

*On the Journey*  
*Pathway to a Promising Future*

Dr. Dan G. Johnson

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It is my deep belief that as we look at biblical characters—over the next weeks and months together, God will reveal to us great and profound truths about our journey with Him. We'll gain insights into ourselves, our relationships with others, and our walk with God. We'll be mentored and inspired by God and by the people of the faith. We'll find new strength and deeper spiritual resources than we've ever known before. Each week we'll look at a Biblical personality, how God shaped them, and each week we'll have spiritual practices or exercises or questions which will be great for personal or group work (perhaps a Sunday School class).

To begin a journey or deepen a journey, no Biblical character could be more helpful than Abraham for he both began his walk with God and deepened it.

And so today we look at Abraham and Sarah. It is important to remember that just as God worked with Abraham, so God longs to work with you and me. It is also important to note that Abraham doesn't appear until chapter 12 of the Book of Genesis. Chapters 1 and 2 are the creation story and chapter 2 ends with "it is good." But chapters 3—11 are a different story. It is one mess after another. There are enormous problems—all the problems we experience today: brother against brother, issues between husbands and wives, parents and children. There are the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the need for the Great Flood, human hubris, the Tower of Babel. By the time the careful reader comes to the end of chapter 11, he or she is convinced that humankind, left to their own devices, will continue to mess things up. We hope there could be a better way and God shares that way. God has a plan. He won't work in the huge way, in a big and glorious way, not on a grand scale. God decides to work with one person, with one family.

I think God is saying that the key to the future is God's relationship with the individual—with you and me and Abraham. The family. Everything rests on that. Have you ever wondered why the Bible has all those begets—parts of Genesis, early parts of Luke, the first eight chapters of I Chronicles—so and so begat so and so? It all depends on the family. It is the heart of the God's new way with Abraham.

This past Tuesday, while I was attending the Children's Ministry Team's Kick-off Carnival, I ran into one of the young fathers who is a part of Trinity. We began to talk and somewhere along the way I asked him how he and his wife first met. He told me they met in high school and then he mentioned something very profound. He said that when they sat down with Rev. Tom Price (a great friend and active member of the Gainesville community), he said to them both: "You're going to have to work harder at this marriage than anything else you ever do in your life!" And he repeated it, several times. We both got the point, and that's exactly what we have done, and now, ten years down the pike we can both say that our marriage is the most rewarding thing we do in life.

According to Genesis 12-22, the unique relationship with the individual are the absolute key—the central point. Everything hinges on that.

It is interesting to me that God spends two chapters to create the world and eleven chapters to shape Abraham. Abraham is like you and me. We don't mold easily. We don't transform easily.

So, I want to retell Abraham's story—Abraham's Journey.

Let me remind you of Abraham's story. At each critical point, I'll try to lift up a principle that might apply to you and me.

First, it is very important to sweep out of our minds any and all pious notions that make Abraham more than he was at the beginning. Abraham, like you and me, had to go to school. God was his major teacher and through all of the adventures, trials, twists and turns—right up to the final exam with Isaac—only then was he ready to be the leader of God's new way. Now, if God did that with Abraham, it's likely God will do that with you and me. He calls to us. He commands us. He uses trials to shape us. God doesn't leave us. He takes us right where we are on our journey.

The story actually begins earlier than chapter 12. It begins in chapter 11 with Abraham's father, Terah. Terah had already moved up to Haran. We don't know why. He may have already sensed that the Babylonian gods were inadequate—maybe he felt that the moon and stars were heavenly bodies and not gods. Terah may have thought that there was likely a creator. So, Abraham was a childless, restless, maybe godless first born of an old wanderer who might have been in the process of outgrowing the Babylonian way and the Babylonian gods. God somehow got to Abraham and told him “go from your land, your kindred, to a place I will show you and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and make you a blessing.” Abraham did what God told him to do. He got up and went to a strange land. He took his possessions and all those he was responsible for. And here is the first principle:

1. God continually calls us out from the known into the unknown.

Why did Abraham go? No doubt, Abraham was probably ambitious, he had a desire for greatness, to establish a great nation. He had big dreams and aspirations. God continually calls us out from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the known to the unknown. Many of us start things for selfish reasons, for “what is in it for us” and that is okay but it won't last. It won't sustain us.

And that takes us to principle two:

2. The process of the journey is designed to get us to love God for who He is and not for what He does for us.

As soon as Abraham left and arrived in the new land, there was famine. Abraham must

have wondered, as you have, what is this? So, Abraham decided to go to Egypt on his own and not consult with God. He did what you and I, what I, tend to do when we face trouble—decide on our own. I take things into my own hands without consulting God which takes us to our third principle:

3. When in doubt, wait. Be careful about running off and making decisions that don't include God.

Sarah and Abraham went to Egypt and right away Abraham got himself into a big mess. He realized that his wife was so beautiful that Pharaoh might have wanted her for his harem. So, Abraham made another bad decision—a self-centered decision that put himself before his wife. When Pharaoh found out the truth, he asked Abraham why he did that; why he wasn't truthful with him.

4. Self-centeredness is real but with God's help we can get better.

Every husband, every wife can attest to that. Fortunately, God intervened. He sent plagues. When Abraham and his nephew, Lot, were deciding how to divide up the territory. Abraham graciously gave Lot first choice. Lot looked at the lush land of Jordan and the city of Sodom and chose that land. Abraham said, "Fine, I'll take the hill country." Lots of troubles followed leading to principles five and six. Five is in two parts.

- 5a. The obvious choice may not be the best choice.

In this case, Lot made the no-brainer choice and it led to lots of difficulties.

- 5b. Graciousness to God is always pleasing to God.

When God was gracious towards Lot, God enhanced his promise. Abraham's offspring would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. Soon Lot was captured in a war between the kings of Babylon and the kings of Canaan. Abraham preferred to stay out of it. He came to Lot's rescue and defeated the enemy and saved Lot. In an indication of major personal and spiritual growth, Abraham refused the spoils of war so that he wouldn't be beholden to anyone and vowed to give a 10th of all he had to God to acknowledge that all he had came from God.

6. Remember and act on the reality that all you and I have (and are) are gifts from God!

Abraham is concerned about not having any heir. So he re-enacts a covenant in dramatic fashion. He is still not ready to trust God fully. So, when Sarah offers her maid, Hagar with whom to have a child, Abraham accepts—again without consulting God (He forgot Principle #3—When in doubt, don't). This leads to family strife and Hagar leaves and God intervenes to help.

God continued to work with Abraham and changed his name from Abram (lofty father) to Abraham (father of many). Sarah and Abraham were gracious (see #5) to three travelers who in turn announced the couple would have a child through 89-year old Sarah.

7. Treat others kindly. You may be hosting angels unaware.

So Abraham showed progress but like most of us, growth was up and down. It is hard to learn our lessons. Once again, Abraham got himself into difficulty. He wandered into the land of the Philistines and once again lied about Sarah saying she was his sister and not his wife. Human selfishness is harder to get over than we might think.

Once again God intervened and Abraham owned up to his wrongdoing about his wife. Now, at last, Abraham was fit to be a father. Isaac was born in peace. When everything is set for a glorious future, God asked Abraham to do the hardest thing anyone could probably do. The hardest thing; the final test and we'll talk about that next Sunday.

Just like Abraham, you and I are on a journey. God thinks we're worth the effort for Him to exert huge amounts of energy on our behalf. Life isn't easy. Our most precious relationships aren't easy. The most precious things in life are worth our very best efforts. They're worth working really hard on. God is shaping you because He loves you and wants you to be a part of His new way. He wants to put the same amount of work in us as He did in Abraham.

The Book of Hebrews says "Those whom He loves, he also chastens."

When my brothers and I were kids, we would often say to Mom and Dad, "Why don't you let us have the same freedoms our friends have?" The answer was "because we love you too much." As I get older, I realize they were right and I am grateful.

I am convinced of two things: God either wants to begin a new journey with you this morning or God wants to deepen your journey with Him. And he will, too, if you have the courage to let him!