

Just who is Thomas Carlyle? It's likely that you've never heard the name, or if you have, it's probably pretty fuzzy why Carlyle's name might sound familiar. Well, that's because he made his mark way back when...a couple centuries ago...by articulating and successfully labelling what's called the "Great Man Theory."

Here's the thing. Depending on who's doing the talking, the *Great Man Theory* is about History with a capital "H," where one individual actually played a defining or dominant role in a large geographic sense or cause, like Alexander the Great or Winston Churchill or Harriet Tubman. But others say the Great Man Theory is more directly about Leadership with a capital "L." As you might expect, some folks have turned this idea into a sort of late-night parlor game—throwing out a name and seeing what everyone thinks.

There are several subset issues in all three words in the "Great-Man-Theory." First, the middle word of the Great Man Theory is clearly wrong from the outset—it would better suffice to honor and learn from women as well! But for the other two words—Great Theory—more speculative, open questions arise. Are leaders born or made? Can families forge greatness in their kids or can individuals even *sculpt themselves* into greatness? Then, do particular societies or specific crucibles like wars produce great leaders? But what *is* clear is that there are indeed great leaders...and there are also average leaders. After all, are *you yourself* trying to identify *just average people* as your role models? Of course not—you have very high criteria driving you, ideas and expectations burrowed in the back of your mind!

In this podcast series about Abraham and what we can glean from the Biblical accounts of his life, we can gain some very meaningful traction by poking around on some of the thoughts inherently stimulated by the Great Human Theory...and that, of course, from a Biblical perspective! After all, serious followers of Christ don't study Abraham because he was average...or unimportant...or evil...or unknown. So, was Abraham a "great man"—whether by God's lights...or by Carlyle's framing...or by your friends casually talking about Abraham? Here's the foundational question for us: *is God's standard just plain different?*

'Course, we have to start by saying that the only truly Great Human in the Biblical sense was the Sinless One, Jesus Christ...fulfilling the strategic, eternal vision of the Trinity of the Lamb being slain from the foundation of the world." (Revelation 13:8) Now, that's definitively the Great Human—Jesus Christ!

Yes, the entirety of the New Testament is about God coming as a man on our behalf—and delivering at the Cross exactly what we all need for our salvation and eternal fellowship with God! Sorry, Alexander the Great, you fall far short of that! Sorry, Winston Churchill, and, yes, sorry to every leader, every Caesar who has ever lived or will ever live, all the way to the coming Antichrist. Everyone will move aside, bow down, and confess that Jesus is Lord. The Only Great Human is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

But, still, now we get to Abraham, zeroing in on a Biblical standard that actually inherently addresses the idea of the Great Human Theory. You see, there's really only one key place in the Bible that calls out a notable number of people by name and by example as pleasing to God, and that passage reveals the core standard that God lifts up. And the high-impact reality that comes to the fore is this: unsurprisingly, God's standard for His Kingdom is quite different than that of the kingdoms of this world. The consummate Bible verses where God reveals this is Hebrews 11, a Bible passage that's etched in the hearts of so many. That's because Hebrews 11 is all about *faith*...in fact, it's often called the "hall of faith" by many Christians.

So, let's start with Hebrews 11:1-2: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by [faith] the people of old received their commendation." Let's repeat that last sentence: "For by [faith] the people of old received their commendation." Wow, this letter *that's written as instruction to the early church's Hebrews* calls out "the people of old"—those are key people who were written about in the Old Testament. And it's *by their faith* that these people receive God's commendation!

Hey, imagine walking down a heavenly corridor and seeing their pictures on the wall! Abel. Enoch. Noah. Isaac. Jacob. Joseph. And also there was “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah...David and Samuel and the prophets.” And Moses was specifically called out in the midst of all these names, this for his faith as demonstrated by his actions. When you consider Moses, do you think of *his faith or the law*? Well, “faith” is why God commended Moses, not law, with His calling out instances of actions stemming from his faith.

But the heart of the Hebrews 11 passages contains a sketch of Abraham, in verses 8 through 19. Abraham was commended for his faith multiple times in this passage...not to mention elsewhere in the Bible! Not only that, there you go, right in the midst of extolling the faith of Abraham was...the commending of his wife *Sarah* for *her* faith. So, we have a full Biblical perspective...yes, a “Great Woman theory,” too! And, startling to many a hardened legalist...Rahab the prostitute is called out positively for *her* faith!

But let’s not stop there. In verses 29-30, the *people of God* are called out for their faith in crossing the Red Sea...as well as encircling the walls of Jericho. Yeah, *that’s ordinary yet faithful people* being called out for their actions in faith to God! Think of it: in God’s economy, “ordinary” people of God serving Him and His purposes by faith are recipients of His commendation! Wow. Savor that! You don’t have to be an Abraham to be called out for your faith-driven actions, you can be an “ordinary” Joe. Or Sally. Or Chang. Or Maria. Remember, Hebrews 11 was written to New Testament believers as a guide to what we might call “*God’s Path to Great Personhood.*” Yes, *ordinary believers made extraordinary by fully exercising their gift of faith!*

But, for that to happen, it does require our *intentional* focus and direction—His rightly-identified Kingdom purposes, like going forth and making disciples! After all, what the kingdoms of this world might identify as examples of the “Great Human Theory” often have little to nothing to do with God and His Kingdom. How about an example with that very contrast? Hebrews 11:29 says, “By faith the [Israelites] crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.”

Still, why is God’s toolkit so powerful in every setting, in every event? Because our greatness is defined by our faith-girded actions honoring God! When we operate in faith, we are inherently acknowledging we want to “partner” with God, that we are relying on God for His power in service to His eternal purposes. Yeah, that’s the very definition of great! Contrast that with Moses’s Pharaoh, a very powerful leader, but one who was unanchored to the one True God and was serving his own fleshly purposes. As for all those in the Egyptian army, riding to realize Pharaoh’s presumably noble goals...every person drowned.

Now here’s an astonishing dimension of Hebrews 11, found in 11:13-16. “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

And like these people of old, we’re privileged to be anchored sojourners in our faith in God. Hear this: in order to be fulfilling the greatness He intends for us in our everyday lives, in our workplaces—yes, in order to best fulfill the purposes of God’s Kingdom—each of us is appointed to interact *by faith, even within and serving the kingdoms of this world*. In so doing, we can give powerful witness of God’s leading in our lives!

So. Ephesian 2:8 tells us each and every believer has been given the gift of faith by God. All that’s needed is for us to exercise that faith. Abraham displayed a lifetime of faith by his actions. Every man and woman in Christ—including you and me—can do the same! So, cast any demoralizing, elitest theory like Carlyle’s aside and simply be a full follower of Christ, acting by faith in every circumstance of life! *Yeah, go be great!*

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. When you first thought of a “great man” right at the beginning of this podcast, did you think of a Ceasar Augustus, or a George Washington, or a Harriet Tubman? Or did you perhaps think of a Billy Graham, an Amy Carmichael, or a neighbor down the street who’s just consistently loving people into the Kingdom? Discuss.
2. How easy is it for current-era Christians to believe that greatness only truly comes through widely-recognized or highly-esteemed vocational positions...or vast digital outreaches...or great wealth? But isn’t the true audience for a believer’s greatness really first and foremost God...and then *might* expand from there? Discuss.
3. In your heart of hearts, do you believe your consistent exercise of your God-given faith will in and of itself bring you to the greatness that God desires for you? Discuss.