that scientists today would call an experiment with a control and a variable. Elijah said,

At times, God honors the motives of our prayer but denies the specific petition in order to give us something better.

> How much longer will you waver, hobbling between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him! . . . Now bring two bulls. The prophets of Baal may choose whichever one they wish and cut it into pieces and lay it on the wood of their altar, but without setting fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood on the altar, but not set fire to it. Then call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!
>
> 1 KINGS 18:21-24

The priests of Baal had no choice but to accept his challenge, so they both built altars and prepared identical sacrifices. Elijah volunteered to go second, so the priests of Baal began their petition.

> They called on the name of Baal from morning until noontime, shouting, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no reply of any kind. Then they danced, hobbling around the altar they had made.
>
> About noontime Elijah began mocking them. "You'll have to shout louder," he scoffed, "for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is daydreaming, or is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!"
>
> 1 KINGS 18:26-27

The priests tried harder. They shouted louder and danced with greater abandon. They even began cutting themselves according to their pagan customs, but nothing happened. Can you imagine how tragic this scene was, with these Baal worshipers bleeding and begging for a response? How sincerely they believed in something that existed only in the realm of superstition. Finally, as the sun edged lower in the western sky, Elijah called them to observe his altar.

> He dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold about three gallons. He piled wood on the altar, cut the bull into pieces, and laid the pieces on the wood.
>
> Then he said, "Fill four large jars with water, and pour the water over the offering and the wood."
>
> After they had done this, he said, "Do the same thing again!" And when they were finished, he said, "Now do it a third time!" So they did as he said, and the water ran around the altar and even filled the trench.
>
> 1 KINGS 18:32-35

Then, around the time God's priests normally made the evening sacrifice in the Temple, Elijah prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. O LORD, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God and that you have brought them back to yourself" (1 Kings 18:36-37).

No screaming. No wild dancing or gesticulating. No droning repetition. No incantations. No raving or cutting. Elijah appealed to God for a specific response with an honorable motive. And before he could utter a concluding amen, "the fire of the LORD flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the trench!" (1 Kings 18:38).

Elijah received exactly what he asked of God. Yes to the petition; yes to the motive. One of the ways to tell you have connected with the Lord is when your prayers synchronize with God's will. I don't guarantee miracles; in fact, I counsel against expecting them. Let God surprise you. Regardless, how marvelous it is to call on the Lord's name for His own glory, make known your request, and then wait expectantly on Him.

4. He can say no to our petition and no to our motive.

No one wants the "no-no" response. No to the what, and no to the why. This often occurs when we are unrepentant and have unconfessed sin in our lives. We learn this from the testimony of a Hebrew songwriter: "I cried out to him for help, praising him as I spoke. If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But God did listen! He paid attention to my prayer" (Psalm 66:17-19).

God can't shower you with blessing or grant your requests while you're in rebellion; it's not good for you.

This is not to say the Lord will never grant your request when you have unresolved sin in your life. Sometimes He will. But don't count on it. His first desire is to get your life back on track. He can't shower you with blessing or grant your requests while you're in rebellion; it's not good for you. He certainly won't say yes to your motives while you're at odds with His will!

In the absence of unresolved sin, the Lord will also deny your petition if your motives are tainted with hypocrisy or pride. He'll also ignore meaningless repetition, because chanted prayers presume that God is like a vending machine rather than a personal Being with whom we can have a relationship. The Lord also wants us to trust in His power and goodness, knowing He will always act in our best interest. Prayers offered in doubt are like compliments laced with sarcasm; they're insulting and alienating.

The Bible also warns of another cause for "no-no" answers to prayer: unresolved conflict. First Peter 3:7 warns that husbands who dishonor their wives may find their prayers hindered. The Greek term translated "hindered" pictures a runner on a track cutting in front of another competitor's stride. Keep your relationships uncluttered by conflict so nothing will clip the stride of your prayers on the way to heaven.

Three Responses to Prayer

In terms of timing, God's responses can take three additional forms.

1. Sometimes God responds with an immediate yes.

Sometimes we receive our desired response within a relatively brief period, and those answers bring magnificent moments of joy and great relief.

When my wife and I first moved to Dallas Seminary in the summer of 1959 so I could begin my years in graduate studies, we lived in a tiny campus apartment with no air conditioner. It was our home for the duration of the four-year program, all year round. That included the sweltering summer months in Dallas that will sweat the pounds off your body. Some of our neighbors had little window-unit air conditioners, so I said to Cynthia, "Without telling anyone, let's just ask the Lord to provide us with an air conditioner."

The following spring we returned to Houston on a holiday weekend to visit our parents. While there, I received a phone call from a longtime friend named Richard Parks. "Hey, Chuck, I was just calling to see if you could use an air conditioner. We're installing central air, and I have a brand-new Fedders unit you can have. I'll bring it over and stick it in your trunk if you can use it. Would that be okay?"

Having experienced one Dallas summer without air-conditioning, we prayed for relief. And God's yes came back with perfect timing.

2. Sometimes God says no.

Other times we receive a second kind of response: no. That's hard to hear, especially when we think we have a good reason for our request. God's negative response may have nothing to do with our motivation or the presence of sin in our lives. The Lord may be denying our request based on His all-knowing and compassionate judgment. In fact, the apostle Paul, one of the greatest Christian men who ever lived, experienced God's no himself.

> To keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.
>
> Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-9

The word rendered *thorn* means "a stake, a sharp object." Paul uses this term as a metaphor for some kind of affliction. It could have been something physical, like migraine headaches or an eye condition resulting from injury or disease or complications from the beatings he'd received for following Christ. The thorn might have been psychological or emotional distress due to all the traumatic events Paul endured. Or it could have been the piercing pain of ongoing persecution from his enemies.

Paul didn't include these details in his letter for at least two reasons. First, he didn't want his ailment to distract his readers from identifying with his point. We all suffer the affliction of a "thorn" that's unique to us, and we should take his example and accept God's no with grace and a positive attitude. Second, Paul didn't want his readers to rationalize why God said no to his request. The point is, when God says no, we must trust His judgment.

If you have not yet discovered this for yourself, you haven't hurt enough. Suffering teaches us many things about God's character and helps us navigate a world in which there are no simplistic answers. God's no can become our opportunity to grow deeper in our relationship with Him.

God's no can become our opportunity to grow deeper in our relationship with Him.

3. Sometimes God says, "Wait."

A third kind of response includes the word we considered in depth toward the end of chapter 6: *wait*. It's not an immediate no—but sometimes it feels worse when God returns a delayed yes. Dr. Bing Hunter, while serving at Biola University, wrote,

> God's delay in giving answers seems to be a major way He encourages faith. Having seen that He is faithful following prayer over a week, you find it easier to trust Him for ten days. Seeing the answer to persistence after a month strengthens me to wait in faith even longer for another. . . . Patience and faith thus develop together in prayer.[30]

You put your petition before God, and it becomes clear that nothing will happen in the short term. So you wait, unsure of whether it's a no or simply a matter of timing. If that's what you're experiencing right now, take a seat in the

waiting room with a host of your brothers and sisters. We're all waiting for something. But don't fritter away your time nursing a bitter attitude. Accept your waiting as an opportunity to grow deep.

As you turn from this chapter to the next, I urge you to reflect on these difficult truths concerning prayer, and I offer this petition on your behalf:

> Lord, in the midst of this journey from earth to heaven, teach us to honor the privilege of prayer with great respect. May we examine our motives and commit to keeping them pure. Help us to acknowledge selfishness when it occurs, and give us the courage to repent of that sin. Then, through Your Holy Spirit, align our will to reflect Your good and perfect ways. Give us patience to wait on Your timing and grant us the grace to accept Your response of no.
>
> Lord, I praise You and thank You for the many yes responses we receive. Because we deserve nothing, we accept these gifts with gratitude. I pray that each yes will become our opportunity to publicly acknowledge Your power and mercy.
>
> With confident trust, I ask this on behalf of all who read these pages. In the name of Your Son, Jesus, amen.

CHAPTER 10



WHEN THE CESSPOOL OVERFLOWS

THE FIRST FOURTEEN VERSES of Genesis 19 paint a grim picture of what might be called relational contamination. To contaminate means “to soil, stain, corrupt, or infect by contact or association.”[31] Overflowing cesspools contaminate the soil. Toxic fumes contaminate the air. Unclean foods contaminate the body. Associations with evil contaminate our lives. Contact with evil people can poison our minds and erode our morals.

Evidence of this truth appears throughout the Bible. The leader Joshua addressed his fellow Hebrews, who had fought their way into the land of Canaan. With the wilderness wanderings behind them and the occupation of the Promised Land before them, he warned,

> Be very careful to love the LORD your God.
>
> But if you turn away from him and cling to the customs of the survivors of these nations remaining among you, and if you intermarry with them, then know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive them out of your land. Instead, they will be a snare and a trap to you, a whip for your backs and thorny brambles in your eyes, and you will vanish from this good land the LORD your God has given you.
>
> JOSHUA 23:11-13

Several generations later, in 1 Kings 11, we see that King Solomon had acquired everything a person could want in life. Yet for all his wisdom, he chose to fill his palace with women from rival nations—seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, if you can believe it! "In Solomon's old age, they turned his heart to worship other gods instead of being completely faithful to the LORD his God, as his father, David, had been" (verse 4). Solomon became relationally contaminated by the idolatrous women he'd brought into his life; their influence led him far away from the one true God.

The book of Proverbs warns, "A gossip goes around telling secrets, so don't hang around with chatterers" (20:19). It also says, "Don't befriend angry people or associate with hot-tempered people, or you will learn to be like them and endanger your soul" (22:24-25).

The New Testament teaches this message as well, as seen in Paul's admonishment to the Christians in Corinth, whose city lay in the shadow of the most notorious fertility temple in the Roman Empire. Known for its official prostitutes, it attracted pilgrims from lands all around the Mediterranean Sea. The apostle writes,

> When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don't even eat with such people.
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 5:9-11

We can't avoid casual association with evil people, and we should be friendly with everyone, but cultivating close friendships with immoral people is dangerous to our spiritual health. Especially if they claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. Paul reiterated his warning in a subsequent letter:

> Don't team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness? What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil? How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever? And what union can there be between God's temple and idols?
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-16

Again, this doesn't mean that believers should avoid contact with people of other religions or philosophies. In fact, Paul wholeheartedly encouraged close association with others as a means of demonstrating the love of God. If, however, these individuals maintain an evil lifestyle, it's only a matter of time before their troubles become our troubles. To illustrate his point, Paul quotes a pagan playwright in 1 Corinthians 15:33: "Bad company corrupts good character" (Menander, *Thais* 218).

Immorality is poisonous. You can never become immune to its deadly potency.

Immorality is poisonous. You can never become immune to its deadly potency. It's like sewage spewing from a cesspool; it contaminates everything close by.

The Cesspool in the Valley

When God paid His visit to Sodom and Gomorrah, these twin cities controlled a lush, fertile valley through which ran the Jordan River (see Genesis 13:10). These two population centers were the economic hub for everyone living at the southern end of this valley, and their wealth probably contributed to the beauty of their architecture and art. Still, their immorality had become notorious, even among pagan, idol-worshiping communities outside the valley. A thin veneer of beauty shielded the uninformed eye from the cities' true nature.

Earlier, when God had stopped to dialogue with Abraham, His two accompanying angels had continued on down the foothills toward the cities. They arrived to find Lot, Abraham's nephew, sitting at the gate (see Genesis 19:1). Sodom and Gomorrah probably didn't have high stone walls to protect them; when the invasion of their cities is described in Genesis 14, we see that their armies met the enemy out in the field rather than fighting from the safety of ramparts (see verse 8). Very often, a community without walls would build an arch to serve as the gate—the official entrance into the town.

In the ancient Near East, the gate served as a city hall. Elders gathered there to debate issues, conduct business deals, resolve disputes, and even advise the city ruler on civil matters. Early readers of this text would have raised their eyebrows to discover that Lot was sitting at the city gate. This minor detail revealed that he was no ordinary resident; he had become an active participant in the politics and commerce of Sodom.

So why did Lot align himself so closely with an evil city? He probably convinced himself that he could avoid falling into gross sin while maintaining a positive testimony for Abraham's God. Maybe he thought his good influence would entice sinful Sodom to repent of their sin and follow God.

Regardless, he was sitting at the city gate when the angels approached. They didn't have shining halos and oversized wings; they looked like ordinary men traveling through the area looking for a place to spend the night. In fact, Lot didn't recognize them as angels. Like Abraham, however, he did see something in them that warranted a deep bow—an unusually humble greeting. Addressing them with the Hebrew equivalent of "sirs," he said, "Come to my home to wash your feet, and be my guests for the night. You may then get up early in the morning and be on your way again" (Genesis 19:2).

Offering hospitality to traveling strangers was considered a sacred duty and a great privilege in Lot's culture. The same is true today in the Middle East. Lot may have initiated this contact in the spirit of generosity. More likely, however, he leaped at the chance to preclude any of his neighbors from inviting the men home, fearing what they might do to the travelers. But the men refused. "Oh no," they replied. "We'll just spend the night out here in the city square" (Genesis 19:2).

The city square refers to a wide street and market complex near the entrance of the city. The envoys of heaven would ostensibly curl up on the ground in one of the market stalls to spend the night. But angels need neither lodging nor sleep. Clearly, their intention was to test Lot. In providing hospitality, the host accepts responsibility for the safety of his guests. How insistent would he be about taking them in? But Lot knew the city; he understood what would happen to them as they slept, because he'd no doubt witnessed other hapless victims in the past.

It should be noted at this point that Scripture never names one particular kind of sin as the reason for God's judgment. Sodom and Gomorrah had completely given themselves over to immorality of *every* kind—and to such extremes that God made a unique example of them. While the name of Sodom has become associated with the homosexual act and the story is best known in popular culture because it features homosexual lust, these sins alone did not invite divine punishment. Sodom was not exclusively guilty in this regard. However, it is no coincidence the narrator chooses to illustrate the depth of their depravity by highlighting their desire to rape the innocent strangers (see Genesis 19:5). They should have extended hospitality. Their failure to do so was a sin in itself. And they should not have engaged in the homosexual act. That was sin upon sin. And they should not have raped. That was sin layered upon sin. I shudder to think that this was merely a single representative sample of Sodom's evil.

At any rate, Lot feared for the men's safety and convinced them to accept his offer. Unlike Abraham, who had made a feast for the visitors, Lot served them matzo—unleavened bread made in haste. But before anyone retired for the night, "the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house" (Genesis 19:4, ESV). Note that sin had contaminated the entire city, young and old. The description of who was involved drives home the point that everyone shared the guilt: "the men of the city," "the men of Sodom," "all the people." The last phrase could be rendered "all the people, to the last one."

They shouted to Lot, "Where are the men who came to spend the night with you? Bring them out to us so we can have sex with them!" (Genesis 19:5). The Hebrew term translated "have sex" is the word for "know," a common euphemism similar to our "sleep with." For example, Genesis 4:1 says, "Adam

knew Eve his wife, and she conceived" (ESV). The New American Standard Bible renders the phrase "had relations with his wife." The New Living Translation: "had sexual relations with his wife." In this context, the meaning is clear. They shamelessly stated outright what they wanted, expending no effort to hide or minimize their intentions.

The people of Sodom had long ago lost the ability to feel shame.

Lot knew he needed to take action. He "stepped outside to talk to them, shutting the door behind him" (Genesis 19:6). From there, he pleaded with the ravenous crowd. He knew his words would eventually fail and he wouldn't be able to keep the men back if they became violent. As an alternative to raping the strangers, Lot proposed a compromise: "'Please, my brothers,' he begged, 'don't do such a wicked thing. Look, I have two virgin daughters. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do with them as you wish. But please, leave these men alone, for they are my guests and are under my protection'" (verses 7-8).

The Hebrew term for doing a "wicked thing" recalls the wickedness that prompted the great Flood. Moreover, the narrator uses the verb in an unusual way, found next in Judges 19:23, in which the men of Gibeah demanded that their fellow citizen produce his sojourner, a priest, so they might rape him. That host used the same form of the verb when he tried to protect his Levite visitor from almost certain death.

Lot's offer makes me feel sick to my stomach. As a father, I would use any necessary violence to protect my daughters from the horror to which Lot had just condemned his. No custom or law would convince me to sacrifice my girls for anyone, least of all two strangers. His bizarre, deranged proposal illustrates just how twisted his brain had become after living for so many years in this moral sewage pit. I can't determine which disgusts me more: the vileness of Sodom's citizens or the depraved hypocrisy of Lot.

For the purpose of the narrative, Lot's offer illustrates just how rapacious and perverted the people of Sodom had become. In ancient cultures, nothing in the realm of sex exceeded the value of a virgin. Yet they lusted for the unknown men even more. They shoved Lot backward and rushed the door. The angels reacted quickly by pulling their host back inside the house and then bolting the door. This, however, would buy them a few minutes at most.

Until now, the angels had kept their true identities hidden. They didn't need protection, of course. They merely played their assigned parts in a drama designed to reveal the true nature of the city and the man Abraham presumed "righteous." At this point, the story pivots. The angels no longer played the part of potential victims; they became the aggressors. With supernatural power, they "blinded all the men, young and old, who were at the door of the house, so they gave up trying to get inside" (Genesis 19:11).

The urgency and sense of danger now shifts. We no longer feel the tension of two men in danger of being raped; we now feel the pressure of time. Would Lot and his family escape before the wrath of God obliterated the city? The urgency in the voices of the angels must have been jarring. Lot knew nothing of the destruction about to rain down on his adopted hometown. The angels knew their objective, but they weren't omniscient. They didn't know how many people to evacuate.

> "Do you have any other relatives here in the city?" they asked. "Get them out of this place—your sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone else. For we are about to destroy this city completely. The outcry against this place is so great it has reached the LORD, and he has sent us to destroy it."
>
> GENESIS 19:12-13

Lot offered no resistance, and he showed no doubt. His reaction seems to indicate that God's response to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah came as no surprise. He responded to their question with a quick head count. Besides himself, he had a wife, two daughters, and the two men betrothed to them.

Reading this through the eyes of a father of two young women, I have to wonder who Lot found to be suitable husbands. In those days, marriages were arranged by the parents. What families in Sodom did he approach? What sins and glaring character flaws did Lot force himself to overlook to justify placing the lives of his precious daughters into the hands of these men? Obviously, his moral compromise ran deep and cut across every value he'd seen in his godly uncle.

Lot cared enough about his future sons-in-law to help them escape. He warned them of God's coming judgment and urged them to leave with him. "Quick, get out of the city! The LORD is about to destroy it" (Genesis 19:14). But

rather than following him out of the city, they dismissed the warning as a practical joke. Evidently, they saw nothing in Lot's character to suggest he had that kind of relationship with God. Indeed he didn't! The Lord spared the man for the sake of his uncle. So when Lot and his family rose at dawn the following morning and fled across the valley, they left the two men behind.

This last encounter with citizens of Sodom hints at the kind of life Lot led and the reputation he had made for himself. Sodom never embraced him as one of their own. Outside his home, his neighbors said, "This fellow came to town as an outsider, and now he's acting like our judge!" (Genesis 19:9). He never took part in their sin, but he had never before opposed them. He lived among them with values taught to him by his uncle, but rather than living authentically and presenting himself openly as an example of a better way, he chose to minimize his different ethic, shrug off their wickedness, and blend into the scenery. Instead of representing God's goodness, he settled on being less evil than his peers.

Choose Good

Theologian Alexander Whyte offers a sobering reflection on Lot's compromise:

> Why did a man with a beginning like Lot, and with past experiences like Lot, why did he not rise up and leave a life, and a neighbourhood, and an occupation, and a companionship out of all which so much danger and so much vexation of soul continually sprang? The reason was that he had invested in Sodom, as our merchants would say. He had invested money, and he had embarked himself and his household in the land round Sodom, in the produce of Sodom, and in her splendid profits. And with all the vexations that wrung his heart Lot could never make up his mind to be done with Sodom and Gomorrah for ever.[32]

Lot enjoyed the challenge of living in Sodom. He didn't think about the impact it would have on his family, but of this we can be sure: when you flirt with immorality, your heart will be corrupted and eventually broken.

Let me offer a humorous illustration you won't forget. If you put white gloves on a child and send him out to play in the mud, he'll return with muddy gloves. The mud never gets "glovey." You'll never see glovey mud. Like a clean pair of gloves, your convictions can only become soiled when you tolerate

immorality in your presence. You cannot make immorality less dirty by your compromise. That doesn't mean we shouldn't associate with immoral people; it merely means we need to reject immoral behavior and remove ourselves from any environment in which immorality is permitted or encouraged as a lifestyle.

Lot became soiled by Sodom's sin because he lacked convictions. Convictions are deep, firmly rooted inner principles regarding integrity, morality, ethics, and faith. A set of convictions helps us recognize good and evil, and then prompts us to confront evil and choose good.

Because we are born with sinful, selfish natures, we cannot look within ourselves to discern the difference between right and wrong. Our convictions must come from a place that's higher and better than our own desires. That's a major reason God has given us His Word, the Bible. The mind of God defines good and bad, and He has written down the standard in black ink on white pages. Therefore, we derive our convictions from this Book of books.

Fortunately, we don't have to go it alone; we have a community of people who look to the same objective moral standard. Hopefully you have parents, family, and friends who encourage a righteous lifestyle. Hopefully you have a strong church with faithful and courageous leaders. Hopefully teachers and mentors have poured their convictions into yours. Hopefully you have by now cultivated a firm set of convictions of your own based on the truths of Scripture.

We need beliefs. Beliefs fuel our doctrinal knowledge and help establish us in faith. Beliefs form a major part of the Christian conscience and provide direction for our faith journeys. Our beliefs sharpen the edge of discernment. But convictions. . . . What you know is one thing, but what you *do* with your knowledge defines your character and establishes your reputation. It takes guts to develop deep, firmly rooted inner principles regarding integrity, morality, ethics, and faith. *That* is what we need in government and so rarely find. *That* is what we need in churches and schools. But even those institutions may lack such convictions. You can make a major difference in your part of the world by determining and then holding a set of convictions derived from God's Word.

What you know is one thing, but what you do with your knowledge defines your character and establishes your reputation.

That's where Lot failed. He remained righteous in the sense that he didn't commit the sins of Sodom. But without strong convictions, he allowed their sin to diminish him as a man and as a father. So how can we do better? We begin by embracing three truths concerning conviction.

Convictions must be clearly established before God, or they will be twisted and weakened before others. I can speak from my own experience about this from my time in the military. As soon as I walked onto a military base in Okinawa and dropped my seabag on the floor, I found myself surrounded by people and activities that threatened to weaken my will and twist my convictions. Prostitution, pornography, drugs, and booze literally enveloped that island base. Talk about a moral cesspool! I knew that in order to survive the assault, I would have to determine and define my convictions expressly and then commit to them. I didn't dare "go with my gut" or trust that my family's values would somehow kick in at the right times. Though I was married, merely being a husband didn't empower me to be pure. I needed my own clearly defined convictions. This had to be a conscious exercise.

Convictions must be affirmed and modeled in the home, or they will be compromised on the street. When I sat down to define my convictions, I drew upon twenty-plus years of home life and church life, all of which (thankfully!) conformed to biblical standards. Mom and Dad hadn't given me these convictions in the form of Bible lessons and classroom lectures. I gained them around the supper table, while doing chores, when we gathered around the piano to sing, on shopping trips, on vacation, and at social events. I heard my parents articulate their value system, and then I saw them live it out. I can't number the times I heard my mother or father say, "Now listen to us, son; listen to this." And then they'd nail down an important truth. Such training in my home became crucial when I was eight thousand miles from home.

Convictions must mean everything to us personally, or they'll mean nothing when we're under pressure. We often know the difference between right and wrong; we know what we *should* do. In some cases, however, we aren't entirely convinced that it's worth the effort. We doubt we'll get caught, or we minimize the severity of the consequences. That's when we're almost certain to buckle under the pressure to sin when temptation bears down unexpectedly and relentlessly.

Pressure, by the way, typically comes from the majority opinion. I hadn't been at Camp Courtney for twenty minutes before the guys in my barracks began telling me where I could go to shack up at night. Not surprisingly, a majority of the forty-eight Marines in my Quonset hut had contracted a venereal disease. Meanwhile, I had a wife waiting for me at home. While I knew temptation, I knew even more strongly that one day I would have to look her in the eye and either tell her the truth or tell her a pack of lies. And I knew that what I told her would become part of the foundation upon which we would build our marriage, our life together, the home in which we'd rear our children, and ultimately (though I didn't realize it back then) the ministry we would share together.

My convictions became compelling to me personally, which helped me return to her arms with a clear conscience.

As a lifelong admirer of President Abraham Lincoln, I have devoured more than one biography about him. I savored *Team of Rivals* and saw the movie *Lincoln* twice. The strength of this man's convictions inspires me to act boldly on my own. Surrounded by a cabinet that didn't believe in the viability of the Thirteenth Amendment and pressured by men in his own party to compromise with the South to end the war sooner, Lincoln refused to fold. He challenged his peers to rise above their doubts, act upon their shared goal of ending slavery in America, and press the opposition. In the end, Lincoln's convictions carried the day. Against all odds, clinging to hope against hope, he led the defeat of slavery.

Oh, for leaders like Lincoln. Oh, for men and women of faith like father Abraham. Oh, God, that I will end my days on earth as a man like them. May God make us all people of unrelenting conviction!

CHAPTER 11



A WAIL OF TWO CITIES

I LOVE THE BIBLE, but I dread preaching, teaching, or writing on certain sections in the Scriptures. Genesis 19 is one of them. It deals with sin so unspeakable that the biblical narrative omits all but a few details. It describes the wholesale destruction of—as best we can determine—five cities and multiple thousands of people. This passage explains why God reduced an otherwise idyllic valley to a salty pit of rocks and dust, and a sea that to this day cannot sustain life.

In my own outline of Abraham's biography, I would prefer to omit this dark chapter, but I am compelled by the wisdom of an omniscient God to include it. He always knows best. While Abraham doesn't appear in Genesis 19, the events that took place just twenty miles east of his camp helped define his character. We

learn more about this great man of faith by examining the world in which he lived. Equally important, however, we learn more about the God he worshiped and trusted . . . the One he gave up everything to follow.

As we resume the story of Abraham's nephew and the doomed city in which he lived, I urge you to take God seriously. Lot and his family did not take God seriously until they were nearly consumed by His wrath for their neighbors. Lot's future sons-in-law never did take his God seriously and perished—physically and spiritually. A. W. Tozer writes, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."[33] That was certainly true for Abraham and Lot, and it remains true for us today. So take a moment or two to ask yourself, *What comes into my mind when I think about God?*

A good place to start would be to examine His attributes, His defining characteristics. What is God like? What do His actions and responses reveal about His abilities, His values, His character?

Scripture repeatedly describes Him as a God of love. He is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, all knowing, and all powerful. He is good, merciful, kind, wise, compassionate, and patient. He is immutable, meaning His personality never changes. He is sovereign, meaning He has the moral authority to make any decision He chooses and the power to see it through. In other words, He is in full control. He is holy, which means He is not contaminated by the evil that has overtaken His creation. He is righteous, completely pure in all His actions and motivations.

All of those things are true, but the list is incomplete. Most people would agree with these characteristics, but many would stop there. How easy to overlook the quality of divine justice. We prefer to avoid the theological principle that God's tolerance and patience have a limit. His mercy comes with an expiration date. There are occasions when God says, "That's enough. That's it. No more."

God said, "No more" in Genesis 6, when He expressed sorrow for ever having made humanity and later brought the great Flood. In His grace, however, He saved Noah and his family.

God said, “No more” in Genesis 11, when humans in their pride became obsessed with building a monument to themselves, and He thwartred the construction of the Tower of Babel.

God said, “No more” in Daniel 5, when Belshazzar profaned God in a debauched feast celebrating false gods, and He caused the city of Babylon to fall.

God’s mercy has limits because His justice demands satisfaction. If evil is never held accountable, if sin is never punished, God would not be just. If the Lord established rules and then never enforced them, what purpose would the rules serve? He established a moral code—an objective standard of right and wrong—that is always for our good. His laws, when obeyed, make life better for everyone. When people break those laws, others suffer.

In Genesis 19, God said, “No more.” Abraham pleaded for God to withhold His wrath if He found ten righteous people among all the immoral ones. He hoped this would spare Lot and his family. God chose to deny Abraham’s specific request, yet He honored his motive by sending angels to evacuate Lot’s household. The angels opened the opportunity to anyone else Lot knew to be righteous, but none came.

Judgment Day

The predawn hours brought with them an opportunity for Lot to escape with his life and to save his family. Animated with a sense of urgency, the angels rousted the household from sleep. “‘Hurry,’ they said to Lot. ‘Take your wife and your two daughters who are here. Get out right now, or you will be swept away in the destruction of the city!’” (Genesis 19:15). But Lot hesitated. The Hebrew term here means “linger, delay, wait.”

The narrator doesn’t tell us Lot’s reason for delaying. There’s no hint of a death wish, so all we can say for certain is that Lot didn’t take the threat of destruction all that seriously. Imagine someone coming to your home and saying, “An earthquake will strike in three minutes, at which time this whole area will be destroyed. I know it to be a fact, so get as far away as you can.” You wouldn’t hesitate if you trusted the messenger and believed the message.

When Lot continued to delay, the angels had to drag him and his family to the edge of the city. When the angels urged them to escape into the mountains, he expressed a curious fear. "'Oh no, my lord!' Lot begged. 'You have been so gracious to me and saved my life, and you have shown such great kindness. But I cannot go to the mountains. Disaster would catch up to me there, and I would soon die'" (Genesis 19:18-19).

I have a difficult time understanding this man. The message is clear: "Soon—very soon—this place will be reduced to pools of bubbling sulfur. Get out." If God ever outlines an escape route with a specific place to run, I'm running to where He commands! What's the point in arguing with omniscience?

Furthermore, Lot's logic is confusing. His objection ("I cannot go to the mountains. Disaster would catch up to me there, and I would soon die") can be interpreted one of two ways. First, he appears to argue that he could not physically outrun the destruction. "Catch up to me" comes from a Hebrew verb that means "stick to, cleave, join." By this interpretation, he feared the disaster would cling to him before he could get away. Lot then asked permission to run to a small town nearby. Earlier he'd dragged his feet, so this sudden interest in a quick getaway doesn't make sense. Also, if he was worried about being able to get far enough away, he would not have chosen a town nearby.

A second more likely explanation is that Lot was reluctant to leave the comfort of city life for a less genteel outdoor existence. He had become so entrenched in the affluence and comfort of his home in Sodom that he hesitated to leave it, even with God's fearsome wrath looming overhead. When forced out of his home and dragged to the edge of the city, he begged for permission to take refuge not in the hills but in a nearby village on the southern edge of the valley. As long as you're saving your life, a cheap motel bed is better than the cold, hard ground, right?

Take note of Lot's overstatement: "Disaster would catch up to me there, and I would soon die" (Genesis 19:19). This is further evidence of just how demented Lot's thinking had become. Years of rationalization and compromise had stolen his ability to use reason; he no longer possessed the ability to distinguish between losing comfort and losing his life. He moved into Sodom as a step up in affluence and became part of Sodom's society to preserve his wealth

and status, only to become mentally and emotionally dependent upon the city . . . despite its obvious depravity. The wealth and comfort of Sodom had become a mental trap.

A German scholar named H. C. Leupold helps paint the picture: “It almost taxes the reader’s patience to bear with this long-winded plea at a moment of such extreme danger. Lot appreciated but little what was being done for him.”[34]

In Lot’s defense, however, we do much the same today. We don’t take God seriously. We prefer the image of God as a kindly old grandfather with fluffy white whiskers and a reassuring smile. The wrath of God’s justice is too unsettling to think about. Yet the New Testament warnings send a chill up my spine. The time when God will give the ultimate, “No more” can come in an instant. His Son will appear in the clouds and bring this age of grace to a fearsome and immediate conclusion. For that matter, any one of us could die tonight and stand before Him to give account for our lives.

Jesus urged everyone to keep our priorities straight and to hold temporal comforts loosely. Because we all want to cling to our earthly conveniences, even under the looming threat of divine judgment, Jesus told this parable:

> A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, “What should I do? I don’t have room for all my crops.” Then he said, “I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. And I’ll sit back and say to myself, ‘My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!’
>
> But God said to him, “You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?”
>
> LUKE 12:16-20

I repeat for emphasis: Lot didn’t take God seriously. He weighed God’s wrath against his creature comforts and found in them roughly equal motivations. Thankfully, God’s mercy extends much further than mine, or that would have been the end of Lot! But the angels granted this concession and graciously altered the plan, one of them saying, “I will grant your request. I will not destroy the little village” (Genesis 19:21).

At long last, Lot and his little family started across the valley, never to see their comfortable home in the city again. We can only imagine what they were thinking as they faced a bleak reality. All the years they had invested, all the possessions they had collected, all the work they had put into making their homestead a showpiece, all the effort they had put into relationships and climbing the social ladder of Sodom . . . abandoned. Gone. Before the sun set that day, all would be ashes, and they would have to start over again with nothing but what they could carry.

When urging Lot and his family to flee, the angels said, "Run for your lives! *And don't look back or stop anywhere in the valley!* Escape to the mountains, or you will be swept away!" (Genesis 19:17, emphasis mine). They said, in essence, "There is nothing for you here now. Your life in Sodom is no more; look only to the future that lies before you. What happens here, now, is between God and these depraved people. It's no business of yours."

A few hours later, Lot, his wife, and their daughters approached Zoar, a little town on the southern end of the Jordan River Valley. They were hurried out of Sodom by the angels before sunrise; now the tops of the mountains to the east turned orange with the dawn. Behind them, God's wrath rained down from the skies as fire and burning sulfur. "He utterly destroyed them, along with the other cities and villages of the plain, wiping out all the people and every bit of vegetation" (Genesis 19:25).

As Lot and his family approached little Zoar, his wife couldn't resist a last, longing glance over her shoulder toward Sodom. Why? Again, she didn't take God seriously. The angels had dragged her physically to the city limits and urged her to flee across the plain, but her heart remained in her doomed city, bonded to her depraved neighbors and held captive by her comfortable life. She doomed herself with that backward glance: "Lot's wife looked back as she was following behind him, and she turned into a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26).

Jesus later used her death to illustrate a spiritual principle: the world is temporary; God's Kingdom is forever. Predicting a future conflagration that will affect the entire planet, Jesus said,

The world is temporary; God's Kingdom is forever.

> The world will be as it was in the days of Lot. People went about their daily business—eating and drinking, buying and selling, farming and building—until the morning Lot left Sodom. Then fire and burning sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. Yes, it will be "business as usual" right up to the day when the Son of Man is revealed. On that day a person out on the deck of a roof must not go down into the house to pack. A person out in the field must not return home. Remember what happened to Lot's wife! If you cling to your life, you will lose it, and if you let your life go, you will save it.
>
> LUKE 17:28-33

So Long, Sodom

After assembling the biblical evidence and having observed this area firsthand, I am of the opinion that entire region of the lush Jordan River Valley sank into the giant hole that is the southern end of the Dead Sea today. It is now literally the lowest place on earth. The surface of that salt lake lies 1,400 feet below sea level, plunging another 1,200 feet to the bottom. One keen writer describes it this way:

> The means causing the destruction are said to be "sulphur and fire" which Yahweh brought down so plentifully upon these places that He is said to have "rained" them upon Sodom and Gomorrah. On this point the account is very concise. Whatever attempt is made to discover more nearly the details of what transpired, such an attempt must stay strictly within the limits of the textual statements. Nothing points directly to a volcanic eruption; nor do lava remains happen to be found in the immediate vicinity. Nor does the expression "overthrew" necessarily point to an earthquake. The "fire" which rained down from heaven may have been lightning. The "sulphur" may have been miraculously wrought and so have rained down together with the lightnings, although there is the other possibility that a huge explosion of highly inflammable materials, including sulphur, deposited in the ground (cf. the "bitumen pits" of 14:10) may have cast these materials, especially the sulphur, high into the air so that they rained upon these cities, causing a vast conflagration. Besides, it seems quite likely that after these combustible

> materials once took fire, the very site of the cities was literally burnt away to quite a depth, and so the waters of the northern part of the Dead Sea filled in the burnt-out area.[35]

The event was so dramatic that Abraham witnessed glowing plumes of smoke from his camp in the mountains, twenty miles away (see Genesis 19:27-28). Lot's daughters thought the whole world had come to an end, leaving them the sole survivors (see verse 31, ESV).

Years ago, while traveling through Japan, my wife and I had the privilege of visiting the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, which commemorates one of the most horrific man-made conflagrations in history. It is incredible what one massive bomb can do. Photos and films captured before, during, and after the explosion show giant trees that were turned into black, burned stalks leaning away from the blast. Buildings were leveled. Nothing was left but random scrub brushes that somehow survived, charred and leafless. People visiting the museum stood and stared in silence.

The disaster in Abraham's day that swallowed an entire valley, several cities, and thousands of people was even more severe. Today, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are thriving modern cities . . . but nothing will ever be built where Sodom and Gomorrah once stood. It is the ultimate ground zero. What land remains cannot support human life on any practical scale; it's barren and bleak and silent. The Dead Sea and the surrounding wasteland continue to warn each new generation to take God seriously and respect His justice. The whole region recalls the day when God said, "That is enough. No more."

The destruction of the Jordan River Valley continued through the night. Early the next morning, Abraham ran toward the giant, billowing cloud that blocked the morning sun. He stopped at the place where he'd last spoken to the human manifestation of God (see Genesis 18:22). There he "looked out across the plain toward Sodom and Gomorrah and watched as columns of smoke rose from the cities like smoke from a furnace" (Genesis 19:28). He stood in this place alone—we see no mention of Sarah or servants—wondering if the rising smoke contained the remains of his nephew. For all he knew, God had found fewer than ten righteous people and then destroyed the righteous with the immoral. That's because Abraham took God seriously.

Sodom Today

To the objective observer, Lot and his wife were downright foolish. They had built their home on an island in a cesspool, and when death loomed overhead, they didn't want to leave. Who would do something so irrational, so strange, so . . . stupid? The story of Mr. and Mrs. Lot and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah has become iconic. Their experience, as described and preserved in the Bible, is so extreme that it has taken on mythical qualities. Consequently, we might struggle to see these historical figures as real people just like us. If we're not careful, we will lean back in the comfort of our living room sofa and judge Lot and his wife too harshly. The fact is, in many ways, we're no different. Though we're separated by 3,500 years, several thousand miles, and a language, we struggle with the same frailties and desires of human nature.

Lot—regarded in the New Testament as a righteous man (see 2 Peter 2:8)—could live comfortably in Sodom because his perception of reality had gradually become distorted over time. He made sense of his senseless choices with small excuses and minor rationalizations. If you've ever dealt with a severe addict or sat through the very difficult process of an intervention, it's not so farfetched to imagine how Lot ended up comfortable in his contaminated environment. You know the hold an addiction can have on a person, and you have seen the gradual distortion of the addict's mind. Your addicted loved one will rationalize, deny, excuse, bargain, fight, lie, and use every available means to remain in his or her deluded misery. The addict fears freedom from addiction as though it were certain death.

Perhaps you're not as deluded as Lot and his wife, and you're not in the grip of an addiction. Still, reflect on your current situation. Try to see your life objectively, the way you have observed Lot's. What are you putting up with? Where are you compromising? It may be that you're allowing pornography to pollute your home or your mind. It may be that you're keeping the secrets of an abusive partner, who causes you or others continual harm. It may be that you're fudging financial records where you work, which you have rationalized in your mind because this helps you provide for your family. Before we look down on Lot and his wife, thinking, *How could they do that?* just think.

According to the apostle Peter, Lot wrestled with his conscience the entire time he lived among the Sodomites. “God also rescued Lot out of Sodom because he was a righteous man who was sick of the shameful immorality of the wicked people around him. Yes, Lot was a righteous man who was tormented in his soul by the wickedness he saw and heard day after day” (2 Peter 2:7-8). And he undoubtedly grieved over the effect it had on his daughters.

He probably watched his teenage girls become more like their peers, wearing what the other girls in Sodom wore. He no doubt overheard their chatter from another room and felt sorrow over their eroding values. He saw the young men they considered desirable and worried about their futures. He may have said to his wife, “You know, honey, I don’t think this city is good for our children; maybe we should move.”

I can hear Mrs. Lot’s response. I’ve heard it from many compromising parents. “Oh, Lot! Don’t be so serious. This is life in the busy city. They’re just teenagers going through a stage. They’ll turn out all right. Just wait. You’ll see.”

Lot wrestled with his conscience and eventually succeeded in silencing it. By the time of Sodom’s destruction, he no longer worried about his daughters. In fact, he was willing to hand them over to be gang-raped by his neighbors to save his houseguests. After so many years of compromise and rationalization, his conscience had become a distant whisper.

Don’t be fooled. If it’s wrong, it’s a big deal. If it’s a habitual wrong, it’s a bigger deal. It’s time for all of us to open our eyes and examine our homes, our neighborhoods, and our nations objectively. What sins do we tolerate? What evil have we rationalized? Perhaps with tongue in cheek, Billy Graham’s wife, Ruth, said, “If God doesn’t punish America, He’ll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.”[36] The same could be said of the whole world because we are no less guilty of Lot’s blindness.

If it’s wrong, it’s a big deal. If it’s a habitual wrong, it’s a bigger deal.

I don’t set dates. I just know there will be a day when God will say, “That’s enough. No more.” In anticipation of that future day, I have three things to say to all who care to hear and take heed.

God is still a God of holiness; take Him seriously. He's holy! Morally pure. Unblemished by wrongdoing. Free of impure motives. He wants the place in which you live to be holy. He wants your decisions to be holy. He wants the way you rear your children to be holy. He wants your possessions to be holy. He wants your thoughts to be pure. He wants *you* to be holy.

Having stated that, I will also add this reminder:

We are still creatures of immorality; take Him seriously. We're all unholy, unrighteous people. I realize that. We still battle our depravity. All the more reason to take God seriously. As Solomon counseled his son,

> Trust in the LORD with all your heart;
> do not depend on your own understanding.
> Seek his will in all you do,
> and he will show you which path to take.
>
> Don't be impressed with your own wisdom.
> Instead, fear the LORD and turn away from evil.
> Then you will have healing for your body
> and strength for your bones.
>
> PROVERBS 3:5-8

In response to our own depravity and in spite of our failures, we must listen closely to God before making decisions. That's especially true when our motive is to enjoy a little more comfort or to make a little more money. Examine your potential new surroundings and consider the influence of the people you will call friends, coworkers, or neighbors. How will this decision affect others in your life, such as your mate or your children?

We are still at the mercy of God's grace; take Him seriously. The reason we still have breath in our lungs is because of the mercy of a gracious God. He hasn't wiped us all out because He has implemented a plan to redeem us from our own immorality. Like foolish, deluded Lot, we do not deserve mercy and we're slow to respond when God sends messengers to lead us out of danger.

Fortunately, some of us have been rescued. Others, however, still do not take God seriously. If you're compromising, if you're focusing only on the love of God while ignoring His justice, if you're lingering after He has urged you to get away from those contaminating influences, you're in grave danger.

The Day of Judgment could come at any moment. Remember Lot . . . and don’t resist His offer to rescue you. Remember Lot’s wife . . . and don’t look back.

CHAPTER 12



OVERCOMING DEPRAVITY'S DANGEROUS UNDERTOW

YEARS AGO, evangelist Billy Graham wrote, "It has always been a mark of decaying civilizations to become obsessed with sex."[37] No one can pinpoint exactly when it happened, but we can say for certain that in this generation, our Western culture is obsessed with sex.

Someone might make the case based on art and literature throughout the ages that humanity has always been sex obsessed, but never before in history has sexual content been more omnipresent and brash. What appears on television and billboards used to be considered pornography. To view pornography, one had to drive to the seedy part of town and buy it in print or on film in a sleazy, dimly lit X-rated shop; today it's available online for free. According to one

large-scale study, 51 percent of boys and 32 percent of girls first viewed pornography before the age of thirteen.[38] As a society, we're corrupting the imaginations of a whole generation of children before they reach puberty. The expression "youthful innocence" is fast becoming an oxymoron.

Billy Graham continues,

> The immutable law of sowing and reaping has held sway. We are now the hapless possessors of moral depravity, and we seek in vain for a cure. The tares of indulgence have overgrown the wheat of moral restraint. Our homes have suffered. Divorce has grown to epidemic proportions. When the morals of society are upset, the family is the first to suffer. The home is the basic unit of our society, and a nation is only as strong as her homes. The breaking up of a home does not often make headlines, but it eats like termites at the structure of the nation.[39]

Dr. Carle Zimmerman, a Harvard sociologist who examined the rise and fall of empires through the centuries, paid close attention to the correlation between family life and national life. His book *Family and Civilization* concludes that deteriorating civilizations follow a reasonably definable pattern and that "atomistic families" dominate the social landscape in decaying cultures. When civilizations began to unravel, they had five characteristics in common.

1. Marriage lost its sacredness, divorce became commonplace, and alternative forms of marriage were accepted.
2. Feminist movements undermined complementary and cooperating roles as women lost interest in mothering and pursued personal power.
3. Parenting became increasingly difficult, public disrespect for parents and authority increased, and delinquency and promiscuity became more commonplace.
4. Adultery was celebrated, not punished; people who broke their marriage vow were admired.
5. There was increased tolerance for incestuous and homosexual sex, with an increase in sex-related crime.[40]

Zimmerman's conclusions are so current, they're frightening. He appears to have observed the United States in the twenty-first century and then summarized his findings. In fact, he wrote them in 1947, at the dawn of what many would consider the golden age of the nuclear family. His study of history and sociology was purely academic, not a reaction to what he saw as the decline of America. While his description of a doomed civilization describes our culture all too well, we must keep in mind that depravity has been a part of our human condition since Adam and Eve.

After the first couple chose to violate God's one rule, it didn't take long for sin to plunge to its darkest depth. In the very next generation, one man killed another. Paradise to murder in a single generation. The apostle Paul explains why: "When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. . . . Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners" (Romans 5:12, 19). That means depravity is a universal problem; we all struggle with the downward pull of a sinful nature. Left unchecked, the evil within humanity would cause us to self-destruct within one generation, possibly sooner.

I make this point to help us maintain a proper perspective of Genesis 19. The events described in this dark chapter represent some of humanity's worst qualities. Sodom and Gomorrah have become iconic, almost mythical, as cities of sin. If we're not careful, we might forget that we share the same depraved nature as the people of these doomed cities. Despite the many thousands of years that separate us, our societal sin looks a lot like theirs. God preserved these accounts of Abraham, Lot, his daughters, and their culture to help us examine ourselves and then determine how we shall live. "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction" (Romans 15:4, ESV).

Aftermath

After he was dragged from his comfortable bed and then pushed to the edge of his favored city, Lot had been instructed to flee into the hill country. Fearing he might die of discomfort, he begged, "I cannot go to the mountains. Disaster would catch up to me there, and I would soon die. See, there is a small village nearby. Please let me go there instead; don't you see how small it is? Then my

life will be saved" (Genesis 19:19-20). Sadly, however, Lot's wife never made it to Zoar; she died along the way. Consequently, only three people survived the destruction of the Jordan River Valley: Lot and his two daughters.

They took refuge in this little town near the southeastern end of what is now the Dead Sea, but things didn't work out. "Lot left Zoar because he was afraid of the people there, and he went to live in a cave in the mountains with his two daughters" (Genesis 19:30). Of course, that's exactly what the angels had told him to do in the first place, except that they might have recommended that he take refuge with his uncle instead of going it alone.

It appears that living in Sodom did something terrible to the brain. Throughout the narrative, the residents of Sodom lacked the ability to reason properly. Lot's wife resisted leaving a city God considered a cesspool. Lot made bizarre decisions, such as offering up his daughters to protect his guests, clinging to a city marked for destruction, bargaining with the angels over where to run to, and choosing to live in a cave rather than seeking refuge and help from Abraham. This defective thinking, characterized by a skewed perspective on reality, affected his daughters as well.

In this incident involving Lot and his daughters, I find four characteristics of defective reasoning. And like Zimmerman's observations about a civilization, these traits identify a family on the verge of total collapse. Pay close attention. If these traits describe your household, it's time to take drastic action.

Trait #1: The absence of divine perspective

We don't know how long Lot and his daughters lived in their cave. Enough time, at least, for the daughters to give up hope of ever marrying. The older sister turned to the younger one and said, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of the earth" (Genesis 19:31, NASB). The phrase "come in to us after the manner of the earth" is a euphemism for having sex. The women may have thought the destruction of Sodom and the other cities was a worldwide event, leaving only a few isolated survivors like those in Zoar. Or, having just lost everything, they doubted their chances of ever finding arranged marriages to eligible men. Regardless, their perspective omits any consideration of God.

We see no thought given to prayer or waiting on God to care for them. It never occurred to them that God had just saved them from destruction and would, therefore, protect them from harm and provide for their needs. Instead of asking God what they should do, they imagined how their neighbors in Sodom would have solved the problem. The girls grew up walking alongside the others in their community—looking like them, talking like them, acting like them. By the time the daughters were rescued from the cesspool, their minds had been contaminated.

Trait #2: A distortion of moral discernment

To borrow from an old expression, you can take the girl out of Sodom, but it's hard to take Sodom out of the girl. Lot's older daughter suggested a solution she considered natural and reasonable. "Our father will soon be too old to have children. Come, let's get him drunk with wine, and then we will have sex with him. That way we will preserve our family line through our father" (Genesis 19:31-32). Who knows how many of their friends lived in incestuous homes? How often did they hear their peers talk about their sexual experiences with family members? Often enough, apparently, for such behavior to seem normal.

The younger daughter didn't object. We see no hesitation. Both girls appear quite adept at getting what they wanted from a man using alcohol and seduction. They formulated and implemented their scheme as casually as they might have planned a trip into town.

Trait #3: A breakdown of parental authority

I find it disturbing that neither girl saw herself crossing a momentous boundary by sleeping with her father. They wanted to become mothers. A mother needs a man to impregnate her, and Lot was conveniently present. So why not? They clearly didn't see him as a man to be honored or respected. He had not been a spiritual leader during their growing-up years, and he was nowhere near an example of a righteous man. He'd done his best to gain the acceptance of their neighbors in Sodom. So in the minds of these daughters, nothing distinguished their father from any other man.

From this point on in the narrative, Lot is passive; he no longer plays an active role. Judging by the way his daughters moved him and manipulated him, he might as well have been a piece of furniture. "That night they got him drunk

with wine, and the older daughter went in and had intercourse with her father. He was unaware of her lying down or getting up again" (Genesis 19:33).

Trait #4: A buildup of immoral insensitivity

Children who are exposed to immorality repeatedly over long periods of time begin to lose their sensitivity. They become emotionally hardened and spiritually detached. If their exposure starts early in their formation, they never develop a conscience. If somehow they gain a sense of who they are and develop a personal code of ethics, they still have no problem behaving immorally, because that's all they've known. They barely hesitate to commit acts that would shock people with a moral compass.

Observe how casually the two young women carried out their plan:

> The next morning the older daughter said to her younger sister, "I had sex with our father last night. Let's get him drunk with wine again tonight, and you go in and have sex with him. That way we will preserve our family line through our father." So that night they got him drunk with wine again, and the younger daughter went in and had intercourse with him. As before, he was unaware of her lying down or getting up again.
>
> GENESIS 19:34-35

Back in Sodom, many would say that Lot had it all—comfort, wealth, property, stability, power. He sat among the prosperous, influential leaders of the community and owned a home in the city. He had arranged marriages for his daughters and looked forward to grandchildren. But truth be told, his success was all superficial. There was no substance to it. Moreover, he gambled on Sodom and lost everything.

Often when someone's home burns to the ground, you'll hear the person say, "We didn't lose anything that can't be replaced. We all got out alive, so we have each other." But Lot couldn't say the same. After he lost all his material goods, his family disintegrated, and everything he had spent his life acquiring quickly came to nothing.

Fallout

A few weeks later, the physical signs were clear. "Both of Lot's daughters became pregnant by their own father" (Genesis 19:36). According to the next

two verses, both gave birth to sons.

Nine months separate verses 36 and 37, and we neither see nor hear anything from Lot. No outrage. No confrontation. No sorrow or repentance or confession or acknowledgment at all. As if to reflect the family's shamelessness in the whole situation, the narrative announces these births as if they were no different from any other.

Even the naming of the boys shows their brazen attitude.

In many Middle Eastern cultures, a person's name carries significance. It's a conversation starter that often leads to a story. Isaac's name means "he laughs." A dinner guest would be prompted to ask, "Why did your parents name you after laughter?" which would prompt a telling of the story. A name was a kind of legacy. Lot's eldest daughter named her son Moab, which means "from father." The younger daughter named hers Ben-ammi, "son of my kinsman." How about *those* for icebreaker stories?

After this story closes and the narrative of Abraham's life continues, we hear nothing more of Lot. We don't know his immediate reaction to his daughters' sin or how he regarded the births of his sons/grandsons. We don't know how, where, or when he died. We don't know if he ever reconnected with Abraham or how long his uncle presumed him lost with Sodom. He simply fades out of the story.

His life would be irrelevant were it not for Moab and Ben-ammi, who became the patriarchs of two nations: the Moabites and the Ammonites. Those familiar with Hebrew history know these nations as implacable, relentless enemies of Israel during the Exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land. These enemy nations continued to harass Israel through the period of the Judges. Israel briefly silenced Moab and Ammon during the reigns of David and Solomon, but when civil war divided the covenant nation, their enemies resurged.

So what do we learn from the disintegration of Lot's family, the aftermath, and the subsequent fallout? If I were to put a warning in modern terms, it would be this: "Beware the undertow."

Anyone who knows much about swimming or surfing in the ocean has stories about the silent, downward pull of rip currents. Beach officials sometimes place

Our culture has a dangerous moral undertow current. If we're unaware of that and fail

signs with large red letters warning, "Dangerous undertow," because these currents can't be seen. Swimmers don't know about them until they're being carried away from shore and in danger of drowning.

to respond effectively, immorality will drag us under.

Our culture has a dangerous moral undertow current. If we're unaware of that and fail to respond effectively, immorality will drag us under. The question is, How do I help protect myself and my family from this dangerous undertow? May I offer four very practical suggestions?

Recognize that no one is immune to the dangers. Lot moved into Sodom, either oblivious to the dangers or thinking he could withstand the pressure to conform. According to the apostle Peter, he did manage to avoid committing the sins of Sodom personally (see 2 Peter 2:7), and (amazingly!) his daughters had remained virgins in that immoral city (see Genesis 19:8). Even so, the influence of his culture relentlessly dragged his family down as they drifted away from God. Eventually, the years of exposure to evil took a dreadful toll on everyone in his family.

You are not immune. You, with an advanced degree. You, who attend church regularly. You, who have a strong Christian heritage. Even you, who are engaged in ministry. You're not immune. Your family is not immune. The deadly downward drag of immorality can overcome anyone, just as a strong riptide can overwhelm an excellent swimmer. Repeat to yourself, *I am vulnerable. This could happen to me and to my family.*

Pay attention to subtle hints. Stay alert. Don't ignore hints that something is wrong when you spend time with family or friends. Beware of any toleration of the profane and the vulgar. Choose your entertainment wisely, and keep an eye on what entertains your children. Get into the habit of asking yourself, *Will I be a better person because of this? Is this the kind of thing that will make me healthier? Are my children going to benefit from this? Is this spiritually wholesome and healthy?* Avoid people who make light of sacred things. Don't spend time with people who profane what is good or mock what is righteous. And don't overlook off-color comments or ignore words your children pick up.

Back in the 1970s, one of our daughters had just entered the second grade and had attended school for only a few days when she asked me one evening, "Daddy, what is oral sex?" That was a not-so-subtle hint to learn more about her little world and what might have exposed her to that concept. After talking to her more, I discovered she had heard the phrase at her school from one of her classmates. Today, there are even more opportunities for children to hear such language, as expressions like this can be heard on countless television shows. My wife and I saw this as our signal to get more involved and make some necessary changes.

Declare and model your standard repeatedly. Lot never did this; he had no standard. He may have avoided involvement in the sinful lifestyle of Sodom, but he thoughtlessly planted his family right in the middle of it. Declare your standard and then live it out consistently. You might consider imitating one family I know that has a list of virtues posted in their kitchen. They read them regularly. They work on them as a family. They recite them. The children are encouraged to memorize them. They talk about these virtues at the dinner table and discuss how they can put them into practice.

That might seem extreme, but consider how often and how long children are exposed to immoral influences. Because they love and admire you—believe it!—your example carries immense weight. Discuss your values, model your values, and encourage your children to do the same. Being proactive is essential in today's world!

Guard against passivity. Ours is a filthy culture. It's easy to look past it, shrug your shoulders and think, *Ah, that's no big deal. Those kinds of things happen. I was a kid once, too, and I turned out okay.* Stop and think. Was your generation anywhere near today's generation?

Listen to what your kids bring home from school. Pay attention to the friends they choose. Be assertive and clear about establishing standards, and then hold them accountable. Take an interest in what movies they watch, what music they like, what kind of video games they play. Participate with them. Don't expect the church or Christian school to do your parenting for you. I've said this for years: *the church cannot resurrect what the home puts to death.* Ministries can't work miracles in one or two hours.

Billy Graham's words are, again, helpful on this subject.

> In a declining culture, one of its characteristics is that the ordinary people are unaware of what is happening. Only those who know and can read the signs of decadence are posing the questions that as yet have no answers. Mr. Average Man is comfortable in his complacency and as unconcerned as a silverfish ensconced in a carton of discarded magazines on world affairs. He is not asking any questions, because his social benefits from the government give him a false security. This is his trouble and his tragedy. Modern man has become a spectator of world events, observing on his television screen without becoming involved. He watches the ominous events of our times pass before his eyes, while he sips his beer in a comfortable chair. He does not seem to realize what is happening to him. He does not understand that his world is on fire and that he is about to be burned with it.[41]

Be alert! Pay attention! Step up! Parent up! The next generation needs you!

Always remember: passivity is an enemy. I've never known a time when passivity was healthy or led to good results. Be alert! Pay attention! Step up! Parent up! The next generation *needs* you! You have been equipped and placed by God in a place where you must be proactive. I don't promise domestic miracles, but I can affirm the value of "a long obedience in the same direction."[42] It's a depraved culture, and some will still get caught in the undertow. Don't be swept away because you ignored the dangers or failed to give your very best.

CHAPTER 13



DISOBEDIENCE DÉJÀ VU

WOULDN'T IT BE GREAT if we could suddenly become instantly mature and completely perfect? Imagine how different this world and our churches would become if trusting in Jesus Christ made us intellectually astute, morally flawless, and spiritually wise. Sinners from birth and sinners by nature . . . immediately transformed. No more struggles with impatience or greed or lust or other selfish, self-serving motives. No more complaining. No more gossip. No more passive-aggressive politics. No one trying to control other people's lives. The instant we trusted in Christ, we'd become a model of flawless integrity. Wouldn't that be great?

So much for fantasy; now let's come back to reality. If you're hoping for perfection, good luck. It won't happen. Even though you may have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ with all your heart, you believe in Him and Him alone, and

you're saved by grace alone through faith alone, you still carry within you a nature that loves self and consequently loves sin. And that drives all of us to distraction, especially unbelievers, who observe Christians and fail to understand this spiritual reality.

While we have not escaped the influence of our old sinful nature, those who have trusted in Jesus Christ have received a new nature. We have within us the Spirit of almighty God, whose mission and purpose is to transform us. Therefore, we have a power that frees us from the domination of sin. With Jesus Christ in our hearts and the Holy Spirit resident in our lives, we do not *have* to submit to that old master. As the Spirit of God continues to change us over a lifetime, we become more like Christ . . . but we're still 100 percent human!

In the words of the late Alan Redpath, a British pastor and evangelist, "The conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment, the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime."[43] The birth of a newborn is a momentary event, taking place in a matter of hours, but at that moment, life has only just begun. Growth and maturity occur steadily and gradually as a child develops from infancy to young adulthood. He or she must learn to be courteous and learn to share. A child must discover how to be authentic, honest, forthright, assertive, compassionate, empathetic, and kind. He or she must learn from mistakes and must appreciate that commitments are commitments: when one's word is given, it must also be kept. Babies take years to grow up.

After we have trusted in Jesus Christ and we begin growing after our new birth, we still never reach a state of complete perfection. Not in this life. Sin continues to stalk us. We struggle with old temptations. We sometimes fall back into familiar selfish patterns. We return to the sins of our past. And therein lies one of the most regrettable truths about the life of faith: faithful people sometimes abandon their faith only to become temporarily faithless.

As you read the Bible, you discover that if Moses had lived today, he would have had to go through anger-management classes. Before the age of forty, Moses murdered an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew and then tried to hide his crime (see Exodus 2:11-12). Forty-plus years later, during the wandering years of the Hebrews, his temper flared several times. The people were in the wilderness complaining about having no water, and they looked to Moses, their

leader, for an answer. God wanted to use the occasion to teach the Hebrews about His faithfulness to care for them, but Moses ruined the lesson with his outburst of anger (see Numbers 20:10-13).

God chose Samson to liberate Israel from their Philistine oppressors, but Samson struggled with a lifelong compulsion to follow his sexual urges. In fact, his first recorded words are, “A young Philistine woman in Timnah caught my eye. I want to marry her. Get her for me” (Judges 14:2). Later, Samson fell asleep in the lap of another woman, who betrayed him to his enemies. His lust led to his demise. He worshiped the one true Creator, but he never conquered his old, go-to response—his over-the-top compulsion for sex.

David became known as “a man after [God’s] own heart” (Acts 13:22), yet he collected women like butterflies, and his career became soiled by a sex scandal (see 2 Samuel 11). To make matters worse, David passed on this trait to his son Solomon, whose many wives and concubines led both king and kingdom into idolatry (see 1 Kings 11:9-10).

Each of us could tell a story of failing faith and repeated struggles with old sins. Reflect on the past few weeks. There you are again—there I am again—coming back to the Lord saying, “Here I am, Lord, bringing before You what I have done yet again.”

Temptation 2.0

Abraham is a forerunner of faith for the rest of us. His journey of faith blazed a trail we all follow, and Genesis tells his story for our benefit. Each of our journeys is unique, but we will find in Abraham’s story episodes that resonate with our own. And that includes the continual struggle to rise above old temptations and conquer repeat sins. In Abraham’s case, this meant fighting the compulsion to lie when the truth might jeopardize his life.

Abraham is a forerunner of faith for the rest of us. His journey of faith blazed a trail we all follow.

You may remember that twenty-five years earlier, while sojourning in Egypt, he had broadcast the half-truth that Sarah was his sister, leading everyone to believe she was not his wife. So Pharaoh took Sarah into his harem, only to

suffer for the decision. When Pharaoh realized the truth of the matter, Abraham had to hear a shaming lecture on morality from a superstitious, polytheistic king who didn't know the one true Creator. Surely Abraham had learned his lesson.

After watching the plumes of smoke rising from the valley once occupied by Sodom and Gomorrah, and having heard of the great destruction, Abraham pulled up stakes and moved south toward the region called the Negev, which means "dry, parched"—a synonym for desert. At first, he lived in a wilderness in the far south before moving north again to an area guarded by the city of Gerar. This fertile plain between the mountains and the Mediterranean Sea had been settled by the Philistines, although they had not yet spread inland in great numbers. Gerar, a city-state, followed the leadership of its king, whom they called Abimelech. Most likely, this name was a title, similar to Pharaoh.

Abraham knew he had moved into potentially hostile land. Finding himself surrounded by people who might kill him for an opportunity to take his wife into their harems, "Abraham introduced his wife, Sarah, by saying, 'She is my sister'" (Genesis 20:2). As that great baseball sage Yogi Berra has been credited as saying, "It's déjà vu all over again." And, just like before, Abraham's ploy backfired. "Abimelech of Gerar sent for Sarah and had her brought to him at his palace" (verse 2).

I should point out that Sarah was ninety years old at this point. When Pharaoh had taken her into his palace to become one of his wives, she was considered a knockout at sixty-five. Apparently, her beauty had not faded much in twenty-five years. The king heard about this beautiful woman—the eligible sister of a nomad—and sent a squad of soldiers to bring her to the palace. In keeping with ancient custom, she would be kept away from all men, including the king himself, and prepared for a future wedding. After several months proved she was not already pregnant, the king would consummate the marriage and make her an official part of his family.

As the king slept that first night, however, the Lord invaded his dreams. "God came to Abimelech in a dream and told him, 'You are a dead man, for that woman you have taken is already married!'" (Genesis 20:3).

Abimelech, like Pharaoh, didn't believe in or worship the one true God. But he had integrity enough to honor another man's marriage. Never think that a person who doesn't worship God can't have integrity or behave morally.

Candidly, some nonbelievers have more integrity than Christians do. In this case, Abimelech behaved more righteously than Abraham did. So Abimelech pleaded his case in response to God's warning. "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Didn't Abraham tell me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'Yes, he is my brother.' I acted in complete innocence! My hands are clean" (Genesis 20:4-5).

While Abraham did not honor God with his actions, the Lord nevertheless used the occasion as an opportunity to capture the heart of this pagan king. God said to Abimelech in a dream, "Yes, I know you are innocent. That's why I kept you from sinning against me, and why I did not let you touch her. Now return the woman to her husband, and he will pray for you, for he is a prophet. Then you will live. But if you don't return her to him, you can be sure that you and all your people will die" (Genesis 20:6-7).

This is the first use of the term *prophet* in Scripture, and surprisingly it applies to Abraham, who had just reverted to his old sin. We are imperfect, too often overtaken by old temptations and too frequently guilty of faithlessness, but we serve a faithful God. Despite our weaknesses and our faults, He will accomplish His purposes. He'll use even our failures as opportunities to involve us in His plans. The Lord acknowledged Abraham's sin yet called him a prophet—a divine spokesperson, a designated intermediary between people and their Creator.

We Christians sometimes fail to rely on our new nature. Instead, we fall back on our old nature, and that's exactly what Abraham did. Yet his failure didn't make him any less God's man or any less a prophet. But how interesting that must have sounded to Abimelech, who undoubtedly thought, *He's a prophet? This man who just told me, "She's my sister"?*

The Lord not only affirmed Abraham as His prophet, He also upheld Abraham's role as a divine intermediary. "He will pray for you, for he is a prophet. Then you will live" (Genesis 20:7).

Abraham fell back on his old nature. Yet his failure didn't make him any less God's man or any less a prophet.

I'm intrigued by the irony in this story. Abraham told this lie to save his own skin, worried that people might kill him or that the king might steal his wife. Yet his

lies got him into the very trouble he tried to avoid. Meanwhile, the God who had promised to protect Abraham and to provide for his needs worked supernaturally behind the scenes to save his life and rescue his wife. Abraham, in trying to protect himself, gave God more work to do than if he had simply trusted the Lord in the beginning.

> Abimelech called for Abraham. "What have you done to us?" he demanded. "What crime have I committed that deserves treatment like this, making me and my kingdom guilty of this great sin? No one should ever do what you have done! Whatever possessed you to do such a thing?"
>
> GENESIS 20:9-10

Abraham's response was pathetic, but at least he spoke honestly.

> I thought, "This is a godless place. They will want my wife and will kill me to get her." And she really is my sister, for we both have the same father, but different mothers. And I married her. When God called me to leave my father's home and to travel from place to place, I told her, "Do me a favor. Wherever we go, tell the people that I am your brother."
>
> GENESIS 20:11-13

The word *godless* translates the phrase "no fear of God," referring, of course, to the one true Creator. The Philistines had, in fact, many gods. Abraham used the expression "fear of God" to imply that those who worship Him also look to Him for their ethical standard. He recognized that people who worship a made-up god may have moral standards that sanction sin. So his justification sounded something like this: "You are an immoral people, so I sinned to protect myself from you. In reality, it was only a half sin because Sarah is my half sister. So in following the one true God, I have my wife lie for me."

Abraham made a blind assumption about Abimelech and his subjects, and then he let his imagination run to the worst-case scenario. When confronted, Abraham justified his actions—insulting the people of Gerar in the process—minimized his sin, and explained how the lie had become a part of his standard

operating procedure. What is more, he apparently didn't see how the lie undermined his testimony of faith. *I follow God, but I don't trust Him to protect me . . . so I lie.*

Isn't it funny how our rationalizations grow to be so familiar that we become blinded to how absurd we sound?

Put yourself on the throne of Gerar for a moment. Imagine you're Abimelech and Abraham is standing in your court, offering this bizarre defense. What would you do? A reasonable response would be, "Get this foolish man out of my sight! Take your woman and get out of here. And then get your camp off my land." But that wasn't the king's response. "Abimelech took some of his sheep and goats, cattle, and male and female servants, and he presented them to Abraham. He also returned his wife, Sarah, to him. Then Abimelech said, 'Look over my land and choose any place where you would like to live'" (Genesis 20:14-15).

In the military, an unworthy man can rise through the ranks to achieve a high position. Consequently, his subordinates may not have much respect for his character or his ability to lead, which makes it hard for his reports to salute him. This quote in Stephen Ambrose's book *Band of Brothers* offers insight to help resolve the dilemma: "We salute the rank, not the man." Abraham behaved in a manner unworthy of his God, but Abimelech looked past the man to honor his rank as God's prophet. The king honored God by treating His representative with honor. And in response, God favored Abimelech and his household.

When we as God's people fail to trust Him and then sin to protect ourselves or to provide for our own needs, we look exactly like unbelievers. As a result, the "faithful" present a confusing model of faith to a watching world.

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While Abimelech treated Abraham with undeserved dignity, he couldn't resist a sarcastic dig. He went above and beyond the call of decency with another gesture. He said to Sarah, "Look, I am giving your 'brother' 1,000 pieces of silver in the presence of all these witnesses. This is to compensate you for any wrong I may have done to you. This will settle any claim against me, and your reputation is cleared" (Genesis 20:16).

Besides calling Abraham her brother, he flashed his wealth and demonstrated his nobility as if to say, “Too bad you married the wrong guy; I’m the more honorable man.”

Abraham, feeling suitably shamed (we hope), responded by interceding for the king. “God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants, so they could have children. For the LORD had caused all the women to be infertile because of what happened with Abraham’s wife, Sarah” (Genesis 20:17-18).

This story of Abraham reminds me of discordant music, full of confusing rhythms and clashing chords and unintelligible lyrics . . . sort of like a Super Bowl halftime show. The God-worshiping man behaves immorally, while the idolatrous man acts with integrity. The God-worshiping man justifies his sinful choice, while the idolatrous man forgives the offense and returns good for evil. It’s all theological noise and confusion until God steps in. Then Abraham’s song finally resolves into a harmonious, melodious, soothing anthem to God’s grace.

How gracious of the Lord to affirm Abraham’s role as His prophet and to answer his prayer. How gracious of God to restore the health of Abimelech’s household and to grant him more children. God’s grace even turned Abraham’s repeat failure into an opportunity to increase his personal wealth. I’m grateful and relieved to know that God’s people don’t have to be perfect to receive His favor, His protection, His provision, and—most of all—His promise to redeem us from our sin. It’s no wonder we call it “amazing” grace.

Never

I stated earlier that Abraham is a forerunner of faith. His story is our story. Abraham returned to his habitual sin because he was trying to make things happen and solve problems on his own, depending upon his own ingenuity rather than confidently trusting in God’s care. We do the same thing in our own unique ways. Each of us has a go-to response when stressed, and it usually leads to trouble. After observing Abraham’s struggles, I offer three “nevers” to help us steer clear of our repeat sins.

First, *never presume on your own weaknesses.* Deep inside, Abraham had a weakness for lying as a means of getting out of tight spots. Apparently, it was a family trait, because he passed it along to his son Isaac (see Genesis 26:7-11), who passed it to his son Jacob (see 27:36). Abraham knew about this weakness

when he settled near Gerar; he must have known he would eventually fall back on that old lie when put under pressure. He could have gone anywhere, as plenty of pastureland lay to the north, but he flirted with his weakness.

If you're an alcoholic, you don't rent an apartment above a bar. You stay away from even the smell of alcohol, and you spend time with people who are sober and will hold you accountable. Fear of your weakness helps you make better decisions. If you're given to lust, you place protection on your computer, and you avoid the Internet when you're angry, hungry, bored, lonely, or depressed. If you eat to make yourself feel better, you don't keep tempting snacks in the house. Whatever your weakness, you find a way to put distance between yourself and failure . . . whatever the cost.

I have friends who travel often for business, and they tell me that when they are alone, away from accountability, their weaknesses arise out of nowhere. So they plan ahead. They have a standing order on their hotel reservations to block adult channels in their room. They have accountability software installed on their computers. They have a planned call home to check in and to connect with the people who depend upon them.

Never presume upon your weakness. Accept your vulnerabilities and plan ahead.

Second, *never rely on your own crutches.* Soon after leaving Ur, Abraham concocted this phony story about Sarah to protect himself. His lie formed a crutch that kept him from leaning on God instead. Consequently, he set himself up for one moral failure after another. Furthermore, Sarah should never have cooperated with the ruse. A far better response would have been, "Abraham, I love you too much to lie for you. We're not going to do that as a couple. Let's agree to trust God instead."

Get rid of any well-worn crutch. Toss it aside and stop relying on phony excuses to get around admitting your weakness. Call it what it is, repent of your sin, claim God's forgiveness, ask for strength to get beyond it, and seek help from others. What friends can become helpful accountability partners? What professionals specialize in your particular weakness? How can your family help you? Don't go it alone; allow others to support your decision so you can stop relying on that old crutch.

Third, *never lean on your own understanding.* Abraham had a sharp mind, but he allowed it to work against him. If you're bright, you can devise any number of creative ways to solve your problems or meet your needs while avoiding dependence upon God. Rather than facing the possibility that He might let you down or not give you what you want, you arrange your own satisfaction. Those ways have become a habit. You have developed a routine . . . almost a ritual. And you probably can't imagine how you will continue unless you take care of matters your own way, through your own understanding.

Abraham leaned on his own understanding and, ironically, created the very problem he'd hoped to avoid. And he did it twice! Meanwhile, God operated behind the scenes, supernaturally working to protect him. Both times, Abraham walked away safe. In fact, by God's grace, he gained more wealth in the process. But at what cost, we'll never know. How much better might the outcome have been if he'd trusted God?

This chronic dependence upon self as opposed to living by faith is referred to as carnality by many theologians. It's based on *carne*, the Latin word for meat or flesh. It's the idea of living life by human ability rather than looking to, and leaning upon, God and His promises. Invariably, when we choose carnality, we find temporary satisfaction followed by deeper need . . . and eventual death. The late Paul Harvey wrote a parable that illustrates how choosing sin to find satisfaction ultimately leads to death.

> I shall now recite the manner in which an Eskimo kills a wolf.
>
> The Eskimo coats his knife blade with blood and allows it to freeze there. Then the Eskimo adds another layer of blood, and then another. As each succeeding smear of blood freezes to the blade of the knife the Eskimo adds an additional coating until the blade is concealed by a substantial thickness of frozen blood. Then the knife handle is buried in the frozen ground with the blade up.
>
> The marauding wolf follows his sensitive nose to the scent and tastes the fresh-frozen blood. . . . And licks it. . . . More and more vigorously the wolf licks at the bait until the keen edge is bare. Feverishly now, he licks harder. . . .

> In the arctic night so great becomes his craving for blood that he does not notice the razor-sharp sting of the naked blade on his own tongue. Nor does he recognize the instant at which his insatiable thirst is being satisfied by his own warm blood. . . .
>
> "More!" his carnivorous appetite craves, "more!" Until dawn finds him dead in the snow.[44]

If you're finding satisfaction in your sin, you're licking the blade. Eventually, you will reach the razor-sharp edge and fail to recognize the danger. Sin always creates greater desire for itself, and it always leads to heartbreak. It could even lead to your demise.

CHAPTER 14



IT’S A BOY!

HAVE YOU EVER had anyone break a promise? Of course you have—we all have. It happens all the time.

You loan money to a friend who fully promises to repay the debt. You’re still waiting for the money. A promise broken.

Your dad said he would be at the ball game, right up there in the stands, to watch you play. He never showed up. A promise broken.

You share a private matter with a close friend on the promise that she’ll keep it confidential. Not a week passes before you hear about it from someone else. In a few days, it’s around the office or all over the church. A promise broken.

Parents of teenagers can appreciate this one. Your son or daughter tells you, “Thanks for letting me slide on my chores today; I promise my room will be all cleaned up by Saturday afternoon.” It still looks like a war zone. Another broken

promise.

I could fill another page with examples you and I have experienced. Broken promises are so common, we're often surprised when someone actually follows through. Courtroom dockets are packed with lawsuits over breached contracts. Why? It's a rare soul who keeps his or her word, especially when there's no written covenant to keep everyone honest. When I need something done or I look to hire help, I have no problem finding competent people. But consistently honest people? People who keep their promises? Rare treasures, indeed!

While we are unable to count on most people, I'm thankful we can always depend upon God. This we can say for certain: *God keeps His promises.*

We know we can trust Him because He has *veracity*. The word means "adherence to the truth." He cannot lie. Because truth is central to His identity and He cannot violate His own nature, it's impossible for Him to speak an untruth. So when God makes a promise, you can stake your life on His fulfilling it.

It's a good thing God keeps His promises, because the Bible is packed with them. Years ago, someone counted 7,474 promises found in the Bible. I can't verify that number . . . but I do know that from Genesis to Revelation, there must be thousands. Assuming this figure is true, with sixty-six books in the Bible, that amounts to an average of 113 promises per book.

Promises, Promises

Some of the promises in the Bible have not yet been fulfilled. Since God keeps His promises, however, we know for certain a future completion awaits. That includes the promises made to the nation of Israel. The fulfillment may not occur in our lifetime or even in this generation, but it will take place. How do we know? I repeat: He has veracity.

As we resume the story of Abraham's faith journey with God, we should consider three truths concerning God's promises.

1. God is not in a hurry.

We view all events from the limited perspective of time. It's like trying to drive a car while looking through a straw. We're down here at street level, and our vision barely takes in the landscape. God, however, isn't constrained by time or

human perspective. He views events on earth from above, taking in the whole panorama of time from Genesis 1:1 to the end of things, and He sees all events at once. While we hurry because we might be late for something, the Lord doesn't need to rush because He maintains complete control over time. He has prearranged the unfolding of His plans down to less than a nanosecond.

For us, within the flow of time, waiting often feels like an eternity. When I'm with people I don't know well, I sometimes ask, "Are you waiting for anything?" Invariably, they have an answer. Everybody I know is waiting for something. Waiting for relief. Waiting for an answer to prayer. Waiting for a dream to be fulfilled. The people who have grown deep in their relationship with God have learned to wait with anticipation instead of worry. They know that God keeps His promises, so they don't fret over *whether* the fulfillment will come but only *when* it will take place.

God keeps His promises, so we don't fret over whether the fulfillment will come but only when it will take place.

2. God never forgets His promises.

God is always trustworthy. People sometimes forget what they say to whom, but His memory doesn't fade over time. Even before God speaks the words, His promises have been woven into the fabric of future history, waiting to unfold at just the right moment.

Here's an example:

> The Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. So encourage each other with these words.
>
> 1 THESSALONIANS 4:16-18

God doesn't frantically arrange world events hoping to shove everything into place before time runs out or Satan gets ahead. The time has already been established for the promise of His return to be fulfilled.

3. God's promises are linked to their context.

All the Lord's promises are not universal. Not every promise is for everyone. When reading a promise, we have to ask a few questions: To whom is He speaking? In what circumstance did He make the promise? Who will be affected by the promise? Is the promise universal, affecting everyone who ever lived? Or did God direct the promise to a specific person or group?

Here are some universal promises:

- "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).
- "Anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life" (John 3:36).
- "Those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life" (John 5:24).

You can claim those promises for yourself. Anyone can. They apply to all people, everywhere, throughout all time.

Personal promises, on the other hand, have a specific, limited audience. Here are some personal promises that apply only to a specific person or people group:

- "I have promised to rescue you from your oppression in Egypt. I will lead you to a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:17).
- "Your house and your kingdom will continue before me for all time, and your throne will be secure forever" (2 Samuel 7:16).
- "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!" (Genesis 15:5).

These words don't apply to you or to me. God made the first promise to the descendants of Abraham who were living under the oppressive rule of Egypt. The second is the Lord's promise to David, assuring him that no other dynasty would have the Lord's blessing to rule Israel and that Messiah would eventually reign as king.

We should recognize the third promise—God intended this one for Abraham and no other. If you were to marry extremely late in life, you couldn't say to your aged spouse, "Honey, just because you're sixty-eight and I'm seventy-four,

it's no problem. Look at what it says in the Bible. 'You will have a son in your old age.'" That's a statement taken completely out of context. You'd be foolish to claim that for yourself.

Another issue related to context is the question of condition. Is the promise unconditional or conditional? Does the promise contain an if-then structure? Here's an example: "Those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life" (John 5:24). Take note of the condition. The promise could be restated, "*If* you listen to my message and believe in God who sent me, *then* you have eternal life." That's conditional. If you fulfill your part, God will complete His.

True Freedom

Because God isn't in a hurry, He didn't have a problem waiting a quarter century before allowing Abraham and Sarah to conceive. Who knows why He waited that long? It was His call; His timing is perfect. Personally, I believe Abraham would not have been ready any earlier. After all, there was more at stake with this promise than a single baby boy. God established a covenant with Abraham as the first step in a plan of cosmic proportions—a comprehensive, predetermined strategy through which He will redeem the world from sin and evil. This involved multiplying Abraham's descendants into a nation, blessing them with provision and protection, and then settling them in the Land of Promise.

Abraham needed spiritual maturity, so the Lord waited.

Because God doesn't forget His promises, Abraham and Sarah had no reason for doubt. Sadly, however, they did doubt Him often. Abraham doubted the Lord's provision and ran down to Egypt. He and his wife doubted the specifics of God's promise, so they went ahead and conceived a child through Hagar. More than once, Abraham doubted God's protection and lied to save his hide from pagan kings. Each of those doubting times led to problems, some of which affect us to this day.

Because God made the promise to Abraham and Sarah specifically, they could count on fulfillment. "The LORD kept his word and did for Sarah exactly what he had promised. She became pregnant, and she gave birth to a son for Abraham in his old age" (Genesis 21:1-2). About a year earlier, the Lord had

promised that Sarah would conceive and bear a son. “This happened at just the time God had said it would” (verse 2). Are you ready? Sarah was ninety and Abraham was one hundred!

The phrase *just the time* comes from a single Hebrew word that means “appointed time.” It can be used to describe a time or place designated for a specific purpose. Twenty-five years earlier, God’s chosen couple had left their hometown, Ur of the Chaldeans, with all their stuff on carts, along with their servants and their livestock. They held nothing back as they took God at His word. After famines, scrapes with enemies, family strife, more than one failure, and lots of learning along the way, Abraham and Sarah finally received the fulfillment of God’s promise.

The concept of “appointed time” holds great significance to the Hebrews. In a book written by Solomon called Ecclesiastes, the wise king reflects on world events and how they relate to God’s sovereign care:

> For everything there is a season,
> a time for every activity under heaven.
> A time to be born and a time to die.
> A time to plant and a time to harvest.
> A time to kill and a time to heal.
> A time to tear down and a time to build up.
> A time to cry and a time to laugh.
> A time to grieve and a time to dance.
>
> ECCLESIASTES 3:1-4

The poem goes on from there, using the Hebrew word for “time” twenty-eight times in reference to virtually any human activity we could name. Nothing occurs outside God’s plan, and everything happens exactly at the time He planned it to happen. Because each event occurs at an appointed time, nothing surprises the Lord. That’s what theologians mean when they apply the term *sovereignty* to God. He has a plan, and He has the power and the will to carry it out.

Some people don’t like the concept of sovereignty and the existence of a foreordained divine plan. It makes them feel unimportant, as though they don’t have a say in their own destiny. Most don’t like the idea of giving up their

autonomy to a plan that isn't of their own making. It's an important issue that deserves clarification.

First, God's sovereign control doesn't necessarily invalidate or override our ability to choose or to determine our own future. Within His plan, there is wide latitude for human free will. God's foreordained plan does not reduce us to robots who must follow a program. To illustrate, A. W. Tozer offers this analogy. It's not an airtight explanation, but it is a helpful word picture.

> Suppose a ship leaves New York City bound for Liverpool, England, with a thousand passengers on board. They're going to take a nice, easy journey and enjoy the trip. Someone on board—usually the captain—is an authority who carries papers that say, "You are to bring this ship into the harbor in Liverpool."
>
> After they leave New York and wave to the people on shore, the next stop is Liverpool. That's it! They're out on the ocean. Soon they lose sight of the Statue of Liberty, but they haven't come yet in sight of the English coast. They are out floating around on the ocean. What do they do? Is everyone bound in chains, with the captain walking around with a stick to keep them in line? No. Over here is a shuffleboard court, over there is a tennis court and a swimming pool. Over here you can look at pictures; over there you can listen to music.
>
> The passengers are perfectly free to roam around as they please on the deck of the ship. But they're not free to change the course of that ship. It's going to Liverpool no matter what they do. They can jump off if they want to, but if they stay on board, they're going to Liverpool—nobody can change that. And yet, they're perfectly free within the confines of that ship.[45]

Second, human autonomy is highly overrated. We think that our capacity for self-determination makes us distinctly human. Indeed, it is one of the gifts God granted Adam and Eve back in the beginning. He gave them the option to obey or disobey, without coercion from Him. But autonomy is not what makes us special. Humanity is extraordinary because we bear the image of God. When Adam and Eve exercised their autonomy and disobeyed their Creator, they became less like Him and, therefore, less human. In many ways, they lost their

free will by becoming slaves to sin. Their rebellion made a mess of the world with repercussions we continue to suffer to this day. Ever since that time, people have done what is right in their own eyes, thinking they're exercising free will when, in fact, they're following a program set for them by their fallen nature.

The fact is, we have far more freedom in God's foreordained plan than we will ever have as slaves to sin! So I'm comforted to know that God has so carefully planned my future and has covered every detail.

Third, our desire for autonomy is pure selfishness. We live in an age of entitlement. Too many people think the whole universe revolves around them. "What about my rights?" "I deserve happiness." "I worked hard for what I have." "What about my right to choose?"

It's refreshing to meet someone who isn't selfish. These individuals have grown in maturity to become *selfless*. Maturity arrives with the realization that the universe isn't all about me or you. We are but tiny specks, living on a slightly larger speck, floating in a universe too large for the human mind to conceive.

Of God's grand design to redeem the world from evil, Old Testament scholar Walt Kaiser writes,

> This is a beautiful plan, yet men and women do not and, as a matter of fact, cannot apprehend it because of their prevailing worldliness. So vast, so eternal, and so comprehensive in its inclusions is this plan that man is both threatened and exasperated in his attempts to discover it for himself. Nevertheless, being built by God and made in His own image, man possesses a hunger within his heart to know the vastness and eternity of this plan.[46]

By "worldliness," he means a mind-set by which we get our cues from human education and institutions instead of from God's truth. We grow up when we look at God's plan not as something that diminishes humanity by taking away our free will but as a means by which He will restore true freedom.

True Joy

At long last, at the appointed time, Abraham and Sarah received the fulfillment of their promise. Ninety-year-old Sarah gave birth to a son and, in obedience to God, named him Isaac, which means "he laughs." Years earlier, when God had

told Abraham, “Sarah, your wife, will give birth to a son for you” (Genesis 17:19), Abraham had fallen over laughing. When God came again to announce, “I will return to you about this time next year, and your wife, Sarah, will have a son!” (18:10), Sarah, too, laughed in disbelief. She was the age of most great-grandmothers by that time. Neither she nor Abraham could imagine her birthing and nursing her own infant.

When God accomplished the impossible through this aging couple, their disbelieving snickering became joyful laughter . . . laughter of pleasure and praise. They now saw greater meaning in the name Isaac.

> Eight days after Isaac was born, Abraham circumcised him as God had commanded. Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born.
>
> And Sarah declared, “God has brought me laughter. All who hear about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse a baby? Yet I have given Abraham a son in his old age!”
>
> GENESIS 21:4-7

Sarah said, in so many words, “I’ve borne this old man a son.” (Interesting that she saw her husband as an old man.) Today, we would see dear old Abraham and Sarah at the mall with both walkers and a stroller. It’s a humorous sight, no matter the era, but it’s an important image for us to notice. We can be sure that Abraham had become famous after his routing of Kedorlaomer, and since he was an expanding nomadic presence in Canaan, news of this unusual birth would spread across the land. And with it, the story of God’s promise and the details of His covenant with Abraham’s descendants would spread too.

In obedience to God’s command, Abraham circumcised his son on his eighth day of life. When God established His covenant with Abraham and formalized it with a covenant-cutting ceremony, He commanded circumcision as a sign of the boy’s participation in God’s plan. The practice wasn’t new. Egyptian temple paintings show that circumcision had been part of human culture since 4000 BC. Usually, however, boys were circumcised when they reached puberty as part of fertility rituals. God changed this starting with Abraham. “The Hebrews were the only ancient practitioners of circumcision to observe the rite in infancy, thus freeing it from association with fertility rituals.”[47]

Pause and think. Can you imagine how Abraham and Sarah adored that child? Watch grandparents with a newborn in their arms who came from their daughter or their daughter-in-law. It's magnificent to behold! But we're not talking about a couple of adoring grandparents—Abraham and Sarah were Dad and Mom. Long after they had given up hope of experiencing this joy, they held their very own son in their arms. And as we will later see, they would be tempted to cling tightly to the child.

Years ago, when our children were very small, I was serving at the First Evangelical Free Church in Fullerton, California, where Corrie ten Boom chose to attend toward the end of her life. After a worship service on one occasion, I stood at the door greeting people as they left, and eventually it was just Corrie and me and my family. I'll never forget the moment. My kids were playing all around, and she asked if they were mine. "Yes," I said. "Two boys and two girls."

"Give me your hands, Pastor Svindoll," she said as she held out her little hands. I put my hands in hers as the kids bounced all around us. "Listen to me, Pastor Svindoll. Hold everting loosely. Hold everting loosely. Because if you don't, it vill hurt when the Fader pries your fingers open and takes dem from you. They're His, you know. Not yours. You know that?"

"Yes, ma'am, I know that."

Then she pushed her hands together with mine and released a deep sigh. When I looked into her eyes, I could see her sister Betsie, whom she had lost in the Nazi death camp. She knew what she was talking about. Her message was clear. She didn't need to say anything more. Don't clutch. Don't cling. Our children are not really ours. They came at His appointed time, and they will live out their days according to His plan . . . and then they will leave at His appointed time. In the meantime, we must become stewards of the precious lives God has placed in our hands. It's our job as dads and moms to return them to Him as healthy, strong, wise, godly adults.

Cynthia and I have had to remind ourselves of that truth on various occasions. When we moved back to Dallas in 1994, all four of our adult children were living elsewhere. They had their own lives and families, so none of them moved with us. As the years passed, however, each came to live nearby. In God's time, as He appointed, all four lived within fifteen miles of our home. But little

by little, in God's timing, He has a way of prying our fingers loose. Now one has moved to another state, and the others may follow the Lord's leading elsewhere. I'll never forget Corrie's counsel: Cynthia and I must "hold everything loosely" and enjoy their closeness in the meantime.

True Perspective

What about you? What are you waiting for? What are you clinging to? What do you hope for?

Everyone has answers to those questions, so I want to give you a few simple words to help you gain perspective on the issue.

When we finally receive what we desire most, we will see that no time earlier and no time later would have been right.

- *Remember* that God is never accidentally late. His plan unfolds right on time, even though on our timetable, the next step has been delayed for a long time. From our perspective, God's actions come later than what we want or expect. But His timing is perfect—He's never too late. And when we finally receive what we desire most, we will see that no time earlier and no time later would have been right.
- *Forget* about your own schedule and plans. Your agenda cannot take into account all the details that affect other people, and you cannot see how future events will unfold. Fortunately, God has the perspective we lack, and He loves us more than we love ourselves. So His plan will give us greater joy than anything we could devise for ourselves. It could be said, then, that God answers the prayers we would pray if we could see what He sees.

Years ago, country singer Garth Brooks cowrote a song with these words:

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers.
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs,
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care.
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.[48]

Anyone who has lived very long can appreciate the truth of those lyrics. As I look back, I recall many prayers I'm thankful the Lord chose to set aside. He gave me instead what I needed. And what He gave brought me even greater long-term happiness and more deep-down joy.

- *Ask* the Lord for sustaining strength and divine wisdom. I know that sounds elementary, but we often forget that we can't do life on our own. We need divine help from one day to the next. In addition, we need supernatural strength and divine wisdom to wait for God's plan to unfold. Good things come to those who wait.
- *Forgive* yourself for being shortsighted and for missing the big picture. Forgive yourself for clinging when you should have released. Forgive yourself for failing to be excited about what's ahead when God's plan doesn't include your plans. Repent of your failings, receive God's forgiveness, and then forgive yourself.

I've learned this in my lifetime: the last one we forgive on this earth is ourselves. God forgives you, so why don't you?

In time, you will come to realize, as Abraham did, that in God's appointed plan, the best is yet to come. The poem "Life" by Henry Van Dyke captures the essence of this attitude:

Let me but live my life from year to year,
With forward face and unreluctant soul;
Not hurrying to, nor turning from, the goal;
Not mourning for the things that disappear
In the dim past, nor holding back in fear
From what the future veils; but with a whole
And happy heart, that pays its toll
To Youth and Age, and travels on with cheer.

So let the way wind up the hill or down,
O'er rough or smooth, the journey will be joy:
Still seeking what I sought when but a boy,
New friendship, high adventure, and a crown,

My heart will keep the courage of the quest,
And hope the road's last turn will be the best.[49]

CHAPTER 15



FORGIVEN SIN . . . LINGERING CONSEQUENCES

SOME OF THE MOST comforting words in the world are *God forgives our sins*.

You may have heard those words for as long as you've been alive. Maybe you heard them in Sunday school, around your home, or maybe even at school. Or maybe for you those words feel like cool water on parched ground. You could never escape the guilt or shame over the things you'd done because someone never let you forget. When the ancient songwriter David heard that amazing truth about God's forgiveness, he put his joy into an inspired song.

Let all that I am praise the LORD;
may I never forget the good things he does for me.

He forgives all my sins
and heals all my diseases.
He redeems me from death
and crowns me with love and tender mercies. . . .
His unfailing love toward those who fear him
is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth.
He has removed our sins as far from us
as the east is from the west.

PSALM 103:2-4; 11-12

I want to paint a mental picture to help you remember this truth. Think of a cross. The larger of the two beams is vertical. Think of the vertical beam as your relationship with God. Throughout our lives, we crawl up that beam carrying the weight of our sin. We're not perfect, and we're still growing in maturity, which means we still sin. So we crawl up that beam and say, "Lord, I've gotten myself into this mess, and I confess it to You. I was wrong, and I regret it. I failed again, and I bring this before You."

The Lord never responds, "Shame on you! Crawl back down and get out of My sight! Pay penance for the next three weeks." Never! He says, "As you crawl back down, go away cleansed and clear and forgiven." So back down we go, glad to be forgiven . . . only to sin again. Then we're back up on that beam again. Consequently, the Christian life can feel like a yo-yo. Up and down, up and down. As we get older and we learn our lessons better, we crawl up that beam a lot less frequently, but we never reach the point of never needing to seek God's forgiveness. Fortunately, His forgiveness never runs out.

The more difficult part of that cross is the horizontal beam. This represents our relationship with the world. While God forgives our sins and wipes the slate clean in terms of our relationship with Him, our wrongdoing may have lingering consequences with others. God forgave the sin, but He didn't change events to reverse the effect of our sin in the world. For example, if in an act of pure carelessness, you were to run over your neighbor's

While God forgives our sins and wipes the slate clean in terms of our relationship with Him, our wrongdoing may have lingering consequences with others.

beloved pet, God would forgive you, and your friend *might* forgive you, but the animal would remain dead. The consequences of your carelessness linger.

On a more serious note, let's say someone abused drugs or alcohol for half his life. He was taught better, but he began to cultivate a habit, and before long he became addicted. The addiction only got worse until he began to lose everything that was important to him. Career, family, friends, health . . . everything. After years of abusing his body and destroying his relationships, he brought his addiction to God and began the long process of recovery. He has received God's forgiveness and perhaps the forgiveness of family and friends. The trouble is, the longstanding wounds remain. The years lost to his addiction are gone. His health is forever compromised. The consequences of his sin linger.

Some people have problems with anger. They carry a reservoir of rage that comes out in harsh, sometimes profane words. A mother reaches her boiling point and screams her frustration at the children with name-calling and insults. As her temper cools and she has a little time to reflect, she regrets her behavior. She kneels before the Lord, saying, "Lord, I sinned again. I need help with this problem. Please forgive me."

God forgives. He always forgives when we ask. But her harsh words cannot be unspoken. Her insults have torn through her children's minds like hot shrapnel and have become embedded. The damage will take years to heal, if it ever does. The consequences of her sin linger.

All of this points to a difficult yet helpful truth:

Though every act of sin is forgivable, the effects of some sins are not erasable.

There would be a satisfying sense of justice if only the guilty experienced the fallout of their sin, but the truth is, sin hurts the innocent as well. Sin is like a terrorist's bomb in a crowded mall. It causes chaos and throws fragments everywhere, injuring anyone of any age close to the explosion. The shock wave of sin can even reverberate down through generations, causing harm to people not yet born. Tragically, the innocent suffer alongside the guilty, and sometimes they suffer more.

Collateral Damage

Genesis 21 gives the account of a man whose previous sin now haunts him and harms the people he loves.

The birth of their long-awaited heir, Isaac, gave Abraham and Sarah great joy, but their delight became tinged with regret. Roughly fifteen years earlier, they had tried to rush God's plan. In their haste to receive the fulfillment of God's promise, they schemed to have a son on their own terms and according to their own timing. Sarah suggested, "Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her" (Genesis 16:2). So Abraham had sexual relations with Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian handmaid, and she conceived a son. Nine months later, she gave birth to a son then named Ishmael—a child of Abraham, but not the long-awaited promised child.

Now Sarah had given birth to a son of her own—the child of God's covenant with Abraham. They named him Isaac, "he laughs," because they laughed in disbelief at first, and then, upon his birth, they laughed with joy. This baby boy joined a half brother who had just turned fourteen, a young man described as "a wild man, as untamed as a wild donkey! He will raise his fist against everyone, and everyone will be against him. Yes, he will live in open hostility against all his relatives" (Genesis 16:12).

The birth of a new baby always threatens an older child, especially if he or she has enjoyed exclusive attention in the past. Ishmael, for the first time in his life, had to share his home with a rival. To make matters worse, he understood his position in the family hierarchy. He represented the compromise; Isaac was the true child of promise. And for three years, conflict brewed. It finally came to a head at a family celebration. (Drama always surfaces at family celebrations, doesn't it?)

"When Isaac grew up and was about to be weaned, Abraham prepared a huge feast to celebrate the occasion" (Genesis 21:8). In ancient Near East cultures, children were typically breast-fed until about the age of three, so Ishmael would have celebrated his seventeenth birthday by this time. At this age, he would have been regarded as a man ready to take a wife and begin his own family. During the celebration, however, "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking" (verse 9, NASB).

The term rendered *mocking* shares the same root as Isaac's name, "to laugh," but the intensive verb form gives it a different nuance. This particular Hebrew term means "to jest; to make sport of; to play with," not simply "to laugh."[50] He ridiculed the little one, which is enough to make any mother's blood boil. If you think a grizzly sow is protective of her two little cubs, just imagine the rage of a ninety-three-year-old mother in defense of her toddler! So with motherly protectiveness mixed equally with petty jealousy, Sarah demanded to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son. He is not going to share the inheritance with my son, Isaac. I won't have it!" (Genesis 21:10).

Parents trying to keep peace in a stepfamily situation can identify with this. Helpless Abraham found himself stuck in the middle. He loved his wife, and he felt overjoyed by the little boy tottering around the tent . . . but he also loved his other son, Ishmael. He had reared the baby to young manhood. He probably looked forward to arranging a marriage for him, getting him situated within the camp, and celebrating the arrival of grandchildren. Yet he saw Sarah's point. Strife between Ishmael and Isaac would eventually make life intolerable for everyone. Perhaps he flashed back to his separation from Lot—how necessary that had been but how poorly it had turned out.

While Abraham would not have been subject to any laws—who would enforce them?—he undoubtedly looked to his culture's customs for guidance. The city of Nuzi preserved its laws and heritage on clay tablets. Babylon carved its laws onto stone pillars as well as clay tablets. Both cultures prohibited a family from disowning the son of a concubine once a wife gave birth to a legitimate heir. So Sarah's request would have violated social customs. On the other hand, another common law "stipulated that the father may grant freedom to the slave woman and the children she has borne him, in which case they forfeit their share of the paternal property."[51] Abraham didn't belong to any of these civilizations, so he could make any decision he believed was the right one. Still, he would have felt obligated to honor custom. His dilemma was palpable.

He decided to apply the Code of Lipit-Ishtar, which granted Hagar her freedom in exchange for releasing any claim to an inheritance.[52] Still, Abraham agonized over the decision. The narrative twice describes him as "distressed" (Genesis 21:11-12, NASB). It's not difficult to imagine the man kicking himself for his earlier sin. *What a mess I've made of this thing! What on*

earth was I thinking eighteen years ago? Now I'm caught between a grown son whom I love and an angry ninety-three-year-old wife. There are no good options. Finally, God stepped in and told Abraham, "Do not be upset over the boy and your servant. Do whatever Sarah tells you, for Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted. But I will also make a nation of the descendants of Hagar's son because he is your son, too" (verses 12-13).

Abraham could arrive at no other conclusion: Ishmael had to go. The Lord promised to take care of him and to multiply his descendants. That settled it. "Abraham got up early the next morning, prepared food and a container of water, and strapped them on Hagar's shoulders. Then he sent her away with their son" (Genesis 21:14).

While I can appreciate the decision to send Ishmael away, I struggle to understand the haste. Surely Abraham could have sent the young man and his mother away in style. He had tents, provisions, livestock, and servants to spare, so why not help his young-adult son establish a life of his own? Abraham most likely found no support for that idea with Sarah. Anything given to Ishmael would have come out of Isaac's inheritance, and she had earlier objected to that (see Genesis 21:10).

Upon leaving Abraham's camp, Hagar "wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheba" (Genesis 21:14), a region roughly thirty miles southwest of Hebron. The land could not have been much more hospitable than it is today. It can support life, but not without hard work and plenty of planning. Having seen that landscape in person, I can think of no better metaphor to describe single parenting. Hagar, like most suddenly single parents, faced the challenge of having to survive alone, wandering aimlessly (at first), having to make too little provision cover too many needs, being forsaken by loved ones, and wondering if God still cared. Her desperation knew no bounds.

"When the water in the skin was used up, [Hagar] left the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, 'Do not let me see the boy die.' And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept" (Genesis 21:15-16, NASB). What a dreadful place was Beersheba!

If you're a single parent, you understand Hagar's despair. Whatever may have been the cause of your single-parent situation, you're now alone. Whatever the situation, you wound up in your own Beersheba, with no mate to count on. Survival may be a constant struggle. Maybe your vehicle was taken; maybe you no longer have a home. And the church rarely addresses you, to say nothing of giving you the dignity you deserve. To whom do you turn when you're a single parent and church people treat you like an outcast? To whom do you go when others look at you over their glasses and think, *I wonder what she did.* Or, *I wonder how he wound up like that?*

Now you're absolutely alone. You now must care for yourself and your children without another person to help carry the load. Your bed is cold and still. The holidays remind you of better days, so you dread them. Your memories are sad, your future is bleak, and you can't remember the last time you really laughed. Your soul is parched, and you don't know where to turn.

At the risk of sounding like a preacher, may I offer a few words of hope? Please read them slowly and carefully. Please know that they come from a place of deep compassion. If it would help, you may even want to read these words aloud.

You need to know that while you feel all alone, you are not alone. God sees you. He hears your weeping. He will care for you and turn your sorrow into dancing. The nights are long, but God will sustain you and restore you. He will see you through the barrenness of Beersheba. You will be whole again—and sooner than you think.

While you may feel all alone, you are not alone. God sees you.

Hear the words of an ancient prophet, who wrote them with people like you in mind. Hear the relevance that rings in each reassurance that flowed from his pen, promising you a future and a great hope. Please . . . believe them!

"Fear not; you will no longer live in shame.
Don't be afraid; there is no more disgrace for you.
You will no longer remember the shame of your youth
and the sorrows of widowhood.
For your Creator will be your [mate];
the LORD of Heaven's Armies is his name!

He is your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel,
the God of all the earth.
For the LORD has called you back from your grief—
as though you were a young wife abandoned by her husband," says your God.

ISAIAH 54:4-6

If you identify with Hagar, take heart. When your life has recovered from this dark time, the strength you will have gained will compensate for those desperately difficult days. In the meantime, I repeat: please know that God has not left you alone. As Hagar lay weeping in despair and the young man lay dying of thirst, God heard their sorrow. He hears your son at night. He hears your daughter. He knows that they're confused. He knows that you're trapped between deep regret and gnawing bitterness. He understands you. After all, you probably didn't ask for what you must now overcome.

This story would be troubling enough if Hagar and Ishmael deserved their treatment. But Hagar didn't ask to conceive. Nobody asked her how she felt about it. She was simply told to lie down, and nine months later, she gave birth to a baby that wasn't conceived in love. Now she and her son were thrown out together. And the very ones who had concocted the plan threw her out. While Hagar could have been nicer to Sarah—and she probably was after her first solo trip into the wilderness (see Genesis 16:6-7)—and Ishmael could have behaved himself better, neither deserved to wander the wilderness of Beersheba alone.

Fortunately, the Lord saw the injustice. The Lord heard their cries.

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, "Hagar, what's wrong? Do not be afraid! God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Go to him and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants."

Then God opened Hagar's eyes, and she saw a well full of water. She quickly filled her water container and gave the boy a drink.

GENESIS 21:17-19

The spring had been there all along, but when you're in the middle of a mess, you don't see relief . . . you won't see a lot of things. You don't see the water. You can't see past your own misery. So the Lord opened Hagar's eyes. He

sharpened her perception to see what she had been missing and what she needed so badly. The incident turned everything around for her and Ishmael. In showing her the well, He was saying, “Hagar, I’m right here. You have nothing to fear.”

As I reflected on Hagar, the single parent, and Ishmael, the fatherless son, my mind settled on a psalm written by David. His words offer comfort to people who find themselves suddenly single and children who suddenly have only one parent.

> Father to the fatherless, defender of widows—
> this is God, whose dwelling is holy.
> God places the lonely in families;
> he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy.
>
> PSALM 68:5-6

Earlier in this chapter I offered words of compassion. Now allow me a few words of warning. If you stay bitter, you will starve. You will never see the nearby well. You will become your own worst enemy. Don’t go there! Turn instead to seek God’s provision and accept His protection. Exchange bitterness for mercy. Tell the Lord, “I don’t need a mate in order to survive; I look to You alone to provide.” He will show you a well of fresh water. He’ll not only see that you survive, He’ll help you thrive. Look at how well God took care of Hagar and her son.

“God was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness. He became a skillful archer, and he settled in the wilderness of Paran. His mother arranged for him to marry a woman from the land of Egypt” (Genesis 21:20-21). And so Ishmael prospered in the desert region along the east side of the Sinai Peninsula. He married and became the father of twelve sons (see 25:13-17) and an unknown number of daughters. Today Arabs trace their ancestry back to Abraham through Ishmael.

If their claim is true, we may never expect to see widespread or long-lasting peace between the Arabs and their half brothers, the Hebrews. For centuries, they have clashed as nations and as races. And so we might say the sin of Abraham continues to reverberate down through the ages to affect everyone, innocent and guilty alike.

Three Lessons

The brief story of Hagar and Ishmael contains many lessons, but I've narrowed them down to three. I base them on each of the three most prominent figures: first Sarah, then Abraham, and finally Hagar.

To those who identify with Sarah: sinful consequences may stalk you, but they won't conquer you unless you let them.

Sarah comes off as a villainess in this story—and not without reason. After all, it was her idea to have Abraham produce an heir by her handmaiden. Then, when she resented how things turned out, she blamed her husband, mistreated Hagar, and cut Ishmael out of the family estate. Her shrewlike behavior doesn't make her likable or sympathetic. In fact, she reveals those parts of ourselves we don't like very much.

Sarah discovered—as we will under the right circumstances—that the lingering consequences of our sin can turn us into bitter and defensive people if we don't make peace with our past. Lingering consequences can become a continual source of shame, making it difficult to close the chapter and turn the page. But we must. The past is the past; we cannot unlive it. Our responsibility today is to make the best use of our present circumstances.

I encourage you to take your past sin to the Cross and leave it there . . . as often as you need to. When you find your shame clinging to you again, resist the urge to excuse or minimize or defend or shift blame. Take that as your cue to make another trip to the cross of Christ, where you will again drop your burden. Keep returning until your sin no longer clings to you.

To those who identify with Abraham: marital disagreements will trouble you, but they can be great teachers, if you're willing to learn.

I have never held up my marriage to Cynthia as ideal. When people ask me, "How's your marriage?" I say, "We'll soon have been married sixty years, and it's reasonably good." I've learned not to say, "Fantastic!" because it isn't. After all, look at who she's married to! I'm nowhere near perfect, and neither is she. We still have disagreements that drive each of us crazy sometimes. Thankfully we have learned how to resolve disagreements and bear with the difficulties.

Through the years, after countless resolved disagreements and difficult moments, I have finally learned to listen. My wife has a lot of wisdom. She knows me better than anyone else and can say better than anyone else what I

need to hear. Even when she happens to be wrong about something, her perspective has value to me. I learn how to be a better man through our disagreements, and I learn how to love her better.

Lessons that we need to learn often come through the person we're married to, if we're not too stupid to hear what he or she is saying.

To those who identify with Hagar: personal regrets can discourage you, but they can't cripple you if you choose to press on.

Through this story, God says to the outcast and the marginalized—not only single parents—"Look up. There's water. Drink from that well. I have a plan for you that's beyond what you can imagine. Trust in Me. You may not find comfort from those around you or from others who live in this wilderness. You may not get encouragement from those back in Abraham's tents, but you'll get it from Me."

Take your eyes off other people, and stop looking to them for what you need. While God may choose to work through some people, no one has what you ultimately long to receive. The Lord alone will provide. Furthermore, stop expecting the circumstances of sin to go away. Whether or not you caused the mess, you must live with conditions as they exist now. You can choose to do so with a bitter attitude or a triumphant attitude. That choice is yours.

To all, I say this: close the chapter; turn the page. Whatever your sin, whatever your struggle, God is greater. And He will carry you through whatever difficult circumstances you face.

CHAPTER 16



WHEN GOD SAYS, “LET GO!”

CLUTCHING AND CLINGING are two bad habits. Unfortunately, we all have them. We love to possess; we love to control. We love to keep our treasures close. And the more valuable the treasure, the tighter our grip, and the more difficult it is to release it. You see, it’s not our nature to let go. Our nature is to possess, to clutch, to cling.

In his book *The Pursuit of God*, A. W. Tozer describes the desire to clutch our treasures this way:

> There is within the human heart a tough, fibrous root of fallen life whose nature is to possess, always to possess. It covets things with a deep and fierce passion. The pronouns *my* and *mine* look innocent enough in print, but their constant and universal use is significant. They express the real nature of the old Adamic man better than a thousand volumes of theology

> could do. They are verbal symptoms of our deep disease. The roots of our hearts have grown down into things, and we dare not pull up one rootlet lest we die.[53]

Mine. We learn the word while playing in the sandbox. “That’s *mine*, not yours.” We clutch. We cling. The things to which we cling are called “treasures.” What makes them treasures is our desire to hold on to them. The value of the treasure goes up the tighter we cling, and if we cling tightly enough, long enough, a treasure can become a fetish.

The things I have called “treasures” naturally fall into four categories.

First, of course, would be *our possessions*—tangible, valuable things. These could be as large as a piece of property, a house, a car, or a boat, or they could be as small as a diamond ring, an heirloom pocket watch, or a rare coin. The treasure could be expensive, such as an original painting or an exquisite Persian rug, or it could be as cheap as an old pair of sneakers, a childhood sled, or a special memento. This kind of treasure is a thing that can be possessed.

A second category would be *our vocation*—our work or career. For some, this would be a calling. It doesn’t take long for panic to set in when a job becomes threatened—and not merely because we fear losing provision. If it’s just a job, we look for another. For many, however, what they do is closely connected with who they see themselves to be. For these people, vocation is identity. For those answering what they believe to be a calling, vocation is purpose. To have one’s calling compromised is to lose a reason for living.

Every minister who lives a long life must face the eventual day when he or she must look in the mirror and say, “It’s time.” That can be especially difficult not only because we love what we do but also because our vocation is central to our relationship with God. We have followed a destiny, so hangin’ up the spurs becomes especially difficult. Many ministers have turned their vocation into a priceless treasure.

A third category encompasses *our dreams*. In youth, our hopes keep us going through difficult times. We can struggle through setbacks and disappointments because we expect better days. We can endure punishing seasons of deprivation and sacrifice in pursuit of a goal. Olympians who win the gold and stand on top of the medal platform began with a dream years earlier. Winners cherish their dreams.

Many, however, become so preoccupied with success or some great achievement that they sacrifice too much. By the time they arrive at success, they realize how much was lost and how little was gained. Or worse, they have to accept that all their sacrifice gained them nothing.

The fourth category of treasure involves *our relationships*. We can treasure people: a parent we depend upon, a son or daughter over whom we worry constantly, a lover we fear losing, a friend who means the world to us. Any relationship can become a treasure for which we sacrifice too much.

On February 20, 2013, word reached me that my longtime mentor and friend Howard George Hendricks had died that morning. It was almost unbearable for me to hear those words. I had loved him for well over fifty years. Like thirteen thousand other students, I had sat under his teaching as a young seminary student, and then Providence had brought him to Stonebriar Community Church, where he served as an elder, and I, during his final years, had the pleasure of being his pastor. When the news of his death came, I thought, *What an amazing man.* I wanted him to live forever. I *never* wanted to see his casket go into the ground. I treasured our relationship. So when it comes to finding a treasure in a relationship, I speak from experience.

Genesis 22 reveals a man with a treasure so valuable, so cherished, that it threatened to compromise his relationship with God. He didn't treasure money or possessions. He didn't treasure his calling. He didn't even treasure a dream. His long-awaited son, Isaac, was his treasure, and he would have sacrificed anything for that young man. Never doubt it; Abraham adored his son!

Abraham's Final Exam

Since leaving Ur of the Chaldeans, Abraham had come a long way. Not merely in terms of miles traveled, but also in how great his faith had become. This spiritual nomad had endured a great many trials—some of which had gotten the best of him. He'd sinned by running to Egypt and lying to Pharaoh, and he'd repeated that same sin with Abimelech. Then he'd run ahead of God's plan by sleeping with Hagar. In spite of all that, Abraham established his reputation as a devoted man of God whose journey of faith earned the respect of his peers. He left his comfortable life behind to follow God wherever He led. He demonstrated uncommon maturity while dealing with Lot's exasperating shortcomings as a

man. He showed outstanding bravery in rescuing his family from a powerful army. He faithfully represented the one true Creator in every situation, even in his failures.

Some years after receiving Isaac, as promised by God, the time had come for Abraham's faith to be put to the supreme test. God is, of course, omniscient. He knows the future as accurately as He knows the past. He doesn't put people to a test to see how well their faith responds under fire; He prepares tests of faith to show *us* what He has made of us lately. Whether we pass or fail, we learn about ourselves. We learn where we need improvement, or we discover how spiritually mature we have become.

At this point in Abraham's faith journey, Isaac has become a young adult. The Hebrew term *na'ar* can refer to a young male from infancy (see Exodus 2:6) to young adulthood (see 2 Samuel 14:21; 18:5). Isaac was old enough to travel without his mom, engage his father in reasonable conversation, and climb a mountain carrying an armload of firewood. Having enjoyed several years with his son—perhaps as many as fifteen—Abraham had his faith put to the test with an unusual and unexpected command. God said, "Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you" (Genesis 22:2).

As a father, I can easily imagine the anguished questions that must have run through Abraham's mind. *Why must I give up my only son? How will Isaac produce descendants, as promised by God, if he's dead? How can God require a human sacrifice like the detestable pagans of Canaan?* But we see no indication of hesitation, no reluctance, no resistance, no argument, no bargaining, no pleading, no delay whatsoever.

"The next morning Abraham got up early" (Genesis 22:3). He rousted Isaac from his bed and led him through the early morning darkness to find a donkey loaded with firewood and two servants waiting to set out on a journey. They traveled three days to a place called Moriah, the precise location of which is debatable. In all likelihood, it refers to the old site of Herod's Temple, where the Dome of the Rock mosque now stands (see 2 Chronicles 3:1).

The biblical narrative omits any conversation on the journey. I think the four men traveled in silence except the occasional command or question. I doubt Abraham engaged in small talk. Meanwhile, Isaac must have wondered, *What on earth is this about?* But he had been trained to trust his father. So when his dad said, "Let's go," he fell in line. When they closed in on their destination, Abraham saw the place of sacrifice looming above them. "'Stay here with the donkey,' Abraham told the servants. 'The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back'" (Genesis 22:5).

Take note of the pronouns in Abraham's instructions. *We* (first person plural) will worship. *We* (first person plural) will come back. Some suggest that Abraham fudged the truth. The statement "*We* will worship; *I* will return" might prompt awkward questions, so he lied. After all, Abraham had been known to use half truths to his advantage in the past. In this case, however, I think his pronouns reflected a genuine expectation. He didn't understand the situation, but he knew the righteous character of his God, and he believed the promise He had made.

He didn't understand the situation, but he knew the righteous character of his God, and he believed the promise He had made.

A New Testament writer summarizes Abraham's state of mind this way:

> It was by faith that Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice when God was testing him. Abraham, who had received God's promises, was ready to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, even though God had told him, "Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted." Abraham reasoned that if Isaac died, God was able to bring him back to life again. And in a sense, Abraham did receive his son back from the dead.
>
> HEBREWS 11:17-19

As the story unfolds, don't lose touch with the humanity of the drama. Place yourself in the old man's sandals. Feel the warmth of your son walking close beside you. Smell the firewood he's hauling up the mountain. Feel the knife bumping against your hip with each stride. Envision the summit, where you will plunge that razor-sharp knife into the chest of your only child. Now pause right here and examine your emotions. What questions do you have of God?

Abraham hadn't read Genesis 22. He didn't know what would happen next, which makes his conversation with Isaac all the more meaningful. Allow me to describe the scene in today's terms.

"Hey, Dad."

"Yes, Son?"

"What's going on? You have the torch. You have the knife. I have the wood. Where's the animal for sacrifice?"

Throughout much of his life, as long as he could remember, Isaac had helped his father prepare burnt offerings. He knew the routine. "Normally there's an animal. I don't get it."

Old Testament professor John Sailhamer describes Abraham's response with great eloquence.

> The writer gives no hints as to the nature of Abraham's inner thoughts, but this is certainly only because no hints are really necessary. Who cannot imagine what Abraham felt? When at last someone in the narrative speaks, it is Isaac, not God, who breaks the silence; and the question he raises—"Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"—serves only to heighten the anguish that the Lord's request brings to Abraham and by now to the reader. . . .
>
> As Abraham begins to speak, his words cast light on his previous silence. Amid the anguish that the reader has read into Abraham's silence, there is now also a silent confidence in the Lord, who will provide.[54]

It's amazing how children—especially as they get older—gain the uncanny knack of putting a finger on the very issue you hope to avoid. Isaac called attention to the obvious: "Dad, where is the animal?"

His father replied, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Genesis 22:8, NASB). Literally rendered, that's "God will see to the lamb for Himself."

Abraham's statement did more than reassure Isaac; it reflected Abraham's utter confidence that God would do what was right. It also foreshadowed the end of this story. Most important, Abraham unwittingly prophesied an event nearly

two thousand years into his future. God would indeed see to a Lamb for Himself. His own Son would become the atoning sacrifice to free us from the death we deserve as a consequence for our sin.

"When they arrived at the place where God had told him to go, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it" (Genesis 22:9). It must have felt like he was turning down the sheets on a deathbed. The faithful father then looked at his son and calmly said, "Lie down on the altar, Isaac."

The narrative doesn't describe a fight. Though he was strong enough to haul a load of firewood up a mountain, Isaac obediently crawled onto the altar and stretched himself across the logs. We're not told how he felt at that moment, but we can be sure of this: he knew exactly what this meant. His bound hands told him what would happen next. How was he able to do this? His father had trained him well in the discipline of humble obedience. Moreover, Isaac trusted his father implicitly. He never doubted his father's love, and he obviously didn't fear death.

This scene reminds me of another true story of a father who courageously stared down death. Try to imagine this tragedy as it unfolds.

> When George Jaeger took his three sons and an elderly grandfather out on the Atlantic Ocean for a fishing trip, he had no premonition of the horror that he would face in a matter of hours. Before he would step on shore again, Jaeger would watch each son and then his father die, victims of exhaustion and lungs filled with water.
>
> The boat's engine had stalled in the late afternoon. While increasing winds whipped the sea into great waves, the boat rolled helpless in the water and then began to list dangerously. When it became apparent that they were sinking, the five Jaeger men put on the life vests, tied themselves together with a rope, and slipped into the water. It was 6:30 P.M. when the sinking craft disappeared and the swimmers set out to work their way toward shore.
>
> Six-foot waves and a strong current made the swimming almost impossible. First one boy, and then another—and another . . . swallowed too much water. Helpless, George Jaeger watched his sons and then his father die. Eight hours later, he staggered onto the shore, still pulling the rope that bound the bodies of the other four to him.

> “I realized they were all dead—my three boys and my father—but I guess I didn’t want to accept it, so I kept swimming all night long,” he said to reporters. “My youngest boy, Clifford, was the first to go. *I had always taught our children not to fear death* because it was being with Jesus Christ. Before he died I heard him say, ‘I’d rather be with Jesus than go on fighting.’”
>
> Performance under stress is one test of effective leadership. It may also be the proof of accomplishment when it comes to evaluating the quality of a father. In that awful Atlantic night, George Jaeger had a chance to see his three sons summon every ounce of the courage and self-control he had tried to build into them. The beautiful way they died said something about the kind of father George Jaeger had been for fifteen years.[55]

The young Isaac silently climbed onto the altar. Without another word, Abraham took the knife in hand, withdrew it from its sheath, and prepared to slit the throat of his son in the same manner he had killed many sacrificial lambs before that day.

But before the blade touched the boy’s neck, a voice broke the silence. “Abraham! Abraham!”

The old man froze.

“Yes,” Abraham replied. “Here I am!”

“Don’t lay a hand on the boy!” the angel said. “Do not hurt him in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son” (Genesis 22:11-12).

Abraham passed the ultimate test. The Lord allowed this drama to play out to the very last moment to demonstrate the completeness of the patriarch’s faith—both to Abraham himself and to the world at large. That had to have been the greatest moment of his entire life.

As Abraham had stated to Isaac earlier, God saw to the lamb for Himself. “Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son. Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means ‘the LORD will provide’). To this day, people still use that name as a proverb: ‘On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided’” (Genesis 22:13-14).

A more literal translation of the Hebrew expression *Yahweh-Yireh* would be "the Lord will see to it."

Your Final Exam

The Lord saw to Abraham's test, and He saw to supplying everything he needed. The Lord will *forever* see to it. Never forget that name! When you come to a situation that appears impossible, name it Yahweh-Yireh—"the Lord will see to this." Risk is a necessary factor in every trial; the Lord will see to your provision and protection as you obey.

Your son is on his way to a front-lines deployment. The Lord will see to that young man.

Your daughter opts to marry much sooner than you had anticipated. The Lord will see to her.

Your doctor calls you in for a face-to-face consultation after tests. She tells you to bring your spouse with you. Yahweh-Yireh—"the Lord will see to this." Look for a ram nearby. Remember that the Lord is with you and is providing for you.

Right now, think about what provision you need that only God can provide. I'm not talking about some luxury or mere desire—I mean an essential provision. What do you really need from the Lord? Follow Abraham's example. Don't presume to tell the Lord what to do, and don't waste your time guessing how He might accomplish doing it. Simply trust Him. Expect His supernatural involvement. Accept whatever He chooses to provide, regardless of how unlikely or unusual. Rest in His unfailing love and righteous character.

Don't stop there, however. The story of Abraham's test offers much deeper insight. Here are three timeless truths we can draw from Abraham's experience.

1. What you cling to is usually what God asks you to release.

He knows exactly what treasure has captured our hearts. He wants to give us the opportunity to confirm for ourselves and our peers what we value most. He does so by asking us to release our grip on what we treasure most. So what is that for you? Is it a possession—something you can buy, trade, or barter? Is it associated

with your vocation—what you hope will provide an identity in addition to sustenance? Could it be a lifelong dream that demands your attention and all your resources? Or have you made a relationship your chief treasure?

What would it look like to release this treasure? And now for the hard question: When will you follow through?

2. What you release, He often replaces with something or someone far more valuable.

We don't like the risk factor associated with faith. We like things buttoned down. We like all the details neatly laid out ahead of time before we have to make a decision. But the Lord calls us to trust *Him*, not merely His methods. In the words of Eileen Guder in her book *God, but I'm Bored!*:

> You can live on bland food so as to avoid an ulcer; drink no tea or coffee or other stimulants, in the name of health; go to bed early and stay away from night life; avoid all controversial subjects so as never to give offense; you can mind your own business and avoid all involvement in other people's problems; spend money only on necessities and save all you can.
>
> You can still break your neck in the bathtub, and it will serve you right.[56]

We are *so* careful. And *so* afraid of risk! We are *so* uptight! Why?

Trust your God. That's not to suggest taking foolish risks or living irresponsibly. But do release your treasures to the Lord. He will honor your risk by giving you something or someone far more valuable than what you release.

3. When God replaces, He also rewards.

When Abraham unbound Isaac, placed the Lord's ram on the altar, and saw it consumed by fire, the angel of God spoke again:

> This is what the LORD says: Because you have obeyed me and have not withheld even your son, your only son, I swear by my own name that I will certainly bless you. I will multiply your descendants

When you release your treasures to the Lord, He will honor your risk by giving you

> beyond number, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will conquer the cities of their enemies. And through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed—all because you have obeyed me.
>
> GENESIS 22:16-18

something or someone far more valuable than what you release.

The Lord expects a lot from those who claim to trust Him. The rigors and risk of faith must be daunting, or else it isn't really faith. But God isn't merely fair; He delights to surprise us by exceeding our expectations. He rewards risky faith with blessings beyond our ability to guess.

As for Abraham's descendants, they are truly innumerable. And to this day, He preserves His people, Israel, with great plans for their future. Why? Because God keeps His promises, and in doing so, He exceeds our expectations.

At the end of each chapter in his book *The Pursuit of God,* A. W. Tozer includes a prayer. The chapter titled "The Blessedness of Possessing Nothing" concludes with a prayer that applies to us as we release our treasures for the sake of trusting our God:

> Father, I want to know Thee, but my cowardly heart fears to give up its toys. I cannot part with them without inward bleeding, and I do not try to hide from Thee the terror of the parting. I come trembling, but I do come. Please root from my heart all those things which I have cherished so long and which have become a very part of my living self, so that Thou mayest enter and dwell there without a rival. Then shalt Thou make the place of Thy feet glorious. Then shall my heart have no need of the sun to shine in it, for Thyself wilt be the light of it, and there shall be no night there.
>
> In Jesus' name, Amen.[57]

CHAPTER 17



A HEALTHY HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH

IN FEBRUARY OF 2011, the world's most enduring marriage ended with the death of Herbert Fisher . . . no less than eighty-six years after he said, "I do." In 1924, when Calvin Coolidge was president, Herbert married Zelmyra, who scorned the idea of a "secret" to marriage, saying, "There isn't any secret. It was only God that kept us together." Even so, the couple answered relationship questions via Twitter on Valentine's Day in 2010.

Herbert, a mechanic with the Coca-Cola Bottling Company, built their family home in 1942, and the couple reared five children there. All five went to college, thanks to their parents' diligent savings. Their marriage survived the Great Depression, during which Herbert earned a nickel a day. They reared their

children through World War II on rationed supplies and then witnessed the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the passing of fifteen presidents, and the invention of countless modern wonders. They also witnessed the civil rights movement with great personal interest as a black couple living in James City, North Carolina.

By the time Herbert died, the couple had been married longer than most people live.

Abraham and Sarah also enjoyed a long marriage before she finally passed away at the age of 127 (see Genesis 23:1). If she married at the typical age for ancient Near East cultures, she was likely fifteen. Imagine 112 years of marriage and what an amazing journey she and Abraham shared for well over a century!

For the first seventy-five years of his life, Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, somewhere near Babylon, in present-day Iraq. His family and culture worshiped many gods, with the moon god being his father's favorite. He undoubtedly worshiped by his dad's side and looked forward to following in his steps. Then Abraham received a visit from the one true Creator God, who said, in effect, "I have chosen you to become My model of a man of faith. Enough of idols—I want you to walk with Me. Through My relationship with you and your descendants, I will redeem the world from sin and evil." The Lord then uprooted the couple from their comfortable and predictable life. From then on, they learned to depend entirely upon Him for protection and provision. Abraham was seventy-five at the time; Sarah was sixty-five. They had been married about fifty years before their journey of faith began.

A Journey to Share

The couple set out together for a destination that had yet to be revealed by God. In the words of a New Testament writer, Abraham "went without knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). You and I rarely make trips like that; we always know where we're starting and where we're headed, and we have either a map or a GPS to guide the way—usually both. This man and his wife traveled strictly by faith. "Even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith —for he was like a foreigner, living in tents" (verse 9). After fifty years of marriage, their entire lifestyle changed completely. God called them to a

nomadic existence—both physically and spiritually. They were to live in a land not yet their own so they might establish their permanent home in God's faithful care.

This story becomes even more remarkable when you stop to think that Abraham and Sarah were not newlyweds when they became nomads. When Cynthia and I married, we were young and full of ideals. We barely had enough money to afford a honeymoon; in fact, we returned early from that trip! But we loved each other and had the energy to take on the unknown together. Not so for Abraham and Sarah. They had ventured into the unknown during what was, for them, middle age.

Though he was a great man of faith, Abraham was not a perfect husband. He placed his wife in danger at least twice when he lied about their relationship. In Egypt, he insisted that they pretend to be brother and sister, which in itself must have strained the relationship. I can only imagine Sarah's loss of respect for her husband. Then, to make matters worse, she found herself isolated in Pharaoh's palace undergoing preparations to join his harem (see Genesis 12:10-20). She was rescued by God from this disaster only to endure a repeat ordeal in Abimelech's palace a few years later (see Genesis 20).

Of course, Sarah had her flaws too. Having gone through menopause, she gave up all hope of bearing a son and suggested that Abraham help God's plan along by sleeping with her handmaid. Then, when Hagar bore Abraham a son, Sarah blamed her husband for the strife that ensued. Sarah made life in the camp so miserable that the young woman opted to face the wilderness alone instead. When the boy, Ishmael, grew to be a young man, Sarah insisted that Abraham disown the boy and immediately evict him and his mother (see Genesis 21:8-14).

Together, Abraham and Sarah faced strife with extended family. What couple hasn't? Abraham's wayward nephew, Lot, lived in and out of trouble, constantly scheming for more wealth and greater status. He was selfish, greedy, and shortsighted, and he lived on the extreme edges of morality. His life of compromise led to his being kidnapped, after which Abraham rescued him. Then, having failed to learn his lesson, Lot barely escaped the catastrophic destruction of Sodom. Abraham interceded on his behalf, and he was saved from God's wrath, but he still had a hard time tearing himself away. Finally, with no time to spare, Lot scurried across the plain to safety, with the heat of Sodom's

destruction toasting his backside and his wife being lost in the process. Meanwhile, Abraham and Sarah watched the whole valley go up in smoke, wondering if their wayward nephew had escaped.

Fast-forward a few years, and finally, at long last, the time came for Abraham and Sarah to receive their divinely promised son. By then, Abraham had just passed the century mark; Sarah was ninety. They laughed at the thought of Sarah bearing a child and nursing at her age, but their sarcastic snickering turned to joyous laughter when their infant son arrived. They named him Isaac, "he laughs," to celebrate the Lord's faithfulness despite their earlier disbelief.

Having received Isaac at such an old age, long after they had given up hope, Abraham and Sarah adored their son all the more. Each child-rearing experience they had witnessed other families enjoy, they now savored like no other parents. But their love for Isaac bordered on idolatry. Because of our fallen nature, we tend to rely upon God's gifts for happiness and forget to trust the Giver. Did Abraham's love for Isaac outweigh his faith in God? An ultimate test revealed the truth.

Because of our fallen nature, we tend to rely upon God's gifts for happiness and forget to trust the Giver.

The Lord brought Abraham to a time and place of enormous sacrifice, telling him, in effect, "I want you to take Isaac up the mountain, and I want you to offer him as a sacrifice there." The Bible doesn't recount the conversation between Isaac's father and mother that night. I like to think it's because there was little to tell. Undoubtedly anguished and confused, their unified faith in God prevailed, and Abraham obeyed without hesitation. So when Abraham did as the Lord had commanded and then returned with Isaac happy and whole, it was a shared victory. Both husband and wife rejoiced in triumphant victory that day, and the Lord rewarded them together. As an additional blessing, their young-adult son, Isaac, received the greatest and most unforgettable lesson in faith imaginable.

At long last, after 112 years of married life, Sarah's faith journey ended. She died and her faith became sight. Abraham was ten years older than his wife; Isaac was thirty-seven.

A Place to Remember

During their long and adventurous journey of faith together, Abraham and Sarah had amassed great wealth. By the time of Sarah's death, their camp included multiple hundreds of servants and their families. Their own community numbered as many as some small towns in Canaan. And because of his victory over Kedorlaomer, Abraham was a highly respected chieftain, honored and feared for his military power. Stories of his interactions throughout the years also added to his fame.

Despite his wealth, reputation, and military might, Abraham didn't have a home per se. The land promised to his descendants did not become his personal land. Still the nomad, he camped in open territory and controlled his surroundings, but he owned none of it. So when the time came to bury his deceased wife, he suddenly had need of a family grave site—a private plot of land large enough to contain his wife's remains and his own, in due time. Ancient civilizations would go to great lengths to bury their dead in their homeland, but Abraham no longer considered Ur or anywhere in Mesopotamia to be home. Canaan had become native soil to the patriarch and his wife. So he approached the elders of a civilization that had been growing more prominent in recent years, the "sons of Heth" (Genesis 23:3, NASB).

Some translations render "sons of Heth" as Hittites, referring to a sizable nation of people living in present-day Turkey, far to the north. But the Hittites were Indo-European, while the names in this account reflect Semitic culture. Most likely, the sons of Heth were indigenous tribes that had been living in Canaan for hundreds of years before Abraham and Sarah arrived.

Notably, they respected Abraham, and the patriarch didn't presume to cause trouble with them. He could have swaggered into their towns, announcing, "God gave me all this land, so I'll just lay claim to any part of it I want!" But he didn't. Until the Lord transferred ownership to his name or to his descendants, he approached his neighbors as honored landholders. Take note of their mutual respect when Abraham sought to purchase a family burial plot:

> [Abraham] said to the Hittite elders, "Here I am, a stranger and a foreigner among you. Please sell me a piece of land so I can give my wife a proper burial."
>
> The [sons of Heth] replied to Abraham, "Listen, my lord, you are an

> honored prince among us. Choose the finest of our tombs and bury her there. No one here will refuse to help you in this way."
>
> GENESIS 23:3-6

They offered to allow Abraham to bury his wife in one of their family tombs—a generous and gracious offer on the surface. Ancient people took their burial rituals very seriously, and they believed that the manner of burial affected how that person would spend his or her afterlife. To bury Sarah with their deceased suggested that she would join them wherever they and their descendants spent their lives after death. Clearly, this was not an option for Abraham, who had left his polytheistic, superstitious life behind. Sarah would spend her afterlife in the presence of the one true God. Only a new private place of burial would do. So Abraham countered their generous offer.

> Abraham bowed low before the [sons of Heth] and said, "Since you are willing to help me in this way, be so kind as to ask Ephron son of Zohar to let me buy his cave at Machpelah, down at the end of his field. I will pay the full price in the presence of witnesses, so I will have a permanent burial place for my family."
>
> GENESIS 23:7-9

Abraham wanted more than a place to bury his wife; he wanted to establish a family tomb. In ancient times, one was said to be "gathered to his fathers" when he died. It pictured the ancient Near East burial custom in which a person was laid to rest on a shelf in a family cave. Much later, after complete decomposition, the bones of the deceased were gathered up and placed in an ossuary (a bone box) along with the bones of his or her ancestors. So the process of being gathered to one's ancestors—literally—became a euphemism for death as well as a poetic image of a person being reunited with departed loved ones in the hereafter. Sarah would be the first ancestor of a new nation to be buried in a Hebrew tomb.

The cave Abraham hoped to purchase lay near the oaks of Mamre—the place where he'd settled in Hebron—and the owner of the land, Ephron, happened to be present when he spoke to the elders.

> [Ephron] answered Abraham as the others listened, speaking publicly before all the [sons of Heth] elders of the town. “No, my lord,” he said to Abraham, “please listen to me. I will give you the field and the cave. Here in the presence of my people, I give it to you. Go and bury your dead.”
>
> Abraham again bowed low before the citizens of the land, and he replied to Ephron as everyone listened. “No, listen to me. I will buy it from you. Let me pay the full price for the field so I can bury my dead there.”
>
> GENESIS 23:10-13

Ephron’s offer appears generous on the surface, but Abraham objected for several reasons. First, he wanted to own the cave, which gave him control over its future. Second, he didn’t want a long-term relationship with the permanent owner of the cave, who might decide to rescind the gift later. Third, his wife deserved a burial place that had been purchased, not borrowed or obtained for free. So Abraham expanded the offer to purchase not only the cave but also the land to which it belonged.

While Ephron and his community were likely not Hittites, their customs appear similar to those of the Hittites. According to Hittite law, a landowner who sold only part of his estate still had to pay taxes on the whole. If, however, he sold the entire lot, the new owner would be liable for the tax bill. So Ephron politely insisted on selling the entire estate to Abraham, who would not have paid any taxes on the land.[58] Abraham had no king but God.

The landowner suggested a price of four hundred pieces of silver—a very large sum compared to other land deals in the Bible (see 1 Kings 16:24; 1 Chronicles 21:25; 2 Samuel 24:24). He saw in Abraham a wealthy man with an urgent need for land, so he smiled through his teeth when he said, “But what is that between friends? Go ahead and bury your dead” (Genesis 23:15).

Abraham had more money than most city kings at the time, so he agreed to the asking price. After all, what grieving husband haggles over the purchase price of a burial tomb? “Abraham bought the plot of land belonging to Ephron at Machpelah, near Mamre. This included the field itself, the cave that was in it, and all the surrounding trees. It was transferred to Abraham as his permanent possession in the presence of the Hittite elders at the city gate” (Genesis 23:17-

18). Abraham weighed out a little more than ten pounds of silver in front of Ephron's community elders so that no one could later dispute Abraham's ownership.

Having secured the land, Abraham placed Sarah's body in the new family tomb and sealed it up. Afterward, generations of Abraham's family would be laid here, including Abraham himself (see Genesis 25:9); Isaac and his wife, Rebekah; their son, Jacob, and his wife, Leah (see 49:31; 50:13); and undoubtedly many later descendants.

A Duty to Continue

Abraham loved Sarah. They experienced life together for 112 years. But God was not yet finished with Abraham. He had more life to live and a big responsibility to complete. For one, Isaac had grown into a man of thirty-seven years but had no wife. If the covenant were to make it past the first generation after Abraham, his son needed at least one heir. Abraham would turn his attention to that task next.

As Solomon would later write, "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. . . . A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4). Abraham would live another thirty-eight years after the death of his first love. Sometime later, the passing of grief granted him permission to go on living, and he found love again in the arms of a woman named Keturah. She bore him six sons: Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah (see Genesis 25:2).

While they married and Abraham loved her, her legal status remained that of concubine to protect Isaac's exclusive claim on the family estate (see verses 5-6). When Keturah's sons came of age, Abraham did for them what he should have done for Ishmael. He gave them gifts to get them started, and they left to establish family clans of their own.

I include this postscript to the marriage of Abraham and Sarah to make an important point: the death of one spouse does not end the life of the other. That might seem obvious, but we seem to forget this when two people have spent a lifetime together and one finally and permanently leaves the other person's side.

Their children expect the surviving partner to live like a monk, celibate and silent for the rest of his or her days. If someone marries "too soon" afterward, people tend to wonder just how much the widowed spouse loved his or her mate.

Most of us have not yet experienced the loss of a longtime life partner. While I'm married to Cynthia (coming up on sixty years soon), I cannot imagine being married to anyone else. And I don't even want to *think* about the grief of losing her. But that's *me*, and this is now. I would be wrong to expect someone else to live according to my sensibilities in cases where sin is not an issue. Death breaks the marital bond and frees the surviving partner to marry again if he or she chooses.

As for the marriage of Abraham and Sarah, their long, eventful, fruitful life together highlights two principles.

First, *God established marriage as a shared journey of faith*. Sure, procreation is important to carrying on the human race, but God could have accomplished this without lifelong pairing. Companionship is another great benefit of marriage, but plenty of single adults can tell us that they find contentment in their circle of friends. God intends marriage to be a journey in which a couple grows in faith together. The bond of marriage creates opportunities for mutual spiritual growth unlike any other relationship.

Some people do not need a mate to help them grow in maturity. My sister, Luci, is an excellent example, and she has written extensively on the subject. The apostle Paul was another example of someone for whom a married partner would have been a distraction from spiritual growth. Most of us, however, need the kind of intimate partner in faith that only marriage can provide. And I am one such man.

The bond of marriage creates opportunities for mutual spiritual growth unlike any other relationship.

I look back over my years with Cynthia, and I see countless ways in which our marriage made me a better person, a better minister, and a better Christian. I can't say with any confidence that I would have grown in maturity without a godly mate challenging me, encouraging me, stretching me, praying for me, and occasionally jerking me back into line.

Second, *God established marriage to make new generations of faithful men and women.*

If Abraham and Sarah had died soon after giving birth to Isaac, who knows what would have happened to God's covenant? Faithfulness to the one true Creator would have died before one generation had passed. But the Lord used the marriage and household of Abraham and Sarah to model faith for their son. Isaac witnessed his father's final exam. He saw his mother's response to the Lord's request. He learned from them what it means to love and serve God while rejecting idolatry and superstition. While he had to walk his own journey with God, his parents gave him an excellent start.

No other creature on earth produces children and then nurtures them for eighteen or more years before sending them off to live independently. God wants more than increasing numbers of people; He wants more people with whom He can enjoy a relationship. He created the institution of marriage so that a man and a woman, together, might rear boys and girls who will grow up in a healthy household of faith and be faithful to Him. That is still God's desire. Unfortunately, a healthy household of faith is the exception rather than the rule. But thankfully some households are rather remarkable exceptions.

Is yours one of them?

CHAPTER 18



ON FINDING YOUR LIFELONG COMPANION

IN OUR TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY Western culture, we begin the process of looking for a mate by dating. Before long, dating becomes an ongoing, enjoyable courtship, which leads to a formal engagement and later a marriage. Those who get married in our society remain in charge of who they marry and when. Not so in other parts of the world. In many Eastern cultures, parents make the majority of the decisions. Often the young man and woman participate in the arrangement process, and some societies allow them to decline a proposal they don't prefer. But it's the parents who guide the matchmaking process. This time-honored custom has helped stabilize entire civilizations. Statistics show that arranged marriages often fare better than our spontaneous approach here in the West.

In biblical times, parental matchmaking was the norm. So when it came time for Isaac to marry, it was up to Abraham to find the right woman.

By the time Abraham buried Sarah, his wife of well over one hundred years, he had amassed enormous wealth. Huge herds of cattle grazed the countryside, providing plenty of meat and leather to cities in the region. Flocks of sheep roamed the pastures, feeding and clothing the people of Canaan. The sales had kept Abraham's extended family and servants living abundantly and securely as silver and gold poured into the coffers. He continued on with business as usual for three years after losing his mate, no doubt teaching Isaac how to keep the whole enterprise financially healthy and growing.

Eventually, however, Abraham realized that the years had slipped by him too quickly. Perhaps the death of Sarah not only reminded him that his own days were numbered but also that his son Isaac was almost forty years old . . . and still single. It was past time for him to have a bride, but she couldn't be just anyone. Abraham knew from experience the importance of having a woman of integrity for a mate. She had to be someone capable of appreciating the importance of God's covenant—someone who would help Isaac be a good steward of this great honor. He wanted Isaac to marry a woman with the same kind of strength and dignity he had enjoyed in Sarah for more than a century.

There was just one problem: although Abraham was wealthy and secure, he lived in a lousy neighborhood.

A Worthy Woman

For reasons we can only surmise, Abraham didn't want Isaac to marry anyone from Canaan. It could not have been because the Canaanite women were idolatrous; that would have ruled out virtually every woman in the world (which was probably why Isaac hadn't married earlier). Throughout most of history, societies regarded marriage not merely as the joining of two people but also as the merging of two families. Treaties between rival tribes or warring nations were often sealed by the marriage of the leaders' offspring.

Abraham didn't want his new nation to become mixed into the Canaanite melting pot. He kept good relations with the locals by treating them fairly, supplying them with goods, maintaining his integrity, and keeping out of their squabbles with one another. Taking one of their daughters in marriage would

have erased that delicate boundary. Furthermore, this fledgling nation—which consisted of Abraham, Isaac, and a prospective wife—would have to cultivate its own culture, completely distinct from the rest of the world. Bringing a woman from far away would help reduce outside interference.

To accomplish the all-important task of finding the right woman for Isaac, Abraham called on his most trusted employee. On his trek from Ur to Canaan, Abraham passed through Damascus, where Eliezer joined his caravan (see Genesis 15:2) and signed on as a servant. Before long, he became Abraham's head servant, what we would call today his chief of staff. Scripture describes him as Abraham's "oldest servant, the man in charge of his household" (24:2). He would have been Abraham's financial consultant, head of operations, and quite likely his closest friend. He had been involved in the life of Abraham for decades, so he knew the aging patriarch as well as anyone.

Abraham called his chief of staff aside to give him an assignment so important he would entrust it with no other man. "Swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not allow my son to marry one of these local Canaanite women. Go instead to my homeland, to my relatives, and find a wife there for my son Isaac" (Genesis 24:3-4).

This "homeland" lay nearly five hundred miles north of where Abraham was living. Naturally, the servant raised a logical concern. "What if I can't find a young woman who is willing to travel so far from home? Should I then take Isaac there to live among your relatives in the land you came from?" (Genesis 24:5). This suggestion struck a nerve with Abraham. His response in Hebrew, "watch yourself," comes across as overly harsh, adding force to his warning: "Be careful never to take my son there" (verse 6). For whatever reason, Abraham saw danger in that plan.

Abraham reassured the servant that his mission contributed to a divine plan and would, therefore, receive God's guidance: "The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and my native land, solemnly promised to give this land to my descendants. He will send his angel ahead of you, and he will see to it that you find a wife there for my son" (Genesis 24:7).

Abraham's search for a suitable companion for Isaac began and ended with God's guidance. Marriages in ancient days were motivated by finances and status. Young women who married aristocratic men helped elevate their family's

position in the community. That's why beauty was so important. A poor family with beautiful daughters stood a good chance of rising higher in the social pecking order. Today, motivations may take different forms, but they're no less vain. The most difficult question singles must ask is "Who is the Lord's choice for me?" To keep bad motivations out of the search, Abraham depended upon the supernatural leading of God.

His faith didn't waver at this point, but he recognized that the servant felt overburdened by the task. So he gave the man an out. "If she is unwilling to come back with you, then you are free from this oath of mine. But under no circumstances are you to take my son there" (Genesis 24:8). That settled the matter for the servant, who swore an oath as Abraham had requested.

As we follow this story, I will lift from the narrative five guidelines for people seeking a mate today.

Here is the first: *Hear and heed the counsel of godly parents.*

Not all parents are godly, and godly parents are not always right. Nevertheless, your chances of choosing the right partner increase when your parents walk with the Lord and seek His counsel. Furthermore, they often know you better than you know yourself, and they can help you examine your motives. Your parents will also maintain a healthy objectivity that will help balance your "in love" subjectivity. Pay attention to that sixth sense parents often have about people.

Again, parents aren't always right, but you are wise to hear their counsel and take it seriously. In my years of experience counseling engaged couples and then seeing them married, I have rarely seen parents get it wrong when they are godly people who speak with pure motives.

Abraham's servant didn't waste time after getting his instructions from his master; he set out immediately. "He loaded ten of Abraham's camels with all kinds of expensive gifts from his master, and he traveled to distant Aram-naharaim. There he went to the town where Abraham's brother Nahor had settled" (Genesis 24:10).

Today we associate camels with the Middle East, but domesticated camels were not common during Abraham's time. Since they were rare and made ideal pack animals for long journeys, each beast represented a small fortune. Ten camels in Abraham's day would have looked like a ten-limousine entourage

today. After nearly a monthlong journey, the servant arrived in a region in northern Mesopotamia known as Aram-naharaim, which means Aram of the Two Rivers, bounded by the great rivers Tigris and Euphrates.

When he located the city inhabited by Abraham's brother Nahor, he strategically positioned himself where he could observe eligible women. "He made the camels kneel beside a well just outside the town. It was evening, and the women were coming out to draw water" (Genesis 24:11). As a close friend of Abraham, the servant enjoyed his own personal relationship with the one true Creator. And just as he'd seen Abraham do thousands of times over the past several decades, he asked for God's unmistakable leading.

> "O LORD, God of my master, Abraham," he prayed. "Please give me success today, and show unfailing love to my master, Abraham. See, I am standing here beside this spring, and the young women of the town are coming out to draw water. This is my request. I will ask one of them, 'Please give me a drink from your jug.' If she says, 'Yes, have a drink, and I will water your camels, too!'—let her be the one you have selected as Isaac's wife. This is how I will know that you have shown unfailing love to my master."
>
> GENESIS 24:12-14

Here's a second guideline: *Saturate the entire process in prayer.*

That said, I don't recommend laying out specific tests or parameters for the Lord. Don't say, "If she shows up to the blind date wearing a sweater with red in it, I'll take it from You, Lord, that she's the one I am to marry." That's not how God works today. Eliezer didn't have the advantages of Scripture to read or the inward leading of the Holy Spirit. He did, however, have Abraham's promise that God would provide supernatural leading.

Also notice that the servant's parameters weren't random or arbitrary. He looked for the woman who demonstrated uncommon hospitality. Drawing and lugging water required hard work. In the evening, the women came out to the spring with clay jars to fill and carry home—a tiring chore all by itself. He presumed to add to their work by asking for a drink for himself.

Most anyone would offer a sip to a thirsty stranger. Watering ten camels, on the other hand, took a lot of extra effort—especially considering that each camel could drink as much as fifty gallons in three minutes. And he had ten thirsty animals! A five-gallon jar weighed almost fifty pounds. For a woman to volunteer to water someone's camels would mean offering to haul five hundred gallons, five gallons at a time. (Don't worry, I'll do the math.) That's one hundred trips back and forth from the spring. (Bear with me a little further.) If each trip took only a minute, she just added two hours of backbreaking work to her already busy day.

That would be one extraordinary woman!

> Before he had finished praying, he saw a young woman named Rebekah coming out with her water jug on her shoulder. She was the daughter of Bethuel, who was the son of Abraham's brother Nahor and his wife, Milcah. Rebekah was very beautiful and old enough to be married, but she was still a virgin. She went down to the spring, filled her jug, and came up again. Running over to her, the servant said, "Please give me a little drink of water from your jug."
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> GENESIS 24:15-17

A quick study of Abraham's family tree shows that Rebekah was his grandniece, Isaac's first cousin once removed.[59] The servant quickly noticed that Rebekah was a beautiful woman, but that was not enough. Her clothing would have identified her as unmarried and therefore a virgin. But most important of all, was she God's choice? Her response to the servant's need would reveal her character.

> She quickly lowered her jug from her shoulder and gave him a drink. When she had given him a drink, she said, "I'll draw water for your camels, too, until they have had enough to drink." So she quickly emptied her jug into the watering trough and ran back to the well to draw water for all his camels.
>
> The servant watched her in silence, wondering whether or not the LORD had given him success in his mission.
>
> GENESIS 24:18-21

She *said* she would water his camels. But would she go the distance? He watched her tread back and forth from the spring to the trough, carrying that fifty-pound jug for two solid hours. The longer she worked, the more confident he became that he had found in Rebekah a rare gem among her peers.

Rebekah's response brings us to a third guideline: *Look for qualities that reveal true character.*

By "true character," I mean those inner qualities that set someone apart from ordinary people. For instance, he's not only polite to people he admires or hopes to impress; he's also considerate to a waiter he'll never see again. She's not only kind to her friends; she's also generous with people who cannot repay her kindness.

When Rebekah finished the job, Abraham's servant approached her (undoubtedly a bit in awe) to learn more. He gave her three pieces of gold jewelry weighing about ten shekels. This was significant considering the historical context: "Legal materials from the first half of the second millennium suggest a worker might expect to make at most ten shekels [of silver] per year and often less."[60] His gesture more than compensated her for the favor; it communicated extraordinary gratitude, not unlike handing a bellhop a Rolex wristwatch as a tip.

Perhaps not trusting his unbelievable fortune, the servant asked a question that would tell him about the character of Rebekah's family.

> "Whose daughter are you?" he asked. "And please tell me, would your father have any room to put us up for the night?"
>
> "I am the daughter of Bethuel," she replied. "My grandparents are Nahor and Milcah. Yes, we have plenty of straw and feed for the camels, and we have room for guests."
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> GENESIS 24:23-25

Rebekah came from a hospitable family. She didn't have to run home to ask permission; she already knew they would welcome a stranger . . . even one with ten hungry camels. Her physical beauty merely reflected her even more beautiful character. She was sexually pure and morally strong. She was unselfish, thoughtful, courteous, diligent, and industrious. What a discovery Eliezer had made!

This brings the fourth guideline: *Proceed cautiously; think deeply.*

Proceed cautiously; think deeply. First impressions can be deceiving.

This is the step we too often omit. First impressions can be deceiving. Anyone can be impressive on a date—it's only for a few hours. Several years into a marriage, how will this person respond if you contract a dreaded disease? What if the bottom drops out in your financial situation?

The servant learned all about Rebekah by watching her closely. He applied keen insight to observe details, because it's not easy for people to fake subtleties. When you're seeking the Lord's choice, you have to be sensitive to details and then have the courage to question things that don't strike you the right way. Trust your instincts, and don't dismiss unsettling clues. Take time to observe the other person under pressure. How does he or she handle conflict? What kind of relationship does this individual have with family and friends?

While the servant thanked God for giving him success, Rebekah ran home to tell her family about her encounter with the man.

> Rebekah had a brother named Laban, who ran out to meet the man at the spring. He had seen the nose-ring and the bracelets on his sister's wrists, and had heard Rebekah tell what the man had said. So he rushed out to the spring, where the man was still standing beside his camels. Laban said to him, "Come and stay with us, you who are blessed by the LORD! Why are you standing here outside the town when I have a room all ready for you and a place prepared for the camels?"
>
> So the man went home with Laban, and Laban unloaded the camels, gave him straw for their bedding, fed them, and provided water for the man and the camel drivers to wash their feet. Then food was served.
>
> GENESIS 24:29-33

Proceeding cautiously, the servant observed Rebekah's family. That's important to note, even today. When you marry the person, you marry the family. Even if you don't live near them or visit often, your mate carries his or her family within. And don't ever think, *My goodness, that's a messed-up family, but my potential partner is the exception.* I have seen wonderfully healthy people

emerge from terrible families, but they are rare. I'm not advising you to call it off right away; I merely suggest that it's a flashing caution sign on the road to the altar. Pay attention.

Before we continue, let's consider one final guideline: *Determine if there is a mutual interest in spiritual things.*

I will tell you openly—that is what attracted me most to my own bride. Some sixty years ago, I realized this young woman had a heart for God that was beating harder than my own. I not only admired that but also wanted to be around that. I wanted to have this kind of person near me and in my life.

Because the servant knew Rebekah's family of origin to be a crucial factor, he explained his mission and then measured the spiritual temperature of the household. He ignored his food and said (I'm paraphrasing here), "Let me come right out and tell you why I'm here." He then told them the whole story of Abraham's calling, his journey of faith with God, his wealth, and his purpose for sending an envoy back to Mesopotamia. Throughout his account, the one true God plays a central role in orchestrating the events. Having explained the significance of Rebekah's response at the well, the servant asked, "So tell me—will you or won't you show unfailing love and faithfulness to my master? Please tell me yes or no, and then I'll know what to do next" (Genesis 24:49). Beautiful! What an excellent question!

Her family's response is key, because it reflects their knowledge of the same God worshiped by Abraham. "The LORD has obviously brought you here, so there is nothing we can say. Here is Rebekah; take her and go. Yes, let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has directed" (Genesis 24:50-51).

Everything appeared to check out. The Lord appeared to have directed him to a woman from Abraham's family clan—a woman of uncommon character who worshiped the one true Creator. And in addition to all that, she was pretty! All systems were a go, except . . . Would Rebekah be willing to travel five hundred miles away from everything familiar to marry a complete stranger? It was a big decision, so the family proposed they take ten days to discuss the matter. But the servant insisted on returning right away, certain of the Lord's hand in guiding him. "'Well,' they said, 'we'll call Rebekah and ask her what she thinks.' So they called Rebekah. 'Are you willing to go with this man?' they asked her. And she replied, 'Yes, I will go'" (Genesis 24:57-58).

She had never laid eyes on Isaac. She had met the servant only a few hours earlier. But she had heard enough to know that the Lord had sovereignly arranged her marriage. It wasn't long before she and a few servant women were headed south on camels to meet her husband.

In many ways, Rebekah demonstrated the same kind of faith her late mother-in-law exercised when leaving Ur with Abraham. Like Sarah, Rebekah left her stable existence among her kin to become a nomad with her husband. She committed herself to a life of faith, not knowing where it might lead or what she might find along the way.

When the caravan drew close to Abraham's camp, Isaac happened to be in the field meditating (see Genesis 24:63). The Hebrew word means "to rove about; to go back and forth." I would imagine the man spent his days pacing, thinking, and praying—perhaps wondering if the servant had found a wife and what she would be like.

She committed herself to a life of faith, not knowing where it might lead or what she might find along the way.

> When Rebekah looked up and saw Isaac, she quickly dismounted from her camel. "Who is that man walking through the fields to meet us?" she asked the servant.
>
> And he replied, "It is my master." So Rebekah covered her face with her veil.
>
> GENESIS 24:64-65

According to custom, brides-to-be wore a veil. By pulling her veil across her face, Rebekah signaled that she was his bride. As a red-blooded male, Isaac wanted to know what kind of face he would be staring at for the next several decades. Because of their marriage rituals, however, it was common for a groom to have no idea what his bride looked like until their wedding night.

The final verses of the chapter compress events into a short summary. Very likely, the couple took a little time to get acquainted. Meanwhile, Abraham and the rest of the community prepared a lavish wedding feast. People in that culture didn't hold covenant ceremonies with a minister or priest; the vows did not need

to be spoken aloud because the promises were implied by their agreement to marry. On the day of the feast, the couple would enjoy the celebration until bedtime and then quietly slip away to their tent.

> Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother Sarah's tent, and she became his wife. He loved her deeply, and she was a special comfort to him after the death of his mother.
>
> GENESIS 24:67

The tent once used by Sarah was more spacious and ornate than the others and would have remained empty after her passing. By taking Rebekah into his mother's tent, Isaac communicated to his new wife and to the rest of the community that "she is now the mistress of the household."[61]

I admit, I'm kind of a sucker for great love stories, and this is one of the great ones. I like that some details of the story can't be explained; every great romance has some mystery to it. A 1940s love song called it "that old black magic," but we know better. From start to finish, the Lord guided every step to bring these two people together.

That's not to say that every marriage is divinely ordained. Some people marry when they shouldn't. Still, the Lord will give them everything they need to thrive as a couple if they turn to Him and give Him control of their lives.

Ah, but for those who heed the counsel of their parents, saturate their search with prayer, focus on real character, take time to observe carefully, and seek a mutual interest in spiritual matters . . . now that's a love story that will last a lifetime.

CHAPTER 19



WHAT A WAY TO GO!

EVER THOUGHT about how you hope to die? One man with a choice sense of humor wrote, “When I die, I want to go like my grandfather did, peacefully in his sleep—not screaming and yelling like the other people in his car.”

I know, I know. Death isn’t funny. On the other hand, does it always have to be morbid, grim, and depressing? When I ask about how you hope to die, I’m really asking about how you intend to live until you die. What will be the condition of your mind and your heart when death comes for you? How will you spend your days prior to taking your final breath?

Tragically for many, their grave marker could read, “Died: age forty-five. Buried: age seventy-five.” Many die long before they draw their last breath. They simply stop

Many die long before they draw their last breath.

living; they no longer seek all the joy and purpose and pleasure that life has for them. After a certain age, they figure, *Well, it's over. It's all history for me now. I have nothing left to give and nothing more to gain.*

The Greek term for that kind of thinking is *hogwash*!

Each year I go to the Cooper Clinic in Dallas to have Dr. Kenneth Cooper check me from nose to toes. Frankly, I don't know of any other person I admire more. The founder of that clinic burst into popular culture in 1968, when he coined the word *aerobics*. At first, people thought it referred to a religious cult. He opened his clinic with a vision to popularize preventive medicine. Instead of focusing on treating people after they get sick, he proposed a new kind of medical care to help people avoid illness in the first place.

Now in his eighties, he's still active, still engaged, still excited about getting the message out. Instead of planning his retirement, he has his heart set on expanding into China. He has been invited to establish clinics all across that nation to help more than a billion people learn to live smarter and longer.

When this book releases, I will be eighty. People ask me frequently, "When are you going to retire?" My answer is always the same: "Never!" People ask because we live in a culture in which men of a certain age are forced out of the mainstream and onto a golf course. We're expected to stop producing and start chasing a little white ball around a park, hoping to knock it into a hole that's *way* too small. (If I'm going to play, they'll have to make those holes bigger.)

I won't retire because I love what I do. Who needs golf when there are people to help, books to read, ideas to explore, and visions to fulfill? I'll keep doing what I'm doing until my body will no longer let me, and then I'll make the necessary adjustments. In the meantime, I plan to stay engaged and keep *living* to the fullest until I'm dead.

One of the ways I plan to keep living is to avoid spending time with "old" people. I don't mean old in the chronological sense; I mean those who have become old in attitude. I've met people in their forties who are *old*. One-foot-in-the-grave old. Those kinds of old people share at least three characteristics.

The first is *narcissism*: "It's all about me." This is an ultraselfish mind-set that says, in effect, "Leave me alone. I've earned my right to be miserable." Old narcissists believe they've paid their dues (whatever *that* means), so they have a

right to be first in line and the last to be denied anything. The fact is, there are no dues to pay; life is a gift. What a privilege to live it. What a joy to pursue our God-given calling.

Narcissism leads then to *pessimism*. I hardly need to describe a pessimist. This is a person who moans and complains, "I have nothing to contribute. I'm over the hill. I've been kicked out of life, so I've decided to just quit. My past is meaningless, and my future is bleak." What a terrible way to think.

Pessimism then leads to *fatalism*. This person lives with death as a destination. "The only thing in front of me is a grave or an urn." He or she has run out of hope and energy. The pessimist sees nothing interesting or important on the horizon and has no sense of purpose. They're long faced and short winded, they have zero sense of humor, and they already have their funeral planned. No thanks.

As Abraham faced the final third of his life, he displayed none of these characteristics.

Abraham's New Wife

Abraham had plenty of reasons to fade into the background and while away the days waiting to see his beloved Sarah again. After roughly 112 years of marriage —longer than most people live—he buried her in a newly purchased family tomb and returned to his nomadic tent city near Hebron. For the first few weeks or even months, Abraham's grief probably left him feeling like he wanted to die. That's not uncommon for a widowed partner after death ends a long, successful marriage. But God calls the shots on life and death, not us. So the aging patriarch held on.

Time passed, and Abraham's emotional wounds slowly healed. We don't know how long—months, perhaps, or more likely a few years. Many counselors say it takes a widowed spouse as long as three years just to find normalcy again, to say nothing of full recovery. I suspect Abraham allowed five years, but that's just a guess. Sarah died after his 137th birthday, which would make him 142 before the old spring in this step returned. Isaac and Rebekah, now happily married, had taken over the day-to-day operations of the family enterprise. Golf hadn't been invented yet, so what did he have to live for? What lay in his future?

Well, a marriage, for starters.

“Abraham married another wife, whose name was Keturah” (Genesis 25:1). This woman is hardly mentioned anywhere in the Bible except in a genealogy (see 1 Chronicles 1:32-33). Regardless, Abraham fell in love with her, and she became his bride. For some, that information doesn’t quite settle. His getting married again after a full lifetime with Sarah feels a tiny bit like betrayal—almost as if his falling in love again somehow invalidates the love he had for his first wife. That’s often how children feel when their widowed parent develops feelings for a new relationship.

Abraham enjoyed a long, productive, delightful relationship with Sarah. He was a faithful and devoted husband throughout their life together. They shared the role of parenting for thirty-seven years, rearing their promised son to godly manhood. After a century of marriage, Abraham had become accustomed to coffee and bagels every morning with his partner, and her scent in his nostrils had become as natural to him as breathing. But death stepped in, uninvited, and parted them.

Romantics like to say that love is forever, and by that they mean to say that a husband and wife parted by death will resume their romance in heaven. In the New Testament, some religious leaders wanted to test Jesus’ theology, so they picked up this romantic theme and concocted a hypothetical situation in which a woman was widowed seven times. Then the woman herself died. Regardless of the fact that she had a series of incredibly bad experiences, they wanted to know, “Whose wife will she be in the resurrection? For all seven were married to her” (Matthew 22:28).

Jesus dashed their romantic little hearts with a dose of theological truth: “When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30). In other words, we, like the angels, will worship and serve God forever as individuals. Only in heaven, we will *never* feel lonely or alone.

While romantics would have Abraham feel the pangs of Sarah’s loss for another thirty-eight years, God granted him the grace to experience a fresh romance with another godly woman. (I know she was godly because Abraham would not have chosen anyone less.) And there’s just something delightful about new love that puts zip back into life. I recently spoke with a longtime friend who

had lost his wife a few years ago. He is now ninety years old. “Did you hear that I got remarried five weeks ago?” he asked me with a chuckle. We laughed together—how delightful.

Abraham’s Second Family

God had some new experiences in store for Abraham—and a few surprises as well. Abraham probably thought he and his new wife would sit on the front porch and watch the world go by. But then one day she said, “Guess what? We’re going to have a baby.” Nine months later, they welcomed a son and named him Zimran, which likely means “musician.”

A few months later, Keturah said, “Honey, we have another baby on the way.” Nine months later, Jokshan arrived. His name most likely means “snarer” or “one who snares.”

Abraham had never experienced this before. He and Sarah had struggled with infertility for decades, throughout which he longed to hear the words, “Abraham, we have a baby on the way.” In his second marriage, he heard that announcement no less than six times! The Bible names all six sons with Keturah (see Genesis 25:2), and they may have had daughters as well.

This reminds me of a story my mother once told us. My parents were married in October 1930, and by the following August, she delivered my brother. (Stop counting—the math works out.) She obviously got pregnant shortly after the wedding. About thirteen months later, she delivered my sister. Then, not long after that, while my sister was still in diapers, I was growing in Mom’s womb. During her third pregnancy, my parents visited my grandmother. My dad’s mother stood at about four feet five and weighed about ninety pounds soaking wet, but she had a reputation for being a pistol. When she saw my mother waddling along, with two toddlers running around in diapers, she called my dad over. He bent his six-foot-one frame down to hear her. “Yes, Ma’am?”

“The Bible says to ‘be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth.’ Earl, God never meant for one woman to do it all.”

Abraham and Keturah didn’t get that message. Over the course of their marriage, they went through at least fifty-four months of pregnancy. Assuming they had as little as six months between pregnancies, they could have welcomed all six boys in less than a decade. More likely, the children came further apart,

which kept Abraham busy playing with toddlers, wrestling with school-age boys, and roaming the hills with teenagers. How did Abraham stay young as a man in his 150s? May I offer some suggestions from my imagination? By teaching six boys to drive a cart without running into a ditch. By playing war and hunting wild game. By breaking up fights and teaching them about the opposite sex. He certainly must have taught them how to herd cattle, shear wool, bargain with city dwellers, cut a straight deal, manage employees, and defend their reputations. And most important of all, he taught them how to build a proper altar and worship the one and only God.

The Bible doesn't describe all of that, of course; it's implied in the white spaces between the names in Genesis 25:1-4. When you stand in a cemetery, look at that half-inch line between "Born" and "Died." It stretches the imagination to read the short epitaph and wonder how that person's life unfolded. We are left with similar ponderings about the lives of Abraham and Keturah after Genesis 25:1.

Regardless of the particulars, Abraham continued to live a full life, watching a whole second family sprout, grow, bloom, and then bear fruit. That may not be what you would want in your latter years, but Abraham embraced it . . . and that's what makes this passage important. I hope his second life causes you to ask the Lord, "What future do You have for me?"

Abraham's Generous Legacy

While Abraham continued living, he never let his second life take anything away from his first. Isaac was the promised son—the one whom God said would be the sole heir of the covenant, the one through whom the Hebrew nation would be born. So when the patriarch remarried, Keturah's legal status did not match Sarah's. In their custom, Keturah was more like a concubine.

According to the tradition of many ancient cultures, concubines were often female servants in a household who became part of the family and bore children for the patriarch. They typically enjoyed all the rights and privileges of a wife, but a legal wife outranked them. Furthermore, the children of a legal wife did not have to share their inheritance with the offspring of concubines.

Abraham most likely took Keturah as a wife in the fullest sense of the word, and the Bible offers no evidence that he ever shared a marital bed with more than one woman after his error with Hagar. Keturah was his wife in every way that mattered, but he considered her a concubine to protect Isaac's inheritance. "Abraham gave everything he owned to his son Isaac" (Genesis 25:5).

Obviously, this refers to his estate *after* he died. Before he died, he took good care of all his children, establishing each of his sons financially as they left the nest and started families of their own. He had evidently learned from the mistake he'd made with Ishmael and Hagar, whom he had sent away with inadequate provisions. Having repented of that earlier sin, "he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines[62] and sent them off to a land in the east, away from Isaac" (Genesis 25:6).

Many years ago, a wise and godly financial planner convinced me that Cynthia and I should share our inheritances *before* we die. He liked to quote the old saying "Do your givin' while you're livin', then you're knowin' where it's goin'!" In our opinion, that was good advice. Why wait until you're dead before your offspring and others can enjoy what you have earned and saved? Why not take pleasure in watching your abundance help people now—especially your children and grandchildren?

Do your givin' while you're livin', then you're knowin' where it's goin'!

Are you experiencing the joy of releasing your wealth while you're still alive, as Abraham did? Have you stopped to think how much the government will take if you don't plan your estate well?

When Paul visited the troubled church in Corinth, he defended himself against people who accused him of sponging off wealthy Christians. He wrote in response, "I am coming to you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you. I don't want what you have—I want you. After all, children don't provide for their parents. Rather, parents provide for their children" (2 Corinthians 12:14). Paul saw parental provision as a self-evident responsibility.

Long ago, Cynthia and I determined to help each of our grandchildren earn a college degree. It became our commitment to their parents. Not only does this help these young people with a real need, but it also endears them to their

grandparents. We want to be there when they graduate. We want to be at the commencement ceremony to watch our granddaughter or grandson walk across the stage and take that diploma, knowing we invested in each one. An education, after all, goes with them forever.

I share this only to plant an idea in your mind and to assure you that Cynthia and I put into practice what I'm preaching in these pages. When our family grew and the time came to revise our earlier plan, we worked with a financial adviser who said, "I've never seen anything like this." I mistakenly thought this was something most people did. After all, what else are you going to do with your abundance? Stuff the cash around you as you lie there in the casket?

Abraham chose to do his givin' while he was livin'. While he was alive, he helped his six sons with Keturah get started; he also helped Ishmael with his needs. Given Abraham's immense wealth, he was still able to leave a vast fortune in the hands of Isaac, who inherited the rest from his father.

"These are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years" (Genesis 25:7, NASB). When you do the math, he lived thirty-eight years after the death of Sarah. Then "Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people" (verse 8, NASB). I love that!

Satisfied translates from the Hebrew word *sahbah*, which literally means "to be full." Abraham died with a full smile. Full of years. Full of satisfaction. Full of contentment. When he looked into the eyes of his children and his grandchildren, he could engage them without a guilty conscience. He gave of himself, and he shared his resources.

The expression "he was gathered to his people" pictured the practical burial ritual in which his body was allowed to decay and then his bones were gathered and placed in the family's ossuary with those who had gone before. But it carried the added significance of joining his God-believing ancestors in eternal intimacy with the Almighty in heaven. Abraham's bones joined those of Sarah in the tomb as his soul joined hers in the throne room of God.

"His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite. This was the field Abraham had purchased from the Hittites and where he had buried his wife

Sarah" (Genesis 25:9-10). They must have been proud of their father and honored to place him in the family burial cave.

Abraham's Satisfying Departure

I have one simple response: *what a way to go!*

Don't cry for Abraham. Don't mourn his death. Don't grieve his departure. Rejoice! Celebrate him. Look at what he made of his days on earth. Look how he used his resources.

I've said all along that Abraham's story is our story. This particular narrative of how he lived his last days and then died a satisfied man holds at least two valuable secrets to our finishing well. One has to do with being faithful; the other has to do with being diligent.

The first secret: *faithfully remember that each day offers opportunities for staying young at heart.*

Each morning you wake up with a fresh opportunity to live that day well, to see your next twenty-four hours as a series of choices. The Lord has granted you a genuine stake in what the day holds. Choose a positive attitude. Choose to seek out and focus on the good things. Choose to face your opportunities with eager anticipation. Choose to set aside your own expectations, and then embrace what God chooses to do. Choose to live in a constant state of surprise by laying aside your will and letting the Lord's will unfold.

Each morning you wake up with a fresh opportunity to live that day well, to see your next twenty-four hours as a series of choices.

Choose your friends well. Be kind to everyone, but distance yourself from negative people, or you will become like them. If they're selfish, you, too, will become self-serving. If their world revolves around themselves, you, too, will become narcissistic, cynical, and bitter.

Choose wisely where you invest your time, energy, talent, and resources. Cultivate healthy habits. Fill your environment not only with technology but also with music and art by attending the symphony and going to concerts, plays, museums, and galleries. Become a part of these celebrations of life and beauty. Watch less television and read more books.

Choose to sweat more. Eat fewer snacks and savor more nourishment.

Legendary baseball pitcher Satchel Paige once pitched an inning of an exhibition game at the age of sixty-two. Before he sat down, he retired Hank Aaron and five other batters with twelve pitches. When asked about his excellent health and impressive longevity, he offered six homegrown rules for staying young. “If you’re over six years of age, follow these rules closely,” he said.

1. Avoid fried meats, which anger up the blood.
2. If your stomach disputes you, lie down and pacify it with cool thoughts.
3. Keep the juices flowing by jangling around gently as you move.
4. Go very light on the vices, such as carrying on in society—the social ramble ain’t restful.
5. Avoid running at all times.
6. And don’t look back. Something might be gaining on you.[63]

Choose how you will face failures or disappointments. We all admire Babe Ruth as one of the greatest sluggers to play the game, ending his career with a home-run record of 714, which remained unbroken until 1974. The home-run king also struck out 1,330 times. In fact, the all-time strikeout leaderboard reads like a who’s who of champion power hitters. Reggie Jackson, Sammy Sosa, and Alex Rodriguez appear in the top five.

The lesson: to hit a lot of balls, you have to swing at a lot of pitches.

Keep swinging away.

The second secret: *diligently refuse to give up.*

Determine that you will never stop living until someone puts a mirror under your nose and there’s no fog. Never stop. Never give up.

A Satchel Paige biographer writes, “Told all his life that black lives matter less than white ones, he teased journalists by adding or subtracting years each time they asked his age, then asked them, ‘How old would you be if you didn’t know how old you were?’”[64]

That’s a thought-provoking question, isn’t it?

So how old are you?

CHAPTER 20



PORTRAIT OF A HERO . . . WARTS AND EVERYTHING

AN OLD WOODSMAN'S PROVERB SAYS, "A tree is best measured when it's down." Carl Sandburg picked up that line and applied it to Abraham Lincoln in his biography.[65] It's poignant and utterly true. I hesitate to admire people who still have years before them with the potential to wipe out the good years they have lived thus far. I've seen this happen too many times to count. And some of the disgraced have been among my friends.

When the tree is down, however, we can judge greatness with unquestioning confidence. The person's life has become a legacy, so all the facts are in. Even a giant redwood, whose lofty branches held secrets high above the forest floor when its vertical frame stood tall, cannot hide anything once it's down. Ordinary

people can approach and appraise. The deaths of most men and women merely bring them down to size, but in the cases of a few special individuals—the truly great—the secrets they once held while living now show them to be worthy of even more respect.

The mighty redwood that was Abraham is now down, lying horizontal before us. We have walked his length from the roots up and have examined each flaw and every triumph. His many imperfections reveal that he was a man with a nature like ours, yet more than half the world has judged him "great." Jews, Muslims, and Christians venerate him as "father" in some respect. Jews, Arabs, and many Bedouin tribes trace their physical ancestry to him. Christians follow the reasoning of the apostle Paul, who called Abraham "the father of all who believe" (Romans 4:11, NASB). But should we call him great?

Abraham's many imperfections reveal that he was a man with a nature like ours, yet more than half the world has judged him "great."

In the New Testament, the writer of the book of Hebrews offers a summary of Abraham's life, and in the span of about twelve verses, he makes a compelling case for the patriarch's greatness.

Praise for Abraham

Hebrews 11 has been called the "hall of faith"—and for good reason. Beginning with one of the first people on earth, the author traces the essential quality of faith through Hebrew history, highlighting ten great men and women. Abraham receives extended treatment as the writer follows his spiritual journey through its heights, down into its depths, and back up again. In a short space, Abraham is measured and found worthy of imitation.

The author begins by examining Abraham's high points, the first of which is this: *when he was called, he obeyed.*

The assessment opens with these words: "It was by faith that Abraham . . ." (Hebrews 11:8). Those words "by faith" are the most important part of Abraham's story. He responded based on belief—not because he could see what

was ahead, not because he had a printout of what the future held, not because he could calculate a return on his investment for this venture. "By faith" means he willingly exchanged the known for the unknown—all because he trusted in God.

"God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. *He went without knowing where he was going*" (Hebrews 11:8, emphasis mine). Abraham didn't follow the Lord's instructions because he had no other options or because he thought it would make him wealthy. He already had an established life in a prosperous civilization, and he had every reason to remain in his home. By the time of his call from God, he had lived in Ur of the Chaldeans for seventy-five years! Many seventy-five-year-olds think it's a risk to step off their front porch and take a long walk or go to the store alone. God called this seventy-five-year-old man and his sixty-five-year-old wife to pack their belongings on carts and leave everything else behind—including their extended family—to pursue an unknown, sketchy future. By faith, Abraham obeyed. And without hesitation, I call that great!

Think of all that Abraham *didn't* have. No precise destination, no map or GPS, no travel agency, no AAA membership, no insurance, and no written contract promising safety. He had no security team—and as a wealthy man, he could have easily been robbed. No hotel accommodations. No prayer support from home; everyone he knew worshiped idols. It was a calling most of us would have extreme difficulty following. Some wouldn't even consider it. If God should command us to go somewhere far from home, we at least want a map. But God responds, "No, I want to cultivate your faith in Me, so I'm holding back all the details. You won't know ahead of time what you're going to encounter, so you'll have to stay close to Me."

Great rewards await if you obey without knowing all the details.

Great rewards await if you obey without knowing all the details. It's a principle God wants each of His followers to experience. Learning to trust Him is like making a journey step after step. Faith builds upon faith. When we trust, we receive unexpected blessings. This strengthens our confidence and inspires us to trust God again as we take another step. It isn't complicated, but it goes against our nature. Regrettably, faith is a hypothetical concept for most. The great majority of

people never experience the joys of this faith journey because they won't take the first step without knowing the precise destination. But if we know the destination and have all the details, we don't need faith, and we will never experience its rewards. (Read that last sentence again.)

God wants us to grow in faith, not only because we need Him, but also because it's good for us. It stretches us beyond our comfort zone. *Way* beyond. We need to know the experience of embarking on an endeavor we've never tried before. We need to know that, with His help, we can safely tackle any challenge and take the risk of getting in over our heads. We need to know that when God calls us to a task, He will give us what we need to succeed.

Cynthia and I have made several moves in our lives. Every one of them led to a future we couldn't have anticipated, with challenges and rewards we never could have imagined. Invariably, we look back over our almost sixty years together and say, "I'm so glad we did that." Was it easy? Rarely. Obedience requires slightly more faith than we have exercised in the past. But trusting God never fails to satisfy. The rewards along the way are exhilarating. (Read those two sentences again.)

The author of Hebrews praises Abraham for another spiritual high point: *what he was promised, he believed.* "Even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith—for he was like a foreigner, living in tents" (Hebrews 11:9).

If you've ever lived in a foreign land where you didn't know the language or the culture, then you can appreciate Abraham's difficulty. He moved to a place where he didn't know a soul. He didn't know whom to befriend and whom to avoid. He had no permanent place to live, no community to rely upon for support, and no one to call in times of trouble. When he left Ur, he left the security of a permanent place of residence. He camped on lands that may or may not have been claimed, and he likely was regarded with suspicion. He was able to live apart from established and secure human communities only because he "was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God" (Hebrews 11:10).

He was also sustained by God's promise of a son. Many years after Abraham, Paul commented on Abraham's ability to endure difficult circumstances and to remain obedient through years of waiting:

> Abraham didn't focus on his own impotence and say, "It's hopeless. This hundred-year-old body could never father a child." Nor did he survey Sarah's decades of infertility and give up. He didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong, ready for God, sure that God would make good on what he had said.
>
> ROMANS 4:19-21, *THE MESSAGE*

Whether living in a tent on foreign land or defying the odds of having a child, Abraham believed the promise. He took the Lord at His word.

Do you believe God? If He says something in His Book, do you look for ways to dodge the issue and rationalize your way around it, or do you see His commands as a personal opportunity to live by faith? Guard against letting the difficulty of a choice keep you from accepting the challenge of doing what He asks. Don't let the odds of any situation keep you from trusting God. The odds will often be stacked against you, or truth be told, you might find yourself blindsided by overwhelming odds. People who live by faith don't focus on actuaries and statistics. When God says, "Go!" people of faith don't waste time calculating the odds. They obey God's instructions and refuse to live on the edge of fear.

In describing another of Abraham's high points, the writer of Hebrews praises his enduring faith: *when he was tested, he trusted.* "It was by faith that Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice when God was testing him. Abraham, who had received God's promises, was ready to sacrifice his only son, Isaac" (Hebrews 11:17).

How could Abraham do that? How could a father ascend a mountain with a razor-sharp blade, firewood, and a torch, and then place his son on an altar as a sacrifice to God? How could he trust the Lord's character so completely that he would slit the young man's throat just as he'd done with the many animal sacrifices he had offered before? Sometimes I close my eyes, take a slow breath, and try to imagine myself in his sandals. What enabled aging Abraham to make that sacrifice?

"God had told him, 'Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted.' Abraham reasoned that if Isaac died, God was able to bring him back to life again. And in a sense, Abraham did receive his son back from the dead"

(Hebrews 11:18-19). When he left his servants at the bottom of the mountain, he said, “The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back” (Genesis 22:5).

Don’t forget to take note of those pronouns. “*We* will worship. . . . *We* will come right back.” Abraham knew on the front end that whatever happened on the hilltop, however difficult it might be, he would somehow return with Isaac. How could he know that? Because he had the eyes of faith.

I will add one final high point in Abraham’s journey: *as he was blessed, he shared.*

As we have learned, Abraham became incredibly wealthy (see Genesis 13:2; 24:35). Rich in land. Rich in cattle, sheep, goats, and camels. Rich in silver and gold. And generating all of this wealth was a huge enterprise that employed hundreds of people (see 14:14), perhaps thousands by the end of his lifetime. But as he was blessed, he shared with others. He allowed Lot to separate from him and to keep the portion of wealth Abraham had helped him build (see 13:2-11). Abraham insisted that the people who had helped him rescue Lot keep a share of the spoils while he took none for himself (see 14:24). He helped his many sons establish their own households by giving them provisions out of his wealth (see 25:5-6).

The only valid reason for anyone to make more than they need is to give away the surplus. God graciously provides an overabundance for one purpose: so that we might share it. So . . . share it! Go against the grain of our culture. Start a radical new fad. Choose to live reasonably and modestly—I don’t mean we should exist in a dump or wear burlap for clothes—and give the rest of it to whatever ministry the Lord places on your conscience.

The average Christian today gives between 3 and 4 percent of his or her discretionary income to God’s work. Imagine the problems ministries could solve—without the help of government—if Christians followed Abraham’s example and donated at least 10 percent of their income. These organization’s debts would be paid, their facilities would be owned outright, their equipment would be current, their supplies would be fully stocked, and great work would be accomplished. And that’s based on only 10 percent!

Abraham’s Blemishes

No one is perfect. Not even the heroes we admire.

Norman Cousins, a biographer of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, tells the story of how the great missionary-physician loathed any distractions from helping his patients. A publisher had been after him to write, but he refused to make it a priority. On top of his reluctance, he made no effort to organize his material. Once his assistant pressed him to write, and he reluctantly promised to do some work on the manuscripts. She told Cousins,

> He came to his room early in the afternoon and began to write. I returned an hour later and peeked into the room. The Doctor was no longer there. A breeze had blown some of the sheets of the manuscripts off the desk. An antelope had wandered into the room. Some of the sheets had been trampled upon. I had no way of knowing whether any had been eaten. [66]

While Dr. Schweitzer was a phenomenal individual—he had earned several PhDs and was a magnificent organist, a brilliant scientist, a man of medicine, and a philosopher—he was still a mere human being. Cousins writes,

> Albert Schweitzer is not above criticism. Few men of our century have come closer to attaining the Greek idea of the whole man—the thinker, the leader, the man of action, the scientist, the artist. But like all great figures in history, he becomes real not despite his frailties, but because of them.[67]

The Bible doesn't try to paint its heroes as anything but real people with real flaws. We get to see them "ruffness, pimples warts & everything," in the words of Oliver Cromwell.[68] Consequently, Abraham becomes real not despite his frailties, but because of them. Like all real people, he had weaknesses. Some of them are disappointing to look at, but they help us see the whole man. And those weaknesses help us learn how to regard our own.

In Genesis 12, we see evidence of Abraham's first flaw: *when he was afraid, he retreated*. "There was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land" (verse 10, NASB).

As a reader, we want to shout a warning back through time: "No, Abraham, don't go to Egypt! There's trouble down there. Stay in the Land of Promise. God will not let you starve; He will meet your needs!" But he retreated from the

challenge. While there, one weakness triggered another.

> As he was approaching the border of Egypt, Abram said to his wife, Sarai, "Look, you are a very beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife. Let's kill him; then we can have her!' So please tell them you are my sister. Then they will spare my life and treat me well because of their interest in you."
>
> GENESIS 12:11-13

This was no mere flattery; he genuinely recognized that her beauty might put *him* in danger. He was saying, in other words, "To save my skin, go ahead and let him make you a part of his harem. At least I'll live." By having Sarah tell a lie, he hoped to turn a liability into an asset. Even after the scheme blew up in his face, he did it again several years later! "He moved on to Gerar. While living there as a foreigner, Abraham introduced his wife, Sarah, by saying, 'She is my sister.' So King Abimelech of Gerar sent for Sarah and had her brought to him at his palace" (Genesis 20:1-2).

Abraham repeated the failure because he had a propensity to lie when he felt threatened. And whether this ugly trait was inherited genetically or learned by example, Isaac picked it up from his father. Many years later, after Abraham had died, Isaac moved near the Philistine city of Gerar. "When the men who lived there asked Isaac about his wife, Rebekah, he said, 'She is my sister.' He was afraid to say, 'She is my wife.' He thought, 'They will kill me to get her, because she is so beautiful'" (Genesis 26:7).

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Some time passed, and Isaac visited the city along with Rebekah. Apparently, he forgot to keep playing the part of brother. The king of the Philistines happened to see Isaac acting in a very unbrotherly way with her while they were alone. Some translations read, "He saw Isaac caressing Rebekah." *Caressing* is based on the Hebrew term for "laughing," but the form suggests something far more intimate. He probably was playing the lover's game of tickle-slap.

> Immediately, Abimelech called for Isaac and exclaimed, "She is obviously your wife! Why did you say, 'She is my sister'?"
>
> "Because I was afraid someone would kill me to get her from me," Isaac replied.

> "How could you do this to us?" Abimelech exclaimed. "One of my people might easily have taken your wife and slept with her, and you would have made us guilty of great sin."
>
> GENESIS 26:9-10

If you have children, share your past mistakes with them and help them learn from your failures. They won't think less of you; they'll admire your authenticity. They will feel closer to you. Your humility will endear them to you, and it will give them the courage to confess their struggles to you.

Abraham failed to do that with Isaac, and Isaac repeated his father's sin.

Abraham's second weakness: *when Abraham became impatient, he heeded the wrong counsel.*

> Sarai, Abram's wife, had not been able to bear children for him. But she had an Egyptian servant named Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "The LORD has prevented me from having children. Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her." And Abram agreed with Sarai's proposal.
>
> GENESIS 16:1-2

I confess that I, too, have heeded the wrong counsel. I've followed advice that I hoped would resolve a situation quickly. I had grown tired of waiting. In Abraham's case, the bad advice came from his wife, which put him in a no-win situation. Any decision he made would get him in trouble with someone—either God or his wife. When put under pressure, Abraham chose to please his wife instead of the Lord.

Be careful whom you listen to. Sometimes the people you love most will offer counsel that is absolutely wrong. Your spouse loves you, but your decisions affect your mate, so he or she may have difficulty remaining impartial. Your children adore you, but they lack life experience. Even wise, godly, impartial advisers can be wrong. Take care to hear the people who love you, and give consideration to their opinions, but always examine the counsel you receive under the white-hot lighting of Scripture. Make your decision a matter of prayer, and resist the urge to believe what you're told and rush ahead.

Again, I want to shout a warning back through time: “Abraham, think. Having sex with your maid? Ask yourself how a child conceived by sin could possibly be God’s promised heir?”

Abraham responded to the stress of delay by heeding bad advice and then rushing ahead. His plan was doomed to fail from the beginning. You can be a great and godly person who chooses to listen to wrong counsel. If you do, you’ll live to regret it. Abraham, as great a man as he was, ignored his better judgment and acted in haste. How often after the fact must he have thought, *What was I thinking?*

Lessons for the Road

As we come to the end of Abraham’s faith journey, I want to leave you with just a few parting principles taken from this review of the patriarch’s life—four of them, to be precise. They’re simple to understand but challenging to apply. In fact, they’ll take a lifetime to master. Like the four points on a compass, they will steer you well on your journey toward spiritual maturity.

1. Wherever God leads, follow.

Be sure your decision is based on God’s leading. You can usually tell by asking yourself how much faith will be required by each of your options. The one requiring the greatest trust in God . . . that’s usually the one. Ironically, the one with the greatest apparent risk is the safest of all, because the Lord will always honor your decision to trust Him. Even if you make a misstep, He will honor your faith by guiding you back onto the path He has established for you. There’s no safer place than where God sends you.

In my life, one of the greatest challenges to my faith came in the form of a call from Dr. Don Campbell, who was the president of Dallas Theological Seminary at the time. He and a board member called to ask if I would let them put my name on the short list for the next president.

I said, “President of what?”

“President of Dallas Theological Seminary, of course.”

I thought one of my buddies had put them up to a practical joke. When it became clear that they were serious, I replied, “I don’t have to think long. No.”

I didn't want to leave the ministry I loved in Fullerton, and I *really* didn't feel qualified to lead a group of seasoned scholars. But after time and prayer, it eventually became clear that this was exactly where God was leading. Leaving a good thing is hard. Going toward the unknown is even harder. It requires trust in a sovereign God to lead you there. It demands some sacrifices, a willingness to accept uncertainty, a loss of position, misunderstanding among a few friends, even some outright hardship at times. All that and more accompanied my decision to obey. But make no mistake: in terms of ministry, I made exactly the choice God wanted. The rewards have eclipsed all the hardships.

Our journey of faith requires us to go where we should be and do what we should be doing. If we don't—if we reject God's leading—we forfeit His best and accept mediocrity. That's never a good trade.

2. Whatever God promises, believe.

Someone put it this way: "Never doubt in the dark what God gave you in the light." During the great days of your life, when God speaks through His Word, remember His promises. Rest in them, apply them, and expect their fulfillment. His promises are given for you to believe, not merely to quote. So? Believe them! Quit quibbling over them. Stop overanalyzing them. Believe them, which means you accept them, and then act upon them.

God's promises are given for you to believe, not merely to quote.

3. Whenever God tests, trust.

A test usually makes us feel vulnerable. We get weak. We begin to panic. We try to find safety in the familiar. We avoid taking risks. But tests of faith call for boldness. You may have heard it said that "God never gives us more than we can handle." That's absolutely wrong! He frequently challenges us to trust Him more by giving us far more than we can handle on our own. He wants us to turn to Him in desperation and ask for His assistance. He's always willing to help, but He wants us to recognize our need and to *want* Him.

After I accepted the call to be the president of Dallas Seminary, my first two years in Dallas became a private crucible, a time of personal refining that occasionally reduced me to trembling tears. I loved what I was doing. I was

being stretched and challenged. My colleagues at the school gave their enthusiastic support and embraced the changes I implemented. But I was in *way* over my head. Having left the safety of my role as pastor, I had to depend completely on God now that I was a seminary leader.

Ultimately, what kept me going through the difficult transition was trust. I knew God would not lead me someplace only to back off and let me self-destruct. I discovered that my determination to lean on Him and draw my strength from Him always paid off. He provided inner confidence and creative ideas that proved essential.

4. However God blesses, share.

How easy it is for us to receive God's blessings yet fail to balance receiving with giving. Resolve to become a generous person. I will warn you, however, that giving generously requires faith—trust that the Almighty will look after your needs. That's because we have a natural fear of running out of provisions, no matter how much we possess. When asked, "How much is enough?" a thin and frightened voice within our soul shouts, "Just a little bit more!"

I wonder how much better we would know our God if we gave more generously. We don't have greater intimacy with the Almighty because we don't really believe He will honor our generosity . . . so we hold back. To test this, ask yourself, *When was the last time I gave something away? Something really nice. Something that meant a lot to me.* Deep, satisfying joy awaits those who give abundantly.

God has blessed you. So share. Become a generous person. When you do, you will discover a greater satisfaction than you have ever known.

Wherever God leads, follow.

Whatever God promises, believe.

Whenever God tests, trust.

However God blesses, share.

These four simple directives summarize Abraham's formula for success. At times he succumbed to weakness and let his flaws lead him astray. Even so, he ended well. Despite his occasional failure, God rewarded his faith and called him

“my friend” (Isaiah 41:8; see also 2 Chronicles 20:7 and James 2:23). The apostle Paul measured the patriarch after he was “down” and wrote a fitting epitaph.

> Abraham never wavered in believing God’s promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God. He was fully convinced that God is able to do whatever he promises. And because of Abraham’s faith, God counted him as righteous. And when God counted him as righteous, it wasn’t just for Abraham’s benefit. It was recorded for our benefit, too, assuring us that God will also count us as righteous if we believe in him, the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.
>
> ROMANS 4:20-24

Abraham’s story is our story. In our own way, each of us is a nomad. Like this great man of faith, we have been called to embark on a great spiritual journey toward a destination God will show us (see Genesis 12:1). Abraham’s epitaph can also be ours if, like him, we choose to be “fully convinced that God is able to do whatever he promises.” Then, like our father in faith, we will be declared righteous on the basis of our trust in Him.

You have read enough about this. It is now time to do it. Trust your God. He will abundantly reward you for doing so. God will do what He has promised. Will you trust Him?

Prove it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE WORDS OF SOLOMON ARE FAMILIAR TO MANY:

> Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. . . . Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.
>
> ECCLESIASTES 4:9, 12

Those words are certainly true when it comes to writing a book. Anyone who thinks a book is the work of only one person has never written one! I am so grateful for all who have assisted me in bringing this volume to completion. I could never have accomplished this project alone.

Mark Gaither, my son-in-law, faithfully and efficiently served as my editor. I am grateful for his willingness to juggle his other demands and responsibilities in order to give this project the time and attention it required. In addition to the task of correcting my literary mistakes and giving his creative touch to the text, he was diligent in doing research to guard the accuracy of numerous facts as well as verify the sources of all my references. Doing all of this within the required deadline was no small task. Mark deserves loud applause for this monumental accomplishment.

The team of men and women at Tyndale House Publishers has made writing this book a delightful experience from start to finish. My initial visits with Ron Beers and Lisa Jackson as we discussed my writing this book were insightful and invigorating. I found their excitement affirming as I began to write and their anticipation encouraging during the long months that followed. During this time, Jon Farrar, Stephanie Rische, Kara Leonino, Maria Eriksen, and Erin Gwynne made suggestions and offered ideas that added fuel to the fire of my enthusiasm. My gratitude for the competence, integrity, and professionalism of this outstanding publishing firm knows no bounds. It is a distinct pleasure to be named as one of their authors.

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Finally—as always—I must again acknowledge my lifelong partner in ministry. I have no one more enthusiastic or supportive than my wife, Cynthia. She remains fully committed to whatever project we're engaged in together. Regardless of the time and energy a book like this requires and in spite of the hours it takes to do it with excellence, she's there. However, I must add, she had no idea what she was getting into when she said "I do" more than fifty-nine years ago.

APPENDIX

How to Begin a Relationship with God

OF ALL THE HEROES mentioned in the Bible, the only one God called His friend was Abraham (Isaiah 41:8; see also 2 Chronicles 20:7 and James 2:23). Abraham's biography shows that he was far from perfect, however; his flaws appear throughout his life story. So why did the Lord regard him so highly? Equally important, how can you and I become God's friend?

According to Abraham's biography in Genesis, God chose to befriend him based on no merit of his own. The Lord, all on His own, extended an invitation for Abraham to receive His favor. The patriarch responded to God's invitation by believing His promises. "Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith" (Genesis 15:6).

That was then. Fast-forward to now. The good news is that God has extended the same invitation to us. If we want to have a relationship with God, we need to understand four vital truths. Let's look closely at each one.

Our Spiritual Condition: Totally Depraved

The first truth is deeply personal. One look in the mirror of Scripture, and our human condition becomes painfully clear:

> There is none righteous, not even one;
> There is none who understands,
> There is none who seeks for God;
> All have turned aside, together they have become useless;
> There is none who does good,
> There is not even one.
>
> ROMANS 3:10-12, NASB

We are all sinners through and through—totally depraved. Now, that doesn't mean we've committed every evil known to humankind. We're not as *bad* as we can be; we're just as *bad off* as we can be. Sin colors all our thoughts, motives, words, and actions. If depravity were blue, we'd be blue all over. Inside and out.

Still don't believe it? Look around. Everything around us bears the smudge marks of our sinful nature. Despite our best effort to create a perfect world, crime statistics continue to soar, corruption oozes from the pores of every society, and families keep crumbling.

Something has gone terribly wrong in our culture and in ourselves—something deadly. Contrary to how the world would repackage it, me-first living doesn't equal rugged individuality and freedom; it equals death. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "The wages of sin is death" (6:23). He had in mind our spiritual and physical death that comes from God's righteous judgment of our sin, along with all the emotional and practical effects of the separation we experience on a daily basis.

God's Character: Infinitely Holy

How can God judge each of us for a sinful state we were born into? Our total depravity is only half the answer. The other half is God's infinite holiness.

The fact that we know things are not as they should be points us to a standard of goodness beyond ourselves. Our sense of injustice on this side of eternity implies a perfect standard of justice over and above our reality. That standard and source is God Himself. And God's bright-white standard of holiness contrasts starkly with our all-blue sinful condition.

Scripture says, "God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all" (1 John 1:5). He is absolutely holy—which creates a problem for us. If He's so pure, how can we who are so impure relate to Him?

Perhaps we could try to be better people, extending our very best effort to tilt the balance in our favor with our good deeds. Or maybe we could continually seek out methods for self-improvement. Throughout history, people have attempted to live up to God's standard by keeping the Ten Commandments or by living by their own code of ethics. Unfortunately, no one ever has—and no one

ever can—come close to satisfying the demands of God's high and holy law. "No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are" (Romans 3:20).

Our Need: A Substitute

Here we are—sinners by birth, sinners by nature, and sinners by choice—trying to pull ourselves up by our own strength and effort to attain a relationship with our holy Creator. But every time we try, we fall flat on our faces. We can't live a good enough life to make up for our sin, because God's standard isn't merely "good enough"—it's absolute perfection. And we can't make amends for the offense our sin has created without dying for it.

Who can get us out of this colossal mess?

If someone could live perfectly, honoring God's law completely, and could bear sin's death penalty for us—in our place—then we would be saved from our predicament. But is there such a person? Thankfully, yes!

Meet your substitute: Jesus Christ. He is the One who suffered the punishment of death . . . the punishment you deserve!

Read the following statement slowly and thoughtfully.

> [God] made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 5:21, NASB

God's Provision: A Savior

God rescued us by sending His Son, Jesus, to die for our sin on the cross (see 1 John 4:9-10). Jesus was fully human and, at the same time, fully God (see John 1:1, 18)—a truth that ensures His understanding of our weakness, His power to forgive, and His ability to bridge the gap between God and us (see Romans 5:6-11). In short, we are "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24, NASB). Two words in this verse need further explanation: *justified* and *redemption*.

Justification is God's act of mercy in which He declares believing sinners righteous while they are still in their sinning state. Justification doesn't mean God *makes* us righteous so we never sin again; rather, He *declares* us righteous

—much like a judge pardons a guilty criminal. Because Jesus took our sin upon Himself and suffered our judgment on the cross, God forgives our debt and proclaims us pardoned.

Redemption is God's act of paying the ransom price to release us from our bondage of sin. Held hostage by Satan, we were shackled by the chains of sin and the unbreakable jaws of death. Like a loving parent whose child has been kidnapped, God willingly paid the ransom for each of us. And what a price He paid! He gave His only Son to bear our sins—past, present, and future. Jesus' death and resurrection broke our chains and set us free to become children of God (see Romans 6:16-18, 22; Galatians 4:4-7).

Placing Your Faith in Christ

These four truths describe how God has provided a way to Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ. Because the price has been paid in full by God, we must respond to His free gift of eternal life in total trust and confidence that He will save us. We're back to that all-important word that was woven through Abraham's life: *faith*. We must step forward into the relationship with God that He has prepared for us—not by doing good works or by being a good person, but by coming to Him just as we are and accepting His justification and redemption by faith.

> By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.
>
> EPHESIANS 2:8-9, NASB

We accept God's gift of salvation simply by placing our faith in Christ alone for the forgiveness of our sins. At that moment, our colossal mess is forever removed!

Would you like to enter a relationship with your Creator by faith . . . trusting Christ as your Savior? If so, here's a simple prayer you can repeat to express your faith:

> Dear God, I know my sin has put a barrier between You and me. Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to pay the complete price for my sins as He died in my place. I trust in Jesus alone to forgive my sins, and I

accept His gift of eternal life. I ask Jesus to be my personal Savior and the Lord of my life. I thank You for accepting me as I am and for Your commitment to make me the person I long to be. In Jesus' name, amen.

No other decision you will ever make can compare with the one that puts you in a right relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ, who loved you and gave Himself for you!

When you enter into this eternal relationship with God, you follow in the footsteps of Abraham, "the father of all who believe" (Romans 4:11, NASB). Like him, you begin your own journey of faith in which the Lord will cultivate your trust in Him. And, best of all, God calls you "My friend."

NOTES

[1] Oliver Cromwell, *The Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*, vol. 21 (London: William Sandby, 1760), 200.
[2] Oliver Cromwell, quoted in Laura Lunger Knoppers, *Constructing Cromwell: Ceremony, Portrait, and Print, 1645–1661* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80.
[3] Most statistics show that more than half the world's population claims to be Jewish, Muslim, or Christian. Each of these religious traditions traces its roots to Abraham.
[4] Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 11.
[5] James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement*, 3rd edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 179.
[6] Manfred Krebernik, "Mondgott A. I.," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, vol. 8 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993–1997), 361–69.
[7] Allen P. Ross, "Genesis," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 47.
[8] F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Abraham: The Obedience of Faith* (Lynnwood, WA: Emerald Books, 1996), 41–43.
[9] Running to Egypt wasn't inherently wrong for Abram or for his descendants. It was sin for the nation of Israel because God had told them to trust in Him instead. They committed the sin of direct disobedience to God's command.
[10] Thomas Carlyle, *Thomas Carlyle's Collected Works* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), 228.
[11] Richard J. Foster, *Money, Sex and Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 61.
[12] Alexander Whyte, *Bible Characters: Adam to Achan* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier, 1896), 134.
[13] Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 949.
[14] Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 569.
[15] Patti Davis in Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Viking, 2001), 154–55.
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