

Radically Devoted to God!



*how an **Extraordinary** God
uses **Ordinary** people
to achieve the **Impossible***



God is into the character building process. How does the God of the Bible, Who created all humanity, build character? What really is character? How would we know if we had been in God's school for character building? How would we know if we had "passed the test" for becoming a man or woman with character? Are the common criteria used for assessing character (power, possessions, prestige, or position) the criteria/standard God uses to build and assess character?

Obviously these questions and more will be examined during this series on biblical characters and how they were formed. The fascinating part of all of this is that God never gave up on any of them (even in their moments of despair, doubt, frustration, and even failure!) In fact, many of these people appear in the "Hall of Faith" recorded in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11. We could assume that God is much more interested in the process that He takes us through, with what we are becoming, more than in what we can accomplish. The process in character building has been described more precisely as a "refining process."

Once a silversmith was asked how he knew that the raw silver ore he submitted to intense heat was in its final stage of refinement. (Silver must be refined under increasingly higher temperatures in this process.) How does the silversmith know when the silver has reached the "finishing" stage? The smith remarked that he knows the silver is refined **when he can see the reflection of his image** in the silver.

What is God's purpose in choosing men and women just like us to fulfill his plan? He begins the refining process by first giving us great hope and confidence in Who He is. The world we live in is one of great fear, terror, doubt, conflict and tension. But to entrust our lives into the hands of our Creator is to take that all-important step of believing Him. To become a dynamic, vibrant "God-follower" is truly an experience of "living on the edge"! We can be certain that the refining process will be an interesting one, howbeit, requiring intense stretching and purifying (pruning) from the Master Refiner! (John 15:1-10)

There are those who see the life God offers us as one of constant conflict and turmoil. In the midst of an already conflictive and tension-filled world, many simply "bow out" and say "no thanks"! Unfortunately such a decision moves people into the realm of a low risk, comfortable, acceptable, style of life—"going with the flow" or "escaping from reality"! We can succumb to despair, disillusionment, and distress or we can enter into "extreme" spirituality and thus enter a life-long adventure in faith!



Most students of the Scriptures recognize that the “heroes of faith” that appear throughout the pages of the Bible were ordinary people God selected to live extraordinary lives. This series of studies should enable us to capture the essence of how God enables people like you and me to be all He wants us to be. As we examine each of these lives we should achieve the following:

- 1) Identify the “heart throb” of each hero, including the reasons why their response to God’s call led them into an exciting adventure of character building.
- 2) Describe the criteria God uses to advance His process of character building so that we can evaluate how well we are tracking with Him.
- 3) Develop a sensitive heart, spirit, and will that accept an unusual, abnormal, innovative approach to human development.
- 4) Respond to God’s initiatives to build our own character with specific Action Points that will be evaluated weekly at the group meeting by fellow pilgrims to assure increasing trust and obedience.
- 5) Covenant to continue the “walk of faith” until God has implanted in our lives the elements necessary for a vibrant, dynamic relationship with Him and His creation (which, of course, includes other people).
- 6) Depend on God the Holy Spirit to empower us to live in process—not as people who have already achieved, but as fellow pilgrims who can help evaluate our progress.



Background

We first encounter Abram (later his name is changed to Abraham) in Genesis 11. Abram, along with his father, Terah, his nephew Lot, and Sarai (the wife of Abram) are beginning their pilgrimage from the land of the Ur of the Chaldeans to an undisclosed destination. After he had lived in Haran for sometime, the father of Abram died. Now, God comes once again to Abram with a fascinating promise and charge to which Abram will need to respond.

Interacting With the Facts

1.1 Identifying the “heart throb” of the heroes of faith

1. What was unique (in terms of heart, mind, spirit) about Abram that God would select him to be the “father of a great nation”?
2. What is the threefold promise God gives to Abram?
3. What do you think would have been Abram’s *initial* response?
4. How do you think Abram, Sarai, and Lot felt as they began their pilgrimage from the “known to the unknown”?

1.2 Describing the criteria God uses to advance His process of character building

1. Why did Abram take a detour instead of going directly to the “Promised Land”?
2. How did Abram “fail” the first character building exercise God gave him? What is the significance of this in God’s overall design of building character?
3. What led the Egyptian Pharaoh to realize all was not well with his relationship to Sarai?

1.3 Responding with Action Points that need to be evaluated weekly

1. How would you have handled this situation with Pharaoh and Sarai?—(role playing Pharaoh and Sarai would be an excellent way of responding to this question—if you’re brave enough!)
2. How can you develop a higher sensitivity to what God wants in your life? Write at least two Action Points that you will trust God to develop in you during the next week. Return to the group next time prepared to explain what has happened.

Abram Fails to Obey God

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Study 2– Genesis 16:1-15

Background

Our second encounter with Abram occurs after God (Genesis 15) had reassured him that He would be “his shield and ... very great reward.” In other words, God has indicated to Abram (in spite of the fact that according to Abram “you have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir) that there would be a “son coming from your own body.” God took him outside and told him to look into the heavens and told him to count the stars, if indeed he could. Then God assured him that his offspring would number as many as the stars! Abram believed the Lord and “God credited it to him as righteousness.” But, then, the very next event (Gen. 16:1-15) in Abram’s life indicates that he had grown impatient. Sarai and Abram decided to force God to fulfill His promises on Sarai and Abram’s timetable and by their own method and power! Moving out of the will of God into our own will and following our own desires is always fraught with pending disaster. So we discover in this passage when Abram fails to obey!

Interacting With the Facts

2.1 Identifying the “heart throb” of the heroes of faith

1. What evidence is there that Abram may be doubting what God has promised? (Gen. 15:1-5)
2. Place yourself in the “sandals” of Sarai. Why do you envision that she was becoming “desperate”. (Don’t forget the important role that child-bearing played in the eastern cultures at the time of this story.)

2.2 Describing the “criteria” God uses to advance his character building process

1. What was the result of “taking matters into their own hands”. Why did Abram and Sarai not perceive the consequences of disobedience?
2. Who initially suffered the most severe consequences of disobedience in this scenario (Abram, Sarai, or Hagar) and why? What were the interpersonal dynamics involved here?

2.3 Responding with Action Points that need to be evaluated weekly

1. Have you ever “taken matters into your own hands”; grown “impatient with God’s timetable”; or assumed you “had a better idea” than God? What were the consequences?
2. How do you react to Hagar’s statement, “You are the God who sees me. I have now seen the One who sees me.”
3. How can we avoid falling into the “trap” of doing it our own way on our own timetable? What specific steps will you take to strengthen your resolve to “wait on God”; to do it His way?

God's Extreme Refining Fire

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Study 3— Genesis 22:1-19

Background

Our next encounter in this series of studies with Abraham is when he and Sarah have both acquired new names. This occurred when God reconfirmed with Abraham for the third time His unfulfilling covenant. (Gen. 17) In spite of Abraham's very human reaction to the "reconfirmation" (Gen. 17:17-22), God assured him that His promise would not fail. God fulfilled that promise when Abraham was 100 years old! (Gen. 21: 1-7) Our **extraordinary God** truly achieved through **ordinary people** what all said was **impossible!** But God was not finished with His character building process in the life of Abraham. Now He is asking Abraham to trust Him for a different impossibility—"take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering....!"

Interacting With the Facts

3.1 Identifying the "heart throb" of the heroes of faith

1. What "feelings" do you suppose ran through Abraham's mind, heart, and soul when he heard God's instructions?
2. In what ways would Abraham have reacted differently this time from the previous encounters he had had with the living God?
3. How would you have reacted to the test God brought to Abraham? Explain your answer.

3.2 Describing the criteria God uses to advance His process of character building

1. What aspects of Abraham's character was God testing with this command? Why would the development of these be so important for the "father of our faith"?
2. Why could Abraham respond so confidently to Isaac when he questioned his father, "The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering." (Gen. 22:7) What does Abraham's answer reveal about God's development of his character?

3.3 Responding with Action Points that will be evaluated next week.

1. Describe an incident in your life when God passed you through His "refining fire"! If you are willing, explain what were the results.
2. When the next encounter with His "refining fire" occurs, how will you be better prepared to learn and grow from the experience? What approaches would be wise to follow, thinking of how Abraham learned in the process?

Bringing It All Together

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Study 4— Learning from Abraham

Background

If you have been participating in this study of this hero of the faith and pilgrimage from the land of the Ur of Chaldeans, you have seen God developing Abraham's character. Abraham became a man who "lived on the edge" spiritually and became radically devoted to God! In an age where his family and friends worshipped and served many gods, to submit to the will of the One true God was indeed radical. This is not overly different from the environment we face today. The prevalent mindset and lifestyle either benignly ignores the existence of any God or blantly declares that there is no God! Those of us who claim to be intimately related to this God through the Son He sacrificed for us are also on a pilgrimage of faith. God is in the process of building our character with the ultimate goal that we become more and more like Jesus. (Romans 8:29)

It becomes our responsibility to not only understand how God develops men and women with godly character but also our privilege to "take our everyday ordinary life—our sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking around life—and place it before God as an offering." (Romans 12:1) When we approach the refining fire of God in this way, we become truly transformed. Instead of becoming "so well-adjusted to our culture that we fit into it without thinking,...we recognize what He wants ...and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity." (Romans 12:2)

Now It's Our Turn

4.1 Covenant with God to "walk by faith, not by sight".

1. What concrete approaches can you take so that your thinking is "no longer pressed into the mould of this world's thinking"?
2. How can you assure that your mind will be progressively changed, renewed (even as Abraham's was upon leaving his people of origin to travel to an undisclosed land)?
3. Specifically how can you allow God to "put you into his refining fire" so that you can become more like Jesus? What might this mean in terms of leaving an immature lifestyle for a more mature one?

4.2 Develop a sensitive heart that accepts God's process of developing character.

1. List some specific ways you can move from "doing it my way on my timetable" to "doing it God's way". Make certain you put some guidelines on what you propose so that a trusted friend can help you evaluate your progress (preferably weekly).

4.3 Develop dependence on the Spirit to empower you to live on the "radical edge."

1. Abraham believed God (even in the event of being commanded to sacrifice his long-awaited only son) and it was considered righteousness to him. How do you envision that happening in your life, specifically?
2. What is there in your life that you would "hope against hope" God would not require that you relinquish? (For example: a relationship? a good-paying career? an adventuresome lifestyle? an "independent" lifestyle? an attitude of "getting what I want, when I want it"? or...etc.)