

# God Builds a Nation

## The Story - From Eden to Egypt

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There's nothing better on a rainy day on vacation than to do a jigsaw puzzle. Choose the box and level of difficulty and get to work. My strategy is usually to find the corner pieces first, then any piece that has a straight edge to it. That establishes the frame.

But to get the rest of the puzzle together, I look at the picture on the box. I need to see the end product. I look at the colors that match with other colors and that way I can get the puzzle together.

Real puzzlers don't look at the picture on the box. And some of them even work puzzles that are just white and black. I think I'd go nuts on those kinds.

The Bible can be like a jigsaw puzzle without a picture if we don't have the end picture in view. Without the end picture, the big picture, the Bible can be very confusing - just a bunch of laws or genealogies or verses that seem disconnected and make little or no sense.

But if see the big picture, if we have a view of the entire story of the Bible, things become clear. Last week we got a pretty good view of God's big picture. We learned that with all that God made in those first 2 chapters of Genesis, the main point is creation itself, but that God's passion is for human beings. His passion - and God's supreme passion - is to be with us.

That's what we learned last week. Then we saw how Adam and Eve messed everything up by disobeying God, and how their sin, which we call "original sin", was passed on to their sons, Cain and Abel resulting in Cain killing Abel and God's creation became so wicked that God regretted ever making human beings.

Then God hit the re-set button, he cleared His divine Etch-a-Sketch, and sent a flood but he saved Noah, his family, a bunch of smelly animals, and mosquitoes. God could have washed His hands of the human race and gone back to heaven, but His passion was still for human beings and His supreme passion still is to be with us.

The entire rest of the Bible is The Story of how God made that happen. And so, the next stage of God fulfilling His supreme passion is to build a nation. Which is exactly what God did.

### I. God Began to Build a Nation

And to see how God did that, we turn to the man we read about in chapter 2 this past week: Abraham. Here's where we open our lesson for today.

Turn in your copy of The Story to page 13. Right from the get-go we see how God will do this:

*"The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. <sup>2</sup> "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:1-3*

First, let's look at **the place**. God told Abram to leave his country. Turn to the map inside the cover of *The Story* and find the city of Ur again. That's the city of Abram's father whose name was Terah. Abram's home town was Ur.

Abram was told to leave Ur and eventually get to Canaan which is way to the west. He would stop and live in a place called Haran. This tells us a little about the beginning of the nation God was building.

Now, let's look at **the people**. We're talking about Abram, also known as Abraham. Scripture says that Abraham was going to be the father of a great nation. But, Abram was not the logical choice for this, and here's why.

First, Abram comes from a family of idol worshippers. Terah, Abram's father, was an idol worshipper. Ur and Haran were cities known for worshipping a moon god. Logic says that Abram would not be a good choice to be the father of the great nation God was building.

On top of that, Abram and his wife Sarai are old and have no kids. Could you just imagine God up in heaven talking with the angels. He says, "So, I am going to build this great nation. Who should be the father and mother of this great nation?" And the angels look down at this yuppie couple: good genes, young, strong, energetic. But God looks over and sees this old couple: walkers, no teeth, going to Costco to stock up on the Depends.

The amazing thing is this: the people God uses for His purposes are usually not people you would expect. God uses flawed people to accomplish His purposes.

- He used Abraham who was old and Isaac who was insecure.
- He used Leah who was unattractive and Joseph who was a slave.
- He used Moses who stuttered and Gideon who was fearful.
- He used Samson who was proud and Rahab who was immoral.
- He used David who had an affair and Elijah who was suicidal.
- He used Jeremiah who was depressed and Jonah who was disobedient.
- He used Mary who was a poor teenage girl and John the Baptist who was eccentric.
- He used Peter who was impulsive and Martha who worried a lot.
- He used Thomas who doubted, Paul whose health was poor, and Timothy who was timid.

The people God uses are people we wouldn't expect. Why? Because God's strength shines through our weakness. God does this all the time.

- He used Charles Colson, an ex-con, to develop an incredible prison ministry.
- He used Joni Erickson Tada, a quadriplegic, to teach patience.
- He used Josh Hamilton, an addict, to show other addicts how to give up drugs.
- He used Colton, a 4 year old boy, to tell people that Heaven is for Real.

Because God's supreme passion is people, He chooses flawed people like you and me to accomplish His great purposes. Why? The answer is found 2 Corinthians: *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."* 2 Corinthians 4:7

God chooses flawed people to accomplish His purposes so we can experience His all-surpassing power.

### **So, what's the Basis of this New Nation?**

At first glance, we could say that the basis for this new nation is a group of people, the people of Israel. The Jewish people today believe they are the chosen people. What's important to them is that they can trace their lineage. But the basis for this new nation goes far beyond lineage. If God's passion is people and His supreme passion is to be with people, then what He longs for is for people to have a relationship with Him.

The basis for this new nation is faith. So, God tells Abram to leave his family and go to a new land that God would give to him. All the rest of Abram's friends are retiring to condos in Florida, but God tells Abram to go to some undisclosed location.

Realize that Abram could have objected. He could have asked about the climate and the condition of the golf courses. Sarai could have asked if they had a Whole Food's grocery store there. But they didn't. Verse 4 simply says: "So Abram went." Abram obeyed. Here that's the first thing we learn about faith, the basis of this new nation.

**Faith is obeying God even when you're not sure where you're going.** Some people are handy when it comes to fixing things around the house. Some people are not. The first thing the not-so-handy sometimes do is to go to the library and get a book. The next thing is to study the book and figure out how the thing that needs to be fixed is supposed to get fixed. But reading the book is not the same as doing the work, and the book was written for application.

So also is faith meant for application. To have faith is to have a changed life. To have faith is to obey God even when you're not sure of where you are going. Abram obeyed. He got off his couch and went. Faith is obeying God even when you are not sure of where you are going.

Second, **faith is believing God against all hope.** Abram and Sarai leave Ur and Haran and start out for Canaan and finally arrive. That's about an 800 mile journey. And when they arrive in Canaan, God appears to Abram again with another covenant. This is on page 15, right in the middle:

*"After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." Genesis 15:1b*

Abram remembers the first covenant, that God promised to make him the father of a great nation. Yet Abram is old and childless and Abram asks God how this can be, how he will be the father of a great nation when humanly speaking he has no chance to ever become a father. Abram wonders how God will build a nation from the geriatric ward. This is also on page 15:

*"(God) took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars –if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Genesis 15:5*

Faith is believing God against all hope. This is how Paul describes Genesis 15:5 in Romans 4:

*"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as*

*dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”* Romans 4:18-21

Did you hear Paul’s description? *“In hope, Abraham believed. . . without weakening in his faith. . . he did not waver in his faith. . . (he was) fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”*

When it came to having a child, when it came to being the father of a great nation, according to Abram’s age, according to his and Sarai’s physical condition, they were hopeless so much so that when Sarah did get pregnant later on, she laughed. Abraham was doing his little happy dance but Sarah laughed. I imagine that Sarai laughed up until the time she experienced morning sickness at the age of 105.

But, against all hope, Abraham believed and here’s what Genesis 15:6 says (it’s on the bottom of page 15 of The Story):

*“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”* Genesis 15:6

Here’s what God longed for with the people He created. Here’s His supreme passion. Faith. Belief. Acknowledging God as Righteous.

Not following the rules. Not obeying the 10 commandments. Even an atheist can follow all the rules. That’s what Jesus railed about with the Pharisees. They followed the rules well but there was nothing inside.

That’s the basis of every religion of the world except Christianity.

- Pray 5 times a day and follow the 5 Pillars and you get to Islamic heaven, you get your virgins.
- Live better than your caste and you get to return in a higher caste, repeat that about a million times and you reach Hindu heaven.
- Free yourself from yourself, work real hard at it and you get to Buddhist heaven.

It’s in some Christian denominations too. Come to church each Sunday, say your prayers every day simply to say them, give some money to the church because the church says to give money - and if you do these things, then you go to heaven. It’s entrenched in that original sin nature passed on from Adam and Eve. God will only accept me, God will only love me, if I’ve been a good girl or boy.

But, God longs for more than that. He longs for a relationship of love with His people. God longs for us to trust Him. It was faith—not doing a bunch of stuff—that gained righteousness for Abraham. It was God’s grace, accepted by faith that justifies us and puts us right with God.

It’s about a relationship. If you’ve been striving to get God to love you, understand this: He already does! You can’t do anything to get Him to love you because He already does. He simply wants you to love Him back. He just wants you to have faith, even if that faith is against all hope.

So Abram and Sarai are old and infertile and yet God says Abram will be the father of a great nation. And Abram believed. But then Abram and Sarai kind of take matters into their own hands.

Sarah thinks that maybe she won’t be the mother of this new nation so she offers up her servant, Hagar, to be a surrogate mother. That wasn’t an unusual thing in

those days and Abram didn't object. But Ishmael, the son born to Hagar, is not the child of the promise and Sarai gives birth to Isaac.

Abraham and Sarah experience the fulfilment of the promise. Sarah laughed. Abraham danced. In their lives they were right where God wanted them, in a love relationship with Him.

Now, there is one last aspect of the basis of this new nation, this faith that we need to look at and that is this: **Faith is trusting God even when the story doesn't make sense.**

And it doesn't always make sense to us. Let me show you what I mean - I'll read it from The Story, page 19 in the middle.

*"Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.<sup>2</sup> Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love - Isaac - and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." Genesis 22:1-2*

Can you imagine Abraham's feelings when God said this? Can you imagine what was going on in his faith?

A little background here. At the time that God told Abraham to do this, Isaac was about 15. He had just gotten his camel's license and was acting like a typical teenager: searching for independence, pressing his father and mother's buttons, so God's instruction to Abraham may have come as a welcomed command.

And did you notice what Abraham did?

*"Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac." Genesis 22:3*

Abraham got up and went. And do you know why? We find the answer in the book of Hebrews chapter 11, verse 19:

*"Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead. . ."*

Now, wait: this is thousands of years before the first Easter, thousands of years before the resurrection of Jesus, yet Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead?! Abraham trusted God even when the story didn't make sense.

So Abraham marched up that hill, laid his son out on the altar there on Mt. Moriah, raised his knife to slay his only begotten son, and an angel stopped him at the last moment and said:

*"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Genesis 22:12*

And in the place of Isaac, God provided a ram to be sacrificed. Now, do you want to see how God's plan all worked out? A couple of thousand years later, on that same mountain, on Mt. Moriah which is where Jerusalem stands today, on that same hill now called Calvary, God provided another lamb, THE Lamb, who takes away the sins of the world.

On that same mountain, God provided resurrection because— (here it comes again) —God's supreme passion is to be with us - forever.

For Abraham, faith was trusting God even when this whole sacrifice Isaac thing didn't make sense. For us, faith is also trusting God even when it doesn't make sense.

**And with that, we begin the rest of the story.** So what we found as we read The Story this past week is that Isaac comes down from the mountain, marries and has two sons, Jacob and Esau.

Jacob outwits his brother—actually, he was pretty sleazy—and gains the birthright. The promise will flow through Jacob, not Esau. Jacob's name is changed to Israel and Jacob has 12 sons who are the 12 sons of Israel, the 12 tribes of Israel - and a nation is born.

Keep in mind, this nation has its roots in the Jewish people but it doesn't stop there. This new nation is a nation of faith and so Peter can say to Jew and gentile alike:

*“But you (people of faith, people who believe regardless of nationality, regardless of race, you, all who are part of the Christian church, you) are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”* 1 Peter 2:9

“People of faith”, that's us. We're part of that new nation God created. We're right in the middle of God's plan, His Story, His passion, for us to be with Him. We're right in the middle of what The Story is all about.

And next week, we will see how The Story continues with Joseph and His amazing Technicolor dreamcoat.