

THE ABRAHAM STORY

Genesis Chapters 12-25

[You are encouraged to read the biblical text before reading this commentary.]

In Part One of Genesis (chs 1-11), we dealt with prehistoric people and events. In Genesis 12 to 50, we move considerably closer to what we would call “history” in the modern sense. We encounter people and events which can be placed in a particular time and location in general history.

We might say that beginning in Genesis 12, God shifts gears. He comes up with a new plan to save humanity. He chooses one family who will become a nation and witness his revelation to all nations. Genesis 12 to 50 is a family history. It gathers together the treasured memories of the founding fathers and mothers of God’s new chosen people, Israel. “It is history written from a religious standpoint – each turning point of the story is signaled by a divine intervention and the hand of Providence is seen in each event” (Jerusalem Bible, p.10).

CHAPTER 12: God calls Abram

“The Lord said to Abram: ‘Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.’ Abram went as the Lord directed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.” (Gn 12:1-4)

God’s call comes from out of the blue to a man steeped in paganism who lives in a place called Ur of the Chaldeans (near the Persian Gulf). Abraham and Sarah are called Abram and Sarai until chapter 17.

God invites Abram to leave his father’s home and all that is familiar and secure to him, and to go to some unknown land that God will show him. God makes a threefold promise to Abram.

- He will receive a *land*. (For the people of Abram’s time, to have one’s own land is necessary for identity. To be a people, they have to have a place.)
- Abram’s people will become a great *nation*, which implies prosperity and blessing. This promise was fulfilled during the reign of Solomon.

- This newly chosen people will become a *blessing* to *all* the communities of the earth, a promise fulfilled with the coming of Jesus, the One who died for *all* people and sought to bring all people into the mantle of God’s love.

Abram’s response of faith. When God calls Abram, he could have said: “Who are you? Which god are you? You ask me, a 75-year old man, to leave behind all that is familiar to me and go with you to some strange land. Sorry, I’m not up to the challenge.” Instead, Genesis 12:4 tells us: “*Abram went as God directed him.*” With that response and several more faith responses, Abram became the model believer for both Jews and Christians—the model of *obedient faith* (see Heb 11:8-12).

Pause: Can you recall a time when you were uprooted in your life? How was that experience for you? Did it bring any blessings?

Abram’s faith in God is tested (12:10-20). Following Abram’s original decision to place his trust in God, we will encounter several events in which Abram’s faith is tested. This incident, when Abram and his wife go to Egypt in search of food, is one of those events.

As he is about to enter Egypt, Abram realizes that Sarai’s beauty may come to the attention of the Pharaoh who may kill him in order to take Sarai into his royal harem. Abram asks Sarai to pretend that she is his sister so that his life will not be in danger. (This is *not* an outright lie since according to Genesis 20:12, Sarai is Abram’s half sister as they share the same father.) As Abram predicted, the Pharaoh is attracted to Sarai and takes her into his court, and assuming Abram is her brother, he bestows gifts on him.

Some commentators let Abram off the hook saying he had to do what he had to do to save his life. Others say the story shows the astuteness of Abram. He even fools the Pharaoh—or somewhat. In those days, when a man’s life was regarded more valuable than a woman’s, a lie was considered lawful under certain circumstances.

In his commentary on Genesis 12 to 50, John Gibson is not nearly as kind to Abram. He writes: “*The lesson that is being taught Abram—and all God’s people after him—is that it was not up to him—or to*

them—to plan victories for God’s cause. Their task was to trust God, not to do God’s job for him. Abram was succumbing to fear, and worse, resorting to expediency—he was, if you like, trying to guarantee his own salvation—when he should have been leaving the outcome to God” (p.35).

CHAPTER 13: Abram and Lot part ways

“Abram said to Lot: ‘Let there be no strife between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are kinsmen.’” (13:8)

In the last story (Gn 12:10-20), Abram fears for his life, loses trust in God, and takes matters into his own hands with near-disastrous results. In this scene, Abram is presented as a model of generosity. “The fact that both stories remain in the tradition indicates that the community understood the challenges that exist for those who rely upon God” (Barbara Leonhard, OSF).

In this episode, the issue is land. To end the escalating tension between Abram’s and Lot’s herdsmen, Abram suggests that they part ways. Abram, though older, allows his nephew Lot to choose which area he prefers. He trusts that he will receive the land that God wants him to have. Lot looks around and favors the area that looks like “the Lord’s own garden.” What Lot does not realize is that he is entering an area where immorality flourishes. God is very happy with the way Abram deals with the problem and renews his promise of blessing to him.

Pause: When it comes to dealing with relational conflicts, what have you found to be most helpful?

CHAPTER 14: Abram meets Melchizedek

This chapter is divided into three segments: a report on an international war (14:1-10); intervention of Abram for Lot’s sake (14:12-16); and the meeting between Melchizedek and Abram (14:17-24). The second segment extols Abram’s bravery. It shows that his display of cowardice in Egypt does not paint a complete picture of him.

Abram and Melchizedek meet (14:17-24). In verse 18, Melchizedek suddenly appears in the narrative. As a priest, he offers a sacrifice of bread and wine to thank God for the military victories achieved by Abram. Out of respect for this local king and priest, Abram in turn offers him a tenth of all that he has (the first Bible reference to tithing).

Later on, in both the Jewish and Christian tradition, Melchizedek’s brief appearance in Genesis 14 receives a lot of attention. Psalm 110:4 presents him as a type or figure of the Messiah who is both priest and king. Hebrew 7 compares Melchizedek’s priesthood to Christ’s priesthood. The early Church Fathers saw the eucharist foreshadowed in Melchizedek’s offering of bread and wine.

In Genesis 14:21-24, Abram refuses to take gifts from the King of Sodom (a wicked city) except for what we would call his war expenses. Abram does not want the king to brag that he is the one who has made Abram rich. As far as Abram is concerned, God and God alone is the source of his wealth and blessing.

CHAPTER 15: Abram struggles to keep faith in God’s promise

“Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.” (15:6)

In this chapter, Abram expresses anxiety about God’s promise to give him an heir and a land: “O Lord God, what good will your gifts be if I keep on being childless...” (Gn 15:2). Regarding the promise of land, Abram asks: “How am I to know that I shall possess it?” God reassures Abram that he will not only have a child, but that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the sky (Gn 15:5).

God’s response regarding the land comes in the form of a *covenant ritual*. Animals are split in two and both parties entering a covenant (in this case, God and Abram) walk between the separated pieces of the animals. If one party fails to keep the terms of the covenant, they are doomed to share a fate like that of the split animals. This ritual is intended to ‘seal the deal’ or covenant between God and Abram.

In verse 12, as the sun sets, Abram falls into a trance or deep sleep in which he receives a revelation from God. During this experience, Abram is told that his descendants will be enslaved (in Egypt) and liberated from there, and that he will be “buried at a contented old age” (15:15). Then Abram witnesses a “smoking brazier and a flaming torch” (sign of God’s presence) passing between the pieces of the separated animals, and he hears God promising once again that he would give land to his descendants (15:18). God initiates the covenant and agrees to be bound by it. So in this chapter, God renews his covenant with Abram, promising him a son and many descendants, and that they will have a land of their own.

Pause: In the above story, Abram struggles to keep faith in God. Does this ever happen to you? If so, what helps you to cope with such a crisis?

CHAPTER 16: Abram has another lapse in faith; Ishmael is born

“Sarai said to Abram: ‘The Lord has kept me from bearing children. Have intercourse then with my maid; perhaps I shall have sons through her.’” (v.2)

Chapter 16 achieves four things:

- Abram and Sarai struggle to keep their trust in God’s promise about their future.
- God shows concern and blessing for people outside of Israel.
- God appears to a woman (one of the few times shown in the Bible).
- The origin of Israel’s later troublesome relationship with its southern neighbors, the Ishmaelites, is explained.

It has been ten years since God promised Abram that he will be the father of a great nation, yet he and Sarai are still childless. While God is dallying, Sarai comes up with her own plan to have an heir. She suggests that Abram take Sarai’s slave woman, Hagar, as his proxy wife and have a child with her. Abram goes along with the suggestion. This is common practice back then. A child born in this way would legally belong to the couple and be considered a legitimate heir unless the childless wife subsequently bears a male child.

While Sarai’s plan seems like a good way to resolve a big problem, it leads to serious marital issues in the home. Hagar starts to look at her mistress with disdain (16:4). Then Sarai lashes out at Abram and makes him the villain (16:5). Abram is seemingly weak in character as he allows Sarai to abuse Hagar. The result: Hagar flees into the desert. The loss of trust in God leads to a big mess.

Verses 7-14 describe Hagar’s encounter with the Lord’s messenger, which clearly shows God’s concern and blessing for the outsider. In the encounter, the angel instructs Hagar to return to her mistress and promises that she will be blessed and will become the mother of a nation. She will bear a son called *Ishmael* (“God has heard”) who will grow up to be a “wild ass of a man” (16:12). His people living out in the desert will be known for their wild, free spirit and warlike

nature. The Israelites will remember their close relationship with their neighbors for they are also an offspring of their father Abraham.

One lesson from this narrative: “God keeps promises according to God’s own timeline. He will not be pushed, forced, or in any way manipulated” (Eugene Hensell O.S.B.).

Pause: When it comes to life’s challenges, how does placing your trust in God and working the problem yourself play out in your life?

CHAPTER 17: Circumcision becomes the outward sign of Israel’s covenant with God

“God said to Abram: ‘My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a multitude of nations. I will render you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings shall stem from you.’” (vv 4-6)

“God also said to Abraham: ‘On your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. Circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the mark of the covenant between you and me.’” (vv 9-11)

At this stage in the narrative, Abram is 99 years old and has most likely lost all hope that God will fulfill his promise of giving him and Sarai a child. As far as they are concerned, Ishmael will be their heir. Suddenly, God appears and renews his commitment to make Abram the father of a host of nations (17:4). Then God changes Abram’s name to Abraham, a name that means “a host of a multitude of nations.” In the Bible, a change in name symbolizes a change in one’s relationship with God. Abraham’s new name is a sign of his covenant relationship with God.

Verses 9-14 tell of the introduction of circumcision into the life of Israel and its importance. Henceforth, all males, including slaves in the household, are to be circumcised.

Historical note: At the time the book of Genesis is taking shape (latter part of the sixth century BC), Israel has lost its land and temple. In exile, they also are in danger of losing their identity as a people. The people truly wonder if God has abandoned them, just as Abraham has questioned God’s promise to him.

In this historical context, the ancient ritual of circumcision (which the Babylonians didn't practice) becomes a *distinguishing sign* of one's identity, a sign of one's covenant with God. It means belonging to the Israelite people. To be uncircumcised is a mark of estrangement from God's chosen people (17:14). In the New Testament, circumcision is analogous to baptism.

Laughter (17:15-19). In verse 15, God changes Sarai's name to Sarah (both names mean "princess") and tells Abraham that Sarah will bear a son. Laughing, Abraham exclaims: "Can a child be born to a 90-year old lady?" In the next chapter, Sarah will also laugh at hearing that she will have a son. The memory of her laughter will be preserved in the name they will give their son, Isaac, which means "laughter."

In 17:20, God blesses Ishmael and promises that he too will be the father of a great nation. In 17:23-27, Abraham obeys God's commands and circumcises all the men in his household, including himself.

Pause: Can you think of any examples that might cause you to laugh?

CHAPTER 18: Heavenly visitors; Abraham intercedes for Sodom

"One of them said, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will then have a son.' Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, just behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years, and Sarah had stopped having her womanly periods. So Sarah laughed." (vv 10-11)

Genesis 18:1-15 gives us a beautiful story of hospitality during which heavenly visitors announce that the fulfillment of God's promise of an heir is less than one year away.

In this narrative, Abraham and Sarah show themselves to be the perfect host and hostess. The visitors are offered rest, water to bathe their feet, and a great meal. While the men are eating, Sarah eavesdrops on their conversation. She is amazed at hearing one of the visitors announce that she will give birth to a child in the coming year, causing her to laugh. But when Sarah senses that her inner thoughts can be heard, and realizes that their guests are no ordinary persons, she denies that she laughed. Here comes the central verse and question of this text: *"Is anything too marvelous for the Lord to do?"* The author of Genesis would want Israel in exile to remember this verse as they struggled to continue to believe that God was still with them.

God's justice and mercy (18:16-33). *"Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?"* (18:25) The narrative begins with God reflecting on whether to tell Abraham about his plan to destroy Sodom. God decides to reveal to Abraham his intentions so that he can teach his descendants about God's justice and mercy. Thus the destruction of Sodom takes on a special admonitory significance for future generations.

In the dialogue between God and Abraham, the latter challenges God's sense of justice. Will he slaughter the innocent with the wicked? How just is that? God patiently listens to Abraham's plea and shows that he is not only just but also merciful. He will spare the lives of Lot and his wife and two daughters. Abraham knows that God is just but he may have wondered if he is merciful. His conversation would have told him that God is both just and merciful—a lesson future generations would need to learn again and again.

Pause: Have you ever bargained with God about an issue, about what you would do if he answered your prayer in a particular way?

CHAPTER 19: Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is one of the best known stories in the Old Testament. The narrative opens with Lot offering hospitality to two strangers (19:1-3). Later in the evening, some of the townsmen arrive at Lot's door and demand that he send the two men out so that "they may have intimacies with them" (v.5). Then Lot does something that is nothing less than reprehensible to our modern sensibilities. Rather than hand over his two guests to the mob, he offers them his two virgin daughters. Scholars tell us that the ancient audience would not have been scandalized by Lot's behavior for the law of hospitality (protecting one's guests at all costs) took precedence over the sexual violation of even the women in one's own household. It also expresses the lowly stature of daughters in this ancient society. When the mob threaten to break into Lot's home, his heavenly guests intervene and strike the attackers blind.

The angels reveal that they are about to destroy the city because the outcry to the Lord against Sodom is so great (v.13). It is not explicitly stated what exactly is so wicked about the city. Some people believe that, based on the above account, Sodom's principal sin is sexual perversion. But according to other biblical texts, Sodom is guilty of injustice (Ez 16:49) and general immorality (Jer 23-11).

Verses 15-22 tell us about Lot's reluctance to leave the city, mirroring perhaps our reluctance to leave a sinful habit. Lot has to be literally dragged out of the city. Like his uncle Abraham, Lot bargains with the Lord to spare him from traveling to the mountains. Instead, he travels to a nearby town called Zoar and thus saves it from destruction. For disobeying the Lord's command, Lot's wife becomes a pillar of salt. The chapter ends with Abraham looking down upon a city destroyed by fire. God has saved Lot because he is mindful of Abraham (19:29).

Pause: What are the sins in our society today that cry out to God?

Incest; Origin of Moabites and Ammonites (19:30-38). "Our father is old and there is not a man on earth to unite with us as was the custom everywhere" (19:31). The purpose of these verses is to explain the origins of two of Israel's neighbors and enemies (Nm 25:1-5). Scholars believe the author included the story in order to disparage the ancestry of Israel's traditional enemies. In ancient times, the actions of Lot's two daughters may not have been seen as shameless as much as a true desire to perpetuate their race.

CHAPTER 20: Abraham endangers Sarah a second time

A similar story is told in Genesis 12:10-20. Abraham lies about the identity of Sarah because he thinks there will be "no fear of God in this place" (20:11). In reality, Abimelech fears God and it seems Abraham fears for his life more than he feared or trusted in God to protect him. In the end, Abimelech and Abraham reconcile and the latter leaves a much wealthier man.

CHAPTER 21: Isaac is born; Hagar and Ishmael are sent away

"The Lord took note of Sarah as he had said he would; he did for her as he had promised." (21:1)

In his commentary on Genesis, John Gibson introduces this story with these words:

"It is a story of the highest artistry. But this does not mean that it is an enjoyable story or even a nice one. It is in fact neither of these. It opens with laughter, but very quickly it moves on to tears and there is ends with seemingly only a little belated kindness on God's part to alleviate its overwhelming sadness" (p.99).

It is told that Abraham is 100 years old and Sarah 90 when the heir promised is born—to show that both were advanced in years when God fulfilled his promise to them. Abraham names their son Isaac and circumcises him. Sarah says that God had given her a cause to laugh (21:6). "*Sarah's laughter expresses a newness that shatters our human ability to explain everything in totally rational terms. In effect, Sarah's laughter is a form of prayer that celebrates a God of surprises*" (John Craghan).

Domestic dispute leads to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (21:14). The mood of the narrative suddenly changes from one of joy and laughter to one of tension caused by the domestic situation. When Sarah sees Isaac playing with his half-brother, an old jealousy wells up inside her. She fears that Isaac's future inheritance may be threatened by Ishmael's presence in the home. After all, Ishmael is their firstborn son and legally theirs. So she asks Abraham to "drive out the slave and her son" (21:10). Fear is often the root cause of much sin and nasty behavior. Abraham is "greatly distressed" by Sarah's demand and is ready to fight for Ishmael, a contrast to how he felt previously when he told Sarah in 16:6: "*Your maid is in your power, do whatever you want.*" But God intervenes and tells Abraham to "heed Sarah's demands...for it is through Isaac that descendants shall bear Abraham's name." To soften the blow, God promises Abraham that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation. Abraham places his trust in God and obeys. This incident is a good example of "the cruel demands that faith can place on us."

The next morning must have been a very painful one for Abraham as he sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert with a little bread and water (21:14). Hagar becomes depressed when she realizes that she will be unable to provide for her son. But God hears the cry of the child and assures Hagar of Ishmael's future. "*God was with the boy as he grew up*" (21:20).

What are we to make of Sarah's behavior in verse 10? Scripture scholar Edward Owens writes: "The modern reader must take care not to judge Sarah too harshly. The ancient Near East had slavery as an institution, and Sarah was appropriately protecting her "territory" and vested interests. She was, after all, Abraham's primary wife."

We may even wonder why God conceded to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from their home. In this episode, divine *election* takes center stage—God has chosen Isaac, not Ishmael. Yet Ishmael will become the father of a great nation (v.18).

Beersheba (21:22-34). This story is told to explain the origin of the word Beersheba, a well that lay at the point where the starkest part of the Negev Desert begins. This is the place where Abraham and Abimelech swore an oath. In Hebrew, “beer” means well and “sheva” is oath.

Pause: What strikes you most about the above narrative? What questions, thoughts or feelings does the episode evoke in you?

CHAPTER 22: Abraham is put to the ultimate test

“This story is one of the great masterpieces of narrative writing in the Bible. We are drawn from the very beginning of the story and held in suspense until an angel intervenes. We are left to imagine Abraham’s inner thoughts as he makes the fifty-mile trip to Mount Moriah. We feel the silence as father and son walk together, coming closer with each step to that moment of ultimate decision.” (Collegeville Study Bible p. 60)

The story is centered in Abraham’s great faith and obedience to God and not on the horror of God’s command. Will Abraham be able to place on the altar the child of promise, his whole future? The answer is ‘yes’—he is ready and willing. He who pleaded with God to spare the innocent in Sodom (18:17-32) does not plead here to spare his own son. Here, obedience to the divine command is uppermost.

Walter Brueggeman, in his book on *Genesis* (pp 185-194), says that this text is nestled between a God who *tests* (22:1) and a God who *provides* (22:8-13). In the beginning of the narrative, God puts Abraham to the ultimate test—to hand over to him the one on whom his whole future hinges. It means going back to barrenness and, at the same time, trusting somehow that God knows what he is doing and will provide—even if it means raising Isaac from the dead.

A key question this text raises is: Does God really test us in this way? In the biblical books ahead, we will see that testing is rather common in Israel’s history. God tests Israel to see if she will remain faithful to him or will she look to other gods as well (Ex 20:20, Deut 8:16; 13:3; 33:8). All too often, we only want a God who *provides* and not a God who *tests*. Three concluding remarks:

- God is opposed to human sacrifice, a common practice in those times.

- The early Church Fathers saw the sacrifice of Isaac as a type or foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ, i.e., the father offers his only son and the son carries the wood for the sacrifice, just as Christ carried his cross to Calvary.
- On a spiritual level, we might say that going up the hill, Isaac belonged to Abraham; coming down, he belonged to God.

Genealogy of Nahor (22:20-23). This genealogy lists the twelve sons of Nahor, who are Semitic relatives of Israel. The reason for including this genealogy is to prepare the way for the appearance of Rebekah in 24:23.

Pause: What are your thoughts, feelings and questions about this story?

CHAPTER 23: Abraham purchases a burial place

Abraham purchases a piece of land in Canaan as a burial place for his wife and later for himself (23:9). “Though this chapter correctly reflects the legal and social customs of the ancient Near East, its purpose is not simply to record an event in the life of Abraham. Rather, Abraham’s possession of a portion of the land stands as a pledge of the future possession of the land in its entirety” (Pauline Viviano).

CHAPTER 24: Abraham finds a wife for Isaac

Having found a burial place for Sarah, Abraham has only one obligation left to fulfill, namely, to find a suitable wife for Isaac. Even though Abraham has settled permanently in Canaan, he is still a foreigner amongst a pagan people. He does not want Isaac to marry a local girl and perhaps adopt her pagan ways, but rather a woman from his own people in Mesopotamia.

The chapter opens with Abraham having his trusted servant swear that he will only search for a wife for Isaac within Abraham’s family. As the servant arrives at Abraham’s native place (Haran), he prays that God will show him the right woman for Isaac (24:12). He creates a plan to help him discern God’s choice. Almost immediately, Rebekah appears who seems to be the one that he is looking for. She turns out to be the granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham’s brother. Rebekah’s brother, Laban, is head of the household. (We will hear much more about him when we come to the adventures of Jacob.) The story of the servant persuading Rebekah and her brother Laban to permit her to marry Isaac is considered a masterpiece of

ancient writing. Some 67 verses describe this one event. The servant's sense that Rebekah is God's choice for Isaac is confirmed by her willingness to leave her home and go to a land she never heard of, all on the strength of a promise. When Rebekah and Isaac meet, it is a story of love at first sight, a marriage made in heaven (24:62-67). The story is intended to leave no doubt that God is guiding the servant's journey and his efforts to find a wife for Isaac.

CHAPTER 25: Abraham remarries and dies

Abraham remarries Keturah who bears him several sons. But Abraham is clear that Isaac is the heir to God's promise to make him a great nation—so he deeds all he owns to Isaac. He gives some things to his new sons and then sends them away just as he had sent Ishmael away.

When Abraham dies, he is buried with his wife Sarah in the plot of land he had purchased for her grave. Then follows the genealogy of Ishmael who becomes the father of twelve tribes. The promise given to Abraham for Ishmael (21:13) is seen as fulfilled.

Pause: Can you recall a specific time when things fell into place as if God was working behind the scenes, as in the case of Isaac and Rebekah? As we conclude the Abraham story, what is your overall impression of him?

FAITH OUR RESPONSE TO DIVINE REVELATION

God speaking and man responding is a central theme of biblical spirituality. This call/response theme started with Abraham continues through the pages of Scripture.

Faith is the name we give to our relationship with God. The gift of faith is what enables us to recognize God's presence in our lives and to trust that God will help to get through every difficult situation in life. Theologian Desmond Forristal writes: "People of deep faith see God in everything and in everyone. No burden is too heavy for them and no task is too difficult for them, because they are upheld by the power of God."

Faith takes us to that place beyond which reason fails. Faith is also what enables us to embrace the teachings of Scripture and the Church. The *Catechism* states: "Faith is, first of all, a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed" (150).

Faith seeking understanding. "Faith seeking understanding" is the classic definition of theology. The person of faith seeks to understand what he/she believes. Aided by grace, the Holy Spirit, gifted teachers, prayer, and personal study, we grow in our understanding of God and his truth. One of the exciting developments in our Church in recent years is that more and more Catholics are joining faith formation programs. As a result, they are growing in their understanding and appreciation of Scripture and the Catholic beliefs and practices and also in their ability to see and respond to God in all aspects of their lives.

Obstacles to faith. Despite God's will to draw all people into a personal and communal relationship with him, many people, sadly, do not develop a faith relationship with God. Why? The *Catechism* (29) names several things that can hinder us from having a faith relationship with God: "the presence of evil in our world, religious ignorance and indifference, preoccupation with the cares and riches of the world, the scandal of bad behavior of believers, currents of thoughts hostile to religion, the sinful attitude in man that makes him hide from God out of fear and flee his call."

Helps. How can these obstacles be overcome? By perseverance in prayer, study, spiritual direction and fellowship with other faith-filled people.

Pause: Which of the above obstacles to faith have you experienced in your life? Which of these obstacles are most prevalent today? What helps you to keep faith in God especially during the tough times in life?