



When people ask Dr. Perkins how to make the world better, his simple answer is this, “Be friends. First with God. Then with others—every kind of other you can think of.” Learn how to change the world one friendship at a time.

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CHAPTER 1

The Hound of Heaven Who Pursues

Marty Nesbitt was known as the “first friend.” When Barack Obama ran for the presidency in 2008 he instituted a “no more new friends” rule. He decided to surround himself with trusted, longtime friends who could help keep him grounded. He shared something special with Marty. They both had had disappointing relationships with their fathers and decided that they would be great dads to their own children. They shared a deep father wound that was a bond and a motivator for both men.¹

Abraham was “first friend” with God. We infer from God’s interaction with Adam and Eve in the garden that they were friends, but Abraham was the first man God referred to in the Bible as His friend. I love the story of Abraham. When I first read through the Bible I understood why God would call him “friend.” I think that when people share common experiences it creates a bond that true relationship can be built on.

Traumatic experiences have a way of creating bonds that are unique and lasting.

Some of the bonds I shared with others who fought for civil rights went so deep because we risked our lives just to register people to vote. This didn't sit well with some of the local whites in Mendenhall, Mississippi. We started getting threatening phone calls, and cars started showing up at night, driving real slowly past our house. When I shared all this with some of my neighbors, the community jumped into action. Almost a hundred men arrived each night to protect my house. They told me to go to bed and get some rest. "We'll protect you and your family," they said to me. "You are here to do what we can't do, and it's our task to protect you."² This common experience served as a foundation that led to lasting friendships between us. I would never forget their personal sacrifice for me.

God's request of Abraham created a common bond between Him and Abraham that was unique. He asked Abraham to do something that He never asked another human being to do. It was the ultimate sacrifice. And Abraham obeyed. That common experience, I believe, established Abraham forever as a friend of God like no one else. Keep reading!

THE GOD WHO SEEKS

Abraham grew up in the city of Ur, which was known for its worship of many gods. We know from Joshua 24:2 that Abraham and his father, Terah, worshiped idols. They would bring their offerings to the temples for their gods in hope that they would provide protection and would favor them. The people of Ur believed that the moon god, Nanna, was the greatest god because he provided fertility for their crops, herds, and families.

For seventy-five years Abraham had believed that he needed

to give things to these gods in order to be safe, in order to prosper. And suddenly God came to Abraham, seeking after him, and promising to bless him. I love that! I couldn't believe that this God, who was the God of creation, would lower himself to seek out Abraham as a friend and promise to bless him! This is not an ordinary god. This is the God who seeks relationship. This is a God who reaches out, who seeks friends to love and bless.

I learned early on that if you want a friend, you have to be a friend. That's what God did. He didn't wait for Abraham to look for Him or to give him things. He pursued

Abraham. He's like that. Francis Thompson wrote a poem titled "The Hound of Heaven," that pictures God as one who tirelessly pursues and follows after His prey like a hound chasing a rabbit. He follows after, never turning away, until the soul feels the weight of His pursuit and turns to Him. This idea that God is relentlessly pursuing us is beyond comprehension. The Song of Solomon uses the picture of a bridegroom pursuing his beloved to represent God's passionate love and desire for us to be friends and experience His purpose for our lives. This pursuit lasts for a lifetime. It first calls us into His embrace as friend and then repeatedly draws us toward His plan for our lives.

I don't know how you see God. Some people see Him as a doting grandfather who is quietly watching over us. Other people see Him as an angry drill sergeant who is never pleased with us and always demanding more than we can give.

God loves you, and He wants you. How does this truth challenge what you've previously believed about Him?

Abraham's story reminds me that God is so full of love that He seeks us out wherever we are and lavishes us with His love. Here's how God talked about His love for us: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me" (Isa. 49:15–16). Think about that for a moment. God loves you, and He wants you. How does this truth challenge what you've previously believed about Him?

THE GOD WHO PROMISES

God told Abraham, then called Abram, to leave his kinfolk and everything that he was familiar with and just go. With the promise that God would show him where he was to go, Abraham was told to leave his homeland and trust that God would make him into a great nation, and that everybody on earth would be blessed through him. So, at seventy-five years of age, Abraham set out on his pilgrimage. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him" (Gen. 12:4).

Twenty-five years later, God reminded Abraham of this promise and He entered into a covenant with him (see Gen. 15). In that covenant He told Abraham that his descendants would be slaves for four hundred years and would be set free to live in the land that He would give them. In order for that to happen, God would have to miraculously give Abraham a son. By this time Abraham was one hundred years old and his wife, Sarah, was ninety. This was no small miracle. It was so impossible to imagine that both Abraham and Sarah laughed when they heard the announcement (Gen. 17:17; 18:12). But they were both getting ready to learn that this God not only reaches out to seek relationship, He keeps His promises.

I am blown away by the fact that God would make promises to any man. But He did that again and again. He obligated Himself to men.

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. —Isaiah 41:10

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. —Isaiah 43:2

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” —Jeremiah 29:11

God makes promises, and His promises are sure. The ultimate promise is the promise of eternal life for those who believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. If you are a friend of God, He can get you there. The whole Bible was written to help us know the promise of God, and to restore us to what He intended for us. We can rest in the truth of the words of that old hymn:³

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God.

Everything God says He will do . . . He does. Though they waited many years after His promise to Abraham and Sarah, their son, Isaac, was born. As someone who is more than eighty

years old, I take heart from the fact that God waited until Abraham was an old man before He used him. He could have called Abraham out of Ur when he was a young man, strong and full of energy. But He waited until Abraham was diminished and up in age. I like that. It proves that God is not a respecter of persons. Our world has a way of putting old folks on the shelf and ignoring the wisdom of the ages. But God is not like that. He desires friendship with everyone, even those who are well past their productive years according to the world's standards.

When John Glenn boarded the space shuttle on October 29, 1998, at the age of seventy-seven, *Time* magazine ran an article that began by saying, "This is no country for old men." The opinion of most folks is that at the age of seventy-seven, a man should be sitting in a rocking chair at a retirement home, collecting Social Security. He should move aside so the young folks can take over. I'm grateful that God still calls old people today—and He has abundant purpose for each of those lives until the very end. I'm finding that even at the age of eighty-nine He has still got things for me to do in this life. Actually the complete quote from *Time* goes on and gets it right: "This is no country for old men, so John Glenn will be leaving it in October—will quit the entire planet and head out for a realm where age doesn't count."⁴ God certainly works through us in a realm where age doesn't matter!

GOD DEMANDS TRUST

Again and again, I read that Abraham believed God. Abraham believed God. But I think the thing that really cemented Abraham's friendship with God was what happened when God told him to sacrifice his son Isaac. "Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of

Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you” (Gen. 22:2). Early the next morning, Abraham got up. He loaded up his donkey, cut the wood for the burnt offering, took Isaac and two of his servants along as he headed out in obedience to God. Abraham would have been familiar with the horrific practice of child sacrifice because it was common in the city of Ur. But Isaac was not an infant or young child. He was most likely a teen or young adult,⁵ and his heart was knit together with his father’s heart. And Abraham had left the pagan practices of his upbringing and was following God faithfully. But he followed God’s command in faith.

I can identify with the grief and struggle that Abraham faced. The thought of losing a child is unspeakable. It shakes your foundation. When our son Spencer died, I almost lost my will to live. I had envisioned passing on my life’s work to him; and he was gone. And years later when our youngest son, Wayne, died, I visited the land of mourning once again. The pain was hard to put into words.

But God commanded Abraham to give up Isaac, his only son, to test whether he really trusted him or not. And Abraham met the test. Just as he was preparing to take Isaac’s life, God stopped him and pointed out a ram in the bush. When Abraham sacrificed the ram, he declared that the place would be known as “The LORD Will Provide.” I think this was the turning point in Abraham’s friendship with God. God would never ask another father to sacrifice his son on an altar . . . until He Himself would do that in offering Jesus as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. I think Abraham learned that friendship with God is all or nothing. God expects that kind of all-or-nothing surrender because He gives us His all. In the words of A. W. Tozer: “An infinite God can give all of Himself to each of His children. He does not distribute Himself that each may have a

part, but to each one He gives all of Himself as fully as if there were no others.”⁶

ABRAHAM FOUND THE PEARL

I’ve often asked the question, what did Abraham give up and what did he gain when he chose to be a friend of God? He gave up everything. He walked away from his homeland, his birthplace, the customs he had been raised with. He walked away from considerable wealth. I believe that Abraham discovered that friendship with God was like the pearl of great price. Matthew 13:45–46 tells us what Jesus said: “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

Abraham discovered the true pearl. He found out that the only way to this awesome, all-knowing God was by faith. He gave up everything and began a pilgrimage of faith, trusting God every day for direction. And along the way he learned about God’s faithfulness. Friendship with God means leaving everything else behind . . . especially our prejudices and wrong notions about people who don’t look like us.

ANSWERING GOD’S CALL TO FRIENDSHIP

When God calls you to something, He calls you first to Himself as friend, then He calls you to work for Him. When the vision is big enough, it’s worth giving up everything you have to follow that vision. When I think of someone who gave up everything, I think of Jim Elliot. He was a missionary to Ecuador. He knew that the Huaorani people (formerly known as the Aucas) were violent and had had no contact with the outside world. He understood the risk he was taking when he and four other

missionaries landed their plane and waited to be approached by the people. At first the people seemed to receive them well, but they soon became suspicious and afraid that they were being taken advantage of. “They decided they should kill the visitors before they were themselves killed.”⁷ They speared Jim and his friends to death and left their bodies in the water. Jim Elliot believed that being a friend of God was worth giving up everything, even your life, so that people who didn’t look like him could become friends of God.

After Jim’s death, his wife, Elisabeth, got to know two of the women from the tribe. She, along with Rachel Saint, the sister of Nate, another of the murdered missionaries, was invited to come back and tell them about God. She lived with the Huaorani for two years and many of them became friends of God, and Rachel remained with them for thirty years. I became acquainted with Elisabeth when she would come to Mississippi to visit her daughter and son-in-law. Our paths often crossed at the airport as we were both heading out to answer God’s call on our lives. I admired the bravery both she and Jim had in taking God’s message to such a dangerous place. Jim gave up everything in response to God’s call on his life. And it provided an open door for many people to know the God he called friend.

I learned something about the call of God when we were in Monrovia, California. In some ways my background was like Abraham’s. I didn’t grow up worshiping God in Mississippi. My people were not Christians. We didn’t go to church. We were known for being outlaws and for our bootlegging business. It was a badge of honor that we could outwit the man by making money on the side to survive. The system of sharecropping was rigged against us from the beginning, so we became experts at finding other ways to make money. A lot of those ways had us at odds with the law, so good church people looked down

their noses at us. My concept of God was tainted by my view of church folk; I didn't have a good feeling about either one.

But when I went to California and became a part of a

church and got to really know God, things changed.

I was disciplined by a white woman who had served as a missionary to Brazil for nineteen years. Many missionaries came home after World War II and realized that our own country was a huge mission field. Americans need the gospel as much as people in developing countries do. After I was converted, I told her that I wanted to be a Bible teacher. She helped me see that the Bible was the revelation of God and that if I was going to be a Bible teacher I needed to know

Like Abraham, I learned that God is always seeking, always drawing. He draws us first into relationship with Him as friend. And then He continually draws us into more intimate fellowship with Him and toward the plan He has for our life.

the whole story. When I got to chapter 12 of Genesis, I felt my call from God, very much like His call to Abraham.

But our life was comfortable. We finally had everything we dreamed of . . . a nice twelve-room house, a well-paying job as a welder, a growing family, and a loving church. I began doing evangelistic work at a prison work camp that had been set up in the San Gabriel Valley by the California Youth Authority. The camp was filled with black teenage boys. Most of them had come from the South. I was sure that if they had heard about

Jesus and His love for them earlier in their childhoods, like our son Spencer, they would have had a better chance at life.

When I shared my story with them, two of them who were sitting in the back were crying. When I looked at them, I realized that I was looking at myself. That could have been me sitting behind prison walls wasting away. I don't know what ultimately happened to those two boys in that prison, but I know that my life has not been the same since that day. I had sworn that I would never return to Mississippi to live. I had nothing but bad memories when I thought about Mississippi. But I felt God calling our family to give up everything and go back to serve Him there. In a lesser way than Abraham heard it, I felt like God was asking me to give up my comfortable life and to trust Him to make me a blessing to others. Maybe I could help young boys in Mississippi; I could tell them that God wanted to be their friend and keep them from ending up in prison.

Like Abraham, I learned that God is always seeking, always drawing. He draws us first into relationship with Him as friend. And then He continually draws us into more intimate fellowship with Him and toward the plan He has for our life. He was drawing me back to Mississippi when I was in California. He has a way of drawing you that lets you know it could only be Him. Because of the weight of everything we had left behind in Mississippi—the anger, the bitterness, the bad memories—it would take nothing less than a God-sized purpose to convince us to return to the South to live and serve.

GOING BACK? NO— GOING FORWARD WITH GOD

We did move back to Mississippi. And I learned that God keeps His promises. He promised me that if I obeyed Him and went

back to Mississippi, He would take care of our family. And He did that. He allowed us to share the gospel with the destitute, alcoholics, and unchurched teenagers walking the streets and wasting themselves in the honky-tonks in New Hebron, Mississippi.⁸ He brought us through being jailed and beaten, and having our lives threatened.

He gave us a testimony for Him. He showed us that He has the power to bridge the divide between people who don't look like each other. Where hatred had been sown, He showed us that love and friendship can uproot those ugly seeds. I think about that a lot when I reflect on what's happening in our country today. We are divided as we have never been before. We've allowed the color of our skin and other differences to separate us and keep us from being friends. I believe that God is calling all of us to His great vision of reconciliation—biblical friendship. That's a calling that's bigger than any one of us; but not big at all if we work together with His power.

We learned that being a friend of God is worth giving up everything else for. Possessions. Popularity. Prejudices. Power. Friendship with God is the pearl of great price. Have you discovered that pearl yet? If you have, can you sense how He is pursuing you now? What purposes does He have for you? If you haven't discovered it yet, please keep reading!

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need for further grace.

I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still.

Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, so that I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Say

*to my soul, "Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away."
Then give me grace to rise and follow Thee up from this misty
lowland where I have wandered so long.⁹*

—A.W. Tozer

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