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*The Magnificent Obsession*

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# If . . .

*If you are a member of the younger generation who sometimes feels the traditional church is irrelevant . . .*

*If you are a member of the older generation who sometimes feels excluded by the contemporary church . . .*

*If you are a member of my generation who has been raised in the church and has been burned by the hypocrisy within . . .*

*If you have been a seeker of God but have been hurt by those who call themselves by His name . . .*

*If you consider yourself a Christian but are not actively involved in, or even currently attending, a church . . .*

*If you attend a home church, seeking God outside the mainstream . . .*

*If you are a believer in exile . . .*

*If you are a liberal who is uncomfortable with the God of the religious right . . .*

*If you are a conservative who is uncomfortable with the God of the progressive left . . .*

*If you are a member of another religion but feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled in your relationship with God . . .*

*If you just have a restlessness in your spirit, believing that there must be something more to life than you are experiencing . . .*

*this book is dedicated to you.*

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*For this reason  
I kneel before the Father,  
From whom his whole family in heaven  
and on earth derives its name.*

*I pray  
that out of his glorious riches  
he may strengthen you with power  
through his Spirit in your inner being . . .  
that you may be filled  
to the measure  
of all the fullness  
of God.*

— EPHESIANS 3:14 – 16, 19

## FOREWORD

# You Are About to Begin the Adventure of a Lifetime

**T**he Bible is extremely clear about the importance of living by faith: “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6); “The just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17); “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). Learning to love and trust the loving God who created you and sent His Son, Jesus, to die for you is what life is all about. My dear friend Anne calls it “the magnificent obsession.”

*Magnificent* is the perfect description! The faith life unlocks amazing resources you may have never imagined. Jesus says, “According to your faith, it will be done to you” (Matthew 9:29). For just a second, think about the implications of this truth. Jesus says, “You get to choose how much I use and bless your life. It’s all based on how much you choose to trust Me.” Intimacy with God is a choice. You decide how much God gets to work in your life and how close to God you are. If you feel far from God right now, guess who moved? You’re only a decision away from reconnecting.

For this reason, I am thrilled you have picked up Anne’s book. Anne Graham Lotz is God’s woman with God’s message of faith for all of us today. I read everything Anne writes, and you should too. She has a passion for God’s Word that shines through on every page, and because of her faith in His Word, God has given

her a unique ability to hear His voice through Scripture and then communicate it in a clear and compelling way.

The great model of faith in the Old Testament is, of course, Abraham. He is the father of faith. You cannot fully grasp the life of faith God intends for you to live without understanding the lessons of Abraham — both his successes and his failures. Abraham shows us why we are often full of faith one day and full of doubt the next. In this book Anne shows us how an obedient faith must be lived out step-by-step and day-by-day. You need new faith for each new day. To enjoy the life God intends for you, you must daily lay everything down and let everything go in surrender to Him. You release everything — and then you receive more than you ever imagined!

Here's what I urge you to do with this book. Don't just read it. Buy several copies and start a reading group with some friends. At Saddleback we call these groups "Connection Groups." Share your struggles and admit your doubts. Get your fears out in the open and watch them vanish when held up to the light of truth. Pray for each other. Then create some practical ways that you can help each other practice the transforming truths of a God-filled life.

I am excited for you. You are about to begin the adventure of a lifetime! After you've completed this book, let us hear how you are moving forward in *your* magnificent obsession. You can write Anne, or me, or both of us! We'll be praying, *in faith*, for you!

DR. RICK WARREN  
author, *The Purpose Driven Life*  
rick@purposedriven.com

# My Magnificent Obsession

I was raised in a home where God was not only believed but loved, obeyed, and served. As I was growing up, it never occurred to me to question or doubt His existence because His presence permeated our family's life. Yet it wasn't until I was older and able to think through some of the larger issues of life for myself, such as who am I and why am I here and where am I going, that I was struck by the fact that my parents had not just taught me the truth by their words but, even more powerfully and effectively, by their own example.

And what an example it has been! With my mother's heartfelt support, my father preached the gospel face-to-face to over 220 million people around the world. He shared his faith in God with presidents, kings, queens, emperors, popes, dictators — every conceivable world leader — as well as masses of ordinary people for over six decades. In so many ways he has lived out his faith on a world stage. What I saw in private was totally authentic and completely synchronized with the public figure.

While I cannot emphasize enough the impact my parents' faith has had on my own, I must admit that Billy and Ruth Graham are not the primary ones who shaped my own personal magnificent obsession. Instead, I can trace my passionate embrace of the God-filled life to someone I have never met in person, someone with whom I have little else in common. He lived in a long-ago time, in a foreign

culture, in a patriarchal society, in an idolatrous home. His life was full of twists and turns, riches and losses, deceit and redemption, failure and success. Nevertheless, he has become a spiritual mentor to me.

The person who has motivated me to pursue a God-filled life, the person whose own magnificent obsession is as powerfully contagious today as it was four thousand years ago when he first embraced it, is Abraham. His name means “father of nations.” And even though he was a wanderer, he was the founder of the Israelites, Ishmaelites, and Edomites. Even more interesting, while he claimed no religion, he is claimed as the patriarch of three: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Let me tell you how we met . . .

In the spring of 1976 I established Bible Study Fellowship, a weekly lay Bible school in my hometown, because I wanted to be in it. A group of 150 women joined me in the small church chapel as I stumbled my way through teaching a six-week class on the New Testament book of Ephesians. After a three-month break, the class reopened, doubling in size to the capacity allowed by the national headquarters, and I plunged into teaching the first book of the Bible, Genesis. After wrestling with the mind-expanding, controversial, fundamental first eleven chapters, I was unprepared for what happened next. The text blossomed into the biography of Abraham — and my life was forever changed.

As I saturated myself in the text, Abraham walked off the pages and into my life — a very ordinary man who became extraordinary for one primary reason — he made the critical choice to embrace a God-filled life, to pursue knowing God and making Him known through living a life of obedient faith. His initial choice was then followed by a series of choices that were worked out on the anvil of his life. Each subsequent choice not only reinforced the first one but became the stepping-stone for the one that would follow. Like a hammer striking steel, Abraham made choice after choice after choice until he forged an intimate relationship with God that God acknowledged as a friendship.

I decided that Abraham’s goal would be mine, and I began a passionate pursuit of embracing the God-filled life. Choice after choice after choice. Knowing Him has become the magnificent obsession of my life that grows and intensifies with each passing moment. I want to know God as He truly is . . . and make Him known . . . *to you.*

A few years after I had set knowing God as my life's goal, I was confronted by a contemptuous public rebuttal to a message I had given. I had done my best to point people to Jesus, but I was informed emphatically and somewhat condescendingly that we all have our own gods! I was told that some may call him Buddha, some may call him Muhammad, some may call him Allah, some may call him Messiah, some *may* call him Jesus.

I remember thinking, But I don't want to know God like that. I don't want to know the names other people call Him. I don't want to know Him as someone says He might be like, or thinks He might be like, or was told He might be like. If there is a God at the center of the universe, I want to know Him as He is. Surely He has a name He calls Himself. I want to know that name. I am not content with religion. I want to know God personally. And there's a big difference.

Since that moment on the platform so long ago, I have noticed a similar attitude to that of the emcee, but within the evangelical church. It's an attitude I have heard bestselling author Dr. Henry Blackaby describe as "evangelical idolatry": Christians who worship and serve a god they have made up. A god who meets their needs. A god who serves them. A god who is convenient. And comfortable. A god they can market and promote and politicize for their own agendas. A god they can use to justify their prejudice and oppression and greed and selfishness and shallowness and sin. A god who bears no real resemblance to the Creator of the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of Jesus Christ. A god of religion.

I don't want to know God like that. I don't want to know God as *I* want to know Him, as my imagination conceives Him. I don't want to know Him as others say they know Him. I want to know God *as He is*. For myself.

I want to know God . . .

as Noah did . . . in His salvation from judgment.

as Moses did . . . in His liberating power.

as Elijah did . . . in His still, small voice.

as Isaiah did . . . in His glory.

as Jeremiah did . . . in His faithfulness.

as David did . . . in His shepherding care.

I want to know God as Ezekiel did . . . seated on the throne as the Son of Man.



I want to know God ...

as Mary did ... in His humanity ... and in His deity.

as Peter did ... in His forgiveness.

as Mary Magdalene did ... in His authority over demons.

as Lazarus did ... in His resurrection life.

as Lazarus's sisters did ... in His tender compassion.

as Paul did ... in the sufficiency of His grace.

I want to know God as the apostle John did ... seated on the throne as the Son of God.

Summed up, I want to know God as Abraham did ... as His friend. As *His* friend. The Bible reveals an astonishing fact when it describes Abraham as God's friend.<sup>1</sup> The designation "friend" comes *from God's perspective*. What an achievement! It would be one thing if I told you the president of the United States was my friend. You might smile rather skeptically. But it's an entirely different matter if the president were to say, "Anne Graham Lotz is my friend." The president's personal perspective would make all the difference in how seriously such a relationship would be viewed.

Likewise, Abraham did not claim to be God's friend. It was God who stated that Abraham was His friend. And since the Bible also says that God does not change, that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever,<sup>2</sup> then I decided if I don't know God as Abraham did, nothing is wrong with God ... there must be something wrong with the way I am living out my Christian life.

It was this thought process, triggered by my first in-depth study of the life of Abraham, that redefined my life as I made the initial choice to pursue ...

Knowing God and making Him known.

Receiving His blessing to be a blessing.

Fulfilling all the potential He has for my life.

Living a life of step-by-step obedient faith.

Embracing the God-filled life ...

... a life of eternal significance.

*This is my magnificent obsession ...*

# Leave Everything Behind

*Genesis 12:1 – 13:4*

The Bible doesn't tell us exactly what prompted Abraham's desire to know God. Perhaps the desire began when he witnessed the miracle of human birth and marveled, *This baby is so perfectly and wondrously made, there must be a Maker somewhere.* Or was it when Abraham observed the migratory habits of the birds and the way the sun came up every morning and went down every evening, and he reflected, *These things must be more than just an accident or a coincidence.* Was it when he entered into a business deal and refused to cheat even though he could have profited personally if he had? Did he walk away, shaking his head and wondering, *What's wrong with me? Why did cheating make me so uneasy? How did I know that it was wrong even if I could have gained by it?* Did he come away from the worship of idols empty and dissatisfied with his religion, restless in his spirit, increasingly convinced that it was as man-made as the objects of wood and stone on which it focused?

Although I don't know the tantalizing details that surrounded Abraham's launch into the adventure of knowing God, it's clear that something stirred in his heart. The small candle of his conscience must have been lit, his spirit must have sought to draw near to the one true living God, because God leaned out of heaven and invaded Abraham's life.<sup>1</sup> Abraham was not some random selection on a divine whim. He had been carefully chosen by God. Why? Why out of all the people living

on the planet did God lean down out of heaven and call Abraham to follow Him in a life of faith? Was it just *because*? Because God loved Abraham? Because God discerned that Abraham, deep down in the secret recesses of his soul, longed to know Him “in spirit and in truth”?<sup>2</sup>

It was that last assumption that captured my thoughts and resonated with my heart. Because deep down, in the secret recesses of my soul, I too long to know God in spirit and in truth. I yearn for God to fill my life, saturating me with Himself.

But how does a person today even begin to pursue knowing God? Does a person . . .

Go to church every time the door opens?

Do more good works than bad works?

Meditate in a monastery in some remote mountain village?

Walk barefooted over fiery coals?

Pray facedown five times a day?

Chant repetitious phrases in unison with others?



How does someone even take the first step in God’s direction?

For me, the process began with a small desire in my heart, a small thought in my mind, a small light in my eye, a small turning of my spirit when I observed the example of someone else who pursued God. Nothing really big and flashy.

Like Abraham, do you want to know God? Could Abraham serve as the example for all of us? Has the magnificent obsession begun in your heart and mind and eye and spirit for the simple reason that you have chosen to read this book? Maybe the small spark of desire has been fanned into flame by what you have observed in the created world around you or by your conscience within you.<sup>3</sup> I do know that if you and I ever truly know God, it will not be an accident. It will be because we have pursued with focused intentionality. It will happen when, like Abraham, we abandon every other goal, every other priority, and embrace the God-filled life until He becomes our magnificent obsession.

## LEAVE BEHIND THE FAMILIAR

So who *was* Abraham? As I delved into his life, I discovered he was the son of Terah, a wealthy man living in the Mesopotamian city of Ur, an internationally recognized center of culture and trade. Terah was also a worshiper of idols, which makes me wonder what the trigger was that fired the faith for which Abraham has been so well known for four thousand years. And because it was his home, he must have been comfortable in Ur; it was very familiar territory. It was the land of his father, the city in which he had been raised, the values he had lived by, the culture that had shaped him, the attitudes he had adopted, the religion he had followed.

Ur was not only familiar to Abraham, Ur was a habit. To my knowledge, he had never known anything else. Yet when God called him out of that familiar place, Abraham leaped to obey, making the choice to take steps that began a journey that lasted a lifetime.

Abraham's willingness to leave *everything* behind arrested me, challenged me, convicted me. Would I be willing to do the same? Could I ever really know God if I didn't choose to leave everything behind? If I clung to some things, small things, hidden things, past things, *anything*?

What Abraham did in the Old Testament, the apostle Peter did in the New Testament. In response to Jesus' invitation, Peter climbed out of his fishing boat, put his feet on the surface of the stormy sea, and walked on the water to Jesus. As Peter stepped out in faith, we have to step out in faith.

As we begin this journey of faith together, let me ask you:

What is the familiar territory of your life?

What values have you lived by?

What culture has shaped your thinking?

What attitudes have been molded by your social or educational  
or political environment?

What religious experience has formed your concept of God?

My familiar territory is the southeastern United States, where magnolias bloom and NASCAR reigns and neighbors still know each other by name. I love the varied beauty of North Carolina, my home state. I love the friendly authenticity of the people who surround me. I love the down-home atmosphere that is still felt in even the larger cities. I love pig-pickin's and shrimperooos and Silver Queen corn and

homemade ice cream. I love fried chicken and fried fish and fried hushpuppies and fried green tomatoes and fried anything, actually.

But my familiar territory is also the land of cultural Christianity. It's the buckle of the Bible Belt, where there's a church in every neighborhood and sometimes on every corner. It's a land where many people believe they are Christians because they were born that way, have gone to church all their lives, were baptized in the river at age twelve, have gone to church youth camp, and have even been on a missions trip. They can quote Bible verses, recite the Apostles' Creed, sing the second and sometimes third verses of most hymns from memory, and weep during the visiting preacher's revival sermon.

These are some of the familiar components of my home territory, my background, my "country." I love it here, and it's hard to leave. It's hard to shed the comfort of assuming that of course I'm a Christian because, after all, it's my culture. I'm a church member, and I'm a southerner.

Surely Abraham, after a virtual lifetime in Ur, must have felt just as strongly about his country and his culture as I feel about mine. So I can imagine the impact God's command must have had on him. "Leave your country" were the exact words that God leaned out of heaven and spoke into Abraham's life (Genesis 12:1).<sup>\*</sup> How they must have reverberated through Abraham's heart and mind, ricocheting off his attitudes, values, perceptions, culture, and religion until his entire world shook with the personal command: "Leave your country." In other words, "Abraham, you must choose to leave your comfort zone and your familiar territory."

### **A Personal Command**

Seventeen times in the first three verses of Genesis 12, God used the personal pronouns *I* or *you* or *your*. I have no doubt that God was speaking to Abraham personally, commanding him to leave all that was familiar.

But I can't help wondering what Abraham was doing when God called him to embark on the magnificent obsession. Maybe he was running an errand for his wife, or striking a business deal for his father, or attending the funeral of his brother, or just sitting in the courtyard of his home, contemplating the meaning of life.

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<sup>\*</sup>Throughout this book, Scripture references in parentheses refer to the book of Genesis.

And then it hit me: God shows up in the ordinariness of our day, doesn't He?

He doesn't show up *only* when He parts the Red Sea with a powerful wind, or in the banquet hall with handwriting on the wall, or on Mount Sinai with thunder and lightning, or on the Mount of Transfiguration in radiant glory.<sup>4</sup> He shows up in everyday situations, as we are going about our everyday responsibilities in our everyday routines.

Moses was shepherding his flock at Mount Horeb. Gideon was threshing wheat by the winepress. David was looking after his father's sheep. Elisha was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen. Nehemiah was serving wine to the king. Amos was tending his flock and his sycamore-fig trees. Peter and Andrew were casting their fishing net into the sea. James and John were mending their nets. Matthew was collecting taxes. The Samaritan woman was drawing water from the well. Saul was in the midst of a "business trip."<sup>5</sup>

All of these people were simply living their ordinary lives when God invaded, interrupted, and turned their world inside out.

When has God's Word come to you in a personal way? What were you involved in at the time? What difference has it made?

I remember when God spoke to me through His Word, calling me to step out of my familiar territory, teach a Bible class for women in my city, and begin pursuing Him through a life of obedient faith. I was riding in the front seat of our family station wagon, which my husband was driving from New York City to Hyannis on Cape Cod. His parents were in the backseat, and our three children were crawling all over the seats (long before the requirement of infant car seats or even seat belts). In the midst of the chaos, my sweet mother-in-law was reading the Bible aloud to no one in particular. Suddenly my ears tuned in to her voice. I asked her to pass her Bible to me in the front seat, and I read out loud the verses she had just read. As I read them, they seemed to be lit up with my name on them. No one else was listening, but I was: *Anne*, "I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."<sup>6</sup>

During the ordinariness of a family vacation, God leaned out of heaven and called me to leave the familiar territory of cultural Christianity, reject what seemed to be a mediocre pew-warming faith, and plunge into the magnificent obsession. I chose to obey — but also discovered there was more to the command.

I had to leave my extended family and do something no other woman in my family had done. I had to be willing to break with family tradition.

Thousands of years earlier, Abraham had perceived the same call. God commanded him to leave “your people and your father’s household” (12:1). If leaving his country and familiar territory was hard, it must have been even harder to contemplate leaving his loved ones behind.

And it *is* hard. While I didn’t have to physically leave my family, I know from personal experience how hard it can be to leave them in other ways — psychologically, emotionally, and culturally. When I began the Bible class in my city, both of my parents opposed what I was doing. Although my grandmother was a trained nurse, the traditional role of women in my family had been one of stay-at-home mother. My parents gave me loving, firm counsel; they commended my desire but stated clearly that my role was at home as wife and mother.

My husband also resisted my efforts because he knew how tired I stayed throughout the day tending three children ages five and younger. He couldn’t imagine my taking on added responsibility. He also knew that by nature I’m shy and have an inferiority complex. How could I possibly train and disciple leaders, much less stand in front of hundreds of women to give a forty-five-minute weekly lecture?

At that point in my journey, I did not recognize that I was embracing the magnificent obsession. All I knew was that I wanted to fulfill the potential God had for me. I wanted everything He wanted to give me, and I knew I was missing something. I instinctively knew that what I was missing was an authentic life of faith. I wasn’t living it. At least I wasn’t living on the cutting edge of it. And that’s what I wanted. At the time, I described myself as being homesick for God as I had known Him as a little girl. Because of the busyness of young motherhood, I had neglected Him and I wanted Him back in the center of my life.

It was hard to shed the comfort of assumptions: Of course I’m a Christian; after all, it’s my culture; I’m a church member; I grew up in the church; I’ve been baptized. And yet I felt a deep, compelling conviction that if I wanted to really know God and experience all that He had for me, I had no other option but to leave that comfort zone.

## A Radical Promise

Abraham walked out of Ur of the Chaldeans not only challenged by God's personal command but also encouraged by God's radical promise to saturate him in blessings. Five times in Genesis 12:2 – 3 God distinctly promised to bless Abraham. Thousands of years later, we see how those promises were fulfilled:

“I will make you into a great nation.”

Today's Jews and Arabs descend from Abraham.

“I will bless you.”

At one hundred years of age, Abraham fathered Isaac, the longed-for desire of his heart.

“I will make your name great.”

No name in all of human history is greater than the name of Abraham, except the name of Jesus Christ.

“You will be a blessing.”

Abraham not only longed to receive God's blessing, he began to long to impart it to others . . . and he has for the past four thousand years.

“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.”

God would so fill Abraham's life, so identify with him, that the way others treated him God would consider to be treatment of Himself.

God blessed Abraham's friends and destroyed his enemies.

“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Through Abraham's descendants, God gave the world the sacrificial system and the ceremonies that instructed people on how to approach Him and reconcile with Him. He gave the law that taught people how to live a life that not only worked but would be pleasing to Him. He gave the historical record of His interaction with His people that revealed not only the glory of His character but also the fact that He was involved in the details of their lives. He gave the prophets, whose writings revealed He was in charge, working out a divine plan for His people that would climax in the coming of the Messiah. And ultimately, He gave the Messiah, His own Son, as the sacrificial Lamb who died to take away the sin of all people and open heaven to forgiven sinners. God's blessings were poured out on Abraham in order for him to be a channel of God's blessing to the entire world.

These were God's radical promises. They were promises to enlarge the scope of Abraham's life beyond anything he could have thought to ask for.

God desires to enlarge each of our lives, usually beyond what we can imagine, if we are willing to let Him. I could never have envisioned how God would enlarge my life. But as I look back over more than thirty years since that first BSF group, I realize the size and scope of my life have grown beyond imagining.

It's also important to understand what is meant by "God's blessing." God's blessing is not the same thing as wealth, health, prosperity, and a problem-free life. I know this personally too! My son has had cancer and has been through a devastating divorce; my daughters each have painful and chronic physical problems; my husband is struggling with the long-term effects of adult-onset diabetes, including increasing blindness, renal failure, neuropathy, heart disease, and much more. Yet in the midst of it all, I know the blessedness of the presence and peace and power and provision and pleasure of God in my life.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, I firmly believe God has blessed me! And the primary blessing in my life that makes all the others pale in comparison is that through it all I have indeed come to know God. I don't know Him as well as I would like to, or as well as I should, but I know Him now much better than I knew Him when I first began to observe Abraham. And I know Him better today than I did yesterday.

God's promise to me, like His promise to Abraham, was radical, yet it was fulfilled more abundantly than I could have ever imagined. Which leads me to wonder . . . what blessing are you missing because you refuse to leave behind the familiar "country, your people and your father's household"?

It's time to leave. Maybe not physically, but emotionally and spiritually and mentally and psychologically and culturally. It's time for you to get out of there!

## LEAVE BEHIND THE FENCE-SITTING

Abram left, as the LORD had told him (12:4).<sup>8</sup> The fascinating thing about Abraham's journey is that although Abraham left Ur bound for Canaan, he stopped in Haran. He seemed to sit on the fence of compromise, halfway to where God wanted him to be.

### **Starting Out to Pursue God**

The first hints about why this happened are given in the previous chapter of Genesis.

God commanded Abraham to leave Ur<sup>9</sup> and all that was familiar, including his father's household, but we see that he initially heeded only part of God's command. He left Ur with his father, nephew, and wife, and when they came to Haran, they settled there. We can only guess why this happened, but perhaps Abraham shared the news with his family, and his family decided it was a great idea. I can hear his father, Terah, reacting with something like this: "Abraham! That's amazing! I've been thinking myself lately . . . I could easily sell the family business and retire at this stage of my life. In fact, your brother Haran's death has been harder on me than I would have thought. I just can't seem to get over the grief. It would be really good to have a change of scenery. So . . . we'll all go with you!"

I don't know why Abraham's family accompanied him. I don't know if Abraham invited them and they accepted his invitation — or if they decided to come along and he failed to stop them. But I can see by what happened that Abraham was not clear and decisive about fully following God's call. I assume he must have struggled with whether to leave his family. Maybe he straddled the fence . . . offered a compromise in how he followed God's directive. He would leave his country, but he would bring his family with him.

If I could have warned Abraham, I might have said, "Abraham! God said to leave Ur *and* your people *and* your father's household! He did *not* say to leave your country but take your family with you! What on earth are you doing with Terah and Lot and all of their servants and belongings?"

I wonder if he might have answered, "Anne, it's easier this way. You just don't know how hard it is to leave my country and all that's familiar in Ur. Having my family around will take the sting out of the separation and some of the sacrifice out of the commitment. Plus, I just couldn't hurt my father's feelings by leaving him when he's still in mourning for my brother. It just isn't a good time to begin to pursue God on my own."

What has caused you to think this isn't the right time in your life for you to embrace the magnificent obsession? Does it have something to do with your family? Have you refused to pursue God until you can get your family to join you?

The problem for Abraham, besides his disobedience to God, was that when his family stopped before reaching the destination, so did he. And as a result, he postponed experiencing the God-filled life for as long as he delayed going all the way.

## Stopping Halfway through Compromise

If Ur represented all that was familiar and comfortable in Abraham's life, Haran represented the place of compromise. It was six hundred miles from Ur but still approximately two hundred miles from the outskirts of Canaan. It was the place where Abraham tried to do things God's way — and also his way. The place where he tried to force what he wanted and what God wanted into a synchronized plan. And it just didn't work. Compromising with God never does.

What is your place of compromise? Did you start out on a journey of authentic faith, then stop halfway because of the demands of your job? Or the birth of a baby? Or the opinions of those you love or want to impress? Are you living in Haran, halfway to real discipleship? Halfway to a vibrant, personal relationship with God? Halfway to the fullness of all He wants to give you?

As you read this, are you acutely aware that God did call you to follow Him in a life of genuine faith years ago? Is His call to you in the past tense?

There is no record that God called Abraham twice. And God may not call you again. What will it take to get you to resume the journey?

As Abraham observed his aged father grow more and more frail, as he stood by his father's bedside in Haran and watched him breathe his last breath, as he said his farewell and placed Terah in the tomb, was he overwhelmed with the brevity of life? Did he begin to question life's purpose? Did he wonder if there was something more to his own life than just being born, living from day to day, working to support himself and Sarah, then dying and being buried in an earthen grave where his body would return to the dust from which it had come? Was there more to life than maintaining a degree of comfort through compromise? What *was* the meaning to life, after all?

As I have observed my own father grow more and more frail, I have been forcibly struck by the biblical truth that "all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever."<sup>10</sup> And as gloriously significant as my mother's life was on this earth, like the grass, her beloved body withered away, died, and was buried. And someday my father's body will complete the same earthly journey. Despite all the accolades and honors they collected during their earthly lives, the only thing that matters at the moment of their death is what they did in obedience to God's

Word, according to His will, and carried out in His way. Everything else, without exception, will be no more.

I wonder if Abraham began to examine his own life and started wondering what in the world he was doing in Haran. Or maybe his compromise and fence-sitting had been nagging at his spirit for years. His father's death may have been a relief in a way, setting him free to embrace the God-filled life, to pursue the magnificent obsession.

The only thing that seems obvious is that Abraham resumed his journey to pursue God when his father, Terah, died. Which triggers these thoughts . . .

Who has to die to get you to resume your journey?

What will it take to wake you up to God's call in your life?

What will God use to push you off the fence of compromise?

Thousands of years after Abraham, Jesus would admonish the people crowding around Him with words that even now seem to echo throughout the "Harans" of our lives: "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."<sup>11</sup> Jesus made it clear: you and I must — it's not an option — we *must* give up everything, not *half* of everything, if we want to truly know and follow Him.

Abraham was seventy-five years old when he finally left Haran and resumed his pursuit of God. I can only imagine how hard it was for him to organize and close down his business, to pack up his wife and his belongings, to make a clean break with all that was familiar, to put one foot in front of the other, having no clear idea of where God was leading him.<sup>12</sup>

Do you think you're too old and it's just too hard to embrace the magnificent obsession? Are you even now wishing you had been given this challenge ten or twenty years ago? Are you feeling too tired, too weak, too slow, too dull, too forgetful to leave everything behind and begin? Or . . . do you think you are too young? Are you even now thinking that you will read this book, yet you won't really take it to heart until after you graduate from school, get settled in a good job, marry and establish a family?

Remember that God's timing is perfect.<sup>13</sup> He knows what time it is in your life, and He is issuing this challenge to you right now. If you want to truly know Him in a vibrant, personal relationship, then you must leave everything behind, including that which is familiar, the places of fence-sitting compromise, and your fear of living a life that will be very different from the people around you . . .

## LEAVE BEHIND THE FEAR

Once again, Abraham found himself leaving a place that had become familiar. Surely he must have felt some fear as he set off into the unknown. Once again, he left with an entourage, which still included at least one questionable person, his nephew Lot. But this time, Abraham went all the way. “He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there” (12:5).

He had left Ur not knowing where he was going; yet when he got to Canaan, he knew he had arrived. He had the deep assurance and conviction that he was exactly where God wanted him to be. His heart must have been filled with overwhelming joy and peace. After a lifetime of being everywhere else, he had finally arrived in the center of God’s will. He had begun the adventure of stepping out of his comfort zone in order to truly experience God in a personal, authentic, vibrant relationship.

What a thrilling adventure that is. I recently spoke with a young mother who felt God had called her to accept the incredible challenge to write. As she prayed about it, He confirmed again and again through His Word what she was to do. And so in fear and trembling, she stepped out of all that was familiar and began to put her thoughts on paper. As she related her experience to me, she described the thrill of “stepping into the flow of His will and knowing I am exactly where I am supposed to be, doing exactly what I am supposed to do.” The intensity of joy in her voice revealed that she too has embarked on the magnificent obsession as she experiences God outside of her comfort zone.

### **The Fear of Standing Out from the World around You**

Abraham arrived in Canaan and “traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem.” But the joy he felt in arriving there was surely dampened by the fact that “at that time the Canaanites were in the land” (12:6). The Canaanites! The biblical and historical record indicates they were among the vilest, most obscene and pornographic people ever to inhabit planet Earth.<sup>14</sup> They indulged in prostitution and human sacrifice as part of their religious worship! And now they surrounded Abraham. They were the majority of many while he

was the minority of one. He must have stood out in stark contrast to them in every facet of his life: his looks, his dress, his behavior, his relationships, his attitude, his values, his priorities, his speech . . . everything!

I have discovered that as I pursue knowing God, I too have found myself in the minority. I am surrounded by others who seem so different from me in their values and priorities. Canaanites today are those the Bible describes as worldly. Their pattern of behavior is based on what everyone else is doing, on what feels right to them, on what seems to work for their advantage. Their preoccupation is with personal pleasure. Their priority is “me first.” And their lives are so fast paced they have no time for God or for their neighbor. Yet many of them are very religious, like the Canaanites, worshiping a god of their own making.

It’s easy to be deceived by the fact that “Canaanites” are religious because the world assumes religion is the way to know God — when the truth is exactly the opposite! Think about just a few examples: The priests of Baal who worshiped the Canaanite gods were the ones who led Israel into idolatry and provoked the judgment of God.<sup>15</sup> The Jewish religious leaders turned Jesus Christ over to the Romans for crucifixion.<sup>16</sup> The religious people of the first century persecuted the early Christians, putting many of the disciples of Jesus to death.<sup>17</sup> In fact, during the two thousand years of church history since Christ, religion has been a prime source of division, hatred, war, injustice, and prejudice. It has been religious people, often within the organized church, who have been the most critical of and even hostile to my relationship with God. It was religious people from the board of deacons who voted to remove my nine-year Bible class from their church facility. It was religious people who voted with applause to remove my husband from a church leadership position.

It’s reasonable that you and I should stand out from those around us. Absolutely. Obviously. Is that what you’re afraid of? Are you afraid of being so different that you draw the stares of your coworkers? That you provoke whispers behind your back? That someone will raise an eyebrow, curl her lip, and leave you off the social register in your community?

Abraham was surrounded by Canaanites, but I can see no evidence that he felt any fear at all at this point in his journey. He probably felt empowered and encouraged because the Lord appeared to him and said, “To your offspring I will give this land” (12:7). I wonder if Abraham’s lack of fear was because he kept his

focus on God. This seems likely, because just the opposite happens at the end of this chapter when Abraham loses his focus. He was so filled with fear when surrounded by the Egyptians that he instructed Sarah to lie on his behalf.

The best way for you and me to overcome our fear of those people so unlike us who surround us in our everyday lives is to keep our focus on the Lord and cultivate an awareness of His presence in our lives. We need to learn to be more aware of *Him* than of *them*. And the best way to cultivate an awareness of His presence in our lives is to read our Bibles every day, listening for His voice to speak to us.<sup>18</sup>

Not too long ago, I found myself sitting in a select group who were very religious, very self-assured, very articulate — and very unsettling to me. As we began our discussion, the sun came through the window, and I could feel it warming my face, almost blinding my eyes. When the conversation began to deteriorate into personal attack, I heard the still, small voice of God speaking to my heart: *Anne, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”*<sup>19</sup> I knew God was affirming that I was in the light . . . literally and figuratively. I was acutely aware that He was with me in the midst of the “Canaanites,” and my fears melted.

### **The Fear of Speaking Out to the World around You**

Right in the midst of the Canaanites, God spoke to Abraham, saying, “To your offspring I will give this land.” Abraham responded with the equivalent of a gospel presentation to the world around him: “He built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him” (12:7).

I can imagine the Canaanites rather curiously and cynically gathering around Abraham, laughing, mocking, questioning him as he gathered the stones for the altar, piled the wood on the top, and sacrificed an animal:

“What did you say your name was? Abram? What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m building an altar to the Lord.”

“What Lord is that? Here in Canaan, we have lots of lords and many gods. Which one is yours?”

“My God is the one true living God. The Creator of the universe and all that is in it.”

“That sounds pretty narrow-minded to us. So what’s with the altar?”

“God has said the only way we can be reconciled with Him, the only way we can enter into His presence, is through the sacrificial blood of a lamb. I’m worshiping God as He requires.”

“Didn’t I tell you he was narrow-minded? I’ve never heard of anything more intolerant or exclusive — not to mention weird. We need to keep our eye on this stranger in our midst.”

When have you presented the gospel to the people around you? Who has seen your “altar”? When have you told others that you have been reconciled to God through the blood of His Lamb, and that they can be too? Are you afraid, in our politically correct, increasingly pluralistic, multicultural society to exalt Jesus as . . .

the unique Son of God,  
 the sinner’s Savior,  
 the captive’s Ransom,  
 the Breath of Life,  
 the Centerpiece of all cultures,  
 the One who stands in the solitude of Himself, by His own authoritative declaration, as “the way and the truth and the life”?

Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>20</sup> So don’t be afraid. Build your altar!

When Abraham built his altar “there to the LORD,” right in front of the Canaanites, what impact did it have on them? Was anyone converted? Did anyone turn from darkness to embrace the light of truth? No, not that we know. So what difference did it make?

It may not have affected the Canaanites at all, but I think it made a difference in Abraham’s life. It must have strengthened his faith. It must have been very freeing for him to live his life openly, unafraid of what others would say. It must have sharpened his focus as he lived out the genuineness of his relationship with God regardless of where he was or who was watching. Instead of being a spiritual chameleon who changed behavior/attitudes/values according to the whimsical dictates of those around him, Abraham lived a life of consistent worship.