

UNCHARTED WATERS

GREENER PASTURES

UNKNOWN TERRITORY

# ABRAHAM

A FIELD GUIDE TO LOVING GOD

PLAINS OF INDECISION

SEA OF UNCERTAINTY

PEAK OF PROMISES

VALLEY OF SHADOW

SLIPPERY SLOPE



David A. Tiche

# **ABRAHAM**

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**A FIELD GUIDE TO LOVING GOD**

**DAVID A. TIECHE**



**WESTGATE CHURCH**

*Abraham: A Field Guide to Loving God*

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*To Justus and Jaelle.  
You both have my whole heart.  
Always.*



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## INTRODUCTION

I wrote this book for the people at WestGate Church, the church where I serve in my home city of San Jose, CA. And as I wrote this, I had in mind the faces of an entire community of people. People I've served alongside, people I've laughed with, people I've served communion to, people I've sat next to during services as we prayed and sang songs to God, and people who I've just hung out with because they're super fun people and life is better with them in it. These are people who I know, above all else, want to love God well. I know this because this desire leaks out of them so often. I can see it in the way they give of their time, the way they respond with their money and support important work both here and across the world. I see it in the way they speak to other people, serve their kids, love their spouses, and devote their very best time and energy to living like Jesus did.<sup>1</sup>

That's why I'm so excited to share this. Part of being a pastor is sharing your own life and what God is teaching you and forming in you. And this model, from Abraham, has been very helpful to me to follow Jesus more closely and more fully submit my life to God. But this model isn't mine.

In September of 2019, I decided to enroll in seminary to get an advanced degree in theology, mainly because I had way too much free time and money just hanging around. At the time, Western Seminary up in Portland was experimenting with a new way to do seminary. They put a group of pastors from around the country into a single cohort, and the goal was for the next two years that we would go through the material all together, as a group, with one instructor. So, several times a year, me and this amazing group of people from all over the country fly into Southern California and spend a few days together with our instructor Dr. Gerry Breshears.<sup>2</sup> It's like Hogwarts, and Gerry is our Dumbledore. Or maybe it's like Dagobah, and Gerry is our Yoda. You get the idea. Gerry's been teaching theology at Western for more than 40 years.

---

1 Folks like Bob, Erik, Sarah, Lindsey, Ryan, Bree, Joey, Deb, Mark, Heather, Rees, Jeannie, Laura, Doug, Robbie, Philip, Dean, Kim, Marc, Frances, Matthew, Rhoda, Bobby, Chi-en, Calvin, Justin, Shelby, Chris, Ronda, Phil, Olivia, Jon, Lorelei, Kelly, Maya. Man. I could keep going. You all rock. Not to mention the entire staff of WestGate Church, who I get to work with every week. I love building this thing with all of you. Well, everyone except you, David Kim. How dare you imply you're the best "David" on staff, knowing it's true, driving a stake into my heart.

2 Dr. Breshears' first name is pronounced like "Gary" not "Jerry" in case you ever meet him.



I remember our first class together, as a group. I had no idea what to expect. I remember thinking “I wonder how long it will take in this opening lecture before my mind is completely blown away by something Gerry says.” I set a timer on my watch and began taking notes.

Well, it was 14 minutes. 14 minutes! That’s how long I had to wait to have my entire mind blown. But that’s neither here nor there. The first 8 hours of class in that cohort, I felt like I learned more about the Bible and God than I had in the last 8 years. But it was the second day that really did a number on me. After spending 8 hours on the first 11 chapters of the first book of the Bible, Gerry began to talk about the life of Abraham, starting in Genesis 12.

Genesis 1 shows us that human beings are created to be in vibrant relationship with the Creator God. Then, things fall apart. And the stories of Abraham show us some important things about what it means to live life with God.

I’m incredibly grateful to Gerry and the way he walked us through the story of Abraham. He took the life of Abraham and connected it directly to the teachings of Jesus to love God with your heart, soul, strength and mind. As I read Abraham’s story through the lens of Jesus’ teachings, it unlocked something in me. It helped me make sense of things I couldn’t have articulated before. And I’m grateful when I asked him if I could take his teachings and notes and ideas (and all the things that I’ve learned from them), and try to put them in a book, that he graciously said “yes.”

That’s one of the core reasons why I’m so excited to share this. Over the past year, I’ve seen its fruit in my own life. It’s been a four-part diagnostic that’s helped me submit my life to God. It’s been the follow-up questions to this prayer, famously prayed by King David:

#### PSALM 139

<sup>23</sup> Search me, God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

<sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

But I also have another reason for this book. I also wrote this book for *me*.

You see, as I am writing this, my son, Justus, is 15 years old and is a sophomore in high school. His sister, Jaelle, is two years behind him in school. As of this moment, I have a little more than 1,000 days left with my son before he leaves for college. I don't want to think about that too much. Right now, I put my daughter to bed every night, tucking her in and praying with her. That's going to end soon. I don't think her college roommates will appreciate that ritual.

How my son and my daughter choose to live their lives is wildly important for me. These teenage years are so challenging for me as a parent. I'm supposed to instruct them on this stuff, like an Air Traffic Controller, calling ahead of them to provide them a flight plan, to help them avoid turbulence.

And I'm going to be honest: I don't always know how to do this. Like I'm building the airplane *while* I am flying it.

One of my mentors, Ken Van Meter, once told me that you can never give your kids a roadmap, but you can give them a compass. After all, who knows what the world or what life will bring? It's impossible to know or predict. So as my son (and a little while after that, my daughter) prepare to launch into a wonderful and cruel and confusing world, I want to be the sort of father who gives them a compass – or a field guide if you will – a way to know whether they are on course as a person. A way to evaluate things. A trustworthy compass that will guide each of them (and me!) through life, especially the dark storms that will inevitably come their way.

Because life isn't easy. Being a parent is one of the best things that has *\*ever\** happened to me, defining and redefining my life in magnificent ways. But parenting is also humiliating. It reveals you for who you actually are, and I can't tell you how many times I realized I was inept or incapable.

Nobody tells you how to disarm the clever and complex defense mechanisms you developed to survive in this harsh world – the ones that keep you safe but lock your true self and God outside in the cold.

Nobody tells you what to do when your own demons start rattling up in you, and you can't seem to make them go away.

Nobody told me that.

I need more than “Try harder.”

Or simple platitudes that pretend like everything is okay.

I don't want my shortcomings and character flaws to continue to hurt the people I say I love the most. I want to be healed.

I am tired of the uncertainty of having desires and ambitions, but not knowing which ones are good and from God, and which ones are from my brokenness. I want to have a heart that's recalibrated.

I'm tired of my selfishness and ruthless preoccupation with my own self. I know life is not about what I want. I want to know that it's possible to use the entirety of my life – my energy, my money, my words, my influence, my privilege – to help people. To love others.

I want to stop being held hostage by my bad theology about God. When bad things happen, I always expect God to leave, because God clearly has his favorites – it's just not me. I want to stop believing the lie that at His core, God's primary emotion toward me is profound disappointment.

I need help out of this.

I need a guide.

I need to get closer to God.

And Abraham has been helpful.

Because. Despite his lowly background.

Despite his considerable flaws.

Despite his wrong-headed religious ideas.

Despite his failures.

Despite his mistakes.

God found Abraham.

And Abraham followed God.

Even though he didn't know what he was doing

Or where he was going.

Abraham stubbornly hung onto God.

He heard God.

He listened to God.

He followed God.

Even when it didn't make sense.

And sometimes, he failed miserably.

But God still came through. And God never left him.

And because of that, Abraham learned much about what God is like.

And the story of Abraham's life with God

Is an amazing story

That changed the world.

And even today

When people think of Abraham's story, they think of his God.

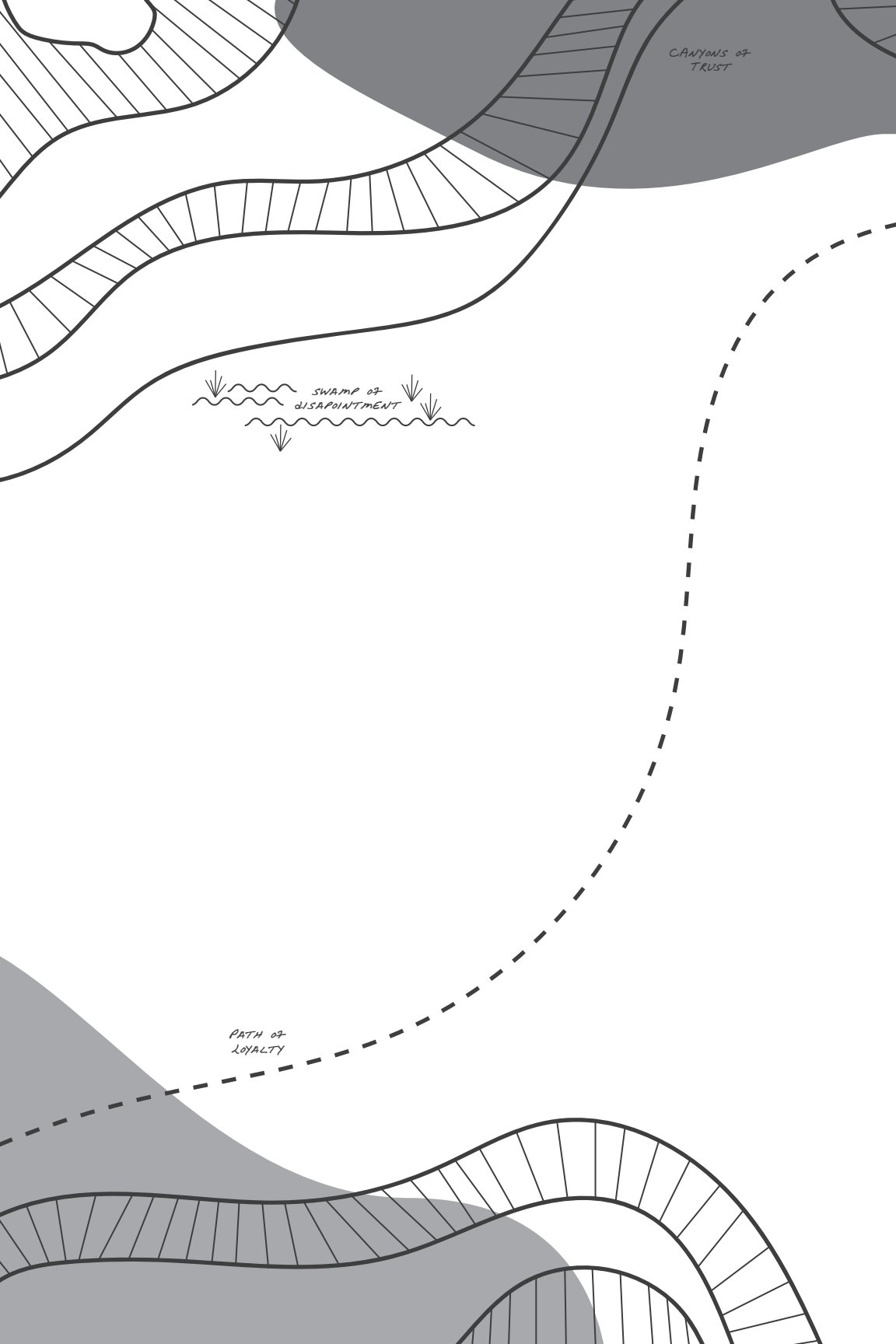
And say, "That's the kind of story only God could write."

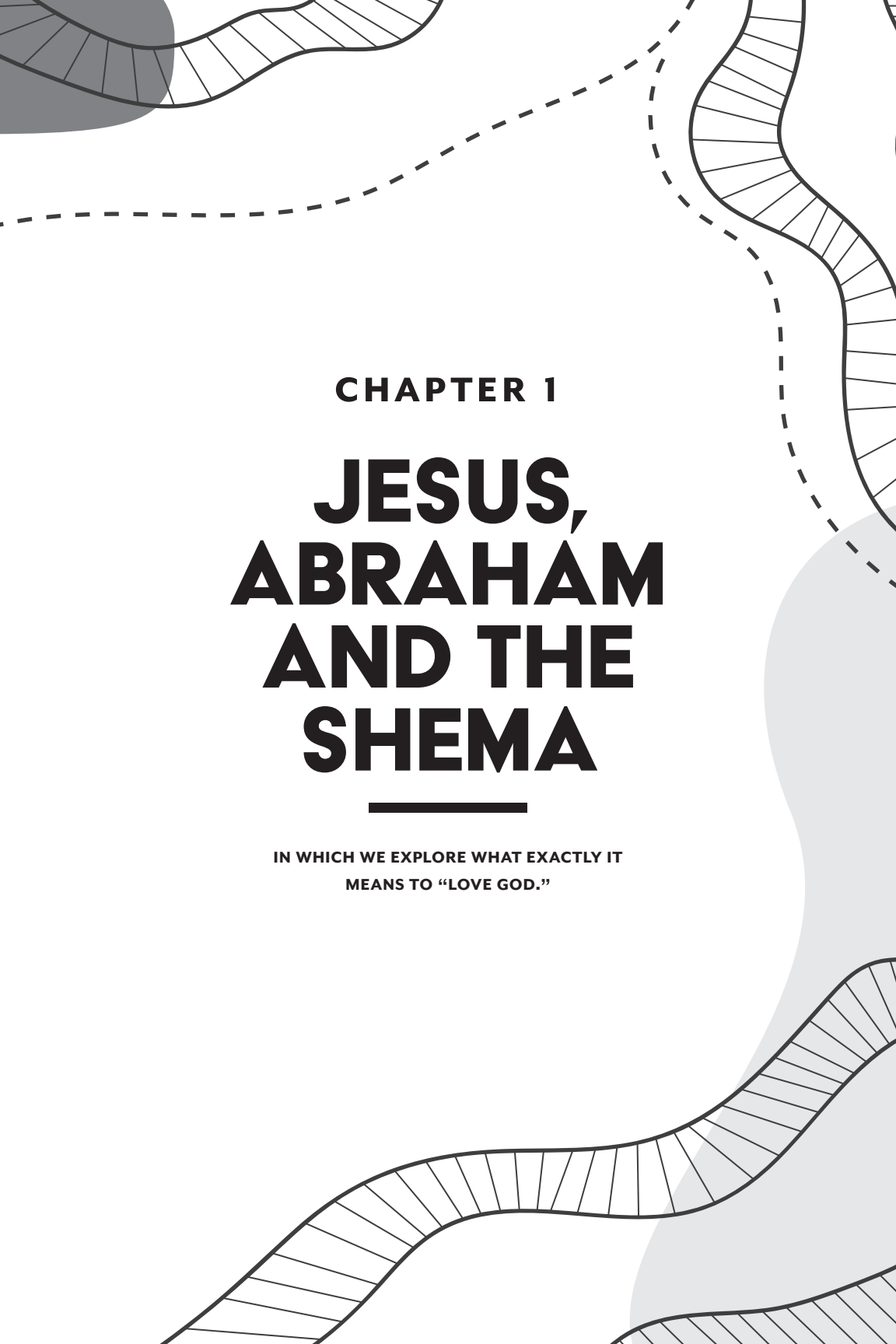
And I guess, that's what I'm after, too.

CANYONS OF TRUST

SWAMP OF DISAPPOINTMENT

PATH OF LOYALTY





**CHAPTER 1**

**JESUS,  
ABRAHAM  
AND THE  
SHEMA**

---

**IN WHICH WE EXPLORE WHAT EXACTLY IT  
MEANS TO “LOVE GOD.”**

## THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING.

I want to tell you about my first experience with God.

Which is a weird way to start a book, but not so weird if the book is about God.

I know, for some people out there, it's like me saying, "I want to tell you about my first experience with poltergeists." Or "I want to tell you about my first experience with aliens." Or "I want to tell you about my first experience with Vancouver Grizzly fans."

But here it is.

I was five.

Sometime around when I was in kindergarten, my parents (who were good, Mid-western folk) must have decided that now that they had a kid, they had best cobble together some values, and decided to send me to church on Sunday mornings for Sunday School. Luckily, there was a yellow brick church down the road – exactly 1 mile down the road, in fact – called Mt. Zion. My Dad dropped me off each Sunday morning at 9 a.m. There were kids there, and sometimes fun games or songs to sing, and best of all, cookies.

The Sunday School teachers were nice, and told Bible stories that, looking back on them, felt a little like Aesop Fables. Emphasis on "felt" here, because there was this thing called a Flannelgraph, which was a big felt board featuring blocky characters cut out of felt to illustrate the story.

We did not have HD video.

At any rate, one morning, immediately after class was over, the teacher told us that we could go to the church library. My mom was a kindergarten teacher, and our frequent visits to the local library were my favorite, so I was excited to go. The church library had a children's section, and I picked a few books and checked them out. That night, I opened up one of the books that had been suggested to me.

This children's story book happened to be about hell.

That's right. Hell. The first line was "Do you know what hell is?" I did not. I was five. But, thanks to this author, I was about to find out.

The book began to explain, using words like "eternal separation from God" and "punished for your sins" and even "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Oh! And there were illustrations.

I would have loved to see the back-and-forth correspondence between the author and the illustrator.

*"Yeah, Monique, what we're going for on page 4 is more of a visual hellscape. Yeah. Something with flames. Do you have much experience drawing people experiencing eternal conscious torment?"*

I remember sitting on my bed, and instinctively pulling my multi-colored striped comforter over my head, as a five-year-old protection technique. And I remember feeling a strong emotion rising in me.

Fear.

It was cold, unflinching fear, as strong as iron.

This was the worst news ever.

This was worse than the fact that Darth Vader lived in my closet.

And definitely worse than the tentacled creatures under my bed that required me to long jump onto my mattress when I came back from the bathroom in the middle of the night, lest they grab my ankles and pull me into their lair.

I can't imagine that there are a lot of children's book authors out there whose goal is to pen a book that "provokes existential fear and dread" in children. But I have to hand it to the author of *You're Probably Going to Hell* or whatever the book was titled: he had done an excellent job developing tension within the reader. I frantically turned the page. Was there a way out from this? Or were we all doomed?



The author explained that yes, there was a way out of this horrible fate.  
An escape route.

“Yes, yes,” I said to myself, “I’ll take it. Whatever it takes, I’ll do it.”

The author laid it out. To escape this place – Hell – which was filled with demons, wild torment, blazing fire and unquenchable thirst for all eternity, all you had to do was say these six words.

*God, will you forgive my sins?*

Wait, what? I read that part again, in disbelief. Seriously? This was all you had to do? That was it? Say one sentence?

I read the page again. I looked at each word. I felt a giant relief rising in my kindergarten heart. I could get out of this hell place. I looked at the sentence again, and I said it out loud, like it was a spell, and I was Harry Potter. *Expecto Patronum! Dei Hellus Escapum!*

*God, will you forgive my sins?*

I said it. I looked around, half expecting some sort of cosmic indication. I said it again, this time a little louder, in case God couldn’t quite hear it. I looked at the page again. I followed along, tracing each word with my finger and said the line, out loud, again.

*God, will you forgive my sins.*

I flipped through, to the end of the book, making sure there was nothing else. The author assured me there was not. I closed the book, and said the line one more time, you know, just for good luck.

*God, will you forgive my sins.*

And that was that. I rolled over on my Star Wars pillowcase, kissed Princess Leia goodnight, and prepared to go to sleep. I was safe from the Bad Place, and assured a spot in the Good Place, none of which mattered until after I died, anyway. And

with that terrifying caricature theology lodged firmly in my little five-year-old brain, I drifted off to sleep.

And if I'm honest, I didn't think much about God again until years and years later.

After all, why would I?

God was only really useful as some sort of "get out of Dante's Inferno free" card. He had served his purpose. As I entered into adolescence, I had a life to live, classes to pass, SAT scores to get, girls to get rejected by, Bell Biv DeVoe<sup>1</sup> to listen to.

## SAINT DIANA

Speaking of hell, years later, I was in junior high. I was still hanging around church, mostly because some of my friends went there. At one point, there was a trip or retreat of some sort, where adult leaders took 30 or so of us junior high students to a giant mansion called the Procter House, located in the middle of nowhere. Writing that sentence, I realize that sounds exactly like the plot for a horror film.

During this time, a number of things happened. We played in the snow, played hide-and-seek in this cavernous mansion, and watched movies. But the adults also wanted to do something to help us spiritually, so the leaders prepared little talks and activities. One of the leaders was a saint of a woman named Diana Thomas.

I need to pause and talk about Diana Thomas for a minute. Diana was an adult who voluntarily agreed to hang out with junior high kids. On purpose. And she was singularly gifted at it. Junior high is a terrible time, developmentally, for humans. We were all a quivering mess of insecurity and immaturity, but the primary thing I remember about Diana is that she made me feel like a million bucks. She always made me feel like I was her personal favorite. And she made everyone feel this way. She was filled with an easy, affable joy that made you feel like you mattered. She was a saint.

---

<sup>1</sup> I know that some of my younger readers might be like "whobee whattee" but all you can just keep eating your avocado toast in your wide-leg pants and shut it. NO I AM NOT GETTING DEFENSIVE!

As we gathered as a teeming mess of insecure humanity in one of the great rooms in the Procter House, Diana handed out little slips of paper. It was a quiz. It went something like this...

### The Reason We Go To Church And Follow God Is Because:

- A .** It gets us out of hell.
- B .** We get to go to heaven.
- C .** We get to live a full, meaningful life in a close, loving relationship with God , who walks with us through all the ups and downs of life.

Ooh, ooh, I knew this one.

It was A.

*(Possibly with shades of B.)*

But definitely A. Get out of hell. I remembered that book from all those years ago. I mean, how could I forget? Trauma is funny that way. At any rate, I knew the answer.

I raised my hand.

“The answer is that we get out of hell,” I said. I said this with the exact same surety and confidence that I would have said “Kris Kross” if she had asked, “Who are the Mack Daddy and the Daddy Mack who make you wanna jump, jump?”

Diana looked at me quizzically, and tilted her head to the side, like a cocker spaniel.

“Actually the answer is C,” she said, kindly.

“Uhh, the answer is A,” I said. I wasn’t trying to be disrespectful, or contrarian. I wasn’t that type of kid. I was just stating a fact.

At that point, Diana began explaining why “C” was the correct answer. She began to share about her life. You could not tell by the joy that spilled out of her, but Diana had experienced some real tragedy and pain. Some deep human betrayal. The kind of things that we junior highers – with our limited life experience – probably imagined would make someone permanently sad.

But Diana was not permanently sad. She was the opposite. And she told us, through tears, that through all of this, God had helped her and had been with her. Through everything. She talked as though she had a deep affection for God. Like He was a real person.

“Helped” her?

Been “with” her?

What? This was completely foreign to me.

This was the first time I had ever heard anyone infer that God had something to do, not with merely the afterlife, but with this life.

The way Diana talked, it was as if she somehow lived her life *\*with\** God.

After her brief talk, it was time for a snowman building contest and then hot chocolate, so the room emptied as the junior highers excitedly scurried away to change into their winter gear.

I sat in the room, as it emptied. I looked at the quiz on that slip of paper that Diana had handed us. I read it again.

*C. We get to live a full, meaningful life in a close, loving relationship with God, who walks with us through all the ups and downs of life.*

A loving relationship with God?

I think about this moment a lot. I want to be careful here: I am *not* minimizing the presence or importance of the Biblical ideas about heaven and hell. This is a significant Biblical theme. For example, Jesus directly teaches or says something about hell more than 70 different times in the Gospels. And He talks about heaven,

eternal life, or His coming Kingdom roughly three times as much (more than 190 different times). We would be foolish to ignore Jesus' clear warnings and teachings on this. But of the roughly 1900 total verses that contain Jesus' words, that's only about 3 percent of the time on hell, and 10 percent on heaven. A big deal, for sure – but what about the remaining 87 percent?

My point is, it's possible that without Diana Thomas, I might have gone my entire life without hearing that the church, Jesus and the Bible had *anything* to do with loving God, or living life with God in the here and now.

## **I WANT TO KNOW WHAT LOVE IS. I WANT YOU TO SHOW ME.**

Fast forward a few decades. I'm a pastor now. For years, the church I work at has had a mission statement saying that we exist to help people love God and love other people.

This is because Diana was right. The giant Cosmic story told by the Bible is one of God's desire to be *with His people*. The idea of humans "living life with God and learning to love Him" is one of the main points of the entire Bible, and a major thrust of Jesus' life and words and teachings.

There is a moment in the New Testament, part of which recounts the time when Jesus walked on Earth, when a Jewish scholar - one of the teachers of the Jewish Law - asked Jesus, "What is the most important commandment?" Basically, the Jewish leaders were asking, "You're a religious teacher, so break it down for us: what is the most important thing that God wants us to do?"

Now, at this point we have to back up to the 10 Commandments, handed to Moses by God Himself on Mt. Sinai. But those weren't the only rules or commandments that God had given the Hebrew people. Remember, this was a group that had been horrifically oppressed for 400 years under a genocidal tyrant in Egypt. These people didn't know how to be free, or live free. They had only known slavery. God was trying to rehabilitate their view of themselves, and to teach them how to live

well. And in those Jewish Scriptures, God outlines more than 600 different laws and regulations<sup>2</sup> to follow, including:

- Food laws (so the people won't get sick)
- Guidelines for religious festivals (so the people can worship God freely)
- Temple rituals (so the people can know they're forgiven and God is still with them)
- Civil governance (so they can have a just and fair society)

Jesus is asked, by religious scholars: "Of the 613 laws and regulations, which is the most important?" For centuries, the Jewish people would have had a clear answer to this question. From their 613 laws and regulations, the Israelites found one they clearly identified as the most important. Every parent would have taught it to their child. This was as common in the minds of the people of Israel as the Pledge of Allegiance is to modern Americans. It's found in Deuteronomy 6, and is affectionately known to Jewish people even today as the "Shema" (pronounced "schmah"). Here it is:

#### DEUTERONOMY 6 | THE SHEMA

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

This one was the **MOST** important. And when asked which commandment was the most important, Jesus quoted the Shema in Deuteronomy 6. This is not a trick question. This is a chance for the religious leaders in Jerusalem to find out whether

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2 SIDENOTE: There's even a rule about how you have to cover up your poop with dirt (Deuteronomy 23:13). Because who wants poop just laying around? Am I right? If you're wondering how I know about this obscure law, it's certainly *not* because I searched through the Bible for references to bodily functions and then made a running list of all of the times urine, dung, feces and vomit showed up. I definitely did not do that. I am very mature.

this country preacher from Nazareth (Jesus) is orthodox or not. Does He get it? Is He with us? And Jesus replied by saying this:

#### MATTHEW 22

<sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

In the Gospel of Luke, this same exchange is recorded slightly differently. Here’s how that one reads:

#### LUKE 10

<sup>25</sup> On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> “What is written in the Law?” Jesus replied. “How do you read it?” <sup>27</sup> He answered, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” <sup>28</sup> “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

This exchange is also recorded again in another Gospel called Mark, and Jesus says:

#### MARK 12

<sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

So to recap:

### Love God with all your...

	Heart	Soul	Mind	Strength
Deuteronomy 6:5	X	X		X
Matthew 22:37-40	X	X	X	
Luke 10:25-28	X	X	X	X
Mark 12:30-31	X	X	X	X

Regardless of the order, Jesus is giving a provocative answer: the most important religious, moral, ethical codes can be reduced to this: love God and also love your neighbor. And whatever the words heart/soul/strength/mind might mean or how they overlap, the clear implication from Jesus is that we, as humans, should love God with the entirety of our being.

## WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR

Now, before we go any further, I do want to point out<sup>3</sup> that Jesus' answer in those verses is actually pretty revolutionary. Notice his answer wasn't "The Shema" as it had been for centuries – Jesus' answer was "The Shema" **AND** "love your neighbor as yourself." The "and" part is critical. Jesus is basically rewriting the ancient Jewish version of the Constitution by adding in the shocking and critical part of "love your neighbor as yourself." In general, it's frowned upon to rewrite things like that. It would be like adding a line to the Pledge of Allegiance or adding a verse to "Ice Ice Baby." It would be shocking!

Now, I promise we will come back to this radical command to "love your neighbor as yourself" – which is a quote from Leviticus 19:18 – in a little bit, but for now, I want to admit that at least for me, the "love your neighbor as yourself" part of the Jesus *Instructions About What's Important Speech* makes sense.

<sup>3</sup> This is not an idea original to me, or course. So many other scholars point this moment out - especially Scot McKnight, whose book *Jesus Creed* tackles this in depth. You should read that book.



Ever since I was in kindergarten, I've been taught the Golden Rule about "do unto others" by nearly every adult. So, I have some instincts about what it means to love other people (and due to the fact that my mom was a kindergarten teacher). General rules like:

- Don't lie to people
- Don't hit them
- Don't take their graham crackers while they're not looking
- Share the craft supplies
- Be nice with your words
- Help other people (especially if you're good at something and they're new to it)
- Don't move the spinner in Chutes and Ladders just to avoid losing
- Make sure everyone is included in the game of kickball – even if they totally suck
- If they do totally suck at kickball, clap and say, "It's okay! Next time."
- Don't say, "Ugh, you suck, KEVIN, and I wish you were dead."
- Because that's not nice
- Seriously, winning at kickball isn't that important
- Don't cut in line
- Listen to the teacher

Even today, at my church, we talk about the three loves **ALL THE TIME** (Loving God, Loving One Another and Loving Our Neighbor) and if I'm honest, the metrics and measurables and action steps for *Loving One Another* and *Loving Our Neighbor* are a lot more concrete, and easy to wrap my mind around. It's stuff like:

- Be a part of a Life Group
- Serve the community by doing service projects

- Give money to support important projects that will help people here and across the globe
- Serve at Church

At some level, I understand those.

But man, it's the **LOVE GOD** part that still sorta trips me up. Often times, when folks hear it, they interpret it to mean something like, "read your Bible" or "pray" or more simply "attend weekend gatherings." It's very mushy. And it's certainly not actionable or measurable. How do I know if I am loving God more? Is there a device like the people of Whoville used to measure the Grinch's heart?

*"Good news, Mrs. Kandinsky, it appears that your heart for God is three sizes bigger."*

This is compounded by the fact that the English word "love" itself is so elastic in its meaning to be rendered largely meaningless. I "love" tacos, but I also "love" my mom. What?

And what about those words that Jesus used to explain how we're supposed to love God, using our "heart" and "soul" and "strength" and "mind." What are those words? Do they overlap? Are they synonyms?

**LOVE GOD WITH YOUR HEART.**

Is this about my emotions? Do I have to maintain some passionate, religious zeal inside me at all times? If so, I don't know how to do that. I don't even have overwhelmingly positive emotions about my *own children* all the time. In fact, in my life, the only person I've been able to muster up unwavering love, devotion and affection for is Princess Leia. Oh, and Mariah Carey. And even then, that was only when I was a teenager. Okay, and maybe through my early 20s.



**YO! Scan this code with your phone's camera to learn more about the Shema in a short, informative animated video from our friends at BibleProject.**

**LOVE GOD WITH YOUR SOUL.**

What is that? What is my soul? Is it like the movie *Ghost* with Patrick Swayze? Do I have an immaterial part of me that can pass through walls, talk to Whoopi and eventually kiss Demi Moore? Is this soul somehow living in my physical body? I have so many questions. How am I supposed to love God with something I don't even understand?

**LOVE GOD WITH YOUR STRENGTH.**

What? Is this about my physical strength? Am I supposed to bench press for Jesus? Box Jumps for Jesus? Is this just about my physical body? Am I supposed to be ripping phone books in half for Jesus?

**LOVE GOD WITH YOUR MIND.**

Is this about my intellect? Does this mean I'm supposed to study God? Learn about God? Take some classes? Is there a curriculum? Is there a test? Should I be studying? Is this test pass/fail? Oh man. Me and all my perfectionist friends are now freaking out.

If Jesus is saying one of the most important things to do with your life is to “love God” with your whole self – your heart, soul, strength and mind – then, man I would like some more detail on how exactly to do that. And that's what the story of Abraham – and the framework given to me by Gerry – helps with.

## **YOU KEEP USING THAT WORD. I DO NOT THINK IT MEANS WHAT YOU THINK IT MEANS.**

Okay, at this point I realize I have to stop. Something has been bothering me here, and I need to take a few minutes to clear it up. I have been unclear thus far in this book about a word I've been using. So let's start with this sentence:

*I love God.*

Now, I submit to you that this sentence is beautiful but it's also a muddled mess. Because if the word “love” is vague in our world, then the word “God” is even *more* vague and malleable. If I were to ask you, “What comes to mind when you hear the word *God*?” – the answers would vary *widely*. Look, I'm not a religious historian, but

it seems that in our society, the term “God” is basically a Rorschach test, allowing people to import whatever conceptions, whatever meaning, whatever ideas they want onto it. There are as many ideas about God as there are noses, it seems.

This is where I think Abraham’s story is **VERY** helpful. Abraham’s story allows us to be concrete and specific about which God we’re talking about. Also, if you’ll notice, this story about Abraham happens very, very early in the story of the Bible. Abraham, to his credit, really doesn’t know much about this God. He doesn’t have the entire Bible, or the history of the prophets, or 2,000 years of church tradition. He’s flying blind. And as we follow along with Abraham, like him, you and I will begin to learn things about God’s character. In that way, the story might actually confront our wishes or our preconceived ideas about what God might be like. Those ideas might actually be off-center. Or worse, they might be very wrong.<sup>4</sup> As Voltaire once famously quipped, “In the beginning God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favor ever since.” We want a god who looks and thinks like us. But the Story of the Bible shows us this is not always true. The story of Abraham helps us in a few key ways learn about God. Because it’s tough to love someone you don’t know, right?

## 1. I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW

There’s a philosophical term called “the doctrine of revelation” which says, basically, that if God didn’t reveal Himself to humans, then because of our finiteness, we would have no real way of knowing anything about Him. We’d just be guessing. Or making stuff up. In the story of Abraham, God breaks through into human history and reveals information about Himself to Abraham. So we can know, and stop guessing.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. SAY MY NAME, SAY MY NAME

The Bible doesn’t always use the word “God” when it’s talking about “God.” Sometimes, in Hebrew, it uses the word Yahweh (sometimes spelled YHWH) which is translated in your Bible as LORD (small caps). This word LORD is the

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4 This reminds me of the hilarious monologue by John C. Reilly’s character in *Talladega Nights*, who at the family prayer at dinner, says, “I like to picture Jesus in a Tuxedo T-shirt, ‘cause it says, like, ‘I wanna be formal, but I’m here to party, too.’ I like to party, so I like my Jesus to party.... I like to think of Jesus like, with giant eagles’ wings and singin’ lead vocals for Lynyrd Skynyrd with like an Angel Band, and I’m in the front row, and I’m hammered drunk.” A perfect example of making God into our own image and being off-center, at the least.

5 In Genesis 12:6-7 the text says that God appeared to Abraham and that he built an altar to this god who appeared to him. God has *revealed* Himself by appearing to Abraham.

**MOST USED** word in the entire Bible with more than 6,500 references.

So where did this name come from?

In Exodus 3, Moses has an encounter with God at the Burning Bush. Moses is freaked out and asks, “What kind of God (*elohim*) are you.” That Hebrew word *elohim* is actually a generic word for “a supernatural deity.” Moses was raised in Egypt, a polytheistic society. There were gods (*elohim*) everywhere. Egypt had:

- Hapi, the *elohim* of the Nile River
- Ra, the *elohim* of the Sun
- Nut, the *elohim* of the Sky
- Hathor, the *elohim* of motherhood
- Elon, the *elohim* of electric cars

### EXODUS 3

<sup>13</sup> Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” <sup>14</sup>God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

How does the *elohim* who shows up to Moses in the Burning Bush differentiate Himself from all those other *elohim*? Well, first, He tells Moses his name. <sup>6</sup>

In English, this name is translated into “I am who I am” which in Hebrew consists of four letters: “YHWH” or Yahweh. In English, this name is always translated as all-uppercase LORD. Not to be confused with the general word “lord” which means “master” or “ruler” which could be anyone, including a human. It’s God’s name. But

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<sup>6</sup> Let’s talk about those other *elohim* for a moment, what Christians often call false gods or so-called gods. Were they real spiritual beings? Did they have powers? Did they appear to people? Later in the New Testament, the apostle Paul helps us out with these questions. He tells the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 8:4-5) that idols are nothing at all: basically just stone and wood, a non-thing. But then he says “indeed there are many gods.” It seems Paul has room in his mind for both *elohim* that are real and *elohim* that are not real, so his advice is JUST STAY AWAY. Part of being a Christian is being open to a spiritual realm, some people call this the supernatural, a reality beyond what is physical. Christians know that Yahweh *elohim* is the Creator, He’s in control and the most powerful of all *elohim*.

this is not only a name, it is a deeply personal character statement. Translated from Hebrew, Yahweh basically means:

**Whatever it is that I am, that is what I am.**  
or  
**I am, and will continue to be, what I am.**

Whatever character traits that this *elohim* Yahweh exhibits, He has **ALWAYS** been those things (He is self-existent) and He will **ALWAYS** be those things (He does not change).

This is important. Because this is not true about you or me. You and I are only *sometimes* what we are. For example, my name is David and I am funny (except when I am not). I am a loving father (except when I am not). I am devoted to God (except when I'm not). You get the point.

This God is consistent, reliable and unchanging. But there's one more thing to note. If you asked someone their name, and upon introduction, someone told you that "I always am what I always am" what is the very next question that would naturally occur to you? I think it would be: "**Then what are you?**"

Do you see? The very name that God gives Moses contains a riddle **AND** an invitation. What am I? Well, come and find out. It's an invitation to a grand journey of discovery of God Himself. About what He's like. And an invitation to be with Him, to walk with Him, through all the changing experiences of life.

You'll also notice God tells Moses that His story is rooted in the particular story of Abraham. So, by studying the life of Abraham recorded in this Bible, we can learn to find out things about this God's character. Just as Abraham is learning about God, so are we.



**YO! Scan this code with your phone's camera to learn more about the origins of the name "Yahweh" from our friends at BibleProject.**

The story of Abraham reveals the beautiful, cosmos-healing mission of God, and a big part of that mission is that the unique character and person of Yahweh would be known to the entire World. In the Old Testament, Yahweh is presented as being completely *unique and fundamentally different from all other gods*.

The knowledge of God and about God is central in the story of Abraham because it's central to the larger story of salvation that God is writing. And as we walk through the story of Abraham, we are going to learn (along with Abraham) just how wildly different this *elohim* is than anything Abraham has ever seen, or even heard about. That's what I mean when I use the term "God."

### EXODUS 3

<sup>15</sup> **God (elohim)** also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The **LORD (YHWH)**, the **God (elohim)** of your fathers—the **God (elohim)** of Abraham, the **God (elohim)** of Isaac and the **God (elohim)** of Jacob—has sent me to you.'

So. I hope that's helpful. Or, at the very least, more clear.

## HOW THIS BOOK WILL WORK

So here's what we're going to do: we'll be looking at four (4) key moments in the story of Abraham. They are four "high point" moments in the life of Abraham – I think you could make a pretty strong case they're the four most important moments in the account in Genesis of Abraham's life. And then, using Abraham as a mirror, we'll examine what lessons jump out from these four moments about what it means to "love God" – what Abraham shows us about what loving God – and doing life with God – actually looks like.<sup>7</sup> Visually, here's where our focus will be.

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<sup>7</sup> I want to remind you: these ideas are all completely and directly from the mind of Dr. Breshears. He is like the rock group Queen, and I'm like Vanilla Ice sampling the baseline from "Under Pressure." Wait. Is that two Vanilla Ice references in one chapter? I gotta cut that out.

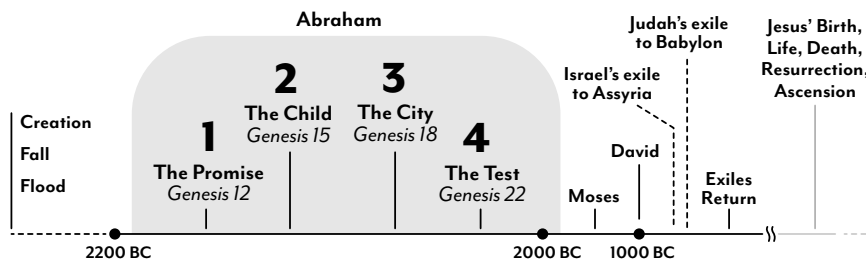


FIGURE 1: Four key moments in the story of Abraham, in relation to the Story of the Bible. Timeline is not to scale at all, not even a little bit; also, dates are approximate and debated.

Here's why I'm excited. I think you'll find – as I did – that the story of Abraham found in Genesis serves to provide us with a **functional** and **actionable** definition of what it means to **LOVE GOD**. Abraham's life gives us a picture of how a human can live out what it means to **LOVE GOD** with all of one's heart, one's soul, one's strength and one's mind.

## IMPORTANT CLARIFICATION

We're studying the life of Abraham because he's one of the most important characters in the entire Bible, but not because he was perfect. As we'll see, Abraham was **NOT** a Superhero. Just like almost every other character, Abraham got things totally wrong as often as he got them right. There's only one model of perfection in the Bible, and that's Jesus. As another one of my Western professors, Tim Mackie said that instead of being heroes, these characters are more like mirrors for self-reflection. We're meant to study these stories, identify with and see ourselves in those stories and ask ourselves what we would do. The goal is to enter into the character's story and let it become instructive for me in how I might or might not want to make a similar decision or not. The biblical author is often evaluating a character's decisions by narrating consequences and putting the ball in your court to make connections.

Sometimes, these characters fail in tragic ways. That's to serve as a warning.

And sometimes, they get things gloriously right. That's to serve as an inspiration.

As we travel through the four key moments of Abraham's life, we'll unpack four key lessons, which will serve as the basic framework for the book:



## 1. LOVING GOD MEANS BEING LOYAL + COMMITTED TO HIM

*(Even if it costs you)*

In Genesis 12, we see the first interaction between God and Abraham, where God interrupts and upends Abraham's whole life. And while living in a foreign land with foreign gods that demanded to be served, Abraham makes a decision that this God – and God alone – will be his god. And we learn, along with Abraham, why exactly this god is even *worth* our loyalty and commitment.

## 2. LOVING GOD MEANS TRUSTING HIM

*(Even when it doesn't make sense)*

Jesus said to love God “with all your heart” and in the Bible, the word heart doesn't mean “your emotions.” Its meaning is closer to “motives” or your “control panel.” But turning over control of your life to *anyone* is terrifying. In Genesis 12, God tells Abraham to move from his home. Where? He is not told. He must go, and trust without knowing all the information. God tells Abraham in Genesis 15 that he'll have a son, despite his advanced age. How will that work? He is not told. Part of loving God means trusting Him – not only part of your life, but with the entirety of your life. And often, these situations cause deep fear, and require vast courage and trust in God.

## 3. LOVING GOD MEANS WE SEEK JUSTICE

*(We live right, do what's right and help set things right)*

In Genesis 18, we see a city descending into great moral chaos and wickedness. This is juxtaposed to Abraham, who God says practices “justice and righteousness” – a complex, nuanced phrase that means, basically, that Abraham loves and does what is right. Abraham is told by God that he is going to be a blessing to all the nations, and part of that is that God wants His people to embody righteousness and justice in a world filled with oppression and injustice. It turns out that loving God and loving your neighbor are inseparable. Loving God means having His character and acting like Him in human affairs.

#### **4. LOVING GOD MEANS WE EXPECT GOD TO BE GOOD.**

*(We believe that God will provide, especially when life falls apart)*

What we believe about God – if He’s good or not, or trustworthy or not – will come to bear when life falls apart. The traumatizing narrative in Genesis 22 of Abraham going to sacrifice Isaac is instructive because it reveals Abraham’s complete certainty of the goodness, provision and help of YHWH, coupled together with complete openness as to the details. When life falls apart (and it will fall apart) Abraham’s refrain “The LORD will provide” is a model reply for us in the middle of the most agonizing questions of life. And this story points forward to the ultimate proof of God’s provision: the Cross.

One more note. Throughout the book, you’ll see Quick Response (QR) codes embedded on the pages. If you scan these with your phone’s camera, they will take you to various websites and links. Many of these QR links are to videos from the good folks at BibleProject, who create wonderfully detailed, informative and beautiful animated short films that explain Biblical concepts. These videos supplement the content in this book, but their inclusion should not be considered an endorsement of this book from BibleProject. Okay.

I think that’s it.

You ready for this?

Yeah, me neither.

Let’s jump in anyway.

## CHAPTER 01 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What impacted you the most about this chapter? What questions did the chapter bring up for you? What was the most helpful part of the chapter?
2. What were your first experiences with God? How did your family of origin or church community talk about and introduce “Christian vocabulary” (such as heaven, hell, salvation, etc.)? Did you have a later experience that corrected those first impressions (like Diana did in this chapter)?
3. Did you have a “Diana” in your life whose maturity and depth of relationship with God shaped or helped you in your spiritual journey? Explain.
4. Read Mark 12:28-34. Discuss what you think it means to “love God” and to “love your neighbor.” Have these definitions changed over time for you?

5. God wants us to know Him and be known by Him, but He is complex: a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Was there anything surprising or new to you in the description of Yahweh and *elohim*?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What do you already know about Abraham? Read Hebrews 11:8-19 for a brief summary. Do all four (4) key moments in Figure 1 appear in the Hebrews passage?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Read through the four (4) key lessons (Loving God means...). Which of these are you most drawn to, or think you might need the most help with right now?





## CHAPTER 2

# THE CALL

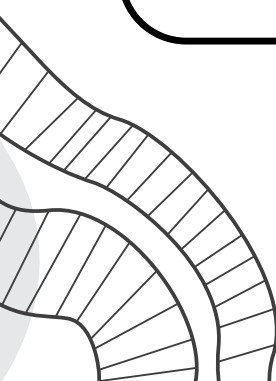

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IN WHICH WE ENTER THE ANCIENT WORLD OF ABRAHAM,  
LEARN ABOUT HIS WORLD, AND DISCOVER (WITH HIM)  
SOMETHING QUITE SURPRISING ABOUT GOD.

## KEY LESSON

1

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means being **LOYAL + COMMITTED** to Him

- Even if that means making an altar to God in the land of Ba'al.
  - Even if it costs you.
- 
- 

## ABE'S WORLD. ABE'S WORLD. PARTY TIME. EXCELLENT.

A few summers ago, my family and I went on an adventure to go see France. My wife was an exchange student in France in high school, and then spent her junior year of college studying abroad there, so that nation is embedded deeply in her DNA. Interestingly, somehow this passion leaked onto my son, who signed up to take French for his foreign language requirement at school (not too weird) and also turned into a full-blown Francophile, studying French history and culture on his own (a little weird). I had never been to France, but I like food and art, and France is arguably the best in the world at both – and I wanted to see these places my wife had spoken of so glowingly for so many years<sup>1</sup>.

Now, before you go to a foreign country, if you're a smart traveler, you do some research. You know you're going into another culture, with different customs and different ways of doing things. So, before we went, we had to get all new SIM cards for our cell phones to work there, not to mention power adapters to plug into the outlets. My son picked up a book of common French phrases, to brush up on his language. We read tour books, planning out our routes around Paris and the south of France. And we studied the train schedules and routes, so we could get around.

The point is, before we went to this distant place that we knew would be so different than where we lived, we did some research to understand where we were going – so that we wouldn't be a confused, befuddled mess wandering accidentally into traffic. Or worse, unable to buy croissants.

Before you go to a place that's foreign to you, it's always good to do a little research.

So, with that in mind, before we jump into the story of Abraham, we need to do a little research. We're not only travelling to a distant *land*, but we also need get into our 1985 DeLorean with Michael J. Fox and go back in *time*. Way back in time to Abraham's day and age. In fact, it's so far back in time, it's almost difficult to imagine. An example: my wife had a relative named Grandma Tubbs, who lived to be 100 years old. After she died, I made a list of all the things that happened (or

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<sup>1</sup> France did NOT disappoint. Incredible country.

were invented/discovered) in her exceptional lifetime. Before Grandma Tubbs was born, there was:

- No human flight in a plane
- No rockets or space travel
- Plastics had not been invented
- Only 50 percent of homes in the US had electricity
- Antibiotics had not yet been discovered
- No refrigerators
- No Netflix

If we go back **200 years** ago, there would have been no cars, no lightbulbs, no bicycles, no plywood, no canned food, no thermometers, no combustion engines, and no matches – and I don’t mean matches on eHarmony. I mean like actual matches you use to start fires. Did people just carry around torches? It’s insane. And that’s just going back two (2) centuries.

The story of Abraham is set more than **2,000 years** before Jesus was born, which is roughly **4,000 years ago** or **40 centuries ago**. In some ways, it’s difficult to enter into the world of someone so long ago, whose world was so completely and utterly different. But we have to at least try.

One of the reasons why I want to do this is because the story of Abraham is so distant, if we’re not careful, we’ll start to treat it like mythology. Like a fairy tale – “a long time ago, in a land far, far away.” But the Bible is real and rooted in human history: a real God interacting with real people in real places. And I don’t want to lose that, even if it does sometimes seem as though we’re describing Middle Earth.

The second reason I want to do this is because if we’re not careful, we’ll treat these ancient people and societies as though they were primitive cavemen, which they *most definitely* were not. As you’ll see, their language, culture and customs were different than ours, but not inferior. We must lay aside what C.S. Lewis termed “chronological snobbery.” Just because we have the internet doesn’t mean we’re suddenly a superior race of people over our ancestors – unless you mean “superior in the number of cat memes” in which case you would be correct. We have to avoid falling victim to the idea, brilliantly articulated by British philosopher Owen Barfield,



that “intellectually, humanity languished for countless generations in the most childish errors on all sorts of crucial subjects, until it was redeemed by some simple scientific dictum of the last century.”<sup>2</sup> This is hogwash. So, unless you want to wash some hogs, knock it off.

The story of Abraham and his family actually begins in Genesis 11 (heads up: you’ll notice he is called “Abram” and his wife, Sarah, is called “Sarai.” This is because later on in the story, God changes their names. We’ll get into that when we get there.) This is the introduction to Abraham.

#### GENESIS 11

<sup>26</sup> After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran...<sup>28</sup> While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth.

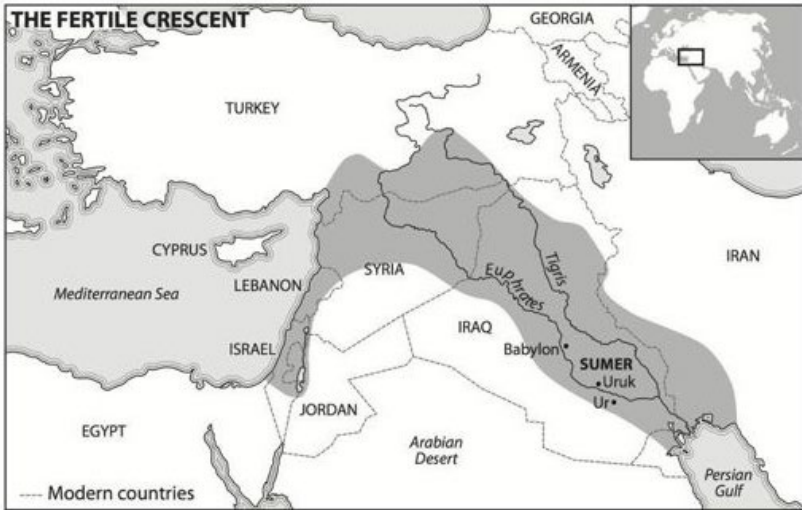
The story doesn’t tell us *where* Abraham was born, exactly, but it does say this his younger brother Haran was born in Ur, which is just north of Cleveland. I’m kidding. But I do want to share some fun maps and facts with you, which leads us to the part of the book I like to call:

## SUMER-SUMER-SUMER TIME<sup>3</sup>

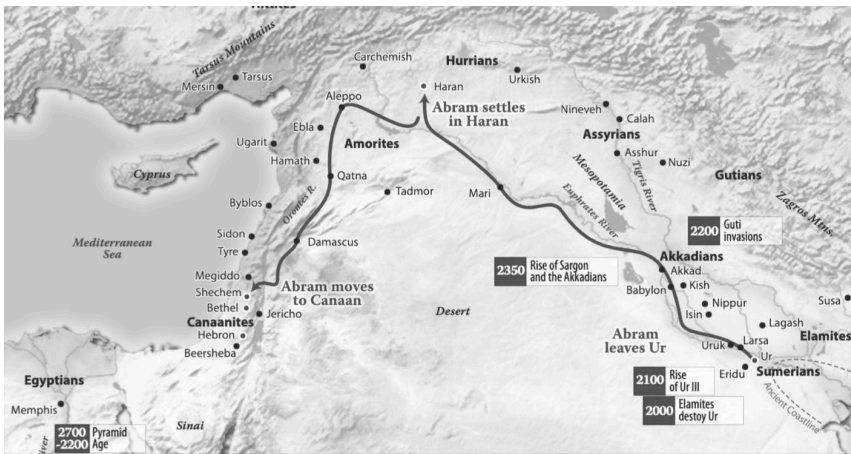
Sumer – where the story says Abraham is from – is located in a region that is sometimes called the “fertile crescent” – a lush, fertile area framed by two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates. This area is also called “Mesopotamia” and is considered the birthplace of civilization because this is where humans developed crop cultivation, allowing them to stop being hunter-gatherers and stay rooted in one place. There aren’t a lot of natural boundaries in this area, and so from 3,000 BC to 400 BC, tribal/region family groups combined forces while sharing resources, intermarrying, and developing into a brand-new form of government: empires. Sumeria’s largest city was Uruk (on the map, it’s north of Ur). Uruk is thought to be the first city with more than 50,000 people, and archeologists think it might have been the biggest city in the world in Abraham’s day.

2 Owen Barfield, *History in English Words* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 164.

3 Time to relax and unwind.



**MAP 1:** The shaded area is the Fertile Crescent. You can see the cities of Uruk and Ur (where the Bible tells us Abraham’s family is from).



**MAP 2:** This is a rough idea of what Abraham’s world would have looked like, with indications of all the cities and empires of that time period.

4 P. R. S. Mooney, *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 302, 306.

## ZIGGU–RUT–ROH

Now that we understand a bit more about the time that Abraham was from, let's learn more about the place where he was from. Abraham, the Bible tells us, lived in Ur.

### GENESIS 11

<sup>37</sup>Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan.

You can tell a lot about a city (and its people) by its architecture. For example, if futuristic archeologists were to look at ruins of the Bay Area, they'd find a giant skyscraper devoted to business (Salesforce Tower), a gleaming, ringed spaceship-looking circle (Apple campus) and a pyramid building (Transamerica Tower). These are three of the Bay Area's most iconic buildings, and they're all related to business (and tech) because the Bay Area is *all about* business and tech. The buildings reveal the values of this area – what's important to that society and to the people living there. It was no different, really, in ancient Mesopotamia.

Archeologists tell us that Sumerian cities all had something in common: perfectly designed, large rectangular buildings called ziggurats. Ziggurats were temples, with steps leading upward, rising above everything else in the city, to show their significance. Archeologists have discovered nearly thirty ziggurats in the general region of ancient Sumeria.

And wouldn't you know it, the best-preserved ziggurat from all of ancient Sumeria was in Ur, where Abraham was from. It was called the Great Ziggurat of Ur and it contained 720,000 baked bricks.<sup>5</sup> It was constructed for Ur's patron deity, the moon goddess Nanna. The towering architecture of the ziggurat stressed the significance of the temple to the surrounding community – it was the center of life, and the god it represented was central to the lives of the people.

You see, ziggurats might look like pyramids, but there's nothing inside. No tomb, treasures or pathways, they're just giant mounds of dirt and rubble, supported

5 I was like, "Dang, that's a lot of bricks. That's even more than John Starks threw up in Game 7 of the 1994 Finals." But then I realized the Empire State Building has 10 million bricks, and the Great Wall of China has 3 billion. Billion. With a "b." Wow.

and framed with mudbricks. Their primary function was support for a ramp or a staircase.<sup>6</sup> A stairway to heaven. Cue Led Zeppelin. Sometimes, at the top of the ziggurat, there would be a bed, or a table, for the god. The goal was to coax the deity to come down to Earth, from another realm, to bring Divine Blessings. The reasoning was simple: if we provide for the gods, they will provide for us. It was a symbiotic relationship – a relationship of mutual dependence. Or maybe if we build something high enough, we can get up to them.

## ZIGGURAT THEOLOGY

The ziggurats give us some insight into the religious and theological frameworks of these ancient Sumerians. But there is other evidence to help us understand their mindsets, as well. For example, the oldest surviving work of literature is also from this time, the ancient Mesopotamia story/poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is about a man searching for the secret to life and immortality by going on an epic quest to find the gods. Spoiler: he fails. But hey, he gets a cool story named after him.

These types of stories circulated, and continued in various forms, like the ancient Greek story of Hercules, who was Zeus' son, but he wasn't welcome on Olympus. He had to accomplish 12 impossible tasks (Herculean tasks, you might say) in order to prove he was worthy to sit at the table with the gods.

I know I'm several thousand years removed from the Sumerians, but if I'm honest, for a long time in my life, this is how I viewed religion. You have to work to get to God.



**Yo! Scan here to see an artist's model of what a Ziggurat would have looked like.**

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6 One way to understand the role ziggurats played in Ancient Sumeria is to see how the people named them. For instance, the name of the ziggurat at Babylon, *Etemenanki*, means "temple of the foundation of heaven and earth." One ziggurat in the ancient city of Larsa had a name that meant "temple that links heaven and earth." And another is the ziggurat at Sippar, whose name meant "temple of the stairway to pure heaven." SOURCE: John H. Walton (editor) *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Zondervan Academic, 2009) Article: Tower of Babel



**Scan here  
to see what  
I imagined  
the end of  
a spiritual  
quest might  
look like.**

Even the way people I knew talked about religion, it was always presented as a “spiritual journey.” “I’m just trying to find God,” they’d say. I imagined trying to find God would involve a long, arduous trek, where you had to go climbing up a steep mountain, and if you were lucky, you got to the top, and there was God, who had his eyes closed in quiet meditation, stroking his long, white beard while peach blossoms floated around him.<sup>7</sup>

Even Christians, when they talked about God, made it sound like this. They would say things like, “There was a great chasm opened up between people and God, and Jesus’ death is a bridge that allows us to get back to God.” Jesus was always presented like a giant rope bridge over the Grand Canyon of Death. God might have built the bridge, but you were still the one who had to make the trek over to the other side. You were the one who had to get over to God’s side.

This is what God was like, I figured. If you tried really hard, and if you’re really lucky, you can be one of those people who has a religious experience with God. Whatever that means. This is “ziggurat theology.” Try harder! Climb to god! Do your part!

I say all this because the religious and cultural backdrop is important in the story of Abraham. These ideas about god(s) were what Abraham and his family were steeped in for a long time. And your environment affects you. It’s easy to get caught up in it all, especially if it’s the dominant message of your entire city. So, with all that in mind, let’s jump into the story.

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7 Why does God look a lot like Master Shifu from Kung-Fu Panda? I don’t know. I’m just telling you what I thought.



I found this graphic online, but I think it's suspect theologically. Seems like with a running start, dude could probably clear that "death" chasm. That can't be more than six feet. Right? This graphic is basically screaming "Translucent Jesus Bridge optional to beat Death."

## RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK

One of the very first things that we discover from the text about Abraham is that his family's lineage can be directly traced back to Shem. Now this name might not mean much, but the author is putting this in as a **HYPERLINK** back to the story of Noah, of *Noah and the Ark* fame. It's like someone saying, "Now Luke was from the line of Anakin." It brings the *earlier* story to bear on the *present* story.

### GENESIS 11

<sup>10</sup> This is the account of Shem's family line.

Most people know Noah from the story about the Flood, and the Ark he built for his family and the animals, but Noah's importance is actually much deeper than that. The story of Noah doesn't begin, or end, with a flood.

Noah's story begins with nearly unmitigated violence erupting on the face of the Earth as if the showrunner of *The Walking Dead* was writing the script for humanity. This leads us to one of the most tragic verses in the entire Bible.

### GENESIS 6

<sup>5</sup> The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. <sup>6</sup> The LORD regretted that

he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.<sup>7</sup> So the LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them.”

Holy cow. Look at those words:

*“every inclination of the human heart was only evil all the time.”*

Dear heaven. This is humanity at its lowest point. But how did it get so bad? Well, to put it mildly, the previous couple of chapters of the story have not gone particularly well for humanity. Or for God.

The name of the first book of the Bible – Genesis – means, simply, beginnings. And in the beginning, we’re told not only *that* God created everything, but *why* God created everything. In the ancient world, people simply did not ask the question “Hey, where did everything come from?” The answer to that question would have been obvious: “Duh, the god(s) made it.” The bigger question was “why?” Biblical scholar John Walton says that this story in the beginning of the Bible was meant to answer not only where everything came from but also “how was everything designed to work, what are the functions, and how do we humans fit in so that we might know our own functional place in the Cosmos.”<sup>8</sup>

## GENESIS 1

<sup>26</sup> Then God said,  
 “Let us make mankind  
     in our image,  
     in our likeness,  
 so that they may rule  
     over the fish in the sea  
     and the birds in the sky,  
     over the livestock  
     and all the wild animals,  
     and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

8 John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 48.

This is, arguably, a much bigger, and much more important question than “where did everything come from.” And the story is pretty fascinating – the story shows men and women who are made *in God’s image*. Theologians sometimes call this the *Imago Dei* which is Latin for the “image of God” because smart people love using Latin phrases even though perfectly good English translations of those exact phrases exist.

The image of God is fascinating because it tells us something about ourselves. Some theologians say it reminds us of our essence. The Bible says that in the entire created realm, only humans have the *Imago Dei*. Not animals. Examples of the *Imago Dei* which humans have that animals don’t are the capacity to reason,<sup>9</sup> that we can sense and be in relationship with God,<sup>10</sup> that we have morality and can choose to do good,<sup>11</sup> and we’re not afraid of the vacuum cleaner. It’s also a reminder that we’re from dust, and therefore God is the source of our very breath and life.



**Yo! Scan this to learn more about the Hebrew word *tselem* from our friends at BibleProject!**

#### GENESIS 1

<sup>27</sup> So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

But *Imago Dei* is more than our essence. The *Imago Dei* also involves our purpose: what we’re here for. The word “image of God” in Hebrew is *tselem*. A *tselem* in the ancient world was a big deal, and broadly defined it was a localized, visible, corporeal representation of a divine being. Think a giant statue or a totem pole or an idol. Sometimes in the Ancient Near East, powerful kings put up statues (*tselem*) of themselves, to remind everyone who was in charge.<sup>12</sup> These *tselem* or *statues* were

9 Isa 1:18, Deut. 30:19, Josh. 24:15

10 Ps 19:1-4, Rom. 1:19-20, John 16:7-8

11 2 Chron. 7:14, 2 Tim 2:19-20

12 One more thing linguistically. In ancient Mesopotamia, the word for statue in the Akkadian Empire (one of the first empires in the region where Abraham lived) was *tsalmu*; in Assyrian, the king was known as *tsalam ili* or “image of the god.” Fascinating, huh?



a representation of a king, their rule and their empire. And if you saw a *tselem* of a particular god or goddess, then you knew that deity was in charge in that area.

Now here's the shocking thing: ancient gods and kings had *tselem* made out of wood or stone. But God has something better: *tselem* that can walk around and reproduce! Walking, talking statues! God's *tselem* are humans which means humans are to embody and express the essence of God, particularly in our functions.

So, what function?

That word "rule" (Hebrew: *radah*) – which is repeated in Gen. 1:28 – is sometimes translated as "dominion" and means "to exercise authority over." It's a kingly, ruling word. We are to act like ambassadors for the King. And in another sense, we're given delegated authority to co-rule with God, representing Him, His values, His ways, and His character through the earth.

But wait. There's more.

Humans are also given the command to "subdue" the earth<sup>13</sup> and this word (Hebrew: *kabash*) is a violent word: a word that implies war, conquest or battle. The implication here is that this God (the Creator God) is engaged in an active battle. At first, God is overcoming the "formless and emptiness" of the deep by forming and filling Creation. That phrase "formless and empty" (Hebrew: *tohu wa bohu*) brings with it a connotation of "uncultivated" and "uninhabited." God is cultivating Eden and filling it with inhabitants, and He is inviting His *tselem* to continue this work and do likewise.<sup>14</sup> As Genesis continues, though, it's also clear that God is at war against evil and will bring good into this world through his *tselem* – making things on Earth as they are in Heaven.<sup>15</sup> So in a sense, this is a Cosmic battle between Good and Evil. This is some *Lord of the Rings* stuff.

Then things go sideways. Humanity decides to trust their own perceptions rather than trust what God had told them, in essence seizing moral autonomy, and breaking the relationship with God. Humans hide in fear, men and women can't face each other without shame and blame, and even the ground under mankind's

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis 1:28 – fill the earth and subdue it

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 1:28 – Be fruitful and increase in number

<sup>15</sup> Just like in Matthew 6:10!

feet doesn't respond as it should. And in case you ever wonder if sin is really that corrupting, remember that on page 3 of the Bible, humans disobey, distrust and disregard God and eat from a tree and one page later, Cain kills his own brother Abel in cold blood. (!)

But as bad as things are, the story is still marked by repeated signal fires of God's incredible grace. For every human misstep, there's a counterbalance of grace. Adam and Eve are naked and ashamed, but God gives them clothes. The serpent lies and deceives humanity, but God gives a promise that the snake's head will be crushed. Cain kills his brother, but God supernaturally protects him in the wild and waste of civilization. Yes, things have gone horribly wrong, but God's Creation project is still wobbling along with His sustaining help.

Until.

It isn't.

And that's the tragedy of the story of Noah. We learn something vital: as people drift further and further away from this sacred partnership with God, their *Imago Dei* is marred. It's as though they turn sub-human – into animals. God created order and life, and sustained it, but as humans get further away from Him, disorder and death reign.<sup>16</sup> As the world descends into madness and violence, God grieves and decides to start over, cleansing the Earth of the vile scourge of humanity, the Cosmic equivalent of unplugging the Earth, and then turning it back on. But there is one bright spot.

## TSELEM'S LOT

The story tells us that “Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD”<sup>17</sup> and that “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.”<sup>18</sup> This is *great* news. Noah is a faithful *tselem* and the story leaves us hopeful he can remain that way – an honest-to-goodness partner with God in ruling with Him the way God intended.

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16 Genesis 6:11 – Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence.

17 Genesis 6:8

18 Genesis 6:9

God asks Noah to build a giant boat. And Noah, because he is righteous and walks faithfully with God and apparently lives close to a Home Depot, builds this giant floating structure. Noah obeys God by building the ark, the Flood comes, and Noah and his family are spared, humanity's last great hope to continue their role as faithful *tselem*. After the flood, Noah starts off well. Noah makes an altar to God and God makes a promise to Noah:

#### GENESIS 9

<sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: <sup>9</sup> "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.

And we're hopeful! Maybe Noah and his family can continue to be what Adam and Eve could not – *tselem*. Images of God. Co-regents with God. Maybe sin is gone. Maybe Noah will continue to walk with God and get it right.

But like the absolutely horrifying 1979 film *Alien* – it turns out that getting into a ship to try to get away from Evil didn't work, because Evil was hiding on the ship the whole time *inside one of the inhabitants*.<sup>19</sup> Noah turns to wine and drunkenness, and sin and evil are back in control. And things slide from good to even worse. The *tselem* – these walking, talking images of God – stop acting like the King they're supposed to represent and reflect. They forget God. They walk away from Him. And even worse, a few generations later the people stage a formal coup against Him. This is not just bad: it's insurrection. Like the post-*Return of the Jedi* Star Wars sequels, things go from very bad to absolutely terrible.

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<sup>19</sup> True story: when I was in high school, I went to Universal Studios in Florida with the school choir (more on that later), and while on a movie ride, there was a part where the ride tram stopped and an animatronic Xenomorph Alien popped out – right at my car. I was so scared, that I, hopped up on adrenaline, stood up and broke the lap-bar restraint as I scrambled to get away. I ended up basically sitting on the lap of Leila Blevins, who I secretly had a crush on. They stopped the ride, turned on the lights, and the ride operator chastised me over the loudspeaker. "Please do not stand up during the ride." I'm like, "Then please do not make aliens attack me!" I seriously hate the Alien movies, and they give me nightmares, so let's not talk about it again, okay? Okay.

## THE TOWER OF BABEL

In some ways, Genesis chapter 11 is the height of human rebellion. Here is what the text says:

### GENESIS 11

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.  
<sup>2</sup> As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

Some details we miss because we're not ancient readers. First of all, archeologists tell us that the plain of Shinar is in southern Mesopotamia, in Sumer. And what are ancient Sumerian structures made with bricks designed to go to heaven called again? That's right. Ziggurats.

So, humanity comes together and builds the Tower of Babel - a ziggurat: a staircase to heaven. They use their new brick technology to build their own way to heaven, perhaps attempting to get to the Tree of Life and circumventing God in the process – thereby also decisively rejecting God as their King (and rejecting their designed role as His image bearers). It's an insurgency. A riot to storm Heaven. The people are trying to ascend up to heaven, like Jack climbing the magical Beanstalk, trying to grab what they can.

And God responds. First, He confuses their languages and stops them from achieving their plans. Then, God scatters them – which was the original intended goal, but now, humans are more divided and confused.

This is very bad.

And then the story gets even worse.

## SAY MY NAME, SAY MY NAME. WHEN NO ONE IS AROUND YOU.

In the very next verses, we find out that Noah's direct descendants (Abraham's family) had settled in the land of the Chaldeans in the cities of Ur and Harran, which were two major centers of lunar worship.<sup>20</sup> Because you and I are modern Westerners, foreigners to this land, language and time period, we don't pick up the subtlety going on here. The commentators and ancient historians tell us that Abraham's father, Terah's name was the same phonetically as the moon god that was worshipped in that region. And Sarai's name is the female partner of the moon-god Sin<sup>21</sup> and Milkah's name is the name of Sin's daughter – also a moon god.<sup>22</sup> And maybe you're thinking, "Why is that such a big deal?"

The names of Terah and Milkah and Sarai are so significant because it is a **HYPERLINK**. Those names mean that **NOAH'S DESCENDENTS** – which would have had knowledge of God – were not acting as faithful *tselems* and instead have fallen into lunar worship of lunar gods. Abraham's ancestors had been rescued by God from the flood. But his family is not worshipping that God. They're worshipping other gods. This would be like being a huge Chicago Bears fan, moving to Green Bay, and then naming your kids *Favre* and *Rodgers*.

Just *unthinkable*.

This is not what God was hoping for with humanity – with his *tselem*. We were supposed to be in loving, faithful relationship with God, and be fruitful and multiply.

### GENESIS 11

<sup>27</sup> This is the account of Terah's family line. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. <sup>28</sup> While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. <sup>29</sup> Abram and Nahor both married.

20 Edward Conklin, *Getting Back Into the Garden of Eden* (Landham, MD: University Press, 1998), 23.

21 Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990)

22 Admittedly, this is pretty obtuse ancient Ugaritic language etymology. But we also have this. In Joshua 24:2, Joshua says "Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods." So.

The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah.<sup>30</sup> Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

The details of the story are even more heart-wrenching. In Genesis 11:30 we learn that Sarah cannot have children. How can Abraham and Sarah be faithful *tselem* if they can't have children to fill the earth? This is all bad news. In his Old Testament commentary, Walter Brueggemann puts it like this:

*The barrenness of Sarah is an effective metaphor for hopelessness. This text tells us there is no foreseeable future. There is no human power to invent a future. The human race and human history have just hit a dead end.*<sup>23</sup>

And we're left wondering, "Where is the counterbalance?" God always responds to human messes with Grace. Where is the grace? There is none. None that we can see. And none in sight. And we're left wondering:

*"Has the bond between God and mankind been cut? Has God run out of patience? Was that the final straw?"*

And this is where things would have ended.

Except that God gets involved. And when God gets involved, dead ends suddenly aren't so dead.

## **ARE YOU THERE, ABRAHAM? IT'S ME, GOD.**

It's in this setting, with this backdrop, with this backstory, that we encounter one of the most exceptional moments in the entire Biblical story. This moment is typically referred to as "The Call of Abraham" and seriously, I think if you made a list of the 10 most important passages of the Bible – moments in the Bible – this one in Genesis 12 will make the cut. It's that critical. It's that *beautiful*.

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23 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010)

<sup>1</sup> The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

<sup>2</sup> “I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.

<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”

Just as God called forth the entire created world with just His words, creating order from chaos and bringing life from the wild and waste, He is doing it again, only this time in the plain, localized life of a man named Abraham. And God’s promises are *staggering*. They start with the specific. The particular.

*I will make you into a great nation*

*I will bless you*

*I will make your name great*

*I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you*

Abraham will get his lineage. He will become a great patriarch. He will have a family. And that family will become powerful. Things will go well for him, and he will get Divine Blessings. But then this line:

*And all the peoples on earth*

*Will be blessed through you.*

The promises are no longer individual, but universal. This promise goes back to Genesis 1. This is “king” language – the idea that humanity could somehow walk with God and be a co-ruler and make things on Earth as they are in Heaven.<sup>24</sup>

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24 Just to be clear, the term “co-ruler” doesn’t mean that we “become like God” or can “become Gods.” God is God. We are not. We maintain our proper place as God’s loyal subjects. Nevertheless, the language in the Bible is there, like Paul in 2 Timothy 2:12 saying we “reign with Christ” or John saying that we “sit with Christ on His throne” in Rev. 3:21. Again, we’re not setting up our own kingdoms, but we serve and reign with God in His.

I know, I know, we are modern American people and we hate the idea of kings – the worst character in *Hamilton* is the sniveling King George, after all. But for most people at most points in history, their lives were tied to the king. If you had a good king – a fair king, an honest king, a compassionate and strong king – then your life would go well. And if you had an evil or corrupt king, then your life could be terrible. Abraham is told that he can be a *tselem* – to work with God to bless the whole world.

Abraham and God are now linked. God has attached himself to one particular human family, and now Abraham is invited to partner with God to bring Divine Blessing into the entire world to every nation, tribe, people and language.<sup>25</sup> The Creator of Life is going to bring His glory to earth, somehow, through Abraham. And this is not about Abraham, alone. He was not chosen by God for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the entire world. And I find it fascinating that by meeting a deep need of Abraham’s – a desire for a child, for biological fertility – that God does something much greater. Abraham will have a spiritual fertility that will mean spiritual fatherhood extending across the entire world. I love the way that Bruce Feiler captures this moment in his book *Abraham*:

*This is the Ultimate power of the Call: it’s a summons to the world to devote itself to God. God once again sends out an olive branch to humanity. If you put your entire life in my hands, you will be rewarded.*<sup>26</sup>

Abraham’s response is astonishing. The text is glaringly simple.

## GENESIS 12

<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...

This single verse is short and simple, but it contains a universe of meaning. Abraham just...goes. His father had taken them from the land of Ur (modern day southern Iraq), to Harran (modern Turkey). Abraham’s father originally set out for Canaan but chose to stay along the river, in the fertile, lush region. Abraham does not do this. He must cross a desert, an arid and dry region. Now Abraham goes down to Shechem in Canaan (modern Israel) – more than 400 miles. Is this to say that Abraham exhibited trust in God that his father lacked? Regardless,

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<sup>25</sup> Revelation 7:9

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2004), 43.



Abraham walks a long way, but now, unlike before, he walks with God. Just as it was intended in the Garden. And when Abraham gets to Canaan, he does something extraordinary.

#### GENESIS 12

<sup>6</sup> Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.  
<sup>7</sup> The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Now, again, we have to pause for a moment to drink this all in. And I want to concentrate on that last line, about the altar.

In the ancient world, when you went into a foreign land, you built an altar to the god or gods of that locality. Even today, certain places are associated with certain local gods. For example, Mt. Everest's Tibetan name is *Chomolungma*<sup>27</sup> which means "mother goddess of the world", and its Nepali name is *Sagarmatha*, which translates to "goddess of the sky." If you were to hike Mt. Everest, you might have to go to a temple and offer a simple sacrifice at a monastery to the goddess of Everest. You would offer simple flour cakes, and drink (Coca-Cola is preferred!) while monks burned juniper leaves to offer protection for you and your gear. It would be incredibly unwise to attempt to summit this mountain without completing the *puja* – or blessing ceremony. The implication is that if you do not, this goddess will kill you. And there are bodies strewn at the top of Everest to prove it. You don't go around insulting local gods.

This was the mindset in the ancient world. When Abraham enters into Canaan (whose local god was named Ba'al) the expectation was that he would set up an altar and make an offering to this local god. Just like travelers or new settlers to Abraham's old home of Ur in the land of the Chaldeans would make an offering to the lunar god Sin or Milkah who were worshipped there.

But Abraham **DOES NOT DO THIS**. Incredibly, in the land of Ba'al, Abraham builds an altar to a different God. In the land of Ba'al! This is no small thing. When

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27 Not to be confused with "Chumbawamba" who is the god of getting knocked down. And then getting back up again.

you went to a foreign land, you built altars to their local gods. And if you didn't, well, that's incredibly offensive and the kind of thing that just might get you killed.

So why?

Why would Abraham do this?

I think it's because of ziggurats.

## **REVERSING THE ZIGGURAT**

Just like you and I, Abraham lived in a world that is frightening and unpredictable and outside the control of mere mortals. Things happened in his world that Abraham had no control over, just like things happen to us. Sometimes, because we live in a world with more social services and social safety nets, it feels like we're more in control. But if you listen to wisdom whispered down through the ages, you'll hear the sages tell us that we all have far less control than we think. The same was true for Abraham: if the summer rains flooded the plains, not only would the crops (and the local economy) be ruined, but your family might die. In 2020, it's a tiny novel virus that is destroying the economy and killing people. You and I have to admit: sometimes, the world is harsh.

And when you live in the middle of an unpredictable world (like we all do), you start to hedge your bets. Try to make it out alive. Do whatever it takes. The stories told to the people in Ancient Mesopotamia was that help was probably not coming because god or God (or the gods) were far away. Very far away. Maybe they will come down. Maybe they will not. There is no guarantee. Perhaps if you leave something valuable enough, you'll catch the gods' attention. But there's no telling what type of sacrifice might work. We're all guessing.

If you hike all the way up the ziggurat, maybe you'll find God.

But more than likely, you'll find nothing.

Because there's no guarantee that help is coming.

More than likely.

No one is coming for you.

Is this message so different than what we're told in our modern era? And yet in this one simple moment in Genesis 12, we see the reversal of Ziggurat Theology. This God is different. This is Immanuel Theology.<sup>28</sup>

## **THIS GOD ISN'T ANGRY BUT IS..... UH.....FORGIVING?**

Abraham had not done anything to deserve God's particular visitation to Him. Actually, it was the opposite. This was not something Abraham earned through righteous living. This is not about Abraham's merit.

Abraham did not do everything right.  
He was not a paragon of religious devotion to God.  
His family was worshipping other gods!

Why would God do all this? It seems so...extravagant. No, that's the wrong word. Almost...foolish. After all, we expect God to come and have a few choice words to say to Abraham. And if God had rejected Abraham, saying, "You're not a suitable partner for me to work with" we wouldn't have blamed Him. We expect God to point out all the ways that Abraham has blown it and made a royal mess of his life.

But He didn't.

He doesn't.

That's not what this story says.

## **THIS GOD COMES NOT TO TAKE, BUT TO GIVE.**

Abraham must have been awestruck. Unlike every other story of every other ancient Mesopotamian deity, this God is here not to *take* something from Abraham,

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<sup>28</sup> Thanks to John Walton for introducing this phrase to me.

or demand a lavish offering, or to unleash thunderbolts of fury – but to *give* something. God comes with a promise. A promise to bless Abraham. To overlook the foolishness of his life, look and see something deeper, and invite him to walk with Him. To give him a son. A family. A legacy. To restore Abraham's family place as a *tselem* of God, just like his ancestor Noah. And to extend this blessing to all of humanity through this family of Abraham.

## **THIS GOD DOESN'T WAIT FOR THE PERFECT ZIGGURAT**

This God does not wait for humans to build a ziggurat. He comes down from Heaven and He Himself comes to Earth. He moves first. NZN. No Ziggurat Needed.

## **THIS GOD COMES AND FINDS...US?**

If you think about it, Abraham was in worse shape than he realized. He was in a darker, more hopeless spot than perhaps he even knew. Or maybe he did know, deep down. I don't know. But there is one person who knew.

God knew.

God knew how lost Abraham was. He knew how lost all of humanity was. And instead of letting chaos and destruction continue, he attaches himself to one particular family out of all families of the earth. This God is going to re-establish his presence on earth through Abraham and his family.

Heaven came down to Earth. God, walking with people, dwelling with people – Immanuel, like He always wanted to. Like he did in the garden with Adam and Eve. That's what his original plan was.

I know something about this.

## 305 W. 29TH STREET

In the Fall of 1997, during my senior year in college, I was doing a semester-long internship in New York City. To say that it was not a great time in my life is an understatement. I was training to be a journalist, at a time when the newspaper industry was going extinct.<sup>29</sup> I tried to pivot, thinking maybe interning at Columbia Tri-Star pictures would help. It didn't. I was stuck doing thankless grunt work, anonymously, with little prospect of standing out. If college was supposed to help me find a career, I felt no further along than I had the first day I stepped on campus.

It didn't help to think about the fact that in mere months I'd graduate, and the beloved community of roommates and friends I had forged over the past four years would evaporate nearly instantaneously.

And I was grieving. Earlier in the year, both my grandparents had passed away. God had dealt me a pair of aces when it came to grandparents – they were towering figures of unconditional love in my life. And now they were both gone. This opened up all sorts of existential questions.

I was not in a good place. Some of you know exactly what I am talking about. Some of you have been there, too.

As I walked home from the Sony Building through the teeming masses of people, I realized that even in the most densely populated city in the nation, it's possible to feel very much alone. And that night, on the third floor of 305 W. 29th Street in Manhattan, NY, in the room I rented — which was six feet wide (I could touch both walls), and about 12 feet long and 12 feet high — I came to a desperate conclusion.

I was lost.

I didn't know which direction to turn. Or how to live my life. I was wracked by grief I didn't know how to process. My thoughts were dominated by fear about the future.

My best friend from high school, Eric, still lived back in our hometown of Ohio. He was the only Christian friend I had. Like Diana before him, when Eric talked

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<sup>29</sup> Newspapers were printed publications (usually issued daily or weekly) consisting of folded, unstapled sheets and containing news, feature articles, sports and advertisements.

about God, I swear to you, it was like he was talking about someone he *actually knew*. And like Diana, Eric would share with me all the ways God was *helping* him. Eric kept insisting, over and over and over again, that God wasn't far away. I didn't know what he meant. God felt a million miles away. He might as well have not even existed.

But.

That night.

Desperate and scared. I admitted it.

I admitted I couldn't do it. That I was hopelessly lost. That there were things in life that I could not fix. Including, even, things inside me, like my anxiety and my insecurities which seemed to control me. I had made a mess of things, and I knew that full well. So, I admitted, out loud, to anyone who could hear, to God (if He was listening), that I simply could not do this on my own.

*God. If you're there – and I don't know if you are – but if you are, would you help me?*

And there, in that tiny, cramped 6x12 apartment on the third floor of an apartment building in Manhattan, God found me. I was lost, but now, was found. But even that's a bit of a misnomer, friends, because in fact, God had been there the entire time, present and active in my life in ways I did not have the eyes to see, present since the very beginning.

Some of the people reading this know *exactly* what I'm talking about. You had a moment, too, when God found you. Do you remember that moment?

One of my favorite poets and songwriters is a woman named Nichole Nordeman, who penned a song describing exactly this:

*It will find you at the bottom of a bottle  
It will find you at the needle's end  
It will find you when you beg and steal and borrow  
It will follow you into a stranger's bed*

*It will find you when they serve you with the papers  
 It will find you when the locks have changed again  
 It will find you when you've called in all your favors  
 It will meet you at the bridge's highest ledge*

*So hold on, love will find you  
 Hold on, He's right behind you now  
 Just turn around and love will find you<sup>30</sup>*

This is the truth. It's what I discovered in that small room in the middle of New York City. God finds *us*. We don't have to traverse the mountains, or cross creaky rope bridges, or climb, exhausted, to the top of a tower of steps to get to heaven. God finds *us*.

And it's what Abraham discovered, too.

God comes to us.

I think that's why Abraham made that altar. I think that's why he pledged his loyalty to this God. Because what other god does *this*? What other God leaves Heaven to come to Earth for us? What other god reverses the ziggurat? We don't have to build something to climb up to god or coax the gods to come down. This God comes to us. For us.

So why did Abraham build an altar to this God?

*Because what other god in the whole world offers anything  
 even close to this?*

In some ways, I think this might have been an easy decision for Abraham. This is like peak LeBron James going to the worst team in the NBA and saying, "I want to play for your franchise. You will not have to pay me a salary: I will play for free. I will bring legions of fans and make all your players better and we will win multiple titles. All you have to do is sign this contract and let me be your franchise player." What General Manager wouldn't sign up for that? It's almost too good to be true. Almost.

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30 Nichole Nordeman, "*Hold On*," from the album *Brave* (Sparrow Records, 2005)

By building an altar, Abraham is saying, “I know that I am in a foreign land. And I know they worship other deities. I know the other people around me might worship those other gods. But not me. You are my God. And I choose you.”

And this story shows us something about what it means to love God.

In the Hebrew, there is a special word for this love: *khesed*. This is an important word in the Old Testament, showing up more than 248 times with an incredibly elastic range of meaning. When used about God acting toward humanity, the word *khesed* is sometimes translated as *lovingkindness*. Or *covenant faithfulness*. Often, it’s used as an attribute of God.<sup>31</sup> Generally, the word means, “zeal toward someone else” and so, when it’s used about humans toward God, it usually means reverent piety and devotion toward God.<sup>32</sup>

And this is what Abraham is showing by making this altar. He’s showing us that loving God means being faithfully committed to Him. This is what loving God means.

This Hebrew word *khesed* has given me better language around the mushy English word “love” – especially regarding what it means to love God. It means you’re loyal and committed.

Abraham’s altar is a symbol of his devotion. His loyalty and commitment. For Abraham, it was the only proper response – emphasis is on the word “response.” Because in essence, Abraham is reflecting back to God something that God has already shown to him:

Love.

*Khesed*.



**Yo! Scan this to learn more about the Hebrew word *khesed* from our friends at BibleProject!**

<sup>31</sup> See especially Exodus 34:6-7

<sup>32</sup> H.W.F. Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures: Numerically Coded to Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* (7th ed.; trans. Samuel Tregelles; Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1990)



And the love that this God has shown Abraham is not a weak, emotional, sappy, sentimental love. No. This God has shown a deep, robust, forgiving, transformative, committed, devoted love.

A God who comes down to find us? A God who comes not to take from humanity, but to give? And not give a little, but give to overflowing?

Now *that* is something else.

And it can change *everything*.

## KEY LESSON

1

Abraham shows us in this moment that

**LOVING GOD** means being **LOYAL + COMMITTED** to Him

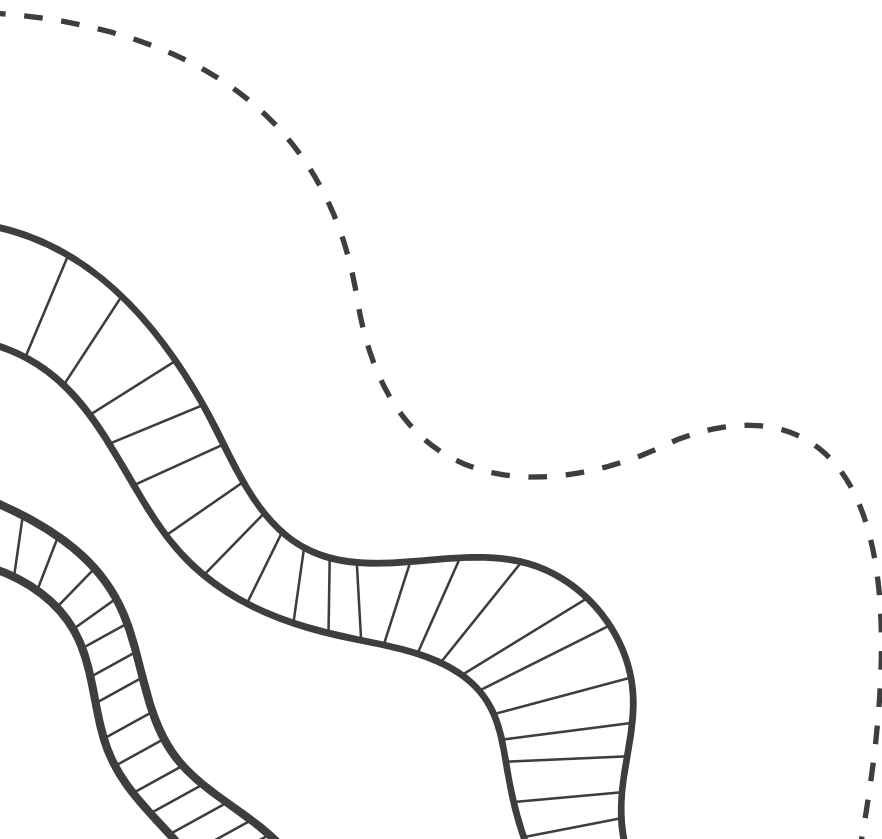
- Even if that means making an altar to God in the land of Ba'al.
- Even if it costs you.



## CHAPTER 02 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What impacted you the most about this chapter? What questions did the chapter bring up for you? What was the most helpful part of the chapter?
2. Have you ever travelled to (or lived in) another country? What are some of the cultural differences between that place and where you live now? What advice do you have for people who travel internationally?
3. Some of us love history, others simply do not. Where do you put yourself on this spectrum? What are some differences and similarities between “then” and “now?” How can we avoid “chronological snobbery?”
4. Were the differences between ziggurats and pyramids new to you? Have you ever viewed Christianity like “ziggurat theology,” having to “climb the stairs/ladder to God” or “try harder” in order to please God? Explain.
5. Read Psalm 8. In verse 5, what did God crown humanity with? In verse 6, what did God make humanity? Compare translations of Psalm 8, noticing what word(s) are used to describe humanity (mankind, human beings, etc.).

6. What does it mean that we are the *tselem* — the image of God? Have you thought about this identity before? How could it change your daily life if you saw yourself this way?
  
7. Read Genesis 12:4. Do you resonate with Abraham’s bold and astonishing obedience? Has there been a time in your life when you felt you were bold in responding to or obeying God?
  
8. Do you have a story of God “finding” you? What did that look like?
  
9. The tendency in the ancient world (and even now, for us) is to view the gods as very far away — very distant. But the word “Immanuel” means “God with us.” How does the Biblical understanding of God being “with us” change things? (Read Matthew 28:20. What does Jesus promise? How could this change the way we live?)
  
10. Read 1 John 4:7-16. Read it several times, in different translations, if possible. What connections between the Hebrew word *khesed* and John’s word love (Greek: *agape*) do you notice?





## CHAPTER 3

# THE PROMISE

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IN WHICH ABRAHAM SHOWS US HOW THE WORDS “LOYALTY” AND  
“COMMITMENT” CLARIFY WHAT IT MEANS TO “LOVE GOD.”

## KEY LESSON

1

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means being **LOYAL + COMMITTED** to Him

- Even if that means making an altar to God in the land of Ba'al.
- Even if it costs you.

## MISS HERD

On my first day of kindergarten – and I remember this as if it happened nearly four decades ago – right after morning announcements, Mr. Montague came over the PA system and told us it was time for us to stand up and say The Pledge. I had *no idea* what this was.

That was the first time I heard the Pledge of Allegiance. I would go on to say this pledge *every single morning* for the next seven years. I don't know why they made us say it every morning. Were they afraid of waning commitment of elementary school students to the American Way of Life? To be fair, this was the tail end of the Cold War, which was an intense time in our nation's history. But still. Every single day? *If we skip a day, Glenda, it's tetherball on Wednesday and <bam> Communism on Thursday!*

As Mr. Montague led us in the Pledge, my classmates and I repeated the words after him, verbatim. There was one small problem. I didn't know what words we were supposed to be saying. So, I *might* have misheard some of the words.

This happened to me all the time as a kid. Listen all you Gen Zers and Millennials, I did **NOT** have the internet in my pocket. I could not simply look things up. I had to go with phonetical approximation. For example, later on, when I heard Michael Jackson's classic song *Man in the Mirror*, I thought he was singing, "*And no moustache could have been any clearer.*" This 1) literally makes no sense and 2) is absolutely **NOT** what he was saying. Or when I heard Jon Bon Jovi's rock anthem *Livin' On a Prayer*, I thought the lyrics were, "It doesn't make a difference if we're naked or not." Which is 1) not true, legally speaking and 2) again, not what he said.<sup>1</sup>

**AT ANY RATE**, at the risk of having you, dear reader, lose all respect for me, I will now tell you what I thought Mr. Montague, and all the teachers, wanted us to say each day:

*I led the pigeons to the flag  
of the United States of America.*

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<sup>1</sup> This happens to everyone. When my son was about five, I obviously introduced him and his sister to classic 90s music, and the first time he heard C+C Music Factory, he told me he thought the famous opening line was, "Everybody's Dead Now!" This, admittedly, makes it a much, much darker song.

The first time I saw the actual words of the actual Pledge of Allegiance printed out, I was like, “Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.” It suddenly made so much more sense. The *actual* pledge, I learned, contains no imperatives to lead any birds anywhere. I learned \*so much\* in college.

## I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE

Although the Pledge of Allegiance was an ubiquitous and ever-present part of my elementary school life, the actual word “allegiance” is a really rare one. It’s a word we don’t use much. But it’s a word that I think can help us a great deal as we continue in the story of Abraham. First, let’s get a proper definition:

### **AL·LE·GIANCE**

*/əˈlējəns/*

*noun*

*loyalty or commitment of a subordinate to a superior or of an individual to a group or cause.*

*"those wishing to receive citizenship must swear allegiance to the republic"*

So, our working dictionary definition is that *Loyalty + Commitment = Allegiance*. As we’ll see in this story, Abraham moves from being (either) vaguely untethered religiously (or perhaps devoted to other Mesopotamian gods) to being deeply committed and loyal to God. And the story shows us that this deep commitment and loyalty is a key marker of what it means to love God – or love anyone, really. But first, let’s see the pattern from the story. Here’s how things go.

### **PHASE 1: GENESIS 12:1-7**

As we discussed in the previous chapter, the Call of Abraham is a key moment in Abraham’s life. God appears to Abraham, telling him to leave his family in Harran. God promises that He will make Abraham into a great nation, that his name will also be great, and that somehow, all the nations and families of the earth will be blessed by him. Abraham does what God says, goes to Canaan, where they worship Ba’al. Abraham’s response is to build an altar to the LORD.



## GENESIS 12

<sup>7</sup> The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

**PHASE 2: GENESIS 12:8**

Abraham is in the land of Canaan and finds a nice spot in the hills. Abraham then builds another altar to the LORD and calls upon the name of the LORD.

## GENESIS 12

<sup>8</sup> From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

**PHASE 3: GENESIS 13:3-4**

Unfortunately, there’s a famine in the land and Abraham promptly goes into Egypt, where the Nile River would have likely made food security better. Things don’t go well there (more on that later) and after a few brushes with death, Abraham gets kicked out of Egypt. He repents, and goes back to Canaan, right back to that altar he’d built. There, Abraham calls on the name of the LORD again.

## GENESIS 13

<sup>3</sup> From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier  
<sup>4</sup> and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD.

**PHASE 4: GENESIS 13:18**

God shows up again! There’s a small conflict with Abraham’s nephew Lot, where their herds are so large that the land can’t support them, and bickering breaks out between their herders. Abraham, wanting peace, agrees to give part of the land to Lot, who after that terrible experience of famine in Canaan chooses the lush, green river plain. Abraham takes his family tribe and animals, and God appears to Him, this time, telling him, “All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.” Come on! Tell me you don’t hear Mufasa saying to Simba, “Everything the light touches is yours.” Abraham’s response is to build an altar to the LORD.

<sup>18</sup> So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the LORD.

So, what is going on here? There a lot of altar building **AND** a lot of calling on the name of the LORD. What's up with that?

Abraham is changing in some radical ways. The four phases above (when Abraham is building altars and calling on the name of the LORD) are outer signs that something inside him is changing. Abraham's deepest commitments and loyalties are shifting. This is a good part of what it means to love God – your commitments and loyalties shift. In fact, it's *one of the things* that Abraham is celebrated and remembered for throughout the rest of the Bible by the other writers of Scripture.

## YOU GOTTA HAVE FAITH, FAITH, FAITH

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul refers to Abraham multiple times as the father of the faith. In fact, in one section in Galatians, Paul uses the word “faith” four times regarding Abraham. Look at these verses. Clearly, Paul holds Abraham's faith in high regard, and the faith of Abraham is something we should try to emulate. It's part of Abraham's spiritual lineage, and a source of blessing.

### GALATIANS 3

<sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who have **faith** are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by **faith**, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” <sup>9</sup> So those who rely on **faith** are blessed along with Abraham, the man of **faith**.

It's clearly important. But I'm going to be honest here: I don't know what it *means*.

And I don't think the English language helps us much here. The English language doesn't have a verb form of the word “faith” so we have to use a different word – believe – or add a verb (have faith). It really is confusing and muddy. Sometimes

“faith” is used as a verb, as in “I have faith in God,” which usually is meant to suggest that a person believes something (sometimes very strongly). But people also use “faith” as a noun, as when they are talking about their particular religious beliefs, as in “my Catholic faith guides me.” Other times, it’s used as the object of a prepositional phrase, like when people ask, “are you a person of faith?”

It doesn’t help that our modern usage of the word “faith” is even more muddled. For a long time, I thought that the word “faith” meant “trying really hard to believe something you knew probably wasn’t true.” The most manic example I have of this is the 2007-2008 Golden State Warriors, who were termed the “We Believe Warriors.” The team caught fire at the end of the regular season, winning 16 of their final 21 games. They clinched the eighth and final spot in the West on the last day of the regular season and this never-back-down, tough-as-nails, Oakland-strong team defeated the overall no. 1 seed in the playoffs, the Dallas Mavericks, in a stunning upset. My friends started talking crazy talk, saying, “We can go all the way.” And I was like, “Uh. No. That’s not how the NBA works.” The “We Believe Warriors” lost in the next round of the playoffs 4-1. Because. Uh. They weren’t that good. In this way, the word “faith” means the “opposite of reason and the examination of evidence.” You believe something **IN SPITE** of the evidence. Is that what faith is? Believing something improbable against all evidence and against all odds?

Another connotation of the word “faith” is “believing something to be true.” In religious circles, this is often how the word “faith” is used, so that “I have faith in Jesus” means something very similar to “I believe that Jesus is actually God.” What’s fascinating in that definition is that “faith” is nearly always juxtaposed and contrasted to “works” or “doing something.” It’s **ONLY** about believing – mental assent to a series of truths. Paul writes that the “righteous will live by faith” which I was told meant that when you die, if you believe the right things, then you will be accepted by God. He has a scanner, like at a grocery check-out aisle, and he scans your brain for a particular set of beliefs – the right answer – and if you believe it, then you are all good.

Bible translators tell us that the English word “faith” is a cognitive word used to translate a Hebrew word *aman* and the Greek word *pistis*. The trouble is, these are words whose semantic range is larger and more expansive than merely “mental assent.” The Hebrew word *aman* for example – used in Genesis 15:6 and translated

as “believed”<sup>2</sup> – is used to describe driving a tent stake into firm ground<sup>3</sup> but it also means to “fully put one’s trust in something.” This word is used roughly 110 times in the Old Testament. In a sense, Abraham has driven the stake of his life into the ground of God, knowing it will hold. This is trust **AND** loyalty to God. And we see that this act of trust and loyalty is affirmed by YHWH as good and right and pleasing. God is pleased.

### **ALL RIGHT STOP! GRAMMAR-TIME!**

Okay, let’s pause for a quarter second because in the paragraph above, I just wrote the words “semantic range” which sounds hecka smart. “Semantic range” means that the word has different shades of meaning, depending on how it’s used in context. Like the English word “green” which is a color, but also can mean “new or inexperienced” or a “piece of lawn” or “lush with vegetation” or “less harmful to the environment” or even “envious.” The word *green* has a much larger semantic range than the word *turquoise*. Make sense? Good.

This is also challenging because even English words shift in their meaning over time. As the comparative religion scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed out, when the King James Bible was printed in 1611, “to believe” meant something like “to hold dear.” Smith, who died in 2000, once wrote this, which gets to the heart of it:

*The affirmation “I believe in God” used to mean: “Given the reality of God as a fact of the universe, I hereby pledge to Him my heart and soul. I committedly opt to live in loyalty to Him. I offer my life to be judged by Him, trusting His mercy.” Today the statement may be taken by some as meaning: “Given the uncertainty as to whether there be a God or not, as a fact of modern life, I announce that my opinion is yes.”<sup>4</sup>*

That’s a *big* difference. And it seems to me that both the Apostle Paul and the implications of the story of Abraham in Genesis are closer to the first meaning. As I learned every single time that I had a crush on a girl in high school, there’s a world

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2 Genesis 15:6 – Abram believed [*aman*] the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

3 Isaiah 22:23 – I will drive him like a peg into a firm [*aman*] place; he will become a seat of honor for the house of his father.

4 T. M. Luhrmann, Article: *Belief is the Least Part of Faith*, New York Times, May 29, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/30/opinion/luhrmann-belief-is-the-least-part-of-faith.html>

of difference between “acknowledging someone’s existence” and “being loyally committed to them in a relationship.”<sup>5</sup>

For Smith, the word *faith* has the implication of not only **TRUST**, but also **LOYALTY** to God. So, with all that in mind, let’s take Paul’s words about Abraham in Galatians 3, and do a little linguistic expansion, again, because of the *much larger semantic range*<sup>6</sup> of the translated words.

### GALATIANS 3

<sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who have **trust + loyalty to God** are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by **trust + loyalty** and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” <sup>9</sup> So those who rely on their **trust + loyalty** are blessed along with Abraham, the man of **trust + loyalty to God alone.**

Understanding that the word “faith” means both “trust” and “loyalty” allows Abraham’s actions building altars and “calling on the name of the LORD” to make more sense. Again, these are exterior markers of something that is going on inside of Abraham. His loyalties and commitments are shifting. Abraham is shifting. And these altars are proof.

## BIG IDEA 1: ABRAHAM BUILT AN ALTAR TO SHOW THAT HIS LIFE HAD BEEN ALTARED

(SEE WHAT I DID THERE?)

The word *altar* is used 389 times in the Old Testament and the word *offering*, which is what almost always goes *on* an altar, is used 689 times – making it one of the 20 most-used words in the entire Bible.<sup>7</sup> Altars were common in Abraham’s world and were widely used in the ancient Middle East. Archeologists have found many Canaanite altars, both smaller ones built with small field stones and later, larger

5 Dang it, Mariah Carey, you did neither! <sigh>. Dreamlover, come rescue me. I TRIED, MARIAH. I TRIED. Dang concert venue security.

6 Bam! Got that phrase back in there! You can do it too! Amaze your friends! Dazzle your co-workers!

7 I know you’re dying to know. The top 5 most used words in the Bible are, in order *Lord* (1st) *God* (2nd) *Son* (3rd) *King* (4th) *People* (5th) and of course, *cubit* (192nd).

ones built with brick (of course) have been excavated dating back to not only the time of Abraham, but also many centuries before.<sup>8</sup>

But the function of the altar shows us something.

## ALTARS COMMEMORATE SACRED MOMENTS + PLACES

Altars often were frequently built in the ancient world to signify a sacred space. According to archeology, all temples in the ancient world had altars (although not all altars were in temples) – linking altars to worship of gods. Sometimes these sacred places are called “thin places” or a “high place” to designate that the line between heaven and earth is pretty thin.

In the passage we looked at last chapter, the Call of Abraham in Genesis 12, Abraham has an encounter that’s more than thin. Heaven and earth aren’t pretty close, they overlap. The spiritual realm – what the Bible often refers to as the “unseen” realm – breaks through into Abraham’s reality like the Kool-Aid Man through a living room wall.<sup>9</sup> Just imagine this interruption. There is Average Abraham, going about his Average Mesopotamian daily business and suddenly, he is visited (and talked to) by a Supernatural Deity. This is not something that happens every day. Abraham follows this God’s detailed instructions, and then Abraham has yet **ANOTHER** encounter with this God.

Sometimes, an encounter like this in the Bible is called “theophany” which means “an appearance of God” or a “visible manifestation of God to humans.” And the Hebrew language is helpful here to make sense of this. If you’ll notice, I’ve bolded a word in this short passage that shows up twice: the word “appear.”

### GENESIS 12

<sup>6</sup>Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

<sup>7</sup>The **LORD appeared** to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give

8 Walter A. Elwell (Editor), “Altar” in *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Pub Group, 1988), 62.

9 Oh yeah!

this land.”

So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had **appeared** to him.

- The first word “appear” is the Hebrew word *yera’eh* which means “to reveal”
- The second word “appear” is the Hebrew word *nir’eh* or “to appear, to be visible, to be seen.”

In this encounter in Genesis 12, something is “revealed” to Abraham that he did not know before. Something about the future. Something about *his* future. Something about ultimate reality. In this encounter in Genesis 12, something is “made visible” to Abraham too – the unseen realm bursts through, the world of God-space, invading Abraham’s average, dusty Sumerian life – a mind-bending, destiny-shaping encounter that would forever change the trajectory of Abraham’s life.

There’s some word play going on here, too, which unless you speak Hebrew fluently (I do not) you’re likely to miss. The place where this event happens to Abraham is called the Great Tree of Moreh – and “Moreh” is a word that is phonetically similar to the Hebrew word “mareh” which means “vision.” So, at the Grove of Trees of Vision, Abraham “sees” something that was invisible to Him before, and God is “revealed” to him.

This is a sacred place, where God encountered Abraham, and his instinct is to memorialize this place. Another word that some Bible scholars use for these types of encounters is an “apocalypse.” Now, an “apocalypse” might sound like it has to do with the end of the world or fiery destruction like the simply terrible film *2012* starring John Cusack – but it’s not that. An apocalypse is when someone “sees” something, or God “reveals” something important to someone. It’s a vision of something transcendent in which God tells a person something about ultimate reality. In an “apocalypse” God chooses someone – a special representative – to learn about God and God’s ultimate purposes so that person can serve, basically as a “vehicle of Divine wisdom.” In fact, the final book of the Bible, which we call *Revelation* is the Greek word *apokálypsi* where we get the word “apocalypse.”

At any rate, this is what happened to Abraham. And it might seem like a once in a millennia experience for humanity, but I don’t think it is. I think God breaks through more often than you’d think. And these moments can truly change us – shift something inside us forever.

## OAHU, NIGHT DIVING AND THE MILKY WAY

Right after college, I lived in Hawaii for a while on the island of Oahu. One night, a group of my friends decided that they wanted to go night diving off the North Shore to look for 'ula'ula.<sup>10</sup> I thought this was an absolutely terrible idea. First, being from Ohio, I did not have a lot of ocean night diving experience. Second, I have a super active imagination, so the idea of hanging out in a reef at night with the dark abyss of the ocean extending beyond us was definitely going to freak me out. And third, I had just watched a very frightening nature documentary featuring sharks<sup>11</sup> called *Finding Nemo* and really didn't want to die. But my friends convinced me to come. We drove to the North Shore, parked at a beachfront hotel, and then walked about a mile and a half, carrying our gear, along Kaihalulu Beach until we came to a cove with a reef.

That was not a fun hike. First, the gear was heavy. Second, we were slogging through sand. Third, it was a new moon, and the whole beach was completely pitch black. And fourth, I was fairly certain I was marching to my death. We were far away from the dim lights of the resort. If there were an emergency, how would we get help? I have this funny thing I do – this quirk – when I think I'm going to die, I chatter nervously. It's just a little thing I do. So, as we huffed along the beach, I kept peppering my boys Manua, Jason and Owen non-stop with questions about night diving.

*Have you ever seen a shark while night diving?*

*Has anyone you've ever known ever seen a shark while night diving?*

*Have you ever died night diving?*

*Is 'ula'ula really worth this kind of risk?*

*Aren't 'ula'ula basically giant marine cockroaches?*

*Aren't 'ula'ula basically mermaids for scorpions?*

“Here we are,” my friend Owen said from the front of the pack, clearly ignoring my completely legitimate line of questioning. We all gratefully dropped the diving gear held in our mesh dive bags onto the beach. It was pitch black, and the sound of the crashing waves reverberated in the night wind. And that's when it happened.

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10 The Hawaiian word for lobster. They come out at night, and when in season, these things get giant, like 2-3 pounds. But you have to check to make sure it's not a female lobster carrying eggs. You have to let those go.

11 Or “manō” in Hawaiian.



“Woah,” my friend Jason said.

“What, what, what?” I said, nervously.

Jason pointed up.

Above us, in the Hawaiian sky, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, miles away from any light pollution, on the night of a new moon, I looked up and saw more stars than I have ever seen in my life. These were not simple pinpricks of light through the domed, black canopy of the night sky. No. The deep, dark purple velvet of the night sky revealed the dimensions of nebulous clouds from the Milky Way, enormous mists of stars and light extending above us in their vastness. It wasn't stars we were seeing. It was galaxies.

We all sat down, and not because we were tired. We looked up, in silence, for minutes, overwhelmed. Just completely overwhelmed.

“Whoa, brah,” my friend Manua finally muttered, out loud, to no one in particular.

And I assure you, for as long as I am alive, I will remember that *exact* moment on that *exact* beach on the North Shore of Oahu. It was a moment of deep connection with God, for me. Something like overwhelming awe – but it was a simultaneous awe that all of us, this band of friends, had together, all at once. And in our silence, together, we were worshipping, astonished at God's vastness – and closeness – at the same moment.

The old Irish Celts had an expression for moments and places like this. They call them “thin places” – places where the distance between Heaven and Earth seems to collapse, and we get a glimpse, or catch a feeling of something Transcendent. Something Big. Something Other. Something Divine.

“Heaven and Earth are only three feet apart,” the Celts used to say, but in these thin places, that distance shrinks. Sometimes it even disappears.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Have you experienced this? Places that, as you think about it, seemed sacred? Different than the rest of the common, ordinary world. Imbued with something Other. Maybe even God Himself?

The DMV is not a thin place.  
Neither is Las Vegas.

But thin places are not always at the top of mountains, or scenic views. Sometimes, even common places can be thin.

## SACRED PLACES IN COMMON PLACES

In 2002, my girlfriend<sup>12</sup> and I went on a triple double date for Valentine's Day to a fancy Japanese Steak House. This made total sense because my girlfriend was a vegetarian. We went with my buddy Ryan and his date, and our friends Daniel and Listay, who had just gotten married. I don't remember much about the meal except for this moment when the chef flipped a shrimp into someone's mouth at the table, and then that person suddenly realized they had a severe shellfish allergy, so she spat it right back out onto the grill. Oh man, the look the chef gave her. I still laugh when I think about that.<sup>13</sup>

Three years later, my wife and I were again with Daniel and Listay. Only this time, it was in a hospital. Daniel had been diagnosed with aggressive, inoperable, terminal brain cancer. Our entire young adults' group at church prayed for months for the cancer to recede – for a miracle. The miracle never came. We visited Daniel, in an antiseptic hospital room, with blue-and-white tiled floor and buzzing, blinking machines. His wife of only a few years sat nearby. “How are you doing,” I asked. It was a stupid, stupid question. And for a second, I thought the sadness would break all of us. But Daniel, laid in his bed, thin, his head shaved, his face beaming.

“God is so good,” he said. And he then began to describe all the ways God had loved him, served him, helped him in the previous week, the previous month, the previous year. I was speechless.

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12 And by “girlfriend” I mean Nicole Kozma, who later would become my fiancé, and later my wife...because, to borrow the words of the great American poet Beyoncé, “if you like it, then you shoulda put a ring on it.”

13 Probably the second funniest moment to ever happen at a Japanese Steakhouse, behind the *A Benihana Christmas* episode of *The Office*. **Michael:** *Excuse me [tries to take away meat with chopsticks] Ah, un guard. [Fights with chopsticks and laughs] Family style.* **Jim:** *No, it's not.*

“That reminds me of the song,” Nicole said. “Do you remember it? *How great...is our God*,” she sang, weakly, through her tears.

Daniel, who loved music, closed his eyes, and sang that familiar chorus, his frail, dying body somehow brimming with joy and life.

I will remember that moment forever, too. That simple hospital room was a “thin place.” A sacred place, where heaven and earth seemed closer than ever. Death, they told us, was coming, but in that moment, all I saw and knew and felt was Life. We buried Daniel three weeks later. At his funeral service, a packed room of his friends and family sang some of his favorite songs about God. In true Daniel style, he had recorded a video of himself singing some worship songs, so he could join with us. Leading worship at his own funeral. Incredible.

In a very human way, by building this altar of crude stones, Abraham is saying something like, “I won’t forget this moment because it changed me.” Abraham could never forget the moment God broke through time and space to talk to him. In one way, an altar is a monument saying, “This is a thin place!” It’s a way of commemorating that something incredible happened here that makes this place sacred – a place where God-space (Heaven) interacted with Human-space (Earth).

## **BIG IDEA 2: ABRAHAM BUILT AN ALTAR TO SHOW HIS PARTICULAR ALLEGIANCE TO HIS GOD**

The primary word for *altar* in the Hebrew Bible is *mizbēah* which is derived from the root *zbh*, “to slaughter.” Why slaughter? Because it was on an altar that one made a sacrifice, which was almost always an animal. Altars were about the worship of a deity, and worship involves giving the deity some sort of sacrifice – something valuable. This was not something unique to Abraham – we see sacrifice in the Bible all the way back in Genesis 4 with Cain and Abel, and undoubtedly, Abraham’s culture would have had lots of altars and lots of sacrifices. The offering of sacrifice answered the universal human need to present an offering to the deity as a gift and as a show of humility, submission or even an offering of repentance to gain forgiveness.<sup>14</sup>

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14 Walter A. Elwell (Editor) “Altar” in *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible Vol. 1*, 62.

The very first time we see the word *altar* in the Bible is a few chapters earlier, after the flood waters receded and Noah's ark comes to rest on the top of Mt. Ararat. One of the very first things Noah does is build an altar and sacrifice some of the animals.<sup>15</sup> This offering on Noah's altar was a **NOT ONLY** a symbol of a "theophany" – that moment when God told Noah about the future and directed him to build an ark. In this case, it seems to also be an offering of thanksgiving and devotion. But if you think about it, Noah's act of devotion *was in itself a response* to God appearing to him **AND** helping him and his family survive the Flood. God had *already shown devotion* to Noah and his family and giraffes et al. Noah was *responding*.

## **SOME PEOPLE WANT IT ALL. BUT I <sup>DON'T</sup> WANT NOTHING AT ALL.**

As you've seen from the story, multiple times Abraham makes altars to God (never to foreign gods) and "calls upon the name of the LORD." This phrase "calling upon the name of the LORD" is developed throughout the rest of the Old Testament,<sup>16</sup> but Abraham does it multiple times here in Genesis. The phrase sometimes means "a call for deliverance," but it's also a phrase that means to "worship." It's a proclamation and an acknowledgement that in this moment, Abraham is not calling on the name of Ba'al or Molech or Sinna, but another god entirely. Abraham is calling on the name of this God Yahweh who so graciously appeared to him.

### **GENESIS 8**

<sup>20</sup> Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it.

These altars are Abraham saying, "Of all the gods, God, you are my god." It's an expression of loyalty. And as we've seen, this loyalty and commitment to God (above all other gods) is upheld by Paul and others. But again, if we follow the story,

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15 Don't worry, the particular animals Noah sacrificed were ceremonial animals, all of which had more than one pair on board, so Noah wasn't destroying an entire species with that act. It's not like he killed Pumba and that was the end of all warthogs. Also, 40 days is more than enough time for a few more rabbits to show up on the scene, if you know what I mean.

16 Gen. 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25; 1 Kings 18:24; 1 Chr. 16:8; Ps 105:1, 116:4, 116:13; Lam. 3:55; Joel 2:32; Zeph. 3:9

just like Noah, Abraham's altar building is *usually a response* to something God does, says, or promises. Let me show you.

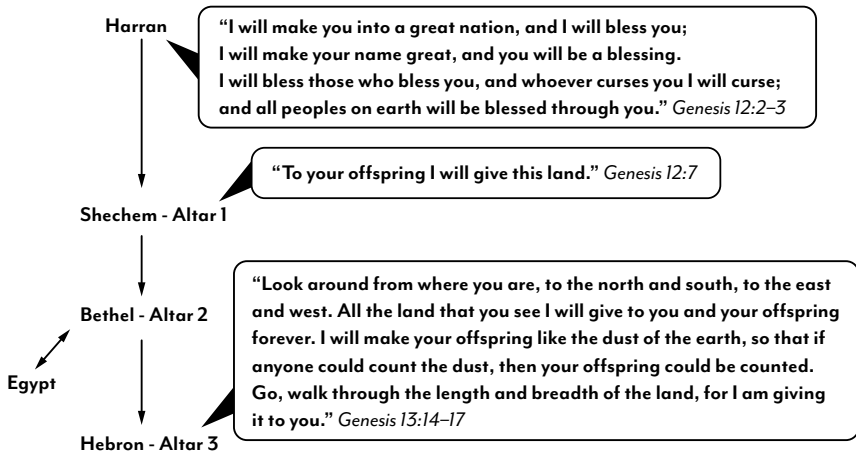


Figure 2: Abraham's travels, altars, and the words God spoke to him.

Abraham builds altars, makes offerings, proclaims and calls out the name of God (not any other god) as signs of his loyalty and devotion. And like Noah, Abraham is doing this *as a response* because God is always showing up **FIRST** and showing his devotion to Abraham first.

And nowhere is this more clear than in Genesis 15, a story with not one, but **TWO** altars. And a story that's about allegiances, but also has a *gigantic plot twist*.

## THE (NON) HUMAN TORCH

In Genesis 15, it's been a few years since God first showed up in that apocalypse, to reveal Himself and Abraham's (and the world's) future. God has promised that Abraham will become a great nation, but Sarah is still barren, still no child.

Abraham is getting worried, so God shows up in *another* theophany – another vision. And God makes *another* staggering promise. I'm losing track how many times this happens to Abraham.

<sup>1</sup> After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

God’s words to “not be afraid” reveal that Abraham is very much afraid. Not only is there a cosmic promise to bring blessing into the entire world, but there’s a deeply personal promise to Abraham too – a son. Abraham is grateful, but reminds God, ever so gently, that he doesn’t have a son yet – and the person set to inherit his stuff is one of his servants.

## GENESIS 15

God clarifies, again, assuring Abraham that He’s not tricking him and that a son “from his own body” or “of his own flesh” will come. God then has Abraham go outside and look up at the stars, telling him his future descendants will be that numerous. I find it interesting that now, whether Abraham looks down at the dust<sup>17</sup> and dirt, or up at the stars, there’s a reminder of these bold promises from God.

<sup>5</sup> He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars— if indeed you can count them.”

And by this point, despite all this taking longer and sounding more far-fetched than a time share presentation, Abraham is resolute. He trusts and believes this God. But then He carefully and respectfully asks, “Yes, but how will I know?”

And now, we come to another part of the story where Abraham builds altars. And not just one, but two. But to understand the importance of this moment, we need a little history. Again. Once more, into the fray!

## WELCOME TO TONIGHT’S EPISODE OF “CHOPPED”

In the last 100 years or so, throughout the modern Middle East (corresponding to the ancient Near East and the time of Abraham) archeologists have found all these tablets of stone which, once translated, turned out to be contracts – pacts

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 13:16 – I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.

and formal agreements – between people of ancient Mesopotamia and Verizon Wireless. I’m kidding. They were between tribes and people groups. Sometimes, these “contracts” were between two parties who were more or less equal. Scholars called these “parity agreements” and the language in these is more informal and equal – often the parties would call each other “brother.” The terms of the contract were basically agreements on sharing resources.<sup>18</sup>

But there was another type of contract called a “Suzerain Treaty” – the word “suzerain” means lord or ruler – between two parties where one was dramatically more powerful or wealthy.<sup>19</sup> In those contracts, the language was formal. The parties were referred to as “lord” and “son” to indicate the power gap. The terms of the contract were more stark: one person/group pledged loyalty to the Suzerain as a “vassal” – basically a slave – in exchange for protection and provision. Keep in mind, the less powerful party had to swear **EXCLUSIVE** allegiance to the ruler or lord.

A vassal can’t have two rulers or lords. Just like an NBA player can’t have two teams. It doesn’t make sense. You swore exclusive allegiance to one ruler or lord.

Then, to seal this treaty, the weaker party, who had the most obligations as the “vassal” would go on a “covenant walk.”<sup>20</sup> There would be two altars built, and then an animal would be killed, and parts of the animal and blood from the animal would be placed on each altar. Then, the vassal involved would walk between the altars, to seal the covenant. Forget signing a document with a pen, apparently the act of dividing the animals and walking through the parts was an ancient form of contractual agreement.<sup>21</sup> It was a way of saying, “If I break my covenant, may

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18 David Noel Freedman (Editor-in-Chief), “Covenant” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 1*. (London: Doubleday, 1992), 1180.

19 Walter A. Elwell (Editor), “Covenant” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible Vol. 1*, 534.

20 We don’t have a ton of records about these, but apparently the act of dividing the animals and walking through the parts was an ancient form of contractual agreement. Jeremiah 34, in the Bible, describes this. Another non-Biblical example of this kind of “covenant walk” is a treaty found from Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati’ilu of Arpad that reads: “If Mati’ilu sins against (this) treaty made under oath by the gods, then, just as this spring lamb, brought from its fold, will not return to its fold, ... alas, Mati’ilu ... will not return to his country” (James B. Pritchard (Editor), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 532.)

21 John H. Sailhamer “Genesis” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Vol. 2*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 130.

what happened to these animals happen to me.”<sup>22</sup> This was a very strong form of a loyalty oath. And with that information in mind, take a look at what’s going on in Genesis 15.

## GENESIS 15

<sup>9</sup> So the LORD said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”

<sup>10</sup> Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half.

This is a covenant walk. God and Abraham are going to seal the deal.

But before we go any further, let me give you a pop quiz. What kind of treaty or covenant is this? Is this a parity agreement, between two equal parties? Or a “suzerain” treaty between a powerful lord and a vassal? Right. Nobody is an equal partner with God. Nobody. Not Tom Brady. Not Tom Cruise. Not even Oprah. This is a Suzerain Treaty. So, who is going to be walking through the two altars? The weaker party, to show his ultimate allegiance to God.

That’s where this whole story is headed. Abraham is going to show his allegiance to God through another altar. He’s going to “be under” the covenant curses, too, if he breaks his promises. But then the vultures show up, and there is Abraham, without a shotgun, and he has to shoo the birds of prey away. This is difficult work, and he falls asleep before he can even go on the covenant walk. And then, something incredible happens.

## GENESIS 15

<sup>12</sup> As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. <sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. <sup>14</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.

<sup>15</sup> You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup> In the fourth generation your descendants will come

<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 34:17-18 – Therefore this is what the LORD says... Those who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces.



back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

<sup>17</sup> When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. <sup>18</sup> On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.

Look at that last part: *When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.*

Who is going on the covenant walk, promising death if he breaks his promises and oaths? Well, it should be Abraham. But who is it? It's a **FLOATING TORCH**. Who is going on the covenant walk?

Not Abraham.

It's God!

God is the one making all the promises. God is communicating to Abraham that He, as God, as the Ruler, as the More Powerful Party, He Himself will bear the penalty if He breaks this promise. God is swearing unto Death, that He will be devoted to Abraham and will keep His promises to bless him.

Now, that for sure, would have surprised Abraham. Nobody in the ancient world would have expected those kinds of promises from a more powerful ruler. But what happened next must have simply astonished Abraham.

*The ceremony promptly ended.*

It ended. And Abraham was never required or asked by God to go on the covenant walk. Abraham didn't have to go on the walk. He didn't have to promise *anything*. This was unheard of, for the vassal not to have to make the formal pledge of loyalty and allegiance. It was unheard of for the vassal not to put himself under the curse of the covenant, if he broke his pledge. Author and pastor Tim Keller, reflecting on this story in Genesis 15 said:

*Abraham knew what it meant, though he didn't see how it could be. It meant God was making the promise for both of them, and he was taking*

*the curse of the covenant on for both of them! And what he was doing was he was saying, "Not only, will I be torn to pieces if I don't keep my promise, I'll be torn to pieces if you don't."*<sup>23</sup>

God knew that Abraham, like all of us, was going to make some mistakes along the way. There would be times when he would make the wrong turn or make a bone-headed decision.

And in this moment, Abraham heard a promise he'd never even considered was possible: a god making a solemn oath of allegiance to a human, upon penalty of death. What?

Now do you see why Abraham was willing to give his total allegiance to God? Because God had given it to Abraham already. This is love. This kind of reciprocity, give-and-give is the way love works. Abraham is doing this not because he's being bribed or bought – but because that's the way love actually works. We've all seen something similar to this. I know I have.

## **ACCIDENT(AL) LOVE**

On the day of our one-year anniversary, Nicole and I got a call from our friend Sagor telling us that our friend Ryan (from the Japanese Steak House story above) had been in a terrible motorcycle accident on the way into work that morning. As our group of friends rushed to get information and get to the hospital, a dread sank in over us. "The doctors are saying it's bad," Sagor told us. "Like really bad."

We drove to Stanford Hospital, got out of our car and hurried to the lobby, where we saw our friends, huddled together.

"What's going on," I asked.

"They're operating on him right now," Sagor said. "We'll know more in a bit when Michelle comes out."

"Michelle?" I said.

"Yeah," Sagor said. "She's been in there with the doctors this whole time."

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23 Tim Keller, Sermon: *A Covenant Relationship*, Sep 9, 2007 <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/a-covenant-relationship-5548/>

This surprised me a bit. Michelle was Ryan's kind-of new girlfriend. They had met about seven months earlier at his New Year's Eve party and started dating shortly after that. Now, I had been friends with Ryan for a while, and watched him go through a litany of girlfriends. These relationships always seemed to flame out, pretty quickly. I guess I figured it would be the same with Michelle. Michelle was great, but after all, this was, you know, Ryan.

A few minutes later, Michelle walked out to where we were. I don't know how Michelle got to the hospital so quickly, but she was information grand central station. She was running the show.

- Michelle gave the hospital Ryan's information, so they could access his medical records.
- She contacted Ryan's parents, who were about to board a cruise ship in Long Beach. She helped them get off the boat and book a flight home a few hours later.
- She called Ryan's sister, who was in grad school in SoCal and who promptly hopped in her car.
- She talked with the doctors, getting the latest info, and passing that along to all of us.
- She set up a prayer chain, for all of Ryan's friends.
- She set up an information chain, to pass along updates.
- She even coordinated with roadside assistance, to figure out to do with Ryan's mangled motorcycle.
- And when the doctors made the difficult decision that they had to amputate Ryan's leg just below the knee, she was the first person they told.

In short, Michelle snapped into Code Red, like a full Monster's Inc Level 2319, turning chaos into order, forming information chains, and taking care of nearly everyone and everything. The doctors were not able to save Ryan's leg, but they were able to save his life on that operating table, thanks in large part to a trauma surgeon and an emergency room nurse that "just so happened" to be driving behind Ryan at 7 a.m. on a Saturday on an otherwise empty highway. They saved his life. That night, Michelle emerged into the lobby where we waited.

“He’s awake,” Michelle said, “And making dumb Ryan jokes.”

We all laughed and sighed. Although a painful and long and life-altering recovery was ahead of our friend, he was not dead. He would be different, but he would be okay. As the night wound down, and we left the hospital to walk to our car, I remember turning to my wife and Sagor and saying, “Man, Michelle is something.” I could not have been more impressed.

“She wasn’t acting like his girlfriend,” I said, out loud, to no one. “She was acting more like...”

I trailed off.

Nicole looked at me. “Yep,” she said.

“Yep,” Sagor said.

Two years later, I was in a black suit, in the front of a room of people. Ryan was standing next to me in a tux as Michelle walked down the aisle in a gorgeous white gown. It was the first wedding I ever officiated, and I think I did it okay, because it stuck – fifteen years and counting.

At the risk of sounding completely heretical, I wonder if that experience wasn’t somewhat analogous – in a small, small, minute way – to what Abraham experienced.

During that traumatic event, Ryan had a bit of an “apocalypse” about this girl he was dating. Something was “revealed” to him and the hidden and unseen became clear as the sky. He got to see Michelle for who she really was, her true character, her true self. That’s what love needs. You can’t love someone you don’t know anything about.

And during that traumatic event, Ryan had seen something. Michelle’s devotion to him. She wasn’t acting like just another girlfriend. She was acting like...well...a wife. We all saw it that day. That’s also a part of love. Someone does something



**Click here  
to see live  
footage  
of what it  
means to  
snap into  
a 2319.**

that shows they care about you, and you respond back. It's just the way it works. Michelle had shown incredible devotion to Ryan, to his friends and to his family that day. And in some ways, when Ryan proposed, he was just responding to the love and devotion Michelle had clearly already shown him.

After that accident, Ryan was done for. There was no going back. There were no other girls out there. Ryan's allegiances shifted entirely. Michelle was it. Forever.

Signed.

Sealed.

Delivered.

I'm yours.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In the final analysis, as we will see, Abraham makes quite a few missteps and mistakes. Some of them are absolutely tragic. But when it comes to this issue – the issue of loyalty and commitment to God – he doesn't mess this one up. Abraham never makes an altar to any other god. He never calls on the name of any other god. In this one area Abraham shows us a beautiful example.

Remember our Key Lesson #1: Loving God means being loyal and committed to Him.

Abraham pledges his allegiance to God because, after all, what kind of God does this? Makes these kind of promises? Is it any wonder that Abraham was willing to give his ultimate allegiance to this God? Again, the words of Tim Keller:

*"Oh Abraham, Abraham," God is saying, and to all of us, "Oh world, I will bless you no matter what. Even if it means that my immortality must become mortal. Even if my glory must be drowned in darkness. Even if I have to literally be torn to pieces."*

Abraham, the story tells us, believed God. He had faith in God.

And in a way, this part of the story of Abraham asks the same question of all of us.

Will we?

\*

\*

\*

Of course, this doesn't answer the practical question of "what does allegiance to God actually look like in the real world?" We'll explore what Abraham shows us about the answer to that critical question in the next chapter.

## KEY LESSON

1

Abraham shows us in this moment that

**LOVING GOD** means being **LOYAL + COMMITTED** to Him

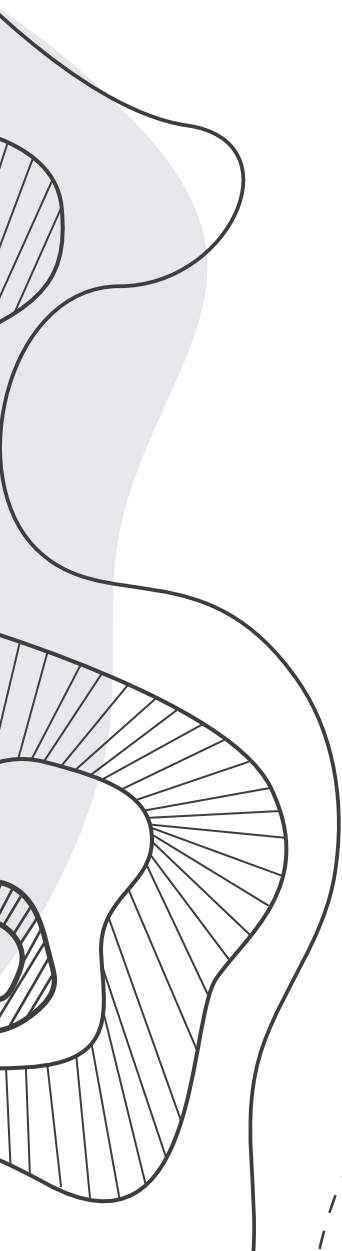
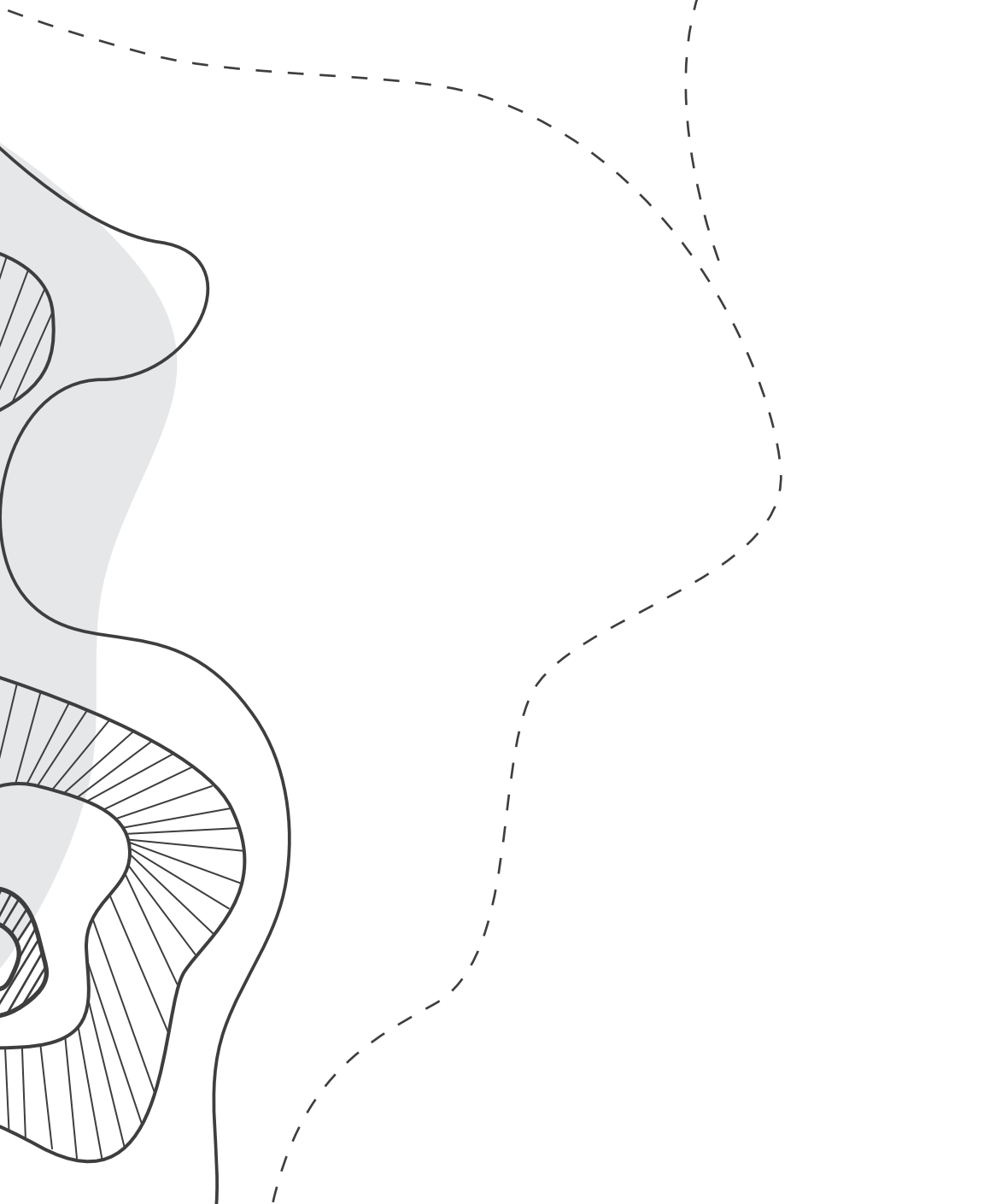
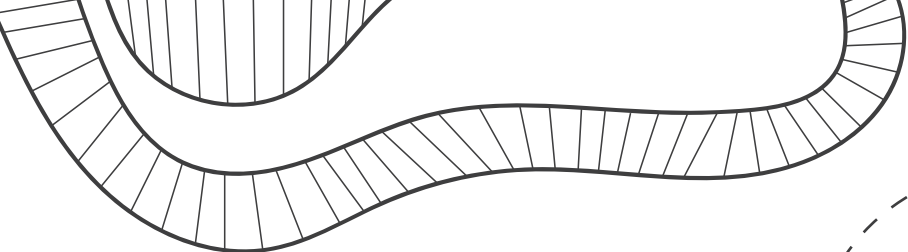
- Even if that means making an altar to God in the land of Ba'al.
- Even if it costs you.

## CHAPTER 03 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What impacted you the most about this chapter? What questions did the chapter bring up for you? What was the most helpful part of the chapter?
2. Talk about a time when you misunderstood what someone said, perhaps in a speech or lyrics in a song. How big of a difference does this make?
3. How have you previously understood the English word “faith?” Was there anything surprising or new in the description of the biblical words *pistis* and *aman*, which are translated as “faith” in English?
4. Have you ever had an experience with a “thin place” where God seemed very close, as though He were breaking through into this world? Share that story.









## CHAPTER 4

# THE LAND

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IN WHICH WE EXAMINE ABRAHAM'S STAGGERING TRUST IN  
GOD AND WHY SUCH ACTIVE TRUST IS SO DIFFICULT.

## KEY LESSON

2

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means **TRUSTING** Him.

- Even when it doesn't make sense.
- 

## ALOHA MEANS HELLO AND GOODBYE

As my senior year of college came to a dramatic close, I was in a pickle. Months earlier, in New York, I had (feebly, but authentically) placed my faith in God and gave Him my allegiance, but now I had to figure out what in the world that might mean. One thing was sure: I had lived my life up until that point with my allegiance to pretty much no one except myself. I had to learn how to live this Christian life.

I figured I didn't know anything, so might as well spend a year or so hanging around Jesus people who did, so I applied to work as an unpaid volunteer at a Christian organization. Providentially, my resume floated across the desk of the international president of an organization called Youth For Christ, and his assistant called me up one day, asking if I was available to talk. Dr. Sam's deep, rich, booming Mufasa baritone voice came over the phone, and soon, I had a year-long internship serving at the international offices of Youth for Christ...which were in (wait for it)...

Hawaii.

I was about to go serve God in **HAWAII**. All my friends who know, say it with me:

*God is good.  
(all the time)*

Mmmm. Somebody testify. As I got off the plane in Hawaii, the ocean breeze blowing in my face, I could not have been more excited. I was living in paradise. But best of all, I was going to be useful. I'd be serving as YFC's communication director, using my college degree, my writing skills and my journalistic experience to serve this global organization.

On my first day at the office, which was on the bottom floor of a local church, I got to meet everyone I'd be working with. Dr. Sam showed me to my office. It was an old broom closet, a simple room encased in cinder blocks with no windows, a desk and a chair. Not the best view of the Hawaiian sky, but whatever. I was excited to get to work. What would be first? Some soaring corporate communique outlining vision? Redesign the website?

"Follow me," Dr. Sam said, as we walked up the stairs to the sanctuary of the church, a huge circular room, with white support walls framing huge, floor-to-

ceiling, sliding glass doors.

“Do you see all these walls?” Dr. Sam asked, opening the doors, transforming the sanctuary into an open-air breezy auditorium.

“Yes,” I said.

“Well, at night, the geckos, they come out and they leave little stains on the walls.”

“Geckos,” I said. We did not have geckos in Ohio.

“So, what I need you to do, is take this bucket and that step ladder and clean all the walls,” Dr. Sam said.

“Clean the walls?” I said, slowly.

“Yes.” Dr. Sam said, handing me the bucket. “When you’re done, come find me.”

And with that he left.

*“When you’re done, come find me.”*

And that resulted in my first real argument with God. As I walked around the entire building with that red bucket, cleaning little beige pellets of gecko droppings, and wiping little yellow stains of gecko urine off the white walls, I became more and more furious. I could not believe – *COULD NOT BELIEVE* – that I had flown 4,459 miles to this stupid island to clean up *LIZARD DROPPINGS*.

“I did not graduate magna cum laude from a prestigious university and give up a hefty salary at some corporate job so that I could clean up *GECKO POO POO*,” I muttered to myself. Somewhere, I heard the clicking sounds of the geckos, hiding in the mango trees outside, mocking me from a distance. I could almost hear their taunts, blowing through the pineapple-drenched, sun-kissed wind that whispered through the sanctuary.

“Fifteen minutes could save you 15 percent,” they said.

Shut up, you stupid pooping geckos!

It took me the better part of two days to clean all the walls in that church. And then, when I was done, Dr. Sam walked me around the wood deck that surrounded the entire second floor of the church. He handed me a scrub brush and pointed to a hose connected to a spigot.

“And you already have a bucket,” Dr. Sam said.. “When you’re done, come find me,” and then he walked away.

I was so mad. So. So. Mad.

## YOU’RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME

Look, nobody wants to be ordered around. Or told what to do. But in essence, this is the scenario that Abraham is invited into by God. Let’s look at the invitation of God again and go through it slowly. Here’s the text again:

### GENESIS 12

<sup>1</sup>The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

As I read it, I think there are at least **FOUR MAIN REASONS** why this sentence in Genesis 12:1 from God is bonkers. I mean, really, really outrageous. Truly, truly shocking.

### 1. ABRAHAM IS TOLD TO LEAVE HIS LAND

The first time I visited Europe, I was surprised at a cultural marker I noticed. In the US, when people want to get to know you they ask, “What kind of work do you do?” But in Europe, people instead ask, “Where are you from?” This simple question gives you mounds of insight into their personhood, their heritage, their culture, their identity. This is true for a lot of people throughout the history of the world – where you are *from* is a large indicator of your identity as a human being. It roots you. I suppose that in the US, our nation is so new<sup>1</sup> and we are so transient, we don’t get this. But more than that, for Abraham this is a risky move. In the ancient world, water is life and Harran sprung up as a major city because it’s located right at the intersection of the Jullab and Balikh rivers. This was the safe bet. Abraham and his family were established in agricultural safety. Uprooting your animals and family like this was risky. This is not like a college graduate moving from home to the big city for a new job opportunity. This is

<sup>1</sup> One of my all-time favorite commentaries on this is from comedian Eddie Izzard, who once quipped he was from Europe, “Where the history is” and that in the US, our concept of history is saying: “We’ve restored this building to how it looked over 50 years ago!” Izzard mocks, “No, surely not! No one was alive then.”

more like the Oregon Trail. You leave and hope you don't die of dysentery. And the settling of the American West was the mid-to-late 1800s – this was more than 3,000 years **BEFORE THAT**.

## **2. ABRAHAM IS TOLD TO LEAVE HIS FAMILY**

If “where you are from” is important in ancient cultures, then family was even **MORE** important. The Call of Abraham is a call for Abraham to abandon all sources of what people in the ancient Near East would have considered *the* critical source of identity: his family. In the ancient world (heck, even now) cutting ties with your family like that would be challenging. In addition to that, God's invitation is also a calling for Abraham to abandon what people in the ancient Near East would have considered *the* critical source of support: his family. If things went sideways in life – and things *always* go sideways, don't they? – Abraham would be without a safety net. He's outside the shuttle, space walking without a tether. Supremely dangerous. Abraham is told to go, and even something as strong as his deepest familial ties wasn't to be an impediment to that.

## **3. ABRAHAM IS NOT EVEN TOLD WHERE HE IS GOING**

Pretend we're hanging out and I say, “Buddy! Let's go get something to eat.” And you say, “Where?” And I say, “I know a place. Get in the car, and I'll give you directions.” You'd probably ask some clarification questions, because 1. You don't have all day. What if I want us to drive 600 miles to Roscoe's House of Chicken & Waffles in Long Beach? Sure, delicious, but that's an **ALL DAY** thing. You don't have all day. You have stuff to do. So, you want to know so you can veto the plans if it's not **WHERE** you like. And 2. You'd also want to know because what if I want to take you to the Green Mynt, a brand-new vegan place that serves cold tofu bisque with sprouts? Now, you want to know so you can veto the plans if it's not **WHAT** you want. In either case, you want to know where you're going so you can ratify the plans if they seem good to you. Abraham doesn't get a chance to do this **AT ALL**. He is asked by God to get up and go without even knowing the destination. This requires a crazy amount of trust.

## **4. ABRAHAM COULD HAVE SAID NO**

God is not playing games with the request He's making of Abraham. There are promises of blessings that are unconditional from God, yes, but in a sense, those promises only get activated if Abraham takes the offer. Abraham has to

make this move to activate them. Just like the Fresh Prince had a wealthy, loving, extended family (and butler!) waiting to give him a family, a home and a much better life in Bel-Air, but he first had to move from West Philadelphia. Where he was born and raised. He had to leave the familiar playgrounds, where he had spent most of his days. Only then would he become the Fresh Prince of *Bel-Air*. Same for Abraham. The implications of this are quite large. Apparently, we humans have real agency. God will treat us like real sons and daughters. Real heirs. Real *tselem*. With real choice. This is not pretense. Everything hinges on the command of God in Genesis 12. And if Abraham doesn't respond, the Bible would have been a really short book.<sup>2</sup> Thankfully, he did.

That's a lot, right? In Chapter 3, we examined the word "faith" (Greek: *pistis*; Hebrew: *aman*) and that it often means "allegiance" or "loyalty + commitment." Well, it's really like a two-sided coin and that's only one side. The other side of that "faith" coin is "trust." Abraham's life showed allegiance for sure, but this is where the "trust" aspect of faith enters into Abraham's story. This move demands deep trust from Abraham. Trust that this God will keep His promises. Trust that this God isn't lying or tricking him. Trust that this God knows where He's going. Trust that this God will keep him and his family alive. Later in the Bible, the author of Hebrews gives some commentary about the life of Abraham, illustrating exactly this point:

#### HEBREWS 11

<sup>1</sup> Now **faith** [*pistis*] is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see... <sup>8</sup> By **faith** [*pistis*] Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By **faith** [*pistis*] he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

Abraham is showing us something absolutely *terrible*. Living life with God means turning over...<gulp>...control.

<sup>2</sup> I know, I know. God's will and purposes cannot be thwarted by mere mortals, and undoubtedly God would have found another human partnership. It was a joke, people.

## WE LIKE TO DRIVE

GENESIS 12

<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him.

For a long while, I was a pastor to youth and young adults. Now, a lot of young people come to the Bay Area because they're seeking job opportunities. After one service, a young woman I knew came up to me. She had a big interview for a promotion the next day and asked me to please pray for her. As I was praying, I prayed something like, "Regardless of the outcome, God, we trust you." Then – and I will never forget this – this woman stopped me in the middle of my prayer. And she said, "No. That is NOT what I want you to pray."

Oh. Well then!

For the next few moments, she explained how she needed this promotion, she *deserved* this promotion, that this promotion was practically her birthright, and requested that I pray for that.

Now I had a new problem. "What if, and just go with me on this for a second," I said, as kindly as I could, "What if God doesn't want you to have this promotion. What if, just imagine with me, that there are some aspects of this job that He knows would be bad for you."

"There aren't," she said, in the same tone someone might use if I had just suggested that Britney Spears would make an excellent Attorney General. I don't think that I have ever been told what to pray.<sup>3</sup> The point I'm trying to make is that this young woman was not trusting God with her future career. She had a very clear roadmap, and she was asking – nay, demanding – that God make it happen.

Now I'm not knocking this young woman at all. If anything, that moment stands in such sharp relief in my memory because I do the exact same thing.

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<sup>3</sup> I had flashbacks to *Talladega Nights* when Ricky Bobby's wife Carley stopped his prayer to say: "I want you to do this prayer good, so that God will let us win tomorrow." And with that, I have reached the allotted limit for references to Will Ferrell movies.



*God, I will trust you, but only if I know where you're going and what we're doing so I can endorse your decision. I get veto power, okay, God? Cool.*

This is **NOT** what Abraham does. He goes to the Land of Canaan. This does not mean that he doesn't have questions. Later in the story, Abraham asks God some clarifying questions about the promises that God made to him back in Chapter 12. Abraham was supposed to get a child – and be the patriarch of a nation – but he doesn't have a kid yet. And his servant is set to be his heir. Abraham wonders if God has forgotten (perhaps wondering if the “son” thing was going to be via adoption) and God clarifies, saying that yes, Abraham will have a son “who is your own flesh and blood.” And then one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible shows up:

#### GENESIS 15

<sup>6</sup>Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

This key verse in Genesis is quoted five times in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> As we saw in chapter 3, the verb in this sentence, “believe,” is the Hebrew word *aman* (same as “faith” and Greek *pistis*) which means “to put one’s trust in something.” It’s also the linguistic reason why even today we end our prayers the way we do, with the English transliteration “amen” – as if to say, “God, you are trustworthy and we put our trust in you.” Abraham makes a decision to trust God and believe that if God can make the stars, He can help an old man and his wife have a child. But it goes deeper than this. This act of trust is affirmed by God as good and right and pleasing (the word *righteousness*). Sometimes, certain theologians focus on this word “credited” and take it to mean, “Because there is nothing good about mankind, we therefore can’t do anything good, but because Abraham believed (trusted) in God, God decides to impute (give) Abraham some righteousness that is alien to him (that belongs to Jesus, actually) because of his trust.” I disagree with that assessment. In this moment, Abraham does something good and true – he “*amans*” or “trusts” God’s promise (even though it must have seemed improbable or even non-sensical) and that kind of trust is seen by God as righteousness. God is saying, “This is exactly the kind of behavior and attitude and posture I am after! I love it!” This is the kind of response God is looking for in His *tselem* – it is what He wants in His blessable image-bearing covenant partners. The righteousness of this moment is located in

4 Rom. 4:3, Rom. 4:9, Rom. 4:22-23; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23

the fact that God was pleased<sup>5</sup> because of Abraham's trust. Look how the later Biblical author Paul puts it, reflecting back on this moment between Abraham and God:

#### ROMANS 4

<sup>18</sup> Against all hope, Abraham in hope **believed** [*pistis*] and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." <sup>19</sup> Without weakening in his **faith** [*pistis*], he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. <sup>20</sup> Yet he did not waver through **unbelief** [*apsistis*] regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his **faith** [*pistis*] and gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup> This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."

Why is this such a big deal to God? Because, I think, it's so rare. This moment revealed something powerful and instructive about how Abraham is making decisions and what is driving him. And Abraham's trust in God actually confronts our modern way of thinking in some profound ways.

## IN GOD WE TRUST

The nation I live in, the United States of America, has an official motto: "In God We Trust." It's printed on all of our money, which is ironic, because money seems to be the thing that functionally America really seems to trust the most. Despite it being the national motto, I don't recall any teachers or principals ever coming over the loudspeaker to say, "Remember kids. We trust God."

The very first Christian song I think I ever heard was the song *Tennessee* by the group *Arrested Development*. The lyrics tell a fascinating narrative, following a young black man going on a journey with God to figure out his place in life by examining his own past, and the past of his ancestors. In the end, he makes a plea, asking to be guided by wisdom and by God. One line still sticks out in my mind:

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5 Also, the Hebrew word *khasab* – which is usually translated "credited" – has the flavor of "considered" or "regarded" or "thought." You can see this in other passages where it's used, like Gen. 31:15, Gen 38:15, 1 Sam. 1:13 and Isaiah 53:3-4.

*I know you're supposed to be my steering wheel, not just my spare tire  
 (Home!) But Lord, I ask you  
 (Home!) to be my guiding force and truth<sup>6</sup>*

Doesn't it feel like Abraham could have written this song? The speaker in *Tennessee* is saying, "I know, God, you are supposed to guide and direct my life, where I go, what I do, and instead I treat you like something only to be used in the most dire of circumstances, if at all." As I think about it, I suppose the metaphor of "spare tire" is not quite accurate. In the story of Abraham, God is asking to be Abraham's GPS. But when this song came out, nobody knew what GPS was. Whatever. It still works.

The point is, Abraham shows us that trusting God is costly. It requires tremendous courage. It means allowing God to steer the direction of your life. It means giving up autonomy which is the most precious thing us modern people have. And the story of Abraham shows us, doing life with God and loving God means turning over the most important things to us – the things we want and the things we need (or the things we think we need). It means turning those things entirely over to God.

Abraham leaves his family. He trusts God with his deepest relationships.  
 Abraham leaves his land. He trusts God with his daily work and sustenance.  
 Abraham has dreams for his future. He trusts God with his future.  
 Abraham has an idea how his life should go. He trusts God with how  
 his life will turn out.  
 This is a *staggering* amount of trust.

As Abraham's incredible response in Genesis 12 shows us, loving God means taking:

Our deepest needs and desires  
 And handing them over to God  
 It means taking our future  
 And handing it over to God

Loving God means trusting that God will give us what we need.

Loving God means trusting that He is good.

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6 Arrested Development, "*Tennessee*," from the album *3 Years, 5 Months and 2 Days in the Life Of...* (Chrysalis/EMI, 1992)

Loving God means trusting that His ways are somehow higher and better than our ways.

And in the case of Abraham, he doesn't get all the information. How will Abraham have a child when his wife is barren? Where exactly, is he heading? Where will he end up? What if the people there are hostile? Then what? How can going south through the desert be good? How can leaving the protection of his family tribe NOT result in his death? These are all very, very good questions. And God does not give Abraham *any* information that answers any of those questions. Still, Abraham trusts.

Man, this is a tough thing to look at. We have to be honest about what is driving our life. What is controlling the way we live. Because if we're honest, most of the time our decision making isn't shaped by a desire to follow God, but something else. The story of the radical trust of Abraham invites us to examine those things. And it confronts the accepted wisdom of our culture.

## **MULAN IS A BIG LYING LIAR**

One of the most ubiquitous ideas present in our culture, in whose philosophy we are all bathed, can best be summed up in three short words:

Follow. Your. Heart.

This mantra is everywhere in our society, and summed up, offers this advice:

*In life, you'll face a number of difficult decisions. And sometimes, you won't know what to do. So, the best way forward is to go inside: ask yourself, "What do you want? What do you think is the right thing?" Pay attention to what your emotions and desires (and values) are saying and follow them."*

This philosophy for decision-making and life-living is embedded everywhere, but it is reinforced by the most culturally powerful medium that's ever existed: Disney movies. Check it out:

**EXAMPLE 1:** Cinderella and a bunch of mice famously sing that “a dream is a wish your heart makes.” Where do dreams come from? Your heart.

**EXAMPLE 2:** In the theme song off the *Mulan* soundtrack (I'm talking about the 1998 version, which I absolutely owned on CD), Stevie Wonder and 98 Degrees (easily the fifth-best boy band of that era) sing these words:

*Though you're unsure, why fight the tide  
Don't think so much, let your heart decide...  
You must be true to your heart,  
that's when the heavens will part...  
Open your eyes.  
Your heart can tell you no lies...*

**EXAMPLE 3:** Elsa, tired of hiding her true self makes the bold decision to “let it go” deciding to “turn away and slam the door” on people who disagree with her radical pursuit of her authentic frosted self. She's going to be the Ice Queen. And she might have had 99 problems but the cold ain't one.

**EXAMPLE 4:** Then there's Moana. Even though she is the daughter of a Chief in an isolated, insular Polynesian island, apparently her sense of identity is not given by her tribe, parents, or culture, but rather herself as Moana's grandmother tells her that:

*If the voice starts to whisper  
To follow the farthest star  
Moana, that voice inside is who you are.*

**EXAMPLE 5:** And perhaps most iconic of all, Pinocchio's trusted sidekick, Jiminy Cricket who came to be known as the personification of personal conscience sang:

*When you wish upon a star  
makes no difference who you are*

*anything your heart desires  
will come to you.*

How do you know what to do in life, and how to make important decisions? Easy! Just follow your inner desires! As we get older, the voices telling us the advice to **FOLLOW YOUR HEART** become slightly more sophisticated, but the message is the same. In his book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, New York Times columnist Ross Douthat calls this the “God Within” heresy. Douthat points to author Elizabeth Gilbert (whose memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* was an international best-seller and movie featuring America’s Sweetheart Julia Roberts<sup>7</sup>) as one of the more clear articulations of this idea. Gilbert, tired of her life and obligations, sought an escape from the constraints of marriage and parenting. In the book, she heard from God speaking to her in “my own voice from within my own self.” She says that “God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are.” And with that, Gilbert found the courage to listen to her own heart, which was telling her to leave her husband and young baby and find deliverance from the solemn vows she’d taken to find true freedom: listening to herself, which Gilbert believed was also the very voice of God. A good friend pointed out to me that this trend has only continued, most recently with Glennon Doyle’s 2020 book *Untamed* – which was a New York Times bestseller, selling more than 2 million copies. It says basically the exact same thing: the way to find yourself is to listen to that voice inside yourself.

As Douthat writes, “[These cultural voices] are telling an affluent, appetitive society exactly what it wants to hear: that all its deepest desires are really God’s desires, and that He wouldn’t dream of judging” and that “Nothing defines the last decade of American life more than our inability to master our own impulses and desires.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the story of Abraham shows us concretely that the voice of God might be difficult to hear – it might even be a whisper, but it’s always *other*. God is not us. We are not God. God is *other*.

So, what if **FOLLOW YOUR HEART** is actually accidentally terrible advice? What if, despite what we are told by our culture, the media and even our friends, our emotions and desires are at best occasionally unreliable and at worst deeply

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7 I wonder if America will ever have another sweetheart, or if we’re just stuck with Julia and Meg Ryan. I’m okay with that. I just wonder.

8 Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2012), 236.

deceptive? After all, the evidence seems to suggest this. We all have seen tragic examples of people “following their heart” to disastrous ends. You’ve seen this right? Maybe even lived it? Perhaps these “voices” inside of us are worthy of a bit more consideration.

Perhaps, when it comes to a trustworthy guide, our “desires” are unreliable. Perhaps they’re even more dangerous than tree ocelots.<sup>9</sup>

## TREE OCELOTS

Tree ocelots live in the tropical jungles of the Brazilian Amazon Rainforest and are largely nocturnal cats that use keen sight and hearing to hunt small prey: things like rabbits, rodents, iguanas, fish, and frogs. They also take to the trees and stalk monkeys. But monkeys, high in the rooftop canopy, are tough to catch. They have the higher ground and also have keen, keen eyesight. So, what do the tree ocelots do?

They mimic the sound of baby monkeys in distress.

That's right.

Tree Ocelots make a sound that mimics the sound of baby monkeys crying out in distress.

And that draws in the adult monkeys. Who then get eaten.

(Note: This is just *incredibly* messed up. In the words of the researchers who discovered this back in 2010, it revealed a "psychological cunning we did not expect."<sup>10</sup>) But there's a lesson here, for all of us: following your heart might be the worst thing that ever happened to you. Because...



Shown here, a tree ocelot stares pensively into the distance, pondering the best way to diversify his investment holdings.

9 That's right. Buckle up, boys and girls. I'm about to get all Discovery Channel on you.

10 Christine Dell'Amore, Article: *Jungle Cat Mimics Monkey to Lure Prey – A First*, National Geographic News, July 15, 2010 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/100712-cats-mimics-monkeys-prey-science>

**BIG IDEA:** *Despite what we are told by our culture, the media and even our friends, our emotions and desires are at best occasionally unreliable and at worst deeply deceptive.*<sup>11</sup>

Please pay attention to what I am saying and what I am **NOT** saying. I am not saying to ignore your emotions or desires. Back to the tree ocelot. Is it morally wrong for the mama monkeys to want to follow their instinct to protect and help baby monkeys? No! Are those instincts God-given? Yes, absolutely. It's just that the monkeys would be wise to – as they attempt to rescue the baby monkeys – make **SURE** it's a baby monkey crying out, not a deadly predator. In other words, we should always **PAY ATTENTION** to our emotions and desires, but we should never **BLINDLY OBEY** them.

There is a difference.

Lysa TerKeurst has a great quote that is similar: “Feelings are indicators, not dictators. They can indicate where your heart is in the moment, but that doesn't mean they have the right to dictate your behavior and boss you around.”<sup>12</sup>

Or, as a high school student I work with put it, “Emotions are great guard dogs, but they are terrible seeing-eye dogs.”

## **EXTERNAL HARD DRIVES**

But. That cacophony of internal voices/desires/dreams isn't the only thing that guides us. There's another. External pressures. These pressures aren't necessarily things you choose, but rather pressures that come and shape your life and decision-making that are **EXTERNAL** to you. These can come from your city, or culture, or (most powerfully) from spoken or unspoken expectations from your own family of origin.

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11 I first heard the story of the tree ocelot from Megan Ryan, who shared it in a break-out talk she did at the ReGen Conference in San Jose back in 2019. She explained how she used that story to illustrate to her high school students the danger of blindly following their emotions. Brilliant stuff. Follow her @megannkoontz

12 Lysa TerKeurst *Unglued: Making Wise Choices in the Midst of Raw Emotions* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012)



A number of years ago, I met a guy named Hao who started coming to our church. Hao had come to the US for his education and quickly moved up through the ranks of Silicon Valley. As I listened to Hao talk about all the projects he had worked on, I was struck by two things: his brilliance (he had not one, but three doctorates!) and his humble origins. He was born in a village in rural China, and then his educational journey took him to Shanghai, then to Singapore, then to the Bay Area for his advanced degrees. I had never met anyone with three doctorates and told him so. Hao told me that if I thought he was smart, I should meet his brother. “Oh, does your brother live here?” I asked Hao. “No, he’s back living with my parents.” I found out that Hao’s older, brilliant brother had never left the village. I asked him why. Hao explained, “Because he was the older brother. And that was what was expected of him.” I tried to make sense of this. “Is your brother...” I paused, searching for the right words “Resentful that you got to leave to get your education and he never did?”

“Oh no,” Hao said, matter-of-factly. “He was the first-born. So, he stayed to take care of our parents. I was the second-born, so I was able to leave. If I had been the first-born, I would have had to stay.”

The more I talked to Hao, the more I realized that the unique demands of his cultural background and his family of origin exhibited far more pressure on him than anything I’d ever experienced.

This is – in a way – the complete opposite of **FOLLOW YOUR HEART**. It’s not internal dreams and wishes and desires you’re trying to sort out – it’s **EXTERNAL** pressures and expectations you’re fighting to manage and live up to. And these are every bit as demanding.

An example. Here in the San Francisco Bay Area, we are one of the most educated regions and wealthiest places in the US. It’s the home of Stanford University and a whole slew of powerful, innovative tech companies. And its public schools are some of the highest performing in the nation. It turns out that there’s tremendous general cultural (and often family) pressure put on kids to academically perform.

Where my kids attend school, a good percentage of the 6th, 7th and 8th graders take courses throughout the summer in math. The goal is to enter high school at

least a grade ahead in math.<sup>13</sup> This means, that instead of taking a leisurely break filled with playing outside, going to the pool, watching movies, and long family summer vacations, these students spend several hours a day racing through math concepts to learn an entire grade level's math skills in one summer.

In some circles, it's actually seen as *shameful* for a student to be at their actual grade level in math. That's a lot of pressure to excel. To be at least a grade ahead in math. And this isn't limited to my kid's school. In so many other high schools across the Bay, there is tremendous pressure to be successful – to be in as many advanced and honors courses as possible. To get perfect grades. Instead of school being a supportive place that helped kids find their sweet spot, a hypercompetitive culture began to emerge, where kids were expected to be perfect **IN EVERY AREA**. My son showed me a meme from a Reddit board<sup>14</sup> the other day, saying this was the new grading scale:

- A = Average
- B = Below average
- C = Can't have dinner
- D = Don't come home
- F = Find a new family

Which is funny. Until it isn't.

I've seen this kind of external pressure create unhealth. Students who begin spending hours and hours and hours on homework, doing their absolute best to ace their next test, and turn in that flawless research paper. Students who cut out sleep in an effort to get better grades. And for a lot of students, this pressure is too much. Because there comes a time when you look around and realize you can't keep up academically.

This is an external pressure. And sometimes, those external pressures are so intense, you internalize them. It's easy to see how those pressures begin to "drive your life."

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13 This phenomenon is not limited to the Bay Area. This national trend was covered by the New York Times: Kyle Spencer, *Taking Summer School to Get Ahead, Not Catch Up*, The New York Times, August 16, 2016 [www.nytimes.com/2016/08/17/nyregion/taking-summer-school-to-get-ahead-not-catch-up.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/17/nyregion/taking-summer-school-to-get-ahead-not-catch-up.html)

14 "r/AsianPeopleTwitter - Asian Grading Scale." *Reddit*, [www.reddit.com/r/AsianPeopleTwitter/comments/9tolst/asian\\_grading\\_scale/](http://www.reddit.com/r/AsianPeopleTwitter/comments/9tolst/asian_grading_scale/)

Is there a way out? I think there is, but it's tough work.

## TELL IT TO MY HEART<sup>15</sup>

If the dominant cultural message is to **FOLLOW YOUR HEART**, then how does that relate to the words of Jesus who tells us to love the Lord with all of our heart? How do those overlap? In the Bible, the word “heart” (Hebrew *lebab/leb* and Greek *kardia*) is used more than 1,000 times (more than 586 in the OT alone), making it the most common anthropological term used in the Bible. Although the word “heart” denotes the actual organ that beats inside a person’s rib cage, it also means much, much more.



**Yo! Click here to see a video about the origins of this Hebrew word for "heart" from our friends at BibleProject.**

Old Testament scholars Dr. Tremper Longman (who wrote a dictionary for the OT) and Dr. Bruce K. Waltke (who wrote a 2-volume commentary on Proverbs) set out to study the Hebrew use of the word “heart.” They say that the best translation for the word “heart” in English is *not* the word “emotions.” This is bizarre, because every single love song talks about the “heart” as being the center of our emotions. But these scholars say a better translation would be the word “motives.” Longman says the Hebrew word “heart” is distinct from the will, the mind, and the emotions – it’s the driving force for all three.

Which, again, is a bit disorienting. After all, Toni Braxton did not tell someone to “unbreak her motives” and it is strange to think of Celine Dion telling us that her “motives will go on.” And even more jarring to consider that Billy Ray Cyrus has “achy breaky motives” or Kanye wondering how you could be so “motive-less.” I could keep going. Should I keep going? I’ll stop.

<sup>15</sup> Yes, I am quoting a Taylor Dayne song. If you ever hung out at a mall in the early 90s, you undoubtedly heard Taylor Dayne, who always sounded like she was shouting at you. Her musical style was the equivalent of people who text in all caps. **TELL IT TO MY HEART. TELL ME I’M THE ONLY ONE.**

In my seminary cohort, Gerry called the “heart” our “control panel.” I love that. Your control panel: the heart is what makes you do what you do. The “heart” is what motivates you. It’s what you’ll spend your life’s energies going after. It’s what your mind fixates on. It’s what your emotions love. It’s what you direct your will (and your life’s energies) toward. It’s what you most want in life.

Waltke says the Bible is constantly asking us to examine our “heart.” What are you really after? What have you set as your deepest goal? What really gives you meaning? What do you most want in this life? Where is your heart really?

And – here’s the troubling part – what if whatever has your “heart” or your “control panel” is your functional god? And if our heart is off and our **MOTIVES** are off and our control panel is jumbled – and this is troubling too – then that means we can short-circuit our life.

What if bad motives are a GPS that won’t guide us true, and like Michael Scott, we’ll end up driving our rental car into a pond. Or worse.



## CONNECT FOUR

I have a friend who told me that in his experience, there are four main things that pull for our heart – for our control panel. Four things that we’re going after. Four things that drive our lives. He says that every single person is pulled toward one of them. I don’t know if he’s right, but the chart below has certainly resulted in some very powerful and vulnerable conversations.

<b>THE FOUR MOTIVES</b>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>PERFORMANCE</b> <i>NEED TO WIN</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>"If I don't win, I'm not worth anything"</i></p> <p>Motivated by :: Success, Winning                      Greatest Fear :: Humiliation                      Problem Emotion :: Anger                      Message to Others :: You'll never be good enough</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>APPROVAL</b> <i>NEED PEOPLE TO LIKE THEM</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>"If someone is upset with me, something's wrong with me"</i></p> <p>Motivated by :: Affirming Relationships                      Greatest Fear :: Rejection                      Problem Emotion :: Cowardice                      Message to Others :: You can walk all over me</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CONTROL</b> <i>NEED TO KNOW EVERY PLAN</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>"If I don't stay vigilant, things will fall apart"</i></p> <p>Motivated by :: Self-Discipline, Standards                      Greatest Fear :: Uncertainty                      Problem Emotion :: Worry                      Message to Others :: You can't handle life on your own</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>COMFORT</b> <i>NEVER WANT TO DO ANYTHING DIFFICULT</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>"I'm in way over my head"</i></p> <p>Motivated by :: Freedom, Leisure                      Greatest Fear :: Stress + Demands                      Problem Emotion :: Boredom/Busyness                      Message to Others :: You're not worth my time + effort</p>

You probably have one quadrant on this chart that calls out. And I don’t know which one it might be, but I know what it’s saying to you. It’s saying, “If you don’t get this thing, then your life will fall apart. So, organize your entire life to get this thing.” As you looked at this chart, which one resonated with you?

## FIRST GRADE, OPTIMUS PRIME AND CRIPPLING SHAME

If my previous paragraphs about academics had a tone that made it sound like I was being judgmental toward parents or students chasing academic performance, well, I didn't mean to sound like that.

None of us escape from the power of other *broken motives*. All of us have experience with messy, messed up motives that seem to drive us – sometimes in ways we're not even aware of – and which sometimes don't lead us anywhere good. None of us get to escape this.

Not you.

And especially not me. For me, my messed-up heart (motives) started when I was in first grade, in Mrs. Neal's class at Valley Elementary. It was the same school where my mother, Kay Tieche, taught kindergarten.

Some of the details are fuzzy. I don't remember what time of year this happened. I remember Matt Bowman was sitting next to me. Matt would sometimes bring Transformers to school and play with them under his desk. I remember on this day, he had Optimus Prime.

The class was talking about family structure, and the topic of adoption came up. My ears perked up. After all, I was adopted. Since before I could remember, my parents had told me that I was adopted, and that I was a special gift given to them.

Mrs. Neal was explaining adoption, and she said, "Well, you know who's adopted, don't you? David. He's Mrs. Tieche's son."

A lot of the kids in that first-grade class had had my mom for kindergarten, so she was practically a local celebrity. The kids nodded to themselves. They had a category in their mind for what "adopted" meant. Now they knew someone.

I felt kind of cool for a second. I was the only one in the room that was adopted. Maybe the only person they knew who was adopted.

"You're adopted, huh?" Matt Bowman said to me.

“Yeah,” I said. Because I was.

And then, the sentence.

*“What was wrong with you that your mom wanted to get rid of you?”*

A poisoned arrow entered my heart. I hadn’t thought about it that way. But now, it was the only way I could think about it.

Maybe there was something wrong with me.

Maybe that’s why I was adopted.

A new feeling.

Shame.

And for the next 17 years, that terrible thought would plague me. It would also drive me. I became fanatical about achievement, trying to prove to everyone around me that I was worth keeping around. I labored tirelessly in school, because grades weren’t just letters, but symbols of my worth. I became the class clown, because people like funny people and usually want them around. It was a never-ending hamster wheel of performance.

Because I had to prove I was worth keeping around.

There’s a word for this feeling. Shame. And it’s a terrible taskmaster. Just terrible.

There’s a famous TED talk on shame by a researcher named Brené Brown from the University of Houston that said this:

*There was only one variable that separated the people who have a strong sense of love and belonging and the people who always struggle with it and wonder if they’re good enough – and that was that people who have a strong sense of love and belonging believe they’re worthy of love and belonging.*<sup>16</sup>

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16 Brené Brown, TEDxHouston, June 2010, [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability)

How are you supposed to have a strong sense that you're worthy of love and belonging if your own biological mom wants to get rid of you? How do you know when you've done enough to earn love?

You don't.

That's why I studied so hard. Because my sense of worth was at stake, don't you see? The grades were a simple numerical reflection of my value. And that's why I stayed up, memorizing comedy albums and reading every humor column and book by Dave Barry I could get my hands on – because if I could learn to be funny, then I could make people laugh. And laughter felt very much like the same thing as approval.

So you keep going. Perform. Do what it takes. Make people happy. For me, the broken motives – the heart dysfunction – was believing that if I performed well, and was successful and made people happy, then I'd be okay because I'd be loved. I was following this motive of trying to gain acceptance. It was driven by external circumstances (my adoption) and internal needs (to placate deep shame and insecurity). My motives were a mess. And they were absolutely driving the car of my life. Even if I didn't know it.

## **CONFRONTING OUR MOTIVES**

Look, I'm not here to throw shade at anyone. The goal, remember, is to love God, and part of loving God is trusting Him. And we all have areas of our life – maybe even whole sectors of our life – where we find it difficult to trust God. We all do. But I get convicted when I read the story of Abraham because (at least in this moment) Abraham shows us what it looks like to trust – and I mean really trust – God. The Biblical text doesn't give us a ton of information about Abraham's core motives, but his actions reveal deep trust.

Abraham doesn't **FOLLOW HIS HEART**.

Abraham doesn't follow his family or his culture either.

In the book of Romans (a book in the library of Scripture that was written much later than Genesis), an absolutely brilliant scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures named Paul



talks about the radical trust that Abraham showed, which we looked at above. In a letter to a church at Galatia, Paul is steaming hot mad, almost furious, because people started saying that in order to be right with God, you had to become Jewish – which meant getting circumcised like every good Jewish boy would be. Paul is trying to show that these kinds of religious customs, though for Jews are very, very important, were no longer important for Christians. But Paul is also trying to show that the seeds of that idea go back to the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul shows through the story of Abraham that “keeping the rules” or “following religious customs” or “religious tradition” (even something as central to the Jewish people as circumcision) isn’t nearly as important as having your inner motives (your heart) completely re-wired by your love and trust of God. Paul writes this:<sup>17</sup>

### GALATIANS 3

<sup>5</sup> So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your **trust + loyalty** [*pistis*] what you heard? <sup>6</sup> So also Abraham “**trusted** [verb form of *pistis*] God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” <sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who have **trust + loyalty** [*pistis*] are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by **trust + loyalty** [*pistis*], and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” <sup>9</sup> So those who rely on **trust + loyalty** [*pistis*] are blessed along with Abraham, the man **filled with trust + loyalty** [adjective form of *pistis*].

Paul is saying that the “children of Abraham” aren’t those who are Jewish, or who are circumcised (not that there’s anything wrong with that at all) – but rather any person (from any tribe or ethnic group) who trusts God. Because this act shows they love God. Toward the end of the library of 66 books that is the Bible, there’s a letter from the brother of Jesus Himself – a man named James. James, in reflecting on Abraham, also highlights his incredible trust in God.

<sup>17</sup> Look, I’m no linguist, but to help show how this verse and the James 2 verse POPS, I’ve bolded every place the Greek word *pistis* shows up and have translated it as “trust + allegiance” per our previous chapter. There are two places where the verb form of *pistis* and the adjective form of *pistis* are used, and I’ve noted that in brackets to help be clear.

<sup>22</sup> You see that his **trust** [*pistis*] and his actions were working together, and his **trust** [*pistis*] was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham **trusted** [verb form of *pistis*] God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by **trust** [*pistis*] alone.

Again, James is **NOT** talking about doing something to get into God’s good favor. His broader point is how trust and action have to work together. James is saying Abraham’s story is about trusting God, and how that is going to **result** in action. If you “trust” that is not going to stay in your mind, as a core belief **ONLY**. The other side of the coin of “faith” is action – putting your money where your mouth is, so to speak. If your motives shift, the way you live your life is going to shift.

Whatever Abraham’s core motives were (or what your core motives are) I am fascinated at how the Call of Abraham by God in Genesis 12 completely challenges all of them.

Abraham teaches us to recognize that each of us have core motives, and those things might be legitimate, or they might not be. Abraham’s trust of God is a way forward. It’s a way of saying, “I will not let my blind adherence to this drive my life and my most important decisions. I will trust God.”

## FOUR CHALLENGES FOR ABE

**PERFORMANCE****NEED TO WIN***"If I don't win, I'm not worth anything"*

God: I want you to leave all the way you've measured success – or anyone in your culture measures success. Leave your family. And your land. Start over as a dusty nomad.

**APPROVAL****NEED PEOPLE TO LIKE THEM***"If someone is upset with me, something's wrong with me"*

God: Leave your family. And tell them it's because you had a supernatural encounter with a deity who told you to leave them. They will be furious with you and will feel hurt and deep disappointment. Never mind them. Get yourself out.

**CONTROL****NEED TO KNOW EVERY PLAN***"If I don't stay vigilant, things will fall apart"*

God: I'm not telling you anything about the details. Anything. Not where we're going. Not even a direction. I will tell you as you need to know.

**COMFORT****NEVER WANT TO DO ANYTHING DIFFICULT***"I'm in way over my head"*

God: Sure, you have a sweet set-up in Harran. You're by a few rivers. The city is thriving. Move everything. Walk 600 miles through desert to a new place, with new customs and rebuild everything.

One of my favorite quotes is from the Christian philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard, who wrote:<sup>18</sup>

*It is one of the major transitions of life to recognize who has taught us, mastered us, and then to evaluate the results in us of their teaching. This is a harrowing task, and sometimes we just can't face it. But it can also open the door to choose other masters, possibly better masters, and one Master above all.*

The story of Abraham's trust is the same invitation. What motives and desires have controlled my life this far? What does it mean to trust God with those deep desires? Abraham teaches us to recognize that following God might look like giving up my deepest heart desires, but in reality, following God is the only way to get what I most need in life. Trusting God means trusting Him with not only part of your life, but your entire essence and the whole of your life. No matter which one of the Big Four is our

18 Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1997), 272.

core motive, God is both confronting and comforting us, inviting us to trust Him as he refines our motives and redirects and redefines how we live our lives.

**FOR PEOPLE WHO YEARN FOR SUCCESS, ABRAHAM TEACHES US TO PRAY THIS:**

God, whatever you give me is enough. I don't need a greater reputation. I don't need wider acclaim. I don't need to grab and seize to expand my own kingdom. I will harvest faithfully and gratefully the plot of land you give to me. And I will use my life not to seek my own good alone, but to serve and help others.

**FOR PEOPLE WHO YEARN FOR CONTROL, ABRAHAM TEACHES US TO PRAY THIS:**

Lord, I am not in control. I never have been. Trying to seize control is a way of pretending I am God. I am not. I trust you to direct my future. I don't need to be controlled by fear of the unknown, you will not change your mind and abandon me.

**FOR PEOPLE WHO YEARN FOR APPROVAL, ABRAHAM TEACHES US TO PRAY THIS:**

How you made me is enough. I don't take my direction or marching orders or get my value from other people – not even my own family. People often are fickle, manipulative, or have agendas. You know me best, and I find my truest identity with you, God. My most sacred relationship is with you, and that will guide me.

**FOR PEOPLE WHO YEARN FOR COMFORT, ABRAHAM TEACHES US TO PRAY THIS:**

You are asking me to join you in your mission to bless the whole world. That is demanding. It will cost me. But it is so beautiful and so good that it deserves to be done. I am afraid, but I will set aside my comfort to follow you into this, knowing you will go with me. And that somehow, giving up the “good” will allow me to see and live in the “best.” God, may your unfailing love be my comfort.

A big part of loving God means trusting Him.

## BACK TO HAWAII AND THE GECKO POOP



**Click here to hear Dr. King's famous speech *The Drum Major Instinct*. For the highlights, go to 26:42 and listen to King's conclusion. Straight fire.**

After cleaning the entire surface area of the white plaster walls of the entire church and scrubbing every wood plank of the entire 360-degree deck, I was too tired to be angry anymore. Exhausted and defeated, I made my way inside. I grabbed a chilled bottle of water and sat down in Dr. Sam's office.

"Do you know why I had you do that?" Dr. Sam asked me.

I had no answer. I shook my head "no."

"Look, David, I know you want to do something powerful and big with your life," Dr. Sam said. "I can hear the aspirations and dreams when I talk to you. But you need to know, the way to make an impact in this world is to serve."

Dr. Sam then spoke about humility. He spoke about Jesus who introduced the virtue of humility to the ancient world by taking the basin and the towel and serving His disciples. He told me about Dr. Martin Luther King's famous sermon about the Drum-Major Instinct (the desire to be first, to be important) and how God redefines and redirects that desire. Instead of wanting to be on top, God wants us to be people who are the first to serve, the

first to help, the first to love. Dr. Sam was totally pulling a Mr. Miyagi, building into me a lesson I didn't even know I needed.

And as I looked back to that time, cleaning that gecko poop with that red bucket, I realized I had not trusted. This first work assignment in Hawaii had made no sense to me. I was blind that something good was happening, or could come out of this dumb, menial, degrading work. The whole situation was counterintuitive to me. Its value escaped my mind. And it is not what I would have chosen. I didn't like it. And it didn't make sense to me.

But God – through Dr. Sam – was up to something. Because I was an arrogant, self-centered, self-absorbed, only-child, recent college grad, something had to change in me.

And let me tell you, if I'd listened to my internal desires – if I'd followed myself – I would have missed it.

For the rest of my time in Hawaii, that entire community showed me others-centered, self-sacrificing, agape-kind-of love. They served me with devotion and care that I not only did not deserve, but could never repay. In Hawaii, *ohana* means nobody gets left behind, and they treated me like *family*. I learned how to live the Christian life in Hawaii, and the trajectory of the rest of my life was set there.

God was at work.

Even though I didn't see it.

And that is how I learned to trust God, even while cleaning gecko poop.

It's the lesson of Abraham. Loving God means trusting Him.

Even if it doesn't make sense to you.

Which is exactly what Abraham does.

Until he doesn't.

And that leads us to our next chapter.

## KEY LESSON

# 2

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means **TRUSTING** Him.

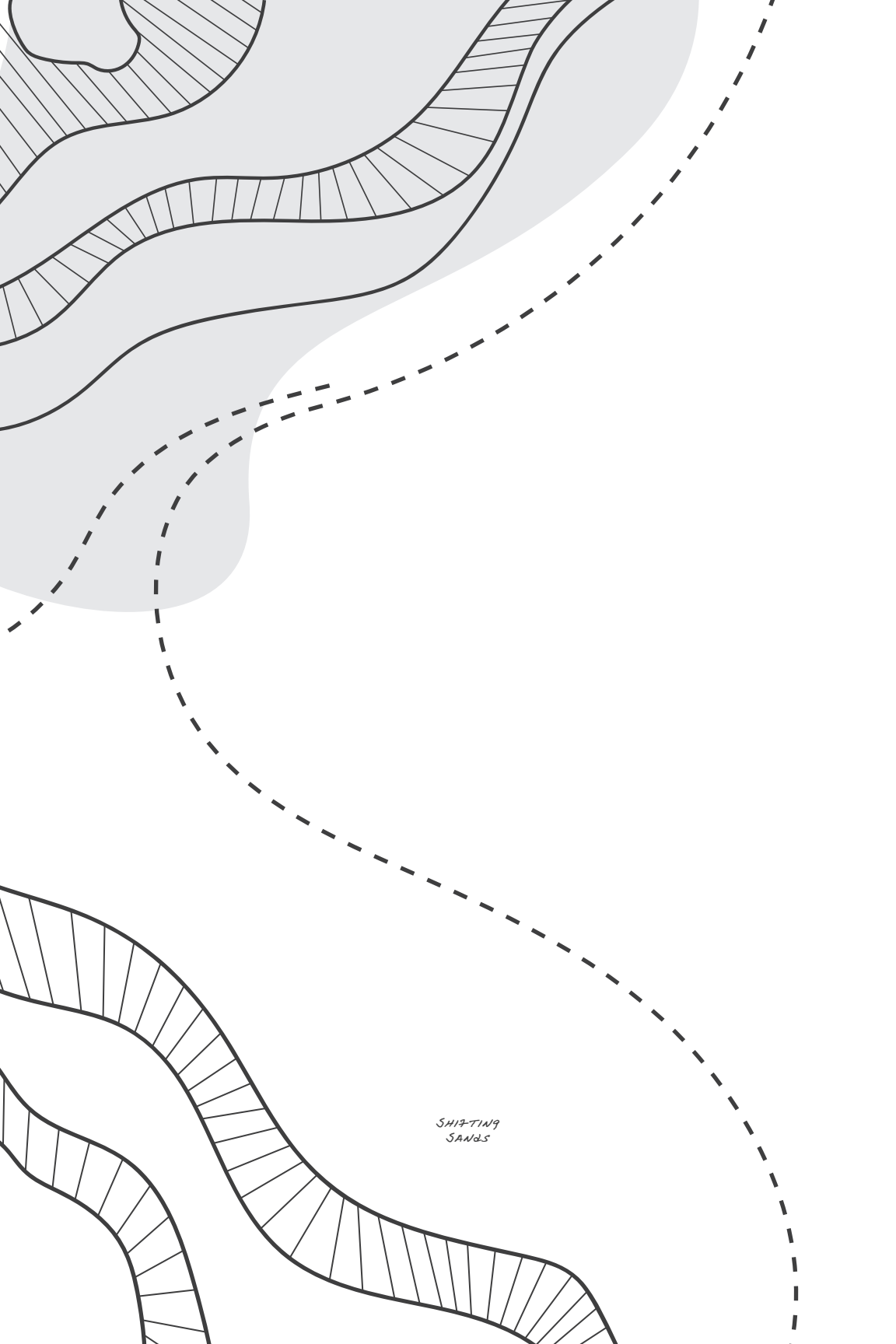
- Even when it doesn't make sense.

## CHAPTER 04 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What impacted you the most about this chapter? What questions did the chapter bring up for you? What was the most helpful part of the chapter?
2. Have you ever had to complete a task that was not what you signed up for, or not part of your official job description? Or have you been forced to do something you didn't want to do, or go somewhere you didn't want to go to? How do you feel when life seems so unfair? How do you interact with God in these moments?
3. Read this quote from Lysa TerKeurst: "*Feelings are indicators, not dictators. They can indicate where your heart is in the moment, but that doesn't mean they have the right to dictate your behavior and boss you around.*" What do you think about this quote?

4. Which one of the four “motives” most resonates with you? Why? Refer back to the chart “Four Challenges for Abe” earlier in this chapter. Which one most resonates with you? What would it look like to accept God’s invitation in the area you identified?
  
5. How does defining “heart” as “control panel” or “motives” instead of “emotions” change your understanding of decision making? What implications does it have for decision making?
  
6. Read Psalm 26:1-3 and Psalm 139:23-24. Substitute the word “heart” with the word “motives.” How could you invite God into the process of examining your heart (motives) today? What would that look like?
  
7. Read through the four prayers at the end of chapter 4 (FOR PEOPLE WHO YEARN...). Which of these prayers resonates most with you, right now? Why do you think that is?





SHI-TING  
SANDS



## CHAPTER 5

# THE CHILD

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IN WHICH WE EXAMINE ABRAHAM AND HIS WIFE'S FAILURES  
TO TRUST GOD, THE DESTRUCTION THIS BRINGS, AND HOW AN  
EGYPTIAN SLAVE GIRL SHOWS US HOW TO TRUST GOD.

## KEY LESSON

2

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means **TRUSTING** Him.

- Even when it doesn't make sense.



## WRONG MOVE YOU'RE DEAD. THAT GROWTH IS POISON.

I was born in Ohio. Later, as an adult, I moved to California for a job. That is, however, where the staggering similarities between me and LeBron James begin to wane. Growing up in Ohio, I was a Boy Scout, and being from the Midwest, whenever we went camping the leaders were deliberate to make sure there was one pattern every single kid recognized. It was a plant that we needed to be able to spot, immediately, and avoid at all costs. As such, the Scout Masters and leaders went over the pattern ad nauseam:

- The leaves are always in three
- The leaves have pointy tips, and are shaped like tear-drops
- The leaves have jagged, serrated edges
- The leaves are glossy on the top

If you're from the Midwest then you know: the plant I'm talking about is poison ivy. They drilled this into us: if you see this pattern, avoid the plant because it has a sticky, oily resin on its leaves that sticks to clothing, and causes an incredibly uncomfortable allergic reaction. So unless you want a miserable rash, recognize the pattern.

- Three leaves
- Pointy tips
- Jagged edges
- Glossy leaves

If you see these three leaves that look like this, don't go off the path. Don't touch it. Don't pretend to touch it. Steer clear. If you see the pattern, stay away.

Just like my Boy Scout leaders, the authors of the Bible want us to see patterns. They repeat key ideas using language and repetition to draw your attention to what's most important. And just like Boy Scouts, as readers of the Bible, we cannot be lazy readers. We have to see the patterns. Or something bad could happen. Okay, maybe not a rash. But maybe something worse.

When I was an English teacher at a local high school, at the start of the year, I would hold up whatever literature we were going to be studying. I would tell the

class that this is a moment in history worth celebrating. “You and I are in the presence of brilliance,” I would boom, channeling Robin Williams “Of staggering – and I mean staggering – genius.” I would explain that these novels, plays and anthologies of poems were each written by one of the greatest minds our world has ever encountered. Inside each is a treasure. But it is an enchanted treasure. It will not simply open. It will not give its treasure to unworthy parties. It will remain closed to the lazy. It will not surrender itself to the unthinking. The unimaginative. But, the author has left us a trail – clues to unlocking it. And if we are careful, and thoughtful, friends, we can solve this puzzle and gain invaluable treasure within.

The same literary approach goes for the Bible, which in my mind is the most brilliant and staggering book of genius ever written. But like every other work of genius, it makes demands of us. Do not be lazy.

There are many important patterns that the Biblical authors want us to pay attention to. In fact, many (most?) of the stories of the Bible have “hyperlinks” to other parts of the Bible – they link to each other in subtle and creative ways. I want to focus on one that’s relevant to the story of Abraham. But the pattern doesn’t start with Abraham. It starts on page 3 of the Bible.

## THE FIRST PATTERN

As we saw in Genesis 1, God creates a paradise. God gives humankind – Adam and Eve – everything they need, including each other and Him. God has created humankind to live in deep and close connection to Him, as his *tselem*. Just as Heaven and Earth belong together, so do humanity and God. God gives them dominion on the earth as His representatives, but in light of that, God makes one firm request – humans must trust God (not themselves) to define what is good, right, true, beautiful and real. Then in Genesis 3 a serpent enters, asking a (seemingly) innocent question. The serpent manipulates, spinning a lie to Eve based on her own faulty thinking that God is keeping good things from her, and encourages her desire to take from the tree: *Eve! Baby! Check it out for yourself! Trust your own judgment! You do you! Grow up and become the human – no, the woman! – that you need to be. That’s what God would want anyway!*

But just see what the author of the story does. Notice how the conversation starts, how it continues and how it ends, regarding word choice.

**SENTENCE 1**

"Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden?"

**RATIO = 1:1**

*Note: Ratio of God vs. Human-centered language = 1:1  
(one "God" and one "you" in the sentence)*

**SENTENCE 2**

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

**RATIO 1:4**

*Note: Ratio of God vs. Human-centered language = 1:4  
(One "God" and 4 mentions of "you" or "we" in the sentence)*

**SENTENCE 3**

<sup>4</sup>"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. <sup>5</sup>"For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

**RATIO= 2:4**

*Note: Ratio of God vs. Human-centered language =2:4  
(Two "God" and 4 "you" or "yours")*

**SENTENCE 4**

<sup>6</sup>When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and she ate it.

**RATIO: 0:3**

*Note: Ratio of God vs Human-centered language=0:3  
(Zero references to "God" and 3 to "woman" or "she.")  
God isn't in this part of the story. Humans have pushed him out.*

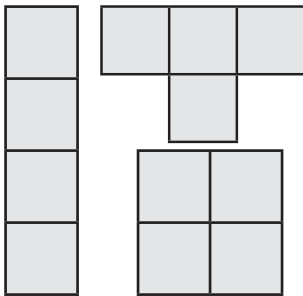
This moment in the story is often called *The Fall*. It's the moment when humans decide that autonomy and independence from God is actually a better path (spoiler: it isn't), that the serpent is telling the truth and that there is a reality out there somewhere better than the one God created for them (spoiler: there isn't). This is the first moment that humans shrug off God and decide to take matters into their own hands believing it would end better. Although this is the **FIRST** time this happens, it would absolutely **NOT** be the last. Nope. A definite pattern would emerge.



**Yo! Our friends at BibleProject have an incredible 9-part series on "How to Read the Bible" that is simply fire. It will not only inspire you, it will help make sense of this giant, oft-confusing library of books all bound into one volume.**

## THE BIBLE AND TETRIS :: SEE / DESIRE / TAKE

Patterns matter in literature (and in life). And if you see the same pattern repeated, again and again, it's because the author wants us to pay attention to it.



It's like this sequence of Tetris blocks. Pretend for a second each one of these Tetris blocks represents a different, specific, unique Hebrew word. Now, in real Tetris there are 7 different blocks, with 343 different three-block combos possible. But

the ancient Hebrew language contained around 8,000 words. So that's more than 216 billion different possible combos.

Now, let's say you keep seeing this *same exact combination* of Tetris blocks (specific Hebrew words) and they were always lumped together in the same way. If that same pattern shows up in place after place, there's a good chance the author is really being intentional. Well that happens *a lot* in the Bible. And it happens here, starting in Genesis 3. Here's the poison ivy pattern:

- God tells humans **NOT** to do something. God is super-duper clear.

- Humans **see** something they want, but getting it would involve **DOING THE EXACT OPPOSITE** of what God said.
- Humans **desire** that thing.
- Humans **take** that thing.
- Things go from good to bad to worse.

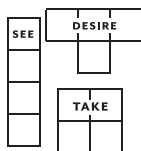
This pattern is **ALL OVER** the Bible. All over. Here are four examples.

## **STORY:: ADAM + EVE**

### **WHAT GOD CLEARLY SAYS**

Genesis 2:16-17 — You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of god and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die.

### **SEE/DESIRE/TAKE**



Genesis 3:6— When the woman **saw** that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also **desirable** for gaining wisdom, she **took** some and she ate it.

### **CONSEQUENCES**

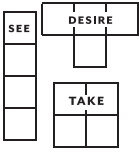
Sin and Death enter God's good world, alienating Adam and Even from the Garden of Eden, from eternal life, from themselves and from God Himself.

## **STORY:: BATTLE OF JERICHO + ACHAN**

### **WHAT GOD CLEARLY SAYS**

Joshua 6:18 — But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them.

## SEE/DESIRE/TAKE



Joshua 7:20-21—<sup>20</sup>Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: <sup>21</sup>When I **saw** in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekles, I **coveted** (**desired**) them and **took** them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath."

## CONSEQUENCES

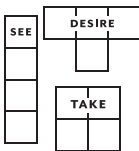
Thirty-six Israelite soldiers are killed in battle when God removes his favor. Achan and entire family are killed.

## STORY:: ISRAEL + KING SAUL

### WHAT GOD CLEARLY SAYS

1 Samuel 12:12 — You said to me, "No, we want a king to rule over us" — even though the LORD Your God was your King.

## SEE/DESIRE/TAKE



<sup>7</sup>When Samuel caught **sight** of Saul, the LORD said to him, "this is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people." (in the next verses, Saul is described as the **desire** of Israel)

<sup>19</sup>But the people refused to listen to Samuel, "No!" they said. "We **want** a king over us. then we will be like all other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."

<sup>20</sup>When Samuel had all Israel come forward by tribes, the tribe of Benjamin was **taken** by lot. <sup>21</sup>Then he brought forward the tribe of Benjamin, clan by clan, and Matri's clan was **taken**. Finally Saul son of Kish was **taken**.



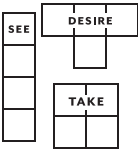
**CONSEQUENCES**

Saul's kingship end very badly.

*Note: The highlighted verses are taken from a much longer, multi-chapter narrative. The verses referenced here are 1 Samuel 9:17-20, 1 Samuel 8:19 and 1 Samuel 10: 20-21*

**STORY:: KING DAVID + BATHSHEBA****WHAT GOD CLEARLY SAYS**

Exodus 20:14— Do not commit adultery.  
(also, David is given a subtle warning in 2 Samuel 11:3)

**SEE/DESIRE/TAKE**

2 Samuel 11:2-4 —<sup>2</sup>One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he **saw** a woman bathing.

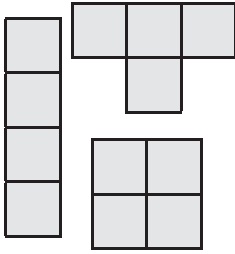
The woman was **very beautiful (desirable)**, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." Then David sent messengers **to get her**.

**CONSEQUENCES**

Bathsheba is sexually assaulted. Her husband Uriah is killed (along with other soldiers) in battle. David and Bathsheba's child dies. David doesn't deal with sexual sin in his own house — a rebellion against his rule is started by his son Absalom. The kingdom of Israel is split. Absalom is killed. All. Bad.

**I SEE IT. I LIKE IT. I WANT IT. I GOT IT.**

Humans it seems, are sadly predictable. We say to ourselves the exact same kind of things that Eve, Israel, Achan and David said to themselves: "If we don't get what we want, we are prepared to take matters into our own hands."



The authors of the Bible (which include God Himself) are trying desperately to train us to see the world correctly – to train us to see the snake, see the temptation, see the evil, see the consequences and destruction. They're expecting us to pick up on these hyperlinks. Master Yoda is trying to train us in Dagobah but like Luke, we're stubborn and headstrong.

The authors of the Bible also paint this sad sequence of events (SEE/DESIRE/TAKE) in the life of Abraham. I know, up until now, I've talked about Abraham as an example of how to love God. But this is where Abraham's life is more like an anti-example for us **NOT** to follow. Instead of continuing on in the proper pattern of HEAR/TRUST/OBEY, Abraham falls victim to SEE/DESIRE/TAKE.

## THE LAND OF DROUGHT

The first example of Abraham not trusting God happens rather quickly in the story. After leaving Harran, Abraham goes to the land God leads him to, and then God shows up again and says, very clearly, "To your offspring, I will give this land." God is saying, "This is your home now." Then, a mere two verses later, something bad happens.

### GENESIS 12

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. <sup>11</sup> As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. <sup>12</sup> When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. <sup>13</sup> Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

Allow me to paraphrase:

God: Leave Harran and Go to Israel.

Abraham: Yes.

God: Okay, this is the land I am going to give you. Also your wife will have a child and you'll become a patriarch.

Abraham: Yes. Great.

**\*DROUGHT HAPPENS\***

ABRAHAM: I should probably leave this land and go to Egypt.

EGYPT: That woman you're with is pretty.

ABRAHAM: She's my sister. Take her.

So if we're paying attention, in the span of one paragraph in the Bible, after hearing God Himself make elaborate and **VERY CLEAR PROMISES** about the land and the child He is going to give Abraham, Abraham has now **LEFT HIS LAND** and **GIVEN HIS WIFE AWAY**. I can almost hear God kicking the wall, and saying, like Jerry Maguire to Rod Tidwell: *Help me help you*.

But I don't want to be too hard on Abraham. After all, some of you reading this book know exactly what he went through. Have you ever been there? Perhaps in the metaphorical land of drought? It's a land of deep disappointment and disillusionment. You have an idea about how life is going to go – how things are going to go – and then the real life happens and it's not at all what you thought you were signing up for. It's tough to believe that God is with you when life isn't going well. What must Abraham have thought? A supernatural deity said that He was going to bless Abraham, and then told him to go south several hundred miles. Abraham did what God said. Now this? A drought? Did you bring me down into this region, away from my home and my family, just so I could die? How was Abraham supposed to make sense of this? Was this God cruel? A jokester? Unreliable? Surely, a sign that God is with you is that things go swimmingly. So what happens when drought hits? Did God remove His favor? Perhaps Abraham even wondered, "Did I hear wrong?"

These are soul-crushing, faith-eating moments of disappointment and hardship. It's tough to trust God when things aren't going well because those situations plant the seed of doubt that cast its long shadow over our lives: maybe God isn't *good*. Or maybe He is good, yes, He is good: I'm just not one of His favorites. Other people get nice things. Not me.

After living as a single man for most of his life, the intellectual giant C.S. Lewis finally found someone who was his joyful equal. Her name was Joy Davidman. They were married when he was 58 years old. A mere four years later, Joy died from bone cancer. What a cruel twist of life – to wait so long to find such love, and to have it ripped away by the cruelty of cancer. Lewis' closest friends (including J.R.R. Tolkien)

encouraged him to write to process his grief. Lewis wrote, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid.”

The problem, Lewis wrote, wasn’t that he would suddenly cease to believe in God. The problem was that he would come to believe such dreadful things about Him. His fear was not saying to himself, “Oh, there is no God” but rather, “Oh, so this is what God is really like. Stop kidding yourself.” Lewis wrote of this fear:

*But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once.<sup>1</sup>*

This is the land of drought. And the thoughts begin to flood in.

*God has left.  
God will not provide.  
He has forgotten.  
It is up to me.  
I must make things happen.  
I must make sure I have what I need.  
There is no guarantee.  
I am alone.*

The story requires us to do some work here, because it is a bit ambiguous and vague. The narrator does not help us evaluate Abraham’s actions. It does not tell us “And Abraham sinned mightily against God by going to Egypt and God’s anger burned white hot.” It just gives us the story. Was Abraham simply being pragmatic and smart? Or was he faithless? A combination? In a drought, in the Ancient world, going to the lush area around the Nile River – the largest freshwater river in the world – seems like a smart move to prevent death, doesn’t it?

We justify ourselves and our actions, don’t we?

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1 C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1961), 3, 6, 7.

And then, there's the matter of lying about his wife. These were different times. Abraham was entering Egypt, the most powerful empire on Earth. And the most powerful leader of the most powerful empire on earth had legal carte blanche. Such men did not ask travelling nomads like Abraham for his beautiful wife. They just made her a widower and took her. See. Desire. Take. And that's what happens.

#### GENESIS 12

<sup>14</sup> When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians **saw** that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. <sup>15</sup> And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her (**desired**) to Pharaoh, and she was **taken** into his palace.

Abraham developed a ruse, based on some half-truths, that Sarah was his sister. He abandons his wife, giving her away. It's difficult not to read into this story that, above all, Abraham was not going to rely on God for help in this situation – that Abraham thought that God was either unwilling or unable to protect him from harm. So you do what you need to do. You hustle.

But as readers, even with all the justifications and rationalizations – hey, Abraham got Pharaoh's favor and some donkeys, sheep and camels out of this deal – it's difficult not to stare at this story and say, "If you give away your land when there's drought and your own wife when there's a threat – is that what it means to live a life trusting God to protect and provide and be with you?"

Or put another way, how many camels is your wife worth?<sup>2</sup>

Abraham, it seems, has lost the plot. The storms of life have veered his ship off course. But even if Abraham is faithless and confused, God is not. God, the story says, is always active, and even the most powerful forces on earth – like the Pharaoh – aren't an issue for Him.

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2 True story: during her junior year of college, my wife studied abroad in France. After the semester's end, she and her dad travelled all over, including a stop in Turkey. While there, my future wife, radiant in beauty, captured the attention of a Middle Eastern man who, through a translator, offered my father-in-law 300 camels for his daughter. Bob, ever the scientific pragmatist, shrugged and said, "Eh. Where would I put them?" I sometimes tell my wife she is worth far more than 300 camels, and she shrugs and says, "Eh. Where would I put them?" She is the best.

## GENESIS 12

<sup>17</sup> But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. <sup>18</sup> So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife?" <sup>19</sup> Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" <sup>20</sup> Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

God sends afflictions to Pharaoh to get his attention. What's fascinating is that the term "serious diseases" is the Hebrew word "covid." I'm joking. That's not true at all. But Pharaoh's response is outright indignation, Abraham is reunited with Sarah (not sure I would want to be there for that conversation) and Abraham is driven out of Egypt.

Because Egypt is not where he's supposed to be.  
And Sarah is not supposed to be someone else's wife.  
God has a plan, after all, and this is **NOT** it.

I'm amazed at the lengths God goes to plaster over the litany of questionable choices that Abraham makes. Abraham might not have believed that God would intervene in human affairs for his benefit, but after this encounter, at least some of those fears must have been dispersed. And Abraham goes back to the promised land.

## GENESIS 13

<sup>1</sup> So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had...<sup>3</sup> From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier <sup>4</sup> and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD.

I find this comforting. After a season of dangerous circumstances because of famine and threat of death, after this time of questionable choices, and of uncertainty about how God works or what it means to live life with Him, Abraham goes back to the basics. He goes back to what he knows. He goes back to where He knows God spoke. He goes back to that altar. And he calls upon the name of the LORD – a symbol of trust and allegiance.

*God. Are you there? You were here once. We spoke. I am lost, now. Will you speak again? Because I want to hear.*

The story tells us that after returning back to Canaan from Egypt, there is conflict with Lot. The land can't support all their animals and they must split up. And Abraham tells Lot to choose which way he wants to go. Abraham gives Lot first dibs, and Lot isn't a fool.

#### GENESIS 13

<sup>10</sup> Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt... <sup>11</sup> So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east.

And in this moment, Abraham shows something different: trust. It's as though Abraham is saying to Lot, "I know that land over there looks like the best land. It's lush and well-watered. Good for crops and farm animals. But I will let you choose. And I will go the opposite way, trusting that God will provide for me." We do not see any hint of that SEE/DESIRE/TAKE pattern here. Instead, it's going with God in trust. And what happens immediately after this? God speaks.

#### GENESIS 13

<sup>14</sup> The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. <sup>15</sup> All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. <sup>16</sup> I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. <sup>17</sup> Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

<sup>18</sup> So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the LORD.

This is God saying, "Hey Abraham. I'm with you. Remember those promises of land and offspring? I'm not revoking them. This is where I spoke to you before, and I haven't changed. I am always what I am. I don't lie. You can trust me."

So Abraham builds an altar. Another “thin place” has occurred. Another apocalypse. More information about God. Apparently, He’s more devoted to Abraham than Abraham ever imagined, and more able to move and act in the world than anything Abraham could have ever anticipated. Ancient gods were supposed to be served by humans, and here is a God helping...*him*? Saving *him* from trouble? Intervening in *his* life. Blessing him?

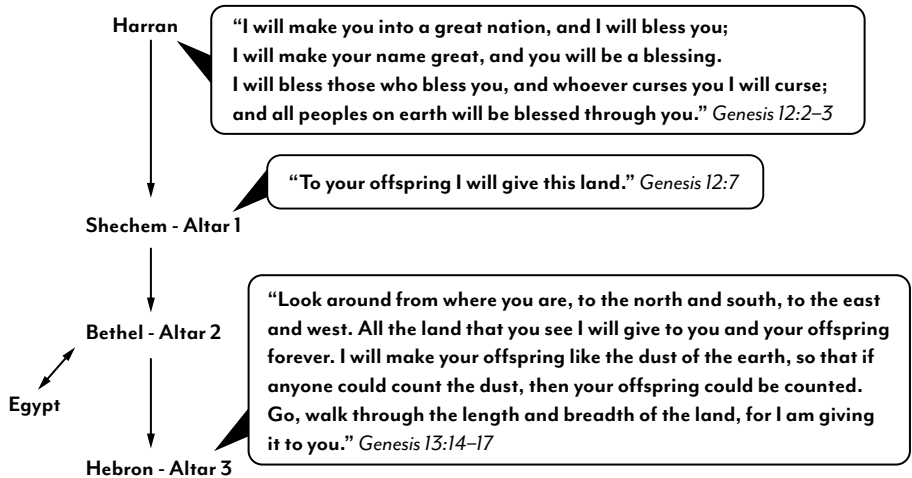


Figure 2: Abraham’s travels, altars, and the words God spoke to him.

Incredible. Again, Abraham shows us, this is a God worth worshipping. No. More than that. This is a God worth trusting.

## WHEN WAITING HURTS

We just watched the lengths God had to go to in order to bring His promises to fulfillment because Abraham failed to trust God. But this failure was not the most egregious, or harrowing. That moment would come later. In the previous chapter, in Genesis 15, Abraham asks God a direct question: “How am I going to become a patriarch if I don’t have a child? Is my servant Eliezer going to be my heir?” God directly responds, saying, “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”<sup>3</sup>

3 Genesis 15:4



God is clear. God has spoken. But then the child doesn't come. A year passes. Two. Five. Finally, a decade. Ten years! Abraham and Sarah grow more than restless – they grow desperate. And they repeat the same tragic pattern – even though God has spoken clearly, it's time for us, as humans, to take matters into our own hands. So Sarah devises a chilling plan.

#### GENESIS 16

<sup>1</sup> Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; <sup>2</sup> so she said to Abram, "**Behold (see)**, the LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. <sup>3</sup> So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife **took** her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. <sup>4</sup> He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

The pattern is here: Sarah **sees** that she has no children, **desires** to have a child, **takes** Hagar (her Egyptian slave) and gives her to Abraham to sleep with her. And there's a spiritual dimension to this, as well: in verse 2, it's clear who Sarah blames for why she is not yet a mother. "The LORD has kept me from having children," she says. And so Sarah, clearly thinking that she cannot trust or rely on God, takes matters into her own hands.

This moment is difficult to process. Abraham is supposed to be the protagonist, but it's hard not to write him off entirely after his jaunt to Egypt and now this. The first thing we need to come to terms with is that Abraham has a servant girl (the text says "slave" – although what comes to mind for most modern American readers when we see the word "slave" is chattel slavery, historians and archeologists tell us that something slightly different than that was likely going on in the Middle East during that time). There's a lot of time and distance here, and the cultural issues surrounding the terms "servant" or "slave" or even "wife" in the ancient Near East give us some problems.<sup>4</sup> The solution to childlessness in the ancient world was not

4 Here's what I could find. Although incredibly alien to us, the custom of an infertile wife providing her husband with a concubine in order to bear children is well documented in the ancient Near East. The laws of Lipit-Ishtar (early 19th cent. BC) deal with the case of a harlot who produces children for the husband of a barren wife; these become his heirs. An Old Assyrian marriage contract (19th cent. BC) stipulates that if the wife does not provide him with offspring within two years she must purchase a slave woman for that purpose. The provision of a concubine slave for bearing children is taken for granted in the laws of Hammurabi. SOURCE: Nahum M. Sarna, Genesis: *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 119.

in vitro fertilization, but taking a second wife, or using another woman (a servant or slave) as a surrogate. But the narrator is giving us hints that all of this – though common back then – is deeply troubling and not what God wanted. Here's what we know.

- Sarah controls every aspect of Hagar's life, including the use of her body.
- Abraham affirms Sarah's control over Hagar.
- Abraham's passivity is an echo of Adam's passivity in Genesis 3:6
- Sarah inflicts abuse on Hagar. (The Hebrew verb "mistreated" in Gen. 16:6 is the same as the one used for Egyptian oppression of the Israelites in Exodus 1:11)
- Hagar is impregnated, not by her choice, but by the choice of another.
- Hagar is not free to return to her home of Egypt.
- Her child, once born, will not belong to her. Her owners will take her child from her.
- This situation causes Hagar to "despise" Sarah (Gen. 16:4). Because of course.
- When Hagar runs away (Gen. 16:6), the verb that's used is "fled" (Hebrew: *barah*) which is used later in Exodus 2:15 in a context of fear/oppression, "When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses *fled* (*barah*) from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian."

It's not always wise to import our modern categories and words into the Bible, but in my seminary class Gerry proposed a thought experiment: was Hagar a victim of sex trafficking? Gerry asked us to consider (for a moment) the idea that Hagar was a young slave woman escaping sex trafficking. He did this as a way to activate the imaginations and empathies of us. Maybe that's too distracting of a term<sup>5</sup> to you. That's okay. The story does not use that word, but through its careful, deliberate word choice, I think it's attempting to show us the full relational and emotional

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5 Just FYI, the official United Nations definition of human trafficking is "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by improper means (such as force, abduction, fraud, or coercion) for an improper purpose including forced labour or sexual exploitation." SOURCE: <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/overview-human-trafficking-and-nijjs-role#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20defines%20human,forced%20labor%20or%20sexual%20exploitation.>

devastation and awfulness of this situation – and is inviting us to consider the grievous pain inflicted on Hagar.

The pattern of SEE/DESIRE/TAKE (again, juxtaposed to HEAR/TRUST/OBEY) always results in catastrophe. Always. And if this story shows us anything, it's that not trusting God has severe consequences. But one of the most uncomfortable parts of this story is not that Abraham and Sarah don't trust God – it's the cruel realization that I do the *exact same thing*. That tendency – to take matters into my own hands when God is moving too slowly (and He always seems to move too slowly) – is not foreign to me. It's what I do too.

## AMERICAN IDOLS

Okay, now comes the part of the book where things get uncomfortable. Real uncomfortable. I asked a number of my mentors – including Gerry – what they thought were the biggest areas where we act just like Abraham and Sarah – taking matters into our own hands. What are the key areas that American Christians tend **NOT** to trust God?

And the answers that came back were pretty unanimous. I'm not even going to tell you what they are, because if you see what they are, chances are you'll put down this book. So I'm just going to sneak them in here.

### IDOL NUMBER 1:

If the term “idols” is meant to represent areas of life where people do “their own thing for their own reason” without really following or trusting God, then this first one is one of the *most* personal and *most* controversial. My mentors and older experienced pastors said, “people don't trust God when it comes to their sexual expression.” Oh, we're in the deep end now! As we've seen in the Creation story in Genesis, God created humanity as embodied, sexed creatures. It's part of who we are.

But, ever since the early church and the days of Rome, the Christian sexual ethic has been one of the most unpopular tenets of the faith. Whatever you think about it, and whatever your views, cultural anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists

have outlined the fact that human sexuality – and how modern people experience and think about sex – has undergone dramatic changes in the last few decades. Let’s walk through some of those changes.

## **THE FIVE MAJOR TECTONIC SHIFTS IN SEXUALITY SINCE THE 1960'S<sup>6</sup>**

Here are five radical changes in how we think, express and process sexuality in the West in the last one or two generations:

### **1. SEX HAS BEEN DISCONNECTED FROM CHILD-BEARING AND FAMILY.**

The first oral contraceptive, Enovid, which was a mix of the hormones progesterone and estrogen, was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1960. It was called, simply “The Pill.” And it wasn’t until 1972 (in the case of *Eisenstadt v. Baird*) when the Supreme Court legalized birth control for unmarried people. Before that, it was actually illegal for a woman to get oral birth control unless she had a husband. But it had implications beyond that: for *most* of human history, it was simply not an option to experience sex without at least a high risk of long-term responsibility. And this has had all sorts of effects on sexuality, but the main one is that it has shifted the primary purpose of sexuality for most people – in and outside of marriage – to be pleasure, not procreation. Don’t @ me. I’m just telling you what sociologists are reporting.

### **2. SEX HAS BEEN DISCONNECTED FROM MARRIAGE.**

For most people in nearly every single culture in human history, sex was tied to marriage commitment. It still is for most of the world, not only for Christians, but for the Dalai Lama, for most of Islamic culture, and really throughout most of the rest of the world (outside of the coastal cities in the US). This has all sorts of implications, but the major one we’re seeing is that this has created an anxiety around sexuality, because so many people now have deep ties (or “soul ties”) without any long-term commitment of “I am with you in this until the end.”

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6 I’m deeply indebted to the work of John Mark Comer and Bridgetown Church in Portland, OR for a series on sexuality that they produced in 2019. <https://bridgetown.church/series/god-sexuality>.

### **3. SEX HAS BEEN DISCONNECTED FROM MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS.**

We're less than two years past the legalization of gay marriage in the US. It feels so much longer than that – perhaps because it's been in the works for a great deal longer than that, at least since the 1980s and the beginning of LGBTQ+ rights. Whatever you think about this, it's a major shift in how people view sexuality.

### **4. SEX HAS BEEN DISCONNECTED FROM LOVE, EMOTION AND RELATIONAL COMMITMENT OF ANY KIND (FOR SOME PEOPLE).**

This is actually, in some ways, the most radical shift of all. The advent of apps like Tinder shows the codification of the ethos of the hook-up culture. The progression of human dating used to move from common interests with someone, to friendship, to romantic attraction, to sexual connection. Now, with dating apps, it's completely reversed: sleep with someone, then in the morning, go grab some coffee and see if you have anything in common, perhaps develop a relationship and find someone you can maybe spend your life with.

### **5. SEX HAS BEEN DISCONNECTED FROM REAL PEOPLE.**

The proliferation of pornography throughout our digital world has had real impact on real people. Over the last 10 years, the percentage of American men between 18-30 who reported not having sex nearly tripled, from 10 percent to 28 percent. Researcher and sociologist Dr. Mark Regnerus has a hypothesis about this, writing that “The quality of porn and masturbation may well have reached a level significant enough to satisfy many men, such that the pursuit of real sex with real women... seems no longer a benefit worth the costs of wooing.”

There were many revolutions that happened in the 20th century – and if the goal of a revolution is to overthrow those in power and replace it with another government – then it seems as though the sexual revolution might have been the most successful. Mary Eberstadt in her book *Adam and Eve After the Pill* writes “the sexual revolution was the de-stigmatization and demystification of non-marital sex and the reduction of sexual relations in general to a kind of hygienic recreation in which anything goes

as long as those involved are consenting adults.”<sup>7</sup> Look, it’s not that all the above-mentioned shifts didn’t happen in ye olden times. What’s new is that these shifts are now seen as *human progress*. Virtuous progress. Throwing off the shackles of prudish Traditionalism so we can finally be our freest and happiest selves.

And if you look at the data from social researchers, although not identical to the broader culture, people who identify as Christians have similar rates of pornography use, pre-marital sex and divorce. This all seems to imply that sex – even for Christians – is an area a lot of people have decided to do what they want.

The Christian teaching about sexuality is not difficult to understand. “Either in a life-long, committed, monogamous, opposite-gender covenantal relationship – or not at all.” It is that, of course, but it is also far more than that. It’s God Himself asking us, as a culture and as individuals, “Where is all this going? Who are you going to believe about this important issue of sex? Are you going to believe me? Or someone else?”

If the data is right, then for a lot of folks, the answer is “Thanks, but no thanks God. It’s too much to involve you in something as private and personal as my sex life.”

## **IDOL NUMBER 2:**

For the second “idol” – the second area of life where people don’t trust God – I’d like to go back to education and academic success for a second. I got to thinking about this one. It feels to me that for many people, academic achievement is so important – because it absolutely hits on so many of those core motives discussed in chapter 4. It provides (or promises to provide) a way to get our deepest heart’s needs. But look at *how* it promises to meet those needs. Here’s what I think the narrative is:

- Academic **performance** provides the pathway to success. You get good grades, you get into a good college, you get a good career, and then you’re successful and can make a lot of money. Bam.
- Education provides the pathway to **comfort**. With success, comes money and money allows you to have and do what you want. Comfort.

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7 Mary Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve After the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2013), 20.

- Education provides you with **control**. With more money, you can finally have more control in life. Security. Stability. Sure, money can't solve every problem, but it can solve a LOT of them.
- Education provides you with **approval**. Your children are a reflection of you, so having your kid be valedictorian, or get into that great school and get a great career is an affirmation for YOU as a parent. It's a great way to climb the social ladder.

Now, just looking at that, I see a common thread. It's almost like "education" isn't the goal. It's almost like education is simply a means to an end. And that end is *money*. I would make the case that money is the most malleable and shifty of all idols, because it promises to provide for nearly every single heart motive.

- You want to be seen as beautiful and stylish. Money can buy you the finest of things.
- You want to be seen as successful? Driving that car or posting pictures from that vacation will help.
- You want comfort? Getting that big house or that cushy second home on the beach sure will help.
- You want power? Money makes the world go 'round. You have money, you already have power.
- You want acceptance? Heck, playas, if you have enough money, celebrities and fame will find you.

And here's the challenging thing about money. It can be the central driving force for people's lives whether they have it **OR** they don't. People who have money will die before they give it up. And people who don't have it, will die trying to get it.

As I talked to my mentors and older, wiser pastors, they all said, "Money is the central motivating factor for most people because it allows them to be in control of their lives."

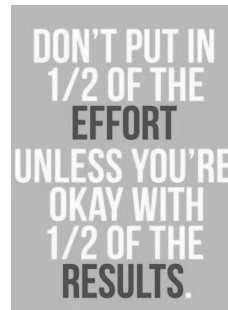
One test of whether something is your central motivation is to fill in the blank in this question, "If I had \_\_\_\_\_, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure and satisfied." And for a lot of people, the answer to that is *money*.

Sadly, this nexus of confused motives often leaves people accidentally crashing on the rocks of workaholism.

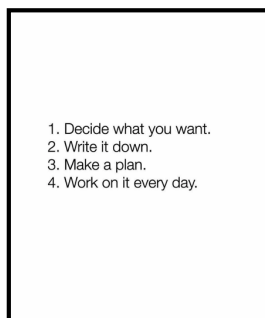
There was a guy in our church, we'll call him Mark. Mark had a high-profile vice-president job at a prestigious company in the area. When he wasn't travelling to China to meet with the factories that made his company's sought-after product, he was on the phone with them. Fourteen hour days? Standard. And at one point, he came home and his wife said, "I have three months left before I've got no feeling left for you whatsoever." And then she said, "And by the way, your kids have learned to stop even asking when you're going to come home."

Another guy I met – we'll call him Tim. He and his wife were interested in getting more involved in church, but he told me that it was tricky, because he was under relentless pressure at work. He was working at a start-up, everyone hoping they'd be picked up as the next big thing and strike it rich. He told me, "I have to work 70 hours a week. That's standard. There is a line of people behind me just waiting to take my job – who would kill for my job. I can't coast. I have to keep pace." When I explained the commitment – about two hours one night a week – Tim told me that regrettably, he wouldn't be able to swing that, but that he would "as soon as things slowed down." That was five years ago.

There's a trend these days where Instagram influencers and social media mavens promote this idea of "hustle." And look, I'm not against hard work. Anything worthwhile takes hard work. But I am against blindly following ambition without even examining where you're running, what you're running after, or why. And to be honest, the message of the story of Abraham doesn't seem to fit *at all* with the central messages of these memes:







Our national motto might be “In God We Trust” but ironically the thing that motto is printed on is what we actually put our trust in.

## WHEN WE GET IT ALL WRONG

I want to say this again, clearly: I’m not here to throw shade at anyone. The goal is to love God – and that means trusting God. We all have areas of our life – maybe even whole sectors of our life – where we find it difficult to trust God. We all do.

But when we get it wrong – and you and I get it wrong sometimes, in small and big ways – this has real consequences. Big consequences.

But (and this is the very good news) these consequences are not bigger than God. Let’s jump back into Abraham’s story to see this.

### GENESIS 16

<sup>5</sup> Then Sarai said to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.” <sup>6</sup> “Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

Again, it’s clear where the sympathies of the narrator lie in this story. Sarah once again doesn’t see reality clearly, this time shifting blame onto her husband, refusing to take responsibility. After taking matters into their own hands, Abraham and Sarah inflict real pain onto Hagar. One of my Bible commentaries put it like this, “The Hebrew verb used here (*treated her harshly*) implies that Sarai subjected

Hagar to physical and psychological abuse. It carries with it the nuance of critical judgment of her actions.”<sup>8</sup> No wonder Hagar despises her. Sarah sinned by doing this to Hagar, and Abraham sinned by letting it happen, allowing a situation of division that was so intolerable that Hagar ran away into the desert, deeply embittered. Again, when we fail to trust God, the consequences are far-ranging and disastrous. And the reader is left wondering, “What will happen now? There’s no way that God could clean up a mess this big, right?” The story continues:

#### GENESIS 16

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,” she answered.

The road to Shur, we are told by archeologists, is the road back to Hagar’s home country of Egypt.<sup>9</sup> But more than that, there’s some Hebrew word play here: the word “spring” in Hebrew can also mean “eye” and the word “shur” also means “to see.” Someone is watching. Someone sees Hagar’s situation in its stark totality, and is inviting her to share her story.

*“Where are you going?”*

Remember, whenever God asks a question it’s not because He needs information or is confused. God is omniscient. He doesn’t forget the lyrics. When God asks a question, it’s an invitation to talk to Him. Or, in this case, it’s an invitation to confession. Confession might seem like a strange term to use here, because you and I tend to think of confession solely in personal terms (the sins I myself have committed). And indeed, that is confession. But there is another sort of sin, too, that needs confession, and that is the sin that has been done to us. The trauma we have experienced because of sin done to us that has deeply hurt us. As you know, that kind of trauma and hurt doesn’t just go away – we need to bring the searingly-painful reality of that sin before God, too. It’s our only hope for healing.

God responds with a difficult instruction and a dramatic, beautiful promise.

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<sup>8</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary*, 120.

<sup>9</sup> Later in the story in Genesis 25:18, Shur is described as being close to Egypt.

<sup>9</sup> Then the angel of the LORD told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” <sup>10</sup> The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.”

<sup>11</sup> The angel of the LORD also said to her:

“You are now pregnant  
and you will give birth to a son.  
You shall name him Ishmael,  
for the LORD has heard of your misery.

<sup>12</sup> He will be a wild stallion<sup>10</sup> of a man;

We’ve seen this pattern of fear before. Abraham left his home country and gave away his wife because of fear. Sarah concocted a plan for her husband to impregnate her servant because of fear. Hagar ran away because of fear. Fear tempts us to do things. But all along, God is inviting these three people to trust Him, even if it doesn’t make sense.

**Abraham**, I am more powerful than even Egypt. I control the destiny of even Pharaoh. There is no need to fear.

**Sarah**, you are barren, and see no earthly way the promise of a son could possibly come true. But daughter, you have forgotten that I am the God of Life. I will give you a son. There is no need to fear.

**Hagar**, I see you. You are not suffering alone, or in vain. I know the brutality. I know you’ve been dehumanized. But you are not what has been done to you. You are not a discarded, abused slave, but the mother of future royalty. Your son will grow into a great nation, and he and his descendants will not be enslaved by anyone, but will run free. No one will put a harness on him. There is no need to fear.

In the end, I’m not even sure I understand the depths of what God was asking of Hagar. God asks Hagar to trust him and to go back to her abusers. Was this God’s invitation to Hagar to confront the pain of her past? Was God rescuing

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<sup>10</sup> A quick note: in your Bible translation, it might say “wild donkey” in verse 12, but that sounds like Shrek’s unruly companion. A better translation for the Hebrew idiom of “untamed donkey” is closer to “wild Mustang, running free through the plains of the American West.” So I made the change. And in the morning, I’m making waffles.

Hagar from a far worse fate of worse slavery in Egypt? Was this an invitation to forgiveness in some way? Was God inviting her to endure through a season of suffering, made possible by His glorious promises about her future which must have been beyond her wildest imagination? Is God somehow doing something in Hagar's character, filling her with empathy and compassion for the broken and cast-away? I don't know.

All I know is that God's invitation to Hagar doesn't make sense. But Hagar runs toward this promise, lifted and encouraged by the God who Sees. And what happens next is one of the more staggering portions of Scripture.

#### GENESIS 16

<sup>13</sup> She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."

Hagar *names* God. This is a statement of comprehension and understanding that God reveals to Hagar, and which she shares. And something else: for someone to name someone or something, there has to be a relational connectedness. You have to know something. Hagar knows something about this God, and it is this: God sees her. God sees our suffering. In patriarchal societies like Hagar inhabited, men often expected to be seen and conversely, women often expected to not be seen. This is often the case with national or ethnic minorities. But here, an Egyptian slave reveals, in Scripture, something true and new about God. This moment is captured forever. We're still talking about the truth of what Hagar said.

Even though Abraham's God Yahweh had been deeply misrepresented to Hagar by Abraham, Hagar still calls upon the name of God and didn't blame God for the way she was treated. Of all the people in the entire planet, Hagar should be the one to curse Abraham's God. But she doesn't. She realizes in this story that Abraham's God pursues her, finds her and speaks to her. Whatever Hagar's thoughts were of Abraham's religious expressions, his God personally invaded her mess, and she got to experience Abraham's God for herself.

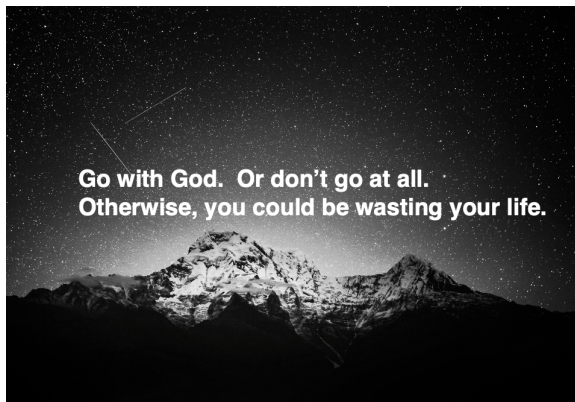
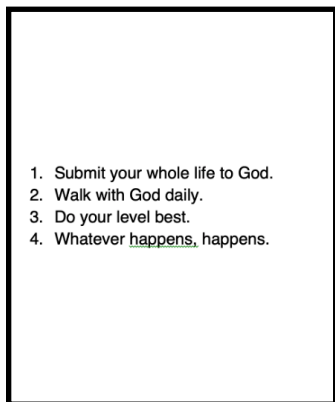
So in a way, Hagar is a hero like Abraham, because she responded faithfully. She responded with trust every bit as big as Abraham's. And incredibly, the story shows that God rewards this kind of trust in any and all people who exhibit it.

No matter who.

No matter where.

This God is for all people.

Makes you think. Maybe I should redo those inspirational memes from Instagram with lessons from the life of Abraham?



It's a reminder that loving God means trusting God.

Even when it doesn't make sense.

Or should I say *especially* when it doesn't make sense.

## KEY LESSON

2

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means **TRUSTING** Him.

- Even when it doesn't make sense.



## CHAPTER 05 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

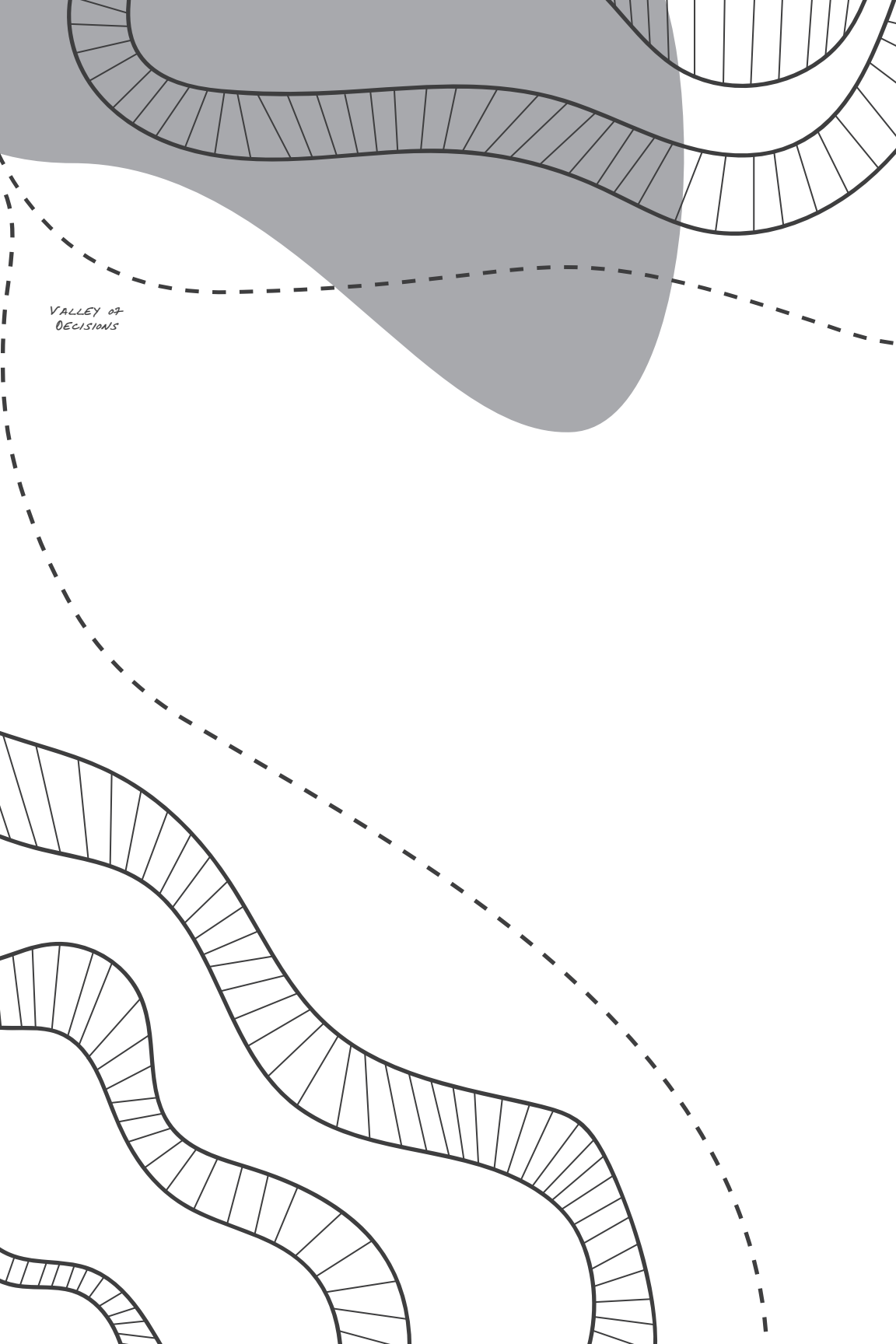
1. What impacted you the most about this chapter? What questions did the chapter bring up for you? What was the most helpful part of the chapter?
2. What did you think about the see/desire/take pattern in the Bible? Have you seen this pattern in your own life?
3. When drought hit the land of Canaan, Abraham left for Egypt and things did not go well for him there. Have you ever been hit with a “metaphorical land of drought”? Did you abandon your plans, make new plans, or change course in some way? How did that work out?
4. Read this quote by A. J. Swoboda: *“God does not deliver his people to the promised land directly. Rather, they must first go through a desert experience as they make their way to the final destination... But there is a fundamental problem with the desert for God’s people. For it is in the desert where we are tempted to abandon the one who has brought us there.”*<sup>1</sup> Why is it so easy to forget God when times are hard? Why is it so easy to think God has forgotten us? How can you guard against abandoning God when you are in a desert season?

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1 A. J. Swoboda, *The Dusty Ones: Why Wandering Deepens Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 70, 72.

5. The section on “American Idols” delved into some sensitive and private areas of our interior lives — sexuality and career/education/money/autonomy. Do you agree that these two are the two primary threats to allegiance to God in the US? What might others be?
  
6. Have you noticed the power of these two highlighted idols (sex and career/education/money/autonomy) in your own life? Are there other idols in your life that you are often tempted to trust more than God?
  
7. Was there anything surprising or new to you in the story of Hagar? Do you resonate with her story? What do you find encouraging about Hagar’s story?
  
8. Read Psalms 31 and 40. Read them again, slowly. Notice the theme of trust. What metaphors does the psalmist use to describe God? Consider reading these psalms every day this week. Or find 2 or 3 verses that resonate with you, write them down, and come back to them throughout the week.



The image features an abstract composition of wavy, organic shapes. A large, solid grey shape is positioned in the upper left, partially overlapping a white shape with vertical hatching. Below these, a dashed line curves across the page. In the lower left, another white shape with vertical hatching is visible. The overall style is minimalist and modern.

*VALLEY OF  
DECISIONS*

## CHAPTER 6

# THE OUTCRY

IN WHICH WE EXAMINE THE TERMS “JUSTICE” AND  
“RIGHTEOUSNESS” AND SHOW WHY THEY’RE IMPORTANT  
TO UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT MEANS TO “LOVE GOD.”

VALLEY OF  
DOUBT

## KEY LESSON

3

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means we **SEEK JUSTICE**.

- We live right.
- We do what’s right.
- We help set things right.

## WE ARE THE WORLD

A number of years ago, I was working for a church in San Jose, and while my wife was 7 months pregnant with our daughter, I found myself in Ethiopia, in a rural city called Zwai. I was there as part of a collaboration between two churches – one in San Jose, CA and one in Zwai. My buddy Rob (who was Ethiopian and originally from Zwai) had introduced us to some folks he knew who led a local church there. We'd built a friendship, and I'd seen first-hand the work these local leaders were doing. We were trying to figure out how to support our sister congregation and its leadership.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most pressing needs in the region was water. So there I was, in Ethiopia, with some brilliant project managers and engineers from our congregation, a group of Ethiopian nationals and church leaders from Zwai and Rob (our translator) trying to figure out how to drill wells – not only for clean drinking water, but also wells to support agriculture for the village.

I will remind you that my degree in college was in *literature*, which though great, did not prepare me much for international drilling operations to improve food security in the Horn of Africa. I was in over my head immediately.

Unfortunately, in the months before our trip, a drought had hit the region. I watched in the morning as farmers took their mules and horses and wooden ploughs and tilled the red earth with no hope of a crop. When I asked why they were doing this, Rob responded, “In case there is rain next season. There is a hope they could save their family, but not if they lose their skill.”

Let me tell you, the American proverb “Work hard and you can make it in life” evaporated in that moment. It's true sometimes, but it isn't always true. Sometimes,

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<sup>1</sup> I want to be careful here not to send the wrong message. Christian theologians, missiologists and sociologists have warned for years about the dangers of “missionary tourism” where Christians from the West pop into a nation, hand out some candy, paint an orphanage and assume they've really solved some problems. This is not only dangerously patronizing, it's also just ineffective and wrong-headed. This was not that. I'm also wary of the tendency to paint certain parts of the world as helpless or needing “rescuing” or “saving” from the West. This was not that. All mission work should be done in deep relational partnership, and should empower local leaders on the ground. This is what was happening in Ethiopia. We were trying to develop brotherhood – and brothers share what they have freely. I hope that comes across.

you get up at dawn and faithfully plow the earth and your children fight starvation anyway.

The elders and the local leaders explained the desperation of the situation through Rob. It hit us all. These were our friends, and co-laborers in the Kingdom (and their friends and neighbors) who were suffering.

“If we don’t get emergency food relief out here, there won’t be any need to dig wells,” my colleague Jeff said, soberly.

Thankfully, we had some money. Earlier that spring, I’d put together a campaign for Lent, to raise money for the people of Zwai. I watched in amazement as the congregation in San Jose was moved to give sacrificially to help people across the globe who we’d only met a year earlier. In one weekend, the community raised nearly \$80,000. So we had some money to help. But when we went to the markets in Ethiopia to buy emergency rations to help the people of Zwai, there simply wasn’t enough food. This wasn’t like the US, where you could go to Costco and buy in bulk – the drought had completely disrupted the supply chain. We bought all that we could, transporting it from the capital city of Addis Ababa to Zwai in the back of vans, but it wasn’t enough. As we drove out of Addis, I sat in the back of the bumpy van, the open diesel exhaust and the heat choking me, and the oppressive poverty overwhelming me. As we headed back to Zwai, I knew we had maybe 65 percent of the supplies the village needed. What were we going to do?

When we got to the village, I unloaded the massive bags of grain and rice and flour. We bowed low to the elders of the village. Rob explained to us that this was the best way; the elders would be given all the supplies and they would make the beneficial determination about who gets it. As I was about to go, a little girl saw us unloading and came out of her small home holding her bowl. She motioned to me as if to ask me “Food?”

This little girl’s name, I found out later, was Genet, which meant “Eden.” As in “the Garden of Eden.” She was probably just about the same age as my son back at home.

I thought about a speech I’d heard recently, given by U2 front man Bono, who was campaigning for his (Red) Campaign to bring awareness to the most pressing

issues of Africa. “An accident of longitude or latitude should not decide whether a child lives or dies,” he said.

I thought about the “accident of longitude and latitude” of my birth. How fortunate I had been to be born in the 20th century in the United States. I thought about the command from Jesus to love my neighbor as I would love myself. What if the places were reversed? What would I want as a father if my own child didn’t have enough food? What would I want if a man from another country (who had more resources than I) came to my home and saw my son, sitting with a bowl, asking for food because he was hungry? What would I hope the man’s response would be? What would love look like in that case?

The short answer is easy: I would want that other father to see my son like he saw his own son – and be moved to real action to help provide us with food, now and in the future. That was what it meant to love my neighbor as myself.

## TWO TYPES OF SUFFERING

Recently, I read an astute article in *The Guardian* by Oliver Burkeman that made a light bulb go off in my head. Burkeman wrote:

*There are two main kinds of suffering. [There] is the universal kind that comes with being a finite human, faced with a limited lifespan, the inevitability of death, the unavailability of grief and regret, the inability to control the present or predict the future and the impossibility of ever fully knowing even those to whom we’re closest...*

*And there is the kind that results from the power disparities between groups: racism, sexism, economic inequality.<sup>2</sup>*

Burkeman’s broader point in the article is that in modern Western culture, we increasingly talk as if the first kind of suffering “barely counts or doesn’t even exist – as if everything that truly matters were ultimately political.” But what I have found is that discussions about suffering with Christians are often the opposite: Christians

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2 Oliver Burkeman, Article: **Beyond Order by Jordan Peterson review – more rules for life**, *The Guardian*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/02/beyond-order-by-jordan-peterson-review-more-rules-for-life>

are keenly aware of the first type of suffering – and realize that God has much to say about this universal human problem.

But the second type of suffering? The type caused by greed and power-mongering? By economic inequality? Well, that's very complex, doesn't have easy solutions, and has political edges that are very messy indeed.

This was the kind that Genet and her village in Zwai were facing. And this experience in Africa showed me that the type of suffering caused by power differentials is real. It causes true harm to people which is very, very real, even if it is largely invisible. And up until I visited Africa, it had been invisible to me.

But it wasn't just that. Our small team quickly learned that we were dealing with issues that were bigger and more complex than we had anticipated. For example:

- To drill the wells, we had to consult with local water officials who had “fees.” Some of the folks back home on the church board hated this idea, calling it an unethical bribe. Others simply shrugged their shoulders, calling it the cost of doing business in a foreign country whose rules were different. How was I to bring those two sides together?
- Another US non-profit had recently drilled drinking wells in a nearby village about 50 miles away. But this free resource was soon swamped by demand. Armed bands of roving gangs took over the wells, demanding payment from the local residents for the water – which were supposed to be free for the whole village. The non-profit had to hire a private security firm to reclaim their wells. What if that happened to our wells? Although “Former African Militia Lord” would look pretty great on my resume, I had no idea how to handle that. Again, I majored in literature.
- There was a very large, fresh-water lake in the area, and the water experts with us suggested pumping water for irrigation by installing a large (but simple and inexpensive) pump-house with connecting pipes. The usage they recommended wouldn't deplete or hurt the lake's water level and would provide for hundreds of acres of irrigated land. A major

problem existed though: a large, multi-national company based in the Netherlands had recently “secured” the water rights around the lake. They were using the water to supply irrigation to dozens of greenhouses filled with flowers. These flowers were then flown to Europe and sold, with almost all of the profit going to the company, and very little of it staying in Ethiopia. Local workers were paid 20 Ethiopian Birr a day – roughly 45 cents. The presence of this company made things tricky – legally. The local village leaders were resentful, wondering how this company from the Netherlands got first rights to use the water when the native Ethiopian villagers, did not. I wondered the same thing. Money is a powerful thing. And my English degree didn’t prepare me for how to win international legal battles over water use rights.

Zwai, Ethiopia is where I saw, first-hand, what some scholars and theologians call “systemic injustice.” What I was seeing was not a situation where one person did something wrong to another person. There was something deeply flawed about the system. Powerful groups had set up structures and systems (perhaps innocuously) but the end result was not encouraging human flourishing – but ended up exploiting, hurting and oppressing. Sin had sunk deep and grown roots.

And there were real casualties. Like Genet.

As we were about to leave on a bus to head home, our friend Negesso, who served like a Bishop overseeing nine local churches in the Rift Valley, bolted onto the bus, and opened a small Bible. “Before you leave, I want to read one verse to you, and pray for you as you leave,” Negesso said.

## GALATIANS 2

<sup>10</sup> All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

*Remember the poor.*

That line stuck out to me. In this verse, the Apostle Paul is remembering his visit to Jerusalem. As Paul was leaving that city to go visit the fledgling churches throughout the Roman provinces, his friends – three monumental pillars of the early church named James, Peter and John – told him to keep at the front of his mind the Christians in Judea and Jerusalem, who were suffering terribly because of a combination of famine, wars and such. Paul said he was “eager to do this.” These

weren't empty words: Paul would go on in his ministry to raise money for relief for the people in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

*Remember the poor.*

This is what James, Peter and John's parting words were to Paul as he went out.

*Remember the poor.*

Not that this story is – or should be – in any way about me, but I have to tell you, I left Zwai utterly frustrated. I was unable to purchase enough supplies to stave off hunger, frustrated by our dealings with local officials, and feeling powerless. I was laden with emotions like guilt and confusion and sadness, paralyzed because I was confronted with a problem that was way bigger than me, was way more complex than I could figure out, that required **WAY** more resources than I had.

Negesso's plea echoed in my ears, because I knew it had also been the plea of James and Peter and John. I know it had echoed around in Paul's ears, just as it was in mine.

In a world filled with overwhelming amounts of suffering caused by entrenched sin that has settled into cultures and societies, what is a Christian supposed to do? How can I think better and think Biblically about these important issues?

I know I have to do something, but I don't know what. Is there a way out of this confusing mental mess that doesn't end up in apathy or blame or guilt?

Well, wouldn't you know it, the story of Abraham is the place to go.

## **SCOOBY DOO AND THE CASE OF THE THREE MYSTERIOUS STRANGERS**

Genesis 18 is one of the absolutely strangest stories in the entire Bible, but it's also become one of my favorites. There are so many things we can learn from this story,

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see how Paul does this in Acts 24:17, Rom. 15:25-27, 1 Cor. 16:1-4.



but for the sake of time I'll focus on one lesson in this chapter and another main lesson in the next. First, let's recap the story.

It has been 24 years since God originally broke through time and space and called Abraham to leave his home of Harran. Abraham and Sarah still don't have a child yet, despite God's clear promises. Years have passed after Abraham and Sarah's debacle with Hagar, whose son Ishmael is now 13 years old. After the drought and trip to Egypt, Abraham returned to the place in Canaan where God had spoken to him, and God spoke again, promising him and his offspring all the land he could see from the north, south, east and west. So Abraham sticks around this area, which the Bible calls the area near the Great Trees of Mamre. During the elapsed time since our last story, God changed the names of Abraham and Sarah!<sup>4</sup> The name *Abram* means "father exalted" which is like someone naming their kid "My Dad Is Pretty Important." Nice, Terah. God changes it to *Abraham* which means "father of many nations" – which is true not only biologically, but also because such a large segment of humanity would come to view Abraham as their spiritual father. The etymology behind Sarai's name change is harder to discern and more muddled, but Sarai seems to mean "princess" (or, according to one Jewish commentator "quarrelsome") and is changed by God to mean "princess of many." Again, this ties Sarah's destiny to God's good work to bless all the nations, as spoken in Genesis 12.

If you're keeping track, Abraham has now had five (5) apocalypses with God where God has spoken to him, revealing something about the future and Himself. In Genesis 18, Abraham experiences yet another apocalypse, getting his sixth "ring" from God.<sup>5</sup>

#### GENESIS 18

<sup>1</sup>The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

God shows up with two angels, the three of them in the form of men. Abraham responds with hospitality that would have been common in the ancient Near East,

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 17:5, 15

<sup>5</sup> Tying him with Michael Jordan and Tom Brady.

and he offers not only water and shade, but takes on the role of a generous servant offering to make them a meal.<sup>6</sup> And this line is arguably my favorite verse in the entire story of Abraham. Abraham runs to Sarah and says in verse 6:

#### GENESIS 18

<sup>6</sup> So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.”

Now, I didn’t know what a “seah” was but my Bible tells me this is the equivalent of 36 pounds of flour. 36 pounds! I don’t know exactly how much bread 36 pounds of flour makes, but it sure seems like an awful lot of bread for three guests. Looks like our boy Abraham is pro-gluten. Way to carbo-load my man. No keto for you. The point is by preparing a calf and making bread from the finest flour, Abraham is offering his best hospitality to God and His Angel Secret Service.

And in response, God – in true apocalyptic form – reveals something only God can know, saying that the long-awaited child He promised Abraham and Sarah would be born within a year. God (or one of the angels – the text is unclear) says:

#### GENESIS 18

<sup>10</sup> ... “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

And Sarah, overhearing this promise from outside the tent, herself long past child-bearing years, laughs to herself. “Oh goody,” she must have thought, “We’re all going to be in diapers together.” And God, who is apparently so powerful that He can even turn our internal monologues into dialogues, challenges Sarah’s (completely understandable) negative self-talk with a perspective-shattering reminder that frankly, nearly all of us need to hear from time to time.

#### GENESIS 18

<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the LORD?”

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<sup>6</sup> The text is clear: Abraham also has a servant prepare “a tender calf” and he gets some cheese curds, so it’s fair to say that veal parmigiana is on the menu. Welcome to Olive Garden. When you’re here, you’re family.

“Is anything too hard for the LORD?” I don’t know who needs to hear this, but maybe you’re facing what seems like an impossible, or irredeemable situation. I invite you: sit and think about those words for a bit. It’s a good thing to ponder.<sup>7</sup>

Now, from a storyline standpoint, this “revelation” of the future is deeply important. Abraham is supposed to be a nation with many descendants who will bless the world, after all. That’s where this is going. But then, the narrative pauses that emphasis and pivots our focus. Because God is not down on Earth walking around in human form with two angels to perform an ultrasound and tell Sarah her due date. He’s there for another reason entirely, and that reason is the focus of Genesis chapters 18 and 19. And in terms of story development, this moment reveals an awful lot about God.

## DON’T MAKE ME COME DOWN THERE

After the three guests accept Abraham and Sarah’s generous and hospitable meal, God and the two angels get up to leave, and God tells Abraham why He is there.

### GENESIS 18

<sup>16</sup>When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.<sup>17</sup> Then the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?<sup>18</sup> Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.<sup>19</sup> For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

<sup>20</sup>Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous<sup>21</sup> that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”

There is so much in this text, but I want to pull out three (3) things worth noting:

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this motif see the following: Job 42:2; Isa. 50:2; Jer. 32:17, 27; Mat. 19:26; Rom. 4:21

## 1. GOD HEARS THE CRIES OF PEOPLE.

God says that the primary reason for His “travels” is to investigate the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah. The word “outcry” here is the Hebrew word *ze’aqah* and it’s a loaded word. This term “outcry” will appear again as a hyperlink later in the biblical story, when Abraham’s descendants are enslaved by the evil empire of Egypt under a cruel Pharaoh and God “heard their cry.”<sup>8</sup> And this term will appear perhaps most graphically when it’s used in the Law of Moses to describe the scream for help by a woman being raped.<sup>9</sup> This word “outcry” is a charged word referring to the plaintive, desperate, aching cry for help from someone being violated or oppressed. And God hears these cries. They reach Him. But it goes further than that.

## 2. GOD GETS INVOLVED.

How does God respond when an “outcry” happens? The first act of physical violence in the Bible is when Cain kills his brother Abel in a rage of jealousy. God tells Cain that his brother Abel’s blood “cries out from the ground”<sup>10</sup> and we see that same cry out /outcry language again. God comes and investigates that murder, inviting Cain to confess and repent, but also giving him a warning that “sin is crouching at your door and it desires to have you.”<sup>11</sup> Like addiction, sin ultimately leads to the destruction and disintegration of a person. Sin results in the destruction of the good things God has made. But there’s another side to this equation, too. And that is that God, apparently, also is active and involved in confronting this kind of evil Himself. That phrase “I will go down to see” is a hyperlink – it’s the same phrase used in Genesis 11 in the story of the Tower of Babel.<sup>12</sup> And just like Babel, what’s happening in Sodom and Gomorrah is an organized coordination of a society doing something that’s not good – sinful, in fact, as the text says. God Himself comes down to investigate. God hears the cries of those who are being hurt and oppressed. He gets personally involved. God doesn’t just hear. He acts.

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8 Nehemiah 9:9

9 Deuteronomy 22:25-27

10 Genesis 4:10

11 Genesis 4:7

12 Genesis 11:5 – But the LORD *came down to see* the city and the tower the people were building. (emphasi<sup>s</sup> mine)

### 3. GOD WANTS ABRAHAM TO BE A CERTAIN KIND OF PERSON – ONE THAT LOOKS AND ACTS LIKE HIM.

In this sixth “apocalypse” God reveals all this to Abraham. God starts by saying “Shall I hide this from Abraham?” a rhetorical question whose answer is clearly “no.” And the reason God gives can be traced back to Genesis 12, when God promised to make Abraham into a great nation. God is going to bless all the nations through Abraham. And here we get a little more information about how exactly that will happen.

#### GENESIS 18

<sup>19</sup> For I have chosen him, **so that** he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, **so that** the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

There are two “so thats” we need to pay attention to. First, God says that He has chosen Abraham **SO THAT** he can teach his family (and those in his circle of influence) to “keep the way of the LORD” by “doing what is right and just.” This can also be translated as “doing righteousness and justice.” What does this mean? Although we’re unsure yet what exactly it means to “keep the way of the LORD” it must be tied to the idea that Abraham is going to serve as God’s *tselem* – God’s representative on Earth who shows the world what God (and His rule) is really like. It stands to reason that Abraham somehow look and act like the God he’s representing.

Secondly, Abraham will teach people to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice – **SO THAT** God can make him into a great nation and make him a blessing to all nations. Somehow, God’s big plans for the world are tied to Abraham’s “practicing the way of the LORD” and doing “righteousness and justice.”

## IT TAKES TWO TO MAKE A THING GO RIGHT

Now, we come to my two favorite Hebrew words, “justice” and “righteousness,” which are found for the first time right here in the Bible in Genesis 18 and used hundreds of times throughout the rest of the Bible.

## **Tzedeqah = Righteousness (159 times)**

(pronounced SAID-eee-kaw)

## **Mishpat = Justice (149 times)**

(pronounced meesh-POT)

What's interesting is that the words "justice" and "righteousness" although they are separate words in Hebrew, are sometimes also put together on purpose. They function as what English and Grammar nerds call a "hendiadys" which means "one through two" and is basically an idiomatic expression. The Biblical writers use *hendiadys* to explain complex terms. This is like stereo headphones, where the "left" ear is playing some notes, and the "right" ear is playing others, but they can't be separated. They are meant to be taken together.<sup>13</sup> And these two words – *justice and righteousness* – appear linked together more than three dozen times in the Old Testament, starting for the first time, here in Genesis 18.

So, let's unpack each word.

### **TZEDEQAH = RIGHTEOUSNESS**

Because I am of a certain age, whenever I hear the word *righteous*, I hear it said in the voice of Keanu Reeves ala Bill-and-Ted. In a religious setting, however, the connotation of the



**YO! Scan this code to learn more about the ideas of righteousness and justice in this short, informative animated video from our friends at BibleProject.**

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<sup>13</sup> Scholar Peter Gentry explains it like this: "The figure of speech is called a "hendiadys," one concept expressed through two words. The word pair becomes an idiom expressing a single thought that is both different from and greater than the words considered independently... Hebrew poetry (which is based upon placing lines in parallel pairs) however, allows such a word pair to be split so that half is in one line of the couplet, and the other half is in the parallel line. The word pair justice-righteousness is central to the discourse of Isaiah and occurs some 18 times, always at critical or key points in the discourse." Peter Gentry, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets* (Wheaton, IL: CrossWay, 2017).

word righteous often is a stand-in for “morally perfect.” But that’s not *\*exactly\** the meaning of the word *tzedeqah*.

The word *tzedeqah* comes from the Hebrew root word *sedeq* which means *straight*. It is used literally of objects when they do what they are supposed to do: for example, in the Bible accurate weights and measures are “*measures of sedeq*”<sup>14</sup> and safe paths for sheep are “*paths of sedeq*.”<sup>15</sup> Building on this root word, *tzedeqah* refers to human beings who are *straight* or *in the right order* with their relationships – primarily and first with God Himself – and also with others. The word *tzedeqah* refers to a life of right relationships. Bible scholar Alec Motyer defined *righteous* as those “right with God and therefore committed to putting right all other relationships in life.”<sup>16</sup> Another bible scholar, Tim Mackie, defines *tzedeqah* as “an ethical standard that refers to right relationships between people. It’s about treating others as the image of God.”<sup>17</sup>

In my own words, the word *tzedeqah* means “a state of affairs in which humans are connected to God and each other properly and therefore live in harmony and peace.” And so, while the connotations I used to hold in my own head about the word “righteous” only involve private piety (my own standing with God) the ancient Hebrew culture from which this word flows knows nothing of this drastic, private individualism – *tzedeqah* has profoundly social overtones to it because it deals with every person I encounter.

## **MISHPAT = JUSTICE**

The word *mishpat* has a basic meaning of treating people equitably – with the same fairness. For example, in the law given to Moses to govern Israel, God tells Israel to “have the same *mishpat* for the foreigner as the native.”<sup>18</sup> *Mishpat* is not just individual, though, it’s about systems, too. In this example, the Israelites are commanded to acquit or punish every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status. Anyone who does the same wrong should be given the same penalty.

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14 See Leviticus 19:36, Deuteronomy 25:15

15 See Psalm 23:3

16 J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 471.

17 Tim Mackie, *Justice* theme video, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/justice/>

18 Leviticus 24:22

Another example: Deuteronomy 18 says that the priests who operate the temple (and therefore can't work or farm) should be supported by the rest of the people. This support is called the priest's *mishpat* which refers to what they are due, or what is rightfully theirs. To not support the priests, while they have operated the temple, would be *unjust* – a violation of *mishpat*.

But it goes even further than that. Remember, the Hebrew word *ze'aqah* which means “outcry” is a unique cry from a person who is being unjustly oppressed. Sometimes, power is used in a way to take or steal from people things that are rightfully theirs – and usually this is done by powerful people toward those who are weaker or more vulnerable.

## THE QUARTET OF THE VULNERABLE

Sometimes, important things (like life, liberty, property, etc.) are stolen from people who are the weakest. Injustice is not equally spread out over society. Injustice falls, disproportionately, on the weak, and those with low social or economic status who cannot defend themselves.<sup>19</sup> This is why we read in the Bible, “Defend the rights of the poor and needy.”<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the Old Testament, over and over again, God says that practicing *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* involves caring for widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor—people on the lowest rungs of power in society who would be at extreme risk for starvation and death if there were a famine, or a war, or a flood. These four are mentioned so often in the Scriptures, scholars have a nickname for them: “the quartet of the vulnerable.” Check out the following passages and pay attention to God's attitude toward the people in these powerless groups.

### ZECHARIAH 7

<sup>8</sup>And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: <sup>9</sup>“This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. <sup>10</sup> Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor.

<sup>19</sup> As philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote, the lower classes are “not only disproportionately vulnerable to injustice, but usually disproportionately actual victims of injustice. Injustice is not equally distributed.” Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 79.

<sup>20</sup> Proverbs 31:9



## PSALM 146

<sup>7</sup> He upholds the cause of the oppressed  
and gives food to the hungry.  
The LORD sets prisoners free,  
<sup>8</sup> the LORD gives sight to the blind,  
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,  
the LORD loves the righteous.  
<sup>9</sup> The LORD watches over the foreigner  
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,  
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

## DEUTERONOMY 10

<sup>17</sup> For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. <sup>18</sup> He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.

Why should we care about the widow, the poor, the immigrant and the fatherless? Because God does. It's His character. As Tim Keller writes:

*If God's character includes a zeal for justice that leads him to have the tenderest love and closest involvement with the socially weak, then what should God's people be like? They must be people who are likewise passionately concerned for the weak and vulnerable.<sup>21</sup>*

## TWO GREAT TASTES THAT TASTE GREAT TOGETHER

But again, these words are a *hendiadys*. They have a deeper meaning when they're combined. Certainly, they can be used alone, but the combination is meant to grab our attention. A peanut butter sandwich is okay. But, man, add some jelly? Now

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*, Kindle edition (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2010), 8.

you're talking.<sup>22</sup> So *righteousness* and *justice* are meant to go together. In this way, *tzedeqah* (righteousness) is how you **AIM TO LIVE IN FRONT OF GOD**. This is your internal set of virtues – which when lived out fosters God's good rule of peace and justice. This is *primary*, or first. And *mishpat* is what you do when *tzedeqah* is violated. It's what you **DO** in order to **RESTORE** things that have been broken.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes it's punishment or reparation. Often, it's protection or care. It's putting things right.

There are two examples I want to call your attention to, the first is found in the Book of Ezekiel, where God defines *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* for Ezekiel. Another famous one is found in the Book of Job. In both circumstances, we see both *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* upheld, and illustrated in robust ways. Here, I have highlighted the positive traits and underlined the ones to be avoided:

#### EZEKIEL 18

<sup>5</sup> “Suppose there is a righteous man who does what **is just** [*mishpat*] and **right** [*tzedeqah*]. <sup>6</sup> He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife or have sexual relations with a woman during her period. <sup>7</sup> He does not oppress anyone, but **returns what he took in pledge** for a loan. He does not commit robbery but **gives his food to the hungry** and **provides clothing for the naked**. <sup>8</sup> He does not lend to them at interest or take a profit from them. He **withholds his hand from doing wrong** and **judges fairly** between two parties. <sup>9</sup> He follows my decrees and **faithfully keeps my laws**. That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD.

Examine the kind of actions that best describe someone acting with “justice and righteousness.” The majority are social, yes, but they also all stem from deep internal virtues: a desire not to steal, a desire to be fair, a desire to treat everyone as the image of God, a desire to be generous, a desire to protect the weak. But the way those desires (virtues) work themselves out is what we might call benevolent

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22 Beyoncé may not think you're ready for this jelly, but I disagree. Also, that song is my *jam*. (see what I did there?)

23 As Christopher Wright wrote, “*Mishpat* is a qualitative set of actions - something you do. *Tzedeqah* is a qualitative state of affairs – something you aim to achieve.” Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 365.

social behavior – not lending money at an exorbitant interest (usury), refusing to treat women like sexual objects, dealing fairly in business, giving food to the hungry and clothes to the needy. These are behaviors that God looks upon and says are “righteous.” And there is a promise that such a person will live, be protected and honored by God. Next, in the Book of Job, when Job is pleading his case before God for his innocence, he appeals to his track record regarding “justice” and “righteousness.” Job says (highlighted emphasis mine):

**JOB 29:14, 31:13-22, 31:28**

I put on **righteousness** [*tzedeqah*] as my clothing; **justice** [*mishpat*] was my robe and my turban. . . . If I have denied **justice** [*mishpat*] to any of my servants, whether male or female, when they had a grievance against me, what will I do when God confronts me?... If I have denied the desires of the **poor** or let the eyes of the **widow** grow weary, if I have kept **my bread** to myself, not sharing it with the **fatherless**—but from my youth I reared them as a father would, and from my birth I guided the **widow**—if I have seen anyone perishing for **lack of clothing**, or a needy without garments, and their hearts did not bless me for warming them with the fleece from my sheep, if I have raised my hand against **the fatherless**, knowing that I had **influence in court**, then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint...these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high.

Francis I. Anderson points out in his commentary on Job that this is one of the most important texts in the Scripture for the study of Israelite ethics.<sup>24</sup> Here we see Job living out the concepts of “justice” and “righteousness” in ways that are outward and social: helping the lame, taking care of the needy like a good father, and defending the rights and dignity of immigrants. These are all “justice” issues, and for Job, they show his “righteousness” before God.

<sup>24</sup> Francis I. Anderson, *Job: Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 231.

## GOD WANTS ABRAHAM TO REFLECT HIS ETHICAL QUALITIES.

God says he chose Abraham **SO THAT** he would train his family in the “way of the LORD” to practice *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*.

And God says that Abraham will do this/become this **SO THAT** the LORD can bring about the promise that all the nations will be blessed.

Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright puts it this way:

*This link is an ethical one. The community God seeks for the sake of His mission is to be a community shaped by His own ethical character, with specific attention to righteousness and justice in a world filled with oppression and injustice. Only such a Community can be a blessing to the nations. According to Genesis 18:19, the ethical quality of life of the people of God is the vital link between their calling and their mission. God’s intention to bless the nations is inseparable from God’s ethical demand on the people he has created to be that agent of blessing.<sup>25</sup>*

In this, we learn from God Himself that loving God means learning how to act as He would act if He were in your place. This means a deep heart desire stemming from one’s loyal love of God to discover and reflect God’s character (internal) and then living this out as best as we can in every situation (external). I don’t see how you could have one without the other. How we treat others reveals our heart toward God.<sup>26</sup> This is action that stems from character/virtue/convictions. The verse above in Job, for example, spoke about social concerns, but in the larger passage Job also speaks of “internal” things, like lust,<sup>27</sup> greed and idolatry.<sup>28</sup> Personal piety and social righteousness seem intertwined here and throughout Scripture.

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25 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 367.

26 Carmen Imes, *Bearing God’s Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 42.

27 Job 31:1

28 Job 24-27

## A MORE PROPER DEFINITION

Years ago, Gary Haugen, the director of the International Justice Mission came to speak at our church, and someone asked him, “With your years of work, how would you define the word *justice*?” A great question. Haugen responded that justice is “giving people what God wants them to have.”

This was a lot to chew on. It raises the question, “What does God want people to have? How do we know?”

Do we turn to the 10 Commandments? God wants people to have their lives and not be murdered. God wants people to enjoy the fruit of their labor, not to have it stolen from them. But the 10 Commandments doesn’t explicitly say anything about, say, kidnaping children.

Do we turn to prominent Enlightenment philosophers, like John Locke, who once wrote that God gave all people the right to “life, liberty and property.” These concepts were imported by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, who changed them to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” But happiness is super vague – and problematic for the black people in chains because of Jefferson’s own private goal of happiness. Ugh.

Do we turn to modern philosophers, like John Rawls, whose famous philosophical thought experiment called “the veil of ignorance” proposed that we should construct society as though we didn’t know where we were going to be born? Rawls proposed the “veil” where all members step out of their current lives, and pretend they’re about to be born – at random – into the world into any position in the global society. This “veil” forces all parties to consider society from the perspective of all members, including the worst-off and best-off members. This exercise, Rawls says, should change the way we organize society’s rules. If you’ve got a 15 percent chance of being born into a family that makes less than \$2 per day, and a 56 percent chance of being born into a family that makes less than \$10 per day, you’d want a shot at living a good life.<sup>29</sup> Helpful, but again, can we even ensure those outcomes

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29 Other stats: You have only a 3 percent chance of being born in the US, but a 22 percent chance of being born into a village without electricity. There’s a 14 percent chance you’ll never learn to read and a 23 percent chance you would not have adequate shelter from the elements. SOURCE: <https://www.100people.org/statistics-100-people/>

as people? And doesn't this put the definition of justice into human hands? Where's God in this process?

I liked Haugen's response because it demands that we seek what the Bible says, lest we move into the realm of conjecture. As New Testament scholar Scot McKnight wrote, "For Jesus, justice describes behaviors and conditions that conform to God's standard, to God's kingdom."<sup>30</sup>

In his book, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life*, David Taylor helps us by combing the psalms for ideas about what it means to practice *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*. He writes:

- Justice shows no partiality. It maintains the rights of the weak and it rescues the needy (Ps. 82)
- It rejects the use of arrogant words and the desire to take advantage of the vulnerable (Ps. 94)
- The just do not kill the innocent (Ps. 10)
- The just refuse to speak out of two sides of their mouth (Ps. 28)
- The just are not bloodthirsty (Ps. 139)
- The just are not greedy (Pss. 10; 73)
- The just are not conniving (Ps. 94)
- The just don't love violence (Ps. 11)
- Those who love justice actively reject all systems that oppress people (Ps. 58)<sup>31</sup>

We can also comb the more-than-2000 Scriptures that speak about justice in the Bible.<sup>32</sup> And the narrative of the Bible both challenges, confronts and affirms various modern conceptions of justice, in some profound ways. Here are a few I find worth considering.

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30 Scot McKnight, *One Life: Jesus Calls, We Follow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 72.

31 W. David O. Taylor, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2020), 126.

32 <https://sojo.net/sites/default/files/2000verses.pdf>

### IS POWER ALWAYS EVIL?

Coming back from Africa, I had to wrestle with the long history of power being used to steal and take, especially from the African continent by Western powers. This led to so much perpetuated evil that many academics and philosophers in our post-modern world concluded that the only inevitable use of power is oppression of people. Therefore power is suspect, or worse, evil. The emphasis in a lot of conversations today about justice revolve around power. But is power a product of the Fall? The Bible says that it's more complex than that. Is not power – the ability to DO something – a Creational good given to humanity by God Himself? In the Creation story in Genesis, we are told that humans are given by God “dominion” and are told by God to “rule” – which are words of kingly power. But the emphasis undergirding this power is that humans are to use that power in wise ways, in submission to God’s leadership, that lead to broader *shalom* (peace) and flourishing. As we’ve seen in the broader Biblical mandates about the quartet of the vulnerable, we have to use that power to keep our eyes on the weak and vulnerable, to help them. We cannot use our power to hurt.<sup>33</sup>

I’m reminded of a moment, right before Barack Obama was inaugurated in 2013, he went to church at St. John’s Episcopal Church where a pastor from Atlanta named Andy Stanley gave a brief message titled, “What to do when you’re the most powerful man in the room.” The implications were immediate: for most of the people attending this service (especially president-elect Obama) they would soon be the most powerful person in any room they entered.

Stanley based the answer to that question from Scripture, specifically the life of Jesus, saying, “You leverage that power for the benefit of other people in the room.” This is Abrahamic “be a blessing to all the nations” kind of language.<sup>34</sup>

### WHAT SHOULD OUR POSTURE TOWARD THE OPPRESSOR BE?

Spend any amount of time around toddlers with no emotional maturity fighting (or on social media, but I repeat myself), and you’ll see an easy human tendency: vengeance. We want to demonize and drive out those who are “bad.”

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33 Also, in Matthew 20:25-26 Jesus says, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.”

34 Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the image of a shepherd is used as a metaphor of Godly leadership (which is self-sacrificing, servant leadership). See Matthew 20:24-26, Matthew 9:11-16, John 21:16, Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2-4.

What is most shocking about the Biblical vision of justice is that it demands non-retaliation. Almost nobody does this, in our modern world. The political left wants to demonize and drive out the political right, and vice versa. You're an enemy. No, worse, you're Hitler! No, worse, you're the Anti-Christ and the Joker, wrapped up together. You're the Anti-Joker!

Justice does demand that the oppressor be held accountable. "Vengeance is mine" says God.<sup>35</sup> But the Biblical story offers another option besides destruction. In the Bible, there is a chance for atonement – for forgiveness that comes by having a repentant heart. That possibility destroys enemies, too, in the most chilling and complete way possible: it turns oppressors into friends and brothers.

In the story of Jonah, we see God sending His prophet to Jonah's hated enemies to call them to repent. The prophet Jeremiah tells the Jewish people in captivity to seek the *shalom* or "prosperity" of the Babylonian city that captured and enslaved them. And of course, Jesus refuses to call down fire on Rome, but dies on a Cross, pleading for His father to "forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."<sup>36</sup> In our own nation's history, the Civil Rights Movement took up this ethic of non-violence.<sup>37</sup> As best-selling author and Wheaton College New Testament professor Esau McCaulley wrote, "What do Black Christians do with the rage that we rightly feel? We send it to the cross of Christ."<sup>38</sup>

## WHAT IS OUR INDIVIDUAL (AND COLLECTIVE) ROLE?

Author and pastor Bryan Loritts once wisely said that there is a difference between activists and reconcilers.<sup>39</sup> Activists focus on the problem – which is good and helpful. They focus on the "what" of the issue – but often stop there. An activist (ideally) is telling the truth about reality, and this is absolutely critical regarding

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35 Romans 12:19

36 Luke 23:34

37 This ethic flowed even before the Civil Rights Movement. In a letter written in 1849 by James W. C. Pennington, a black Presbyterian minister wrote a letter to his former owner and Master, voicing concern about his ultimate destiny, writing, "*What excuse could you offer at the bar of God, favoured as you have been with the benefits of a refined education, and through a long life with the gospel of love, should you, when arraigned there, find that you have, all your life long, laboured under a great mistake in regard to slavery, and that in this mistake you had died, and only lifted up your eyes in the light of eternity to be corrected, when it was too late to be corrected in any other way.*" Man.

38 Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 2020), 131.

39 Message given to One Community Church in Dallas, TX on June 06, 2020. SOURCE: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31nvB\\_V5ymw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31nvB_V5ymw)



justice. But Loritts points out that in 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 we are given the “ministry of reconciliation.” Reconcilers don’t just focus on “what” is wrong but also the “how” of fixing it. It’s not merely *issue-driven*, but is also *people* driven.

Here’s why this is important: if this is about people, then it’s going to involve forgiveness. And though we must not rush past truth to get to forgiveness, forgiveness is often required when injustice has been done. And to quote C. S. Lewis, “We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it.”<sup>40</sup> Forgiveness is painful and costly. But if reconciliation – which is a two-way street – is ever going to happen, then we must broker that deal.

Nelson Mandela taught the world a lesson in reconciliation and forgiveness when he emerged from prison after twenty-seven years. In prison, Mandela was abused terribly by his jailers. These were men who ordered him to dig and then climb into a grave-shaped trench in the prison yard. And then, as he lay in the dirt, likely wondering if these guards would kill him, they urinated on him. But now, Mandela had been elected president of South Africa. And the world wondered if this would be like every other revolutionary upheaval of power. Now that the abused minority had power, would they enact a deadly vengeance?<sup>41</sup>

At his inauguration, there would be a great many dignitaries and global leaders in attendance, but there was one additional name that Mandela insisted upon. His former jailer, Paul Gregory.

Seeing Mandela at the inauguration with his former jailer was a symbol for the world to see. It was an outworking of a very Biblical idea: Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good.<sup>42</sup>

## WHAT IS THE END GOAL?

It’s easy to examine the world’s issues – which go back millennia – and say, “This cycle of violence will never end.” Is there an underlying unity we’re trying to get

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40 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952, repr., New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009)

41 It strikes me as I type that this was the basic motivation for Killmonger, the arch-villain of T’Challah in Marvel’s fantastic film *The Black Panther*. Killmonger seeks retribution for the injustices done to people of African descent by giving them advanced weapons technology to allow them to violently enact vengeance on their oppressors.

42 Romans 12:21

back to as humans?<sup>43</sup> In our modern world, you sometimes see (or hear) echoes that society cannot ever be unified again. And, to a certain extent, I understand this, especially if you are speaking from a context of American history. African-Americans, Asians, women, all look to the past and say, “We were *never* unified. You want to go back to the days of slave ships, World War II internment camps, and pre-suffrage injustice? No thanks.” And if your perspective is only the history of the United States, this makes sense. But if your narrative is larger – the entire Biblical narrative for example – then you have hope. As humans, we are united. We all bear the Imago Dei. You see echoes of this Biblical hope in our Civil Rights Movement, led and organized largely by Christians<sup>44</sup> in Churches – who pushed for the shared brotherhood of all humanity. A unity that is fractured by sin, splitting us into hostile competing factions, but one we can and must get back to.

But even more than that, not only does the Biblical narrative begin with our unity (the Imago Dei), it also ends with our unity in the New Creation. As humans, we are united and will be united!<sup>45</sup> So this vision is not just something to “get back to” – it’s also something to look forward to. Scripture tells us that things will get worse before that final end of days, but that means the Church has a chance – by modeling a community that is (in the words of N. T. Wright<sup>46</sup>) *a worship-based, spiritually renewed, multi-ethnic, polychrome, mutually supportive, outward-facing, culturally creative, chastity-celebrating, socially responsible fictive kinship group, gender-blind in leadership, generous to the poor and courageous in speaking up for the voiceless* – to shine God’s light, made even brighter by the darkness.

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43 I first encountered this profound insight from Joshua Ryan Butler in a fantastic and illuminating podcast conversation he had with other leaders of Redemption Church in Tempe, AZ. SOURCE: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmAoYziQ74s>

44 See here, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s speech *An Analysis of the Ethical Demands of Integration* where he says, “At the heart of all that civilization has meant and developed is “community” the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of man to assume a semblance or responsibility for his brother...The universe is so structured that things do not quite work out rightly if men are not diligent in their concern for others. The self cannot be self without other selves.” SOURCE: [http://www.faculty.umb.edu/lawrence\\_blum/courses/318\\_11/readings/king\\_ethical\\_demands.pdf](http://www.faculty.umb.edu/lawrence_blum/courses/318_11/readings/king_ethical_demands.pdf)

45 See the repetition of Jesus’ followers including every nation, tribe, people and language in Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6

46 Thanks to Glenn Packiam and Andrew Wilson for tweeting N. T. Wright’s letter to the editor in the Spectator, a newspaper in the UK. SOURCE: <https://www.glennpackiam.com/post/is-the-church-too-woke-a-letter-from-n-t-wright>

## SEEK. AND YE SHALL FIND.

Since that moment in Africa, I wish I could tell you how easy it has been to fully practice *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*. I wish I could tell you my 3-step process for how I clearly not only see all the failures in complex systems that bring about pain and suffering, but how to correct them, and correct them easily. I wish I could tell you how my powers of persuasion easily overcame any and all objections I encountered, including ones in my own heart.

But I might as well tell you that I donned the Infinity Gauntlet and single-handedly defeated Thanos.

It's just not that easy. Even providing you with practical steps on how to be good at doing good – to make sure you don't accidentally commit well-intentioned harm – is a subject worthy of a whole other book.<sup>47</sup>

But I will leave you with this: when I think about the nearly insurmountable task of attempting to be a person of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* in a real world of real injustice, I think about a moment in our own nation's history that occurred in 1970, during the Apollo 13 mission to the moon.

Apollo 13 was slated to be the third mission to land on the lunar surface, but during a routine stirring of the oxygen tanks, a spark brought about by a faulty wire caused the oxygen tank to explode.<sup>48</sup> The Control Module was left without oxygen for life-support systems and generating power, so the crew had to move into the Landing Module. The mission changed sharply from “explore the moon” to “get these three men home alive.” There was one problem: the carbon dioxide air scrubbers in the Landing Module were only meant to support two men (not three). Mission Control watched as the CO<sub>2</sub> levels rose – knowing it was only a matter of time before the levels reached a point that was deadly.

There were more CO<sub>2</sub> scrubbers that could absorb CO<sub>2</sub> in the Control Module, but these filters were square, and the ones in the landing module were circular. Mission Control in Houston had a problem to fix: fit a square peg into a round hole.

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47 Here's a great book to start with: Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor or Yourself* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009)

48 This moment was dramatized in the 1995 Ron Howard film *Apollo 13*, which starred Tom Hanks.

In the film, a team of six engineers walk into a room and someone dumps a box onto a table that contains every single item the team of astronauts in Apollo 13 had on hand in their ship. One of the engineers, wearing a simple, short sleeve dress shirt with a black tie and a silver tie clip, explains the situation:

*Okay people listen up.*

*The people upstairs handed us this one.*

*And we gotta come through.*

*We gotta find a way to make this*

*(He holds up a square CO<sub>2</sub> filter box)*

*Fit into this*

*(he holds up a long cylinder CO<sub>2</sub> filter box)*

*Using nothing but that*

*(He points to the contents scattered on the table)<sup>49</sup>*

The technicians look down at the table. The technicians stand, with their hands on their hips, staring at the table. Then someone says,

*“Let’s get it organized.”*

And the team breaks into motion. As the team springs into action, we hear someone say,

*“Better get some coffee going.”*

I love this scene. I love it. I love the urgency. I love the commitment. I love the stakes. I love the problem-solving. As an audience, we feel the weight of the mission. We know that failure is not an option because three people’s lives hang in the balance. We know that if these geeky engineers do not come through, people will die. But as an audience we also know, like the technicians, that this is geometrically impossible. Square boxes don’t go into round holes. This task is impossible. We feel the weight.

But what I love the most is the line, “Better get some coffee going.”

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49 *Apollo 13* Movie Transcript. <https://sfy.ru/?script=apollo13>

This is a sign of commitment. This means, “We’re not leaving this room. We will emerge with a solution. Together, we will work hard. And all of us, we’re all in. Until the problem is solved.”

In recent months, I’ve also begun reflecting on the (perhaps accidental) but deeply meaningful opening lines.

*Okay people listen up.*

*The people upstairs handed us this one.*

*And we gotta come through.*

I feel this, in my bones. Church, listen up. The people upstairs, our higher authority, the Father, the Son, the Spirit, they are giving us an assignment. And we gotta come through.

Do you feel this, too? Do you see the absolute and utter weight of the brokenness of this world?

This story in *Apollo 13* reminds me of another moment recorded in Acts 11 where a man named Agabus comes to the church in Antioch. Agabus had received a prophetic word from God Himself (a revelation) that there would be a great famine all over their world. Bad news, indeed. A pandemic, so to speak. What should they do?

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright had this to say:

*So what do the Antioch Jesus-followers say? They do not say either ‘This must be a sign that the Lord is coming back soon!’ or ‘This must mean that we have sinned and need to repent’ – or even ‘this will give us a great opportunity to tell the wider world that everyone has sinned and needs to repent’. Nor do they start a blame-game, looking around at the civic authorities in Syria, or the wider region, or even the Roman empire, to see whose ill-treatment of the eco-system, or whose tampering with food distribution networks, might have contributed to this dangerous situation. They ask three simple questions:*

*Who is going to be at special risk when this happens?  
What can we do to help?  
And who shall we send?*<sup>50</sup>

Guys, this seemingly untheological response is actually practicing righteousness (*tzedeqah*) and justice (*mishpat*).

### **STEP 1: LET US LISTEN TO THE OUTCRY. WHICH PEOPLE WHO BEAR THE IMAGE OF GOD ARE AT SPECIAL RISK?**

None of this works if we don't listen well to the cries of people who are suffering because of a violation of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*. And sometimes, as people, we're not too good at this because we know, instinctively and spiritually, these cries make a moral demand of us. We must be brave and smart about this. It takes courage to enter these places. But we must do it. In our world something is terribly wrong and cries out to be put right.<sup>51</sup>

This next paragraph is going to get me in trouble. But I don't care. Here's an example of refusing to listen to outcries. This past year – 2020 – our brothers and sisters from the black church community cried out in near unanimity, “Black lives are being taken unjustly! We must do something! Black lives matter!” This outcry was met with a lot of resistance. I heard a lot of excuses. There was a deep and grievous shortage of empathy. Of listening. Responding to the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor by saying “all lives matter” is like telling a starving person “Yes, **EVERYONE** deserves to eat.” We must do better. We must listen better. We must drop the defensiveness, listen and investigate. Please. We're one family, Church. If someone comes into the ER with a knife in their back, I want all the doctors to discuss the best medical options. I am open to *every single possible idea* about what to do. Let's discuss it, family. What must not happen is someone pretending there's not even a knife. The outcries reach the Lord's ears and move Him to compassion and action. Does it do the same for us? That's a good question to ask.

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50 N. T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 31-32.

51 Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 122.

**STEP 2: WHAT DO I/WE HAVE?**

The Shema (and later Jesus) tells us to love God with all of our strength. The Hebrew word for *strength* is the word *me'od*, which is an adverb. It's used to mean "very" or "much," like in Genesis, when YHWH created the world it was said to be *me'od* good, or the floods of Noah were *me'od* powerful or Job was said to be *me'od* wealthy. But used in this case, it means your "muchness." Love God with your muchness: every opportunity, every chance, every possibility, every moment, every capacity. In Greek, this word is translated as *dunamis* which means power (like dynamite) or any strength you have (physical power, wealth, connections, privilege, etc.). So as a group, as a people, and as individuals: pour it all out on the table. Organize it. Somebody get the coffee going.

**STEP 3: HOW WILL I/WE SHARE IT?**

The story of Abraham in Genesis 18 reveals that God wants His followers to know that He not only cares about suffering in the world but that He comes down to get involved and confront it. And God wants to build a collective of image-bearers to care about it and get involved and confront it, too.

Not that this story is about me, but this vision of Biblical justice is deeply impactful for me. After our group came back from Africa, I felt like I was an engineer in that room in Houston. We all did. I'm not good at a lot of things, like strategic planning or finance, but I took what I have – a speaking ability and a love for teenagers – and began speaking at other churches, explaining the dire need that I had seen. I even spoke in a few high schools. At one school, the student leadership class was so inspired, they took it on themselves to raise money. The theater department put on a special dance performance, focusing the night on raising money for clean drinking water and irrigation wells. They raised nearly \$11,000 to drill wells! I also realized that we needed to be "good at being good." This meant being more efficient. It was better to send over strategic partners to develop relationships with the local ministry partners in the field than spend a ton of resources taking 20 people. This wasn't tourism.

We realized that empowering local leaders, like Negesso, was critical. At one point, because he was travelling around the entire Rift Valley, we bought him a dirt bike. It was a few thousand dollars, but it made him a thousand times more efficient and effective. We raised money as a church for more wells. And at one point, the following year, I got to go back to Zwai and see the well gushing out clean drinking water for the village. For Genet. For her family. For her neighbors. No more did the

women have to walk two miles to dirty pools of water, often contaminated by dead animals and run-off. This was a game-changer.

We funded a well for a local school run by the church so the kids could have water. Around Christmas, the youth group rallied and donated their own money to buy the school a pregnant cow. That's right. A pregnant cow. This allowed one cow to be kept for milk to give the students, and the other to be used to produce more baby cows. Then Negesso told us the school needed more teachers. When we asked the cost, he told us it would be about \$600 per year. We hired five. For five years. On the spot. Young kids like Genet, now freed from the burden of water collection, were able to go to school. Negesso took some of the men in the village on a trip to another region to train them in agricultural practices. They learned from professional African farmers about crop rotation, which crops to plant near each other for natural pest control, and best irrigation practices. They bought drought-resistant seed – better seed that would result in better crops – which of course would produce more drought-resistant seeds for the next crop. And the next. And the next.

Unlike the concreteness of the Apollo 13 mission, looking back on it, I don't know if our team was successful. I don't even know what that means. The work certainly didn't stop. Sometimes, I think about Zwai, and how it is only a village of roughly 40,000 people. Ethiopia has 112 million people. That's .0358 percent of the population of Ethiopia. But I know our church – and our ragtag team both here in the US and on the ground in Zwai – really did try. We fought. We sought justice. We went after it.

Seek. Justice.

It's fascinating to me, later in the Bible, the prophet Ezekiel outlines part of what Sodom's great sin was. And wouldn't you know it, part of their sin is the violation of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*. The prophet writes:

#### EZEKIEL 16

<sup>49</sup> “ Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. <sup>50</sup> They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.



Loving God means we seek justice. We stay alert, on the lookout, attempt to find it - and then achieve justice. Both in our own lives and corporately.

We live right, do what's right and help set things right.

As the prophet Ezekiel said to the people of Israel:

**EZEKIEL 18**

<sup>31</sup> Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit.

Stop doing what's wrong.

Do what's right.

Follow God.

Get a new heart and a new spirit.

Beautiful, right?

There's just one problem.

On our own, we can't do it.

We need help.

And that leads us to the next part of the tragic story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

# 3

## KEY LESSON

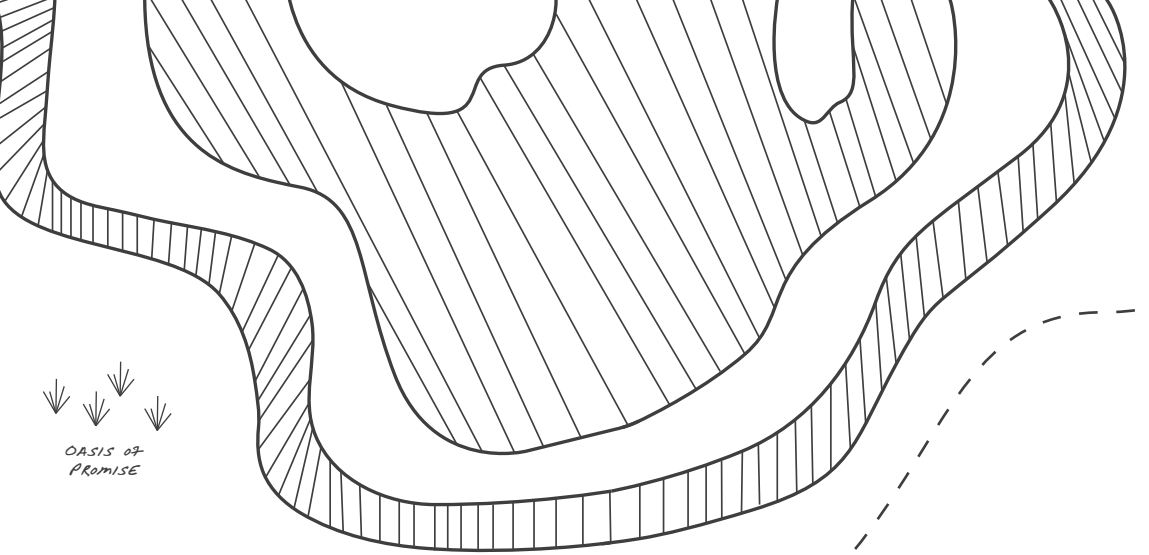
Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means we **SEEK JUSTICE**.

- We live right.
- We do what's right.
- We help set things right.

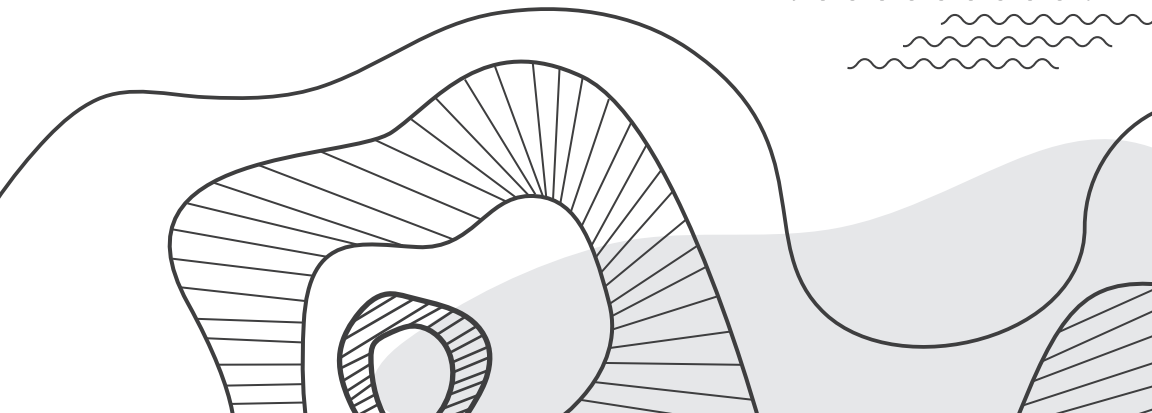
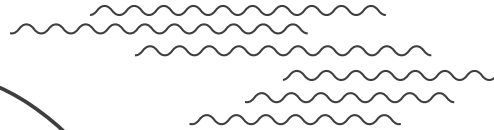
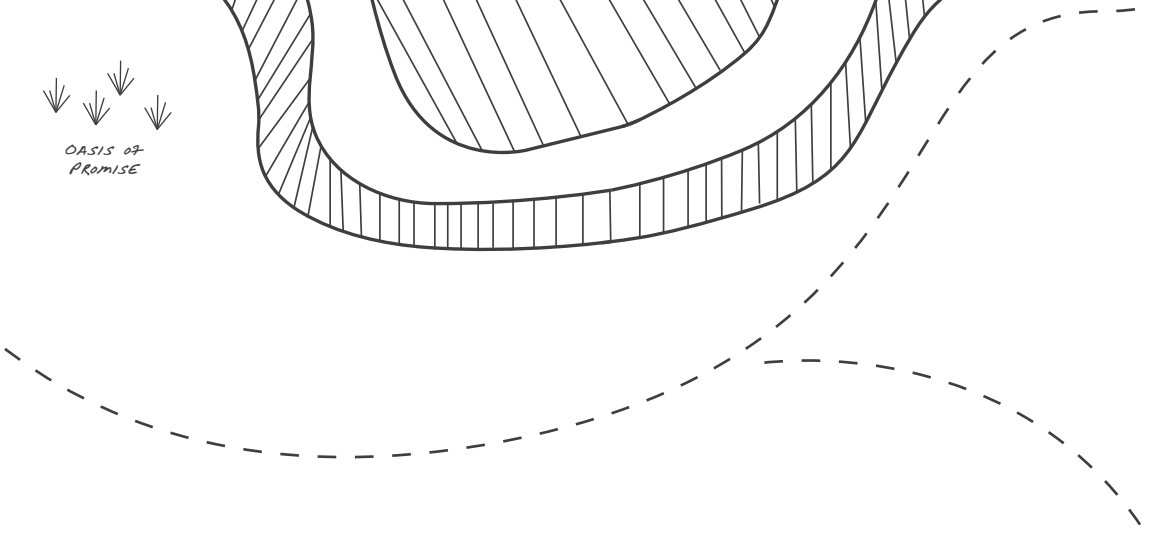
## CHAPTER 06 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What impacted you the most about this chapter? What questions did the chapter bring up for you? What was the most helpful part of the chapter?
2. Have you ever gone on a “mission trip” to a foreign country or another area? Where did you visit? Who did you partner with (a local church, an international organization, other)? What impact did it have on you? What did you learn?
3. Suffering and injustice can happen at the individual level and at the level of society, institutions, or systems. When have you experienced or witnessed injustice at either of these levels? How did it make you feel?
4. Was there anything surprising or new to you about the definitions of the terms “justice” and “righteousness?” How does their combination as *hendiadys* add depth to their meaning?
5. Read this quote by Christopher Wright: “*The community God seeks for the sake of His mission is to be a community shaped by His own ethical character, with specific attention to righteousness and justice in a world filled with oppression and injustice. Only such a Community can be a blessing to the nations.*” What are your thoughts about this quote? What implications does this have for Christians in our world?

6. The key lesson of this chapter is to seek justice and to live right, do right and set things right. In thinking about this definition, what comes to your mind about what this means in your life?
  
7. Read Deuteronomy 27:19 and Psalms 82:3, 68:5-6, 113:7-9. All people require justice, but the “Quartet of the Vulnerable” need it most. Have you heard of this term before? How does this term open your eyes to see those who are oppressed, whether in your own city or abroad?
  
8. Right now, what do you think it means for you to be a person who “seeks justice?” What is the next right step for you?
  
9. Read Psalm 37. How does it begin? How does it end? What does it tell us about the character of God? (Notice Psalm 37:28 in particular: read it in different translations or see Isaiah 61:8 as well.) We learned in this chapter that “loving God means learning how to act as He would.” What might Psalm 37 be saying to you today?



OASIS of  
PROMISE



# CHAPTER 7

# THE CITY

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IN WHICH WE EXAMINE THE COMPLEX AND TRAGIC STORY OF  
SODOM AND GOMORRAH TO DEEPEN OUR UNDERSTANDING  
ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO “LOVE GOD.”

## KEY LESSON

3

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means we **SEEK JUSTICE**.

- We live right.
- We do what's right.
- We help set things right.

## NICE TO MEET YOU. I HOPE YOU DROWN!

Last December, my good friend James' mother unexpectedly died. She had extreme pain in the middle of the night, the doctors discovered she had some internal bleeding, and the surgeons fixed it – but the physical trauma was too much. She died less than 12 hours later. I flew out to be with James and his family, who have been family friends of ours for almost two decades now.

After the funeral, there was a reception at his house, and the family had some food catered by a local Mexican restaurant. James's house was packed with folks offering condolences and coming by to pay their respects. And because James is a local pastor, many of the folks were Christian. Really awesome people.

Well, almost all of them.

Except for this one gaggle of women.

I ran into this small group of three ladies in the kitchen, in line around the buffet chafing dishes filled with enchiladas, street tacos and tamales. It all started off pleasantly enough.

“How do you know James?” one of the women asked me politely.

“Oh, wow, we've been friends for 20 years,” I said. “My wife and I met him before we were even married.”

“Oh, that's great,” one of the women said, helping herself to some beans. “Are you from around this area?”

“No, actually, I flew in yesterday, you know, to be here.”

“That's wonderful,” another woman said, “Where do you live now?”

“In San Jose, California,” I said.

AND...that's when the bomb went off.

“Ugh, oh no, California,” the leader of the pack said. She said this in the same tone you’d use if you found a nest of cockroaches at the bottom of your burrito bowl. You are going to think I’m being hyperbolic in this description, but these women all took a step back, as though I just announced that I was about to vomit. This woman’s whole countenance contorted into anger and disgust. It was as though she and California had dated for a few years, but then she discovered California was cheating on her. **WITH HER BEST FRIEND.**

“Nothing but liberals,” she said, aggressively dunking her chips into the green salsa. “I don’t know how you can stand it. I know I couldn’t.”

“Well, I mean,” I said.

Another woman chimed in, “Do you know they have a militant gay agenda in the schools?”

“I went to a business convention there once, and I got off the plane, and you could almost feel the perversion,” the first woman said.

“*Feel the Perversion* was actually the name of my punk rock band in college,” I thought about saying. But I didn’t.

I began to wonder if I was even needed for this conversation.

“I hope there’s an earthquake and the whole state drops off into the ocean!” the woman said. “Good riddance.” She and the other ladies grabbed some more chips, turned and walked away.

And that was the end of that.

“Nice to meet you, too!” I said after them, cheerily.

“Charming,” James’ father said, under his breath as he stood next to me.



## LITERALLY NO REASON

A while ago, my friend Liz was down in Southern California. She is an ambassador for Compassion International, and was speaking at a large church, and afterwards a man and his wife came up to her who recognized her.

“You are from WestGate Church, aren’t you?” the man said, brightly and cheerily.

“Yes, yes I am,” Liz said.

“We used to go to WestGate!” the woman said.

“Oh, that’s so great,” Liz responded.

“Yeah, we moved down here about, gosh, it’s probably been 2 years now,” the man said.

“How is the adjustment going?” Liz asked (being the polite conversationalist she is).

“Oh, it’s amazing,” the woman gushed. “The schools here are amazing! You can get two, three times the house for the price. There aren’t homeless people everywhere. It’s so much more conservative, everyone goes to church, everyone here shares our values. It’s just so refreshing, you know?”

“Oh!” Liz said.

“You should move down here,” the man said. “There is literally no reason to stay in San Jose. Literally no reason.”

## IN THESE DIVIDED UNITED STATES

Look, I get the tension. Living around people who believe things that are **VERY** different than you is challenging – especially if those people behave in ways that violate your own most deeply held beliefs. One of the very first letters that Paul wrote was the book of 1 Thessalonians, and even in that book Paul mentions that the surrounding culture didn’t like the early Christians in Thessalonica much. This isn’t new. It’s a tension that’s caused by holding deeply personal religious

convictions **AND ALSO** living in the middle of a culture filled with people who do not share your basic religious beliefs or your views about reality.

Heck, for some people, it's not about their culture. People in their *own family* of origin don't share their most deeply held beliefs. And if our default setting as humans is tribal – to identify who our people are – then it's only natural we want to cloister off with just those people who are like us.

But is that the correct response? I think the story of Abraham shows us a different path.

## THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM

Genesis 18 contains a record of Abraham's third face-to-face conversation with God. This one is different than the other two. But before we get into that, let's recap the story briefly:

- God and two angels have shown up at Abraham's camp in Mamre, appearing as men.
- Abraham offers them water, shade and a meal, revealing a humble heart of service and loyalty to God.
- God is about to leave, but He pauses, deciding to reveal to Abraham His plans.
- These plans are related to *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*.
- God shares them because Abraham is, like God, a person of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*.
- God affirms that Abraham's life of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* are a part of the "way of the LORD" and that part of Abraham's mission is to teach his descendants this.
- God affirms that Abraham is going to be a blessing to the nations, and part of that Mission is to have the ethical character of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*.
- Then God reveals why He's on the move.

- God tells Abraham that He is going to the city of Sodom, because a great outcry of injustice from the people there has reached His ears.
- The city is violating, in profound and tragic ways, *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*.
- God is investigating whether it's true.
- God turns to go, and Abraham speaks up.

This is a tense moment.

Because we are astute readers, we know what happens when God finds a people group over-run by wickedness. We saw that play out in the story of Noah in Genesis 6. We know that God confronts this kind of evil head-on, refusing to let the infection of wickedness spread outward any further. God, because He is a God of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* – brings judgment. Which in the case of Noah we now know is destruction. **Total** destruction. In the words of Mike Ehrmantraut, “No half measures.”

What happens next is Abraham's third conversation with God. It's long, but I want us to pay attention to the whole thing, because it's exceptional.

#### GENESIS 18

<sup>22</sup> The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. <sup>23</sup> Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup> What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? <sup>25</sup> Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

<sup>26</sup> The LORD said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

<sup>27</sup> Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, <sup>28</sup> what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?”

“If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.”

<sup>29</sup> Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?”

He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.”

<sup>30</sup> Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?”

He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”

<sup>31</sup> Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?”

He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”

<sup>32</sup> Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?”

He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

<sup>33</sup> When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

Some things worth paying attention to here.

### **THE FOCUS OF THIS THIRD CONVERSATION IS ENTIRELY DIFFERENT**

The first two times Abraham speaks directly to God, the topic of conversation is himself and his own future. Genesis 15:2 + 15:8 and Genesis 17:17 are intentional inquiries about his own future (and attempts to get some clarification). “How will I have a child?” and “How will I know?” and “How can I be a father at this old age?” All very reasonable questions. We all need some clarification from Google Maps to make sure we’re on the right path. But the third time Abraham talks to God, it’s something else entirely. Abraham is stepping into God’s business. And his concern is not himself, or his own future: his focus is on the lives of an entire city of people.

### **ABRAHAM APPROACHES GOD VERY CAREFULLY. BUT HE APPROACHES HIM.**

In verse 23, the text says that Abraham “approached” God. Commentators point out that the term “approached” has a legal connotation to it – as if Abraham is making a formal appeal to a judge. Which of course he is. There’s no doubt in this story that God is the Judge here. Even though God is obviously omniscient, it seems to me that the reason He shows up in human form is to demonstrate (to us, the reader, and to Abraham and Sodom) that He’s there personally to collect real evidence for a verdict so that real justice will be done.

Abraham is clearly aware of this. Take note of the humility of his appeal. Twice, he recognizes that it is bold to even speak to God (v27, v31). Abraham hyperlinks back to Genesis 1, calling himself nothing but “dust and ashes” – Abraham is telling God that he knows where he comes from and to Whom he owes his very life. Twice, he says “May the Lord not be angry” (v30, v32) before requesting to speak, a way of Abraham telling God that he recognizes that even approaching God this way is behavior worthy of incurring His anger. This is a very self-aware way of showing God that Abraham knows his place, and God’s. This is a masterclass in approaching someone powerful. Abraham is respectful, humble and shows deference and honor – but he’s there to make an appeal. Abraham wants something.

### **THE FIRST ISSUE AT HAND IS JUSTICE.**

As humans, you and I learn from a young age – usually around junior high – that the purpose of group projects is to not only teach collaborative learning but also test the very limits of justice and human accountability. There’s always some lazy freeloader who gets up to present and clearly hasn’t done the work.<sup>1</sup> There’s always someone who has done demonstrably more work than everyone else. And yet, everyone gets the same grade. And the number one complaint that cries out from students after a group project: it’s not fair!

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1 One of my favorite Calvin and Hobbes comic strips is when he’s presenting in front of the class on the topic of bats, saying “Dusk! With a creepy, tingling sensation, you hear the fluttering of leathery wings! Bats! With glowing red eyes and glistening fangs, these unspeakable giant bugs drop onto..” and the class interrupts and screams in unison “Bats aren’t bugs.” To which Calvin says, “Look! Who’s giving this report? You chowderheads, or me?” Man, Calvin and Hobbes is THE BEST.

In essence, Abraham is arguing this same line of logic to God. Giving everyone in Sodom the same “failing” grade when there are surely some who “did the work” would make God as capricious and unreliable as any other ancient god. There’s an ancient poem from Mesopotamia called the *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* that’s dated around 1500 BC, which presents the complaint of a devout man whose world has crashed about him, despite his meticulous attention to the demands of his gods. This man says the gods aren’t fair: “What is good in one’s sight is evil for a god. / What is bad in one’s own mind is good for his god. / Who can understand the counsel of the gods in the midst of heaven? / The plan of a god is deep waters, who can comprehend it? / Where has befuddled mankind ever learned what a god’s conduct is?”<sup>2</sup>

Abraham **IS NOT** saying this. Abraham isn’t saying “Who can possibly know the nature of God?” He’s saying, “I know, because you told me and you’ve shown it – that justice is a high value for you. It’s part of your character. You can’t violate that now.” Abraham assumes (for all the mystery of this God) that He has a defined nature that is reliable so humankind can at least try to make sense of life. Abraham appeals to God’s established virtues of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*, protesting, “Will not the Judge of all earth do *mishpat*?”

Perhaps Abraham is thinking of his nephew Lot, and his family. Perhaps there are others Abraham knows who do what is right. Regardless, Abraham, appealing to God’s character, points out that it would be a violation of justice for God to destroy those who are righteous along with the wicked.

## **ABRAHAM ARGUES STRENUOUSLY WITH GOD – AND WE’RE LEFT TO WONDER WHY.**

From a narrative perspective, the “Rule of Threes” applies here, and no, that does not have something to do with Steph Curry. The “Rule of Threes” states that when an author wants to get a point across in a story, they include the detail three times. As a child, the stories we’re told use this rule. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Jokes use the rule of three structure, “A rabbi, a priest and Britney Spears walk into a bar.” Famous orators use this principle: Abraham Lincoln in the iconic *Gettysburg Address* uses it throughout, ending with the unforgettable phrase that “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall

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2 James B. Pritchard (editor), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Fifth ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 435.

not perish from the earth.” The Biblical writers use the rule, too. Peter denies Jesus three times. In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus outlines three people who encounter the man who’s been robbed. Heck, God Himself is a rule of Three.

If the author of this story wanted to make the point that Abraham is lobbying God, we should watch him address God three times. But that’s not what happens. The author **DOUBLES** this number. It’s almost silly. The author isn’t driving home this point: he’s driving it home **TWICE**.<sup>3</sup> But why?

This goes beyond justice. Yes, Abraham first appeals to God’s sense of justice. But justice would be “let me go down and rescue the righteous people like my nephew Lot and then you can rain fire from heaven down.” That is straight-forward enough. What’s a bit more complicated is Abraham’s request that an entire city be spared from judgement because of a few dozen people who practice *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*. Here, Abraham is appealing not only to God’s justice, but also to his *mercy*.

*Delay the judgment, God.*

*Yes, it’s deserved. But hold off.*

*Your white-hot anger is warranted, Oh God, but perhaps you could turn it down? Just for a bit?*

Abraham is asking God to delay his righteous acts of judgment. To turn down the temperature of His white-hot, fully justified anger. And if God were to ask Abraham (in the words of Lil Jon) “turn down for what?” Abraham’s response would be “because of Your great mercy.” I am so sorry. Those last sentences slipped past the editors. Please keep reading. I won’t do that again.

## THIS MOMENT SHOWS ABRAHAM’S CONCERN

This encounter between Abraham and God is remarkable, for several reasons. Throughout the Bible, other leaders and prophets like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah

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<sup>3</sup> The author is using this rhetorical device like WWF Wrestler Hacksaw Jim Duggan used his two-by-four and is just hitting us over the head with it. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Ho!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (Gerry hates violence, but I think this might be okay because wrestling is fake).

and Moses all pray for cities and nations, but they're almost always for Israel or the Hebrew people. What's unique about Abraham's prayer is not only that it is a prayer for a non-Hebrew community, but that it is for a non-Hebrew community that's committing grave injustices.

*Despite their clear wickedness, it seems clear that Abraham doesn't want to see the people of Sodom die and be lost forever.*

Abraham has already been told by God that He's going to be a blessing to all the people of the world (Genesis 12:3), and he's already acting like it. He feels a kinship to these people, who are not his people. He feels concern for this city, which is not his city. This is a progression. In the story of Noah, we saw a great wickedness, but Noah closed the door of his ark. The text gives us no reason to believe he was anything save indifferent to the plight of his fellow human beings. But Abraham is different.

I love this detail in verse 22 which says, "the men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD." It's a narrative hitch in the story, almost as if Abraham is hesitating, along with God. Abraham is conflicted because he has a choice: do I just let this happen? Is it possible for me to plead the case of Sodom? Or should I just walk away?

Sociologists tell us that the default setting of humanity is tribalism. We're driven by it. We want to know what group we're in, what group we belong to, and what the internal and external markers are for our tribe. Abraham, though, is showing us a new model. A *tselem* of God who is not tribal but simply...human. He is a priest, of sorts, representing all nations, tribes, people and language to God, and representing God to all nations, tribes, people and language. And maybe this all makes sense: if Abraham is to be a blessing to all peoples, that's tough to do if one group is going to be destroyed by God before Abraham even has a chance to get down there.

As the ancient Jewish Talmud says, "Whoever is merciful to his fellow beings is without doubt of the children of our father Abraham; whoever is unmerciful to



his fellow beings certainly cannot be of the children of Abraham our father.”<sup>4</sup>  
Abraham is showing this right here.

## WAIT. IS ABRAHAM TRYING TO CHANGE GOD’S HEART AND MIND – OR REFLECT IT?

At first glance, it really appears as though God is about to smite some fools – and Abraham steps in and stops Him – as though Abraham is “bargaining” with God for the lives of the people of Sodom. But if you carefully read the text, you’ll see that Abraham is not “haggling” or “bargaining” as some people mistakenly think.<sup>5</sup> This is not a back-and-forth. God does not counter-offer. He simply keeps saying, “Yes.” And God does this six times in a row. God “lowers the price” to whatever Abraham asks over and over and over again, to the point where you wonder why Abraham stopped. If this is haggling, God is absolutely *terrible* at haggling and should not be trusted to run a booth at a flea market, let alone the Universe.

Something else is going on here. Keep in mind, this episode with Abraham is very early on in the story of the Bible. We, like Abraham, are still learning about the character of God. These verses are in the first third of the very first book of the 66 books that comprise the Bible<sup>6</sup>. Later in the Bible, we find other clear instances of God confronting evil head on. But we also learn that the best way to destroy evil is to have someone repent and turn from their ways. Time after time, God sends messengers (prophets) to places that are behaving badly, urging them (even threatening them) to repent. Check out these verses that show God’s heart.

### 2 PETER 3

<sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

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- 4 *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2005). Passage found in Beitzah, Chapter 4, 32b. Another translation of this text can be found for free online at: <https://www.sefaria.org/Beitzah.32b?lang=bi>
  - 5 Haggling is when I say, “I will give you \$35 for this classic vinyl record of the Fugees 1996 smash hit album *The Score*” and then you say, “No way! It’s worth \$100. But I’ll take \$75.” And then I say, “How about \$50.” And you say, “Man, you’re killing me softly with this. How about \$65.” And I say “Deal” and I go home with Lauryn, Pras and Wyclef. That’s haggling.
  - 6 It’s like when you meet Hermione in the *Sorcerer’s Stone* – you don’t fully know how awesome Hermione is going to be yet. Okay, it’s not like that. But it’s *sort of a little bit* like that.

## 1 TIMOTHY 2

<sup>1</sup>I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—<sup>2</sup>for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. <sup>3</sup>This is good, and pleases God our Savior, <sup>4</sup>who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

## EZEKIEL 33

<sup>1</sup>I Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?’

## EXODUS 34

<sup>5</sup>Then the LORD... passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup>maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Here’s what’s strange: the passages listed above clearly show the call to repentance, which is a **MAJOR** and indispensable theme of the prophets. The prophets harp on this idea incessantly, openly lamenting that the people just don’t get it, calling them “blind” and “deaf” and “hard of heart.” In fact, the doctrine of repentance is so central to Jesus that His first public sermon starts with “Repent.”<sup>7</sup>

But this great theme is not to be found in the stories of Noah or Sodom. Why is this? Perhaps it’s because before a message can be sent to a people, there must be a messenger. Someone must go. Sure, God could do it. Or He could send an angel. But this is also a chance for God to reveal to Abraham that part of being God’s *tselem* is having a heart that **WANTS** people to not perish, because that’s also the heart of God Himself. Sure, a prophet can speak words, but it’s the prophet’s heart that also matters. He’s a representative of God, so His heart needs to care like God’s heart cares.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 4:12-17

<sup>8</sup> The story of Jonah comes to mind here. One of the major lessons of that story is that the prophet Jonah’s heart looks nothing like God’s.

## FAST FORWARD TO JESUS

To drive home this point – that God not only Himself cares about the world, but also wants His image bearers (His *tselem*) to do this as well – I want to turn to one of the most famous teachings of Jesus – and one of the most famous stories in the entire Bible. In Luke 10, we see a man approach Jesus and ask Him a question:

### LUKE 10

<sup>25</sup> On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

<sup>27</sup> He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;’ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” <sup>28</sup> “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

In this moment, Jesus affirms the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and also reaffirms His earlier teaching (Matthew 22:34-40) that linked loving God with loving your neighbor. But the man who asked the question asks another clarification question:

### LUKE 10

<sup>29</sup> But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

This is a valid question. The ancient world was filled with various forms of tribalism. In a world filled with rising and falling empires and conquered people groups, there were confusing lines between people groups, filled with different subsets of national histories, cultural practices and religious identities. The man was asking an important question: Who should I love? Who is my neighbor?

Jesus’ famous response – brilliantly told in the form of a parable – turns the question entirely upside-down. And this is when the world gets the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells the story of a Jewish man, robbed on the road to Jericho, beaten and left for dead. The first two men, devout in their devotion to God, pass him by. But the third, a Samaritan man, picks up the man, tends to his wounds, and

takes him to an inn for care – at personal expense to himself.<sup>9</sup> Jesus ends the story with a direct question:

#### LUKE 10

<sup>36</sup> “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” <sup>37</sup> The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”  
Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Jesus directly challenges the private piety of the Jewish leaders, and links loving God with loving your neighbor, but he also challenges the notion of who is worthy of such love. In this story, the Samaritan man extended mercy to a stranger who was different from him in ethnicity, religion and moral code. And yet the implication is that this Samaritan has practiced *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* and is a closer representation to the *tselem* of God specifically because he does this. Because that’s how a *tselem* of God acts in this world.

Old Testament scholar Carmen Imes puts it this way, “In the covenant community, every part of life is an expression of worship and loyalty to the God who has committed himself to these people. How they treat others reveals their heart toward God.”<sup>10</sup>

***How we treat others reveals our heart toward God.*** In fact, the two negative examples in the story provided by Jesus of the “good religious” people who pass by the man on the road show, in the words of Tom Davis, “When it comes to caring for the people on God’s heart, indifference is a sin.”<sup>11</sup> I find it fascinating that this story from Jesus resonates so strongly, that even today, in many cities there is a hospital named Good Samaritan.

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9 The hero in the story is a Samaritan, which means little to us today, but much to first century Jewish people. Samaria was the capital city of the ten Northern Tribes of Israel, who had been conquered in 722 BC by Assyria as a punishment handed down by the Lord for their idol worship and steadfast refusal to obey Him. Assyria – who was a particularly brutal captor – also forced the conquered people to intermarry. Samaritans were despised and persecuted by Jewish people in the time of Jesus for both their religion (which was seen as idolatrous and despised by God) and their racial identity (they were biracial). Despite this context, Jesus makes the Samaritan the hero of the story. Which is just awesome on so many different levels.

10 Carmen Imes, *Bearing God’s Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 42.

11 Tom Davis, *Fields of the Fatherless*, Quoted by Scot McKnight, *One Life: Jesus Calls, We Follow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 62.

In his famous *I've Been to the Mountaintop* speech, delivered on the night before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr. preached on this text, and put it like this.

*And so the first question that the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?''<sup>12</sup>*

To be a blessing to the nations, you must want to help the nations. You must see their destiny as tied to yours. You must want to go. And it's clear in this story: Abraham's focus is not merely on himself, but on trying to help and preserve the people of Sodom. Even if they didn't deserve it. Why?

Because that's what a *tselem* does.<sup>13</sup> But there's one more implication to this encounter.

## THIS MOMENT SHOWS THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF A DEVOTED FEW

Abraham keeps lowering the number of righteous people in his talks with God. "What about 50 people? Will that save the city? What about 45? 30? 20?"

Underneath all this is a powerful thought. As Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna wrote, this "assumes that the merit of a minority is powerful enough to overcome the wickedness of the majority."<sup>14</sup> Can a few people, devoted to God and practicing *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* truly overcome evil? Can they keep the chaos at bay?

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12 Martin Luther King, Jr., *I've Been to the Mountaintop*, April 3, 1968 <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>

13 Later on in the story of the Bible, another man would stand on a hill, looking over a different city bound for destruction, and this man would weep. He then uses a powerful image of a mother hen spreads her wings over her chicks, as a raging fire engulfs them all, thereby sacrificing herself, but saving them. This is the heart of the one overlooking Jerusalem. This is the heart of Jesus. (Luke 13).

14 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: JPS Jewish Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 133.

I am reminded later in the Bible, when Jesus tells His followers that they are “the salt of the earth”<sup>15</sup> and then telling them they are the “light of the world”<sup>16</sup> using the example of a lamp, shining on a stand. I wonder if these metaphors used by Jesus are a key to understanding something. For example, salt is a potent substance. You don’t need very much to either flavor or preserve meat. It is not a 50/50 beef-to-salt ratio. It’s a tiny amount. Likewise, a lamp is small, but it can illuminate an entire room and drive back considerable darkness.

Elsewhere, Jesus says that the work of God here on planet Earth is “like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”<sup>17</sup> I did the research. You need about three packages of yeast (2.25 teaspoons) per every 5 pounds (17.5 cups) of flour, so for 60 pounds of flour (210 cups) that’s a little over ½ of a cup of yeast. That comes out to a 1/373 ratio by weight of yeast to flour.

Or, put another way, “A little bit makes a **BIG** difference.” I’m not implying Jesus meant for that ratio to be used literally, but I told my wife this, and she did the math. We live in a county with 2 million people in it. And using the yeast/flour ratio, that means that a group of 5,362 truly devoted Christians actively living out their faith and practicing *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* in this city could **REALLY** change things. Just a few people can make a big difference.

## A CONVICTING DEFINITION

As I was studying the life of Abraham, and these beautiful Hebrew terms *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*, Gerry introduced us to a quote by an eminent Old Testament scholar named Bruce Waltke in his commentary on the Book of Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs is concerned about wisdom – the way of the LORD – which is, the right way to live versus the wrong way to live. Throughout this book of ancient wisdom, the author often juxtaposes “the righteous” comparing them to “the wicked.” Here is how Waltke summarizes those juxtapositions:

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15 Matthew 5:13

16 Matthew 5:14

17 Matthew 13:33

**RIGHTEOUS VS. WICKED**

*The righteous are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.*<sup>18</sup>

That quote hit me. That's worth thinking about. That's worth living out.

As we close this story, I am inspired by the way that Abraham steps up, and his heart to plead for the city of Sodom. And even though it probably deserves to be hit by an earthquake and fall into the ocean, that's not what Abraham wants. He wants the city – and all those inside it – to not perish. To find life. To find God.

I think about that woman in Southern California saying to Liz, “There's not one single good reason to live in San Jose.”

She's right.

There's about 2 million of them.

**THE TRAGIC FINALE OF THE STORY**

Abraham pleads with God and gets the number down to 10 people. If there are even just 10 people inside the city limits who practice *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* – the city will be spared and maybe that group could turn things around. Perhaps Abraham was thinking about his nephew Lot and his family. Surely, with Lot's faithful influence, there would be at least 10 people in Sodom who practiced *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*.

But Abraham is wrong. The situation is far worse than we could have imagined. The angels go to the city for a full investigation. They are assaulted by the people of Sodom. There is a shocking juxtaposition between the hospitality that Abraham showed the angels, and the way they are treated in Sodom. Evil abounds. The text says “from the young to the old” surround Lot's home, wanting to sexually assault

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18 Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 97.

these visitors.<sup>19</sup> There is not one righteous individual here. Not a single decent individual can be found. The angels are clear: the verdict is in. God has seen all He needs to see. His judgment will fall on this completely morally bankrupt Canaanite city. God's judgment against this outcry – this horrific violation of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* – will be total. It will be swift.

But there is another tragedy, hidden in the story. The evil and corruption of Sodom is so great, it's even corrupted Lot. He is an upright citizen (elders sat at the city gates) and like Abraham, bows and offers hospitality to the angels.<sup>20</sup> Lot knew what was right, and what was wrong. But he's drifted slowly away into corruption. He's grown wealthy in Sodom, and the wealth and comfort pulled his allegiance away from God. He makes a shocking offer of his daughters to the violent men, saying "Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them."<sup>21</sup> His words of warning about God's judgment aren't taken seriously by his family. The text says Lot "hesitates" leaving Sodom. Lot is so attached, he must be physically dragged out of the city by the angels. His wife was so attached to the city, that she turned back to look, forfeiting her life. Ultimately, if God had not destroyed Sodom, Sodom would have slowly destroyed Lot. It's a warning about the deadly seduction of sin.

In a poignant moment in the story, the next morning, Abraham goes to the same spot overlooking the plains where he had pleaded with God for the sake of the city of Sodom. He looks down in horror and sadness to see that it is too late.

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19 This story is really confusing to me, but a few commentaries proposed something that helped make sense of this. They said that the horrific act of rape of a visitor to a town would be such a staggering violation of the ancient custom of hospitality, that news would naturally spread throughout the region, dissuading visitors and settlers from entering the area. This would allow, the commentators hypothesized, the locals to keep their resources to themselves. So it's not a debased sexual appetite alone that's driving this wicked behavior: it's also greed. Regardless, it's taking as opposed to blessing (which is what Abraham does).

20 Genesis 19:1-2 The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. "My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning."

21 Later in the Bible, in 2 Peter 2:7-8, Peter says, that God "rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)."



<sup>27</sup> Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. <sup>28</sup> He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.

The town is engulfed.

There is no turning things around.

There is no repentance.

*Tzedeqah* and *mishpat* lost.

Evil wins.

The narrative has us standing above the city of Sodom, staring at it burn with Abraham. He is the hope of blessing for all nations, the one entrusted and enlisted to teach his household the ways of *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*. Abraham stands alone on top of the plain, alone on the high place. And in a few chapters, he will commit an egregious act that violates *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* by mistreating Hagar and his son.

And the other righteous man in this story, his nephew Lot, is worse. With their city gone, and their chances of having children uncertain, Lot's daughters do not trust God. Instead, they take their father into a cave, get him drunk, and have sex with him, hoping they will get pregnant. The grave sexual sin illustrated in Sodom plays out again, in an equally horrifying way.

Sodom is destroyed, but evil is not.

The whole story is so depressing and hopeless. This is not what I want. This is not a good story.

The destruction of Sodom reminds me that there is a limit to human endeavors. We cannot create good in the world as much as we want. As much as we need to.

If we are honest, you and I are sometimes like Lot, enticed and corrupted by the comfortable and lavish ways of a decadent society, outwardly talking about its sin but looking back, longingly at it and craving the comforts that it gives us.

Sometimes, you and I are like Abraham, just and right in one moment, brimming with goodness. But then double-minded the next, betraying what we just proclaimed were our deepest heart's values, proving we're nothing more than wildly inconsistent and hypocritical.

And sometimes, at our worst, you and I are like the people of Sodom, wishing and doing harm on others, so that we might keep the spoils of wealth to ourselves. We are inward, refusing to share or care about outsiders. We secretly want California to drop into the sea.

Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn wrote about the deeply disturbing duality of humanity in his novel *Gulag Archipelago*, which deals with the brutality of forced labor camps that existed in the Soviet Union under Stalin. In it, he writes:

*If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?*<sup>22</sup>

The prophet Ezekiel, reflecting on the failure of the Israelites to practice *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* put it this way.

#### EZEKIEL 16

<sup>49</sup> “ Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. <sup>50</sup> They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.

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22 Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 168. Quoted by Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 142.

## EZEKIEL 18

<sup>37</sup> Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit.

And we're left to stare at the words of God Himself, spoken to Ezekiel to deliver to a fallen, confused, broken and sinful people who cannot seem to practice *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* very well at all. A beautiful promise that is almost too painful to hear because it reveals who we really are before God in this world.

## EZEKIEL 36

<sup>22</sup> This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ...<sup>24</sup> “For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. <sup>28</sup> Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

If we ever want to be people who truly seek justice, we need help.

Left to ourselves, we cannot muster up enough moral courage to consistently practice *tzedeqah* and *mishpat*.

We need to be brought home.

We need a new heart.

We need a new spirit.

We need to be cleansed because there's so much ugliness inside of us.

We need light because we humans can't seem to generate much here.

We need a miracle.

We need God to step in.

Which brings us to our final story.

3

## KEY LESSON

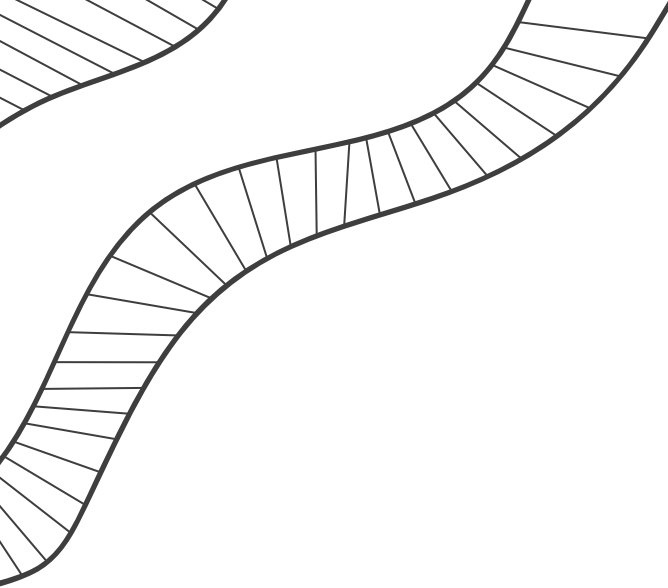
Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means we **SEEK JUSTICE**.

- We live right.
- We do what's right.
- We help set things right.

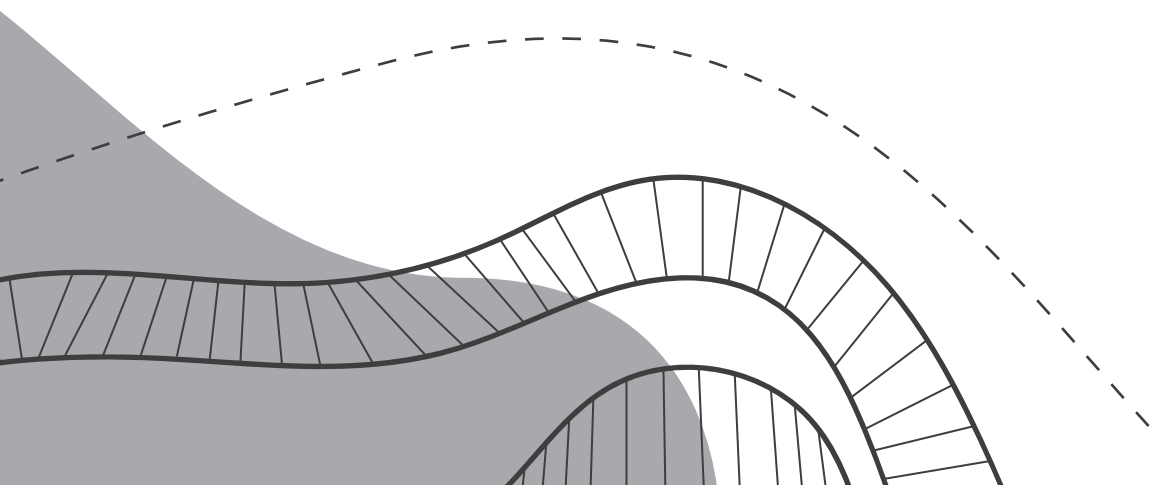
## CHAPTER 07 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What impacted you the most about this chapter? What questions did the chapter bring up for you? What was the most helpful part of the chapter?
2. Tribalism comes naturally to humans, whether with nations, politics or sports. Where have you seen destructive versions of tribalism? On the flip side, have you experienced positive rivalry, healthy competition, or appreciation of differing cultures and practices?
3. Have you ever secretly held antagonism toward someone or a group of someones who believed or behaved in a way you adamantly disagreed with? What was the situation? How does this particular story from Abraham's life challenge our interior attitudes toward others who are not following closely in the ways of God?
4. Abraham's conversation with God in Genesis 18:22-33 is long and intense. Was there anything new or surprising to you in the discussion of this back-and-forth dialogue?

5. Read this quote from Carmen Imes: "*In the covenant community, every part of life is an expression of worship and loyalty to the God who has committed himself to these people. How they treat others reveals their heart toward God.*" What are your thoughts about this quote? Do you agree with this claim that loving God and loving others are inseparable?
  
6. Abraham's back-and-forth with God suggests that just a few people, practicing justice and righteousness, can have an incredible impact. Have you ever seen a few devoted people make a big difference? Share that story.
  
7. Read Romans 7:19-21. Recall Solzhenitsyn's description that the line between good and evil runs through each person. As Paul explained, humans are a mixture, doing both good and evil. Is this easy for you to recognize in yourself? Do you resist this idea? How do we wrestle and live with the tension of this mixture?
  
8. Does it help you to see other people with more grace and compassion, knowing we are all a mixture of both good and evil? Why does it help to remember that God loves us, even on our worst day?



*PLAINS OF  
DISAPPOINTMENT*





## CHAPTER 8

# THE TEST

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IN WHICH WE EXAMINE THE CLIMACTIC STORY OF THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC TO FIND OUT WHAT IT MEANS TO “LOVE GOD” WHEN LIFE FALLS APART.

## KEY LESSON

4

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means **WE EXPECT GOD TO BE GOOD.**

- We believe God will provide.
- Especially in moments when life falls apart.



## NINA AND NATURE VALLEY GRANOLA BARS

In my second year of teaching high school, I met Nina. Nina was one of the students in my 11th grade American Literature class. She was a tiny Latino girl, 5-foot-nothing, pretty and quiet.

One morning, probably on the fourth or fifth week of class, I walked into my room, juggling my books and my papers. I put it all down on my desk when one of my colleagues peeked his head in my classroom. I went out into the hallway to chat with him, and the students started filing in. And one of those students was Nina, who came into my classroom with her friends.

After I was done chatting, I went back over to my desk where I had placed all my things, including something I had planned to eat for breakfast.

It was a Nature Valley granola bar. Plain. In the green crunchy packaging. I went over to my desk to get it and it wasn't there. And I thought to myself, "Oh no! It has fallen on the floor."

I don't like it when they fall on the floor because then the twin bars break. And I like to remove the individual bars cleanly from the package in one smooth motion, and then take that delicious plank of honey-crispness and wood chipper that thing in one fell swoop. Just num-num-num-num-num.

But the bar was not there. So I looked on the floor around my desk and the granola bar was not there either. And then I looked up. And there was Nina. Eating a Nature Valley granola bar.

Which she did not have before!

And I thought to myself, to quote the inimitable Spanish teacher Señor Chang, "Oh no, you didn't."

I approached Nina and her friends and said to the gaggle, "Hey guys, can I talk to Nina alone for a second?"

After they filed out of the classroom into the hallway, I said, calmly, "Nina. Did you take my Nature Valley granola bar?"

“No,” she said as she ate my Nature Valley granola bar.

“Nina, sweetie,” I said. “You have made a terrible mistake. Do I look like a person who does not keep track of his food? I am so good at keeping track of my food, scientists think I’m part squirrel.”

That dumb dad joke broke the ice. It turns out Nina did take my granola bar. But she had a good reason. Nina – like many of my students – had a tough home life. Her dad had abandoned the family when Nina was just three, when her younger sister was born. And as is always the case when men abandon their responsibilities, it hurt women and children, in this case, Nina’s mom, Nina and her sister. They got a one-bedroom apartment. Her mom worked hard at multiple jobs. They were hanging on by a thread.

Nina’s mom, in her own brokenness, met a guy. He was a smooth-talker, and wealthy and promised a lot of things and so, one week, Nina’s mom just up-and-left with him to go to Las Vegas, with no notice, leaving Nina and her sister alone to fend for themselves. After about three days, the food in their apartment started running out. Very little in the fridge and the cupboards. Nina didn’t know what to do. Her mom didn’t leave any money, or a credit card. So on day four, Nina went to the store and shoplifted food for her and her sister. Today was day 5, Nina came to school – without having any breakfast – and saw my Nature Valley granola bar. And that is why Nina took my granola bar. Survival. Nina was Gavroche.

I learned something important from Nina that day.

Toxic environments can warp us.

Some of you know exactly what I’m talking about. If you’re in a toxic environment long enough, it can begin to change the way you think about yourself. About what you think about reality. About the world. It can also change the way you behave.

We all know people who have been involved in horribly dysfunctional relationships – and then they get out of them and they realize, “Oh. It doesn’t **HAVE** to be that way.” Perhaps they realize, “Oh, if I tell you the truth, you’ll tell me the truth, and you won’t punish me. And we will develop this thing called trust.”

Imagine if you’ve never had that.

So I realized – along with some of my fellow teachers – that we had some work to do with Nina because after years in that environment, Nina had picked up and deeply internalized some really destructive messages about life. Namely, that adults cannot be trusted. Nina had been conditioned to believe that she was on her own. This is because the adults in her life, even the ones that she knew were the most morally and legally obligated to help her, had abandoned her. Nina, being a survivor, developed a new mindset. Something like this:

*You have to fend for yourself because no one is coming to help you. You have got to get your own. You can't rely on anyone.*

Again, toxic environments can warp us. The dramatic disappointments and pains of life are sometimes too much to take. And the trauma can seep into our bones.

So after talking with some experts about this, I realized that I had some work to do. And I had to be intentional about it. The next morning, before class, I took Nina over to one of the filing cabinets in the room, and I said to her, “Nina, tomorrow morning when you come into my class, the bottom drawer of this filing cabinet will be emptied out and inside will be a giant, big Costco-sized box of Nature Valley granola bars. They're all yours. You can come and take as many as you want in between any class, or before or after school. It's yours. I might even throw in some Pop-Tarts, okay?”

The next morning, Nina came into my class and do you know what was the first thing she did? She checked the bottom drawer of that filing cabinet. She was checking to see if I was telling the truth.

A few days later, I pulled Nina aside and I told her, “Nina, tomorrow, when you come to school, I am going to give you a card. It's from the school bank. It's going to allow you to get breakfast or lunch from the school cafeteria. And some teachers and I are going to load this card with enough money for you and your sister to have breakfast **AND** lunch every single day from now until the end of the school year. Tomorrow, before class, I will give you that card.”

And the next day, Nina came in and I gave that card to her.

A few days later, after talking with my co-workers and the administration, we realized that it would be good to try to have Nina talk to our school-site

psychologist, to further help her. I pulled Nina aside again. I said, “Nina, I don’t know what it’s like to be you right now, but I’m pretty sure it’s not always easy. And sometimes, Nina, I’ve found that it’s helpful to have someone you trust that you can talk to. And Miss Rachel, our counselor, is good. She’s safe. She knows you. She is for you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not talking to anyone,” she said, walling off coldly. “I know this. You’ll call CPS, they’ll take me and my sister out, and my life will be worse than it was before. No.”

“Okay, okay. How about this?” I said. “I’m going to put a post-it on your desk, every single Monday and Wednesday and Friday. And at some point, I’m going to walk around the classroom, and I’d like you to write a number on that post-it. That number represents how well you’re doing. If it’s 8-9-10, I know you’re fine. If it’s 5-6-7, then I know things are just okay. But if it gets lower than that, I know you’re having a tough time. And you have full permission to just leave my class and go to the counseling office. You don’t even have to talk to Miss Rachel. Just hang out there. Clear your head. Get some space. It lets me know there’s something going on that’s bigger than school. Okay?”

The next day was Wednesday, and I put a post-it on her desk. I did this every Monday and Wednesday and Friday, and she typically wrote numbers in the 5-8 range. One day, she looked at me, and I saw she’d written a 3. I nodded. She got her stuff and left quietly, without any fanfare.

Now, on the surface, it looked like I was giving Nina some Nature Valley granola bars, or a debit-card for the school cafeteria, or post-its. But I wasn’t. Each time, I was giving Nina a chance to trust adults again.

Nina had to heal from her toxic environment, and sometimes, when we’re in those toxic environments for a while, we need to unlearn some things. And that can take a long time. Sometimes, the more time we’re in that toxic environment, the more entrenched those falsehoods become. It’s harder to unlearn them.

And here’s the thing I know for sure that Nina taught me.

You can’t unlearn those things by being told.

Imagine I had simply tried to lecture Nina. “Hey, Nina, your past trauma has resulted in deficient ideas about nurturing, resulting in a baseless and paranoid mistrust of all adults. There are adults out there who you can rely on.”

What would she have said?

Probably either “shut up” or something that rhymes with “duck goo.”

No. To ever unlearn things like that, you must be shown.

You must experience that lesson in person for yourself.<sup>1</sup>

## A STORY WE CAN INHABIT

In a way, we’re all like Nina. Only instead of mistrusting adults, we mistrust God Himself. Because the world is hard and harsh, and bad things happen – and sometimes, all the evidence seems that God has either abandoned us on this blue marble we call Earth or He just doesn’t care enough to intervene. Either we’re alone, or God’s left – either way, no one is coming for us.

C. S. Lewis insightfully wrote that “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>2</sup>

In my own experience as a pastor (now for almost two decades), nothing reaffirms and confirms this fear in the heart of people more than death. It’s also my firm conviction that the death of a loved one is the most terrible suffering one can experience, and the longer the relationship, and the closer the relationship, the more devastating. If your favorite elementary school teacher dies, that’s one thing. But your wife?

Your daughter?

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1 Quoting Dallas Willard, John Ortberg said, “The will is transformed by experience, not information.” Both inside the church and out, we tremendously overestimate the power of information to bring about transformation. Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ’s Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 56.

2 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1940; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1962), 93.

Your son?

The finality and cruelty of this loss is what sends us into tailspins. C. S. Lewis is right. The ring of the pain of death is the sharpest, and wakes all of us up. But for some it's less like a smoke alarm and more like an air raid sired. "The enemy is stalking. He is about to attack."

And some people have come to believe that the enemy – the cruel villain plotting to steal, kill and destroy – is God Himself. I've watched this on the faces of people at funerals – their countenance hardening.

*"If this is what God is like, then I want nothing to do with Him."*

For some people, the distrust of the idea of a good God goes up in vapor as they stare at the staggering totality of their pain. Like Nina, we have scars. We have a hard time trusting. Maybe we even want to believe – we really do, down deep. But we're not sure our fragile selves could take one more disappointment.

God knows all things, and He knows this, too. He is no fool. He knows what is being thought about Him.

We cannot be told things about God. Simple platitudes will not work.

Like Nina, in order to trust we need to be *shown*.

Which leads us to Genesis 22.

## THE AKEDAH

In Genesis 22, we reach the summit, both literarily and theologically, for the life of Abraham. This story is the climax of the narrative of Abraham. More than any other moment or chapter in his life, this story is the one that artists and poets will focus on most often throughout history.<sup>3</sup> This is, for better or worse, the story that will define Abraham's life. In reading books across all sorts of disciplines and viewpoints on the

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<sup>3</sup> Although theologians, like Tim Mackie and Christopher Wright, say that Genesis 12 is really "Grand Central Station" and that all the lines of Scripture run through that verse. Nevertheless, artists and poets are drawn to the staggering human emotion of this scene.

life of Abraham, there was at least one point that theologians from all three major world religions agreed upon: this moment, this episode, is the ultimate expression of religious devotion of Abraham's life. This moment is the most important. Scholars, rabbis, artists, teachers, poets, and readers have tried to make sense of this story for millennia. If the Bible were a mountain range, this story would be one of the five or six of the most important and oft-told from the entirety of Scripture.

It is also one the most confusing and the most horrifying.

Genesis 22 is such a singular story in the Bible, it has a nickname.

*hā 'Aqēdāh*

The *Akedah*.

This word is taken from the Hebrew word that appears in Genesis 22:9 – a word found nowhere else in the Bible in this form - *ya'akod*.

#### GENESIS 22

<sup>9</sup> He bound (*ya'akod*) his son Isaac and laid him on the altar...

"*The binding*" it's called.

The binding of Isaac.

This is the moment when God appears to Abraham for the final time in his life. There are overt literary clues letting us know this story is meant to refer back to the opening story of Abraham from Genesis 12, forming bookends to his narrative. Much time has passed, but the author begins this final story the same way as the first, deliberately using the same form:

#### GENESIS 12:1

Leave your country,  
your people,  
and your father's house  
and go to the land  
that I will show you.

#### GENESIS 22:2

Take your son,  
your only son Isaac,  
whom you love,  
and go to a mountain  
I will show you.

In the first story, radical obedience is asked for by God. Abraham has learned, in the resulting decades, to practice the difficult art of ceding control over the direction of his life. Life with God and loving God means complete trust in Him – *even if you don't know what's next and even when life does not seem to make sense*. Abraham is teaching us that if we try to retain veto power over God on the direction and workings of our lives, that is saying to God “I do not, actually, trust you.” We are invited, by this story, to be like Abraham and submit our whole lives and will to God.

In this final story, an even more radical obedience is asked by God. God appears to Abraham and utters the unimaginable.

## GENESIS 22

<sup>2</sup> Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love— Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

The language is tragically clear. It is not ambiguous. There is no hedging. The burnt offering sacrifice will mean Isaac's death. This is not empty ceremony. Isaac will die. And as if the content of the command from God Himself is not cruel enough, four times God repeats who Abraham is to sacrifice.

*Your son.*

*Your only son.*

*Whom you love.*

*Isaac.*

This is worse than death. In chapter 12, God asked Abraham to trust Him, telling him to cut himself off from his land, his family, his people, his past. In chapter 22, God tells Abraham to cut himself off from his future. We know what Isaac means to Abraham – after all these chapters, after all these years, Abraham finally has his son, his heir, the living proof that God keeps His promises. We know what Isaac means not only to Abraham, but to the broader mission of God Himself. Isaac is the sole bearer of the promise for the future. The end of Isaac would mean the end of hope, blessing, and salvation for the whole world. This is the utter end of the line.



The path set before Abraham is not only one of child sacrifice, unspeakable as that is. It is “the road out into Godforsakenness.”<sup>4</sup> Abraham is asked to burn up the charter of salvation, “leaving for himself nothing but death and hell.”<sup>5</sup> As pastor and author Fleming Rutledge writes:

*In the command that Abraham slaughter his own son, the promise of the salvation of the whole world that Abraham had followed so faithfully for so many decades seemed to be revealed as nothing more than a passing fancy of the deity. God had abandoned his promise and with consummate cruelty had ordered Abraham to destroy what he (God) had been playing around with all along — casting both father and son aside as though they were of no account, as though all those years of obedience and trust had been nothing but a ghastly celestial joke.*<sup>6</sup>

In his book *Fear and Trembling*, the famed Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard says the net effect of this story is to produce horror. Just as Israel trembled in terror at the base of Mt. Sinai, so do we. The illusion of our grandeur as humans is stripped away. There is another realm, and we are not in control. God is **God**. We are not, and we tremble because we know our fate is sealed without mercy. Is God cruel? Is He capricious? Arbitrary? Utterly undependable?

Have you ever felt this way?

Abraham has, too.

## THE DEAFENING SILENCE

The narrative account is extraordinarily economical. The story is almost entirely devoid of words of emotion, or words depicting emotion. We do not gain insight into Abraham’s mindset. Throughout the entire story, he says less than 45 words. We are told nothing of the interior condition of Isaac, either, and dear Sarah — the

4 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: Old Testament Library*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1972), 244.

5 John Calvin, *Genesis*, 22.2, in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. William B. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963).

6 Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 259-260.

mother and wife – does not even appear. She is wholly absent. There are so many unanswered questions. No matter. The story moves on.

The boy and his father walk toward the mountain. Perhaps the worst part is not that his son will die, but that Abraham must be an active participant. He must climb the long mountain with his son. He must bind him. He must raise the knife. Oh, the terrible knife. The glint of that small, included detail catches our eye. Our heart sinks.

Abraham will have to do this terrible thing. It's not enough for God to be told that Abraham loves him.

He must be shown.

The story marches on, as they do.

#### GENESIS 22

<sup>3</sup> Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. <sup>5</sup> He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

<sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.

Just a few chapters earlier, Abraham had stood on a hill overlooking the city of Sodom and made a decision to fight and plead with God Himself to spare the lives of unrighteous, wicked people, most of whom he likely didn't even know. This is what I expect from Abraham now. I expect him to storm the gates of heaven with his pleas and protestations. I expect Abraham to litigate against God Himself, for no other reason than to spare the life of his son. But Abraham does not pray anything. He says nothing to God.

We wait for a stay of execution from God. But there is no further revelation. There is only silence. The sentence stands.

The silence of God.

The silent anguish of Father and Son.

Do you know what this is like?

Abraham does, too.

## THE HEIGHT OF THE STORY

We imagine what they said to each other, this father to the son he adores. The narrator anticipates this and tells us.

### GENESIS 22

<sup>6</sup> As the two of them went on together, <sup>7</sup> Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

<sup>8</sup> Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

There is some debate about how old Isaac was in this scenario. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that Isaac was 25, while the Talmud proposes 33, the same age of Jesus when he died. Other theologians have posited that Isaac was still young – a balancing age where he is old enough and strong enough to carry the wood, but young enough to still be compliant. However old he was, we wonder if he was suspicious. His father’s vague answer surely didn’t help. “God Himself will provide the lamb.” But we are not told anything. Isaac carries the wood, carefully chopped by his father, who did not know if the place they were going would have such supplies.

*The two of them  
Went on  
Together.*

Then the story slows to, in the words of one commentator, an “excruciating crawl.” Abraham builds the altar. Slowly stacking the stones. One after another. Then he arranges the wood. Like a man digging his own grave before his execution, the details are laborious and terrible. An eternity of time passes in those terrible moments of preparation before Abraham must raise the knife. As one Jewish commentator wrote:

*Once again, not a word escapes the father’s lips. Isaac too is speechless.  
The intensity of the anguish is beyond the ability of words to express.<sup>7</sup>*

We read on, frantically.

#### GENESIS 22

<sup>9</sup> When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

The angel appears! One of only two times in the entire Bible that an angel calls from heaven to a human being. The voice rings out:

*Abraham!  
Abraham!*

The angel calls out Abraham’s name. Twice! This not only communicates Divine urgency but also indicates the special relationship that God has with Abraham.<sup>8</sup> The angel speaks the very words of God, the very words of life for both Isaac and Abraham.

<sup>7</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 152-153.

<sup>8</sup> The double repetition call of someone’s name happens only a few other times, each time designating a very special relationship of God with someone. God calls out to Jacob (Genesis 46:2), Moses (Exodus 3:4), and to the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 3:10). Later in the New Testament, Jesus would call three people by name using double repetition - Martha (Luke 10:38-42), Peter (Luke 22:31-32) and Saul (the Apostle Paul – in Acts 9:4).

<sup>12</sup> “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

<sup>13</sup> Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

As readers, we breathe. We exhale. There is no shout of joy from Abraham or Isaac. Perhaps only relief. Abraham looks up and spots a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. He takes the animal and sacrifices it to God.

Jewish commentators proclaim that this scenario – a ram caught in a thicket – would have been an exceedingly rare occurrence. A ram’s horns are located on the back of its head. They are used solely for bucking, not when the animal is eating the vegetation of a bush. These animals are also quite agile and aware of their surroundings. The chances of one getting its horns stuck in a thicket while eating is... unlikely.<sup>9</sup> We are meant to see this as an act of God.

Abraham’s words to Isaac have come to pass.

God has provided. Isaac is saved. (So is Abraham, really.)

And the emotion floods over us.

Relief.

Relief.

## THE TESTING OF ABRAHAM

In the aftermath of the Abraham story, we are left to wonder “What does this mean?” It’s fascinating – in the dozens of commentaries and books I read about this

<sup>9</sup> Just as it is unlikely for a thicket to catch on fire and burn and burn and burn and not be consumed. (Exodus 3:2-4)

event, authors and theologians are split as to what they think the main emphasis of this story is. Is the main point of this story about Abraham and what this story shows us about him? Or is the point of this story what the story shows us about God?

Let's start with what this story shows us about Abraham. About what it means to live life with God.

Sometimes, this event is called the testing of Abraham.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the Bible, we see two types of testing.

- **TEST TYPE 1 – GOD TESTING PEOPLE:**  
Sometimes God puts his people to the test, not to trap them but to give them a chance to demonstrate trust and loyalty.
- **TEST TYPE 2 – PEOPLE TESTING GOD:**  
Sometimes people put God to the test, almost always because of a lack of trust, and they demand that God “prove” himself.<sup>11</sup>

This story is a clear example of Test Type 1. The story even tells us in the opening line:



**Yo! Our friends at BibleProject have a video about the repeated theme/idea of testing in the Bible. Check it out here.**

## GENESIS 22

<sup>1</sup> Some time later God tested Abraham.

This is the first time the word “test” appears in the Hebrew Bible (Hebrew: *nasah*). As a parent of two teenagers in school, I can tell you that their perception of the word “test” is nearly exclusively bad. But not all tests are bad. Some tests are opportunities. Sometimes, at work, those in leadership intentionally assign tasks that stretch us. In those “tests” they see proficiencies, capabilities and limitations. We are “proven” by these tests. For example, University of Michigan grad Tom Brady is regarded as the greatest quarterback in the history of the NFL because

<sup>10</sup> See Genesis 22:1 and Hebrews 11:17

<sup>11</sup> BibleProject, *The Test: Study Notes*, 3. PDF can be downloaded at <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/the-test/>

of the situations he's been in where he has come through, again and again and again.<sup>12</sup> Tests can show what we're made of.

Back in the Garden of Eden, God's plan was to rule the earth with His *tselem* – his faithful, loving covenant partners. But after Sin entered, humans spiraled away from God. As we've already examined with Noah and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, there are times when it is very difficult for God to find faithful covenant partners. In the beginning, even though the word "test" wasn't used explicitly, we see God putting forth a "test" to Adam and Eve, asking them to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, trusting Him to define good and evil. Later, the serpent introduces another test – urging them to throw off God's rule and trust themselves instead. Two tests. And in the process, we see if Adam and Eve are faithful covenant partners. They are not.

But the idea of a crucible – a test – appears over and over again not only in the Bible, but in literature and art. These tests – these charged moments of real decision – reveal the content of the protagonist's true character, illuminating their virtue.

It's the moment in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where Huck decides not to abandon Jim who has been captured by slave-traders, but to risk his own life and the condemnation of all of society to rescue this man who has been devoted to him like a father. We now know who Huck really is. The test has revealed it.

It's the moment in *The Color Purple* when Celie finally stands up to her abusive husband Albert. Though filled with murderous rage, instead of killing Albert, she chooses life. After a traumatic life of denigration, denial, and subservience at the hands of both white and black men, Celie's courage soars, and she decides to seek

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12 My wife, a Michigan grad, made me write that sentence. I sports hate Tom Brady. Go Buckeyes!

her own wholeness, her own prosperity, and her own freedom. We now know who Celie really is. The test has revealed it.<sup>13</sup>

The same is true for us with Abraham. We now know who Abraham really is. The test has revealed it. As one commentator wrote:

*It is not that God's foreknowledge is wanting but that, for Abraham's sake, the quality of character that now exists only potentially must be actualized. In the biblical view, the genuinely righteous man must deserve that status through demonstrated action. Henceforth, Abraham is the incontestable paradigm of the truly "God-fearing" man, one who is wholehearted in his self-determined, disinterested, self-surrender to God's will.*<sup>14</sup>

God, and we as the reader, have seen who Abraham is. We have been shown what trust and loyalty and allegiance to God through the most vexing of all of life's experiences looks like. Abraham has been stretched to the brink of human experiences, and has been faithful to God.

We have been shown what loving God looks like in the most difficult and impossible of all situations. "Perhaps this event," suggests Rutledge, "may be understood as encompassing all the incomprehensible silences of God from that day forward."<sup>15</sup>

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13 Another one of my favorite examples is from pop culture. There's an episode of *Friends*, where Ross is attempting to win back the heart of Rachel who is hardened against him. Rachel's roommate (and Ross' sister) Monica find an old VCR tape at her parent's house and realizes it contains footage from her and Rachel's high school prom night. The group sits down to watch it. The old grainy footage reveals Rachel in a puffy-armed blue prom dress, sobbing to her friend Monica because her prom date, Chip, has stood her up. On camera, Monica's older-brother-freshman-in-college Ross concocts an idea: he'll wear his father's tuxedo and take Rachel to prom, sparing her embarrassment. It's clear that Ross is also enamored with Rachel. Ross puts on the tux, and as he descends the staircase, the camera pans in time to see Rachel leaving with the jerk Chip who has finally showed up. The camera pans back to Ross, who is holding flowers, crestfallen. We see present-day Ross, sheepish by the door. Rachel's face softens. She has now seen Ross for who he is: someone who has been devoted to her since the beginning. She goes to him and we witness in the second-most romantic on-screen television kiss of all time (behind Jim and Pam, obv's). Given the chance, Ross passed the test.

14 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: JPS Torah Commentary*, 153.

15 Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 265.



It is tradition, even now, that the *shofar*, a ram's-horn trumpet, is blown on the highest of Jewish holy days, Yom Kippur. There are many reasons why this is done – why the echoing, raw, stuttering, bellowing sound is used in times of worship. Some scholars trace it back to Moses' call to gather God's people at the base of Mt. Sinai.<sup>16</sup> This is indeed the first mention, the first time the blowing of the “ram's horn” is mentioned in the Bible. But others think it goes deeper than that. For many Jewish scholars, they go back to the first time not that the term “ram's horn” appears in the Torah, but the first time the word “ram” appears, which is here in Genesis 22. For them, the blowing of the horn is a reminder of the ram. It's a reminder of the *Akedah*. As one Jewish scholar Binyomin Cohen put it:

*If you want to go to court, you take a good lawyer. The shofar is like a good lawyer. It reminds God of Abraham's obedience in being willing to sacrifice that which was more dear to him than life itself...when you hear the shofar, recall the akedah and account it to your credit as if you bound yourself to the altar before (God).<sup>17</sup>*

For many, the story of the *Akedah* is the story of ultimate allegiance to God, unwavering trust and conviction that God is good. It's the story of Abraham modeling what it means to be a *tselem*.

But I want to focus on is this question: how did Abraham manage to survive this ordeal intact as a faithful covenant partner with God?

The text gives us three small hints. First, he tells his entourage of servants that “We will worship and then we will come back to you.”<sup>18</sup> The text is careful to include that the return will be both Abraham and Isaac. Abraham somehow believes that God will not violate His previous promise to give Abraham descendants. Second, Abraham says, “God himself will provide the sacrifice.”<sup>19</sup> We're unclear what that means, but it seems to be a glimmer of trust and hope that perhaps things won't transpire according to Abraham's worst fears. And then there's a passage, found in the New Testament commentary about this event, in which the author writes this:

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16 Exodus 19:16-20

17 Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2004), 83.

18 Genesis 22:5

19 Genesis 22:8

<sup>17</sup> By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, <sup>18</sup> even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” <sup>19</sup> Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

A. W. Tozer once wrote that what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. Tozer continued, “I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.”<sup>20</sup> Jesus said to “love the Lord your God with all your mind.”

Abraham is modeling the discipline of focusing one’s mind on the truths of God that we know and trust. Abraham is modeling the discipline of remembering God’s character, which is good, that he is with us, for us and does not change. Because of God’s faithfulness in the past, Abraham expected God to be faithful in the future. And friends, we have **A LOT** more information about God than Abraham did. We have a lot longer track record to judge God’s faithfulness than Abraham did.

When he was younger, my son Justus (who has a very active imagination) would frequently have bad dreams. So we would sing a song whose verses were the same as Paul’s words in Philippians 4:8.

*Finally brothers  
 Whatever is true  
 Whatever is noble  
 Whatever is right  
 Whatever is pure  
 Whatever is lovely  
 Whatever is admirable  
 If anything is excellent or praiseworthy  
 Think about such things.  
 Think about such things.*

20 A. W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1961), 2.

The first words in those verses – true and noble and right – are words that Paul uses in other letters to refer to theology. Paul is saying something rather deep. He’s saying, “Really stop and think about the giant, huge, universal perspective. Think about who God is. Think about why you’re here. Think about what God thinks about you. Think about that stuff.” This is the same point, I think, that A. W. Tozer is trying to make. There are deep lies we tell ourselves that show our lack of accurate thinking about God. These lies creep in, especially during tragic times. Lies like:

*God is punishing me.*

*God does not care about me. God is not here.*

*I can’t change.*

*We have to change how we think about God.*

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains this tendency in his book *Flow*:

*When left to itself, the mind turns to bad thoughts, trivial plans, sad memories and worries about the future. Disorder, confusion, and decay are the default option of consciousness.<sup>21</sup>*

Abraham is showing us how to take our overwhelming emotions and thoughts **CAPTIVE** to the truth about what we know about God and what He’s already proven and shown us to be true.

Throughout the centuries, teachers and poets have offered their *midrash*, commentary and conjecture about what Abraham may or may not have been thinking. It’s confusing to wade through it all. But here, centuries later in the New Testament, we have the plainest and clearest illumination from a writer of Scripture. Abraham reasoned that just as God brought life from a place where there was no hope or possibility of life (Sarah’s barren womb) – so He will do it again. He is after all, Abraham reasoned, the God of Life. Here, in Genesis 22, we find the seeds of the idea of a son killed but resurrected somehow by the very power of God.

How incredible!

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21 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, Quoted in Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ’s Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 152.

## ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD WOULD COME THROUGH. HE DID.

One of the major hints about the theological meaning of this story is the repetition. Three times in this story, the idea of God providing crops up. First, in the conversation between Father and Son.

### GENESIS 22

<sup>7</sup>“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

<sup>8</sup> Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”

And then later, at the dramatic conclusion, after Isaac’s life has been spared, Abraham memorializes this moment.

### GENESIS 22

<sup>14</sup> So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

The phrase “the LORD will provide” is the Hebrew term *Yahweh Yireh*, and it is not only used multiple times in the story in Genesis 22 but is the core lesson and principle of this narrative – and perhaps the core lesson of Abraham’s life, and a core instructive for anyone who reads or hears this story.

Abraham foreshadows this early in the story, saying “God Himself will provide the lamb.” And this is where Christian theologians and thinkers say the story jumps from being about Abraham to being about God Himself.

In this story, Abraham learns – and the people of Israel recently released from bondage learn – that this God is a God who does not take, but rather gives. In an ancient world full of deities with frail egos, demanding costly sacrifice after costly sacrifice, this idea is revolutionary. God doesn’t **TAKE** from Abraham, but instead shows him – when it comes to humanity, He will be the one who **GIVES** first.

And God doesn’t tell Abraham this truth.

*He shows Him.*

In a way, the *Akedah* is not only a test of Abraham's character, but also God's. And He reveals Himself to be good, and to be the first to give. God is a God who provides.

Abraham uses this phrase *Yahweh Yireh* to memorialize this place on Mount Moriah. As such, the phrase "the LORD will provide" becomes not only a name for God (a core part of His identity) but the name of the actual mountain where this dramatic scene unfolded.

Loving God means we expect God to be good.

We anticipate, await and believe God will provide.

But the shocking implication this story points to is beyond *the fact that* God provides, but reaches further to *HOW* God provides.

But that deserves the whole next chapter.

## 4

**KEY LESSON**

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means **WE EXPECT GOD TO BE GOOD.**

- We believe God will provide.
- Especially in moments when life falls apart.

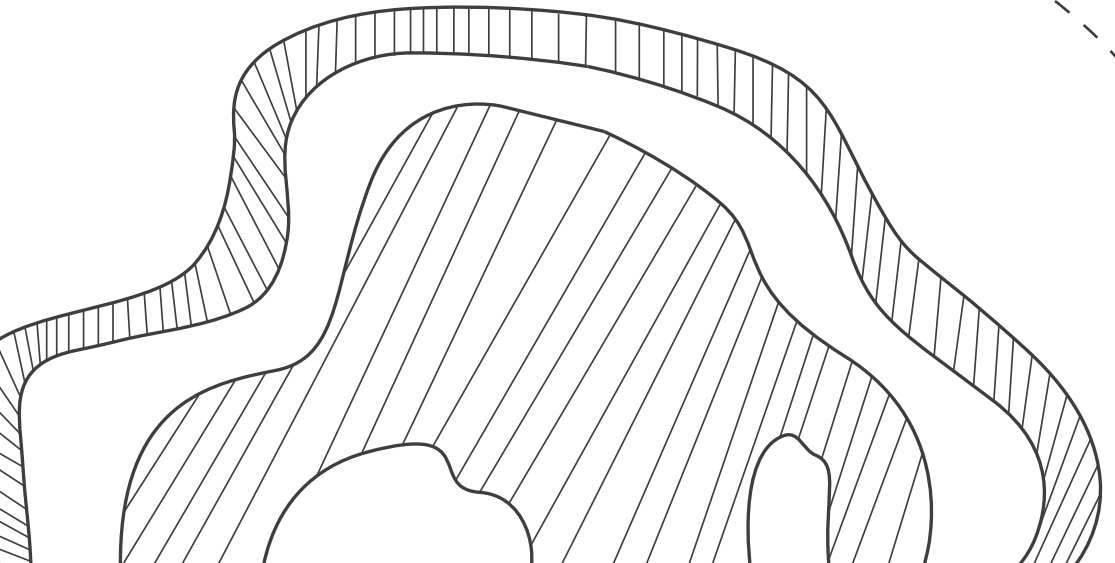
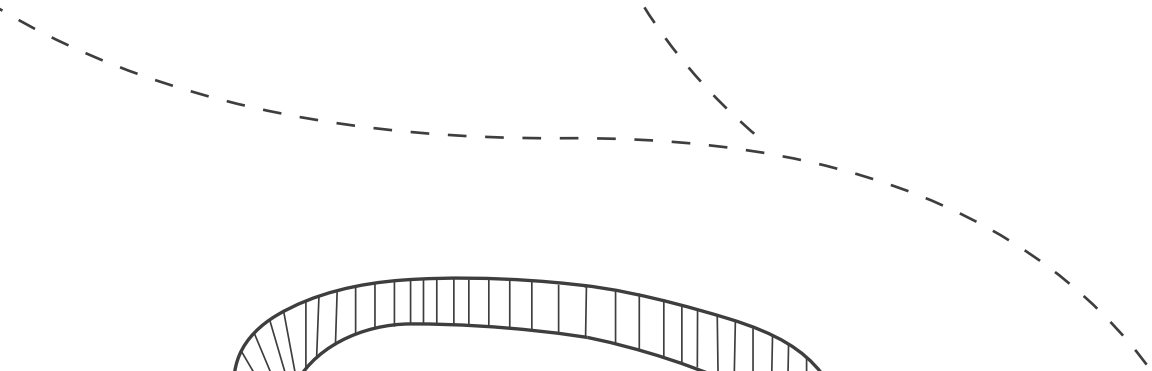
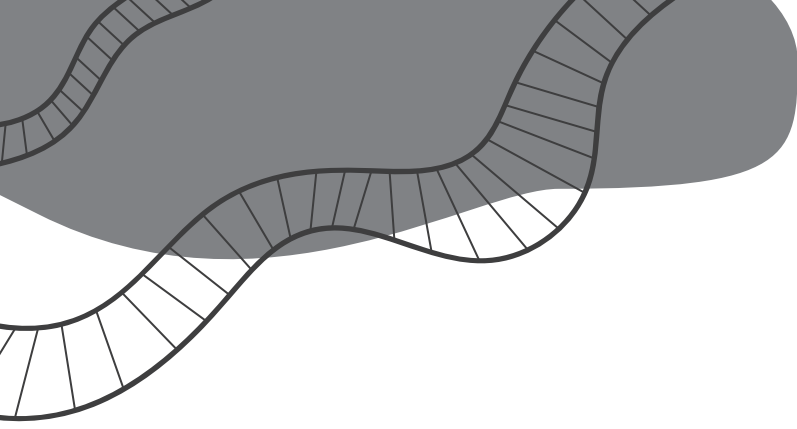


## CHAPTER 08 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What impacted you the most about this chapter? What questions did the chapter bring up for you? What was the most helpful part of the chapter?
2. How did you react to Nina's story? Have you had any experience (either personally or with people you love) with people being afraid to trust because of past hurt or trauma?
3. What is a lesson in life (or a truth about life) that you had to be *shown* or you had to *experience* (not merely had the lesson told to you or explained to you)?
4. The *Akedah*, or the binding of Isaac, is the climax of Abraham's narrative. Was there anything new or surprising to you in the discussion of this story?
5. This story starts off with the words "some time later, God tested Abraham." What is your reaction when you hear the word *test*? How do you react to the idea that God tests people?

6. This chapter gave two examples from literature of tests revealing a person's true character. What other examples can you think of? Have you ever faced a test that revealed something about you?
  
7. This story - the *Akedah* — is difficult to read because we imagine the emotional turmoil of both Abraham and Isaac. The flood of anxiety and fear that happens when life seems to be falling apart is not unique to them. Have you ever had a moment when you felt like things were falling apart? What was the situation? What helped? What didn't help?
  
8. This chapter says that the phrase the LORD will provide is “perhaps the core lesson of Abraham's life.” Do you agree or disagree? How have we seen God provide for Abraham thus far in the story?
  
9. Are you in a situation right now where you feel like things are falling apart and you need God to provide? What would it look like to believe that the LORD will provide in your unique situation?
  
10. Read Romans 12:1-2. What does it mean to “conform to the pattern of the world” vs. “be transformed by the renewing of your mind?” What does it mean to think correctly about God? How does thinking correctly about God help you through worry, doubt, despair and trials?





## CHAPTER 9

# THE GIFT

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IN WHICH WE CONCLUDE ABRAHAM'S STORY, DISCOVERING  
THE CONNECTIONS WITH JESUS, AND ARRIVE AT A FINAL  
UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IT MEANS TO "LOVE GOD."

## KEY LESSON

4

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means **WE EXPECT GOD TO BE GOOD.**

- We believe God will provide.
- Especially in moments when life falls apart.

## DEE DEE AND PAPA

My sophomore year of college, my English professor Tom Chiarella gave our class an assignment. Choose something – an object – that’s valuable to you and write a piece to show us why it’s important to you.

I don’t remember what I wrote about. Probably something stupid, like my copy of Alanis Morissette’s *Jagged Little Pill* CD that was helping me get through a painful break-up.<sup>1</sup> But one of my classmates, who we’ll call Nadia, made such an impact on me that it still resonates in my mind to this day.

Nadia chose to write about a letter, mounted in a simple wooden frame, that is hanging on the wall of her grandmother’s house. It was scrawled out, on yellowed paper. And it was a note from her grandfather, Paul who everyone called PaPaw to Nadia’s grandmother Delores, who everyone affectionately called Dee Dee.<sup>2</sup>

Dee Dee and PaPaw had been high school sweethearts, but after Pearl Harbor, PaPaw signed up like so many others from the Greatest Generation to go fight on the front lines of World War II. He was assigned to the Pacific Theater, a particularly deadly assignment. Before PaPaw shipped out, he proposed to Dee Dee but she promptly turned him down.

“I am not marrying a dead man,” she said. “You get back home, and I promise you,” she said, pausing to slowly spin around, “Then you can have all of this.”

Dee Dee was feisty!

Perhaps Dee Dee hoped that the thought of coming home to marry her could buoy PaPaw through the terrible days of war. And the days were terrible. PaPaw was part of the forces that liberated the Philippines in 1944, and was stationed there, along with tens of thousands of other young soldiers. The US was amassing troops as part of Operation Downfall, which planned to send roughly 2 million troops to invade mainland Japan. Both sides knew this would be a disaster. Japan would never surrender her homeland. Military experts told Eisenhower a land invasion

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1 For those of you reading this who are Gen Z’s, a CD was a thin piece of plastic inscribed with digital codes of music that could be read by a CD player.

2 Nadia was from Indiana. Names like Dee Dee and PaPaw happen in places like Indiana.

would be 10 times more deadly than Normandy. Both sides estimated the casualties in the *millions*. PaPaw knew, if there was a land invasion of Japan, he likely wouldn't be coming home.

You know the history of 1945. Hiroshima on August 06. Nagasaki on August 09. Japan surrenders on Sept. 02. And on that day, rejoicing rang out from the US troops in the Philippines. And, from the account that Nadia tells, PaPaw went out into the markets of the Philippines that evening to buy an engagement ring for Dee Dee. But he couldn't find one. Diamonds were in short supply during war-time, I guess. But he did find a stunning pearl necklace, made with pearls from the Philippines. PaPaw took all his extra money and bought the most beautiful necklace he'd ever seen. He shipped that necklace to Dee Dee, along with a simple note.

*Dearest D,*

*As you've heard by now, the war is over. And soon, all of us will be coming home. Please consider this necklace a symbol of my intention to make you my wife.*

*Yours forever*

*-P*

That fading letter hung in a simple wood frame in Nadia's grandmother's house. PaPaw died of lung cancer when Nadia was little. Dee Dee moved into a house just down the street, to be closer to her daughter, Nadia's mother. Now that framed photograph and the bright, white pearl necklace Dee Dee would wear on special occasions were sentimental reminders of the most precious thing Dee Dee had. That letter and that necklace were the genesis of Nadia's entire family. All her aunts and uncles, her mom, her and her sister and all her cousins. Because of that letter and that necklace, Dee Dee was surrounded by love. She had a habit of bouncing each grandchild on her knee, grabbing their face gently in her hands and saying, "Now I need to tell you a secret. I love you the very most." When met with the protests from the other grandkids, Dee Dee would feign surprise, "Well, I love you the very most, too!"

One summer afternoon when she was about six, Nadia was playing over at her grandmother's. Dee Dee took Nadia's little sister back across the street to her house to get some Kool Aid. Nadia wandered into Dee Dee's bedroom. She wanted to play dress up, so she went into the closet to put on one of Dee Dee's pretty dresses. Then, Nadia saw Dee Dee's vanity. She looked at the make-up brushes and the

lipstick. Nadia put on the red lipstick, and brushed her cheeks with the pretty pink powder. And then she saw Dee Dee's jewelry, her eye drawn to it like any little girl might be.

She took the shiny, lustrous white pearl necklace and put it around her neck. She looked fabulous! So grown up. Nadia knew she had to go show mom and Dee Dee. And so she set off across the street.

She ran down the sidewalk a bit, the dress too long. A road crew was repaving the sleepy neighborhood's streets with hot asphalt. Nadia passed them and bolted across the street, brimming with excitement.

And as she ran, one hand holding up the excess of the dress, her right thumb caught the inside of the pearl necklace, and as her arm swung down as she ran, it pulled and broke the necklace. Nadia watched in horror as the pearls hit the hot summer pavement, bouncing left and right, some down the storm drain, some bouncing into the newly poured asphalt that was literally being pressed down by the giant steel drum.

One second. One mistake.

And Nadia was not too young to know exactly what she had done. She knew there was no undoing this. She knew it was ruined. Dee Dee's precious necklace was ruined. So Nadia did what any little kid would have done. She ran away. And she hid. For 12 hours, she hid in her neighbor's bushes, crying until she couldn't cry any more. She was not very old, but she knew. "There's no way this could ever get put back together."

The image of sweet Nadia, leaning onto the yellow siding of her neighbor's house, behind their tall, branchy bushes, knees and cheeks streaked with dirt and tears, hugging her knees in her grandmother's oversized floral-print dress is powerful to me.

*What do you do when life falls apart, and there's no way for you to put it back together?*

Maybe it's your fault. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe it's not your fault at all. In the end, I'm not even sure that really matters. The pain is the same. It's all ruined, and there you are. What do you do?

This is the story of Nadia.

But it's also Abraham's story. And ours.

## **WE DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH TROUBLE WE ARE IN**

Dallas Willard once wrote, "The reason we do not run to God is because we do not know how much trouble we are in." Sometimes, Genesis 3 is called "The Fall of Man" which is terminology that goes back centuries. But Bible scholar John Walton proposes a different nomenclature, saying "Instead of calling it the Fall, we could call it The Loss, because they lost access to God's presence. What God had planned from eternity past, to dwell with his people, was lost."<sup>3</sup>

I like this. The Loss. It's a reminder that things aren't the way they should be. Sin not only corrupts us, but it pushes us away from the source of Life, God Himself. Sin stains us, but now The Powers want to enslave us and Death is stalking us.<sup>4</sup> And we cannot escape. We cannot invent a way out. This foe is too powerful. Whether or not Abraham raises the knife to his son, Isaac has a death problem. Death will come for him. And for you. And for me. And for everyone we love. We will be, at some point, ripped away from those we love and we will lose everything. In fact, death is a reality that comes not just at the end of our life, but that also visits us in the middle of our life. Anything that depletes, diminishes or corrupts life is like a death.<sup>5</sup> Without God, we will be lost.

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3 John Walton, *Immanuel Theology: What God Has Always Wanted*, May 27, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juLEtVjv8Fk>

4 In the BibleProject Classroom course on the book of Ephesians, Tim Mackie refers to Yale theologian Johann Christian Beker, who called this "Paul's Apocalyptic Power Alliance": Sin, Death, and The Powers. Beker's idea is that "Sin" is not the little bad things you do – Sin is a cosmic tyrant, and the danger is slavery to The Powers leading us toward Death. In his book *Reading Romans Backwards*, Scot McKnight also differentiates between "sin" and "Sin" - saying the most prominent terms for Paul (in Romans) are Sin, Flesh and Death.

5 W. David O. Taylor, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2020), 138-139.

We don't know how much trouble we are in.

We can't be loyal to God.

Left to ourselves, we'll seize control and run our lives  
the way we want.

We can't trust God.

Left to ourselves, we'll grab whatever we desire.

We can't seek justice.

Left to ourselves, we'll devolve into selfishness and greed.

We can't believe that God is good.

When life falls apart, so will we, falling into despair  
and hopelessness.

Ugh. How do we get out of this mess? It'd take a miracle.

## C. S. LEWIS AND THE END OF HUMAN LANGUAGE

There's a staggering moment toward the end of C. S. Lewis' seminal work *Mere Christianity*. For the previous 155 pages, Lewis has used his prodigious imagination and considerable learning to describe with fresh words the wonder of Christianity. His dazzling presentation succeeds in making a powerful, rational, logical case for the central tenets of Christianity, which is why this particular book is one of the most important and impactful books in the long history of Christianity.

And yet, there is a moment in the book where Lewis gives up. His language fails him. It's a moment, near the end of the book, when he's trying to describe the mechanics of how exactly sinful mankind can somehow become clean, become sons and daughters of God, have their nature changed. He's trying to describe, in the words of the prophet Ezekiel, how we can have "new hearts." He's trying to describe how a human being whose inner nature is bent toward allegiance to only himself or herself can suddenly swing to be devoted to God. He's trying to describe, in a word, how salvation works. Lewis starts in with a long metaphor about toys coming to life, and then scraps it, saying:

*But, of course, none of these illustrations really works perfectly. In the long run, God is no one but Himself and what He does is like nothing else. You could hardly expect it to be.*<sup>6</sup>

Now, at this point, Lewis could have easily entered into deep theological discussions, using words and phrases to describe this “new life with God.” But he does not. Because as one trained in literature, and a professor of medieval literature in particular, Lewis realizes instinctively that the Bible does not give us philosophical theories. It does not describe things in that way.

This work of God – whether it’s called salvation or atonement or being born-again or becoming new creations or any other wonderful phrasing used by Christians through the ages – is not shared by the authors of Scripture as theories. These ideas are advanced through word pictures.

Through stories.

Through motifs.

Through images.

Skilled, professional theologians often express deep frustration with the sacred task of trying to explain the Cross of Jesus Christ, and what it accomplished and what it means.<sup>7</sup> This feeling is perhaps best summed up by the famed Protestant theologian William Placher who once wrote “I do not know how to make this story work.”<sup>8</sup>

Imagination and participation, apparently, are the key to understanding the Cross and all the Biblical stories. “We do not so much interpret them,” writes Scot McKnight, “as we do inhabit them.”<sup>9</sup>

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6 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952, repr., New York: Macmillan, 1960), 156.

7 “We must never confuse...fact and theory,” Dallas Willard said. “The fact is, Christ died; the theory is what was going on. Theologians still call them theories of atonement.” Gary Moon, *Becoming Dallas Willard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 211.

8 William C. Placher, *Christ Takes Our Place: Rethinking Atonement* (Interpretation 53, no. 1, January 1999)

9 Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 37.



I've been thinking about this a lot, and it seems to me that the story of Genesis 22 and the lessons in the story of Isaac and Abraham are best understood when taken together with two other stories. This particular story in Genesis ties into two others that happen in the next two proceeding books of the Torah: Exodus and Leviticus.

It's like you can't fully understand Luke Skywalker's meaning to the story just by watching *Star Wars: A New Hope*. You need to know he's a Jedi who is also Vader's son (*The Empire Strikes Back*) and that he risks his own life to redeem his father, and the two of them defeat the Emperor and save the galaxy (*Return of the Jedi*). The Bible as a whole has much to teach us about God, His character, His attributes, and His goals for humanity. We have to be careful not to read bible verses or stories in isolation.<sup>10</sup> So for right now, I want to just pause and briefly examine three moments offered to us through the first three books of the Bible.

- Genesis 22: The story of Abraham and Isaac
- Exodus: The Passover Lamb
- Leviticus: The Day of Atonement

## GENESIS :: IMAGE 1 :: ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

**BACKSTORY:** God asks Abraham to do the unthinkable and sacrifice Isaac on an altar – a seeming violation of His own promises. At the last minute, God stops Abraham from making the sacrifice, giving him a ram, which has been caught in a thicket to sacrifice instead.

**BIG IDEA:** Abraham and Isaac are spared tragedy because God steps in and provides a substitution. Unlike every other deity in the ancient Near East, God shows us He is a God who gives, not takes.

**WHAT IT SHOWS ABOUT GOD:** The LORD will provide. The LORD will provide a substitute sacrifice.

<sup>10</sup> Dan Kimball, *How (Not) To Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 39-56.

## **EXODUS :: IMAGE 2 :: THE PASSOVER LAMB**

**BACKSTORY:** The Hebrew people have been enslaved for 400 years by an evil oppressive tyrant named Pharaoh, suffering economic, physical, and spiritual slavery. God hears their cries and rescues them from an enemy far more powerful than they could ever defeat.

**BIG IDEA:** Through the blood of the innocent, spotless Passover lamb, God rescues the Israelites from slavery to Pharaoh.

**WHAT THIS SHOWS ABOUT GOD:** Although humans are utterly powerless, God will rescue humanity from slavery, bondage and oppression by The Powers into freedom and from Death into Life.

## **LEVITICUS :: IMAGE 3 :: THE DAY OF ATONEMENT**

**BACKSTORY:** The Hebrew people have been taken out of Egypt, but they cannot escape the power of sin. God gives Moses and Aaron detailed instructions on how to help the people repent of their sins before God so that they can know they are forgiven and can live with God (as humans were designed to in the Garden).

**BIG IDEA:** The bloody sacrificial death of two separate goats on the high holy day of Yom Kippur accomplishes purification from sin and forgiveness of sins.

**WHAT IT SHOWS ABOUT GOD:** God provides a way to accomplish two things: 1. cleansing Israel from the effects of sin (to remove guilt and shame) and 2. providing a means for the forgiveness of sins (so that they might re-enter God's presence and live with Him).

By looking at these three stories in the first three books of the Old Testament – Abraham and Isaac, the Passover, and the Day of Atonement – we are given three stories and images whose goals are to transfix our imaginations and hearts, and illuminate truths about the complex and powerful work God is seeking to do in humanity and in the world. God puts things back together.

## DEE DEE FINDS NADIA

Nadia's frantic parents called every neighbor to locate her. Finally, they called the local police to try to find their daughter. As night fell, a police dog grabbed Nadia's scent from one of her stuffed animals and then quickly and precisely made its way to the bushes of the neighbor. The police officer ducked with his flashlight to find Nadia, huddled and shivering in the dirt behind the bushes.

He went to tell the family. Nadia's parents hugged each other in relief.

"She won't come out, though," the officer told them. "I tried to get her to come out, but she wouldn't budge."

"Sounds like a job for Dee Dee," Dee Dee said. (I told you she was feisty).

Dee Dee bent down in front of those bushes and called to her granddaughter.

"Honey, why don't you come out of there," she said. "It's getting cold,"

Just seeing Dee Dee caused Nadia to cry tears again she didn't know she had. She told her grandma, through broken sobs about the necklace. About how it was ruined. About how she had broken it. Dee Dee got down on her hands and knees and made her way through the dirt and branches to the little clearing in the bushes where her granddaughter sat.

"Sweetie. I need you to look at me," Dee Dee said, taking Nadia's hand. "that necklace means more to me than any other single thing I own in this entire world."

"I know," Nadia cried. "I know, Dee Dee!"

"So do you honestly think I would be so foolish as to leave it right out on my vanity in my bedroom, where a curious and beautiful six-year old girl might want to try it on? Sweetie, after your PaPaw died, I had a costume jeweler make a replica of PaPaw's necklace and I put the real one in a safety deposit box down at the bank. That necklace you had on was nothing more than white plastic and glass. It cost me \$27. So now, sweetie, it's getting too cold and I miss my granddaughter too much, so can we please go home?"

Relief flowed over Nadia. She took her grandmother's hand, and they crawled out from behind the bushes, and went home, where Dee Dee used a pink washcloth to wash her up.

Relief.

Relief.

## THE HIGH COST OF LOVE

Those three stories and images from the first three books of the Bible show us three things. God wants us to be cleansed from sin. God wants us to know we're forgiven. God wants us to be rescued from not only Death, but from the power of Sin.

But what is central to understand is that each of these images point forward in the Biblical story to Jesus.

Each of these images is showing us something on the surface about God, the depth of which will be more fully revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. By looking at these early chapters in the Bible, we can enter into the story of salvation – of what God is doing to rescue the world. The Passover lamb, the goat driven into the wilderness, the sacrifice in the temple, the cleansing blood, the ransom, the substitute — each and all of these and more have their place. We are meant to stare at these as a mosaic.

The apostles and the early Biblical writers used these stories and symbols to help understand and communicate the very meaning of the Life and Death of Jesus Christ. We don't have time to fully dive into each of these three stories, so let's just examine this first story of the *Akedah* to see how it ties explicitly and overtly to Jesus.

## KENNEDY HAD A SECRETARY NAMED LINCOLN

It's difficult to overestimate the importance of this story and this mountain to the overall Biblical narrative. Mount Moriah is the location where the Holy City, the city of Jerusalem would be built. It is the place where God tells Solomon to build the Holy

Temple.<sup>11</sup> In New Testament terms, Mount Moriah is where Jesus Christ would later be crucified.<sup>12</sup> This mountain is another biblical design pattern, a hyperlink found throughout Scripture.

For those who know the whole story, it's clear: Genesis 22 is pointing all the way ahead in the story to Jesus.

Earlier, I said that the *Akedah* is not mentioned again in the entire Old Testament, but we do find it clearly in the New Testament. Christian theologians have remarked for centuries about the purposeful design pattern of this story in Genesis 22 and how it links to the story of Jesus. For example:

	GENESIS: ABRAHAM + ISAAC	NEW TESTAMENT: JESUS
Pregnancy predicted by heavenly messenger	Genesis 18:10 <i>Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."</i>	Luke 1:30-31 <i>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary...You will conceive and give birth to a son"</i>
Birth required a miracle	Genesis 18:11 <i>Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.</i>	Luke 1:34 <i>"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"</i>
Son is loved by Father	Genesis 22:2 <i>"Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac"</i>	Matthew 3:17 <i>"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."</i>
Wood is carried up a hill toward death	Genesis 22:6 <i>Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac</i>	John 19:17 <i>Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull</i>

<sup>11</sup> 2 Chronicles 3:1

<sup>12</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary Vol. 1* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 154.

	GENESIS: ABRAHAM + ISAAC	NEW TESTAMENT: JESUS
Prophecy of return from certain death	Genesis 22:5 <i>[Abraham] said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."</i>	Mark 9:31 <i>"...They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."</i>
Bound hands, feet/legs	Genesis 22:9 <i>He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.</i>	John 20:25 <i>"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were...I will not believe."</i>  Luke 24:39 <i>Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself!</i>
Son led by Father and obedient to Father, even unto death	Genesis 22:3 <i>[Abraham] took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac.</i>  Genesis 22:9 <i>[Abraham]... laid [Isaac] on the altar</i>	Matthew 26:39 <i>"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."</i>
Substitute "lamb" is provided by God	Genesis 22:8 <i>"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."</i>	John 1:29 <i>Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!</i>
Journey of three days	Genesis 22:3-4 <i>Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey... On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.</i>	Acts 10:40 <i>God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.</i>

In fact, through much of church history, the church calendar specifically tied this story of Abraham and Isaac to Good Friday, the day Jesus was Crucified. On Good Friday the following passages from Genesis are read, to frame the meaning of the Death and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

*“The LORD Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son”*

**AND**

*“You have not withheld your son, your only son, whom you love.*

But the shocking implication this story points to is beyond *the fact that* God provides, but reaches further to *HOW* God provides.

## **GOD HIMSELF IS THE SACRIFICE**

I find it curious that even though Genesis 22 is a seminal story, the *Akedah* is not mentioned any other time in the entirety of the Old Testament. Moses does not refer to it. Nor does David, in story or in any of his songs. The wisdom literature does not mention it. None of the prophets speak of it or bring it to bear. Perhaps because it is too terrible? Or perhaps because it was so singular. From a narrative perspective, this account in Genesis is utterly unique. Human sacrifice is outlawed by Mosaic Law,<sup>13</sup> and is called “detestable” by God. God clearly prohibits human sacrifice (which was the custom in the ancient Near East) and even goes so far to say that if anyone in Israel participates in human sacrifice, God will “set His face against him” **AND** God then commands the community leaders to kill that person.<sup>14</sup> God is extreme about this. At no other point in the Bible does God ever ask another human being to undergo what Abraham went through. In a real way, this was a one-time event, never to be repeated in the Biblical narrative, nor asked of any other servant of God. The horror of this event is too great.

In this story, as he and his father march up the mountain, Isaac asks, “Where is the lamb?” and his father Abraham replies, “God himself will provide the lamb for

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<sup>13</sup> Deut. 12:30-31 and Deut. 18:9-12, for example

<sup>14</sup> Leviticus 20:1-3 – The LORD said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites: ‘Any Israelite or any foreigner residing in Israel who sacrifices any of his children to Molek is to be put to death. The members of the community are to stone him. I myself will set my face against him and will cut him off from his people

the burnt offering, my son.”<sup>15</sup> Centuries later, when John the Baptist saw Jesus<sup>16</sup> he proclaimed, “Look! The Lamb of God!”<sup>17</sup> The New Testament writers clearly link the two: the death of Jesus is compared to the sacrifice of Isaac. Paul makes a link to Jesus in this verse:

#### ROMANS 8

<sup>31</sup> What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Peter also makes the tie to Jesus as the sacrificial lamb of God, provided by God Himself.

#### 1 PETER 1

<sup>18</sup> For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. <sup>20</sup> He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

And perhaps most famously, in John 3:16, Jesus Himself explains the provision of God.

#### JOHN 3

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The ultimate answer to Isaac’s question “where is the lamb” did eventually come in the Person of Jesus Christ. When it came down to it, God was the one who made the sacrifice.

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<sup>15</sup> Genesis 22:8.

<sup>16</sup> I’m indebted to Warren Wiersbe for pointing out this link to me. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Ge 22:1–24) (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993)

<sup>17</sup> John 1:29



## DEE DEE'S SAFETY DEPOSIT BOX

A good while later, when Nadia was a young woman in her first year of college, she got the call to come home. Dee Dee was not doing well. A few days later, surrounded by her family, Dee Dee passed away. The family prepared to see Dee Dee's house. Nadia and her sister helped provide emotional support for their mother as she went through Dee Dee's things.

Nadia walked through her home, staring at the letter from PaPaw. Somehow that letter was the charter of her whole family – the love that started it all. Somehow that love echoed forward, even now.

They remembered Dee Dee's spirit, her love and they laughed. In her personal affects, they found the safety deposit key for the box that held the pearl necklace from PaPaw.

Nadia went down to the bank with her parents, and they were escorted to the back room. A bank representative pulled out the box, and gently laid it on the table. They opened it up. There were deeds and official records. Some bonds.

But there was no necklace. Just a small piece of paper, with Dee Dee's distinctive handwriting on it.

*Tell Nadia I love her the very most.*

You see, there had never been a replica necklace. That pearl necklace Nadia had ruined was indeed the original from the Philippines. It was the necklace PaPaw had given her, all those years ago. It was the real one. But you see there was something so much more valuable to Dee Dee than even her most precious heirloom.

The heart of her little granddaughter.

Dee Dee knew Nadia was too young. She couldn't understand or take the weight of that guilt, so Dee Dee simply absorbed it for her. She swallowed it, whole. In a way that only love can.

This is what it means to love.

*You absorb the cost, because your kids can't.  
You grab the bee and let it sting your hand, so it won't sting them.  
You catch them, so they won't be hurt by the fall.  
You lose sleep, so they can be comforted after that nightmare  
and can rest.  
You sacrifice, so they can thrive.*

This is parenting. This is grandparenting. This is family. This is friendship. This is love. And this is what God does at the *Akedah*.

Theologians call this the Biblical model of *substitution*. It's a fancy word, but every parent knows what it means. Shoot, anyone who has ever loved knows what it means. It means saying, with your heart and with your life, "You matter more to me than *me*."

God, in his goodness, partners with His son, Jesus Christ, who volunteers to step in front of Death, so that Death might kill Him, instead of us. In a mysterious way that I can't quite describe with words, the Triune God Himself pays the debt we can't pay. He lifts the burden we cannot. But the story continues: Jesus ends up defeating Death, conquering it.<sup>18</sup> He does not stay dead. And He brings that Life to us.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is a story about God providing. And it hints, points, foreshadows a reality that is almost too great to comprehend: that on the Cross, in the moment of the Crucifixion, God is the sacrifice. Himself.

God doesn't demand we sacrifice.

God doesn't give instructions for sacrifice.

God is the sacrifice.

The idea of substitution says that in the movements of salvation, God is always the active agent, and that somehow, the reconciliation of humanity to God happens when God puts himself in Man's place, and puts Man in God's place, as a sheer act of grace and love. As Karl Barth wrote:

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54-55 – Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

*The very heart of the atonement is the overcoming of sin: sin in its character as the rebellion of man against God, and in its character as the ground of man's hopeless destiny in death. It was to fulfil this judgment on sin that the Son of God as man took our place as sinners. He fulfils it [the judgment] as man in our place, by treading the way of sinners to its bitter end in death, in destruction, in the limitless anguish of separation from God. . . . We can say indeed that He fulfils this judgment by suffering the punishment which we have all brought on ourselves.<sup>19</sup>*

God provides for sin.

God provides for reconciliation.

God provides for a way to beat Death.

God provides for a way to be released from guilt.

God provides for a way to be cleansed from sin.

God provides a way for His presence to dwell with people.

God provides.

But it costs Him.

Because it's not rams, or goats, or lambs. Something much more costly is needed.

Something much more powerful.

God Himself will be the sacrifice.

He will substitute Himself.

God is the acting agent. God provides the ram in Genesis 22. And in the New Testament we see that God provides the Lamb, too. But the crucial difference between the *Akedah* and the Cross, finally, is that the Father is **NOT** sacrificing the Son. God the Father and God the Son together, with a single will, sacrifice for us and for our salvation.

Abraham's story (Genesis) is pointing us to the fact that God provides. And what does the provision of Jesus mean for humanity? The other two images come into play here. Jesus brings rescue (Exodus) and cleansing + forgiveness (Leviticus).

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19 Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 253.

## **THE STORY OF ISAAC AND ABRAHAM SHOWS GOD'S HEART FOR US**

Just like God provided a ram for Abraham, God the Father and God the Son together, with a single will, sacrifice for us to secure our rescue, cleansing and forgiveness at great cost to both of them.

## **THE PASSOVER LAMB SHOWS GOD WILL RESCUE US**

Just like God rescued the Israelites from slavery to Pharaoh through the blood of the innocent, spotless Passover lamb, God rescues the world from slavery to the powers of Sin and Death through the blood of the innocent Jesus.

## **THE DAY OF ATONEMENT SHOWS WE CAN BE CLEANSED + FORGIVEN**

Jesus is just like the two goats, whose bloody sacrificial death provided 1. cleansing from the effects of sin (to remove all guilt and shame) and 2. forgiveness of sins (so that we might re-enter God's presence and live with Him).

## **THIS STORY AS AN INVITATION**

For Nadia, this experience with her beloved grandmother Dee Dee provided her with a way to understand what self-sacrificing love is. For the Apostle Paul, this story of Abraham and Isaac provides a way to understand the radical self-sacrifice of **GOD** for His people, for their benefit. For Paul, the death of Christ is proof positive that God is "for us" because in a real way, Christ died "for us."

Abraham's simple line *The LORD will provide* would become immortalized as the name of the place, but it might almost be called Abraham's lifelong motto. One of the invitations of this story is to live by the same confidence that Abraham did. Not because Abraham was so very good, but because in this story **GOD IS**.

Abraham's complete certainty of the provision and help of God, together with complete openness as to details, makes Abraham's refrain in this story "The LORD will provide" a model reply to the most agonizing questions of life.

When life falls apart – and friends it will fall apart – we come together to remember and remind each other what kind of God we have. We remember the lengths that He will go to ensure our rescue and salvation. For many Christian theologians, the

story of Abraham and Isaac is a foreshadowing of the profound words of Paul. God provides. He sees our deepest needs and he solves our deepest problems. There is no place too far for God to go, no problem too impossible for God to solve, no cost too high that God will not pay it so that we can have Him and have Life.

As the Apostle Paul would later write, in one of the most poetically beautiful passages in all of Scripture:

#### ROMANS 8

<sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## THE POWER OF A TRULY GREAT GIFT

I have thought a great deal about the power of what Nadia's grandmother did for her. How much love it showed. I think that Nadia honored that gift by sharing that story with all of us.

But imagine if Nadia *wasn't* moved by the sacrificial, loving gesture of her grandmother. What if Nadia had just shrugged and said, "Whatever. I was a kid. Kids make mistakes. Big deal."

Man, that would be a tragedy, wouldn't it? If someone like Dee Dee gave a gift that expensive for the sake of showing her deep love to her granddaughter – and the granddaughter just shrugged it off. Or if she remained trapped in guilt and shame for the rest of her life, rather than accepting the love and forgiveness from her grandmother? That would be a tragedy.

Yet.

Can we be honest here? That's what so many people do. Right?

That's sort of what I do sometimes.

Growing up, I was always taught that God's love, God's grace and Christ's sacrifice were "free gifts." In fact, I was told that grace was an acronym that stood for God's Riches At Christ's Expense. See. If you underline the first letter of each word in that clever saying, it spells GRACE. It's like a Bible secret decoder ring.

But there's an implication in the overuse of the word "unconditional." Ironically, it was full of conditions, namely that it conditioned me to believe that nothing was required of me. That I didn't have to do anything. That God has done everything, so I am free to kick back in this Barca Lounger of God's Grace and Relax in this Gift. That God gave it to me, and wouldn't **DREAM** of requiring anything from me because that would make the gift **NOT UNCONDITIONAL**.

But.

Although God's gifts are absolutely incongruous to what I deserve, and are absolutely given prior to my action, God's actions and grace are a gift that is supposed to accomplish something. Something in me.

Now, some of you are getting antsy. We all know that we cannot work hard enough to somehow earn God's love, or gain His favor by performance. This is not about earning. The late theologian and philosopher Dallas Willard once wrote, "The path of spiritual growth...is not a passive one. Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning. Effort is action. Earning is attitude."<sup>20</sup> Or put another way: some gifts are so good, they require a response.

Three examples that might help. When I was a high school English teacher, we had end-of-year ceremonies, where we would honor various students. I loved this night. Because I taught primarily seniors, this night was often very emotional for me, as it was toward the end of the year and my journey with these students was coming to an end. Each department got to nominate one guy and one girl from the Senior Class to win that department's Student of the Year. They would get a cord they could wear at graduation, to distinguish them, and they'd get a little asterisk symbol next to their name in the program to designate their award.

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20 Dallas Willard, *Live Life to the Full*, Christian Herald (U.K.) April 14, 2001, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/live-life-to-the-full>

Now, in this setting, giving someone this award “without conditions” would be a misuse of this gift. Imagine giving a math award to someone who was terrible at math and hated the subject. Or giving it to a toddler, “We know you can’t count, but here you go.” You don’t give a criminal a “Citizen of the Year Award.” This defies logic. And why?

Because sometimes, particular “gifts” have a particular purpose. This awards night was meant to **DO** something. To be effective at some end. In this case, the goal of this “gift” was to honor the student’s passions and hard work – thereby communicating one of the values and purposes of education. It upheld the inherent value of that subject or discipline as worthy of one’s best efforts. And it cemented the student/teacher dynamic, giving the mentor teacher a chance to affirm the giftings and skill of the student.

This award had a purpose.

Some gifts have a purpose.

Like in 2002, when I took my girlfriend, Traci Nicole Kozma, to Shakespeare’s Garden in Golden Gate Park on a sunny afternoon and gave her a diamond ring that was worth more than the car I was currently driving. That gift had a purpose. The purpose was to articulate her value to me, and propose my intentions to marry her, thereby creating a new and different future for both of us.

The goal of that gift was to be **EFFECTIVE** at creating that future. And it worked. She said “yes.” She’s been stuck with me ever since. Pray for her. You have no idea what this woman has been through, being married to me.

Now, imagine she took that ring<sup>21</sup> and said, “Wow. Thanks!” and stood up, walked to her car and drove home. And when pressed, imagine she said, “What? Gifts are supposed to be non-circular. You’re not supposed to expect something in return. That’s what all gifts are about.”

To which I would say, “Not **THIS** gift.”

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21 Which again, was the most expensive thing I had ever bought up until that point, and was worth more than my 12-year old Honda Accord whose alternator belt was slightly off so it sounded like a witch being boiled in oil every time I started it...

Because some gifts have a purpose.

Or imagine a father turning the company he has spent his life building over to his son. That gift has a purpose – the father wants the son to know that “everything I have is yours.” The father wants to share not only leisure and family time with his son, but because of their shared common vocational skills, he also wants to pass on his business acumen and passion. This is a relational gift. There is a goal to this gift – to increase the bond and communicate the love and devotion of a father to his son. It would be unconscionable for the son to take the company and quickly sell it for profit, pushing out the father, and then retire to rural Ohio. First off, who retires to rural Ohio? No one. Second of all, it’s a complete violation of the intent of the gift.

This is what God is doing with Abraham. As we covered last chapter, God’s actions are a gift, an invitation and a promise, but in a very real sense, the promise of God’s blessing is also implicitly tied to the call to walk with God.

It’s not unlike a wedding ring. It’s a call – a request – an invitation – to commitment.

There *is* an expectation of reciprocity in God’s gift of Jesus Christ. As Biblical scholar John Barclay writes, “God’s grace is designed to produce obedience, lives that perform, by heart-inscription, the intent of the Law.”<sup>22</sup> It’s the Jesus Creed proclaimed by Jesus: love God and then love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>23</sup>

Which is the final lesson of Genesis 22.

Genesis 22 shows that Abraham is all in.

And Genesis 22 shows that God is all in, too.

Both of them. From this moment on, Abraham and God’s stories are blended and merged. God will go on to identify Himself as “The God of Abraham.” Abraham is

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22 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, ) 492. This book is the longest one I read during my seminary education (thus far), clocking in at 656 pages.

But it was one of the more profound. If nothing else, read Chapters 1-3 (in Part I) and then the conclusion, Chapter 18. This will shape your theology of grace.

23 As Scot McKnight wrote, “God’s gift of Life in Christ... is about God’s love—being loved by God and loving God—and therefore, through that circular gift, those who are loved by God love one another.” Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2019), 170.



tied to God. He's called a "friend of God." He's referred to as the father of anyone who walks with God. Even today, multiple religions consider Abraham to be the father of their faith.

The implications of this are quite large. Apparently, we humans have real agency. God will treat us like real sons, and real heirs. This is not pretense.

And how did this happen? How did this change happen? How was Abraham's story knitted to God's story? Was it because he was so valorous? So smart? So perfect in following the moral law?

Nah.

Abraham just decided to receive the gift.

Some gifts are too good not to respond to.

And some gifts are so good, so charged with love, so overwhelming they change you.

Just ask Abraham.

## KEY LESSON

# 4

Abraham shows us in this moment that  
**LOVING GOD** means **WE EXPECT GOD TO BE GOOD.**

- We believe God will provide.
- Especially in moments when life falls apart.



## CHAPTER 09 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What impacted you the most about this chapter? What questions did the chapter bring up for you? What was the most helpful part of the chapter?
2. In this chapter, Nadia was given an assignment to choose something — an object — that was valuable to her and share why it's important to her. What would you choose? Why is it important to you? What does it represent? What memories do you have when you see that object?
3. In the story of Nadia, she ran away and hid after breaking Dee Dee's pearl necklace. Have you ever experienced a moment when life fell apart (something physical or emotional) and there was no way to put it back together? Describe your feelings. How do you answer the question "Where was God?" or "How could a good God allow this to happen?"
4. How do the combined stories from Genesis 22, Exodus and Leviticus inform your perspective on what the Cross of Jesus Christ means? How do the three images work together to communicate the complex and powerful work God is seeking to do in humanity and in the world?
5. What did you think about the links between the story of Isaac and Jesus? Was anything new or surprising to you?

6. BibleProject claims "*the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus.*" Are there any ways that this story of Abraham has - in your mind - pointed to Jesus?
  
7. What comes to mind when you think of the word "gift?" How did your family of origin give gifts? What are examples of various gifts in our culture - some that have an expectation of reciprocation, some with no-strings-attached, and others?
  
8. Read this quote by John Barclay: "God's grace is designed to produce obedience, lives that perform, by heart-inscription, the intent of the Law." What are the implications of this sentence? What does it mean to accept God's gift of grace?
  
9. After reading this book about Abraham's story, how do you now define "loving God?" How does it relate to "loving others?" What have you learned about God? About Abraham? About yourself?
  
10. What are some ways you can be more intentional with loving God and loving others as a response to being so well loved by God?

## EPILOGUE

### WORLD WAR I

As I write this epilogue, I am flying back from a wedding where I was honored to be the officiant. It was the 61st wedding I have officiated – but the first time one of the parties getting married was a widower. Five years ago, the groom lost his wife tragically to cancer, leaving him alone with his newly born son. Can you imagine?

And yet. Years later he met a young woman. They were married today. The song they chose to play for their recessional thumped with joy as the gathered friends and family stood and cheered and clapped as they walked into their new life. Its words struck me:

*God of mercy, sweet love of mine  
I have surrendered to Your design  
May this offering stretch across the skies  
And these Hallelujahs be multiplied*

Now on the plane ride home, the man in the seat ahead of me on the other side of the aisle is watching a movie. It was the 2019 Sam Mendes film *1917*, an epic cinematic masterpiece whose staggering genius and Oscar-winning visual storytelling is probably not best experienced on a five-inch screen on the back of an airplane seat's headrest.

But whatever.

That film was the last film I saw in a theater before the pandemic. It haunted me then. It haunts me now. As I watch that film play out in front of me, glancing at my co-traveler's screen every once in a while, I am reminded of Abraham.

In that movie, we follow the journey of two English soldiers – Blake and Schofield – who are caught in the fog of war during World War I. Their impulses are Darwinian; just don't die. Make it through the war and get back home. That was their vision. This was their view of life.

But then these two soldiers are given radical clarity of a new Vision. Their General tells them that the next day, at dawn, a large regiment of soldiers in a forward

position was going to march into a deadly ambush. Their job was to race across enemy territory and deliver a message that will stop 1,600 soldiers from walking into a massacre. Including Blake's own brother.

In the span of mere minutes, Blake goes from sleeping under a dogwood tree to willingly leaving the safety of the trenches in the front lines to attempt to save his brother. And throughout the course of the film, we watch Schofield turn from a begrudging and reluctant participant, to one who owns the mission to the point of being willing to sacrifice even his own life. He takes on the Vision.

But these two young men were never given details. They are simply told to leave their trenches and enter No Man's Land, where Death reigned. They were not given a clear map. There were no GPS coordinates. I found myself thinking how much less dangerous their mission would have been if they only had a drone with an HD camera. They could have proceeded with surety and confidence. Their fear would have been nearly eliminated.

But they did not have those things. They were never told *how* to accomplish the mission. They were only given a mission so large, so important, so compelling that it called them to leave and risk death.

One could argue that the story of *1917* is not so different from the story of the life of Abraham, who found himself caught up in a story far bigger and far more dangerous than he could have ever imagined.

The things God did and said provided the vision. And like Blake and Schofield, he was not given a map. He was not told *how* things would come to be. He was given a vision. A call. Not much else.

But the things Abraham did *in response* to those unconditional, utterly gracious gifts become the model for our mission which is faith, trust, and obedience. We take the mission into ourselves and live it out. We find a way to make it happen.

This also reminds me of the Apostles, who found themselves caught up in a story far bigger and far more dangerous than they could have ever imagined. From fisherman to being on the front lines of a Cosmic War. Somehow, the story and life of Jesus changed them, too, from comfortable and selfish to willing martyrs.

Immediately after this powerful film ended, I sat in my seat, in silence, thinking about all this. The man in front of me started another movie, promptly. It was the film *Sonic the Hedgehog*. He just jumped right into it. There was no pausing for reflection. No deep pondering of the meaning of life. Just a cartoon, anthropomorphic blue hedgehog, wearing white tennis shoes. I got all judgey, and then was like, “Wait, Jim Carrey is in this? That’s kinda cool.” Ugh. How quickly we lose the plot, huh?

## DRIVER’S LICENSE

My son, Justus, got his driver’s license two weeks ago. A few days later, he secured his first job. I have a bowl of marbles on my desk at work, with each marble representing how many weeks I have left with him until he graduates from high school and leaves the house for college. Every parent has roughly 936 weeks – 936 marbles – from the time your child is born until they graduate high school.

There are 100 marbles left in the jar.

Next week, it will be double digits. God. I’m running out of time.

Soon, like Blake and Schofield, he’ll be “leaving the trenches” of safety at home and entering a world without the protection of the things he’s been used to. I was reminded of that when we were logging the required 50 hours of driving practice. You never realize how many dangerous, horrible, distracted drivers are on the road until you’re teaching one of your kids how to drive.

I don’t know what joys and what tragedies await him. I don’t know how life is going to go. And I am reminded of that every time he backs out of the driveway and drives away. His job is only 2 minutes – like .75 miles – away from our house but I still have him text me when he arrives. I’m practicing letting go. I’m not good at it. He matters too much to me.

But here is the terrible truth: I can’t protect him. I can’t.

That’s why this book matters to me. It’s why Abraham matters to me. It’s a field guide for the messy, dangerous, awful, beautiful, thrilling, good world we all live in. The world my son (and two years later, my daughter) will be entering.

I'm so incredibly grateful for the Scriptures in general, because they reveal who God is, show me how to live life with God and change me, and without that, I would be lost. But in particular, the account of the life of Abraham has meant so much to me. It's given me a guide to hand to my children. To help them navigate. It's a calibration. A compass. A way to self-reflect and self-correct in a confusing, ever-changing, unpredictable world.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives a powerful message to the people, offering a stunning vision for life.

#### DEUTERONOMY 6

<sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

What a vision. As my kids prepare to leave the house, the story of Abraham has allowed me to share with them wisdom about what it means to walk with God and to love God. It's allowed me to talk with them, as we sit at home and (drive) along the road. It's a prayer when they lie down at night, and before I drop them off at school.

### **1. LOVING GOD MEANS BEING LOYAL + COMMITTED TO HIM (Even if it costs you)**

My son and my daughter – only God is worth your ultimate allegiance. Do the inner work, fight the inner temptation to give your ultimate loyalty to anything or anyone else. In the words of Jesus, if you seek God first, above all, everything else that's good in this world will be thrown in.

### **2. LOVING GOD MEANS TRUSTING HIM (Even when it doesn't make sense)**

My son and my daughter – trusting God – not only with part of your life, but with the entirety of your life – will require vast courage. Do the hard work of



understanding your own (often confusing) motives and your own (always confusing) fears. Don't see/desire/take, but rather be a person who hears/listens/obeys.

### **3. LOVING GOD MEANS WE SEEK JUSTICE**

**(We live right, do what's right and help set things right)**

My son and my daughter – in a world where sin twists individuals and society – in a world filled with oppression and injustice – love what is right and do what is right. Even if no one seems to notice. Even if it doesn't look like it's making a lick of difference. God wants His people to embody righteousness and justice. It matters. For your sake and the sake of everyone you meet.

### **4. LOVING GOD MEANS WE EXPECT GOD TO BE GOOD**

**(We believe that God will provide, especially when life falls apart)**

My son and my daughter – in times of uncertainty, when you feel like you are flying blind, or worse, that your own instruments are lying to you, trust that God is good and that He will provide. Even if it seems impossible. Remember that on the day Jesus was killed, His loyal friends and followers thought it was the worst day in history, but God wrote a new ending, bringing forth Life and turned it into the BEST day in the history of the world. This is what God does. Abraham's refrain "The LORD will provide" is a model reply for us in the middle of the most agonizing questions of life.

After our final seminary class of the semester last month, right before the end of our two-day session together, Gerry was lecturing on Genesis 1, on the nature of man, on the *Imago Dei*, on how we are created to be God's *tselem*. And then he just stopped. He then looked at us.

*I think we dramatically underestimate how righteous we can be. How much God wants to do in us. How much God wants to do through us.*

This arrested me. Yes, sin is a corruptor, and no one on this planet is sinless. But the Bible does show us that it's possible for a person to labor to be a faithful covenant partner with God. Not perfect, for sure. And the temptation is to say, "Well, I know I'm sinful, and will mess things up and fail, so why even try?" But the challenge in Scripture is that God, His word, and His Spirit – are all resources God has

marshalled to help us. We're not "only human." We have God with us, too. And if we determine to, we can live a life that is much more righteous than we think. That has much more impact on this world perhaps than we could imagine.<sup>1</sup>

I pray the lessons we've learned from the story of Abraham help guide my children toward God. I pray that they, like Abraham, get completely caught up (body, mind and soul) in a story and with a God who's bigger and better than they could have ever dreamed. I pray that they participate with God as He helps them become more and more righteous.

I pray the same for me and my wife.

And I pray that for you, dear reader, too.

May it be so.

Amen and Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> I am reminded of Mark 4:20 where Jesus said, "Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

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**Oftentimes, when people hear the term “love God” they interpret it to mean something like, “read your Bible” or “pray” or more simply “go to church.”**

**But what does it mean to love God? Is it something we do? Something we feel? This is compounded by the fact that the English word “love” itself is so elastic in its meaning.**

**I “love” tacos, but I also “love” my mom. What?**

In this book, David A. Tieche examines the life of Abraham and shows that in the ups-and-downs of his story, there is a helpful, practical, real-world definition of what it means to LOVE GOD. By examining four key moments in Abraham’s life, we see four key ways that Abraham lived out what it means to love God. And even though Abraham lived a long time ago, those four key lessons can help us navigate life today and teach us how to love God.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



David A. Tieche is a teaching pastor at WestGate Church in San Jose, CA. He is the co-author of *The Grown-ups Guide to Teenage Humans* with Josh Shipp, *Straight-Up: Honest, Unfiltered, As-Real-As-I-Can-Put-It Advice for Life’s Biggest Challenges* with Trent Shelton and *I Take My Coffee Black* with Tyler Merrit. He lives in the Bay Area with his wife, Nicole, his two children Justus and Jaelle, and their Westie, Jack-Jack.