

I have a question for you. What is God worth? Bill Maher's new movie is out. Its thesis is "God is not worth it." The title of the movie tips his hand, "Religulous," a word intended to show God-minded people are ridiculous. We are beginning to discover in Abram's life that God came to mean a whole lot. So, how do you think he would answer the question, "What is God worth?"

This story will give us a clue to the answer because it takes place during a crisis. At that time, political life was ruled in this region by small kingdoms settled around the Dead Sea. For 12 years five Canaanite kings had been paying allegiance to the King of Elam, and they decided to assert their independence and so refused to pay tribute. In retaliation, four other kings from the area east of there, in modern-day Iran, invaded the five kings. Their destruction of the region is well documented; destruction so complete and sudden, it wiped out everything and the area remained desolate for the next six hundred years. Therefore, historically, the Bible story of Abram can be confirmed through Ancient Near East documentation.

If Abram is connected to historical events, then certainly God is too, because Abram was deeply connected with God. That connection between Abram and God led to some distinct shaping of Abram. His personality and his actions were impacted greatly, and, as we spend time with God we'll find that God impacts our life as well. As you hear this story, keep the question in the back of your mind, what is God worth?

God's presence permeates our lives and the world and so the opportunity always exists to be influenced toward God. We are influenced by one another's encounter with God, including people like Abram. Abram's story blesses us today.

For Abram, knowing God meant power and action. He first became aware of God while living in a culture that saw God in creation, as they worshipped the sun; but Abram said, *nope, I think God is beyond that*. He left, following God. But Abram had no church to go to encourage his faith.

What would it be like if you did not have church? Does this church help your faith? Does coming together as a community benefit you? Many people reject coming to church nowadays; are they rejecting something valuable? What is God worth to you and what is the church worth?

Religulous preaches no, it's ridiculous. If he preaches anything, Mr. Maher says, it's doubt.

How valuable is this church in your life? Could you live without it?

Abram didn't have a church, yet he followed God, built altars, and worshipped. Even though he did not have a church he was able to hear God's voice and God became increasingly important to him. How do I know that? Where's the evidence? He continued to believe the promise and, he kept acting on it. What do you believe about God and how do you act on it? The connection between believing and acting proves what a person thinks God is worth. Abram had a reputation in Scripture. Prophets talk about him, the Psalms talk about him, and so do the New Testament writers. He was called "friend of God." What's your reputation where God is concerned? I would love to have the reputation of being a friend of God. Our actions complete our faith; our actions confirm that we are Christians; our actions put meat on our reputation.

Let's hear the story: (READ Genesis 14:11-24)

Abram lived on the sidelines, he wasn't affected by this crisis; but once he heard Lot was in jeopardy, he became completely involved. He had 318 men who were born in his house. That seems like such an odd thing for Scripture to tell. But go back to my question about what is this church worth? What kind of impact does this church have on your life?

I know when I was a young woman trying to figure life out, if it had not been for the church, I would have been lost. The church shaped me and shaped the faith of my children. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, Sunday School, women's ministries, small group ministries formed in me the character of God and allowed my love of God to flourish. What does the church mean to you? Is it of value to you and your family?

As a man of faith whose God-congruent behavior came out in his leadership, Abram mentored those 318 men in his household in the faith, like a church. There is no way that few men could have done what they did without extraordinary sense of teamwork, courage, and faith. With only 318 men God gave a strategy that overcame four armies, and Abram was able to rescue Lot and all the possessions of not only Lot, but the entire city of Sodom. It's so obvious that this was a miracle that when King Melchizedek came out to Abram he declared the victory was God's. Do you ever expect that kind of victory in your life because God is present?

What if Abram had said, "There are four kings out there whose armies have captured Lot, and the whole city of Sodom. And, I only have 318 servants; so what's the use? It's hopeless. And Abram just stayed where he was, and his nephew Lot was a goner and the land of promise was taken away by these aggressors, and oh well, what good was a promise if you had to fight for it?"

If you had to fight for the faith and the right to come to this church, or if you had to fight to keep it going, would it be worth it? How valuable is this church to you?

Can you say what's important to Abram? (Lot, God.) It's easy to see. Look around you. Are these people important to you? It's easy to see what's important to you. I can see your families and the people in this church are very important to you. Abram melded the two most important things in his life – who he loved, both Lot and God. He loved Lot and he was going to help him. He also believed God and acted on it. His victory was so astounding another king came out bearing gifts to honor Abram. He gave God the credit. It was obviously God's triumph.

This is a mysterious passage about King Melchizedek because kings generally do not arise from nowhere, and kings and priests do not mix; their jurisdiction did not cross paths. But this king was both king and priest because he was God's king. He was like a missionary who brought the good news that God is there where we do not expect him. God is ahead of us and behind us. He was then, and He is now. Abram's giving Melchizedek money is his recognizing God's presence and giving a tribute to God. It was a commitment to show God's authority. Abram did it because God was worth it.

What in your life shows that God is worth it?

In September 1962, John F. Kennedy gave a speech at Rice University initiating the U.S. efforts to put a man on the moon. He did this after the Russians put the first man in space in a speech entitled “We Choose to Go to the Moon,” saying the conquest of space is new knowledge that is good for the progress of all people. President Kennedy felt it was worth it to compete. He said, “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do other things not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.” The President then moved the country from low gear to high gear by tripling the budget. In doing that he said, “All this costs us all a good deal of money. It is \$5,400 million a year, a staggering sum,” he admitted, then he added, “it is somewhat less than we pay for cigarettes and cigars every year.”

Does this church matter? Can you expect success because God is present? Would you stake your future on it? It will take a staggering effort of stewardship, courage, commitment and tithing. That is God’s way. That’s how victory is accomplished. Our beliefs will have to become action. It will be no smaller than fighting four armies with 318 men. But people of God expect success because God is present and God gives astounding victory for the good of people and the spread of His Son’s name.

Are you willing to make that kind of commitment to God for this church?

I think back to my own history in the church. Someone said, why don’t you teach Sunday School? Then I was invited to lead women’s ministry, then youth confirmation, and VBS and was mentored along the way. Later I became an elder and then a deacon. Someone said, maybe you ought to be a pastor. That church sacrificed and invested in me, and funded part of my seminary education.

But there are people who decide the message of the church is no longer worth it. Listen to excerpts from an article by Harry Eyres, in Financial Times, who writes about the cathedrals of Europe:

“Cathedrals are the beached whales of our (Christian) culture; undeniably huge and impressive, but washed up, by Matthew Arnold’s ebbing tide of faith, on the shore of unbelief and multiculturalism. They are magnificent but what, now, is their purpose? When I asked a Canadian friend in Barcelona if he felt like visiting the Gothic cathedral, La Seu, he said: “Oh, not another of those old bunkers.” I know what my friend meant but something over the years has kept drawing me back to the great Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals of Europe.

The prospect of losing something is the best antidote to taking it for granted.”¹

Mr. Eyres inspected John Thornton’s great Cathedral window at York Minster, and it so moved him he realized “all being done with the most infectious enthusiasm.

¹Financial Times, May 17/May 18, 2008, Life & Arts, 22.

Perhaps the draw that the Cathedral windows have for Mr. Eyres is the faith that lay in the sacrifice it took to make them.

The sacrifice made to build those cathedrals was like Abram's giving a tithe. Abram gave the tithe, which was not a free-will offering, but rather acknowledges Melchizedek's rightful superiority as God's representative who deserves the payment. Abram brought a full tithe, because he wanted God to get the credit.

Bill Maher says God is ridiculous. What do you say? God is present, and with just 100 people who believe and act we too can leave a legacy of faith for our children and grandchildren. It's totally in your hands. Will you believe in its worth? How much is God worth?