

FIXING ABRAHAM

Discussion Guide

Introduction

1. Discuss the ways in which our biblical principles can both help us and harm us.
2. Describe a time when God stretched you by challenging your preconceptions of the way he works.
3. The author says that too often we as Christians expect one another to “follow conventions and get to know a static God” (page xvii). How pervasive do you believe such “safe” Christianity is?

Chapter 1

1. Does it bother you that later Old Testament and New Testament writers sometimes quoted earlier Old Testament passages out of context? Why or why not? What do you think this tells us about how the Holy Spirit inspires and uses Scripture in our lives?
2. How do you think we should use scripture for establishing absolute truth and essential doctrines? How do you think we should use it for receiving personal direction? Is there a difference between the two uses?
3. Chapter 1 makes the case that the Holy Spirit can inspire our interpretation of Scripture just as he inspired it when it was being written. In what ways is this idea open to abuse and misunderstandings? In what ways can it be liberating?

Chapter 2

1. How do you think you would have reacted to Isaiah if you lived when he did? Would you have accepted his prophetic words as inspired truth? Why or why not?

2. How do you think Christians today would respond to a prophet who foretells short-term disaster and long-term blessing; who claims to have seen God personally; and who gives his kids strange, prophetic names and acts out strange, prophetic dramas? Why?
3. Are there any Christian leaders today who get on your nerves? If so, what criteria can you use to discern whether their message is from God or not?

Chapter 3

1. When you hear a report of a miracle, is your first reaction skepticism or belief? Why?
2. How do you think you would have responded to Jesus' miracles if you had heard about them at the time? Would you have been more like the skeptical religious leaders or the trusting but uneducated masses? Explain.
3. How does Scripture regard people who are too suspicious of miracles? How does it regard those who are too accepting of them?
4. Do you believe God still does miracles today? What criteria would you use to recognize when he has?

Chapter 4

1. Why do you think we have a different standard for Solomon and David than we have for Christian leaders today?
2. Do you think God's Spirit bears fruit through people who will later fall into sin? Do you think he bears fruit through them afterward? Why or why not?

3. How do you think the church should deal with high-profile ministers who are caught in some act or pattern of blatant sinfulness? At what point, if any, do you think they should be allowed back into a leadership role?

Chapter 5

1. In what ways does Abraham's almost-sacrifice of Isaac clash with our perception of what God might lead someone to do?
2. Imagine yourself in the place of each person in the Abraham-Isaac story. How would you have responded to God if you were Abraham? How would you have responded to Abraham if you were Isaac? If you were Sarah, how would you have felt about Abraham when you found out about the incident? How would you have felt about God?
3. Do you think God would lead someone in our day to do something that alarms others or that defies social expectations? Why or why not?

Chapter 6

1. In what ways does God's assignment for Hosea clash with our understanding of the Lord's holiness?
2. What do you think Hosea's friends and family members thought about his calling? How do you think he justified it to them?
3. Do you think most Christians would accept someone with Hosea's calling today? Why or why not?
4. Does Hosea's experience with God change your perception of God in any way? If so, how?

Chapter 7

1. Why do you think God chose to work through a family as dysfunctional as Joseph's? Why do you think God didn't choose one of the older sons out of respect for normal family order and to preserve family harmony?
2. Do you think God still speaks through dreams today? Why or why not?
3. Can you recall a time when God used someone you found offensive to speak to you? Explain.
4. Have you ever been offended by someone else's relationship with God—or by what they *claimed* to be their relationship with God? If so, what was offensive about it? Looking back, do you think your offense was valid or not? Explain.

Chapter 8

1. What rules did Ruth and Boaz break when they met at the threshing floor? How do you think God felt about the "scandal"?
2. Do you think you've judged any situations or relationships by their appearance rather than their real substance? If so, what caused you to think they were inappropriate? What extenuating circumstances behind the scenes might have made them appropriate?
3. Why do you think most Christians are bothered by the mere *appearance* of scandal or impropriety in their midst, even when they know those involved are acting completely aboveboard? Why do you think God sometimes uses such means to accomplish his will?

Chapter 9

1. How do you think Mary's story would be received if it happened today? What would you think of a young pregnant woman who claimed to be a virgin? Why?

2. Why do you think the Messiah came “in the clothes of apparent immorality”? Why didn’t God send him in a way that was unequivocally righteous?
3. Do you think God still works in ways that raise eyebrows among the most godly, committed Christians? Can you offer any examples?
4. When someone attributes a miracle to God, how can you know whether or not that person is telling the truth?

Chapter 10

1. In what ways did Jesus defy people’s expectations of godliness? Why do you think religious leaders were so opposed to him?
2. How can we know when it’s okay to deviate from strict biblical principles and when it isn’t?
3. If Jesus first came to earth today, do you think you would accept him? Why or why not?
4. If Jesus came today, who do you think would oppose him most strongly? Who would be most open to him? What characteristics would someone have to have in order to accept him? Do you see these characteristics in most evangelicals and churches?

Chapter 11

1. What opinion would you have of a Christian leader who created controversy wherever he went and never stayed in one place for very long? What red flags would you see in that kind of ministry?

2. Do you think it's important for a minister to be liked and respected by everyone? Why or why not? Is it possible for the Holy Spirit to work through someone who rubs a lot of people the wrong way? Explain.
3. Do you know any "Spirit-inspired troublemakers"? If so, how well are they accepted in Christian culture?
4. What are some nonbiblical assumptions you've made about the "right" way to be a Christian or do church? How flexible are you with those assumptions?

Chapter 12

1. Why is it virtually impossible to worship God strictly for who he is without reference to what he does for us?
2. Chapter 12 makes the statement that "God's glory can't be separated from those in whom it is being revealed" (page 119). Do you think this is true? If so, how does it apply to the reasons we worship him?
3. Do you think the gospel is God-centered, human-centered, or both? In what sense is "it's all about him" true? In what sense does it go beyond that?

Chapter 13

1. Do you think biblical leadership should be results oriented? If so, what kind of results should we look for? If not, how should it be oriented?
2. Do you think a church or ministry may be fulfilling God's purposes if it isn't growing and making a visible difference in the world? Why or why not?
3. What kind of leadership did Moses give Israel during the forty years in the wilderness? In what ways might his leadership have appeared ineffective and

weak? What was God actually trying to accomplish with Israel during their wilderness time?

4. What criteria should we judge Christian leaders with today?

Chapter 14

1. In what ways did Hannah “make a deal” with God in an attempt to get God to answer her prayer? Why do you think God honored that?
2. Recall a time when you believe you prayed for something out of completely pure motives. How can you know when motives are completely pure? How has God responded to your prayers—those of pure and of mixed motives?
3. What criteria can you use to discern when a deep desire has been placed in your heart by God and when it is simply a product of your own wishful thinking?

Chapter 15

1. How would you respond to an eightysomething couple who says they are expecting God to give them a child by natural means?
2. At what point is faith in a promise of God too absurd? How can we know when we’ve crossed the line between bold faith and utter foolishness?
3. Why do you think we feel compelled to judge other people’s experiences with God? In what kinds of situations do we need to exercise discernment? In what kinds of situations is it better to refrain from forming any opinion at all?

Chapter 16

1. Why do you think God led Jeremiah to such an unproductive, unrewarding career? Why do you think Jeremiah followed?

2. How does our culture respond to people who are always negative and seem constantly depressed or discouraged? How do you think we would respond to Jeremiah?
3. Do you think God could appoint someone today to live a miserable, unfulfilling life? Why or why not? If he did, what do you think he would be trying to illustrate or accomplish?
4. Some people believe that God's blessings are only for the age to come—i.e., in heaven. Others emphasize God's blessings as something we are to experience now. In what sense are both positions true? In what sense are they both oversimplifications? Where do you fit on that spectrum?

Chapter 17

1. What opinion would you have of an Ezekiel-like prophet if you saw him on the news tonight? How would you feel if he were sitting in the pew next to you?
2. Do you think you've rejected or looked down on people whom God has chosen to get really close to? If so, how can you make sure you share God's opinion of people in the future? What criteria does he want us to use to determine if someone is truly his servant or not?
3. Why do you think God often chooses to work through objectionable, seemingly offensive characters? Why doesn't he avoid the appearance of weirdness in his servants?

Conclusion

1. Why do you think God often refuses to work within our definitions of dignity, respectability, normalcy, etc.?

2. Are there any ways you limit God's work in your life by the expectations you have? If so, what can you do to expand your expectations?

3. Many in the church pray for revival and have done so for years. What kind of revival do you think we expect? How might a true revival defy our expectations? Do you think we will recognize it when it comes? Why or why not?

4. If Abraham preached in your church this week, what do you think he would say about the ways God works?