

The background of the cover is a photograph of a desert landscape seen through the dark, irregular opening of a cave. The cave's interior is in deep shadow, while the exterior scene is brightly lit. In the foreground, jagged, reddish-brown rock formations are visible. A prominent, tall, thin rock spire stands in the center. To its right, another rock formation features a natural rock arch. The sky is a deep blue, transitioning to a lighter, yellowish glow near the horizon. A bright, white crescent moon is positioned on the left side of the frame. Several small, white stars are scattered across the sky. The title "Soul Journey" is printed in a large, white, serif font, centered over the upper portion of the cave opening.

Soul Journey

Jerry D. Ousley

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Revised January 2024**

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By Jerry D. Ousley

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who have embarked on the greatest journey of their lives. It is a journey that may take you through the valley of the shadow of death. It may result in persecution, ridicule, for some, perhaps death. But your journey will ultimately end at one place – before the very throne of God Almighty. Hang in there. Keep on track in your journey. You will make it. I promise.

Jerry D. Ousley

Introduction

We had planned to take a few vacation days from our jobs to attend a denominational conference. It was to be held in Virginia and we had decided to take our kids along. Jeremy was nearly ready to graduate high school and Megan was still in grade school. Of course, the kids really weren't excited about a conference and my wife and I felt a little bit guilty for taking vacation time that should have been experienced in a positive way by the whole family. You make many good memories that way.

Perhaps we shouldn't have done what we did but in the long run we did the best thing. We called the college in Virginia and cancelled our reservations and they started the wheels on getting our money returned. Then we made plans for a real family vacation. We had to let Jeremy in on what we were planning but gave him strict orders not to tell Megan and so we revealed to him our plans to pretend to go to the conference when in reality we were going the complete opposite direction to Sandusky, Ohio and Cedar Point Park.

At that time Megan didn't have a very good sense of direction so when we left, we allowed her to believe that we were heading south to Virginia. She didn't seem to notice. Jeremy held out all the way to Columbus, OH and he just couldn't take it any longer. He was begging to let the cat out of the bag and so we finally caved and let him tell her what our true destination was.

Megan was mad at first because she thought that Jeremy was teasing her. She just didn't believe that her mom and dad would do such a wild and irresponsible thing. But when we finally convinced her that we weren't going to the boring conference in Virginia but to the fun and exciting Cedar Point Theme Park instead she was ecstatic. Suddenly the journey was fun and exciting and we all had a great time.

Whether we know it or not, we are all on another kind of journey. It is the journey of life and, although most people think of it in the physical sense it is spiritual. Regardless what we believe, we walk this spiritual journey each and every day of our lives. Just like a physical journey, our spiritual one is affected by choices that we make or don't make. A journey has a specific goal to reach in the end and even though many adventures may sidetrack us during the way the ultimate purpose of the journey must be kept in focus.

Abraham embarked on such a journey that was both physical and spiritual. His was one of faith, stepping out into the unknown and trusting the word of a God Who was

still a mystery to him. His choices would affect all of his descendants and even the world to come.

Just like Abraham, in our own journey our choices affect more than just us. The choices we make will be reflected in the lives of our children, wives, friends, co-workers and really in everyone who touches our lives. Abraham didn't always make the right choice and neither will we. The great thing about the God of this spiritual journey is that He will always teach us even when we make bad choices. He did it for Abraham and He will do it for us.

Come with me now and let's embark on this journey of the soul. There's much to learn and a lot of trails to cover as we go. When we are finished, we'll find that we are really just getting started. We'll walk roads we have never seen. We'll see places of which we never dreamed. We may not know from one day to the next exactly where the path will lead that day but we will and can know the final destination.

Are you packed up? Think you're prepared for anything? Don't feel overly secure in that feeling because life is always throwing obstacles in the road as we go, but let's follow the Guide and I know we'll get through okay –

Chapter 1

The Journey Begins

Genesis 11:26-32

“And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there. So the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran.”

(Genesis 11:31-32)

What a day! They had been busily packing for the trip to go - where? Well, they weren't sure of that. All they knew was that their father, Terah, had informed the family that they were leaving the place where they had grown up and called home all their lives. He didn't really give them an excuse either. One day he had just come in and said, "Get your stuff packed up. We're leaving Ur." And so, they left with Terah leading the way. There was Abram, Abram's wife, Sarai, Abram's brother, Nahor, Nahor's wife Milcah, and Lot, the son of Haran who had died some time before.

They set out across the desert with all they had and journeyed west. They traveled for what seemed endless days across extremely rough terrain, in scorching hot conditions, to finally arrive at an Oasis in Northern Canaan. Terah decided that this was far enough for now and so they settled down and called the place "Haran" after his deceased son. Here they stayed until Terah died.

What made them just up and do that? Why did they have to go so far? Why would they ever strike out not even knowing where they were going? The Bible doesn't answer any of those questions but I believe I know why. I don't possess any special revelation from God on this, but I think I know Terah's heart. I believe he was grieved at the loss of his son, Haran. We don't know much about this individual except for his name mentioned a few times here in Genesis 11, but his father must have loved him dearly. I believe the grief was more than he could take and as he looked past the gods of Ur and into his own heart and he seemed to hear another voice calling to him. This voice told him to leave Ur.

He was ready for a change of scenery anyway after his son's death. After all, everything here was a constant reminder of his son. I can imagine how he remembered Haran growing up in Ur. If the order of the names of his son is any indication of age (and it usually is), Haran was his youngest son. You cut your teeth with the first one (which was Abram in this case). You learn a little more with the middle one. But by the time the youngest comes along you're more laid back. You've seen the mistakes you made with the other two and you've seasoned out somewhat. You tend to be more lenient with the youngest and you also tend to have more fun with him. Haran held a special place in Terah's heart.

But he was gone now. Terah lost interest in whatever his occupation had been in Ur. When this voice suggested leaving, he was ready to go. He didn't care where, just away. And so, they did.

The Bible doesn't record that any of the rest of the family objected or questioned, though I think in their minds they thought, "Pop has fallen off his rocker!" There seemed to be no question as to whether they were going or not. They followed Dad. They trusted his heart.

Abram (whose name, by the way, means "Exalted Father") and the rest of the clan seemed satisfied with this. They set up a household in their newly formed town of "Haran" and things went pretty well – for a while. But there came a day when Dad became sick and it seemed that he just couldn't shake it off. Terah died.

The Bible doesn't tell us anything about how Abram and Nahor felt regarding the death of their father in this new, strange land, but if I'd been there, I believe I would've been asking, "God, why did You bring us all the way out here where we don't know anyone, then let our father die? What is the purpose in all of this?" It wouldn't be long before Abram would discover the answer to those questions. But for now, he seemed stuck in a rut.

LEARNING TO TRUST GOD

We have to learn to trust God. He will put us in places and in situations where it seems that we just can't understand why. Over time we come to know, but when it first happens it seems like God has surely made a mistake this time. That's because God knows the future. He has a plan for each of us and He knows the paths we must take to get where He has chosen for us to be.

We have to follow His plan. When God puts those seemingly "weird" ideas in our heads, we can choose not to follow Him. But if we do, we usually find ourselves later in life trying to figure out what went wrong. Abram could have chosen to stay in Ur when his father left, but there was a strong urge to go with him. It changed his life forever.

He could have chosen to return to the land of Ur and just blend in with everyone he knew back there. Whatever his dream job may have been, then would have been the time to return to fulfill it. But he didn't.

He could have chosen to just stay in Haran and live the rest of his days as a shepherd with his remaining brother. Would that have been all that bad? Not if that had been what God wanted but it wasn't.

We must learn to trust God. He knows what is best because He knows what's ahead. If we really believe that then trusting is just a matter of following His instruction. The hard part is learning to trust His word. Let's face it, not many of us would be raring to pack our bags and leave for good just because we heard a strange message in our heads, would we? But will the journey really begin until we follow those instructions?

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

It's not always the most profitable route financially. Perhaps we've been trained for a job that could earn a three-figure income. But God has urged you for many years to enter missions or pastor a congregation. I'm here to tell you, there aren't many missionaries or pastors earning-three figure incomes. But is it all about money? Or are there higher, more fulfilling things to consider here? I believe there are.

Following Abram really means following God, for that is what Abram did. As we move through his life's story, we will see a pattern to Abram's journey that always, in the end, led him closer to God. That path never failed to take him in the direction God was going. Sometimes it led down some pretty strange looking roads, but that was where God was going, so he tagged along.

That's what we've got to do today. We've got to tag along with God. We've got to follow Him regardless of how strange the road looks or whether it seems the road has disappeared altogether. I'd say that's how Abram felt after the death of his father, Terah. Thank God, he didn't turn around and head back to Ur. Praise the Lord that he chose to stay where God had led his father until he had a chance to hear from God for himself.

THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

Sometimes God will take us right out into the middle of nowhere and simply leave us for a few days. What's that all about? It's about character. God knows we need it and He knows exactly what type we need. He will put us into those situations that will build the character we need to do the job He has in mind for us. It may not be the way we'd do it, but God really does know best. He may not follow conventional paths to achieve the same goals but we've got to follow Him for He knows exactly where He's going and what we're going to find when we get there.

We must learn to trust, believe, and obey Him. As we do, we will find ourselves less stressed about life and a whole lot happier during the course of our journey. Most people can't see it. We are trained all our lives to follow only what we can see, to trust our senses and go with what we know as being the surest thing possible. But God says, "Follow me," then steps out on the water, or heads into a storm, or perhaps to the edge of a sea with the enemy hot on our heels. That doesn't seem very smart or very logical. But God has a plan. He knows that He can walk on water and so can we if we hold to Him. He knows that all He has to do is to speak a word and calm the storm and as long as we're with Him we'll be safe. He knows that He can smite the sea and it will divide, leaving a path of dry land on which to cross. God knows.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DON'T FOLLOW GOD?

We always get into trouble when we don't follow God. It may not seem like the safest thing to do, or the best route to take, but God's way is always better for He can see the future and He knows the outcome before we ever start.

Perhaps you've spent years running from God's way. Maybe He has been speaking to your heart and you have chosen to ignore Him all these years. The good thing about God is that as long as He is speaking to you it's never too late. We may not have spent years in the peace of following Him but the time spent with Him, whether it is long or short, will always be the best time of your life.

Sure, there will be trials. Definitely there'll be hardships. God never said that the road would be easy. It may even be harder than the road you are currently on. So why do it? Why give up what seems good for you now for something more difficult? Only because you'll be walking with God - and that's always the best place to walk and the best journey to make.

Chapter 2

The Voice on the Road

Genesis 12:1-5

“Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.”

(Genesis 12:1)

A *fine* Christian lady I know told me about a couple who made a radical change in their life. They had raised their children, saw them grow into adulthood and joyfully watched as they got their own lives established. They had a very comfortable home, two nice automobiles and a very handsome income. It seemed that they had paid the price and now were ready to settle down and enjoy life for themselves.

They had earned this hadn't they? They had provided for their family and had sacrificed to be where they were. They deserved to kick back and take it easy for a while. They could afford to take a nice long vacation to somewhere exotic and just disappear for a time. But they didn't.

Instead, they sold everything they had, settled up with their creditors, took what was left and headed to the mission field. They gave up their well-deserved life of comfort for a life of poverty in a foreign land. Why would they do such a thing? I don't know these people personally, but I think I know why they did it. They heard a voice. It was a voice like none they had ever heard before, telling them that if they would be obedient, they would be blessed in ways they could never imagine. As I said, I don't know these people, but I have no doubt that as they fulfill the leading of the voice, they will receive exactly what He promised them.

Abram heard this voice. After the death of his father, who had taken them to Haran by Divine direction, Abram probably thought that he would spend the rest of his days there. But he heard the voice. The Bible doesn't tell us if it was an audible voice or a voice in his spirit, but it was unmistakably clear. "Get out of your father's house and go to a land that I will show you." At this point no destination was given only the instruction to go. It was undoubtedly the voice of God. He told Abram that He would do some specific things for him if he'd just be obedient to what he was being told.

THE CLEAR DIRECTION OF GOD

It is important to know that Abram had clear direction from God, even if it was only one step at a time. We must also have clear direction from God. All too many

times we see a good work and do it only to fail. Our failure is not in the fact that what we did wasn't a good idea or a good thing to do. It can be a totally unselfish act of love, but if we have not heard clear direction from God we will most likely fail.

In today's congregations we are taught to mimic what has been a success. If it worked for that congregation surely it will work for ours. When it doesn't, we ask, "Why?" Have we not duplicated what worked? But we tend to forget that God doesn't always work in formulas. God has a plan for each body of believers. What may work for one may not work for another simply because it isn't what God wants. Rather we should be seeking what His clear direction is for our group and our own lives.

THE NEED TO BE NOTICED

Because of his obedience Abram was promised several things. The first thing he was told was that a great nation would come from him and his name would be great. It was the promise of fame and notability. Everyone wants to be known. In a world filled with people it is a struggle to be someone others know. You have to do something extreme or be tremendously talented to be noticed. Otherwise, you are just another "one" in the multitude. God got Abram's attention with this promise and it wasn't just empty words. At this point in his life Abram didn't know a lot about this newly found God but somehow, he knew that this voice would not let him down.

Don't we still have this desire to be noticed? Perhaps we never vocalize it but I believe that each of us has a need for others to pay attention to what we have to say and who we are. Even children have this craving. They will demand attention even if they have to do things that will get them into trouble. So do adults. We have a need to be counted for something.

But the voice may be taking us away from notability. It may seem that we will vanish into obscurity. Again, follow the voice and the promise will be fulfilled and we will be noticed in a way that will point others to the voice for themselves.

MARKS OF SUCCESS

God promises us the same thing even now. But not in the way most people think. In today's world we are taught that to be a success we must meet the measurements of men's standards that are usually graded in numbers, dollars, and followers (these are the things men think will get us noticed).

Jesus taught that the one who would be great would be a servant to all (Mark 10:44). To people this doesn't make sense. The servant is always considered to be the least. But in the kingdom of God the servant becomes great. I saw this illustrated one time in the life of a man. I don't remember his name and I only saw him one time, but I'll never forget that experience. I was in a barbershop waiting my turn to get a hair cut. There were several men in the shop that Saturday morning, just shooting the breeze. This fellow walked in and he immediately began speaking to others in a way that made you feel welcomed and comfortable. They talked small talk for a while and then the barber spoke up and said, "I sure wish I had a cup of coffee. I had to rush out this

morning and didn't get any." This man immediately got up and said, "I'll go get you a cup. Would anyone else like one?" Then he left.

While he was gone another man in the shop commented that this man was one of the wealthiest men in the county. He could have anything he wanted, and he made a good impression on most everyone he met. Why? It was because he made himself a servant. He didn't put on airs and didn't flaunt himself to others. People noticed him. I don't know to this day if he was a Christian or not, but he certainly proved the words of Jesus about being a servant and he was well liked and noticed for it. It was, I believe, his key to success.

God may not make a great nation from each of us but He will make us a part of the greatest nation on the face of this planet if we turn our lives over to Him. No, I don't mean the United States of America, but the Kingdom of God. We become aliens to this planet and citizens of Heaven. There, regardless how many are present, each and every one is special and great. But to get there we've got to follow the voice.

BLESSINGS

Abram was also promised that he would be blessed. The word "blessed" means to be "congratulated" or "praised." It feels good to be lifted up. God was telling Abram that he would be lifted up, congratulated and praised because of his obedience. As a consequence of being congratulated and praised, we are made happy. There really aren't a lot of happy people in this world. If you don't believe me, just take a stroll some day down the street of the town or city in which you live. You will see a few smiling faces but most will be in a hurry, expressing a frown, and glad when you are out of their way.

However, God can make us happy. When we think of being blessed, we most often think of receiving material things. Being blessed can include "stuff" but the real blessing is not in the tangible but in the elated feeling of being lifted up.

When we come to Christ and are obedient to His calling we are also blessed. Prosperity teaching tells us that the blessing will come in material things and it can, but it is not the things but the feeling that elates us. Being saved from sin and death by the sacrifice of Jesus makes us blessed, but we are also blessed in knowing that this present world and life is not the end at all. Knowing that we live on after this life is to be blessed. More importantly, knowing that the life after this is in the presence of Christ for believers is even more of a blessing! But first, we've got to follow the Voice.

BE A BLESSING

God also told Abram that he would be a blessing. Jesus had once said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35). Many today would disagree with this statement. It is another one of those positive-negatives that Christ taught. But those who have spent their lives in giving know what He was talking about. How wonderful it feels to give to others and see their joy and thankfulness in having a need met. We get the "cart before the horse" way too many times! To be a minister is not to be elated

above others but to be a servant to others. To be a blessing is much better than to be blessed, for in being a blessing we will always be blessed as a consequence.

To be a blessing to others should be one of our ultimate missions in life. Can we reflect the nature of God in any other way? He is our blessing and so as we reflect Him in our lives, we become a blessing to others and in order to do that we've got to follow the voice.

GOD'S REACTION TO BLESSING AND CURSING

God then told Abram that He would bless those who blessed him and likewise would curse those who cursed him. What a freedom for Abram. In that day and in that land, they were obligated to take revenge on their enemies as well as the enemies of their relatives. In this statement God freed Abram from that responsibility. God would be the one who would take revenge on the enemies of Abram.

My wife was from a family of twelve children. I have heard her say many times how that those kids could fight amongst themselves all they wanted to. They could physically exchange blows and even hurt each other and it was okay. But you let someone outside the family hurt one of them and you'd have the whole clan after you.

This is what God has promised to those who are obedient to Him! He is watching out for us. He said, "*Vengeance is mine*" (Romans 12:19). What God was telling Abram He also tells us that He will get even with those who do us harm. We don't have to worry about it because He will take care of it. Isn't that great? However, in order to experience this, we must be willing to follow the voice.

THE EXTENT OF BLESSING

The last part of this promise is the ultimate part of the promise. God told Abram that in him all the families of the Earth would be blessed. The ultimate plan of God was to bring a Savior into the world to redeem man from the curse of sin. God was going to provide blessing for every family on the face of this planet through Abram. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, would come through his lineage. What better promise could a man receive than to know that because of his obedience to God each and every person in the world would have the opportunity to be blessed!

The Messiah is still blessing today. That blessing comes through our lineage every time we win a soul to Christ and the blessing is perpetual. We win someone to the Lord and become blessed. Then that person wins someone else to the Lord and they are blessed. We share in that blessing because of our original obedience. The one who witnessed to us is blessed and so on and so on. What a wonderful promise! All in the world can potentially be blessed as we are obedient to the commission to tell the world about Jesus! Once again, to be a blessing that affects those around us we must follow the voice.

WE DON'T HAVE TO GO ALONE

And so, Abram left. But he didn't go alone. He took with him his wife, Sarai, and his nephew, Lot. They packed up their belongings and struck out after the voice of God.

It is important that we follow the voice of God but God never told us that we have to go alone. We should take everyone with us that we can. We want to share the Good News of the great Divine call we have received to "go" and invite them along.

Not only do we want to take everyone with us that we can but we need to find someone we can tag along with. We don't have all the answers – just the direction from the voice. But He has provided fellow believers who can help us along the way.

They went forth into the land of Canaan and into the land of Canaan they came! As we set forth towards the promised land of Heaven we must continue on and "into the land of Heaven we will go!" But never forget to follow the leading of the voice of God. He is speaking right now telling us what our next move should be. Are we listening?

Chapter 3

A New Vision

Genesis 12:6-8

“And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel, and he 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.”

(Genesis 12:8)

Few people in this world have been graced with an actual appearance from God. Abram was one of those few. Whether in the form of a theophany (which is a big word that simply means God showed up looking like a man) or whether He was in a bright light or something else, we are not told. We are only told that God appeared and Abram knew it was Him. Actually, Abram had several such encounters with God during his life, but this was the beginning of a new era. It was the beginning of a nation. It was, indeed, the beginning of the Jews.

The Bible also tells us that Abram built an altar there, and the original language suggests that it was on the very spot where God had appeared. In this case the altar wasn't meant so much for sacrifice as it was to be a memorial to the spot where God first showed up. He had heard His voice when he was instructed to "go." But now, in one form or another, he had seen just who this voice belonged to. It was such a significant incident that he marked it with this altar.

The Bible tells us that Abram was in the Oaks of Moreh when God appeared to him. The King James Version translates it as the plain of Moreh but the original language suggests that it was more of a forest area. Either way, it wasn't in a city but in a sparsely populated place. He was also in the land of the Canaanites. Abram found himself in a deserted area where he didn't know even the few that were around. He was basically alone except for Sarai and Lot.

I believe that this was significant. Today, we need a new vision of God. We need to have a visitation from Him. But we have so filled our lives with business and other things that demand our attention that we just don't seem to have the time to get into a frame of mind in which we can fully concentrate on Him. I am suggesting that somehow, we find that place. It could be in a city. It could be in the woods. It could be in the privacy of our own homes. But it must be in a place where our minds are not cluttered with what we have done, what we are doing and what we must do. When we arrive at that place, we can hear from God and see a new vision of Him. Perhaps we won't have a physical encounter. Most likely we won't. But the spiritual encounter that let's us know that we are in His presence is still the same.

WE MUST BUILD AN ALTAR

When we have that encounter, then we must build an altar. This altar is not so much of a physical monument as it is a mark in our souls. We mark the place where we encountered God. Why? So, when we begin to fill ourselves up with other things and obligations again, we know where we must return. We can go back to that place in our spiritual lives and be renewed over and over again.

The question becomes, “Just how do I do that?” The answer is really easier than you might think. We encounter the presence of God while we are engaged in our worship of Him. I’m not talking about just singing a song or going through a ritual. While these things can be a part of worship, at best they can only set the mood for worship. The action of worship only takes place when we are fully focused on God, the awesomeness of who He is, and the insignificance of our own selves, and we humble ourselves before Him in praise and adoration. As we do this God shows up and we find that we are spiritually standing in the presence of the Almighty.

That’s the spot to mark. Not a physical place in a building, not an especially heart moving song, and not the ritualistic performances, but that place in ourselves where we can focus on Him. That’s the place.

MOVING TO A MOUNTAIN

Next, Abram moved to a mountain. We all need to live on a spiritual mountain. We will not spend all our days there. We will journey up and down the mountain. We will go through spiritual valleys during which we may even question God. But the key point is that our home is on the mountain. We can return over and over again to this place where we are protected and feel comfortable.

My wife and I love the solitude of our home. It is where we can kick off our shoes and sit back in the recliner. It’s where we can let our hair down and not have to be on guard all the time as to what we say or do. I don’t mean that we say or do wrong things there. But let’s face it, everywhere else we must be careful not to give people the wrong impression. We are constantly checking ourselves so that we don’t offend others.

But our home is where we know each other. We can relax and not be concerned about what others think. Everybody needs a home like this. Everyone needs a place and some time where they can kick back and rest.

We need this spiritually too. We must have the time and the place in our Christian experience where we can just be unconcerned about everything except our relationship with God.

JUST ANY MOUNTAIN WON’T DO

But it can’t be just any old mountain. The mountain that Abram moved to had Bethel on one side and Ai on the other. During the days of Abram Bethel was called

Luz. Moses, the writer of Genesis, used the name “Bethel” because his readers knew where Bethel was while most would not know about Luz.

This place was first called Bethel by Abram’s future grandson, Jacob. When Jacob had fled home in fear of his brother, Esau, his first night was spent here. Luz was a short way in the distance but he didn’t go there. He had a need to be alone, so he made a pillow out of a rock (I’ve always wondered how comfortable that was) and had a dream that he would remember for the rest of his life. This was where he saw the angels ascending to Earth and back to Heaven on a ladder. He awoke the next morning and made a pillar as a marker from the rock he had used for a pillow and renamed the place Bethel which means “house of God.” He vowed there that if God allowed him to return to that place, he would serve Him. God did allow him to return nearly 20 years later. This time he was not alone but had two wives, two concubines and eleven children with him. He had servants and livestock and had become a very wealthy man.

We need Bethel, the House of God near our mountain. I’m not talking about living next door to a church building but just knowing that God is not far off. Having Bethel near us means that we are aware that we can get in touch with God when we need Him. It also serves as a constant reminder that having God as a neighbor means He knows everything we do and say. Living close to Bethel means that we are staying close to God even during our “kick back” time.

On the other side of Abram’s mountain was a place called Ai. Later, when Joshua was leading the Children of Israel in conquest of the Promised Land, they had an encounter with the people of this town. They had just finished the battle at Jericho and had seen the great and mighty way that God had helped them in defeating the city. When they came to Ai, they saw that it was a much smaller place and instead of sending out the entire army and talking with God about what to do they just sent out a part of their forces thinking that Ai would be a piece of cake. They were wrong.

The people of Ai flooded out of their town and put the Israelites to flight. As they returned to camp with “their tails between their legs” so to speak, they were confused. Why had God allowed them such a great victory at Jericho only to be embarrassed at Ai? Had they sought God’s direction before going into battle with Ai they would have probably found out why. But they only sought God after their defeat. Aren’t we like that today? All too often we use God as the last resort instead of going to Him first. How much time, money, and embarrassment might we save if we’d just get it into our heads to always seek Him first and not move until we had heard His instruction?

What they found out was that there was sin in the Camp. A man named Achan had disobeyed the instruction given by God in the matter with Jericho. God had told them to destroy everything but Achan had spotted a garment he just had to have, along with a bar of gold and some silver. He took these things and buried them in the ground under his tent. He probably thought no one would ever know and later on, when they had conquered the land, he could wear his new clothes and spend his gold.

But God knew what Achan had done. He always knows. He’ll let us get so far in our disobedience and then He’ll let us know that He knows. Achan had to pay with his

life for the sin he had committed. We must remember that they were under the Law then, not grace. When this incident had been dealt with, and then they sought God like they should have done in the beginning, God gave them the plan and, to make a long story short, they defeated Ai. But it had cost them dearly.

We need our own Ai near our mountain as well. You see, we don't want to get too sure of ourselves. We need to remember the times of our disobedience so we won't do it again. Our mountain must be a balance of the glorious things of God but still have "checks" in place to keep us from making the same mistakes over and over. We would if we weren't reminded.

ANOTHER ALTAR

So here was Abram. He had seen God. He had marked the spot so he could return if he needed too. He had moved to his mountain and had situated himself between the "House of God" and "Ai." Now he built another altar, this time one on which to worship God. The Bible tells us that here he called upon the Name of the Lord.

After God has appeared to us and we have marked the spiritual spot so we can get back to it if we need too, and we have moved to that mountain on which we live with "the House of God" on one side and our "Ai" reminder on the other, we can begin to worship God in spirit and in truth as Jesus taught. We erect our spiritual altar and come before Him each and every day of our lives.

Some have routines they do when worshipping God on their mountain like reading so many chapters in the Bible or studying a daily devotional. That part is important but being moved into that attitude of worship is even more important. We must spend daily time with God.

The biggest argument against spending time with God, especially in this busy demanding day we live, is that there doesn't seem to be any time. But frankly, if we really want to do it, we will find a way. If we will be honest with ourselves, especially here in the United States of America, if there is something we want or want to do badly enough, we will find the time and money to get it or do it. Am I right? I know that I am (in this case anyway). The key is "how badly do we really want it?"

God will make an appearance to you. You can build your spiritual monument to Him. You can find your mountain to move to with "The House of God" on one side and "Ai" on the other. You can find that place of spiritual solitude and build your altar of worship. You can, if you really want to. Do you want to?

Chapter 4

The Journey Requires Truth

Genesis 12:9-20

“Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.”

(Genesis 12:13)

“I just can’t figure this one out,” these puzzled words were spoken by Jim Sawyer, one of the greatest backyard mechanics I have ever known. He was helping me work on an old Chevy Impala along with his brother Ron, and my wife’s brother, Gary Akers. Now these names may not mean much to you, but the combined knowledge of these three men about auto mechanics was more than phenomenal. It was like having Bill Gates come to your house and personally work on your computer.

The car had been running extremely rough and they had been trying to figure out why. I had performed several “fixes” on it myself, the latest of which was to change the spark plugs. Anyone who knows very much about cars knows that the spark plug has to be exactly the one made for that engine and it has to be gapped just right. What these men didn’t know was that I had bought these plugs at Wal-Mart. I had stuck one of the old ones in my pocket so I could be sure to get the right set. But Wal-Mart didn’t have the exact plugs for my engine. I was in a hurry and didn’t want to make another stop and so I pulled the old plug from my pocket, sized it up and purchased the one made for a Chevy engine that most closely matched.

When I installed them, I accidentally broke one of the new ones and so I thought, “A spark plug is a spark plug, right?” So, I put one of the old ones in its place. I did notice that they were slightly different but I made sure to gap them exactly the same.

I began to sweat a little as these three men surveyed the situation. Then, Jim took one of the new plugs out. Would he notice? Not at first. Not until he took a second one out and guess which one! You got it, the old one. Now the plot began to fall into place. One look at these two plugs together and he knew what was wrong. The three of them looked at me. How could I admit to my mechanical ignorance in front of these three greats? So, I stretched the truth. “I bought these at Wal-Mart.” That was all I said. I didn’t actually tell a lie because I had bought them at Wal-Mart. What I did do was to let them believe that it was Wal-Mart’s fault and they bought it. This was followed by several “Wal-Mart jokes” which took the pressure off of me - for a while.

They all surmised that all I needed to do was to return these mixed plugs back to Wal-Mart and buy a new set – The right set and I'd be back in business. With that they left.

I had dodged the bullet and saved face in front of these backyard mechanical artists but the Holy Spirit in me just wouldn't let it go. I wrestled with the situation for a couple of hours before the guilt compelled me to grab up the phone. I had to call all three of these men and tell the truth. It wasn't Wal-Mart but it was me, my ignorance, and my laziness.

It wasn't easy, mind you, but I did feel much better afterwards. I suspect that deep in the recesses of their minds they suspected anyway. I had tried to deceive them and the Holy Spirit wouldn't let me do it, but at least my Christian witness was still intact even if my pride was pouting in the corner.

ABRAHAM'S DECEPTION

In the text we see Abram still journeying toward the south country. A terrible famine hit the land and so Abram continued southward into the land of Egypt. This was a more civilized area. The kingdom was more organized than those from which he had come but also had the "undesirables" that you find in any city and Abram feared for his life.

His wife, Sarai, was a "knockout." The Bible describes her as being a very beautiful woman. Abram could see it all in advance: Pharaoh would take one look at his beautiful wife, desire her for his own harem and Abram would be history. A quick slit to the throat and Sarai would be Pharaoh's for the taking. So, Abram had a talk with his wife as they were entering Egypt. "Do me this kindness, honey. When the people of Egypt see you, because you are so gorgeous and all, they'll not think twice about killing me and taking you. If you'll just explain to them that you are my sister, then I won't have to bite the bullet. You can see my point, can't you? You don't want your hunk of a man dead, do you?" Of course, this is paraphrased a bit but it's what I read between the lines.

We'll see later on that this wasn't completely a lie just like my story to those mechanical greats wasn't completely a lie. I did buy those plugs at Wal-Mart. I just hadn't told them the whole truth. Sarai was Abram's half sister but by the customs of their day, because she wasn't from the same exact two parents it was legal for Abram to marry her. They had the same father but not the same mother. Abram was just not telling all of the truth to the Egyptians (See Genesis 20:12).

It all went down just as Abram suspected. He might have been a coward in this situation but he certainly was no dummy. Some of Pharaoh's agents saw Sarai and recommended her to Pharaoh. When he found out that she was Abram's sister, sure enough, he took her into his harem but just hadn't done anything yet (if you know what I mean). I've always wondered what Abram was doing the few days Sarai was out of commission in Pharaoh's palace. The Bible is silent on that except to tell us that Pharaoh showed great favor to Abram by awarding him herds of livestock and servants (both male and female) in abundance.

But reckoning day surely came. God had plagued Pharaoh and his household because of Sarai. The Bible doesn't say just what that plague was but I suspect it was something sexual to keep him away from Sarai. God is gracious to us even when we don't deserve it. Somehow Pharaoh found out the truth and called for Abram. He wasn't going to kill him because he wanted out of this plague, whatever it was. But he did get rid of Abram and Sarai. He let Abram know in no uncertain terms that he knew what was going on and then told them to get out of Egypt. Abram took Sarai and all the gifts he had been given and left.

THE ART OF DECEPTION?

I can't help but feel that he was somewhat embarrassed but God still worked it all out for his good. He still had his wife and left a wealthy man. But he paid a price. Not only did he suffer the embarrassment but in the coming generations this deceptive spirit was carried on. His son, Isaac, pulled the same trick that Abram had pulled in regard to his wife (but his was an out and out lie). The greatest deception was done by Abram's grandson, Jacob whose very name means deceiver. There is always a price to pay.

Deception always comes back to haunt us. If we get away with it, we will inadvertently teach it to our children by our example just as in the case of Abram and it will be a source of embarrassment and regret.

Deception has been around ever since Adam and Eve were tempted by the devil in serpent form in the Garden of Eden. Eve was deceived into thinking that if she ate the fruit that God had told them not to eat that she would know good and evil and be equal with God. Adam was then convinced by Eve to eat too (there are some extenuating circumstances here but we'll save that for another time).

Mankind has been deceiving himself ever since. We try to make ourselves right with God by comparing ourselves to others. "I'm just as good as he is!" we might exclaim. And that's very true. But we are being deceived in that because we can compare ourselves to every person on the face of the Earth and are as good as any of them, but we are still inadequate in the eyes of God.

We deceive ourselves by saying things like, "God understands me," "He loves me anyway," and "He knows that I love Him." It is true that He does understand us, He does love each of us, and He does know our hearts, but that doesn't justify us any more or any less. It doesn't change our need to be saved in Christ. God loves us despite ourselves. He loves each and every man, woman, boy and girl on this planet. But that doesn't justify our actions. God looks deep into our hearts and, yes, He does understand us, even more than we understand ourselves, but it doesn't change the fact that we are sinful without the shed blood of His Son, Jesus Christ.

JUSTIFICATION

We can justify ourselves by saying, "God knows my heart and knows that I worship Him." Again, it's true that God knows your heart better than even you do. But if we are not being obedient to His Word then we are still being deceived.

Our hearts are deceitful even when we don't want them to be. It all comes from our original sin. We must come to know that the only way we can rid ourselves of it is by accepting what Jesus Christ did for us at Calvary. This requires us to stop justifying ourselves. That is much easier said than done. But it is an absolute requirement if we really want to be successful on our soul journey. It is time (and in many cases way past time) that we be completely honest with ourselves and with God and admit where we are wrong, lay our cards on the table in plain view ask forgiveness if we need to and move on.

BLESSINGS ANYWAY

The last thing I would like to discuss is that even though Abram left Egypt in shame, he also left much wealthier than he was when he entered the land. He came to Egypt with his wife and nephew Lot and perhaps a few scraggly animals. He left with flocks, herds, and male and female servants. God is good to us even though we don't deserve it. I'm not going to try to put a formula on God or place Him in a box that says when we repent or do or say the right things that He is bound to bless us. No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not God. I don't pretend to understand everything there is to know about Him. But I do know this: He has a plan. That plan could include wealth or it could include poverty. It could include a life of ease, or a life filled with persecution. The fact is, God knows what He's doing.

We said just a little bit ago that God knows our hearts even better than we knew them ourselves. Because of this He forms a plan for our lives based on what is going to be best for us. He sets a path for us that will lead us ultimately to Heaven, but also through the hills, woods, valleys, and meadows of life that will form us into what He knows we can be and what will be the best for us. It may not seem so now. It may seem very unfair. But in the end, we'll wind up being blessed for it. That much I will guarantee.

Don't be deceived. Don't be a deceiver. Let God lead you instead. Our spiritual journey requires truth. We must be truthful with others, with ourselves and with God. Of course, God knows when we aren't being truthful to Him. But He will allow us to cruise under the guise of a lie for a while giving us time to rectify the situation. But rest assured at some point He will bring it to light, not to embarrass us or make us look bad but because He knows we can't have a good journey without the truth.

Chapter 5

Going Back Home

Genesis 13:1-4

*“... to the place of the altar which he had made there at first.
And there Abram called on the name of the LORD.”*

(Genesis 13:4)

Going home is always a good thing to do. I suppose that if you spent most of your average day at home it may not be so special, but when you are gone from home most of the day then it is an oasis in the desert of life.

Many people make a career out of the Armed Forces and I admire them for being able to do so. But it wasn't for me. I tried it for three years at the end of which I was extremely happy to finally be "free." God had graced me with a wonderful assignment and I never witnessed actual combat but still, it was not the life I had envisioned.

Anyway, my time was up and all I could see was the road back home. It felt good to be back in the arms of my lovely wife and to see my young son again. When Dorothy, in "The Wizard of Oz" said, "There's no place like home," I don't think she realized that she was speaking prophetically to me.

Home represents that place where we escape from the pressures of the day – Where we can be who we really are. I don't want to be redundant because we wrote two chapters ago about this mountaintop home Abram chose. Remember? It was located between Bethel – The House of God and Ai – The reminder of our sin and failure.

The famine had driven Abram into Egypt but now that he had been "thrown out" of the country because of the deception concerning his wife, Sarai, there was no place to go except home. It seems strange to say that he went up to the South because we usually think of south as being down. The scripture here is referring to the southern part of Canaan referred to as the Negav. This is the place meant by the scripture and it was where home was for Abram.

Abram had left the land of Egypt a very rich man. But he also left in shame. The people of Egypt had a bad taste in their mouths for Abram (but his great-grandchildren would be back). Of course, we aren't in this world to win a popularity contest (at least not most of us), yet it's never a good feeling when others don't like us.

He had deceived Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. He hadn't stood very tall as a man in the sight of his own wife, Sarai. His wallet may have been loaded but he didn't have much reason to hold his head up. It was definitely time for a trip back up the mountain. It was time to try to make sense of it all. It was time return to God.

He had built his altar there. Not much was said on the way back, I suppose because Abram could only hope that God would forgive him and somehow make restoration. Finally at his altar he once again called on the Lord. From the epic accounts to come God did make restoration in his life and returned honor to Abram.

NO "I TOLD YOU SO'S"

Isn't that just like God? He will allow us to wallow in our pain or embarrassment because of our mistakes. He knows that as we contemplate the situation, whatever it may be, that His true children will find their way back to their altar and do what they should have done in the beginning.

Have you ever noticed how that in most situations in the Bible God didn't spend much time saying, "I told you so?" He will even stand back and let us fail knowing where we're headed. He does this because He knows that our rebellious spirit will drive us to do things our own way despite His warnings.

God has all power and He could very well force us to do the right thing. But He chooses not too. He knows the best lesson we could learn is one we have learned the hard way. One of my uncles had a saying that is very simple yet very profound. He said, "Education is always expensive." Whether we get it by paying tuition to learn it in a classroom, or get it by experience, there is always a price tag attached. It may not be in dollars but it will cost us.

God will let us make our mistakes because He knows that they will drive us back to Him. That's why He doesn't spend a lot of time saying, "I told you so," because back to Him is where He wants us to be. If it takes letting us fail, He will do it to get us back where we belong.

My wife and I worked with kids in our ministry for many years. A lot of those kids are now adults. I can't tell you how many times we have met one of them in a supermarket or other public place and, regardless of whether they attend church now or not, they never seem to forget the good times they had in the youth group as a kid. That's because once you've had a taste of what it's like to be around God, you'll never forget it, and you'll never be satisfied without it. Abram didn't forget either. At this point in his life there was only one place he wanted to be: Back where his altar was between where God lives and his own failure. There he could call upon God and he knew he would get answers.

It's the same with us. Regardless of how far down we have fallen we know we must get back to the place where we met with God - The sooner the better, because things aren't going to improve for us until we do. Many may procrastinate or come up with an excuse for not returning, but they will also tell you that they know what they must do.

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

Over the years I have heard much controversy over what Christians refer to as the “unpardonable sin” (see Matthew 12:31). Jesus said that all manner of sin and blasphemy (speaking defaming words against God) would be forgiven except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Many definitions and doctrines have been built around this statement. Some believe that if we simply speak against the Holy Spirit that we are guilty of this unforgivable sin. It has been argued over the centuries. I know that I don’t have all the answers but let’s just stop and think about this for a moment.

Jesus paid the price for all our sin for each and every person who has ever lived on planet Earth. His supreme sacrifice did the work. All we must do is to accept Him and He will forgive us of our sin. I know that there is no work we can do to earn salvation. It is a free gift given to mankind. But there is one thing we have to do to be saved. We have to accept His sacrifice. We have to have His blood applied to our lives. Without this one act we cannot be saved.

If we die in our sin without ever accepting Him as our personal Savior then He can’t forgive us. If we are not forgiven then we are not saved. We die in our sin. We die without the blood of Christ applied to our hearts. That is unforgivable because we have chosen to not accept Him. That is the unforgivable sin – The sin of not accepting Christ. It is blasphemy to the Holy Spirit for by our action we have stated, “I don’t need God. I don’t need to be forgiven. I don’t need the Holy Spirit in my life.”

By the same token, if we try to live good enough to be saved apart from the grace of God through Christ Jesus, then we are denying the very power of what He did on Calvary. We are walking without God. We are saying, “I can do it myself.” We can’t. We can only be accepted through Christ Jesus and by allowing His saving power to fill our lives with the Holy Spirit.

Do you follow what I’m saying? Do you understand the importance of coming to Christ in true heartfelt repentance for the very sinful nature that is in us? We need Him. We can’t do it on our own. Trying to do it ourselves becomes unpardonable because we have denied His power by trying to do it on our own.

There is one other way we can blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. That’s by knowing the love of God, experiencing His power and might, knowing the word and then denying Him altogether once and for all. I can’t imagine why any Christian would ever do this. How could one who has experienced God’s love and understands what it is all about, turn away from Him and deny the working of that power in their lives? Yet, it happens. It’s like “kicking” the Holy Spirit out of our lives. If we do this then we are in danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit because we have made Christ’s sacrifice ineffective in our lives. There remains no other sacrifice for sin. We are at the end.

HE HAD TO GO HOME

Abram knew that he had done wrong. He knew that he had to get back to God. He had to go home. How many of us are in that same situation right now? How many of us know that we have done wrong and sinned against God? We know that there is only one solution. So, let's take our journey with Abram. Let's return "home," back to our altar, and back to God's grace and mercy.

I firmly believe that when we repent of our sin that God forgives us of every sin we have ever committed and forgives us of our very sinful nature. But I also believe that this is only the beginning of our trips to the altar to repent. Every time we sin, we need to repent. Why? Because it shows that we know we have done wrong and sinned against God. We aren't showing or proving anything to God. He already knows all of this. But it is important that we know. We must realize in our own lives that we need to return to God, that we need His forgiveness not just once but every day of our lives.

It's time to get back to the altar. Come with us. Let's trek down the road that leads back home.

Chapter 6

The Cost of the Witness

Genesis 13:5-18

“Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you.”

(Genesis 13:17)

Two men were fishing in a boat. They had been good friends for many years and their occasional fishing trips were just icing on the cake. This particular cloudless, warm day, as a gentle but cooling breeze swept over the otherwise still lake, the fish had only been nibbling at their lines when they decided it would be good to move to a different spot and try their luck.

Hank, who was slightly older than Bill, wanted to go to the south side of the lake, but Bill insisted on going to the north end. Hank reluctantly agreed and kept his thoughts to himself even though he was slightly perturbed at having to give in to Bill. "Perhaps they could try it for awhile and if it was no better then they could go to his spot," he thought as Bill started the trolling motor.

The bass boat slowly and quietly moved in the direction that Bill had indicated and Hank gave his rod and tackle a "once over" as Bill maneuvered the craft. Hank decided to change the hook on his line while in route to their destination.

The boat belonged to Hank but he had no problem allowing Bill at the helm. He was slightly upset with Bill for insisting on going to the opposite end of the lake from where he had wanted to go but it would pass, that was until Bill steered the boat into a rock. It hit with a thud which scratched the bow a little but fortunately didn't do serious damage. Now he was beginning to feel angry at Bill. "Man, watch where you're going!" he said, raising his voice to his friend.

Bill felt a little offended at Hank for doing this and said, "Hank, what's your problem?"

"What's my problem?" exclaimed Hank, "You've just got to have your way and I gave in to that, but now you recklessly hit a rock in the water and scratched my bass boat. Money doesn't grow on trees for me, you know. Just take it easy."

They didn't speak for several moments and Hank continued working at changing the hook on his fishing line. Finally at the spot Bill had chosen, they stopped the boat and got ready to do some serious fishing, still slightly upset with each other. In silence

Bill cast his line into the water. Hank finished his job, swung his rod back to cast then with a quick jerk, threw it forward so as to obtain the maximum distance with his cast. But as he swung forward his rod gave a second jerk and he heard Bill grunt loudly.

He had hooked his line accidentally into Bill's fishing jacket and the jerk of the line had ripped a section of material completely away from the garment. Now it was Bill's turn to issue a few excited words of correction, "What do you think you're doing man!"

Hank looked down at his line and saw a "hunk" of red material hanging from his hook. He was just getting ready to defend himself with a few choice words of his own when another boat pulled up along side of them. It was Joe, a mutual friend that both men had been trying to get to go to church, "Hey, how's it going fellows?" "I should have known I'd see you guys out here. It must be great to have such a special friendship like you guys have. See you later," and just as quickly as he had pulled up, he "trolled" away, "I might just take you guys up on that church thing this Sunday."

Bill looked sheepishly at Hank and realized how foolishly they had been acting. What if Hank had let go on those "choice" words when Joe had pulled up? It might have blown months of work they had done trying to get Joe into church. He looked down at his ripped jacket and said, "Wow, Hank, I guess I should be thankful I had this jacket on. This thing will be a whole lot easier to patch than my chest would have been." Hank quickly apologized and even though they caught no fish that day, they went home with a much bigger catch than a stringer full of fish.

No matter how close we are, whether it is two best friends like Hank and Bill, husband and wife, or brother and sister, there are times we all get under each other's skin. We're human. But we do have to be on guard as to what we say in the presence of others for we are always on trial and our witness, whether good or bad, is always displayed by our words and actions. I'm not suggesting that we be a doormat or that we just lie down and let others beat on us. But we do need to be cautious.

Abram and his nephew, Lot, found themselves in a similar situation. They had both gotten very wealthy, as time had passed. They both had large flocks of livestock and as their herds enlarged, the land didn't. It was soon very obvious that they were running out of grazing room and so the herdsmen of Lot and Abram began to argue and fight amongst themselves over the best spots.

THE CANNANITES AND PERIZZITES

It was at this point that the Bible interjects, "And the Canaanites and Perizzites were then in the land." As I studied about why this line appeared there it seemed strangely out of place. But it was no accident, God had it put there for a reason. I believe that reason was because of their witness. They were followers of God even though somewhat new at it. All those around them were watching. This God they served was supposed to be a God of miracles and love. What would this strife between Abram and Lot show about this God they served?

We are constantly on trial. Our witness is not just that of ourselves but more importantly it is representative of our God. How can we tell others that God loves them and will change their lives if we are in constant division and strife? In the church of today, particularly in the United States, our witness is on the line. Our divisions are confusing but what's more confusing and harmful to the witness of the church is the accusations, words of condemnation, and even legal actions taken against other brothers and sisters in Christ. How can we portray a God of love to a lost world if what they see coming from our "love" is no different than what comes from the rest of the world?

MAKING HARD DECISIONS

It was at this point that Abram decided to do the right thing. He met with Lot and as they surveyed the land around them from Abram's mountaintop home he suggested to Lot, "Look at all the land around us. There is plenty of room for us but not together. You pick the way you want to go and I'll go the opposite direction. With this decision we can mutually agree and show our neighbors how believers in God can resolve these sticky situations."

Lot looked around. On one side were the mountains. This was a rough territory, and even though grazing land was to be found in the mountains the land toward Sodom was much easier to get to and a whole lot more inviting. Abram had made it Lot's choice and so he took the easy road toward the valley of Sodom. The Bible comments how wicked the people of that land was, even though it was very beautiful and was even compared to the "Garden of God," referring to the Garden of Eden. It was very fruitful but full of wickedness.

That's not unusual. The easy way is not always the best way. We will see in coming chapters just what a hardship Lot put upon himself. It becomes a lesson to each of us, for it is natural to choose the easy way. The path of least resistance is, of course, the most appealing. But in this world and in this life, there is really no easy way. The "good life" also has its hardships, trials, and even more temptations. Christians of today must be careful when choosing the paths set before them in life. The easy way doesn't always indicate the sinful way. But be aware of hidden dangers, concealed traps and snares, and innocent seeming temptation; because the devil is always out to lure believers in Christ into situations that will not only cause them spiritual harm, but will also badly tarnish their witness to others.

After Lot had rounded up his flocks and herds, his servants and belongings and had headed down the mountain towards Sodom, I feel certain that Abram looked towards the direction Lot was headed and felt just a little jealous. But then he looked towards the hill country, knowing that the way would not be easy but feeling satisfaction in himself that this bad situation had been remedied. It was then that God spoke to Abram again. "Abram," God said, "take a look around you. Look to the north, the south, the east, and the west. As far as you can see, I have given this land to you. You are going to have offspring so numerous that counting them will be like counting the grains of sand on the seashore. This land will belong to you and your descendants forever."

It warmed Abram inside to hear the promise of God. He had no reason to doubt Him, but it did take a lot of faith to accept God's words. You see, Abram walked in God's promise even though we will find out as we go through the life of this man, that the only land he ever legally owned was a small field that had a cave on it. He purchased this plot of land to bury his wife. He only had one son that fulfilled God's promise in the here and now even though he had several sons (one by a concubine and several more from his second marriage. It seemed that God had lied to him.

But God hadn't lied. Yet today, amidst great struggle, the land belongs to the seed of Abraham. Though the devil, through plots of man, has tried over the centuries to stamp out the seed of Abraham, it still thrives and is spread out over the entire planet. God doesn't lie. He brings His word into fruition. It will come to pass. It always has, and it always will, despite man's accusations.

THE SACRIFICE OF WITNESS WILL NOT GO UNREWARDED

God has given many promises to those who believe in Him. Those who have chosen to be marked by God and called Christians will receive the fulfillment of those promises. We just have to know that they will happen in the wisdom of God. We may not see them immediately. It may be years. It may be in our children instead of us. But it will come to pass and we can have peace in knowing that.

Don't grow impatient waiting on God's promises to be fulfilled. Instead, relax and have peace in knowing that they will happen. Don't fret and worry because God will not let you down. It just may not happen like we have envisioned. It may not come when we think it should. But it will come when it is most needed and at the best possible time.

Over the years I have heard so many express their hurt at God because they felt He had not come through for them. I must admit that I have felt the same way many times. But I have come to know that God's clock is always accurate and His way is always the best. All we really have to do is to not lose hope in His promises and not stop believing them. We just take each day as it comes and fill it with doing what God has told us in His word and we will see how He can work in our lives. The promise will come.

DON'T FRET – JUST MOVE ON

The last point I'd like to make is that God told Abram to move on. It was time to leave his mountaintop home for a while and move out into the land promised him by God. He had told Abram to get up and walk through the land he had just been promised. Abram obeyed. He packed up and went first back into Hebron to the forest of Mamre. He had built a memorial here to God at one time. But now the Bible tells us that he built an altar for worship.

He had been worshipping God on the mountain. But now God was telling him that he could worship Him wherever he went. That's a good lesson for us. We need places in our lives where we can get alone with God and worship Him. It is good and right that we gather together with fellow believers to worship God but if we only come

together once or twice a week in true heartfelt worship it isn't really enough. It is not practical to have worship service every day nor is it good, except on occasions.

What we really need to do is to make a daily altar everywhere we go. We need that special time in our personal lives to worship God. As we do, we will feel the presence of God around us every day. We will know that He is with us in the work place. We will know that He is with us as we drive our automobiles, as we do our jobs, as we play with our kids and as we live our lives. That's important. You see, it's not about who is closer to God. It's about whether we know God at all!

We need teachers in our lives. We need to hear the word of God from those who have been anointed and appointed to speak God's word. But we also need to hear it for ourselves as we read it in the Bible and as we hear it in our hearts. Build an altar in your heart today, wherever you are and worship God. Worship Him for promises already fulfilled, and worship Him for coming promises. He won't let you down.

Chapter 7

The Right Kind of Blessing

Genesis 14:1-24

“But Abram said to the king of Sodom, ‘I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing, from a thread to a sandal strap, and that I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich’”

(Genesis 14:22-23)

*I*t was “trick or treat” time. When I was a kid, we would begin at least a week before Halloween (I’m sure people appreciate limiting it to one night now-a-days; I know it’s got to be cheaper). For two nights I had collected a rather large booty and couldn’t wait to get home and dig in to my good fortune. But each evening, on the way home, sack bulging with candy and “good stuff” a bully would jump out of nowhere right in front of me on the sidewalk, grab my bag out of my hand and take off running. I would go chasing after him, crying like a baby over my loss and his gain. It was not only hurtful but also extremely humiliating.

But enough was enough! The next night when I went out, I found a nice, large, stick, more of a club. That bully wouldn’t get my booty tonight! I’ll never really know if it worked or not. Whether he was waiting for me in hiding and saw the “club” or whether he just had all he wanted and didn’t bother to show up, I don’t know. What I do know is that I got to enjoy my booty that night

Genesis 14 begins with a story about the kings of the valley of Siddim where Sodom and Gomorrah and some smaller villages were located. Four kings north of there united and decided that they were going to conquer these five kings of the Valley, and they did. The Bible tells us that the kings of the Valley served these other four kings for thirteen years and then decided to revolt. Their revolt resulted in their capture. They lost everything. The four kings of the north took their women, livestock, gold and silver. They left them with nothing (except probably a body count).

If you’re like me there have been times when you got tired of it all and just decided to revolt. Perhaps you’re there now. The problem is that our revolt backfires. We can make a definite decision to see change in our lives and situations but before too long we find ourselves right back in the same mess or worse. Generations of young people have been revolting for years but most times it winds up the same for each generation; they grow up and fall into the trap. Then we spend time wishing we had done differently. It seems like a hopeless cycle of life.

GOD HAS A PLAN

God had a plan of mercy for these people. Even though they were very wicked and godless, our Lord still loved them. He loves us all you know. Some think that God doesn't love us unless we come to Him, but that just isn't true. He loves all men, women, and children and He loves us equally. He desires for us is to come to Him and we cannot be saved or ever hope to see this loving God unless we come to Him in salvation, but that doesn't stop His love.

God's plan involved Abram. Remember that his nephew, Lot, had chosen the fertile green valley in which to graze his herds. He was taken along with the rest in the cities. The Bible doesn't record if Lot had a hand in their revolt. But whether he did or didn't he was still caught up in the whole mess. When Abram heard of what had happened, he didn't hesitate to organize his own servants, as well as his friends and neighbors, into a small army of 318. They strategically divided up, attacked by night and quickly conquered the enemy armies (it didn't hurt that God was with him).

I doubt very much if Abram would have been interested in this fight had it not been for his nephew, Lot. I wonder how many times Abram worried about his nephew in that wicked but beautiful land? The Bible doesn't say but it does tell us that he was quick to go after his "flesh and blood."

GOD IS ALWAYS INTERESTED

God is always interested in others. How many are in captivity in this world? They are held captive by drugs, alcohol, poverty, and a host of other things. Part of spreading the Gospel is meeting physical needs. The world today would want us to ignore these unfortunate individuals. It's much easier to sweep them under the rug than it is to do something for them.

I wonder if the reason many don't do something is of because the guilt they feel. Only by the grace of God "there goes me." It echoes in our brains. We are all only a fine line from prosperity to poverty. We put so much emphasis on our resources but forget that there are homeless individuals with PhD's. There are those who are trapped by these wicked slave masters who were once very successful in life. Only the grace of God keeps us from crossing that line. God wants us to be mindful of the captives who surround us. He wants us to be concerned with those who are held in bonds by sin, who are enslaved with habits that they cannot break, and are jailed in poverty. In order to get our attention, He will often put a "Lot" in our lives. He will allow someone we know to be taken captive or will put such a burden within our souls that we must act.

As we begin to do what we can to help to alleviate the pain of the people, then God will give us opportunity to reach the very soul of these individuals and turn their captivity captive. They become servants of the Almighty God who will change their lives forever. We can become the hands and feet of God. That's exciting.

Just as Abram attacked by night which gave him the advantage, so will God give us the tools and the strategy we need to have the advantage. With Him on our sides we

always have the advantage over the enemy, and though the battle may rage hard, we will always win in Christ.

LOOK WHO SHOWED UP!

After the battle some important characters showed up. The first was a man by the name of Melchizedek. The Bible tells us that he was the king of Salem. Salem means “peace” (it is the same as the Jewish greeting of today, “Shalom”). The Bible also describes Melchizedek as “the priest of the Most High God.” He came with a prophetic word for Abram. He called him “blessed.” The word “blessed” means to be rewarded, or to be made happy. Melchizedek told Abram that the possessor of Heaven and Earth - God Himself - blessed him! I wonder if this was a reminder to Abram that he wasn’t to touch the “booty” of the battle. God will remind us of those things that He has told us if we just listen.

Without hesitation Abram gave a tithe – one tenth of all the spoil - to Melchizedek. “Look out, there he goes, the preacher has always got his hand stuck out!” Actually, the tithe is the fairest and most efficient “tax” of them all. I would venture to say that if our own government would adapt a tithe as a way of funding our nation without exception or deduction, there would be plenty of money to “take care of business” with some left over. Instead, we have developed such a complicated system that we must have experts figure out what we owe. It is full of so many loop holes that many wealthy people and companies wind up paying very little or no tax at all while the “middle class” ends up footing the bill for everyone (okay, I’ll get off my soap box now).

This tithe that Abram gave was not a requirement but a voluntary act. And it always should be. We should want to finance the work of God but we cheat ourselves out of the blessing of God when we give because we have to.

THE TRUTH OF TITHING

I have a problem with “begging preachers.” I also have a problem with those who say that the ministry of God cannot continue unless people give, “and give until it hurts.” I say that God knows what He is doing. I appreciated Dr. Billy Graham’s response back in the early 80’s when so many famous TV evangelists were going down for fraud. He didn’t voice an opinion about what was going on. But what he did say on one of his TV crusades was that he was going to let people know that he needed their help but that when the financial help wasn’t there, he’d take that as a sign that God was done with him and he’d do something else. That was an admirable stand. It was also the truth. My God owns the cattle of a thousand hills. He is wealthier than any human being on the face of this Earth. When He runs out of finances, we are all in trouble. If God has ordained a ministry, then He will supply the need and we don’t have to resort to making people feel guilty just to get them to give.

The tithing system is important but it must be given, not required. As we joyfully give, whether that be money in thousands of dollars or “the widow’s mite,” whether it be time, work or whatever form it is given, when given willingly it not only holds a blessing for the receiver but also for the giver. Abram gave a tenth to Melchizedek, and he was blessed for it.

Abram found out that in being obedient to God in the battle and then in giving of the tenth that the King of "Peace" brought blessing to him. So, in our lives, the King of peace will bring blessing upon those who are obedient to him.

WHOEVER'S NEXT

Next the king of Sodom showed up. He wanted Abram to give the people to him and take the spoil of the war for himself as payment for delivering them from their oppressors. On the surface this sounded like a wonderful idea. After all, Abram deserved it didn't he? He had put his life on the line to rescue them and it seemed reasonable. But Abram refused. He wanted nothing to do with the evil in which they had been living and he didn't want it said that the men of Sodom made him rich. Much was on the line here. Who's to know that the king of Sodom wouldn't hold this over Abram's head for the rest of his life? I can hear it now, "Hey Abram, remember when we gave you all that stuff for saving our necks? By the way, we could sure use some help over here."

God knows what He's doing. He may seem to be keeping us from making a mint now by keeping us where we are. Perhaps you've got a million-dollar idea but you just can't get it off the ground. You pray that God will help you. He could do it you know. But for some reason He chooses not to. He has His reasons. He sees the future, unlike us (who can barely see the nose on the ends of our faces). He knows if we can or can't handle what we think would be good for us.

Paul said, "Let not your good be evil spoken of," (Romans 14:16). We must be cautious and use wisdom as to how we are "made rich" and by what means. Father really does know best. He knows what we need and if we'll just accept His way and learn to be satisfied with where He has us, we'd all be a whole lot better off. But we don't want to be so satisfied that we never want to move from where we are! Rather that we be happy that He has put us here for now.

I am learning something about happiness. You see I have had this longing all my life to do full-time service for our Lord. I have longed to do more for Him. But because I have always had to work a secular job in order to pay the bills, I have felt cheated. I have lived a good portion of my life longing for the day when God would put me in that position. Someday that will happen. But what God is teaching me is that happiness and contentment is a choice. We must determine that where we are for now and what we have is enough. We need to learn to be thankful for those things He has allowed us to have. As we become content then we can begin to be happy with who we are, what we have, and be blessed by those God has allowed to share our lives.

As we progress in this choice, we will find the God of peace coming to us and blessing us. We will be compelled to give not only a tenth but all we are, all we have, and everything we will be to our Lord. That is dedication. That is giving. When we put ourselves in this place God will help us win those battles and be blessed. I want that. It is the cost of blessing during our journey.

Chapter 8

Fear and the Journey

Genesis 15:1

“After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.’”

(Genesis 15:1)

“Ira, I don’t want to race today!” I said in defense of a strong feeling I had.

Ira was a neighbor boy whom I had befriended sometime before. As I recall, my brothers and sister had “built” a clubhouse constructed solely of a very large cardboard box we had found. But one day we observed a stranger playing in our clubhouse and we immediately set out to defend our property. What we found was this rather large boy about my age inside our clubhouse. He was playing all alone and I felt sorry for him because he didn’t have any friends or siblings to play with. So, we allowed him to be a part of our club.

From that day on Ira became a pest. He was constantly bugging me to do something with him. I very seldom said “no,” because I felt sorry for him. But this particular day I just didn’t want to race. To clarify, the race was a trip around the block on our bicycles. We did it a lot with other kids and each other. But this day I just didn’t have a good feeling about it.

“Awww, you’re a chicken!” screamed Ira. Those words could not go unanswered. “Am not!” I exclaimed.

“Why won’t you race me then? You’re afraid I’ll win!”

“No, I’m not! I could beat you any day of the week with my eyes closed!” I retorted.

“Prove it then! Come on, race me!”

“Okay, but let’s stay on the sidewalk.”

“The sidewalk? That’s for sissies. Come on, race me!” Ira insisted.

“Oh, alright!” I finally caved.

With that we were off. We rounded the first turn and I was ahead just as I expected I would be. I had a fast “stingray” bike and Ira had an old fashioned 26” job.

But after that first corner he was catching up fast. I wasn't wearing my glasses that day and so my vision wasn't very good but I could see good enough to beat this guy. Maybe he would stop bothering me for a few hours after I put him in his place.

But as we rounded the second corner, Ira cut in too close to the inside and sent me reeling. I lost control of my bike and went down on the pavement, knocking the wind out of myself. But what happened next was the scariest part of this story. I heard a loud screeching sound and when I looked up, I was staring at the underside of a car bumper!

God certainly had His hand upon me that day! Just a matter of inches and instead of a few scrapes and cuts I might have been in the hospital in very serious condition. Even then I knew that God had protected me and perhaps spared my life. He became my shield.

Needless to say, that was the last race I had with Ira, and if my memory serves me well, I didn't win very many more races around the block because I was too busy checking for oncoming traffic on those corners!

Abram had just returned from his battle with the Kings of the North during which he not only saved the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but also his nephew, Lot. The Bible doesn't tell us how many men those opposing armies had, but Abram's army was only 318 strong. Even though he went in the name of God and he had inquired of God before going it was still a fearsome feat.

DON'T BE AFRAID

Afterwards God spoke to Abram again and the words that He gave to him have echoed down through the ages to such notable figures as King David and others. God had made this same promise many times to those after Abram, but He made it to Abram first. God said, *"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward."*

When I read these great words of encouragement the first thought that came to my mind was, "I wonder why God told Abram these things after the battle instead of before it?" Wouldn't it have made more sense to let him know these things before the battle to give Abram more courage? Wouldn't it have given him strength to do what had to be done?

As I thought about this it dawned on me that perhaps Abram had these very questions on his mind. But God always has a reason. You see, first of all, by sending Abram out in faith, God was able to do a great work through him. Five different kings had united to withstand these four kings of the North who found themselves defeated with all their goods and their wives taken captive. They had been stripped to nothing.

Then Abram comes along with this small army of 318 men and easily wipes out the enemy kings. There had to be something else going on here. And there was. God was at work. God gave Abram the strategy and He Divinely gave strength to these men to defeat the enemy.

And so, He does today. He gives us His strategy in His word and in our hearts. As born-again believers God speaks to us in our hearts and confirms His words by the Bible. His Holy Spirit who dwells within us is always at work, warning us about wrong decisions and advising us about our every move. We don't always listen. I know that I don't. But we should. I could share with you many instances where I haven't listened to that still small voice within and I have paid for it. Listening requires us to be still. We must search our hearts and as we commune with God and listen to His answers. But because we are human, we should always confirm that by His word.

HINDSIGHT

Afterwards we can better understand what God is saying to us just as He did with Abram. "I am your shield." Abram could look back on what had just happened and identify with those times that the enemies' weapons should have killed him, but they didn't. God had been his shield. It means that He is always there to protect us from the weapons of the enemy. He blocks those fiery arrows and armor piercing bullets and stops those things that will do our soul harm. Now that all sounds well and good but why does tragedy still strike? Why do plans fail? It sure doesn't seem like He is shielding us sometimes.

It's because He knows what is best for us. There are times that wounds are good for us because of what they teach us. Sometimes God lets them through because He knows that we need that particular lesson. He sees way beyond what we can see and He is ever molding us to make us what is not only a useful tool for His kingdom, but also to strengthen and benefit us.

OUR SHIELD

But He will never let through what will destroy our souls. Only when He is finished with us on this earth will He allow our physical bodies to die in order to receive us into His physical kingdom. It is a journey. It is a trip from here to Heaven. There are many things we must learn along the way and sometimes the lessons are hard. It isn't because God gets some kind of thrill in seeing us suffer. He hurts when we hurt. But it is because He knows that we need it in order to be strengthened for what is to come.

He is our shield and He won't let through those things that will be bad for us. When we know that then those trials aren't so tough. Knowing is half the battle and although we don't have complete knowledge of the benefit of what is currently happening in our lives, we can know that His shield is up and He won't allow us to be tempted more than we are able to bear.

But sometimes we jump out from behind His shield. There are many instances in the Bible where people have done that. We have a tendency to get overly confident. We experience His protection and see the final result of what He is doing and we sometimes think, "I know He has control so I'll just jump forward and charge." If we are not moving by His direction and we jump from behind His shield we open ourselves up to things that He didn't intend to happen to us.

He uses these instances to teach us lessons. He will give us liberty to make our mistakes and lose a few battles to show us how much we need to stay behind His protective shield. How gracious is our God to use even our own failures and blunders to make us what He wants us to be!

OUR EXCEEDINGLY GREAT REWARD

Finally, God told Abram, “I am your exceedingly great reward.” Remember that after the battle God had told Abram not to take anything from the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. This was to keep Abram from being obligated to them. By keeping separate from them even in this respect he owed them nothing. But now God tells him that He will be his reward, and not just a simple reward but an “exceedingly great reward.”

God was preparing to give to Abram more than He could have ever expected or wanted. And God does that for us too. I know that many of you are experiencing financial difficulties. It seems that no matter how much money we make it is never enough. I know because I’m in that “boat” too. We give our tithe and we try to be mindful of the poor. We search our hearts as to what God would have us give in money, time, and energy. It seems that He is never giving back, but He is. We have all heard the teachings about prosperity. Some of those things are true and some are pretty far fetched.

I feel strongly in my heart right now to tell you not to worry. Remember who your exceedingly great reward is. Know that He will be there with the finances and funds just when we need them. There may be times that it seems like it is too late. But know that He will be there and it will always – ALWAYS – turn out for the better.

We must remember that in this we also sometimes jump out ahead of God. We try to make the way. We try to bless ourselves. When we do we make the situation worse. We have a tendency to blame this on God. But if we have gone ahead, it isn’t His fault at all. In these situations, we must swallow our pride, confess our wrong, and get back to where He wants us to be.

The reward of God may not always be in money. It may come in such a way that we don’t even realize it is being given to us. But I know that as we look back, we can see a trail of blessings left by God. We can see the progress made in our lives. He will be our reward and a very great one.

Just as God had Abram’s best interest in mind, so He does with us too. Rest in that. Know that He will take care of us if we are obedient to His will for our lives. Understand that He will not put us in a place or a position that will destroy us but will build us up. Just as with construction a mess has to be made before the beautiful edifice can be erected. And so, it is with us. Sometimes God has to move in the wrecking crew to get rid of all the junk before He can really begin to build. But I promise you, the final product will be more splendid than we could ever imagine.

He is our shield, and our exceedingly great reward! Don’t fear in the journey.

Chapter 9

Traveling Under Stars

Genesis 15:2-6

“Then He brought him outside and said, ‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.’ And He said to him, ‘lo shall your descendants be.’ And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”

(Genesis 15:5-6)

There are advantages to living farther south, namely the climate (that is, unless you live south of the Equator). Living in Southern Indiana has advantages and disadvantages just like any other spot on the face of the Earth. One disadvantage is that you rarely see the “Northern Lights.” In fact, in my nearly 70 years, I had never seen the “Northern Lights.” But one particular night a few years ago that changed.

It was a freaky thing and I can’t really explain just what happened but as we watched the local evening news it was reported that these strangely wonderful colors in the sky would be visible for a few hours. My wife and I immediately rushed out into the night and, there they were. Even though the air was crisp we stayed out there for awhile and just gazed into the sky at the beautiful but unusual colors blazing across the northern horizon. I’ll never forget it as long as I live.

I have often just stood and gazed up into the night sky admiring the stars. I know what science says about those stars; that they are distant suns of other galaxies and I can’t argue with that. But I often remember the passage of scripture in the first part of Genesis where God was creating everything. As thrilling as it is to look at those specs of light in the sky the Bible only makes mention of their creation by saying, “*and He made the stars also*” (Genesis 1:16).

Once we were camping in the country and we joined a group that was being led into the woods where no manmade lights were located. There we gazed at the constellations. The sky was full of brilliant specs of light. Some of them were so dim that you could barely make them out yet there they were. It was remarkable.

I’m sure that Abram had viewed the stars often but this particular night was different. It started out as he was having a conversation with God. Abram had asked God what he was to do next about an heir. The custom stated that if a natural heir was not born into the household that the oldest servant would gain that right. Abram asked God, “What are Your wishes about this situation? You have provided me no heir and all I have is my oldest servant, Eliezer from Damascus. He was born in my household, so is he to be my appointed heir?”

God had promised him seed. But Abram was no “spring chicken” and the years were creeping up fast. Something had to be done. Perhaps he had been thinking more about this since the battle with the kings of the north. What if he got into another skirmish and was killed? He had made no provision yet. What were God’s intentions?

NO DOUBTS

God told Abram, “Your servant won’t be your heir but a son from your own body will be your heir.” God had promised him offspring. He would have a son. I believe it excited Abram’s heart yet there were doubts.

We all have doubts, don’t we? We really want to have faith and believe God’s word, but there’s always that little voice in the back of your head that says, “Yeah, but ... “

The man who brought his demon possessed son to Jesus had these doubts. Jesus had told him, “Do you believe that I can deliver your son?” The man immediately spoke saying, “Yes Lord! I believe!” But then he paused, thought, and added, “Lord, help my unbelief!” He wanted to believe. With everything inside of him he wanted his son to be whole again. He had tried before. The Bible doesn’t say this but I believe that he had prayed to God often. Yet his son got steadily worse. As a last resort he had turned to Jesus.

Perhaps he had witnessed other miracles of healing done by this Man and he thought, “Maybe this will work.” But when he looked into his own heart, he had to admit that there were doubts there – Doubts that had been produced by years of trying one thing after another with no results. What if this failed too? Before Jesus had shown up the man had asked His disciples to cast the demon from his son but they couldn’t. What if it was stronger than Jesus?

He had doubts. But he admitted that to Jesus. He wanted to believe with everything in him. He tried to suppress his unbelief. But when he had searched his heart, he found that it was still there. He had no recourse but to confess it by asking Jesus to help his unbelief. It was the best he could do.

GOD ONLY WANTS OUR BEST

That’s all the Lord asks of us as well -The best that we can do. When we have done that then we must fall into His arms and depend on Him. That’s exactly what God wants us to do. We struggle and fight to try to make our miracle happen. We turn to every possible solution we can find and yet we are still in the same shape as before (maybe a little lighter in the pocket book). These struggles cause us to doubt. Each and every failure is another hole poked in the boat of our salvation. After a while it just seems hopeless.

It did to Abram. He had waited for the promise. Maybe he had seen sons born to his neighbors and still he held on to God’s promise. But each time the devil spoke, “See the promise is no good. You’re going to have to do something about this. You’re going to have to take matters into your own hands if you are ever to see results.” Those

are the words of doubt. Each time they seem more real. Every reminder wears down our faith.

When this happens then we've got to confront God about it. God doesn't get mad at us when we doubt especially if we go to Him. The devil wants us to talk about God. He wants us to speak in negative tones and agree with him that the promise is never going to happen. If we do then we drive ourselves farther and farther from the promise and the hope that it will bring.

But if we will take our doubt to God, admit to it and listen to His answer instead of accusing, He will give us the reassurance we need. Why doesn't God just do it and get it over with? Why must He make us wait as He does? It seems like torture. Did you ever watch a cat play with a mouse? The cat intends to eat the little creature. The mouse knows that he is in big trouble and probably wishes the cat would just get it over with. Instead, the cat will paw the mouse. He'll let him run away from him just a few steps and give the mouse the false hope that maybe he's going to get away. Then just when it might seem to be real the cat will slap his claw down on the mouse again. The cat will take the mouse into his mouth and take a couple of chews then let him down again. He keeps on doing this until the mouse is completely worn down, then he kills him.

Sometimes it seems that God is doing this to us doesn't it? Why not just do it? But God, unlike the cat, isn't torturing us. He isn't playing games. He isn't trying to make us suffer. He knows that our miracle can only come when we have reached the point where there can be no doubt as to who has done this thing.

NO ROOM TO BOAST

There are times when, if God allowed our miracle to come right away, we'd boast in how much faith we had. Or maybe we'd find some kind of excuse to take the credit for ourselves. What if our miracle came when we thought it should and then we exploited it for personal gain? It could happen and God knows it. He looks right down into our heart of hearts and knows what we'd do even when we don't.

To really drive this home to Abram God gave him something physical to hold on to. He told him to go outside and look up at the night sky. There were those billion and one stars brilliantly sparkling against the black blanket behind them. Then God told Abram to count them. Count the stars? How? Even if man could count that high it would only take a blink of the eye to lose your place. With the natural eye it was impossible. Count the stars ...

Then God told Abram, "So shall your seed be." The sons that were going to descend from Abram would be just as numerous as those stars twinkling in the sky. What a promise! As I read this I thought, "Doesn't this just make the situation worse? Here Abram's having doubts about getting just one heir and God tells him he's going to have as many as there are stars in the heavens?" But God knows just exactly what is going to reassure us. Maybe it was the crisp night air and the spectacular view of those stars but something clicked in Abram's heart and the Bible says he believed God.

GOD KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT WE NEED

It may not be a sky full of stars for you. But I guarantee that God knows exactly what you will need to re-establish your belief in His promise. If we'll only take the time to listen to Him and hear His voice in our hearts then He will give us what we need to hang in there. His promise will come but not until we are where we need to be and accept the right timing for it all to take place. God knows what's best for us even when we don't (or think we do). If we will just wait when that promise is fulfilled it will bring us more joy than we could have ever expected. It will come.

I remember a time when we were in desperate financial need. We didn't have much and we lived as meagerly as we could. But we had always expected more. My wife needed a job but times were hard and one wasn't to be found.

It was in those moments that we realized that we needed to just be content with the situation. And we did. Now there have been many times of discontentment in other situations since then and we've had to come back to this place. But in that moment of satisfaction, we became happier than we had ever been. It was only a matter of days after this when a call came and just like that, she had a job.

That's where God wants us to be. He wants us to just be satisfied and determined that we are going to be happy with whatever He brings to us. When we get to that place then we have opened avenues for Him to transport blessings into our lives.

THE ACCOUNT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Bible says that Abram believed God, and God counted that belief as righteousness. Whether we want to admit it or not, righteousness – a right standing before God – is what we all want and need more than anything else in this life. But no matter how much we try or what we do we'll never achieve that on our own. It only comes by belief.

The sacrifice that Christ made on Calvary is the ultimate act to give us true righteousness before God. But until we believe that what He has done will make us righteous then it does us no good whatsoever. It is only when we truly believe to the point that we forsake everything in our lives and truly start putting our trust in Him - Then we can be righteous.

To be righteous before God is the ultimate miracle. But we must believe. Abram believed God. He stopped doubting for that moment and knew that he didn't have to worry about an heir. God had it covered. It is the same with us. Whatever our need, whatever our desire, if we submit it all to Christ and believe on Him and His word, becoming obedient to it, we will be counted as righteous – Standing in the right place before God looking up at the stars along our journey.

Chapter 10

Predators in the Journey

Genesis 15:7-21

“And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.”

(Genesis 15:11)

It was Christmas morning – early! I mean it was barely Christmas morning. I may have slept an hour or two all night. I couldn't help it. All I could think of were those wonderful gifts to be had downstairs under the tree. I stepped downstairs to "spy" out the booty, then snuck back up. It was just barely 1:00 AM and I knew that it was way too early to get everyone up. So, I tried to sleep – but I just couldn't.

After 5 minutes or so I couldn't take it anymore so I "accidentally on purpose" woke up my brother. I knew he'd be on my side because he was expecting to receive his "dream gift" that year – None other than "Duffy's Daredevils!" It was a set of "Hot Wheels" along with a daredevil stunt track. If I could get him awake, I knew that he'd pester Mom and Dad until they got up. And so, I made just enough noise to stir him awake. "Hey Ken, its Christmas morning!" I exclaimed.

"Wow!" He cried as he jumped out of bed in a single motion, "I wonder if I got my "Duffy's Daredevil?""

We went downstairs (the second time for me) as quietly as two boys in a hurry could. We detoured by the tree to peruse the wonderful treasures to be had before entering into Mom and Dad's room. "Mom . . . Dad . . . its Christmas morning!" I whispered as loud as I could and still have it classified as an official whisper.

"Ohhh, it seems like we just got to sleep. What time is it anyway?"

"Well, it's almost 1:30."

"1:30! You boys get back into bed."

"But Mom, we can't sleep."

"Try anyway!"

We knew that enough had been said and so we went back upstairs. Ken complained, "I can't wait! I've got to get that "Duffy's Daredevil!" "Let's just stay up here a little while and we'll try again," I responded.

We were back in Mom and Dad's room by 2:00. Once again, we were put off, and the hot water we were in began to show bubbles. Finally, at 2:30 Mom and Dad sort of caved in. They didn't get up but they gave us permission to open up Ken's "Duffy's Daredevil" set. By the time everyone else got up we had it opened, put together and the batteries halfway run down.

In the scripture passage God once again made the promise of a great inheritance of land to Abram. During the promise God reminded him of where he had come from. It probably seemed like a lifetime ago when Abram was in Ur. Things had changed. He had spent all those years moving from one area to another in order to provide grazing land for his flocks and herds. There seemed to be no end in sight. Abram didn't want to doubt but he was ready for this inheritance. He had waited a long time already. It seemed he could wait no longer. So, he asked God, "How can I know that I will inherit it?"

ANIMALS OF SACRIFICE

God intended to give Abram an answer, but one that involved more than words. He was going to allow him to take a look into the very future. God told Abram to bring a heifer, a female goat, and a ram all of three years old. This assured that the animals were fully grown. He also asked Abram to bring a dove and a pigeon. It is significant that all of these animals would one day be those acceptable as sacrifices under the Mosaic Law. The animals were to be divided into two pieces except for the birds.

We know that after three short years of ministry Jesus Christ, God's own Son, would become the ultimate sacrifice for the whole world. He was broken for us so that we might be forgiven of our sin. The birds were not divided and they could very well be representative of the Holy Spirit who would represent God's presence after Christ ascended into Heaven.

Christ became the fulfillment of all of these animals, the heifer for the sin offering, the she goat and ram representing that all races and sexes are affected by the need for His sacrifice. And the Holy Spirit to sustain us while we await the promise as represented in birds.

OUR HEART'S DESIRE

If you are even remotely like me, I know that there have been times that it seems you just can't wait for whatever it is that you classify as "your heart's desire." He promised that to us you know (Mark 11:24). Some seem to have very selfish desires while others of us might be thinking, "Lord, I don't know why You are taking so long. My desire is only to be able to do more for You." Whichever the case, God has His reasons for waiting.

But He gives us a glimpse in His word and in our hearts from time to time. He did this for Abram. You see, God has an ultimate plan that not only includes our desire but also affects many others. The promise to Abram involved millions of people to come.

After Abram had obeyed God's instruction with the animals God remained silent the rest of the day. In the hot sun the carcasses began to draw unwelcome visitors. The vultures begin to circle above and then fly lower and lower. As they mustered the courage to land Abram began fighting them off. God had told him to do this and he knew God had a reason. And so, he spent the rest of the day keeping those birds of prey away.

Even after Christ has provided the sacrifice for our sin and given us the hope of His promise, things don't always fall into place. The "birds of prey" in our lives continue to haunt us. They swoop lower and lower and mean to steal away the hope God has given us. We must fight them off. It takes some work. Anything worth having always does. And that is really good for us because it forces us to become stronger. We also find out what our true heart's desire is. They say that it is the prerogative of women to change their minds. The truth of that statement is that we all change our minds, men and women. Many factors may be involved in that changing but we find out what we really want as we begin to chase off the vultures. God knows this. That's why He waits and why He allows the vultures to come. As we endure and hang in there, we are shaping our desires.

NIGHT VISION

As the sun began to go down and darkness began to fall the vultures gave up and went to their own roost. A deep sleep fell upon Abram and as he slept, he dreamed. But it wasn't "visions of sugar plums." It was a nightmare. The Bible says that great horror fell upon him. The sleep turned into a vision when God showed up. Thank the Lord, God always shows up.

At times our struggle and waiting can become a nightmare. In the midst of the great darkness and horror that we may be facing God will show up with some answers. The future can be a dreadful place. When God gives us a little glimpse of it the anticipation of what is to come, can fill us with doubt and uneasiness as to whether we can make it happen or not. Fear of the unknown can strike absolute horror in the heart of mankind. Praise the Lord, that He shows up in those times giving reassurance that He will be with us in the future too.

God became very plain spoken with Abram. He told him what was going to happen to his offspring during the next four generations. They would become slaves in an unfamiliar land and would be afflicted for 400 years. God even gave Abram the reason for this. He said that the nation that would be their taskmasters would be judged and that it would basically take that long for the iniquity of the people in the land promised to Abram to fulfill their wickedness. God was giving them a chance to come to Him. You see, God loves everyone, even those who hate Him. He mercifully waited 400 years for these people to repent and come to Him. But instead, they continued to

fall in their wickedness. They didn't see the signs that proved God's existence and they refused to search for Him.

Again, God will make us wait until the time is right. My Grandmother never learned to drive. All her life she depended on someone else to get her to where she needed to go. Many times, her children and grandchildren would try to encourage her to learn to drive. But she always refused citing that she was too old or really had no need.

I remember driving her places. Whenever we'd need to make a left turn, especially onto a busy highway, it would seem like there would never be an opening to pull out into the traffic safely. She would always say, "Just wait. There will be a time. There always is." You know what? She was right. There was always a time to pull out and proceed to our destination. It is the same with God. We may be waiting to pull out in life and proceed to our hearts desire. It may seem like it will never happen. But there will always be a time and guess what? It will be in God's time. If we try to make it happen, we will fail because God knows it isn't time. But when His time comes, we will be able to pull out into the fast lane and smoothly proceed on our way. When that time comes, we'll look back and wonder why we were ever anxious.

GOD'S WATCH

Then God took the watch. The Bible describes His watch as a smoking oven and burning torch passing between the animal carcasses. It's not clear if this was to chase away night predators or to give light to Abram so that he could see that everything was okay. Perhaps it was both. God will enlighten us. He will take the watch over when we just can't do it anymore. He will keep away the night predators of life while we sleep and He will allow us to see what He knows we need to see.

Finally, God listed all those nations whom Abram's descendants would replace. Can you imagine what it was like when Abram would pass by one of those people groups knowing in his heart that one day, he would own their land (through his descendants). It was a secret he wisely kept to himself. But God had gotten specific. He told Abram what he needed to know. He'd given him the assurance he needed. And so, He will with us. It may not be as dramatic as it was with Abram but nonetheless God will give us our assurance.

Hang in there. Stick with it. Don't ever give up! Have you ever seen that picture? In it a stork is standing ankle-deep in water with a frog in his mouth. But the frog has his legs extended out of the stork's mouth which kept him from being swallowed. The caption says "Don't ever give up!" When the devil seems that he is about to swallow us whole, stick out your legs – Don't ever give up! When the world system throws blow after blow plant your feet solidly in the ring – Don't ever give up! When the vultures swoop down and the darkness and great horrors fall, stand your spiritual ground, claim your inheritance – Don't ever give up! God will be there! The predators will come during the journey but in God, we can defeat them all.

Chapter 11

Journey's Well

Genesis 16:1-16

“Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, ‘Have I also here seen Him who sees me?’”

(Genesis 16:13)

Have you ever had something really backfire on you? The first year my wife and I were married, I decided to have a surprise birthday party for her. It was planned perfectly. One of her sisters had agreed to decorate our first home (on wheels) while we went out with another couple we knew. I got on the phone and invited all the people she would have wanted there and the plan was set.

The day arrived and we met our friends at a good restaurant and enjoyed the next hour and a half. After the meal I casually invited our friends to come over to play some cards and they quickly agreed (of course they were in on the plan from the beginning).

Everything seemed to be falling into place without a hitch that is, until my wife protested. “No! I don’t want to go home! Let’s go bowling or do something. We can always go home.” Now I was in trouble. We had to go home. People were waiting for us there.

“It’ll be okay honey. Come on; let’s go play some cards with our friends.”

Because they were standing right there, she agreed but when we got into our car, she let me know how much this birthday present stank. I listened as we drove towards home with our friends following behind. It was a miserable trip for both of us.

However, once we arrived home and she saw all the people there, she was pleasantly surprised and she very quickly apologized. It turned out pretty good in the end, but I was really relieved to see that all our friends hadn’t decided to make it another night.

A plan with a much more serious result backfired on Sarai, Abram’s wife. She was no “spring chicken” anymore and the likelihood of her giving birth to a son with Abram was very slim. In those days and in that culture, it was a common thing for a woman to give her female servant to her husband to bear children in her place. The child would be viewed as belonging to the wife because the servant was her property. So, she offered Hagar, her Egyptian servant, to Abram.

Right off the bat Hagar conceived and was carrying a baby. The Bible tells us that when she knew that she was with child that Hagar despised Sarai. It doesn't record whether this was outright flaunted or more discretely displayed in snide remarks. Whichever the case it soon became apparent that Hagar felt she was now better than Sarai.

Sarai immediately blamed Abram. The scripture doesn't say that Abram had said anything to provoke the situation but from Sarai's attitude towards him it makes one wonder if perhaps he had made some kind of statement to Hagar that had encouraged her to feel the way she did. Regardless, Sarai turned it upon Abram.

Isn't this a very typical human situation? Maybe it's happened to you. From the kindness of your heart, you have done something very special for another person. You meant it for good. The consideration for vainglory because of your good deed was the farthest thing from your mind. But then it happened. Other individuals involved turned the tables on you and suddenly you were despised for your generosity. Life is never fair.

GOOD FOR BAD?

Why does it seem that deeds meant for good sometimes turn out bad? For one thing, the selfish attitude of many in our present day causes suspicion. "What's he looking for anyway?" We've been taught that nothing in life is free and that if someone gives you something or goes out of their way with acts of kindness we immediately wonder, "What's up with that?"

The other point is that sometimes we've just got to watch our mouths. Again, the Bible doesn't say that Abram said anything to provoke this situation but something happened to make Sarai turn on Abram like that. A polygamist situation almost always causes conflict. The Bible says and supports that marriage was to be one man and one woman from the beginning. God allowed polygamy because of the hardness of man's heart. But it wasn't meant to be that way from the beginning. I know that many strong followers of God in the Old Testament had more than one wife. God honored their belief in Him as righteousness but that doesn't mean that God put His blessing on everything those men did.

I believe Abram had said something to Hagar that led her to believe that she was now more important to him than Sarai was. As a servant she had no hope of having a "normal" life, settling down with a husband and raising a family. Perhaps the relationship she had with Abram gave her a false hope of having that naturally desired life with him. If Abram said nothing but allowed her to believe this that would have been enough.

James says that the tongue is like a flame of fire (see James 1:26 and 3:5-8). Fire can be useful but when it is out of control it is always destructive. And so are our words. It's not the words themselves mind you, but the heart from which the words came from. I know that I said many things over the years to my wife that I wish I could

take back. We can even say that we “take those words back” but we can really never reclaim words. We can only repent of them.

SKIPPING OUT

Whatever the case, the damage was done and Abram had no recourse but to remind Sarai that Hagar still belonged to her and she could handle the situation as she saw fit. She spoke harshly with Hagar, so harshly that Hagar packed her bags and when no one was looking she skipped out.

Who hasn't thought of “skipping out” on life once in a while? Maybe not to the extent of taking your life, but just on “checking out” for a while; getting lost in a crowd, or taking a one-way flight to an exotic island. Hagar saw no recourse. She was no longer welcomed in her mistress's sight. Running away seemed like a very good idea.

We all flee the situation sometimes. Maybe not physically but we do take mental absence. We become much like the little boy who was made to sit in a chair in a corner for a while. He exclaimed, “I might be sitting here in this corner but in my mind, I'm standing over there.” Even if it is a “mental escape” we think, “no one will ever think of looking for me here.” When we think that then we've forgotten about God. Remember? He's everywhere.

Hagar may have fled from Sarai but God knew just where she was. The Bible used some very interesting words when God called out to Hagar. It says, “*Now the Angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water ...*” If God is everywhere, didn't He know where she was? Of course, He did. You see, God knows our every move. He knows our very thoughts. He knows more about us than we know about ourselves. But He has really found us when He succeeds in getting our attention. Hagar had fled through the wilderness and I'm sure was very thirsty by the time she got to the springs of water. She was in a time of need. That's usually when God succeeds in getting our attention.

NOW THAT YOU'VE GOT MY ATTENTION

Some may cry out, “God, why did You let this happen to me?” The truth of the matter is that God needs to get our attention and He will let us go our merry way until we come to that time of need – Then we're ready to listen.

The Angel of God got Hagar's attention at the spring because she was in need. He asked her, “*Where have you come from and where are you going?*” Didn't I just say that God knows our every thought? Sure, He does. So why did He have His Angel ask her this question? It was for her own benefit. I don't believe she had counted the cost of her decision to flee from her home and she didn't have a clue as to where she was going.

Probably most children come to a time in their lives when they feel that the best possible solution to a problem they are having is to run away from home. I did that once. I can't even recall why I felt like running away was the best solution to my problem but I do remember packing some clothes and a few toys in a bundle, putting

them on a stick and heading out the back door. I made a clean getaway and was headed down the highway to freedom. I didn't have any idea of where I was going and after two blocks, I felt a little twinge in my stomach. I didn't know how to cook and hadn't brought any food. It didn't take long to realize that Mom was the best cook I knew at the time. That was as far as I got.

Hagar answered the Angel, "I'm running away from my mistress." You see, that's half the battle. We have to admit what we're running away from. Are we running from a marriage problem? Are we running from a job we don't like? What are we running from? When we can admit that to God then we give Him the tools to begin to make things right for us.

HERE'S WHAT TO DO

The Angel gave Hagar specific instructions: "Go back to Sarai and submit yourself to her. I will greatly multiply your descendants." He gave her a promise, something to hold on to. And God will do that for us. When our situation backfires in our faces and He finally gets our attention, He will give us hope. He will give us something to hold on to – A promise to look forward to. I can't tell you what that promise will be other than what is promised to all in His word, but He will give you something that is specific just for you. That promise will be in the context of His word but it will be just for you.

Then the Angel talked to her about the child she was carrying. She would bear a son and name him Ishmael (which means God has heard). He would be a wild man and would have many enemies yet he would dwell in the presence of all his brothers. In other words, he would be a fighter. Ishmael would be one who wouldn't quit. He would have a great will to live. That's what God wants to birth inside of us – A fighter; one who will face enemies fiercely and have a will to survive. We may not be that character on the outside but God wants to make each of us an Ishmael on the inside. He wants us to learn to depend on Him to the point that we will not give up what He has promised to us no matter how difficult the situation, regardless the enemy that stands before us and without wavering from His promise. He wants us to spiritually stand and fight! Why? Because we know that God has heard us!

Take comfort in those words. Stand bravely in the face of the enemy. Know that God has heard your cry for help and has answered with spiritual help to change you into a warrior for the Kingdom of God. You will prevail if you hold to the promise. With God on your side, you cannot fail even when setbacks seem to jump out on every hand. We can live in the presence of those all around us, friend and foe, because we have the Lord with us and in us!

Hagar named that well "Lahai Roi" meaning "Well of the One who lives and sees me." It was important to people of those days to name wells. The well was the source of their water supply in the hot barren land. So, God is to us. He is our source of refreshment in the desert of life. We can return to the well of the One who lives and sees me when we need reassurance. But in our spirits that well is never a far journey. We can revisit it anytime we need to. Remember that.

She returned to Sarai and she did so with confidence because God had given her the promise she needed to keep going. And so, He does with us. We can face our struggles, our battles, and our disappointments because of His personal promise to us. Hang on to it with everything in you. Don't let it slip away. When the promise seems to be failing return to the well of the One who lives and sees you. He will meet you there. In fact, He'll probably be waiting for you. Trust Him for He will not let you down. Just make your journey to the well.

Chapter 12

Changing Names

Genesis 17:1-8

"No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

(Genesis 17:5-8)

What would it be like to change your name? People do it all the time for one reason or another. Some do it in attempt to escape a past life, others simply because they don't like their name. Actors change their names to something that sounds smoother, or is easy to say and catches people's attention.

It's all about new beginnings. We have discussed new beginnings in other segments of this book, but God is a God of new beginnings. He wants us to be able to start fresh. He grants us opportunities to put the past behind us, so to speak, and start again.

Imagine, if you can, what it would be like to be 99 years old. In our present day and age few people reach that ripe age. My grandmother almost made it. She put 97 years in her past before she went to be with the Lord. I have often thought about all the change she witnessed during her time her on Earth. Just think of all the technological advances between 1902 and 2000.

The Bible says at the beginning of Chapter 17 that Abram was now 99 years old. He had spent all this time waiting on God's promise. When God appeared to him first of all He identified Himself as the "Almighty God." We could go into a lot of theological discussion about this term but let's just keep it simple. God was telling Abram that He was all-powerful and that He could do anything. Perhaps Abram had begun to have some doubts again. God was reassuring him one more time that He hadn't forgotten and He was able.

That is a promise God gives to us as well. He hasn't forgotten what He said to us and He is still able. Just wait a little longer; one more day; one more year; be patient. He is the Almighty!

BE PERFECT

Then God told Abram to walk before Him and be perfect. This was not a feat easily accomplished, let me tell you. In ourselves we don't have the ability to walk perfectly before God. Some versions interpret the word "perfect" as "blameless." While

that might soften it a little bit, it does not change it. Blameless still means “without fault.” It still boils down to having a perfect record. Do you have one? I certainly don’t. Even though we try to change and never do those imperfect things again we cannot erase the past and so we are still imperfect with blame hanging on our record.

So, what was God telling Abram here? In Abram’s case we have to go back to what God counted as righteousness on his behalf. Remember the Bible says that God counted Abram’s belief and trust in Him as righteousness. As of yet Christ had not come. The penalty had not been paid for man’s sin. And so, Abram held on in belief. When he doubted, he was quick to come to God and express his feelings allowing God to reassure him in his belief.

Thanks be to God; we now have the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. He has paid the penalty for our sin and our belief in Him accounts for our righteousness. He becomes our righteousness! That’s the most wonderful news we could ever hear.

WALK BEFORE ME

God had put another task before Abram. He said to “walk before Me.” In other words, we are walking with God in our sight. Every step we make God is behind us. He witnesses our every move. Most of us don’t realize that whether we are intentional about walking before God or not, we still walk before Him each and every day. He sees all. Whether we are intentional about walking before Him or not, we are anyway.

God wanted Abram to be intentional in his walk before Him. And so, He does with us. When we are aware that we are walking before God then we are on our guard. We watch what we say, what we do, and where we go. We are like a child taking his first steps and constantly looking up to his parents after each one to see if it meets approval. That type of walking is good because it forces us to be conscious of what we are doing before God. It helps us to maintain that perfect, blameless state in Christ. I’m not talking about being justified by works. I’m just stating that we’ve got to make a conscious and intentional effort if we are to grow in Christ.

THE COVENANT

God said that He would establish a covenant between Himself and Abram and that He would multiply him exceedingly. A covenant is like a contract only much more binding because it comes from God. Now let’s be careful here. God is not binding Himself up. Always remember that. Some feel that God binds Himself forcing Him to fulfill certain obligations regardless of how we act or what we do. Baloney! God is God. He wishes and desires to fulfill promises to us. It delights Him to do that. But we must also do our part. All too often we want to sit back in an easy chair and just be content with reminding God of His promise. Get up, get out and do something. Then you will see the great and mighty promises of God taking affect in your life. Am I saying that God’s covenants are conditional? Nope. I am saying that we need to do our part. I am saying that when we get on fire for God to the point that we are willing to be of service to Him then we open the floodgates for Him to make those promises reality.

Abram understood what God was talking about because when God said this he fell on his face in awe and worship of the Mighty One. Oh, that we would catch this. If we could really see how wonderful God's promises are to us. If we could just catch a glimpse of the blessing it is that God - Who is all powerful, all knowing, and everywhere in time and space - would even consider making a covenant with puny, mortal man, it would drive us to our faces before Him. Then we could see how insignificant our human problems really are and how big God really is.

A NEW TWIST

God had promised Abram several times now that he would have a multitude of offspring. This time the promise took on a new twist. God said that he would not just have a lot of children and descendants but that he would be the father of many nations. Not just a lot of people but entire nations! Looking ahead in Genesis we know that not only did Abram become the father of the Israeli nation but also several others from children in his marriage after Sarai. But I believe that this promise extends way beyond even that.

By being in the lineage of Christ the Messiah, Abram spiritually became the father not only of physical nations, but also of a spiritual kingdom. In that promise all whom have been born again into the Kingdom of God, each one of us, is a fulfillment of that promise God made to Abram millennia ago.

I am glad to be a citizen of the Nation of the United States of America. But I am even more glad to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God. All of us who come to Him in true, heartfelt, repentance, have been born into a kingdom that is more powerful than any nation that has ever existed on the face of this planet.

Just like God, He not only blesses us into His Kingdom but each one of us that comes to Him further fulfills that promise to Abram. And God does that for us too. The promises He gives us affect other lives in times to come. He fulfills His promise to us but then that fulfillment also becomes a blessing to others. How wonderful is that?!

A NEW PROMISE – A NEW NAME

Then God changed his name. Abram meant "High Father." That was promise in itself. But now God tells him, "You'll no longer be called Abram (high father) but Abraham (father of a multitude)." God wants to change our names too. We may not have a physical name change where people start calling us something different. But our name will reflect a new person. When people think of us and say our name it will no longer be associated with the past life, for we are now walking before God blameless in Christ Jesus. No, they will think of the new person that we have become. That is exciting!

The name change became the seal of the covenant. A covenant is always sealed with a sign or something we can hold to make it official. To Abraham it was a name change. Names carried a lot of weight in Old Testament times. The name defined the individual. But now, in Christ Jesus, we take on His name. His wonderful name becomes associated with us. Imagine, now that we are in Christ, when people

say our name, they not only think of the new individual we have become but they also think of Christ! What a witness! What a testimony!

God finished this part of His conversation with Abraham by once again giving the promise of descendants and land. But the final point I'd like to make from this is that the journey with Abraham is really a journey with God. It is waiting for the promise. It is seeing it fulfilled in our hopes and dreams. It is seeing faith strengthened as we go ever forth, regardless of the outward circumstances and setbacks; faithfully hanging on to what He has promised us.

Take your journey with God. Walk with Him like Abraham did. You will see that He is ever and constantly faithful to you. Your new name will redefine your journey.

Chapter 13

Signing the Covenant

Genesis 17:9-14

"... As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations."

(Genesis 17:9)

I'll never forget the first day of basic training during my three-year tour of duty with the United States Army. Getting to Fort Dix, New Jersey had been an adventure in itself. After a very long day of testing, physicals and then travel, the group I was with arrived about one o'clock in the morning. We were briefed, in-processed and finally assigned a temporary barracks where we got some much-needed rest.

We were allowed to sleep in the next morning because of our late night but I was awakened around six o'clock by cadence being called as a group of troops were marched right below our window.

Our drill sergeant showed up not long after breakfast and we were "yelled into" a truck which took us to another part of the base. This was to be our home away from home for the next eight weeks. The first item on the agenda was haircuts. During those days I wore an afro. I had thought well enough ahead to have it trimmed down some but I knew a haircut would be necessary anyway so I left it a little long.

We had to pay for our own haircuts and when I heard the barbers asking the men if they wanted a long cut or a short one, I knew something was up with that. Those choosing a long cut paid their three dollars and proudly walked out of the shop thinking, "that wasn't so bad," only to be ordered back in by the drill sergeant to get the short cut. That cost them another three dollars. What a scam!

It was my turn and as I sat in the barber chair, I knew this was the last I'd ever see of my wonderful afro. The barber began whacking away at my hair and turned me towards the mirror just for a moment where I caught a glimpse of what he had done so far. This had to be another joke. He had buzz cut all the hair on top of my head leaving it long and curly on the sides. I looked like Bozo the Clown except my hair was brown instead of red. But it wasn't long before the rest of it was gone. Where's that draft coming from?

It was necessary to cut the hair short during basic training because of all the outside activities we would be engaged in. For one thing it was a whole lot less trouble to take care of. Just scrub it down with a bar of soap and let it air dry. No combing

necessary! But it also kept trainees from getting head lice and other parasites that might decide to attach themselves to longer locks of hair. So, it did have a practical purpose.

Sometimes a “cutting off” is a good thing. That’s what God’s next direction was for Abraham. In the previous portion of scripture God had made a covenant with Abraham. It was a legal deal in which God had promised descendants and land. A covenant requires a sign of mutual agreement and this one was no different. The sign that sealed this covenant God had made with Abraham was the rite of circumcision. This sign of the covenant would be upheld by every male in Abraham’s household and in all the males of Israel afterwards. It required the foreskin to be cut off from the male organ. This set them apart from all other males in the world at that time.

We could go into all the medical advantages of circumcision but I’ll not do that for the sake of this chapter because we need to deal with the spiritual aspect of it here. Circumcision literally means “cutting short.”

We have dealt extensively about promises that God has given. We haven’t been specific with them because I feel that God gives us individual promises aside from those in the word that are specific to us personally. To put a definition on these personal promises would be to limit God’s plan and purpose for your life.

THE OVERALL COVENANT AND YOUR SPECIFIC SITUATION

You see, God made an overall covenant with all believers in the sacrifice of Christ. He has made specific promises to those who choose to live according to His direction in the Bible and those promises will be fulfilled to all who believe and choose to take up their cross and follow Christ. However, as a part of that covenant He also has a plan for each individual Christian that will include promises given to that believer. We can claim scripture as our own by applying it to our individual circumstances but still there are personal things that God deals with each one of us about. Those promises are part of the covenant also. I’m not talking about adding to God’s word or taking away from it. But it does involve our personal relationship with Christ.

Only we as individuals can relate to the promises I’m talking about here. You know what God has spoken to your heart. Perhaps you’ve buried it deep inside of you scarcely thinking about it because you can’t or don’t want to believe it is real. But it is. It will be based on scripture but it is also very unique and tailor made just for you and your life’s circumstances.

CIRCUMCISION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

With the Old Testament covenant a physical cutting short was required in circumcision, and there is a cutting short that is a covenant requirement in the New Testament. Paul wrote in Romans 2:29, *“But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”* Jesus fulfilled the Law of the Old Testament when He finished His mission by finally rising from the dead. He paid the sacrifice required for our sin by being crucified, but when He arose from the dead then the mission was complete, for

He had not only paid for sin but conquered the consequences of sin – Death. This opened the door for all whom God had called, Jew and Gentile alike.

Now I believe that the Jewish people are still God's chosen. I have great respect for them as a Nation even though they were the ones who didn't believe in Christ and were responsible for His crucifixion. But were they really? Were they the only ones? They have paid the miserable price for their rejection of Messiah over and over again. Still, they are in the midst of great struggle. But one day they will realize that Jesus Christ was the Messiah as a Nation. It will be during the days in the tribulation period as outlined in the Book of Revelation, but still, they will accept Him and He will give them protection from the Anti-Christ.

So, I am not taking away from God's promises to the Jews that are still to be fulfilled. What we must understand is that God opened the door for all to be saved into His kingdom. Paul had to defend the circumcision of the heart many times as we can read in his Epistles. During his time the Jews rebelled against the Gospel and Paul turned to the Gentiles allowing them into the kingdom.

But today the shoe is on the other foot. More Gentiles have come to know Christ. During Paul's day the Church was largely made up of Jewish believers. Today that has changed. Many today want to push out the Jewish people and claim that all those promises yet to be fulfilled are made to the Church and not to the Jewish Nation but that just simply isn't true.

The "cutting short" today applies to all who come to Christ Jewish or not. As we have already established, a covenant always requires a sign. That sign is the cutting short of our very lives. In order to participate in this New Covenant, we must circumcise our hearts. I don't mean that we cut ourselves open and cut a chunk of our hearts off. The scripture is very plain in Romans that it is "in the spirit." The heart represents the very center of our lives – Our very souls. Our soul is the part of us that continues on after physical death, whether in Glory with God or in eternal punishment. The soul will never cease to exist.

The cutting short that becomes a sign in the New Covenant is that of our soul. We must be cut off in order to live. We must be willing to let the old man, the old sin nature within us, that very thing that we cherish most, be cut away, be dead and buried. When that is done the Spirit of God will come into our lives. Jesus said that He would be in us. Not just affect us, but that He would take up residence inside our very spirits. That requires that the old inside of us be cut away. It means that all of our desires, talents, and hopes be reshaped to reflect how God wants to use them. God put them there to begin with you know. He made us who we are. He gave those unique talents, hopes and dreams to us because He knew we could be useful in those ways to the Kingdom.

There are some who are good in mechanics, others who have talent to put words on paper, or paint on canvass. Others have musical talent and capabilities. Each of us has our own unique qualities that God desires to use. But it requires the circumcision of the heart. That is the first step. Even those who have already developed their talents to serve in the secular world must be reshaped and remolded. A new vision must be seen

before God can make use of them in His Kingdom. He will do that if only we will come to Him in salvation and be circumcised of the heart.

THIS CIRCUMCISION APPLIES TO ALL

When it comes to the circumcision of the heart it doesn't just apply to the male gender. Every man, woman, boy and girl who comes to God gets circumcised. That is a point worth making here. Many will disagree with me and I certainly don't have time or room here to address all the passages of scripture on the subject but let me just tell you this. God wants to use all of us. He calls both men and women. A careful look at scripture will reveal that those who ministered the most to Jesus were women. Christ came to put aside that barrier that says that women can't do service in God's kingdom. As a matter of fact, Paul further said that in Christ there is neither male nor female. It's there - look it up.

So many women who have been called by God to minister the word or be missionaries or teach the Good News have been limited to ministering to other women and children. But I tell you that in Christ, when one is called whether male or female, we must be willing to accept God's call. We must recognize the full grace to be found in Christ and it extends to all.

It is time for the Church to come out of the dark ages regarding this topic for we have long bound up the work of God squabbling over this non-issue. For the sake of Christ Jesus let's get our heads out of the traditional hole in the sand and win souls for Him!

THIS CUTTING OFF FREES US

The circumcision of the heart may require us giving up our total self to Christ, but it also frees us from all the bondage that this world imposes on us. It makes void man's tradition and looses us all to be what God wants us to be.

The Army used to use the slogan, "Be all that you can be." That applies to Christians more than any other group. Christ has paid the penalty and conquered every foe so that we can have that opportunity to be all that we can be in Him. He wants to take you far. He wants to use you extensively. Don't let man's bondages, rules, and regulations bind you any longer. Claim your freedom in Christ whether you are male or female. Let Christ be formed in you and use you with all your unique talents and skills to win souls into the most powerful and important kingdom of all – The Kingdom of God! Most importantly, be circumcised of heart. Sign the covenant of the journey by letting God cut away at you and reform you into a good traveler.

Chapter 14

Waiting

Genesis 17:15-27

“Then God said: ‘No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.’”

(Genesis 17:19)

One thing you learn very quickly in the United States Army is how to wait. Waiting is quickly becoming a lost art in our country. We have become a people accustomed to getting what we want when we want as fast as we want. However, in the Army you learn to wait whether you want to or not. I'm not sure if this is supposed to be a part of the training or just a fact of life. But it is a lesson well learned.

If you have ever served in a branch of the military, you discover this phrase very quickly: "Hurry up and wait." When an important event or training period arrived the drill sergeant would get you up extra early (that meant 3:00 AM instead of 4:00 AM). You were rushed through a shower, yelled down into formation, screamed at while you choked down your breakfast then, after an invigorating time of pushups, setups, and a two-mile run, you were ready to double-time down to your place of scheduled activity where you got to stand in line for an hour or so.

Waiting patiently is an entirely different thing. That's something that most of us Americans aren't good at. I know that I'm not. Waiting with patience requires one to be satisfied with letting time elapse until it's our turn or until the right time arrives. That's much easier said than done.

Going to the doctor's office is the true definition of waiting. They even have a room designed especially for that purpose. While in the waiting room you can find an assortment of magazines to keep you occupied while you wait. However, for some reason, the doctor's offices I've visited never have the magazines that interest most men. I've never understood why they always make your appointment for forty-five minutes before they're ready to see you. Maybe they just want to make sure we are on time.

Abraham had learned from the One to whom a thousand years are as but one day. For many years he had waited on the promise of God. But this day was different. God put some finer definition to His promise. After proposing the condition of His covenant to Abraham God once again changed a name. Abraham's wife, Sarai (which means "dominative" or "governing" – Sort of changes our perspective of her doesn't it?) had her name divinely changed to Sarah (lady, princess, or queen).

Abraham had tried to make his eldest servant, Eliezer his heir, then, at the suggestion of his wife, had fathered a son by her servant Hagar. Neither fulfilled the promise of God. Now God specifically told Abraham that she would be blessed and he would have a son by his wife (now 90 years old). She also would be blessed and would be the mother of nations.

DISBELIEF

It just seemed more than Abraham could take. The Bible tells us that upon hearing this promise he fell on his face and laughed. The thoughts of his heart said it all. He wanted to believe God but the physical evidence just didn't present itself. Here Sarah was, 90 years old and he himself was 99. With these thoughts pouring from his heart, he cried out to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You." His belief seemed to just come to an end. I've been there, haven't you? When you've trusted, believed, and then trusted some more and still it seems that nothing is happening.

But sometimes we are just holding on to the wrong things. Abraham had envisioned a whole clan of children with their own children running around the camp. Yet he had only seen his eldest servant and his son Ishmael. To believe that he and Sarah could have a child now, at their age, was just almost a joke. As an outsider looking in, it seems that Abraham should have been trusting in God rather than the promise. What do I mean by that? The promise will come in God's time. The promise was for a multitude of offspring and all the land he walked on. Now stop and think about it for a moment. He was looking for all those children but he had God's promise that they were coming and Abraham would only have to raise one of them. The promise also stated that all the land he walked on would belong to him and he got to enjoy it before he legally owned it. He didn't have to be concerned at all about it, just walk on it. How great was that if one could look at it that way? All he really had to do was to believe the promise and just enjoy it in simplicity.

In our own lives we look at God's promise in much the same way. We tend to look at the outcome instead of the God of the promise. I've been just as guilty as the next guy in this. But what if we just enjoyed the journey to the promise instead of wishing for the day of its arrival? Would we breathe much easier? Would we have a lot less knots in our stomachs? To trust God and live for Him each day instead of anticipating the future is simpler than living in wonder, anticipation, and impatience. It requires waiting.

RIGHT DOWN TO THE LAST DETAIL

God not only told Abraham that he would have a son with Sarah but He also told him what he was supposed to name him. The covenant would be passed on to Abraham's son, Isaac and then on to his descendants as well. The promise was reaffirmed.

But God had heard Abraham's request concerning Ishmael. God would make Ishmael blessed and fruitful too. As a matter of fact, twelve princes would come from

the descendants of Ishmael. What a wonderful God we have! Often, He will grant our requests even when they are not a part of the promise to us.

But the covenant would only be given to Abraham's son with Sarah. God was emphatic about that. That's just the way it was going to be. God has a perfect plan. No matter how we may try to make it work it's only going to work one way and that's God's way. It's not because God is stubborn but because He has a plan that includes so much more than we can finitely fathom.

It's nice that He sometimes grants our requests along the way. Many times, He doesn't, not because He wants to string us along, or punish us, but because He knows when those requests won't be good for us. We do ask for things at times that would actually do us more harm than good. It doesn't seem like it at the time, but God knows all including the future. He knows what is going to be good for our lives and what isn't. I believe He is ready and willing to grant those things that we haven't asked amiss (in error or for selfish profit). He will answer but it may be with a silent "No" when we have asked for those things, for He knows they will bring harm to our lives.

What Abraham had asked on behalf of Ishmael, although he had asked it to end the wait, was not a selfish request. God granted that and He will do the same for us.

SOONER THAN YOU THINK

Within a year the wait would be over. Abraham would see the beginning of the promise. And with that God stopped talking to Abraham. It was final. Now Abraham had a choice to make. He could give up on the promise and just forget it or he could follow through with the covenant.

What would have happened had he decided to just quit? I can tell you this: God will complete His plan. If we don't follow through in obedience, He will find someone who will. Had Abraham turned his back on God someone would be willing to step up to the plate.

There was only one thing to do at this point – and that's what He did. He followed through with the covenant by taking his son, Ishmael, and all the male servants in his household and they all got circumcised. This sealed the covenant. Did it bind God? Certainly not. Nothing binds God because He will not go back on His word. The sealing of the covenant was for Abraham to have a physical sign, something he could see that would prove the covenant to him.

God doesn't need that. But He will give us something tangible to hold on to. When we have taken the blood of Christ as the sign, seal, and symbol of the promise God has given to us, then we have something to hold on to. I'm glad God gives us not only the promise but also the signs of it.

Waiting is hard but with God it is always worth it. His promise is indeed worth waiting for. Let's learn to enjoy the scenery of the journey when waiting is required.

Chapter 15

Entertaining God

Genesis 18:1-15

“Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day.”

(Genesis 18:1)

Have you ever met someone who knew you but you didn't have the faintest idea who they were? Maybe your mind is a whole lot sharper than mine. It has happened to me many times and I'm probably the worlds worst at remembering names. After I have visited with new people a few times I usually get it burned into my brain but it takes a few times.

My wife would tell me that I just didn't listen well, and that may be true. I'm trying but occasionally I slip back into the old thought patterns and that person's name just flies right out of my head.

There was a little trick I used back in the days (many years ago) when I sold insurance and it normally worked well. I'd find an excuse to write the person's name down asking them how they spelled it so I'd get it right. Most people understood and it bailed me out of a lot of situations. I could just see myself reporting back at the home office saying, "Man, I got a really good prospect today."

"Yeah? What's the name?"

"Uh, I can't remember but I know what they look like and where they live!" Yeah, right! That would have gone over well!

For a while I used this same little trick when new people would come to the church, we where we were pastors. One day, a new couple attended and it looked as if they might be good prospects for membership. I had introduced myself to them before the service and they had told me their names, but, guess what? Ten minutes into the service I didn't have the foggiest idea what to call them. So, after the service I pulled out my notepad and played my little trick. "It was really good to have you in service today. By the way how did you spell your first name?" I'm going to use a fictitious name here but it is very comparable to what they told me . . .

"Well, J-O-H-N." Boy did I feel stupid - Like I didn't know how to spell "John?" I wrote it down as my right foot dangled from my mouth. But I didn't remember their last name either. "Okay, how'd you spell that last name?"

“J-O-N-E-S.”

Okay, now I really looked the part of stupid with two big ole’ feet between my teeth! I don’t think they ever came back. I honestly can’t remember.

I can’t tell you how many times people have come up to me on the street and began a conversation like they had known me their whole life. I’d talk with them just like I knew exactly who they were, being careful not to say something stupid that would spill the beans. When the conversation had ended my wife would ask me, “Who was that?” I’d respond, “I don’t have the slightest idea, but it was good to see them again!”

Fortunately, God is One who is unforgettable. Abraham had been sitting in the door of his tent on a really hot day. Because the mid-afternoon heat (the heat of the day) was unbearable, chores were done early or in the evening when it was cooler. He looked up and there were three men. He immediately jumped up and ran to meet them and then did something unusual. The Bible says that he bowed down before them in worship. He knew Who it was. He had spoken with God many times now. God had appeared to him in some recognizable form on several occasions. There was no doubt in his heart as to who these men were. They were visitors from Heaven.

RECOGNIZING GOD

Recognizing God is a learned trait. Often, I have counseled with people advising them to trust what God was telling them. The question came many times, “But how do I know it is God?” I’ve asked that one myself.

There is no shortcut. Since we really don’t have a picture of God, there is no physical characteristic I can tell you about other than what is in the Bible. But 99% of the time, God comes to us through that silent voice heard only in our heads and hearts. How can we know for sure it is Him? How can we tell if it is God, the whispers of the devil, or just our own thoughts running loosely in our brains? It comes from knowing God and spending time with Him.

In our instant society it would be nice if we got “saved” and just automatically knew from day one when God was speaking. But realistically it just doesn’t happen that way. Recognizing God comes as we read and study the Bible. From its pages we begin to see a picture of God woven throughout the lines of both the Old and New Testaments. In conjunction with reading the word we must also spend time in prayer. Reading and praying together can begin to get us into touch with God. He speaks to us through His word.

He also speaks personal things to us giving us guidance and instruction. We learn that what He tells us will always match the teachings of the Bible but we can only know that for sure as we read it. It takes time to recognize God and unless you are graced by a physical manifestation directly from Heaven with all the lights and glory you won’t recognize Him any other way.

In all appearance the three that stood before Abraham looked like average men. But he had spent enough time with God that he saw their spirits. That's what we need to strive for. I wonder how often God has appeared to me in a humble form? I ponder whether I passed Him on the road, or in a restaurant booth sitting by Himself? We need to learn to recognize the Spirit of God.

SERVE GOD

Once we have recognized God the next course of action is to serve Him. Abraham, after recognizing just Who his visitors were, made haste – worked very quickly – to get a meal prepared for his visitors. It wasn't a bologna sandwich either. Abraham put together the very best meal he possibly could and he involved his entire household in the service. Some servants were busy getting water to wash the feet of the Heavenly travelers while others were preparing a freshly butchered calf. Sarah was baking bread and Abraham was getting butter and milk ready. When it was all prepared Abraham stood by to make sure everything was satisfactory and to ensure that any further needs these men may have had were taken care of. You couldn't have gotten better service in a five-star restaurant!

We all need to be of service to God. All too often we think that it is the minister's job to do all of that and he or she is responsible but in reality, we all are responsible. When God speaks to us and we have recognized Him then it becomes our job to fulfill what He has spoken to us. It might be something that requires us to wait. It could be a task that is to be done immediately. Undoubtedly, He will give us enough instruction to get started and if we haven't received the plans to complete the task, that will come when the need arises.

To be of service to God is a very special privilege indeed and it requires our very best effort. Some have just given what was left over. But God's service requires the best we can give. We had a clothing drive one time. We made an appeal to the community to bring in discarded clothing and we specified "good clothing." But still you'd be amazed at some of the things we received. There were pants with the seat worn out or holes in the knees, and some were very dirty in bad need of the laundry. Believe it or not we even got used underwear. Of course, after we had given away all the clothing to the needy there was a lot of discarding to do. God doesn't want just anything. He wants the best we have in service as well as in things.

There is a flip side to this also. I have heard others say that if they were not in a position or didn't have the equipment to give the very best they could to God, that they would just not do it at all. God's word very plainly says that obedience is better than sacrifice. Giving our best to God means that we give the very best we have. Sure, there might be a more expensive piece of equipment that we could give or if we had better equipment we could do better service to God, but we make due with what resources we have been given and do it joyfully. Who knows, that piece of equipment might be coming to us if we'll just be obedient with what we have. So, the key is to give the very best we can to God using what we have been given for the moment.

NO LAUGHING MATTER

Then there was the matter of laughing. After the elaborate meal Abraham and his crew had provided for the visitors from above, they asked about Sarah. They told Abraham that they would return to him “according to the time of life” (or around 9 months) and Sarah would have given birth to a son. The promise was confirmed again. It was a definite and Abraham could begin counting the days.

Sarah had been listening at the tent door (who wouldn’t want to know what was being said by such important guests?). When she heard what they had said she thought about it. Reason demanded that it couldn’t be true. Abraham was now 100 years old and she was 90 and had long since passed childbearing years. As she realized these things she laughed. It wasn’t a mocking laughter but “this is impossible” laughter. We have dealt extensively with doubt in this book. It is a part of being human. We all have doubt from time to time. It is never a good thing and it can be very destructive to our relationship with God if it is not dealt with and forgiven.

There could be many points here but the one I feel most impressed to make is that we can’t hide anything from God. We may laugh in doubt or hide our feelings inside our heart. We may do things when we are alone that we wouldn’t want anyone else to know about. But we can’t do, say, think, or hide anything from God. He heard Sarah’s laughter and even when she denied it, He confirmed it. She had been discovered and she knew it.

We do try to hide things from God, don’t we? But we can’t. God sees all and knows all. It may seem unfair but when we really think about it, it’s a good thing. God’s knowledge of secrets means that we don’t have to live with guilt. Since He already knows we just “fess up” and be done with it.

It’s great being a child of God. It’s thrilling to recognize Him, and it’s a pleasure to serve Him. It’s actually the greatest life on Earth because that’s what we were meant to be doing. Let’s do something different for a change. Instead of expecting God to do all the entertaining let’s begin to do our part to entertain God in our journey.

Chapter 16

Interceding

Genesis 18:16-32

“Then he said, ‘Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more: Suppose ten should be found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it for the sake of ten.’”

(Genesis 18:32)

We had planned to go see a very well-known evangelist who was going to be holding a crusade in a nearby city. It took about an hour or longer just to get there. After arriving we had to park six or eight blocks and pay five bucks to leave our vehicle in a semi-secure place. We then hiked in nearly 100-degree heat and humidity to get to the auditorium. As we waited our turn to go through the doors, I noticed an expensive looking car pull up to a set of doors where no one was allowed to go in. Those emerging from the sleek sedan were ushered through those doors and I have to admit that an envious scowl crossed my face.

After finally getting in the door, we then climbed several flights of stairs to finally get to a seat where we could only see what was really going on via the giant screens posted beside the stage area. I observed another group of people being ushered to the front floor seats reserved especially for them. I felt the scowl again.

The service was very good and after it was over the walk, wait, and “nose-bleed section” seats were well worth it. Even though it would’ve been nice to have experienced the VIP treatment extended to those other people, I realized that these were special people. They were not necessarily better than I was but probably known personally by the evangelist.

We do give special treatment to those we know. It isn’t wrong and doesn’t mean that we’re leaving others out or being snobbish. It just means that we have something special with that person we know, and we express it by doing favors to show that we care. We all do it.

The relationship God had with Abraham was like this. Can you imagine being such a friend of God that He would share important information with you personally? When the dinner Abraham had provided for God and the two angels was over, they got up to continue their journey. After promising Abraham that all the nations of the Earth would be blessed in him and his descendants, God felt it important to share with him the plan concerning Sodom.

The sin of Sodom had grown so great that an outcry had come up to God. That's how God described it. I believe that God knows everything. He knows every sin committed by each person on the face of the Earth that is living or has ever lived. Nothing escapes the eyes of God. Somehow a cry of the spirit goes up to God. The sin of this ancient city had grown to the point that it required God to come down in a human form (the theological term is "theophany") and give it His personal attention.

GOD SHARED

He shared this with Abraham as we would share a personal situation with a close friend. I want to be that close to God. And each of us can be in our own way. I won't spend a lot of time on this subject because it has been dealt with before. We can only get to that place by spending quality time with the Almighty.

We do that with prayer and Bible study. Now that takes many forms of definition. Some might spend time with God best in nature. Others enjoy hours at a desk surrounded by books. There is no single method that is completely right for everyone. The important thing is that we come to that place with our Lord.

God didn't have to come right out and say it. He didn't say, "Abraham, I'm going to destroy Sodom if I find that they have not repented of their sin." But because of the relationship He had with Abraham, he knew what God was referring to. He knew that destruction would be the fate of Sodom. The Bible doesn't say that Abraham ever visited Sodom but he could have. Who's to say that he didn't take a weekend to visit nephew Lot? Perhaps he had heard the talk as he ran into acquaintances during his journeys. Whatever the case, he knew God's intentions.

This too speaks of the great friendship he had with God. As we draw nearer to Him, He implants part of Himself into us. It becomes that spiritual ear to hear. We begin to see the heart of God between the lines of the Scripture. We begin to forget about the teachings of man and see the heart of God in His words. God will actually begin to speak to us through the word. It takes on life and it becomes a part of our lives.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE?

Now Abraham's thoughts turned toward the people of Sodom. God's heart had been there long before. Have you ever wondered why God waits so long to bring judgment? He is so patient. No one on the face of this planet is as patient as God. Even Job (known for patience) spoke harsh things. God had waited for the people of Sodom to get right with Him. He longed for it and desired it. Not one individual on the face of the Earth is worthless to God. It is His perfect will that all be saved.

But there comes a time when enough is enough. I'm glad I don't have to determine when that time is. Only God has that right and personally, I'm relieved. We have laws, judges, and authorities to determine when people have done enough here. But when it comes to the final decision of our souls only God has the right to say, "Enough is enough."

I'm sure Abraham thought about Lot. He may not have known exactly how deeply involved his nephew had become with the city. He couldn't reverse the judgment of God but somehow, he had to try to rescue him again. He had physically rescued Lot years before when the war of the kings had taken place. But Abraham couldn't begin to organize an army against God. Why would he even want to do that to his best Friend? This was a spiritual battle. Still, he asked God, "If you find fifty righteous people in Sodom would you save the city for those people?"

God knew the heart of Abraham, and His answer brought assurance that God wasn't so bent on destruction that He would kill His own for the sake of the cause. He would save the entire city if He could find fifty righteous people there.

Either Abraham had witnessed it or heard enough to know that there was a good chance that there may not be fifty righteous people in the city. "What about forty-five?" Again, God answered that He would save it for forty-five. Abraham's countdown dropped all the way to ten. God would save the entire city if only ten were there.

Why would God be willing to put up with all that wickedness for only ten righteous people? I believe I know why. It was because He knows that true righteousness (which only comes by belief in God not by anything we can say or do) is infectious. You can't really spread the love of God without touching those who long for that love in their own lives. If ten truly righteous people had lived in Sodom it would soon have been twenty, then forty, then eighty and on and on. God knew that.

We need to be infectious with what God has given us. We need to approach our everyday ministry with a passion. We must ask ourselves "How are my words or actions going to affect others? Will this bring glory to God? Will I be infectious for God?"

LIFE GOES ON

When their conversation was finished, the Bible tells us that God went on His way and Abraham returned to his place. That's the way it is. God will always go on His way to fulfill His plan. Yes, whether we choose to be a part of it or not, He will fulfill His plan. If we choose to not be a part of it, He will find someone who will. He may not always get His will in our lives but His plan will be fulfilled. He will go on His way.

Though we always need to be in touch with God we must also return to our place. Our place is where we are supposed to be doing what we are supposed to be doing. That's ministry. It may be living that righteous life in front of those we come into contact with every day (and I don't mean a "holier than thou" righteousness either but letting Christ live out righteousness through us). Whatever it is, it will touch others.

God will always be near and when we experience that close encounter with God it is always to give us that special boost to keep on going – keep on doing what He has planned for us. Others may not understand. Others may call us overzealous or even quitters (depending on what God has put in our hearts). It doesn't matter. It only matters what we are being obedient to by God's command.

We experience God's presence and return to our place. This means that we must learn to be satisfied with the place God has given us. Sometimes that isn't easy. We may grow restless and long for more. I know, I've been there often. But we must remember this, no one else can be exactly what we can be in the place God has put us. And that makes us special. As we make our way down the path our journey takes us, let's learn to be compassionate and interceding.

Chapter 17

Compassion

Genesis 19:1-38

“And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD. Then he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain; and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land which went up like the smoke of a furnace. And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot had dwelt.”

(Genesis 19:27-29)

When kids get into a disagreement the result is usually name calling. I don't know if this is still popular today, but when we were kids and we'd start calling each other names. There would come a time when we ran out of names and we'd start replying, "Oh yeah? Well, the same back to you two times!" Then the other person would respond with something like, "No! The same back to you four times!" and on and on until someone got tired of it all and gave up

There's a lot of name-calling going on today in the name of Christ. I, for one, think it is detestable in the eyes of God. I'm referring specifically to the homosexual situation we face today. We can't really address this chapter without talking about it in light of the subject matter of this chapter. Actually, homosexuality has been around ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden and men began to multiply on the face of the Earth.

Abraham knew about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Bible doesn't come right out and say it, but let's ponder a little here. When Abraham asked God if He would spare the city if He found fifty righteous people there, then decreased the count all the way down to ten, I believe that with each decrease he thought about what he may have seen or heard concerning what was going on in those cities. He had witnessed at least some of it first hand when he had been led by God to attack the four kings who had taken them captive.

As the number decreased to forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty and finally ten, I believe Abraham envisioned the sin of the people. Homosexuality wasn't the only thing going on. In fact, it was one of the results of the sin that was previously in the hearts of those people before it ever got physical. Sin doesn't come from physical activities or indulgences but directly from the heart and soul of mankind.

Let me state my case plainly. I have studied this subject extensively in God's word and there is no doubt that homosexuality and lesbianism are wrong. I have read arguments on both sides of the fence and the defense of the homosexual that argues that it is a normal, God-given life-style requires stretching the scripture beyond its literal and original meaning. In this chapter we don't have the time and it is not the place to go

into a long, drawn-out study of this subject but if there are any questions feel free to contact me and I'll be glad to discuss them with you.

On the other hand, there are many carrying signs up and down the streets proclaiming that "God hates fagots." This is plain name-calling and is just not true. Many who proclaim such things are also racists and portray a "left wing" fanaticism.

THE TRUTH

The truth of the matter is that the Bible tells us God is love. Read the three letters of John and you'll see that you cannot complete any one of the small "books" without a picture of the love of God. If God is love then He loves all His creation. He may not be pleased with the way it has gone but His love still remains. God loves the homosexual. He doesn't love the sin nor does He love the deception that the individual has fallen into, but without a doubt He loves the person. He longs to lead them to restoration and He will do just that if they will turn to Him.

If God loves the homosexual, and He does, then we, as servants of God are bound to love them too. We are to pray for them. We are to treat those bound in this sin as we would treat anyone bound in any other sin. You can't win anyone into the Kingdom of God by hating them, accusing them, and shunning them. We can only win someone who is bound in sin by loving them. We don't condone nor accept any sin but we must extend the true love of God to them.

GOD IS CONCERNED

If there are those in doubt as to whether God is concerned just for them, take another look at this incident with Lot. When the angels of God entered the city, they went to the place where they knew Lot would find them. They gave Lot opportunity to express his righteousness. Perhaps Lot had chosen the easy life when he and Abraham split up but the experience of the Divine he had enjoyed while living with Abraham did not easily leave his life.

Lot sat in the gate, which was the Biblical way of saying that he had gotten involved with the politics of the city. Perhaps it occurred because of the rescue by Abraham. It could have been because Lot recognized that it was the best way to extend righteous influence on the city.

He saw the angels and immediately invited them into his home. He didn't just invite them but insisted they come home with him because he knew their fate if they stayed all night in the streets. He didn't cherish the embarrassment of the sin that the men of the city would exercise in dealing with these "strangers."

God allowed His angels to come into Lot's house in order to show him mercy. You see, as it turns out only four could be considered righteous and one of those got turned into a pillar of salt (Lot's wife). In fact, as we see at the end of this chapter, even Lot's daughters did wrong. Lot's wife and daughters had been allowed to leave the city only because of Lot.

God had promised Abraham that He'd save the city for only ten righteous people. But even though He found only one He still extended grace. He didn't spare the city but He did spare His people.

And so, God cares for all of us. His care and love will protect each and every one. Sure, bad things happen to God's people, but only to the extent of what God knows will turn out to be for their good. We can rest in the knowledge that God really does care that much about us individually.

WHAT ABRAHAM SAW

Early that morning Abraham got up and went to the place where he had talked with God. He looked out over the plain and could see the smoke filling the sky in the distance. I believe that He expected to see this sight on the horizon that morning. He most likely had hoped that it would be different, but knew that it wouldn't be.

I don't think for a moment that he gazed upon the tragic sight thinking, "they got just what they deserved." I believe he grieved for all those people. It was a tragedy. God had been merciful over and over again. He could have allowed Abraham to just rescue Lot and his family, but He had willed that all of Sodom be saved at Abraham's rescue for He was offering yet another act of mercy upon the city.

We should always have compassion on those who have experienced judgment even when it may seem justifiable that they deserved it. It is still tragic. It is tragic to God and so it should be to us. Anytime a soul is eternally lost it is tragic. The death of a Christian may be considered a tragedy but, thanks be to God, that individual will go on to a life that cannot even be compared to this. But when a non-believer dies it is truly a tragedy because their eternal fate is sealed forever.

There comes a time when a decision must be made. At that point God had to exercise judgment. And so, it is with all things. God had extended mercy to these cities time after time. They continued to rebel against God. Their hearts became harder and harder and the outward display of their sin grew more and more evil. Something had to be done and God did it.

I have heard people say a number of times, "If God doesn't judge America He will have to repent to Sodom and Gomorrah." I tell you that God isn't a man that He has to repent as we do. But I also remind you of the great number of born-again believers in this nation. There may be a lot of things wrong with the Church of America right now, but still the Church does exist in America. God doesn't take that lightly. I believe that it is the righteous people, those born-again believers in Christ Jesus our Lord, who have deferred any judgment that may be due against this nation.

As it continues its decline into wickedness a judgment day may arrive. But it will not precede the time when God removes His people from it as He did with Lot. He will not destroy His children along with the wicked. In our technologically advanced times, war sometimes makes casualties of its own. Because of weapons of mass destruction, our own people sometimes are in the wrong place at the wrong time. But I tell you, God

doesn't allow any room for losing His people in the judgment. If judgment ever does fall upon our nation, you can be sure that God's people will be spared.

THE TRAGEDY OF LOT AND HIS DAUGHTERS

Finally, we look at the seemingly twisted relationship between Lot and his two daughters. "Mom" had been turned to a pillar of salt right before their eyes. Well, not really. Lot's wife looked back upon the burning city against the advice of the angels. They were to leave and not look back. Looking back signified a longing to return. The Bible doesn't tell us whether she was in front of Lot or behind him, but by the tradition of those days she was probably behind him. If that were the case then Lot never again got to see his wife because if he had looked back upon her, he too would have suffered a like fate.

Alone with Dad in a cave, it seemed like the whole world had been destroyed and they were the only three people left on Earth. The two daughters concocted a plan to preserve life on Earth (or so they thought) and provide a son to carry on the name of their father, Lot. In two successive nights the daughters got Lot drunk and had intercourse with their father. By so doing they both wound up pregnant by Dad. Two nations emerged from that twisted relationship, Moab, and Ammon. At times both of these nations plagued Israel. Sin always has a way of coming back to bite us, even when it has been forgiven by God.

The final lesson of this chapter is that we must be on our guard. We are not perfect. Even though we try to live holy lives and allow Christ to live through us, our human nature fails. It is not a thing that we have to do. It isn't that we have no choice. In the case of sin, we always have a choice to make. Sometimes we make the wrong choice and we sin against God. To be sure we are quick to repent of that sin (or at least we should be), but what has been done is done. Even though we have been forgiven, there are times when results cannot be changed.

We've got to live with that. But even then, when we have repented and made things right, there are consequences to pay. The good thing is that God will use our wrongs for our benefit. He will take those bad things in our lives and work them for good if we will allow Him to do so.

IT'S ALL ABOUT CHOICES

Again, it's all about choices - good choices and bad choices. Both affect our lives, but, as we said, God will use both good and bad in our favor. We learn from those things. We learn to depend more upon God and we learn what not to do next time and that is important.

I'm thankful that we have a Savior who will not judge us after we have been judged at Calvary. Praise His name that He will turn even our bad into good. What more could we ask for? Let's serve Him today and give Him thanks knowing that all will work together for the good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). As we continue our journey with God in compassion, always

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remember that when we are tempted to pass judgment on others for their wrongdoing that we are human too. We also mistakes.

Chapter 18

Integrity of the Heart

Genesis 20:1-18

“... In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this.”

(Genesis 20:5)

My father-in-law at one time owned a pail blue Volkswagen van. The very first camping trip that my wife and I made shortly after we were married was in that van. That's when we discovered that reclining lawn chairs, though very comfortable to relax in, are not good for sleeping in.

Some years before that a minister approached my father-in-law and asked about purchasing the van. After my father-in-law thought about it for a few minutes he named a price to the minister. The minister responded with something like, "You know, I believe that God wants you to give me this van." As I recall the story my father-in-law shot back with words similar to, "Well, sir, I believe that if God wanted me to give you this van that He'd have told me too and He ain't."

Now at the time, though he had a high regard for God, my father-in-law was not a born-again Christian. But he knew enough to realize that God speaks to the giver as well as to the "give-e." Those of us in ministry positions have to be very careful to not take advantage of the respect others extend to us as well as guard against being guilty of manipulating people into doing what we think they should do. Deception can be a very easy tool to use when we are in a position that commands respect from others. But manipulation can be a form of witchcraft and I don't know of very many ministers who'd want to be accused of that.

Abraham once again took his journey South and stopped at a place called Gerar. Here was a man who had battled the armies of five kings to rescue his nephew, Lot. He had trusted God for the promise that was soon to be reality after many years. He had spoken with God on several instances and had intervened for the people of Sodom by asking God if He would spare the city for ten righteous people. It seemed that he was a man who knew no fear.

And so, upon entering the city, he once again asked his wife to tell everyone that she was his sister so as to keep another man from killing him to get Sarah. She must have been a knockout for a ninety-year-old woman. Later on in the chapter we find out that what he was saying wasn't entirely a lie. They shared the same father but not the

same mother. But even though this may have not been a lie, doesn't it just seem a little out of character for such a brave and holy man?

When Abimelech, the king of Gerar, saw Sarah and understood that she was Abraham's sister, well, all the bells and whistles went off and he took her into his own harem. Where was Abraham to say, "Hey, man! That's my wife you're taking there!" But we have to remember (and I mean no offense to the female gender here) that in those days (and still yet today in many parts of the world) a woman was considered property with value. He could get another wife. Still, you'd think he would have remembered that God had promised him a son by Sarah.

THE STRANGE THINGS WE DO

We all do strange things sometimes don't you think? Regardless of how brave or heroic we may believe ourselves to be, there comes a time when God will allow us to be tempted with our greatest fear. Why do you think that is? I believe it is because He knows that we have to face our fears sooner or later. Facing fears, even when we fail to our own embarrassment, causes us to have that thing exposed once and for all. Even if we have yielded to the fear, like Abraham did here, we still come out on top (perhaps a bit red in the face) because God has helped us to overcome it. Once it is out in the open, whether we have conquered or failed, we will be put in a spot where we are most likely to not fear that situation again.

In those instances, we must remember that, regardless what happens, God must get the glory just as He does in this instance. Let me explain. Abimelech had not had sexual relations with Sarah yet. Somehow God had kept him from Sarah. In a night dream God told Abimelech that he was a "dead man" because he had taken another man's wife. Because of this revelation Sarah was restored to Abraham.

"YOU SEE, IT'S LIKE THIS . . ."

Abraham had to explain his cowardly actions to Abimelech and with the story out we never read of this situation ever happening again. Why hadn't God forced this same explanation when Abraham had done this with Pharaoh? God has a time. He knows when we are ready to really face things. Abraham apparently wasn't ready when this same thing had happened in Egypt. God had used the Egyptian incident to make Abraham wealthy. But now it was time to really face his fear and get the truth out into the open. It was time to stop believing half-truths and face reality.

Because of this Abraham had to pray and intercede for the people of Gerar. God had "closed up the wombs" of all the people of Gerar because of this sin even though it was unknown to Abimelech and his people at the time. Abraham's intercession reversed the situation for the people of the land.

Why would God do something that seemed so cruel, especially to innocent people? God always has a reason. I believe that this happened not just for Abraham's benefit but also for Abimelech's. You see God saw something in Abimelech that was good and pure and He wanted to reach him as well as Abraham. It taught Sarah something too. Fear was resolved, a man and his kingdom experienced God, and

Sarah learned that there was nothing hidden from God (remember how she thought she had hidden her laughter at God's promise?). But with everything exposed and out into the open it presented the opportunity for all to put those feelings and that part of their past behind them and start anew.

That's what God wants to do for us as well. He will let us go on just so long in our "secret sins" and failures. But He knows that these things will eventually bring us harm if they are not exposed and dealt with. It may put us in a position of embarrassment. It may make us uncomfortable and question God's motives. But in the end, those seemingly bad situations will work for our own good and best interest. It will bring strength to our very souls. That's good for us and for the kingdom of God.

HEART'S INTEGRITY

God had seen something good in Abimelech. When God spoke to the man in a dream, Abimelech defended himself by saying that he had taken Sarah in the integrity of his heart. In other words, he didn't know and he did it out of innocence. God acknowledged that Abimelech had integrity of the heart and also reminded him that this was the reason He hadn't let Abimelech touch Sarah. He gave him opportunity, now knowing the truth, to make things right and he did just that.

God knows the integrity of our heart. He knows when we have done something out of innocence and when we are just "covering up." He also knows that, either way, being exposed will bring us strength. That's why we find ourselves, many times, in a bad situation. We should always be reminded that it is for our own good. That's tough. It's downright hard in fact! We feel uncomfortable facing the imperfections in our lives. I am convinced that this is the reason so many Christians in America are weak Christians - They don't want to "fess up" when they are faced with their own imperfections. But if we really want to grow in Christ, we must stop defending ourselves and realize that we aren't "super-Christians" living life perfectly. Just because a perfect Christ lives within us doesn't automatically make us perfect. We've got to let Him be formed in us and that means we've got to know that there will be some "tearing down" in our own lives.

It can be a hard thing to face but we must if we are to let true integrity of heart be seen in us. We've got to remember that it's a "love thing" and not just "God being mean to us." Love is hard sometimes because it requires change within and without.

These things require us to seek God, and that's the ultimate and final motive for the whole exposure we may be facing. It caused Abraham to pray. He prayed for Abimelech and his household and God restored them. Now, God could have done that without Abraham's prayers couldn't He? Yes, He could have. But then how would things have been between Abraham and Abimelech? Probably not very good. They would have always thought of each other in a bad way. Prayer brought them together. God wants us to be concerned about others we affect. He wants us to bring Him into the situation as the solution. It requires us to pray not only for ourselves but also for those to whom we have done wrong. It requires us to swallow another "hurt my pride pill." But it will always turn out right in the end when we have brought God into the matter instead of walking away talking about it the rest of our lives.

That is God's will because He knows it will be good for us and it will be good for the Kingdom. It's a good witness when we show the world our imperfections and our own dependence upon God. It teaches that we aren't those perfect "goody-two shoes" but we are just like them, and we need God just as badly as they do. It is a challenge to be met and how else can we meet it unless we walk with God? We must learn what real integrity is as we make our way in the journey. Real integrity will win people as we go and not drive them away.

Chapter 19

The Fulfillment of Promise

Genesis 21:1-7

“And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.”

(Genesis 21:1-2)

I went through a wild period during my freshman and sophomore years in high school. By “wild” I mean that I turned away from my Christian teachings and decided that it was high time I do things my way. As everyone is aware, high school students know “everything” and who better than I to know what was best for me? So, I began skipping classes and running with some boys who didn’t have quite the right reputation if you know what I mean.

There was one class in particular whose teacher just didn’t seem like the elevator went all the way to the top. One of the guys in our group had secured a pad of hall passes (I don’t know where and I don’t think I want to know) and so everyday we’d write ourselves a pass out of this teacher’s class. You would’ve thought that he would have caught on after a day or two but we did this for like two whole weeks! We would run all over the school and even go out to lunch early and somehow, we never got caught.

Most of the things we did were just mischievous but there was one thing that I did during that two weeks that I wish I hadn’t done. We went into the school library, messed around awhile, and then when leaving, I decided to walk out with a copy of “Moby Dick.” I didn’t check it out. I just put it under my jacket and walked out.

The next year I renewed my experience with the Lord. I was a different person. I repented of all the wrong I had done. But every time I looked at that book, I was reminded of my sin of stealing. By that time, we had moved about thirty miles south and so I attended another school. I would dismiss the uncomfortable feelings I would get when I saw the book by telling myself that there was no way I could ever return it. Besides, when I stole it, I had torn out the pages that identified it as library property. It was now damaged. They probably wouldn’t want it back anyway.

After I reached adulthood, I couldn’t take it any more. I wrote a very apologetic letter to the school library and stuck twenty dollars in the envelope to cover the cost and finally my mind could rest about it. I received back a “thank you” letter for the donation, but they never mentioned the missing book. I guess it meant a lot more to my conscience and me than it did to them.

The point I want to make with this story is that after all those years that school library at last realized the reimbursement to their cost (even though they had long past written it off). The stolen book was paid for and they had received what was due them. A wrong had been put to rest as right.

Sarah probably felt somewhat the same when her son was finally born. The long-awaited promise had finally come. God had fulfilled what He had promised to Sarah. She had thought it would never come. In fact, she had laughed the last time God had given the promise. How could it ever be? But now, cuddled in her arms, was the living proof that God doesn't go back on His promises.

Abraham was 100 years old but I'm sure he felt young and spry and probably kicked up a heel or two in the realization of the promise. He now had fuel to believe the other things God had promised him for here was the proof that God always does what He says He will do.

A LITTLE LAUGHTER IN OUR LIVES

She named him Isaac – laughter – because God had brought laughter and joy into their household. In fact, Sarah said, "God has made me to laugh and all who hear me will laugh with me!" She was laughing for a different reason now.

We all need laughter in our lives. Today it seems that there is more unhappiness than ever before. The devil doesn't want God's people to be happy and to be filled with laughter. That's why there are so many attacks against Christians. He brings trouble and trials that are designed to drag us down. Just when it seems we get our head above the waters he opens the floodgates again. When it seems we get a little extra money, the car breaks down. When we're just getting over the flu, we fall and break a leg or something. Does any of this sound familiar to you? I'm betting it does.

Sickness seems to run rampant in the face of modern medicine. People are put on multiple medications in attempt to treat what is wrong with them. It seems that no one is positive about anything these days. Why? I believe it's because the devil is attacking harder and hitting lower than ever before.

But that should also tell us something. God wants us to feel the laughter that comes with the fulfillment of promise. Yes! He is fulfilling His promises even in the midst of those problems. Just think, when you got those few dollars ahead and the phone bill was higher than expected, isn't it a blessing from God that those few dollars were there to take care of it?

The Lord has promised that He would take care of us. He has promised that He will never leave us nor forsake us. What would those problems be like without Him around? How miserable would that be?

God wants us to know that we can have joy in the morning after the darkness has fled away. He wants us to see those daily blessings that He gives so we will have hope and know that the bigger promises will indeed take place.

When we can begin believing in those promises and realizing the fulfillments that take place daily then we can laugh. We can be full of joy that will spill over to all those around us thus making them laugh as well.

Perhaps that's why God allows the devil to bring those trying things into our lives. Maybe it is so that we will realize the love that Christ has showered us with and let it then flow out from us. As others see the victory within us it becomes the true witness of the power of Jesus.

OBEDIENT

Abraham was obedient to the direction of God. Eight days after Isaac was born his father had him circumcised. It was the command of separation given him by God Himself. It was his responsibility to take care of business.

How often have we witnessed those who have experienced blessing after blessing but have been slothful in taking care of the business of giving thanks? Have we done it ourselves? It is important to make sure we take care of business with God. That doesn't mean that He's going to throw lightning bolts from Heaven if we don't but it does mean that we will realize within ourselves how dependant we are on Him.

When we are forgetful about giving thanks to God then we begin to grow hard. The next time it is a little easier to shrug it off. Before we know it, we are completely taking God for granted and think nothing of it. That's when the laughter begins to leave our lives. Then we begin to just expect God to take care of things for us. Before you know it, we are finding fault with everything. Nothing is good enough. We wonder, "Why isn't God taking care of me any more? Has He left me? I knew it was too good to be true!" We have talked ourselves right out of what could have been the greatest relationship of our lives. I fear this is what has happened to a large portion of the Church in America.

But our Lord wants to restore the laughter in our lives. He wants us to feel that giddy feeling we first felt in our relationship with Him. He hasn't left us. He's still right there; it's just that it has been so long since we've reached for Him. He's only a "thanks" away.

Joy had come to Abraham's house and celebration was in order. And so, we too have things to celebrate. Let's celebrate Jesus. Let's put things in order and in the right perspective and know that we can still trust Him. He wants that more than anything. What about you? God's promises will be fulfilled – just watch and see!

Chapter 20

Having Our Eyes Opened by God

Genesis 21:8-21

“Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink.”

(Genesis 21:19)

“Let’s give one to this guy walking behind us,” said my friend. The youth group of the church I was attending at the time was sponsoring a day when all the teenagers paired up and walked the streets passing out tracts. Actually, in my group, three of us went together. We had been best friends for some time and when we were around each other we were inseparable. I don’t know if you’d have called us the three musketeers or the three stooges.

We slowed down and let the man walking behind us catch up, then turned to him, told him what church we were from, and handed him a tract. In mid-sentence he loudly interrupted us saying, “I don’t want any of your trash! I’m an atheist so just let me pass by and leave me alone!”

We had heard about atheists – nothing good mind you, but we had never met one. We were shocked to silence and frankly a little scared as the threatening man pushed his way by us and continued on down the street. We didn’t speak for a while as we walked but soon gathered our composure and went back to our task. We knocked on doors for a few more blocks still amazed at the encounter we had experienced.

We had just regained our confidence when we happened upon an old house in bad need of repair. It was a big, expensive looking house with an old wrought iron fence around it. The grass was long and needed a good mowing. The scenario was complete with a creaking gate. A little apprehensive, we went through the gate and stepped up onto the porch. We rang the doorbell a couple of times but no one answered. Assuming no one was at home we walked back down the sidewalk and decided to leave a tract in the gate so that when the occupant(s) got home they would find the it. As we carefully placed the leaflet so it wouldn’t blow away a man emerged from the door breathing fire and brimstone! “I thought I told you boys that I didn’t want any of your junk! No get out of here before I call the police!”

It was the same man and let me tell you, we tripped over each other getting through that gate then bolted down the sidewalk like the starting gun had gone off on a 50 yard dash! It put the fear in all three of us and actually cut our mission short that

day. Feeling the pains of rejection, we knocked on a few more doors and headed back to the church. We had been “kicked out!”

The promised child, Isaac, had grown to the point that he was ready to be weaned from his mother. It was time for Isaac to begin eating solid food and Abraham made sure there was plenty for his boy to eat by throwing a big feast. It was an extremely festive time and all their friends and neighbors were attending and celebrated with them.

But you know how parties go. There’s always someone who has to throw a ‘monkey wrench’ into things when a large group of people get together. This time it was his son by Hagar, Sarah’s servant, Ishmael. Ishmael was now thirteen years old. Puberty had hit and just like most kids at that age, he was going through some changes that have the making for a very difficult time. He didn’t really understand what all the fuss was about concerning the festivities and he was probably feeling a little jealous. He was sure that no one had thrown him a party just because he was weaned from his mother and allowed to eat solid food. He had also noticed all the attention his new brother had been getting and he had just had enough.

Sarah was the wrong one to notice Ishmael’s actions. There was too much jealousy and hard feelings between her and Ishmael’s mother. She saw him, perhaps with some of his friends, making fun and mocking Isaac. It was too much for her and after the party was over, she demanded that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Her defense was that Ishmael was not to be heir with her own son Isaac. The Bible doesn’t say this but I’m sure she was quick to remind Abraham of the promise God had given for so many years. Ishmael now threw a kink into things.

It hurt Abraham greatly. He had grown to love Ishmael. He had spent time with him and, after all, he was his son just as much as Isaac was. He went straight to God about the matter and God was quick to answer him. God told Abraham to listen to Sarah and do what she had said because the ultimate promise was to be fulfilled through Isaac. As hard as it was going to be to send his son, Ishmael, away, it was necessary. Yet God didn’t leave it there. He made a further promise to Abraham that Ishmael would be okay and because he too was Abraham’s son, He would make a great nation to emerge from Ishmael’s offspring.

ANSWERING THE NEGATIVE WITH A POSITIVE

God always answers a negative with a positive. When He tells us that we must do something, or give up something that will bring us despair He will always replace it with good. He wants this for all of us. You see God has a great plan and promise for each of us and if we follow Him, He will always make it turn out for our ultimate good.

The next morning Abraham got up early. It was going to be a difficult day and he wanted Hagar and Ishmael to have as much daylight as possible. He gave her some bread and a skin of water. He carefully placed it on Hagar’s shoulder. She was not his wife but she had given birth to his son, Ishmael and I’m sure he felt a fondness for her. He then gave her his son, Ishmael and sent them away. I can’t even imagine how horrible that must have been for Abraham. I think I would have had to go to God one

more time and question whether this was the right thing to do or not. Had I really heard from God? The strict obedience with which Abraham carried out God's instructions is to be admired.

She headed south when she left. Remember that Hagar was an Egyptian. That was most likely her destination. She found herself wandering in a vast wilderness - the Wilderness of Beersheba. The sun beat down on their heads like a hammer striking a nail. Every step kicked up more choking dust. It was, to say the least, miserable. The Bible doesn't tell us if this was still the first day or just how many days had passed. Whichever it was, they soon found themselves lost in this terribly cruel wilderness with no more water. To Hagar it seemed that Abraham had sent them away to suffer a slow and merciless death.

It looked as if her son, Ishmael, was done for. She just couldn't take seeing him die first, so she laid him under a bush. Perhaps he could get a little shade to ease his suffering before he died. She walked some distance away from him, turned her back and began to weep. The Bible says that she lifted her voice and wept. It didn't matter who heard her there probably wasn't anyone around anyway. They were alone, on their own, and facing the horror of death. It couldn't get any worse.

ALONE

Have you ever found yourself feeling like Hagar? I'll bet you have. Maybe we aren't in a physical wilderness but the loneliness and helplessness of the place in which we find ourselves can be just as cruel as a desert wilderness. Life is full of these places. For some of us it seems we just pass from one to the other. How much more can we take? When will it all end? And so, we find ourselves alone. The best thing we can do is to cry out to God. The Bible doesn't tell us that Hagar cried out to God – it simply says that she cried out.

God has to get our attention. Sometimes He knows that we've got to come to the place where we are utterly helpless. It's better to trust God from the beginning but all too many of us don't. We've been told things like, "You've got to learn to stand on your own two feet." "No one is going to look out for you so you've got to learn to look out for yourself." "There are no handouts in life. If you want something you've got to get it for yourself." Or how about this one, "If you don't look out for number one no one else will."

We learn these things and so we develop a pride in taking care of ourselves. We learn to not trust anyone. We will bend over backwards to meet our own needs. Anyone who wants to give us something must be up to something themselves. "What do they want?" "What are they up to?" We learn that we can't get something for nothing. And so, we head out into the wildernesses of life. We don't know what we will face out there but we feel we're ready for anything until the water runs out, the dust is drying in our throats, and the heat of life has zapped any energy that we may have left.

The plain fact of the matter is that the devil wants us to die. He doesn't want us to cry out to God because he knows that God will hear us. We may not realize it but God has seen every step we have taken in our lives even the bad ones. He is there. We don't see Him, we don't feel Him, but He is there just waiting for us to cry out.

WHEN WE CRY OUT

What Hagar didn't realize was that Ishmael was crying out too. He had witnessed Abraham's discussions with God. He had heard his father tell him about the promises and even though he was a young teenage boy still sowing wild oats and confusing good and bad, he knew enough to cry out to God. The Bible tells us that God heard the cries of the boy and one of His angels spoke to Hagar from Heaven. "What's bothering you, Hagar? Don't be afraid because God has heard the voice of Ishmael lying under the bush. Get up and hold your son because a great nation is to come from him." In other words, "God made a promise to make a great nation come from Ishmael and he will live to see that promise fulfilled."

A ray of hope broke through the otherwise darkness of the situation. Hagar listened to the angel. Then something very wonderful happened. The Bible says that God opened her eyes. Just a short distance away she spotted it. She hadn't seen it before. Her own wailing had covered the faint sound of splashing as water rose from within the earth over the rocks. God opened her eyes and she saw hope. She saw their rescue. It wasn't a troop of men to rescue her and it wasn't a Mercedes to transport her and Ishmael the rest of the way to Egypt but it was exactly what she needed. It was a well of water.

When we cry out to God and then listen to Him, He will open our eyes and give us just what we need in that situation. It may not be what we'd like to have but it will be what is necessary to give us that hope. To Hagar that well looked like a resort. They were at the point of death and this was life.

She filled the water skin to the top and gave Ishmael a drink, then, I'm sure, took a long refreshing gulp for herself. New life entered her otherwise weak body instantly. They were refreshed and encouraged. They did make it to Egypt because the Bible tells us that she found a wife for Ishmael there.

God will give us what we need just when we need it. He will open our eyes to see the immediate answer to our cry. He will fulfill His promise to us and He will give us the provision we need along the way. It may not be in elegance or in great abundance but it will be there. It may require us to admit that we have been wrong. It may be that we will have to swallow some or all of that pride we have built up about making it on our own but still the provision will come. God knows your pain. He knows where you are. He is there with you. As you cry out allow Him to speak. Let Him show you the way.

LEARNING TO TRUST GOD

Finally, Ishmael chose to return to the wilderness. He had learned great strength from it and became an archer. He learned to trust God in that terrible place. God may choose for us to remain in the wilderness. We may never live in luxury and comfort. But if that's the case He will give us the heart for it.

Trust Him today. Know that He is there. Be convinced that He will supply your need no matter the hurt, no matter the pain, despite negative criticism and hardship from others. He will not only pull you through but will make your heart joyful in the face

of it all! Take a moment in the journey to look around. Even though you may be desperate right now look and listen because God is about to open your eyes!

Chapter 21

Taking Care of Business – As a Believer

Genesis 21:22-34

“And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, ‘God is with you in all that you do.’”

(Genesis 21:22)

Getting along in school can be pretty tough. During our childhood we moved several times which made us the “new kids” perpetually. We had just recently moved to the tiny village of Azalia, Indiana. There might have been three hundred people there if you counted Sundays in the summer when relatives would come for visits.

The town had a school that ranged from kindergarten to the eighth grade. That was my grade, the eighth I mean. Middle school is an especially tough time for kids but even more when you’re “the new kid.”

To further complicate matters I was a medium height skinny kid with curly hair and glasses. There was plenty there to poke fun at. I was like a walking dartboard to anyone who felt like hurling a humorously pointed object my way. In other words, I was fair game.

I learned early on that if you wanted to make friends in school as the “new kid” you had to first learn how to make friends with your enemy because that’s the way it was until people got to know you. I became a master at poking fun at myself first. I found out that it is no fun picking on someone who doesn’t mind being picked on.

It wasn’t very many days after starting school in Azalia that some of the boys began to poke fun at my curly hair. I knew that I would have to act fast, otherwise I’d be labeled as “curly top” or some other degrading nickname and so I said, “It sure is curly, isn’t it?” One of the boys said, “I bet you can’t even get a comb through it!” laughing as he spoke. I came back with something like, “Loan me your comb and let’s see.” I know you shouldn’t borrow combs – now, but then no one really thought much about it. With a deep, long stroke of the comb I finally got it through and only broke out one tooth. That generated a few laughs and so I did it again. “Hey, man! That’s my comb you’re ruining!” “Sorry,” I said as several more teeth went flying, “I’ll get you another one.” And with that I was now one of the gang.

Abraham had lived in the country of the young nation of the Philistines for some time now. Here his son, Isaac had been born. Abimelech, whom he had deceived with

the half-truth about Sarah being his sister a few years earlier, had realized that there was something different about this man, Abraham. He saw how the man had been increasing in goods and people and feared a future conflict with him. He had witnessed the victory Abraham and his neighbors had been granted over the four kings who had enslaved Sodom and Gomorrah. He was certainly a force to be reckoned with. Taking along the captain of his army, Phichol, I suppose as his witness but probably as a showing of his own military strength as well, he went to Abraham with a proposal for a contractual agreement to assure future peace between them.

WHAT WISDOM TEACHES

Why would Abraham even consider making this agreement with Abimelech? It was because it was wisdom. So many teach that we are to completely separate ourselves from the world after our salvation but it is a grave mistake. Let me elaborate on this. First of all, the Bible does tell us to come out from the presence of the world and be separate (see 2 Corinthians 6:17). We are to be clearly identified as being distinct from the world. That is not accomplished in the way we dress or the mannerisms we display necessarily. True, our physical actions will reflect our commitment to Christ but the true separating traits will be determined by what comes from our hearts.

There seems to be a contradiction here. Paul is telling us how we must be separate while Jesus tells us in Luke 16:9 to “make friends of the ungodly mammon.” Paul says earlier in 2 Corinthians 6 to not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. The words of Jesus seem to be saying that we should befriend the wealth of this world to ensure an eternal home. So, what are we really being told?

The truth is found somewhere in between the extremes just like so many other teachings taken from the Bible. We should always be aware that any secular ventures we participate in must always be in the shadow of our relationship and witness of Christ. If we partner with unbelievers, we must make our Christian stand well known. It is important. Some Christians feel we must completely withdraw from the world but we have to remember Christ’s command to go into the world (Mark 16: 15). How can we be a witness to the world if we are not in the middle of the daily grind? We can be right in the middle of cutting-edge technology and still be a strong and devout Christian. In fact, if we are to win the world for Christ, we must be in a position to have our witness exposed. People must see fruit as a result of our lives if they are going to desire to be like us.

Jesus was saying that we must be “out there” to be seen by man, not to lift ourselves up or to be admired in vain pride, but so that others will see Christ in us. That is making friends of the unrighteous mammon.

But Paul was right too. In the midst of being “in the world” the world must see a distinct difference in us. We must be separated from the world by being driven not by the desire for success, but by the desire to be a good witness for Christ. We must never let that witness down and we must always let the world know that we repent of our failures to the Master. This is not done in pious bragging or false humbleness but in true heartfelt repentance in realization of our sin. This too is a witness of the power of

Christ for we are allowing the world to see that Christians are only holy in and through Christ.

THE PACT OF PEACE

Abraham made this pact of peace with Abimelech. He took advantage of the opportunity to get a few things straight first concerning a well he had dug that was taken from him by some of Abimelech's people. The matter was cleared up and witness was made that the current well he had dug belonged to him.

There's nothing wrong with taking care of business, again, as long as our witness for Christ is never compromised. For some reason we have been taught that being a Christian requires us to display our humbleness by letting the world run over us. This simply is not true. There may come a time when we give up our rights in order to be a good witness but we aren't to be a doormat to be used by anyone wishing to take advantage of Christ's good nature in us.

WELL OF THE OATH

Abraham named the well, "Beersheba" or "Well of the Oath" to commemorate the pact. The important point here is that Abraham did something to remind himself of his commitment. We must remember our commitments first because we want to be obedient to God but also because of, you guessed it, our witness.

Finally, Abraham planted a Tamarisk tree, perhaps even a grove, and here he worshipped God. He made a point of worshipping God in public so that those around could see him. We don't worship in false pride but when others see us worship God then they know that we are serious in our relationship with him. Until the world sees our worship everything is just words. Words are cheap. But our action for the Lord tells the whole story.

What is our witness to the world around us? Do we speak a multitude of words but reflect something completely different with our actions or our treatment of others? That's for each of us to ponder. Let's take care of business but let's do it as a Christian and our journey will go much, much better.

Chapter 22

The Lord Will Provide

Genesis 22:1-19

"... My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering ..."

(Genesis 22:8)

I couldn't believe that she did that! But then, she is one of the most self-sacrificing women I have ever known. I'm talking about my wife. She had looked forward to that day for a long time. It was going to be a day when she had no responsibilities. That was very unusual for her because she normally gave the bulk of her time to the people of our church.

But this day was all hers. She had made plans to pamper herself and spend time doing exactly those things that she wanted to do and she deserved it. She spent an average week cleaning both buildings belonging to the church – everything from sweeping the floors to cleaning the toilets. After spending a day doing that, she would then sacrifice hours of her time collecting donations to fund our Youth Center. Most people don't realize that money just doesn't fall from Heaven even for a church.

Then there are programs that must be planned, manned, and prepared for. To have a successful program requires hours and days of work. Those of you reading this that have been a part of all the background work involved in a special event in a church knows what I'm talking about.

Of course, at the end of the day our daughter was coming in from school and I was getting home from work and we were ready to eat. Who plans all those meals? More often than not the kids and the husband in the home have no idea how much work goes into putting together meals for the week. We just come home and eat. We're thankful and don't mean to take that responsibility for granted but let's face it, we do.

This day was to be special. But then the call came. It was a lady in the church who was "high maintenance." Not that she meant to be but because of her failing health, it was something she couldn't help. Spending time with her really took a lot of energy and could leave you feeling exhausted. She had a doctor's appointment and needed someone to drive her. "Could you take me Sister?" Believe me (and many of you ladies can identify with this) it was a sacrifice. But my wonderful wife didn't even hesitate, "Sure, I'll be happy to take you." She didn't complain about it but simply got ready and went.

This was a very simple sacrifice compared to what God asked Abraham to do. Isaac was older now and Abraham had spent much time with his long-promised son. He had loved him years before he was born. Many of the things he had dreamed of doing with a son were now becoming reality.

It seemed that God asked him the impossible. He had been obedient to God in everything he had been told. But this was going too far. God instructed Abraham to take his beloved Isaac and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. Though the Bible does not record one word of protest by Abraham he had to have a heart full of questions. What kind of God would ask this of him?

Remember that the Bible indicates that God is omniscient. In other words, He knows everything, past, present and future. So why did God need to “test” Abraham? This thought has occurred to me often in my Christian experience. The Bible speaks of testing. But if God knows everything, why does He need to test us? What could we ever prove to a God who knows all? Doesn’t He know what is in our hearts at any given moment? Why would He have a need to know, unless the test is not to prove our faith to God but to ourselves? There are periods in our Christian experience when we must have physical proof of our own faith in God.

SECOND GUESSING INSTRUCTIONS

Perhaps Abraham had been spending more time with his son than with God and had softened in his relationship with the Lord. Whatever the reason God was justified in this action that would pull Abraham back into a position of great faith in God. “Go to the land of Moriah, and I will show you a mountain which you shall climb with your son and sacrifice him there.” This was God’s instruction.

Have you experienced instruction from God that just didn’t make sense? How about, “Love your enemy” or, “Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself” really, these are tough ones. Who wants to love someone who is spreading rumors and gossip about him and how can you love your neighbor as much as you love yourself? Only the Holy Spirit in us can accomplish such feats.

There was a man who had been a prisoner of war in Korea. During his time as a prisoner, he was treated with much brutality. In one instance he had been taken from his cell for interrogation and when the guard returned him, he slammed the heavy steel door shut on his foot and would not open it to free him. The prisoner had to jerk his foot free from the door and his foot was mangled in the process.

But he had become a Christian there in the midst of his captivity and the God of love became his only peace. He treated the guard with respect and kindness even when he was sorely persecuted. The guard softened and began to treat the prisoner more humanely.

Years later this same man returned to the land of his former captivity as a missionary and won many souls to Christ. I’m sure that during his time of captivity he questioned, “Why God? Why must I go through this brutal treatment?” God remained silent. But all the while he was being formed for the future work he was to do. God

does test us but it is not for God to see if we've got the "goods" or not. Rather it is for us. The testing lets us know that we have faith in our Maker. It becomes a time of learning and conditioning, strengthening our faith.

STEPS AGAINST OUR WILL

The next morning Abraham saddled his donkey and took two servants and Isaac with him. He prepared the wood for the burnt offering and they set out for the place God had told him to go to. It took three days – three torturous days thinking of what he was about to do with his beloved son. Think of the questions that raced through his mind as they journeyed. What nightmares he must have experienced as he tossed on those long nights of the journey.

But the most dreadful thing of all was seeing those mountains in the distance as they approached the land of Moriah. His thoughts troubled and worried him but it was nothing like the dread of arriving at the place where he was going to carry out this horrible command of God.

Many can identify with this. God tells us to do things we don't want to do. It's easy when it is a thing of joy. When He gives us a command that will bring blessing to ourselves and to others it is a pleasure to do the will of God but what about those unpleasant commands? We don't want to do them. Some refuse to carry out those orders and will never know the experience God had in store for them.

Abraham told his servants to stay with the donkey while he and his son went on to worship God with a sacrifice. He set out climbing that mountain. Isaac was with him unsuspectingly carrying the wood that was meant to soon consume his flesh. Abraham carried a burning torch to light the fire, and a large knife to kill his son. It was the longest, hardest journey Abraham had ever made.

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT THE WORST WAS OVER

Then the journey got harder. Isaac spoke up, like any curious son would, saying, "Father, we've got the wood, the fire, and the knife to kill the sacrifice, but we didn't bring a sacrifice. Where are we going to get a lamb for the burnt offering?" I'd say Isaac had been to several sacrifices with his father. This one didn't seem normal.

Abraham mustered all the faith he could in answering his son, "God will provide a sacrifice for Himself." Abraham revealed his true inner feelings. He was going through with this, but deep inside he had faith that God would somehow change the plan. He trusted God. And that's where a lot of us get all tangled up in life. We have learned to not trust God. We go through the motions but don't really throw our entire trust upon the most trustworthy One in the universe.

I've told a story for years of a famous tightrope walker from the past. He was the greatest tightrope walker in the world. One day he stretched his rope across Niagara Falls. He began his show with multitudes watching. They cheered him on and praised him for being the best they had ever seen. But then the man did something different. He got a wheelbarrow and pushed it across the rope and back without as much as a

wobble. This excited the crowd even more as they applauded his feat. “You are the greatest tightrope walker in the world!” they cheered. Then the man asked a question of the crowd, “If you really think that I’m the greatest, who of you will volunteer to climb into the wheelbarrow for a ride?” The crowd hushed and became still. No one volunteered because in reality they trusted him when his life was in his hands, but they were not willing to put their own life into his hands.

All too often we are like that with God. We cheer and applaud Him in the great miracles of the Bible. We even trust Him for minor things in our lives. But can we really put our lives in His hands with the major decisions? Can we really trust Him in our jobs, with our families, and with our very lives? I believe we should and can.

DELIVERANCE

Arriving at the top of the mountain Abraham bound his son; put the wood on the altar they had constructed and raised the knife to kill his beloved son. I’m sure Isaac was confused and wondering about what was going on with his father at that moment. But before Abraham could strike the deathblow God spoke from Heaven. God is always right on time. It may seem close or even too late but in reality, His timing is impeccable. The voice cried out, “Abraham, don’t lay a hand on your son to harm him, for you have proven your love and respect for Me in that you have not withheld even your only son from Me.” Then Abraham heard a noise and looked discovering a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. It became the sacrifice that day. But the true sacrifice had already been made in his obedience to God.

Abraham gave the place a long name that meant, “The LORD Will Provide.” A saying was born that day which stated, “In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” What a statement! Nothing is truer. It may seem like we are at the end and provision will never come. But I assure you that it will. If we continue to trust in God even to the end, He will come through. He not only promised it but He will fulfill it.

At the end of this incident God gave further promises to Abraham. He had been promised prosperity, land and descendants all along. But now the promise included that all the nations of the Earth would be blessed because he had obeyed the command of God. Our obedience affects more lives than we could ever possibly know in this life. It’s not only about us, or even our families, but it’s about changing others – even entire nations, for God. Look to Him. Trust Him. Know that He is on your side every step of the way. Affect your world with your obedience to the command of God. Whatever task the Lord gives you to do know that He will provide as we continue our journey.

Chapter 23

Our Families and Our Journey

Genesis 22:20-24

“Now it came to pass after these things that it was told Abraham, saying, “Indeed Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor.”

(Genesis 22:20)

Larry and Bill were locked in tight wrestle holds. "Let me go!" shouted Larry. "You first!" cried Bill. But both were too stubborn to be the first to let go so they tugged, dragged, and punched on each other until both were ready to shed tears. But they didn't. The first to cry would be considered the loser so they tightened their holds instead.

After awhile a third boy, Jesse, somewhat older, walked by and witnessed the struggle of the two boys. He picked the one who looked most like he was losing, which happened to be Larry, then said to Bill, "Hey what do you think you're doing? Let him go!"

Both boys hesitated at the sound of a new voice. They looked at this stranger as if to say, "Who do you think you are?" Then Larry, the one he had chosen to defend, said, "You can't talk to my brother that way!" Confused by Larry's words he stumbled, "Hey, man, I was just trying to help."

"Well just mind your own business!" exclaimed Bill.

"Look," said Jesse, "you guys shouldn't be fighting like this. You guys are brothers for Heaven's sake. Try supporting one another instead."

"We support one another good enough I guess, just watch!" As he spoke Bill picked up a rock and firmly cast it at Jesse. "Hey, watch it! You don't know who you're messing with!" But before he could lift a finger in self-defense Larry hurled another rock his way. With that Bill shouted, "Get him!" Jesse fled for his life as Larry and Bill sent a barrage of rocks in the air.

After Jesse had escaped out of range Bill put his arm around Larry, "Guess we showed him!" "Yeah," answered Larry, "Hey Bill, let's go see if Mom has any cookies baked!" And they were off.

Family can be our best friends and our worst enemies. There is no fight like a family fight. Brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles can cause a lot of grief.

“But let not one offend our brother!” I’ve heard my wife relate many times about her siblings. They would fight like the proverbial “cats and dogs” but if someone outside the family attacked a brother or sister, they’d have the whole clan on their backs (by the way, she’s the youngest of twelve – that would be like having a small army after you).

Our families are very important to us. Even though there are times we would like to escape them there is no one we can be as comfortable with as our family. Even when great distance separates, with the push of a few convenient buttons, you can be talking with your loved ones like they were sitting next to you.

This was not the case with Abraham. When you walk everywhere a great distance may as well be another planet. Remember that he had left his brother, Nahor in Haran many miles away. He probably thought that he’d never see his brother again.

One day someone passed by who had come from the land of Haran. When he found out that Abraham and Nahor were brothers he had news to share. He told Abraham of his brother’s welfare and reported that Nahor’s wife blessed him with eight sons. He had four more by a concubine! Twelve sons in all!

I’m sure Abraham was glad to hear about those he had lived with a lifetime before. It was good to know that his brother was okay and living prosperously. However, this news may not have been so welcomed just a few years before. While Abraham was waiting for God’s promise of a son it would have made him feel like a failure to hear of the blessings of his brother. We can identify with that can’t we? If we were in need of finances, it would be hard to be happy for our brother or sister who had just come into a great financial blessing. The devil likes to use things like that to thwart our belief and trust in God.

THE LESSON OF LOVE AND LIKE

But by this time Abraham had been blessed with two sons of his own, Ishmael by Sarah’s maid, Hagar, and the son promised by God, Isaac. This made all the difference in the world. He was in a position to be happy on behalf of his brother. God is good.

Loving our families is important. Even when disagreements arise this should never affect our love. We don’t have to agree to feel love. That can be confusing to those who aren’t operating under Christ because people tend to associate “love” with “like.” My wife and I had gotten into a fairly hot discussion over - I can’t remember what. In the course of our heated debate she said, “I don’t like you right now!” I hadn’t learned this lesson of “love” and “like” at the time and feeling somewhat confused I asked, “You don’t love me anymore?” To which she responded, “I didn’t say I didn’t love you, I said I didn’t like you!”

It took me a few years of pondering this (and several more lessons from my wife) for me to realized that love isn’t necessarily based on like. For example, Jesus told us to “love our enemies.” That doesn’t mean we have to approve of everything they do. We may not like very much about that person at all. But we still love the individual. That’s the way God is. If we think for one moment that He approves of everything we do, we are greatly in error. He doesn’t like the rebellious ways of a man one bit. Yet He

loves us enough that He gave His only begotten Son to die in our place for our penalty of sin. That's loving your enemy!

THE LOVE OF FAMILY

I have learned first hand how important the love of family can be. When the chips are down and it seems like everyone in the world is against you, you can depend on the love of your family. How often has a mother, father, brother or sister, gone to the county jail and used hard-earned cash to bail out a son or sibling? They were downright disgusted at what their loved one had done, but the love-connection between them became a driving force to get their flesh and blood out of trouble.

God knows when to bring up family ties. Isaac was getting older and this news set the stage for another very important event in the journey of Abraham. It would soon be time for his son to take a wife. We'll see just how important this was in Genesis 24.

Our great Father knows how to drop those significant hints in our lives. He orchestrates events to lead us down the right path if we'll just follow Him. He becomes our family. He's like a dad who gives sound advice to a son. He's like a mother nourishing us along the way. When we need protection, He is like an overseeing "Big Brother" watching our backs.

He also grants us another family and that is our Christian family. I have "brothers" in Christ who seem closer to me than flesh and blood. I know many of you do too. It becomes what we often refer to as our "extended family." They are people we can depend on because they relate to what we go through and experience.

God gives us a great family but we've got to take time to recognize what He has given us. These things are important. Be blessed in your family. It will make the journey better.

Chapter 24

The Family Plot – A Necessary Part

Genesis 23:1-20

“So the field of Ephron which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field and the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, which were within all the surrounding borders, were deeded to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city.”

(Genesis 23:17-18)

It is coming to all of us. We dread and fear this terrible enemy that knows no cure. We have learned to slow it down with medicine, new procedures and by taking better care of ourselves, but we have not and will not completely cheat it. I'm speaking of course of death. Most of us have experienced the passing of a loved one or a good friend and it brings grief. We can't help it because we miss those who have gone on. It also causes us to wonder about ourselves because we know that one day it will also find us.

As believers in Christ, we have been taught that it becomes a stepping-stone to eternal life. Yet even then it remains a great unknown that we don't want to happen no matter how much we may comfort ourselves, remind ourselves of the promises of the word of God, and put it out of our minds.

Abraham, as much as a friend he was with the Inventor, Maker, and Author of the universe, was not exempt. His beloved wife Sarah was the first to go. The scripture tells us that she lived a good long life of 127 years. He had spent the bulk of his life with this woman and she had not only become his lover, the mother of his promised son, but she was also his constant companion and best friend.

When she died the Bible tells us that he spent some time mourning for her. Who wouldn't in his place? It was right for him to do so because mourning in the right way allows us to express feelings that otherwise suppressed, would bring much detriment to our health. Spending some time letting those natural but negative emotions expel from us is like breathing out used up, bad air from our lungs.

Even when we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this individual that we have been connected to in one way or another has gone to be with the Lord, it still hurts us to become suddenly disconnected from them. We can try to hide those feelings but more often than not this kind of treatment results in negative impacts in our lives. The emotions will come out. If not allowed to be released in a healthy way they will emerge in hatred of God, lack of forgiveness toward others, or a hardening of our emotions that can eventually cause us to be hated and misunderstood by the rest of mankind.

Abraham let it all out when Sarah died. He grieved until he was sure he could live without her. We can you know. It may not be easy to think about and with everything in us we don't want to do it, but we can. God knows we can or He would not have allowed it to happen to us. He will use this terrible tragedy in our lives to shape us even more if we will allow Him.

ABOUT DEATH

It is important to say here that death is never God's will. He intended for man to live forever in the Garden of Eden. Notice in the incident of the fall of Adam and Eve that when God planted the two special trees, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life, God didn't tell them that they couldn't eat from the Tree of Life, only the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But after they had tasted the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil it became imperative that they not eat from the Tree of Life. You can read it in Genesis 3. God said something that emphasized the importance of mankind not eating from the Tree of Life after their sin. It was so important that He said, *"And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever ..."* God stopped in mid-sentence, the thought of that happening was so horrible. Why was that?

You see man had sinned against God. Had he, in his fallen state of sin, eaten from the Tree of Life he would live forever in his sin. The implied thought here is that the fruit of this tree would bring everlasting life. It would have destroyed any chance man had at being redeemed from his sin. So, God "booted" man from the garden and placed angels with flaming swords at the entrance to Eden so man could not return and eat from the Tree of Life. This was not so much a punishment as it was an act of grace.

Death would reign in man until the penalty of the curse could be paid in the life of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. But until that took place it was the mercy of God to allow death in mankind. However, death originated by our own hand, not because of the forced curse of God. We brought death into this world not God.

BUSINESS MUST GO ON

After his time of grievance Abraham looked to the business at hand. A proper burying place for his beloved wife must be found. He turned to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. They had a great respect for him and surely, they would help.

They were more than willing. They told him that he was considered a great prince among them and he could have the choice of their burying places. The finest they had would not be withheld. But Abraham had another thought concerning the matter. He asked them to speak to a man named Ephron. He owned a field in Mechpelah that had a cave on it. Reading between the lines I can imagine that Abraham had thought about this for a long time. Perhaps he had eyed this field many times thinking that it would be a great place for his own burial. When you start getting up in years you think about things like this. Abraham asked the sons of Heth to ask Ephron if he would be willing to sell him this field.

They did and Ephron was more than willing. In fact, he offered the use of it to Abraham for free. He would have to pay nothing for it but that would not satisfy Abraham. He must pay for it. Free is not always the best.

David expressed this very principle. He had sinned in numbering the people against God's will. What was his sin? By numbering his army, he could boast in his military strength. God wanted him to always be dependant upon Him. This numbering suggested strength aside from God. As punishment for his sin David was offered his choice of three things: Seven years of famine, three months fleeing from his enemies, or three days of pestilence. Seven years of famine could be devastating to the land, and who knows what evil could come from being subject to man for three months? David realized that his best chance of survival was throwing himself into the hands of God. He chose three days of pestilence.

God sent an angel to slay people in Israel. It was so horrible that during those three long days 70,000 men were slain. The angel began to go toward Jerusalem and David knew that he had to do something quick. He repented of his sin and was sorry that his subjects were paying dearly for what he had done. God stopped the angel at the threshing place of Araunah the Jebusite. David was instructed to go there and sacrifice to God as part of his repentance.

David rushed to the place with his sacrifice and asked Araunah his price for the threshing place. Araunah was more than willing to just give it to David as well as the oxen for the sacrifice. He could use the threshing instruments as wood for the fire. It would cost David nothing. It was then that David realized that it must cost him something if true repentance was to take place and he uttered those famous words, *"I will not offer a burnt offering to the Lord that cost me nothing"* (see 2 Samuel 24:24).

Abraham also realized this. If it cost him nothing it was not special. Had he not paid for it then really it was not his burial place but merely loan from Ephron. He paid the full price of 400 shekels of silver – about \$3200.00 in our money. Abraham gladly paid this price and ironically, even though God had promised him that all the ground he walked on in the land of Canaan would one day belong to him, this field became the only official property owned by Abraham. It was the beginning of an inheritance humble as it may have been. It was contractually agreed upon and witnessed by the people of Heth. All knew that this was now the property of Abraham. And so, he buried his wife.

ONLY THE BEGINNING

But there is a deeper, extremely valuable lesson to be learned in this incident. Death really does only become the beginning. Up until this point Abraham was content just traveling from place to place never really owning real estate. It took the death of his beloved wife to change his mind about this. He would not just bury her under a tree in foreign soil. He must pay for property that would be his from now on. It took death to initiate this realization.

It is the same with us as believers in Christ. We can read the scriptures and feel the awe of their message. We can long for a life in Christ that will bring us abundant existence. But it will never come until we give the price. "Wait a minute! I thought we

were saved by grace and that it is a free gift of Christ?" And you are right. None of us could have paid the purchase price required to become one of the Redeemed. Even if we would be willing to suffer the horror that Jesus suffered it still wouldn't be good enough because none of us were sinless. That was the price for redemption, a perfect, sinless human sacrifice. No one could fit that bill except Jesus Christ.

"So, what's this price that we have to give?" We must be willing to die. Not a physical death but to die in Christ. You see becoming a Christian is much more than just making our minds up to change. It's more than just deciding to do something different with our lives. We must be willing to completely give up our lives, let our "old man" die with Jesus on the cross, and become a "new man" in the resurrection of Christ. We don't trudge the path to Calvary physically. We can't physically be nailed to a cross. Jesus did that for us. But we must die a spiritual death. It isn't a work but it is receiving the risen Christ into our lives.

Only in death can we ever hope to own our inheritance. It must cost us something. The sacrifice becomes a giving up, not of things, but of our very life surrendered to the Son of God. Our personalities, though still seen by men, begin to be lost in Christ. He begins to be formed in us. As this happens, we are on the way to becoming the person He really wants us to be – the one He has envisioned – the man or woman God wants us to be.

Are we ready to give it all up for the field? We've had our eye on it for sometime. It has passed through our mind again and again. It is a free gift freely given by Jesus Christ. But it does require us to give up ourselves and be submersed in His body.

I'm ready to die. I want the old man in me gone forever and I want to become a new creature in Christ. Who is with me? Death is not a desirable part of the journey but it is necessary and will ultimately bring us complete victory.

Chapter 25

Fulfilling Commitment

Genesis 24:1-67

"... O LORD God of my master Abraham, please give me success this day, and show kindness to my master Abraham."

(Genesis 24:12)

Abraham was getting on in years (remember that he was 100 when Isaac was born). As a man grows older, he begins to think about things in a different way.

We can all identify with that somewhat. When my son, Jeremy was still in high school He loved being active in sports. Before he got his drivers license, we were responsible for seeing that he got to practices and events on time (that's naturally a parent's responsibility, isn't it?). Many times, the games were "away." This meant that either my wife or I had to take him to the school to catch the bus provided for the activity and then we had to be back at the school when the trip was over.

Some of the "pain" of this procedure has been removed today. When our daughter, Megan did the same thing we still had to make the trips back and forth to school but she had a cell phone. When the events were "away" she would call us when she got close to the school and we'd meet her there – a total wait of maybe five minutes.

But that wasn't the case with Jeremy. He would give us an approximate time of his return and one of us would drive to the school where we would wait, and wait, then wait some more – sometimes as much as an hour! We were living a very busy life, keeping up with school functions and serving as pastor of a church while both of us worked secular jobs. Time had become our most precious commodity and to waste an hour of it just waiting was very frustrating.

There were several times that Jeremy became the "whipping post" of my frustration. We wanted to encourage him to participate in extra curricular activities but I didn't like the price of the wait. So, when he'd get into the car, I'd let him have a severe "tongue lashing" because of it.

Now that I'm older I regret that. It was not a good thing to do. It wasn't his fault that the game went into overtime or there were others who were slow getting on the bus. He couldn't help it if the bus got into a traffic jam and it took extra time getting him

back to the school. He was merely a victim of circumstances. He didn't deserve the "tongue lashings."

A couple of years ago I had to apologize to him for that. He is now a man himself but it bore on my mind so heavily that I had to admit my wrongdoing to him and ask for his forgiveness that he readily gave. When you get older you begin to see that some of the things that seemed so important before just aren't that important now.

I believe that Abraham realized this too. He watched his son, Isaac, now a young man and saw the grief of his son over the death of his mother Sarah, and Abraham knew he had to do something about it. What Isaac needed was a good wife.

But it couldn't be just any girl. Abraham had witnessed the paganism of his Canaanite neighbors. Sure, he was a friend to some of them, but friendship doesn't mean that you completely accept everything they do. Abraham feared that taking a wife for Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites could lead his son into idolatry and take him away from the Almighty God of Heaven Abraham had become so familiar with. No, only a daughter from his family would do. So, he called his elder servant and gave him a commission to return to the country where his family lived and take a wife for Isaac from those he knew and trusted.

The servant was concerned to say the least. After all, it had been decades since Abraham had seen any of his family. This servant may have been around when they left Haran but would any of those people that he remembered even be alive now? Abraham had asked him not to just return and make contact with them but to take one of their daughters and bring her back for Isaac. Not being a very good salesman myself, I can almost feel the knots gathering in this servant's stomach. This was not going to be an easy task by natural means. So, he asked Abraham, "What if this woman isn't willing to come back with me? Should I take Isaac back to Haran?"

Abraham responded very strongly to those questions with an emphatic "NO!" He used the word "beware." They weren't in this land just because they liked the view or because it was a vacation resort. This was the place God had told them to go and here they would stay.

REMAINING IN GOD'S WILL

Remaining in God's will is extremely important. We get discouraged, even depressed over things in our lives and we suddenly feel that God is changing His plan for us. It does seem at times that God changes His plan but He really doesn't. Many Christians have just flittered from one thing to another, one ministry to another, never really allowing God time to act. God's plan for our lives hasn't really changed we just got dissatisfied and claimed that God was doing a "new thing" and went with it.

God does have seasons in His plan for our lives. He may have us work in one ministry for a number of years then place us in what may seem to be a completely different ministry. But we must remember that God not only sees today but He also has a clear view of tomorrow. We don't. What we have experienced in one ministry may only be training for where God wants us to really be. We must be careful with this

because only God knows the full impact of what He wants for each of us. Only God sees way out ahead and He will guide us down the right paths to get us to where we need to be. Even though we are all to be servants, witnesses, and ministers in the service of God, He knows what training we need and He will “park” us for a time where we will get the required training before sending us to where He really wants us to be.

What I’m referring to regarding those who just seem to be into one ministry this week and another next week are those who are searching but not being patient enough with God to really let Him show the correct path for their lives. We must take that time. When we get there, we need to have the same attitude Abraham had and stand firm in the promise of God. We need to stand our ground until God says it’s time to move.

THE TRUTH ABOUT COMMITMENT

If the woman would not return with the servant, then Abraham freed him from the oath he was about to take. As the story progresses, we find that there really wasn’t anything to worry about because God had gone before to prepare hearts and minds. So, the servant put his hand under Abraham’s thigh and swore to his master. That seems like a strange thing to do and by today’s standards it sounds almost “kinky.” We must remember that different cultures and different times had different customs. This was the accepted custom at the time for binding an oath.

The point is that the servant made a commitment to Abraham. He may have been reluctant but he was faithful to do it and even made a verbal contract binding him to that commitment. Many today are afraid of commitment. It means that we are bound to do something. In our fast-paced day and age commitment is finding less and less room for survival. A man’s word isn’t what it used to be. It seems we don’t recognize a commitment unless we’ve got it spelled out just right on paper, signed, and dated in triplicate, then notarized publicly. The world teaches that if it’s not provable then it’s okay to go back on our word.

That may be the law but it isn’t reality in the eyes of God. If we are ever to rediscover the true American Dream then we’ve got to rediscover that our word is the commitment not a piece of paper. This is just my opinion, but we spend more money getting commitments on paper then proving them in courts of law, than we do in just getting the job done. If we’d take all the liability aspects out of the cost of things, we’d see prices get a lot cheaper. But then we would have to be willing to live up to our word without all the legal mumbo-jumbo to balance this out. Talk about a boost in our economy! If we didn’t have to pay for liability but just agreed to live up to our word Americans would get an instant raise!

This servant understood commitment and he lived up to his word. Abraham didn’t have to send guards after him to make sure that he would fulfill his oath because Abraham knew that this oath would be honored. And so, he sent his servant away with ten camels loaded down with gifts and provisions for two trips – One there and one back.

THE POWER OF SIMPLE PRAYER

The Bible doesn't record any of the trip to Haran. It tells us that the servant left and it records his arrival at the city of Nahor. Things had changed. When they left it was just a village where Abraham's family had settled but now it had grown into a bustling city. How would he even know where to go to find the family of Abraham's brother? It seemed an impossible task. But this servant had learned much being around a "master" who knew the God of Heaven. So, he prayed. It was about the time that women made their way to the public well to draw the provision of water they would need for the evening and into the night.

He prayed, *"Lord God, let me have success today, and extend kindness to my master, Abraham. The daughters of the men of the city are coming to draw water from this well. Let it be that when I approach a young woman and ask her for a drink that she will say, 'here's some for you and I'll draw water for your camels also.' Let her be the one, Lord."* This may seem to be a very lazy and presumptuous prayer but let's take a look at the emotion of this servant. The crowd of people who surrounded him made him feel overwhelmed. Young girls were coming from every direction of the city. What was he to do being a stranger in this place? How would he ever know? If he just went asking from one to the other, they may think him to be some sort of pervert and have him thrown out of the city. He was desperate and he knew that only a miracle from the God of his master, Abraham, could help him now.

As he finished his prayer he looked up and there, coming before him was one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen. She stood straight with that water pitcher setting right on top of her head. As she lowered the pitcher and began to fill it, a special glow warmed him inside and he found himself speaking the words he had just prayed, "Would you give me a drink?" Without hesitation she looked at him and said, "Drink, my lord." As he tasted the refreshing cool water from the pitcher, he heard her say, "I will draw water for your camels as well until they have gotten their fill." Could it be? Could the Lord have answered his prayer so quickly? He got a nose ring and two bracelets from one of the sacks and approached her. "Do you think that there would be room in your father's house for me to stay tonight?"

She said, "I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Nahor. Sure, we've got plenty of straw and feed for the camels and enough room for you to stay." There seemed to be no hesitation in her hospitable words. The servant was overwhelmed and immediately told her who he was. When she heard his words, she ran home to tell her family and her brother Laban, raced back to the man at the well. Hearing the story and seeing the expensive gifts the servant had given Rebekah, he welcomed him to their household. God had answered his prayer quickly and smoothly. God is like that.

As I think of the story then compare it to prayers I have prayed over my lifetime, it makes me wonder. Not all of my prayers have been answered as smoothly as this. Why is that? The answer is simple really; because it has to do with asking for what is really God's will. We must be willing to wait until God knows the time is right for our answer.

But there are also other things involved. We have built scores of doctrines around the words of Jesus that come from John 14:13 and other similar passages. What we have done is made a “convenient” doctrine out of prayer. Prayer is extremely important for it is our direct communication with God. This verse of scripture tells us the very words of Jesus. He said, “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it.” We have taken that to mean that anything we ask we can have. Preachers have preached and teachers have taught a gospel of prosperity purporting that we can have anything we want by praying to God. Some have gone so far as to say that even if you aren’t a believer in Christ that there are certain rules of prayer that God is bound to honor because we have somehow used a magical formula that forces God to fulfill His word.

JUST WHO IS GOD ANYWAY?

First of all, God is God. Not any of us. We can teach what we want but still God goes right on being God. He’s in control not us. These doctrines are extremely dangerous because they go right back to the original sin of man and that is to put us in God’s place – To make us greater than God. This is what the devil tempted Adam and Eve with in the Garden of Eden. It is what he tempts us all with. It’s his oldest trick and it seems to work like a charm. He has defined it and streamlined it until it even works in the church on the very people who are saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. It is so cleverly disguised that we fail to recognize it. Most Christians would flee from it in an instant if they saw it.

God does bless His people. He wants to give good things to those who have claimed Him as Savior, Master, Redeemer, and King. But we must realize that all these blessings are consequential to the real job and the urgent task at hand – To win souls into the Kingdom of God.

Closer examination of this very verse of Scripture reveals two aspects to our petitions and requests. The first one is that we ask in the Name of Jesus. We have taken those words to be a “magical formula.” What it really means is by the authority of Jesus. We are asking things of God on Earth in place of Jesus as His ambassador. An ambassador acts on behalf of another person or group. Our ambassadors to foreign countries are there to act and perform the wishes of the United States in that country. So, very simply put, we are to ask what Jesus would ask for. If we do that Jesus said, “I will do it.”

The second aspect of this verse is in the latter part, “That the Father may be glorified in the Son.” What we ask for is to bring glory to Christ in the eyes of God. So, our prayers and petitions are not to be selfish, greedy requests. We are not to always be spending time before God looking to selfishly get what we can from Him. We are instead to be seeking Him for the very things Jesus Christ would be asking God for when He was here on Earth.

Does this mean that we can’t ask God for anything for ourselves? No. But it does mean that we should be careful what we ask God for. The Bible also says in James 4:3 that, “*You ask and don’t receive because you ask amiss so you can consume it upon your own selfish desires.*” If we want to see answers to prayer, we

need to pray with these two keys in mind – That it is what Jesus would ask for and that it will bring Him honor and glory in the sight of God.

WHAT'S NEXT?

After the camels had been attended to the servant sat down at the table with the rest of the family for dinner. But he would not eat until he had revealed his errand. How the message of the Church would be changed if we would take this practice to heart! We take care of God's business first. It's our mission and it's what is important.

The servant told them the whole story. How they must have been awe-struck with fascination as the miracle of what had just happened unfolded. God's answered prayers are like that. They are exciting to hear about. How could they argue against this man taking Rebekah back home with him after what had just happened? And so, they agreed. When God's will has been accomplished, and miracles are witnessed in our lives, the world can only respond in one of two ways: Either people believe because of it (which is what God intends) or they try to figure out a way to "make it go away" (which is what the Pharisees and religious leaders tried to do with Jesus). You can't intelligently argue with a true miracle from God.

When they believed and agreed the servant unloaded all the wonderful gifts Abraham had sent for the family. What a dowry he paid! You see, there it is. After obedience to God's word come the blessings – the abundance.

The next morning the servant was up early and rigging up the camels for the journey home. They weren't ready for Rebekah to go yet. It's funny how time can make us doubt. "Let her stay with us awhile before she goes. We may never see her again! At least 10 days!" But God's plan had been unfolded and it was time to move on.

They'd just leave it up to Rebekah. If she wanted to go then they wouldn't stop her. She had a tough decision to make. She had to decide that morning whether she was going to step out in faith and go with this servant or stick around for a few more days to see what kind of man he really was. It would also give her more time with her family – after all she might never see them again (and she didn't).

We all have similar choices to make. After God has revealed His plan and purpose for our lives then the final decision is ours. Rebekah and her family believed the mighty miracle, but was it enough to give up one's life and strike out into the unknown with only your faith in God? Her answer was, "Yes."

Her family hated to see her go but they blessed her. She packed up her belongings and headed out of the city across the wilderness with this servant and only her faith in what had happened. She didn't really know this God that the servant kept talking about. But she believed and trusted and that's what God wants us to do. We don't have to have a full degree in Theology to know and trust God. We don't have to understand everything. But we must step out in faith on what He has shown and revealed to us.

RESULTS OF OBEDIENCE

Her faith paid off. As the journey was coming to an end, Isaac had decided to go out into the field during the evening to meditate and seek God. Seeking God will always bring good. Rebekah saw Isaac a great way off and something in her heart leaped. Before she asked the servant who this was God had revealed it to her. He will do that when we are acting in His will. She jumped off the camel and went to meet her future husband. The Bible tells us that they consummated the marriage, she became his wife, and he loved her and was comforted after his mother's death. God had brought good to both of them and that's what always happens when people are obedient to Him. He will always bring you good even in the face of evil.

The Bible doesn't record the reaction of Abraham but I can see him looking up to Heaven and thanking God for providing for his son. Years before he thought he was going to have to sacrifice him to God but now he realized that he had been sacrificed, not as a burnt offering but as a living offering to the God of Heaven and God was using that to fulfill His promise. Abraham's son was married and would soon be having children himself. The promise was in motion.

God will let us see the fulfillment of His promise if only in its beginning. We will know in our hearts. He won't let us down. Trust Him and believe Him. It requires commitment. The entire journey requires commitment but it is well worth it.

Chapter 26

The Final Journey

Genesis 25:1-11

“This is the sum of the years of Abraham's life which he lived: one hundred and seventy-five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.”

(Genesis 25:7-8)

Most of us know of someone who lived the sum of their lives for God. Such was my grandmother, Pairlee Colwell. She was not perfect and that little woman could sport a mean temper on occasion. She could be as stubborn as any person I have ever known. But, in the midst of her faults, there was no question that she loved God.

She was a generous person when the cause was something she believed in. She dearly loved giving money to missionaries and she regularly supported a child in a foreign country. Her hospitality exceeded any I have known. You just didn't pay her a visit without eating something and taking something home with you. That was just her way.

If you talked with her for any length of time you talked about the Lord. She wasn't one bit intimidated about giving her testimony and telling whoever she was talking to about Jesus. She even allowed representatives from the Jehovah's Witness organization to conduct several Bible studies with her. But I assure you, she was the one doing the witnessing and after a few visits they decided to not return.

She wasn't easy prey for salespeople but if one of her children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren came with a sales pitch, if she had the money, she'd buy it. When she passed on, she wasn't rich and didn't leave much of an inheritance in real estate, money, or value, but she did leave everyone she touched with an experience beyond financial value. She left an impression upon your life. That was Pairlee Colwell.

In this final chapter of our "Soul Journey" we get to see a picture of his last days as well. He was faithful to the Lord until the end. I suppose, out of loneliness, he did marry again to a woman by the name of Keturah. Abraham had several sons with her and apparently had concubines as well. He lived to be 175 years old and experienced a fruitful life.

But he never lost sight of the promise of God. Even though he had more children the Bible tells us that he gave them gifts and sent them East, away from his promised son, Isaac.

When he died, he was buried in the only plot of ground he legally owned, the field of Machpelah on which the cave where he had buried Sarah was located. Though they had much conflict over the years, Isaac and Ishmael buried him displaying their great love for their father, Abraham.

NEVER LOOSE SIGHT

There are two points that need to be made in this final episode. First of all, Abraham never lost sight of God. So many people grow bitter toward God when tragedy strikes especially with the loss of a close loved one. We need to understand death. It isn't as complicated as we make it and we have touched on this already in Chapter 24. It seems we need someone to blame. Somehow, we think that makes it all better but it really doesn't. We need to first of all face the fact that it is our fault. Not the death of a loved one but overall. Death is in this world because of our sin. We'd like to blame it all on Adam but the truth of the matter is, by human nature, we'd have done the same thing Adam did. We prove that almost every day by our own mistakes and our own sins. We don't want to sin but something grabs us in the heart and we just do it.

Man's sin is what forced God to put the curse of death upon the world in the first place. So, we are just as guilty. It's human nature to try to "pass the buck" and blame someone else. Adam did it first you know. When confronted by God he blamed Eve for handing him the forbidden fruit and she in turn blamed the serpent for tempting her to do it. But they both had choices, didn't they? We have choices every day. Sometimes we make the right one and sometimes we make the wrong one. We don't like to admit that we have "messed up" and so we look for someone else to pin it on. We "pass the buck." "I'm a good guy! Why should I take the fall for this?" But if we face the truth we are at fault.

Death is in this world because of man's sin. It has become a fact of life. But Abraham realized something even way back then and that was: God has all things under control. He allows us to live a life for Him and in the end our death is turned into victory. That is especially easier today since Christ has paid the penalty for our sin because we don't have to try to live up to a law of perfection like they did in the Old Testament days. We just trust in the provision of our crucified and risen Savior and commit ourselves to Him. We still need to live a good life not because we have to or we'll lose our salvation but because we want to.

Abraham missed Sarah badly, though we are not told much about his grief and experience. But he had learned to trust in God. He found comfort in his new wife, Keturah. God allowed that because He is a merciful God.

But even in his grief Abraham never lost sight of God's promise. That's why he sent his other sons away from Isaac. God had promised a great inheritance and Abraham was going to be obedient to the end. And so, he did.

Life may seem like its always throwing a curve ball at us. I know I feel that way sometimes. But if we will hang on to God's promise of provision until the end, we won't be disappointed. He will come through with what He has promised. Sometimes it may mean letting go of a dream that might not be from God. Sometimes it may mean that

we must go down a rocky road instead of a smoothly paved one. It seems unfair especially when we see others who might not be as good as we are (or so we think) getting the easy way and having plenty when we are trying with everything in us and something is always getting in our way. But I tell you to hang in there because God will not let you down.

GOOD THINGS ARE COMING

The second point that needs to be brought out is that the Bible says in Genesis 25:11 that after the death of Abraham God blessed his son, Isaac. Good things began to come his way. I'm not suggesting that everything "came up roses" for Isaac. Though the life of Isaac is not given a lot of time in the Bible, we do see him experiencing some difficulties (mostly over wells). But God blessed him.

This was directly related to the promise. Isaac had to carry on the promise. He had lost his mother and was comforted when he received the gift of his wife, Rebekah. Now he had lost his father. This was the man who had taught him faith. This was the man who stood before God even in tough times and had brought the witness of God to him. Now he was gone. He would be tempted to turn away from God. He had to somehow make his own life now. God began to let things happen in his life that brought blessing and it was readily identified as coming from God.

God wants to do that for us. As I have emphasized in this book, we don't live for God just to get blessings. That's using God. Blessings come as a consequence of our salvation relationship with our Lord. He will let things happen that we know come from Him. Sometimes they may be just little things but we know where they came from. It is encouraging when God does this. It gives a little spark in our lives to boost us forward in the promise God has given us.

Know today that God won't let you down. If we learn anything from this journey with Abraham (which is really a journey with God) it should be that we can trust Him, even when it doesn't appear that we can. In the course of our life, He will give us blessing and abundance that we may not have even thought about.

If we don't get a thing except a simple cave to be buried in, we still can know for sure that God has been with us. What would our lives have been like without God? We see so many tragic lives all around us. There are so many who don't have a morsel of bread to eat, or adequate clothing or a decent place to live. If we have been fortunate enough to have these things then we must know that God has not let us down.

It may seem that God has unfairly blessed others with much while we struggle with what we have. Know that God has trusted us with a special blessing and that is to have faith. Being "Fully Assured In The Heart" is enough.

God will pass out those blessings needed to keep us encouraged along the way. Just don't be tempted to believe that they came from your own provision rather than God's. The rich farmer in Luke 12:18 made this mistake. He had toiled during his life and had plenty. Instead of giving thanks to God he said, "I will tear down my barns, build bigger barns and store all my fruit. I will take life easy from now on." He gave no

thanks to God for provision. He gave no pretence of wanting to share the blessings God had granted him. Instead, he just wanted to selfishly take it easy. As the story goes, that night his life was required of him. He died. Now who would get his plenty?

Always be mindful of God. Always know that what we have, whether it is only a little or it is very much – it comes from God and we are only the appointed caretakers. Always be thankful and always be ready to share the wealth with the less fortunate. You won't be sorry, and you will be rewarded either here on Earth or later on in Heaven. Take up and complete your journey with God!

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