

INTRODUCTION

The men and women of the Bible were no different than the men and women of today. Customs were different. The culture was different. They did not have modern transportation, communication, or military machinery. But inside they were people like us. They had the same appetites, the same problems and temptations, the same bodies, the same emotions, and the same dreams. Their relationship with God was no better, and no worse, than ours.

In this little book you will meet ten of these people. Each of them struggled with the same problems you struggle with. Abraham struggled with obeying God. Joshua had tough decisions to make as he went against the crowd. David had to learn from his mistakes. And John Mark, three times a failure, finally made it as a winner.

I am in debt to each of these people. Each has taught me something. Not long ago I was struggling with a major decision in my life. I had received an offer to write a book with a man who had recently gone through a major scandal. The entire world was following his downfall – step-by-step – in the national media. A group of promoters had put together what they called a "publishing package." It consisted of a book about the man and his scandal, a television special, and a nationwide speaking tour. They wanted me to write the book as well as oversee the writing of the television script. The "advance" for the entire package was in excess of \$3 million. My share would amount to 40 percent of the gross.

It was the chance of a lifetime. In less than four months of hard work I could make more than most Americans make in several lifetimes. With this much money I could do everything I had always wanted to do – not just for myself and my family, but for the Kingdom of God.

Still, I had grave reservations as to whether I should accept the offer or not. I spent a lot of time praying, but overshadowing everything was the draw of the money. Much was at stake. Our church was going through a crisis and I needed to be home, giving it my full attention. My reputation as a writer – and as a man of God – was on the line. Working as this man's writer would be the same as endorsing him and his "ministry." I made all kinds of bargains with God, finally telling Him I would keep only 10 percent of the money; ninety percent of it would go to my church and mission projects.

It was the opportunity of a lifetime, yet I knew I could not accept unless God told me to do so. But despite my prayers, I heard nothing. There was no clear, definitive answer, no "yes" or "no" to tell the agents. And the deadline was upon me.

During this decision-making crisis I spent five days in Israel, researching this book and the accompanying video teaching series I was preparing. One afternoon I stood on a small hill near the ancient city of Jericho. Abraham had once stood where I stood. His worthless nephew, Lot, had just thrown down a gauntlet, telling Abraham one of them had to leave the area. (The story is told in detail in Genesis 13.) Abraham did not argue, did not pull rank, did not demand the best even though he rightly deserved the best. Rather, he allowed Lot to take the green pastures of the Jordan, leaving only the desert hills for Abraham to feed his flocks. I stood there in the broiling sun, looking over the lush, green Jordan Valley, then the barren hills of the Negev Desert, and finally down toward the Dead Sea where Lot had ended up, losing everything but his life when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. I remembered how God had blessed Abraham because of his willingness to lay down his

right to be right. Then I asked myself a significant question. "How many Bible heroes ever made decisions based on money?"

I was shocked as I ran through the list. The only Bible characters who made decisions based on money were people like Lot (Genesis 13), Esau (Genesis 25:24-34), Balaam (Numbers 22-24), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), and Judas – who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. I thought of the writing decision I needed to make before I returned home. Would I even consider it if money was removed from the picture? I realized that money, and money alone, was the reason I was willing to get involved. In fact, once money was removed from the picture it was no longer a temptation. I returned home a free man, having decided it was better to have the blessing of God than to be a millionaire.

I am grateful to Abraham for having made a similar decision which gave me insight into God's way for my life – and the courage to do things God's way.

On another occasion, feeling I had made a mess of my life, I followed the story of John Mark through the pages of the New Testament. Here I found a young man who always started out strong, but when it really counted, he let people down. I was like that. Time and time again I had disappointed people who had great expectations. I felt the shame of failure. Then I looked at John Mark. Because Mark's heart was right, God honored him. John Mark's story gave me courage to keep trying.

When our church was going through a tough struggle, and some folks were leaving, I learned a lesson from Gideon. Standing at the "springs of Gideon" I was reminded of how God weeded Gideon's army down from its original size of 33,000 to only 300 men. But that's all it took to defeat the dreaded Midianite foe. Sheer numbers, I learned from Gideon, mean nothing. God, like the U.S. Marine Corps, is simply looking for a few good men.

I learned how God blesses those who yield to His will when I studied the life of a young peasant girl from Nazareth named Mary. When the angel Gabriel appeared to tell her the most terrifying and the most wonderful thing in history was about to happen to her, she, although frightened beyond comprehension, bowed her head and said, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).

That was to be my standard of obedience as well. Because of what I had learned from these men and women I decided to share their lives with others. In the fall of 1987 I visited Israel with a video camera crew. I went to ten sites where these people lived. I went far north, near the border of Lebanon, where – in a place surrounded by heathen temples – Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say I am?"

"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Peter answered.

Looking around at the ruins of the heathen temples, I realized how tough it was to hear God.

I stood above the plain of Armageddon where Deborah risked her life to save her nation.

I walked through the deep wadi, or canyon, where Elijah lived when he was fed by the ravens. A rushing wall of water had just roared through that dried riverbed the night before, picking up speed as it cascaded downhill all the way to the Dead Sea. In the bottom of the canyon – unearthed by the water the night before – I discovered an unexploded hand grenade. It was a grim reminder of the wars still being fought over that tiny bit of land.

I rested in the shade of a huge tree beside the Jordan River where John the Baptist

baptized Jesus.

And one evening I sat beside a sparkling spring in the tiny village of Ein Karem just south of Jerusalem and realized it was probably there, where the water from the spring flowed down into an ancient vineyard, that the Holy Spirit impregnated that frightened, but totally submitted, young virgin named Mary.

Standing on the sites where these men and women had their great experiences, I knew I needed to share what I had learned – and was learning – with my readers.

As you study the lives of these ordinary people you will discover how they did extraordinary things because they submitted to God. As Longfellow said,

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.
Psalm of Life

The same Holy Spirit who inspired and empowered these men and women will give you inspiration and power as well. The purpose of this little book is to stimulate you, excite you, change you by bringing you to the place where you will see that the principles learned by these Bible people apply to our lives as well. While these men and women lived yesterday – the lessons they learned are for us today.

Are you like Mary, frightened but submitted? Maybe you're struggling with decisions like Abraham. Perhaps, like David, you're having to learn from your mistakes. Or maybe, like Deborah, you're having to learn to trust people to help you out in tough times.

As you read you'll meet yourself in every one of these people. And hopefully, the person you see will then call out to God for change and healing.

If you are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, studying the lives of these people will enable you to see yourself in a new way. They will introduce you to the One who has the power to change you. And He will be so attractive you'll rush to invite Him into your life in a new way.

Here are five basic lessons I learned as I studied the lives of these men and women:

1. God loves ordinary people.
2. All God is looking for is someone willing to obey.
3. God uses whom He chooses.
4. There are no big and no little people in God's eyes.
5. Bible people were just like me.

When Joshua and Caleb came back after spying out the Promised Land, they found themselves in the minority. All the other spies said, "We can't do it." When they learned Joshua and Caleb wanted to "go in and possess the land," they threatened to kill them. It was a tough time. For Joshua and Caleb it meant going against the crowd. But their willingness to risk all by standing up for what was right allowed God to bless them in ways they never dreamed.

When Peter, dozing on a rooftop in Joppa, saw a vision of a sheet full of non-kosher food being lowered from Heaven, and He heard God's voice say, "Take and eat," he knew

God was preparing him for something much bigger than his Jewish mind had ever conceived. But he was ready for whatever God had in mind.

That is my prayer for you – that as you study the lives of these people you will be willing to go against the crowd and be ready for whatever God has in mind.

I urge you, therefore, to hear God – and do what He tells you to do, regardless of how illogical it may seem at the time. Only those who seek help find it. Only those who are open to truth receive it. Be warned, though, as Emerson once wrote, "A mind stretched by a new idea can never revert to its original proportions."

Jamie Buckingham
Palm Bay, Florida