

# CHURCH <sup>OF</sup> <sub>THE</sub> NAZARENE

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## HARRISONBURG

### **28-Day Devotional for Best Week Ever 2020**

**Week 1: June 28 - July 4**

**Week 2: July 5 - 11**

**Week 3: July 12 - 18**

**Week 4: July 19 - 25**

## **Week 1: June 28 - July 4**

**Focus:** Abraham + the plan

**Song:** Mosaic, To the Unknown (<https://youtu.be/MUWZ-Owsi38>)

**Key Verse:** Ephesians 1:18 NIV "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."

**Additional Study:** Malachi 3:6-12, Luke 15: 11-31, Joel 2:12-14, Hebrews 11

### **Day 1: Known and Unknown / Genesis 11:27 - 13:4**

The Unknown. We've experienced a lot of that lately. The year 2020 has so far been one for the record books as life as we knew it has taken a turn into the unknown. While some of us may crave adventure and the unknown it brings, the majority of us have trouble with not knowing. When what we know, what we depend on, are taken away, our inclination is to pull back. Become selfish. Party of one. Look out for #1.

Abram, also known as Abraham later in the story that starts in Genesis Chapter 11, gives us picture after picture of human endurance and encouragement from Genesis chapters 12 through 25. We see an Old Testament patriarch who wrestles with selfishness and humility, pride and prejudice. We see in him a human not unlike ourselves.

In this story, we read about an extended family relocating. It's a family that has its own troubles of death, childlessness, and throw in some in-law drama. They are traveling together to a new area to call home. Abram is given a word that isn't easy or light. A word that called him. Into the unknown. Away from his existing known space. Away from extended family. It's provision wrapped in prophecy covered by uncertainty.

And so Abram goes, with nothing to go on other than a word from the Lord. He goes from place to place, building altars to the Lord and listening for his next direction. It's worth noting that when Abram adds Egypt to his travel plans and devises his own scheme to keep himself safe, things get messy.

When we make our own plans in the unknown, they often are messy.

After making a mess, Abram goes back to where he last met God. In Genesis 13:4-5, we find Abram at Bethel, a place he had camped in his travels while leaning into the path God had for him. Done with trying to find his own way, perhaps beating himself up for the misstep on his mid-life journey, Abram returns to the known in the unknown. God.

His quest to look out for #1 in the big picture of the unknown put Abram off track. He traded his listening ears for wandering feet. And God, in his redemption and provision, welcomed him back.

We aren't so far from Abram ourselves. We lean in and listen, guided to purpose by the bumpers the Spirit gives. The next thing we know, we've distracted ourselves with something we think we should be doing. Before we can even get out the chorus of "Go Your Own Way" by Fleetwood Mac, we've headed into a downward spiral of selfish intent because we want to know our unknown.

God is the constant in the known and unknown. The question for you and me is - will we lean in and listen?

If you're resting in that promise today, stay there with active ears for what's next. If you're in the middle of your own mess trying to create known in the unknown, go back to where you last met God. Trade your wandering feet for listening ears.

He's waiting for you.

## Day 2: Pack Your Bags / Genesis 13:17

Take a hike.

If you hear that phrase on its own, it's not usually in a good tone. Those three words usually mean, "get lost." In Genesis chapter 13, we find Abram has continued his nomadic lifestyle and acquired quite the herds and flocks of animals. He and his nephew separate so that their animals aren't competing for grass and their servants aren't fighting. That's when God tells Abram to take a hike.

"After Lot was gone, the Lord said to Abram, "Look as far as you can see in every direction, for I am going to give it all to you and your descendants. And I am going to give you so many descendants that, like dust, they can't be counted! Hike in all directions and explore the new possessions I am giving you."" (TLB translation)

This is a hike of meaning and purpose. This command to take a hike has the weight of promise in it. Coupled with a renewal of the initial vision Abram received from the Lord, this command gives him something tangible to wrap his mind around. God tells Abram to use more than just his sense of hearing for this stage of his life and prophecy. He is to use his sight, hearing, taste and touch as he experiences land and culture that God promises to him.

If someone tells me to, "take a hike," I may have an eye roll in response. But if God tells me to take a hike? I'm packing my bags.

Prayer: Jesus, where do I need to go into the unknown so that I can know you better? Show me the steps. Tell me to take a hike. I pray boldly for character and confidence as I wait on you and as I take steps of action for you. Guard my heart and my mind. Give me your vision. Amen.

## Day 3: Attitude of Gratitude / Genesis 15

A few years have passed since God first gave vision and promise to Abram in Genesis, Chapter 11. He's traveled a lot, separated from family again, and built up impressive wealth and status. He even had his own army of skillfully trained fighting men! At the beginning of Genesis 15 we catch Abram fresh off a meeting with the local kings. How's that for cache? Abram helped to save people and the kings tried to give him a reward, which he refused.

It says that "after this," the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision (Genesis 15:1). Does that make you pause and wonder? Abram denied a human-sized reward and soon after is told he has a God-sized reward. Something bigger than spoils of war or an exaggerated thank you gift. This isn't news to Abram, since in fact it marks the third time he's heard some version of this vision from God. Abram could have rolled his eyes and took on an attitude of resentment or ungratefulness at the same words again. Instead, he asks God clarifying questions on this vision for his life. He doesn't waste the encounter with God, but instead runs wholeheartedly for understanding.

This is a dialogue between Abram and God. Of Abram asking all the who-what-where-when-why-how questions and God providing answers. And here, we learn something about Abram we must never forget:

"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

This statement of faith is referenced years later in the New Testament. The books of Romans, Galatians and James all remind people of this hero of the faith who obeyed. The concept of righteousness based on faith becomes an important biblical principle for how people can come into a right relationship with the God of the universe.

We read that "on that day God made a covenant with him." Don't miss this. It wasn't simply a restatement of a promise after some dialogue back and forth. It was a call to obligation on both parties. Something far more than a handshake agreement. It was a divine renewal on the course of human history.

#### **Day 4: When Helping is Hurting / Genesis 16**

"Mommy, I'm helping!" The words came from my toddler as I looked at the scattered mess that reached from the floor to the counter and back again. I could clearly see that my toddler's version of helping only created a bigger mess for me to clean up later.

Isn't that life? I could tell stories upon stories of instances in my own life where I've made decisions in the spur of the moment trying to play god of my life. In doing so, I've created a toddler-like mess in my own kitchen, inadvertently leaving it up to God to clean up. Our man Abram in Genesis knew about messes. He took several detours over the course of his life, and yet we see God's divine grace pulling him back and cleaning the messes time and time again. Perhaps his biggest (or most memorable?) mess comes in Genesis 16. In his hurry to rush the vision from God that doesn't seem to be happening, he allows his wife Sarai to convince him that her barrenness doesn't need to stand in God's way. So she tells her husband to sleep with another woman. And not just any woman, but her personal servant girl. As she tries to control what's out of control, she goes after the title of god of her own life. And what's true from Day 1 of this devotional is true on Day 4. When we make our own plans in the unknown, they often are messy.

Abram slept with Sarai's servant, Hagar. Can you see the trouble brewing? It's not too long before one woman despises the other for something she cannot have. In her haste to play god, Sarai doesn't factor the backlash of human emotion. Her "helping" has only created a bigger mess. So she fixes it in the only way she humanly can.

She gets rid of it, trying to wrestle it under the rug.

Boy, could we go down several different paths of lessons here. But we'll stick to the story. Abram and Sarai send a pregnant lady into the desert. Brought into the story by a womanly trait that makes her valuable for one thing only, Hagar is pushed out for the same trait.

In the middle of the mess, God shows up. He was always there. But he chooses to be seen at this point. And God doesn't show up back at basecamp. He doesn't wave from afar and yell for Hagar to come back.

He met her in the desert. He'll do the same for you. In the middle of the mess. In the middle of the chaos. The mess becomes manageable when God shows up. Even if you feel like the mistake.

God knows. And God sees. Hagar named him "El Roi," meaning "you are the God who sees me." In her pain of feeling like the mistake, God wiped up the mess. Her status and part in the mess didn't matter. He cared about the humans he created wandering in the desert. He had a plan for them too.

Prayer: God, give us eyes to see when we are becoming the mess. When we are trying to take your place and "help." Give us ears to hear a clear voice from you. To understand that waiting is part of the process. That you are a God of time and timing. We can trust you to work out the details. We can also trust you to clean up our mess and receive us again with open arms. We thank you for the grace given to us daily. God, turn our hearts from sin. Give us strength each day for the holy life you have called us to. Amen.

## **Day 5: Time and Timing / Genesis 21**

A quarter of a century. Twenty five years of repeated visions and lots of hiking. Decades of learning to live with mistakes. Abram and Sarai, now renamed Abraham and Sarah, had done a lot of living while seemingly waiting on God.

Perhaps God was waiting on them.

Waiting for them to fully trust. Waiting for them to be at the right spot in the journey. Waiting for them to fully surrender. Waiting for them to obey. Waiting for them to be at the right stage of life so others around them and others thousands of years later could clearly see a miracle.

God's timing is never off. To make it more mind-blowing, he orchestrates plans for his good and glory even with our mistakes as part of the pattern. God brought Abraham and Sarah something that they only dreamed of. Something that they tried to plan for. Something they tried to orchestrate (remember Hagar?). God does what only God can do - the impossible.

God is over time and timing. What are you waiting on God for? Perhaps he's waiting on you.

## **Day 6: In the Wind / Genesis 22**

We've focused on plans, timing and control over this week. Things that Abraham and Sarah struggled with thousands of years ago that are still relevant today. As we dig a little further into Genesis and watch the story continue to unfold, we find Abraham and Sarah enjoying life as a family of three. Abraham sent away his firstborn son, Ishmael, in a heartbreaking story due to continued tensions. His second son Isaac was growing into a young boy and Abraham and Sarah watched, anticipating what Isaac was in the grand plan God had revealed to them.

But this all comes to a screeching halt when God asks Abraham to kill his son in a sacrifice to him.

A human? His son? The one of promise? The one of waiting? God asks, and I can only imagine the reaction of Abraham as a parent. The quickening breath. The pounding heart. A feeble "why?"

We have to remember that in this moment, Abraham had a choice. He could ignore God's clear direction or he could follow directions. We see a man of faith in a situation of high stakes. A human man who made plenty of mistakes. But a man who continually turned to God.

Faith, to be genuine, must be tested. Without the trials we lack the character and commitment for a full faith. Think about a tree for a moment. Research shows that trees that have been exposed to windy conditions develop a stronger and more supportive trunk. Which, in turn, aids in their survival and overall growth and development.

Sound familiar? Abraham had a choice. Figuratively speaking, he could control his environment and avoid the wind, or relinquish his control and submit to the wind. Either choice was permissible, for God grants us choice.

Abraham let the wind come. And he watched in complete wonder as his son was given back to him. Abraham's tree was strengthened that day. Rooted deep in heaven's glory, he submitted to the wind. His ultimate decision was for an audience of one.

What a challenge. One most of us cannot fathom. What's your choice? When plans don't seem to go your way or the winds begin to blow, what and where are you focused?

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way."

James 1:2-4 MSG

## **Day 7: Gathered /Genesis 25**

"Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people." Genesis 25:7-8 NIV

I love the phrase "gathered to his people." It makes me think of a joyous homecoming, and all my visions of that on this side of heaven always include a potluck. Can you imagine the ruckus in heaven when Abraham took his last breath? Perhaps even the angels jostled each other to get to see him enter heaven first!

One hundred years had passed since Abraham received the call to leave his family and go to the unknown. A century of living a life of mountain tops and also its share of valleys. Mistakes and hurt, but also miracles and help. After 365,000+ days of going after God's vision for his life, Abraham crosses the finish line without the complete promise. He received an heir in Isaac, and spent his fair share of days traveling the land, but the end of the prophecy was left hanging in midair.

"Through you every family on earth will be blessed." Genesis 12:3b GW

Every family? Some versions say - all people. Abraham only knew his surrounding neighbors and family in a time long before technology. His worldview was limited to a small area of land on a vast earth. How could every family be blessed through him?

Flip forward to Matthew chapter 1 and straight into a genealogy. A genealogy that starts with our man Abraham and ends with Jesus. The Messiah, our Savior. Perhaps Abraham's promise had multiple ending meanings. It was filled in part through his relation in the lineage of Jesus, who came to save all people from their sin. But here we are in 2020 studying Abraham's life to bring perspective to ours. His story enters your story. His faith inspires your faith.

Read Hebrews, Chapter 11. A listing of who's who in the Bible, called out onto the pages by their lives of faith. If you look closer into the stories like we have with Abraham this week, you'll see that these heroes of the faith are simply human. They mess up, sometimes fall flat on their face. But they have one overarching quality.

A persistence for leaning into what God has for them. For obeying regardless of emotion. For submitting to God's plan over their plan.

To be a hero of the faith is to be human. A human with a gaze steadfast on the One who created them.

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for...These [the ancients] were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect." Hebrews 11: 1-2, 39-40