

Great Men OF THE BIBLE

A GUIDE FOR GUYS

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INTRODUCTION

This One's for You, Guys

Men. We are spiritual beings, just as women are. But masculine spirituality is in many ways different from feminine spirituality. It is rougher, less pious, more oriented to our work, more concerned with function than form. And it needs male role models.

Recently, I have been conducting a series of programs for men entitled “Great Men of the Bible.” As the men shared their reflections in small groups I have been touched by the ways they connected the Biblical stories about men with their own experiences as men striving to live spiritually in an increasingly secularized world.

Another push to write this book came from a talk I heard on “Using the Media to Tell Our Story.” One of the presenter’s statements that struck me forcefully was his claim that “whoever tells the stories shapes the culture.” It is not difficult to grasp the truth behind that statement: namely, stories (whether true or fictional) can be far more powerful than logical arguments for shaping people’s beliefs and attitudes. Think of the great stories in literature—in legends, history books, movies, stage plays, and popular songs. Whether it is consciously or not, people’s values are strongly influenced by encounters with these stories.

In my mind, some of the most fascinating stories about men are those found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Not only are they filled with human drama, tragedy, and heroism, but they reveal profound truths about human beings and their relationships with God and one another. Moreover, they provide insights

into the great questions of human existence: What is the good life? What is the purpose of our existence? What is our final destiny? How ought we to treat one another? Indeed: “Whoever tells the stories shapes the culture.”

I was also pleased to be introduced recently to *The Message* by Eugene Peterson, a contemporary paraphrasal translation of the complete Bible from the ancient languages into modern, idiomatic, American English. I thought to myself, “This translation makes the Scriptures come alive in ways that I have never experienced before. I think the men I know would be interested in reading it.” So I have used it exclusively throughout the book. Readers will find it interesting to compare the translation with that of their own Bible.

Maybe women will be interested in this book as well. I hope so. There are similar books about great women in the Bible that men should certainly read. But this one is aimed at my fellow men. Guys, this one’s for you. Please join me in examining these stories of great men of the Bible for their human and spiritual wisdom.

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ABRAHAM

(Flawed) Father of Our Faith

Abraham, whom both the Bible and the liturgy call “the father of our faith,” is honored and revered by all three religions of the Book—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His story is one of heroic fidelity to God, as well as of human weakness and failure.

The Book of Genesis tells us that Abraham’s father was a man named Terah, who was said to be a descendant of Noah’s son Shem. Terah lived in a place called “Ur of the Chaldeans,” an extremely ancient city located in present-day southern Iraq. “Chaldea,” however, is an anachronism, since this nation was not known until about a thousand years after Abraham’s time. Also, his original name—Abram—was later changed by God.

As with many families in those times, Terah sought better land for his crops and herds. He decided to migrate north and west to the land of Canaan, taking Abram; Abram’s wife, Sarai; and his grandson Lot with him. But before reaching Canaan, he decided to settle in Haran, near present-day Syria, where he died.

Sometime later, Abram received his first revelation from God:

“Leave your country, your family, and your father’s home for a land

that I will show you.

*I’ll make you a great nation
and bless you.*

*I’ll make you famous;
you’ll be a blessing...*

*All the families of the Earth
will be blessed through you.”*

Genesis 12: 1, 3

The Bible does not record Abram's internal reaction to this religious experience of his vocation or calling. We do not even know if he had received any knowledge or instruction about the God of his ancestors, the descendants of Noah. The text simply says, "So Abram left just as God said, and Lot (his nephew) left with him (Genesis 1:4).

I believe many men have had experiences like this. Not that we heard a voice or saw a vision, but something deep inside spoke to our mind or heart, and we were faced with a decision: "Should I follow this inspiration or ignore it? Maybe I just ate too much garlic last night." Yet something about the challenge was compelling, and we found ourselves saying, "I need to do this, regardless of the risk or uncertainty." Notice that the original motivation was economic: Terah sought better land for his crops and herds. Many men make decisions based on being better able to provide for their family. Notice also that "Lot left with him." This is another experience men have. A lot of our decisions affect others, including our immediate and extended family members.

God again appeared to Abram and said, "I will give this land to your children" (Genesis 12:7).

This must have seemed ludicrous to Abram because he was a migrant in a land that was already occupied by various ethnic tribes collectively called "Canaanites." Besides, Abram and his wife, Sarai (later changed by God to Sarah), had no children at the time. Yet God was now making a promise to Abram, and, once again, he believed. In fact, he gave a religious response: "He built an altar there and prayed to GOD" (Genesis 12:8).

How often do we men dream the impossible dream and then come to believe we can do it? And isn't our response often a spiritual one: to thank God for giving us a mission worthy of our life? And isn't optimism a better way to live than being pessimistic?

Abraham was complicated—like we are

As so often happens, however, even good people betray their own values under stress. When a severe famine overtook the land of Canaan, Abram and Sarai migrated south to the land of Egypt. Abram was aware of the warped cultural practice of the pharaohs of Egypt. For example, when an attractive married woman would catch the eye of the pharaoh, the husband would be killed, and the wife would be forced into the pharaoh's harem. Knowing this, Abram tells Sarai: "Look. We both know that you're a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you they're going to say, 'Aha! That's his wife!' and kill me. But they'll let you live. Do me a favor. Tell them you're my sister. Because of you, they'll welcome me and let me live" (Genesis 12:11-13).

Men have to make these kinds of tactical decisions all the time. Do we stand and fight an evil, even if it means almost certain disaster, or do we fudge the truth or look away in order to live to fight another day? Besides, Abram's lie was not a complete lie but a half-truth; in his culture, any female relative (including wife) was called "a sister." So indeed, Abram's life was spared, but Sarai was still taken into the Pharaoh's harem. Many say Abram was a coward. He was. So are we sometimes. But there was more to the story.

Because of her, Abram got along very well: he accumulated sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, men and women servants, and camels. But GOD hit Pharaoh hard because of Abram's wife Sarai; everybody in the palace got seriously sick.

Pharaoh called for Abram, "What's this that you've done to me? Why didn't you tell me that she's your wife? Why did you say, 'She's my sister' so that I'd take her as my wife? Here's your wife back—take her and get out!"

Pharaoh ordered his men to get Abram out of the country. They sent him and his wife and everything he owned on their way.

Genesis 12:16-20

So, there we have it. Men know that sometimes our weakness or cowardice or even sin works out for us in the end. What are we supposed to do with that reality? We have to forgive ourselves, move on, and somehow try to understand that God works in very hard-to-comprehend ways.

When Abram and Sarai returned to the land of Canaan, another conflict ensued. Since there was plenty of unclaimed grazing land, both Abram and his nephew Lot were able to increase their flocks and herds. Soon the two men began to quarrel over the grazing rights. Abram dealt with the conflict in a very clever manner. He told Lot: “Let’s not have fighting between us, between your shepherds and my shepherds. After all, we’re family. Look around. Isn’t there plenty of land out there? Let’s separate. If you go left, I’ll go right; if you go right, I’ll go left” (Genesis 13: 8-9).

Our weakness or cowardice or even sin works out for us in the end.

And his generosity was rewarded. After Lot separated from him, God said to Abram: “Open your eyes, look around. Look north, south, east, and west. Everything you see, the whole land spread out before you, I will give to you and your children forever. I’ll make your descendants like dust—counting your descendants will be as impossible as counting the dust of the Earth. So—on your feet, get moving! Walk through the country, its length and breadth; I’m giving it all to you” Genesis 13:8-9, 14-15.

No doubt many of us can remember times in our own lives when we chose to sacrifice our own interest or preference in order to help a family member or friend in need. Difficult as it was, we experienced some gift or blessing from God in return. I recall a situation from my own life. I was based in Milwaukee for 13 years and enjoying success in my ministry of teaching, counseling, and speaking to various parish groups. One day my superiors called me in and asked me to take a different assignment: director of our novitiate program in Huntington, Indiana. They said I could

turn it down if I felt that was best, but they asked me to seriously consider it because the need was great. At first I resisted the idea strongly. I was happy where I was; I didn't want to leave my comfort zone for a totally new assignment in a small town far from my roots and my friends. But then I recalled that I have taken a vow of obedience. This was a reasonable request from my superiors and I had no solid reason to turn it down. So I said Yes, and felt a deep sense of peace. And, very much like Abraham, God blessed me abundantly. Maybe you have had a similar experience.

Abram doubted God—just as we all do

Chapter 15 of Genesis begins: “After all these things, this word of GOD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Don’t be afraid, Abram. I’m your shield. Your reward will be grand!’ Abram said, ‘GOD, Master, what use are your gifts as long as I’m childless and Eliezer of Damascus is going to inherit everything?’ Abram continued, ‘See, you’ve given me no children, and now a mere house servant is going to get it all’” (Genesis 15:1-3).

Abram is legitimately distressed. God had promised to make him the father of many nations, yet he and Sarai have not been able to conceive even one child. The situation seems hopeless. Haven't we all been there in our lives? But God doubles down on his promise: “Look at the sky. Count the stars. Can you do it? Count your descendants! You're going to have a big family, Abram!” (Genesis 15:5).

Don't we men do that too? When things aren't going well, don't we double down and try harder? Don't we expect (or at least pray) God will help us succeed? So that's what Abram did: “And he believed! Believed GOD! God declared him ‘Set-Right-with-God’” (Genesis 15:6).

Abram put his faith in the Lord, yes. But at the same time, he asks God for some kind of sign to strengthen his faith. So, God asks him to set up the covenant ritual. This was familiar to many tribal societies at the time. When one chief wanted to make an al-

liance (covenant) with another tribal chief, they would take a couple of animals and large birds, split them in half, and mount each half on poles facing each other, with some space in between. Then the two chiefs would walk between the carcasses and lock arms in the center, gaze at the animals, and say, “May the same thing happen to me if I violate this covenant!” Pretty strong, earthy stuff.

So Abram sets up the poles and carcasses, walks between them—and waits. But God makes no appearance. Meanwhile, vultures are sweeping down and picking at the carcasses, and Abram has to fight them off. Now it’s getting dark, and just before sunset “a trance fell on Abram, and a deep, terrifying darkness enveloped him” (Genesis 1:12). Then God speaks to Abram and warns him that his descendants will have to suffer much and wait a long time until the covenant is fulfilled:

GOD said to Abram, “Know this: your descendants will live as outsiders in a land not theirs; they’ll be enslaved and beaten down for 400 years. Then I’ll punish their slave masters; your offspring will march out of there loaded with plunder. But not you; you’ll have a long and full life and die a good and peaceful death.”

Genesis 15:13-14

Suddenly a flaming torch passed between the carcasses, and Abram knew this was the sign of God’s presence, promising to keep his part of the covenant. He stood up greatly strengthened and encouraged.

All of us have had experiences of doubting God’s promises, even the divine presence in our lives. Sometimes I refer to this as “spiritual depression.” We need not be ashamed of this. After all, God does not usually speak to us or appear to us visibly. “We walk by faith and not by sight,” as one of our liturgical songs says. It’s at those times that we are called, like Abram, to keep fighting off the feelings of doubt, discouragement, and weariness that can overtake us.

Sometimes it helps to talk to someone about our feelings: spouse, friend, priest or deacon, or prayer group. And sometimes,

all we can do is wait, like Abram, until we experience God's presence and encouragement and believe. Only then are we "set-right-with-God." It is all part of the spiritual journey.

Abraham tries to take things in his own hands—
just as we do

Months and years were passing, and Abram and Sarai still had no children. What has happened to God's promise to make us founders of a great nation, they must have wondered. Rather than wait on God's time, they decided to take matters into their own hands. Sarai had a maidservant named Hagar. One day she said to Abram: Have intercourse with my maid; perhaps she will be able to give us children. "Abram agreed to do what Sarai said," the Bible reports wryly, in what must be one of its more humorous verses (Genesis, 16:2).

Now, before we judge the couple, we need to recall that their action would not have been considered immoral according to the customs of those times. Continuing the family line and name was such a high priority that having children by a servant was an accepted practice. When Hagar became pregnant, taunting Sarai about her sterility, Sarai demanded that Abram punish her. Abram, however, left that up to his wife, who then began to abuse Hagar so badly that Hagar ran away into the wilderness. But an angel of God found her there and told her to return. "You will bear a son," he said, "and you shall call him Ishmael." The name in Hebrew means "God has heard."

*From this pregnancy, you'll get a son: Name him Ishmael;
for GOD heard you, GOD answered you.
He'll be a bucking bronco of a man,
a real fighter, fighting and being fought,
Always stirring up trouble,
always at odds with his family.*

Genesis 16:10-12

We today might see Ishmael as a symbol of some of our modern young males who feel abandoned by their fathers, often becoming wild and anti-social.

As for Abram, the wrongness of his actions was two-fold. First, he tried to solve the childless problem by agreeing with his wife to take matters into his own hands, rather than waiting and trusting in God's promises. Second, he refused to intervene when Sarai and Hagar were quarreling, especially when Sarai began to abuse Hagar.

There are lessons here for us. First, because we males have a strong tendency to fix things when they are not working, we can carry that tendency into human relationships. We fail to understand, however, that sometimes we are powerless to fix or control relationships. After all, we human beings have minds and wills of our own. It is then that we need to rely on the grace and power of God to accomplish what we cannot. We pray and we wait. That is the wisdom of the Quaker prayer-meeting. The group simply sits together in utter silence, quietly asking God to do by his power what they are unable to do.

But sometimes we are called to intervene, to take charge of a situation that is out of control. This is what Abram should have done when the two women in his life were hurting each other. Instead, he remained passive. At times we have a responsibility to step into a dysfunctional or destructive situation, perhaps with the help of others, to solve the problem, "stop the bleeding," and bring about reconciliation and healing.

Abraham makes a covenant with God—
just as we must

Chapter 17 of Genesis begins with another appearance of God to Abram. "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, GOD showed up and said to him, 'I am The Strong God, live entirely before me, live to the hilt! I'll make a covenant between us and I'll give you a huge family.' Overwhelmed, Abram fell flat on his face" (Genesis 17:1-3).

Then God changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah. Scholars say there is no special significance to the new names, but the fact of the change indicates the importance of these two people for the Hebrew nation:

“This is my covenant with you: You’ll be the father of many nations. Your name will no longer be Abram, but Abraham, meaning that ‘I’m making you the father of many nations.’ I’ll make you a father of fathers—I’ll make nations from you, kings will issue from you. I’m establishing my covenant between me and you, a covenant that includes your descendants, a covenant that goes on and on and on, a covenant that commits me to be your God and the God of your descendants. And I’m giving you and your descendants this land where you’re now just camping, this whole country of Canaan, to own forever. And I’ll be their God.”

Genesis 17:4-8

As a visible sign of the covenant, God directs that every male be circumcised. This painful and earthy ritual had profound significance for the Hebrew male. It was a wound that symbolically joined the male child to God from the first days of his life. Yes, there was a religious ritual for newborn girls also. The parents would lift her high and offer a prayer of consecration. She too was a child of God and a participant in the covenant with her people.

For the male, however, circumcision was a visible, unmistakable, permanent reminder of who he was: a child/man of God. His sexuality had spiritual significance. This became increasingly important as Jews began to mingle and interact with Gentiles. Every time he looked at his penis, he could remember: I am different; I belong to a spiritual community, dedicated to a unique and transcendent God.

In the New Covenant, circumcision was abolished, and for good reasons. Christians came to realize that Jesus Christ broke down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles, between males and females, between ethnic and racial groups. All people are now

called to live in communion with God and with one another. So circumcision was replaced by baptism, a gender-neutral ritual that powerfully symbolizes death to all sin, self-seeking, and all barriers that would divide one race, gender, or class from another. At the same time it symbolizes resurrection to a new life of love in accord with the new commandment of Jesus:

This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father.

John 15:12-15

Yet, I think we need to acknowledge that something was lost in abandoning circumcision: the connection between sexuality and spirituality. Wouldn't it be marvelous if we men could stop: a) being ashamed of our penis; and b) making a god out of it? If we could rediscover the sacred connection between the penis and our covenant relationship with God? Perhaps then they could take delight in their sexual power *and* recognize the need for its regulation in harmony with the divine plan. In fact, if we understand the sacrament of baptism deeply enough, it is clear that it is our total person, not just our sexual organs, that is joined to God in the ritual action. All of our body and its functions have sacred significance. There are profound implications here for the way we care for our body, the way we treat one another, and the ways we make love. The dignity of the human body is also the basis for the Church's teachings on reverence for life as well as on the proper use of sexuality.

Abraham passes a test—just as we will

At long last, “GOD visited Sarah exactly as he said he would; GOD did to Sarah what he promised: Sarah became pregnant and gave Abraham a son in his old age, and at the very time God had set. Abraham named him Isaac. When his son was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him just as GOD had commanded” (Genesis 21: 1-4).

Abraham named the boy Isaac, meaning “laughter” in Hebrew. As Sarah said: “God has blessed me with laughter and all who get the news will laugh with me” (Genesis 21: 6). But conflicts arose again between Sarah and her servant, Hagar. Sarah noticed the two boys playing together and demanded that Abraham drive Hagar and her son, Ishmael, out of the house. Abraham did not want to do this, but God assured him it would be all right: “Don’t feel badly about the boy and your maid. Do whatever Sarah tells you. Your descendants will come through Isaac. Regarding your maid’s son, be assured that I’ll also develop a great nation from him—he’s your son, too” (Genesis 21:12-13).

We read that God again sent an angel to Hagar in the wilderness and provided her and her son with enough food and water to sustain them until they could settle down. Eventually, Ishmael married a woman from Egypt and his family line continued. In fact, Muslims believe Ishmael to be the founder of Islam, just as Jews claim Isaac.

Next comes the mysterious testing of Abraham. God tells him: “Take your dear son Isaac whom you love and go to the land of Moriah. Sacrifice him there, as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I’ll point out to you” (Genesis 22:2).

The story is full of pathos that pulls on our heart-strings. On the way, the boy notices that they have wood and fire, but no sheep for the sacrifice. Abraham tells him not to worry. God will provide. We can only imagine the agony in the heart of Abraham as he arrives at the mountain, builds the altar, and binds his only son with ropes. Just as he is about to wield the knife, an angel

stops him: “Don’t lay a hand on that boy! Don’t touch him! Now I know how fearlessly you fear God; you didn’t hesitate to place your son, your dear son, on the altar for me” (Genesis 22:12). Abraham notices a ram caught by its horns in the bush and offers it as a sacrifice in place of his son. Then God renews the promises to make of Abraham a great nation.

This story often provokes wonderment, even outrage, in people’s minds. Why would God require such a severe test of this good man? The Bible itself does not provide a clear answer. Many biblical scholars say the story is probably not historically true, but is a symbolic way of teaching two important truths: 1) we are called to obey and trust God, even when what is being asked of us seems contrary to reason and common sense. Christians throughout history have accepted suffering and even death rather than deny their faith in Christ and his teachings; and

We too will
be tested,
and we too
will be given
the means to
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decisions.

2) at times we may be asked to sacrifice something we worked very hard to achieve because something else has become more important. We might think of some examples: a physician being banned from practice in a hospital because he refuses to perform abortions; a venerable parish church has to close because it can no longer be maintained financially or pastorally. These are heart-rending decisions that call us to respond with obedience to things we do not understand and to trust that “every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good” as St. Paul writes (Romans 8:28).

This test tells us we too will be tested, and we too will be given the means to make the right decisions. We just have to look for the angels that are always around us!

Finally, Abraham arranges to find a wife for his son Isaac from among his own kindred back in Haran, because he did not want him to marry a Canaanite woman (see Genesis 24). The sto-

ry ends with the death and burial of Abraham. He was buried by his sons Isaac and Ishmael, next to his wife Sarah (see Genesis 25:7-11).

So, what do we men learn from this great man of the Bible? We learn that we all have a call from God, that life is difficult, that if we remain faithful—even if we make mistakes—that God will be there for us. Not bad lessons for us to learn.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Like Abraham, can you think of a time in your life when you embarked on some venture that seemed daunting, but somehow felt right, even God-inspired? What was that like, and what was the outcome?
2. Can you recall a time when you acted generously—even maybe took a loss—but experienced God’s blessing?
3. When have you had to wait a long time for God to “show up”? What “birds of prey” threatened to make you give up? How did you fight them off? How did God finally answer?
4. How do you handle it when you try to fix a situation but can’t do it? Have there been times when you should have taken action but didn’t? Or when you acted too precipitously and should have waited? What happened?
5. Have you ever been asked to give up something you worked hard to gain (like Abraham with Isaac)? How did you decide what God really wanted you to do?