

Hey, we're continuing a series about the amazing life of Abraham, a man whose lifelong narrative is a top candidate as the pinnacle reference in the Old Testament for a full life in God—well, he sure gets my vote! Now we're focusing on a key mindset for the fullest life of a faithful follower of God *today*. But Abraham was actually on both sides of that mindset at key decision-making junctures in his life—with consequences that followed. So Abraham's stories provide important, very practical principles, lessons, and contrasts! Let's take a look.

Whether for a person of faith from the Old Testament like Abraham or a believer in Christ today, *the vertical must anchor the horizontal*. So just what does that mean? It means that the God-follower's first, primary, and ongoing task is to be solidly abiding in the Most High God. You know, that moniker...“Most High God”...was first introduced in the Old Testament, and I really like that particular name for God. It elevates Him to the highest level...yes, God is *so* vertically above us in heaven and in so many *other* countless ways. Yet, He sent His Son, who *stooped down* to bodily join us here on earth! Wow.

But long before Jesus stooped to join us—when David was fleeing from King Saul—here's what David wrote: “I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.” Psalm 57:2 (ESV). And even before *that*, here's Exodus 33:9. “When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses.” Imagine that: the Most High God speaks with a mere man! This reality of “vertical connections” with God is remarkable—yes, even before the Cross, God was clearly intimately connected to key figures like David and Moses!

And how about Enoch who “walked with God?” Then Enoch didn't even die—he was taken up to heaven! Then there was God directing Noah to build the ark...indeed, Noah's clear obedience in the face of ridicule for years is simply stunning! Then how about the prophets, like the towering lives of Isaiah and Jeremiah?

You see, what's so very important about the relentless pursuit, priority, and depth of a vertical relationship with God is that it works to anchor and direct all of that person's horizontal relationships with others! So how about a couple folks we've listed? For example, we only have to read the psalms of David to see the deep intimacy with God that David sought after and expressed so eloquently. And that translated to his selection as King of Israel, his successful confrontation of Goliath, his boldness and victory many times.

How about more Moses? When the Lord saw that Moses turned aside to see the burning bush, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” That's found in Exodus 3:4. Then how about Moses' parting of the Red Sea? Also, how about his receiving the Ten Commandments? Yes, his vertical connections with God dramatically impacted his horizontal relationships with the Israelites!

And, yeah, how about Isaiah and Jeremiah, whose very roles were to speak God's direct warnings and purposes horizontally to the disobedient nations and people of Israel and Judah.

Of course, all that brings us back to thinking about Abraham and his amazing vertical relationship to God in key incidents over many years. Yes, how about Abraham's obedient departure from everything familiar, leaving his homeland far behind under direct instruction from the Most High God. Yes, Abraham's long-standing horizontal family relationships were deeply disrupted. And, yes, how about Abraham's strong and fearless taking on several regional kings in war and defeating them, then connecting with Melchizedek, the King of Salem and the priest of “God Most High”? Here, listen carefully to Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham: “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” Yeah, Abraham's vertical relationship with the Most High God literally drove Abraham's success against his enemies.

And who can possibly forget Abraham's unhesitating obedience to God's direction to take the trip to sacrifice his son Isaac? Talk about Abraham's vertical relationship with God impacting his horizontal relationship with Isaac! And think on this for a moment: just imagine how Abraham's wife Sarah would have responded if God had not substituted a ram for sacrifice in place of Isaac at the very last minute!

Here's the deal. Abraham's strong faith posture with God directed his relationship in each of these events. But here's the flip side of all that. A couple of times in the Bible record, Abraham's unanchored actions in horizontal relationships caused real problems. In other words, *he got the horizontal ahead of the vertical.*

Take the case of Lot, Abraham's nephew. While God told Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham was to leave *all* of his family behind. But Abraham *did* bring his nephew Lot along, and that horizontal action contrary to God's instructions caused Abraham all kinds of troubles. Hey, putting the horizontal ahead of the vertical can cause real difficulties!

Then take the case of the son God promised to Abraham and Sarah. Years passed with no son conceived, and so Abraham preempted God's still-standing promise of a son by following Sarah's wish for him to father a son through the servant girl Hagar. Of course, the result was Ishmael, and the rift between the two branches of Abraham's family have never been healed, even these thousands of years later.

So, as powerful as Abraham's vertical connection to God was, these unanchored actions taken by Abraham in horizontal relationships over and against God's vertical counsel caused no end of troubles. Those examples are exactly why *the vertical must anchor the horizontal...not vice versa!* That's because the exact protocol of "horizontal-first" prioritization has hindered many key figures throughout the Old Testament who then faltered or failed—you know, like David and his Bathsheba incident...or Samson and Delilah.

'Course, this is also very much relevant to New Covenant believers like us today. That is, whenever we get the people-horizontal "cart" ahead of the God-vertical "horse," we miss God's best for what follows. That's why serious Christians take wedding vows at the altar that put God first. That's why astute Christians ask for God's blessing on their endeavors. That's why strong believers pray for God's direction and correction to their plans. And that's why the model for intimate appeals to God in the New Testament have such phrasing as "God willing" and "Your will be done"—the latter even by the Lord Jesus Himself!

And now, in this context, a very familiar Gospel story is amazingly intriguing and instructive. When the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus about the law, He adroitly gave believers a firm, timeless prioritization. Here's the story from Matthew's Gospel. "And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:35-39 ESV)

Yes, not only are these profound, grace-based instructions for the whole of a life lived for God, the very order of these two commandments is really important! Let me rephrase that point here: *the explicit order of these two commandments is really important!* That's because *if* we love God with all our heart and all our soul and with all our mind, *then* we are working to sustain a vertical relationship with God that's really our only true hope of truly, comprehensively fulfilling the second commandment to love our neighbors.

Yes, the vertical anchors the horizontal! No matter how noble it may appear, trying to love our neighbors without the anchor of loving God is a recipe for failure. True for Abraham. True for you and me. *Yes, the vertical anchors the horizontal.*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Every person except Jesus has had the experience of getting horizontal-people actions ahead of God-vertical anchoring. Sometimes—like Abraham in the cases of Lot and Sarah—this can happen by simple acquiescence to those in closest proximity and relationship to us, like our spouse or close family members. Discuss how you handle the temptation to give in to others close to you in order to “keep the peace.”
2. Seasoned, astute Christians have observed churches that have placed the horizontal-people actions ahead of God-vertical anchoring, sometimes in profound ways. How does your church and its leaders work to prevent this? And, in those cases where it’s already happened, how does your church and its leaders work to thwart that? Discuss.
3. Rank yourself on a scale from “1” to “10” (“10” being great) as to your God-vertical anchoring of all your horizontal-people interactions. If a high score, list the top three tactics you use to do so well. If a low score, list the top three tactics you likely should work on.