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What were we put in the world to do?

Leader's Guide

"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

Genesis 1:31

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What were we put in the world to do?

Creation

Study 1 | **Genesis 1:1 – 2:3**

INTRODUCTION

It is far too easy to read the first chapters of Genesis asking only the questions of our time: "Were the days of creation twenty-four hours long?" "How long ago did this happen?" "Is this history or myth?" "How does this square with modern views of science and evolution?" Of course, these *are* important questions and we can probably learn some things from Genesis 1-11 that are relevant to them. But we don't learn very much from a text if we ask it questions it wasn't written to answer. Genesis is, frankly, about deeper issues than biological origins. It is answering questions like: "What are human beings?" "What are we here for?" "What is our relationship to nature and the world?" Essentially, Genesis 1 is not about the "how" of creation but the "why." Ultimately, that is far more important.

Note: This week's study will open the discussion, but we will take more time in the next session to discuss creation, evolution, and the meaning of the phrase "image of God."

1. **Read Genesis 1:1-3. (a) Was the earth "without form and void" (v. 2) before God began to create (v. 1) or after? Why is this question significant? (Look at Hebrews 11:3 for help with the answer.) (b) What do verses 2-3 tell us about the "means" by which God always creates?**

The relationship between verses 1 and 2
There are at least three ways to interpret the relationship of verses 1 and 2.

The least likely interpretation reads verse 2 as a contrast to verse 1. This view essentially translates: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, but then the earth became formless, void, and dark, and God had to go back and create it again." This is often called the "Gap" theory. It posits that the six days of re-creation occurred many years after an initial creation that was followed by some sort of disaster. Some people try to place dinosaurs, etc. in this "gap" between verses 1 and 2. However, there is no grammatical basis for this view. There is no "But" to begin verse 2, nor is there any reason to translate the verb "was" as "became." This is an example of the way we can try to force a text to answer questions it was not intended to address. Nevertheless, this view has a significant number of adherents.

A more likely interpretation reads verse 2 as a parenthetical statement to a clause completed in verse 3. This view essentially translates: "When God began to create (the earth being without form and void), God said . . . ." This is not impossible grammatically, but it is not the most natural reading. Additionally, we have to ask the question, "If God did not create the original 'stuff' of the earth, where did it come from?" Hebrews 11:3 and many other passages tell us that there was no universe whatever before God spoke. (See also John 1:3, Col. 1:16, Rom. 11:36.) If the earth were "already there," God

did not create absolutely everything, which would compromise the absoluteness of his power and authority.

The most likely interpretation is that verse 2 is the result of verse 1. This view essentially translates: "God created the heavens and the earth. But after the initial creative act, the earth was still shapeless and empty. Then God proceeded to say . . . ."

What are the means for creation?
The two instruments for creation are the "Spirit of God" and the Word of God ("and God said"). It is fascinating to see how the Spirit and the Word always work together throughout the Bible. Christians are said to be born again by the Spirit (John 3:5) but also to be born again by the Word (1 Peter 1:23). We are told to be "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18) but we are also called to be filled with the Word (Col. 3:16). In each case, the effects are basically the same. In the creation of the world and the re-creation of salvation, the Spirit and the Word are inseparable, bringing life where there is no life. If our faith is only Word-oriented, it will be rational, cold, and dogmatic; if our faith is only Spirit-oriented, it will be too emotional, intuitive, shapeless, and unaccountable. God never brings life and growth without both the Word and the Spirit.

2. **A quick reading of Genesis 1 reveals a highly repetitive, patterned text. (a) What are the main repetitions in words, phrases, and ideas? (b) What broader repetitive pattern do you see among the first six days? (For example, how are days four through six a recap of days one through three?)**

The main repetitions
The main repetition is the word "God" with the word "made" or "created." "God" appears thirty-five times in the first thirty-four verses. He overwhelms the text, dominating and overshadowing everything. Nothing happens unless he makes it happen. Nothing is made or created except by him. The extreme repetition is a way of saying, "Without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3 KJV).

The second repetitive pattern is the phrase "And God said." This occurs once on the first (v. 3), second (v. 6), fourth (v. 14) and fifth (v. 20) days of creation. But it occurs twice on the third day and several times on the sixth day. This shows the importance of the Word of God in creation.

A third repetitive pattern is the idea of the power of God's Word. Repeatedly we are told, "and there was" or "and it was so" (vv. 3, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30). We do not see God saying, "I'm going to do this" and then going to do it. Almost always, he says, "Let there (or it) be . . ." and immediately "it was so." Our words only express the intention to act, but God's Word is itself an action.

A fourth repetition is the "benediction" phrase, "and God saw that [it] . . . was good." God's assessment of the goodness of creation occurs in verses 4, 10,

12, 18, 21, 25, 31. In verse 31, we have a kind of "master benediction," where God sees that "*all* that he had made . . . was *very* good."

A fifth repetitive idea is that of "separating" or making distinctions. On the first day, God separates the light from the darkness (v. 4). On the second day he separates the sky from the sea (v. 7). On the third day, though the word "separates" is not used, he separates the land from the water. He also separates the various plants "according to their kind" (vv. 11-12). On the fourth day he separates the day from the night (v. 14). On the fifth day, though the word "separates" is missing, God separates the various animals "according to their kind." The initial act of creation (v. 1) is *ex nihilo*—out of nothing, but after that God's creative work consists of elaborating, distinguishing, and "drawing out" the creation into greater complexity.

The pattern of the days

A sixth repetitive phrase and idea is the days of creation: "the evening and the morning were the . . . day" occurs six times. Obviously, the division of God's creative work into six days is a repetition in itself, but there is also a broader pattern. The last three days return to the realms created in the first three days and give them their rightful inhabitants.

Kingdoms	**Kings of the Kingdoms**
Day 1 Realms of Light and Dark	**Day 4** Lights to "govern" (v. 18) Light and Dark
Day 2 Realms of Sea and Sky	**Day 5** Creatures to "fill" or dominate Sea and Sky
Day 3 Realm of the Earth (Plants)	**Day 6** Creatures of the Earth; Humankind
	Day 7 God the Creator rests

3. Look at each repetitive pattern you have identified and answer: What is each repetition designed to teach us about (1) God, (2) the world and creation? (What are the "lessons" we are to learn from each repetition?)

God

The chapter shows us:

A personal God. The verbs of the chapter show us a God who cannot be in any way referred to as an "It." God speaks, plans, creates, sees, evaluates, and enjoys. First "lesson": This means that ultimately God is not simply a "force" or an "all soul." He is distinct from the universe, rather than being the "soul" of the universe, as Eastern religions teach. That means that, contrary to the teachings of mystical religions, we do not know this God simply through mystical experience and oneness with nature. He is personal, and we must know him as we know other persons, through (a) listening to his verbal self-disclosure (see below), (b) two-way communication, and (c) personal commitment.

The only God. It is remarkable to notice that this text, written in very ancient times, makes not the slightest reference to other deities. This is a claim of exclusivity. This God is the *only* God. Second lesson: This means that only God should be worshiped—nothing else. His personality (see above) means we are not pantheists; his uniqueness means we are not polytheists. This chapter warns against the extreme danger of idolatry, because the things God has created are beautiful and attractive. We noticed that the things God makes in days four through six are "rulers." Both then and now, if we fall into a worship of created things, they become "rulers" of our hearts. We must not let that happen. Genesis 1 tells us that God is ruler over all.

A sovereign God. The power of God is seen in the fact that a mere word from him makes the idea a reality. There is nothing in existence that does not owe its existence to him. There is no energy, force, or substance that pre-existed God—he is the source of everything. Third lesson: Because he created everything, nothing is outside his control or his rightful authority. Therefore, we cannot simply go to him for forgiveness or for crisis needs. We must make him supreme Lord of every area of our lives. It is "all or nothing" with God.

A speaking God. God never creates except through his word. This means he is all-powerful; even his word is a power. Fourth lesson: This certainly must mean that we cannot expect his power in our lives apart from listening and embracing his Word. We said under question #1 that the Word is alive and works hand in hand with the Spirit. So it is not simply truth memorized and mastered, but truth applied and implanted in our hearts that will bring God's power into us. There is no creative power without listening to his Word.

A good God. Nothing God makes is imperfect. Everything is "good." Everything he touches is pleasing, joy-producing, and wholesome. Fifth lesson: As Derek Kidner says, "His ways are perfect. The series of expulsions and cataclysms in Genesis declare that [God] can make no truce with sin." [1] Genesis 1 foreshadows what Isaiah discovered later—that God is perfectly holy. In a pre-fallen (non-sinful) condition, that fact is not threatening. But as we see in Isaiah 6, this quality of perfect goodness is traumatic to sinful people.

The created world/nature

The chapter shows us:

A real world. Eastern religions believe that the natural world is only an "emanation" of God, a superficial projection that is not ultimately real. They understand salvation and eternity to be a liberation from the illusion of a physical world and an individual self. But Genesis 1 shows us that the world is not simply some kind of emanation. It is a real existence outside of God. Though it is created and sustained by him (Heb. 1:2-3), there was a time when it did not exist. It was given existence through God's creative act. First lesson: Christians are realists compared to many today. Movies like *The Matrix* posited that physical laws and limitations are an illusion; that if the mind could exercise

its power we could fly, dodge bullets, and so on. Many strands of the New Age movement and some revived nature religions (like Wicca) are based on the idea that we can transcend disease and other physical limitations "by faith." But Christians know that the body and the world are real. Living within limits is a good thing.

An orderly, designed world. Notice that the overall effect of the highly patterned, repetitive text is to demonstrate that the world is made in an orderly, purposeful way. There was "evening and morning" not just once, but regularly, faithfully, continually. It was created by a rational Word. What we have is a cosmos, not chaos. Second lesson: This is the basis for modern science, which grew out of a biblical view of creation. The only way science can proceed is to assume the uniformity of natural causes. For example, we can count on a chemical reaction happening the same way every time under the exact same conditions. But why is that? Why can we count on this? Why should the universe work that way? The answer: because it is the creation of a purposeful God who made it that way. Science did not grow out of Eastern religions (who taught that the world was not real) or Western paganism and polytheism (which did not believe the world was the product of a single, rational mind). Practical lesson? To a Christian, science and technology in themselves are good things. Christians do not idealize a non-technological existence.

There is another, very important lesson we learn from the design of the universe. If the universe is the product of random forces, as modern secularism says, then how we live is up to us. We can create our own purpose in life and devise our own standards of right and wrong. But most people who say cheerfully that this world is an accident refuse to face the implications of this or live consistently with it. Jean-Paul Sartre was more honest:

> God does not exist and . . . we have to face all the consequences of this. [We are] strongly opposed to . . . secular ethics which would like to abolish God [and then find] an *a priori* Good. . . . Nowhere is it written . . . that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because . . . we are on a plane where there are only [human beings]. Dostoyevsky said: "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." [2]

A random universe is often seen as a great freedom, but if that is what we have, there is no way to talk about purpose. There is no way to talk about anything being right or wrong. It is an empty freedom. However, Genesis 1 is all about being designed to *rule* and to *serve*. It is not about the "freedom" that individuals find so important today. We saw that God created different realms and put rulers in each of them, each ruler higher than the last. The animals "fill the earth" but we human beings "have dominion" over them, while God rules over us all. That means we will find fulfillment only if we obey the royal design—both to rule and to serve—of the One who made us. In the same way, a sailboat only "works" when it is used for the purpose its designer intended—to sail on the water. It will not "work" if you try to cross the street in it; that is not its design. Therefore, Genesis 1 is telling us that we will only find our purpose in life if we know and serve our Designer.

A good world. The repeated phrase "it was good" shows that the material world and physical reality are intrinsically good. While the orderliness of creation prevents us from being overly fearful of science, the goodness of creation leads us to respect natural resources instead of using technology to turn them into commodities. Third lesson: The goodness of creation keeps Christians and Jews from the errors of religions and philosophies that believe we must leave the world or eschew physical pleasures to connect with God. This is not so much a contrast to Eastern philosophy as to Western. The Greeks (and many others) believed that the creation of the physical world was an accident, or even a rebellious action by some lower deities. They taught that matter was the prisonhouse of the soul. It was intrinsically bad, dirty, and stultifying to soul and spirit. Thus, in Greek thinking, the body was something to be transcended in order to reach spiritual heights. As a result, many in Western history have believed that (1) manual labor is demeaning, (2) sexual pleasure is intrinsically dirty or spiritually polluting, (3) salvation is obtained through the denial of pleasures, and (4) suffering is good in itself. In contrast to these legalistic perspectives, Genesis 1-2 show us a God with his "hands dirty," creating the world and deliberately putting a spirit in a body. Of course, the incarnation of Christ and the resurrection of the body show us how Christianity is more pro-physical than any other religion. Even our future is a physical one! No other religion envisions matter and spirit living together in integrity forever.

A wondrous world. We cannot do justice to the view of creation we get in Genesis 1 simply by saying it is real, patterned, and good. There is a wonder and awe about the richness of the world. It teems with life. God diversifies the life of every living thing. He seems to delight in diversity and creativity. There is another important lesson we learn from the "goodness" of creation. The animals, plants, and even the mountains and seas are all part of a choir of praise to the glory of God. This is stated explicitly in Psalm 19 and Psalm 150. We are therefore made *stewards* of nature. Mountains, trees, animals are "declaring the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1) by being themselves. David Atkinson reflects:

> It is from [Genesis 1] that we need to begin in trying to develop a Christian mind on many of our contemporary environmental and social questions. Our concerns for pollution; our motivation to avert the ecological crisis; our anger at terrorism and our hatred of war; our delight in beauty and our support for the arts; our fighting against the depersonalizing trends of so much of modern ideology and for social and economic justice in the world . . . all these themes . . . need all to be traced back to their beginnings. And their beginnings are to be found in the God who makes all things, and [therefore is committed to] make all things new (Rev. 21:5). [3]

Summary: What a remarkably nuanced and balanced view of the world we have here! Secularism can lead us to exploit nature, paganism to worship it, legalism to fear it, pantheism to ignore it. Genesis 1 leads us to love it, care for it, explore it, and take an almost childlike delight in it.

4. What is different about the way humanity is created from the way other things are created? What does that teach us?

What is different about the way humanity is created?
Derek Kidner writes, "'Let us make' stands in tacit contrast with 'Let the earth bring forth' (v. 24); the note of self-communing and the impressive plural proclaim it a momentous step; and this done, the whole creation is complete." [4] Usually, as Kidner points out, God simply speaks ("Let there be") and it happens ("and there was"). But when it comes to humankind, the creative act is not that simple. First, there seems to be much more planning and thought (Kidner's "self-communing"). God says, "Let us make" in verse 26 and only in verse 27 does it read, "So God created man . . . ." Also unique is God's use of the plural when speaking of the act of creation: "Let *us* make." Some people see the hint of the Trinity here, while others think God is referring to the angels around him. Kidner is right in saying that in either case it means some deeper creative act.

Secondly, "*vis-à-vis* the animals man is set apart by his office (1:26b, 28b; 2:19; cf. Ps. 8:4-8; James 3:7) . . . ." [5] Though there is a brief reference to the sun and moon "governing" the day and night (v. 18), and while all the plants and animals are called to "teem" and "reproduce," only humans are explicitly given a "job." They are called to "subdue" and "rule over" the earth.

Thirdly, "but his crowning glory is his relation to God." [6] Only human beings are said to be made "in the image" of God. Though we will look at this more next time, it is clear that we have a closer relationship to God than any other creature. The metaphor of "image" means a "reflection" or a "small scale copy." This means we are *like* God: He is not wholly "other" and mysterious. At the same time, it means we are *not* God. There is no indication of our being "part of God." Most importantly, "image" contains the seeds of the idea of sonship. Just as children are born in the image of their parents, so we are called to be his children.

What does this teach us?
First, we learn the *dignity* of human beings. We have seen God creating a hierarchy of kings and kingdoms, and last of all is humankind. Thus we are the crown of creation, and we are the result of the highest, most complex creative act. A human being is a greater natural wonder than all the oceans, mountains, birds, fish and animals combined. C. S. Lewis says that, apart from the sacramental bread and wine (and different theologians would debate this!), "your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses." [7]

Secondly, we learn the two-fold *calling* of human beings: (a) to serve God as his vice-regents over the world, caring for and cultivating creation, and (b) to know God as his children, loving him and coming to reflect his character in our being.

5. Read John 1:1-18 and Colossians 1:15-17. (a) In what ways do John 1 and Colossians 1 confirm what we have already learned in Genesis 1? (b) How do these passages shed additional light on the meaning of creation?

John 1
John 1 confirms: First, that God is eternal, without beginning. In the beginning of all things, God already existed. Second, that God is all-powerful. He made the world and is the source of absolutely everything—all life and light are from him. Third, God made nothing except through the power of his Word.

John 1 also shows us, first, that God's creative Word is more than an abstraction. The Word is a person, Jesus Christ. The Word was "in the bosom of the Father" (v. 18) and is a "he," not an "it" (vv. 2, 3, 4, 18). Second, this Word is eternal and divine. It is not a created being, since it was "with God" at the beginning. Read from the Christian perspective, then, Genesis 1:1-3 shows the entire Trinity involved in creation—Father, Word (Son), and Holy Spirit! Third, Jesus is not only the agent for creation (vv. 2-3) but also of re-creation (vv. 11-13).

Colossians 1
Colossians 1 also confirms what we learned in John 1 and Genesis 1: first, that God created the world; second, that Jesus is the agent of that creation. Here he is called the "image" of the invisible God, which is very similar to the concept of being the "Word" of God. He is the way God the Father expresses and shows himself. Third, we are again told that Jesus is not only the author of creation (vv. 16-17) but of salvation (v. 18).

Colossians 1 also shows us, first, that all things were created *for* Jesus Christ. He is called the "firstborn over all creation." This does not mean he is the first creature. (Notice, he is said to be *over* all things created, so he cannot himself be a created being.) Rather, the firstborn child in those days was heir to all of the father's wealth. This phrase, together with verse 17—"all things were created . . . *for* him"—tell us what John 1 only hints at. Because all things were created by and through him, all things are only themselves if they are glorifying and serving him. Second, we are told that Jesus not only is the Creator of all things, but the Sustainer. "In him all things hold together" (v. 16). Third, we are told that Jesus is going to "reconcile all things . . . by his blood." So Jesus is not only the past source of creation and the present redeemer of creation. In the future he is going to heal all the conflicts, brokenness, and disintegration of creation.

Summary
John 1 and Colossians 1 tie salvation and creation together in Jesus in a way that most religions do not. We tend to think of "salvation" as nothing but forgiveness and inner peace. But the Bible tells us that the goal of salvation is nothing less than all of creation reclaimed and restored. Jesus himself was so committed to his creation that he was "un-created" on the cross so that we

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could be re-created and restored in him. Jesus' goal is nothing less than the entire rehabilitation of the beauty and integrity of all creation, visible and invisible (Col. 1:16). As Christians, we are not to be content simply to see individuals forgiven and made happy. We are to use our gifts to heal the hurts and rifts in society, in culture, in nature. We fight disease, unbelief, injustice, and hostility between individuals and peoples. As C. S. Lewis put it:

> Confronted with a cancer or a slum, the Pantheist can say, "If you could only see it from the divine point of view, you would realize this is also God." The Christian replies, "Don't talk damned nonsense." For Christianity is a fighting religion. It thinks God made the world—that space and time, heat and cold, and all the colors and tastes, and all the animals and vegetables, are things that God "made up out of his head" as a man makes up a story. But it also thinks that a great many things have gone wrong with the world that God made and that God insists, and insists very loudly, on our putting them right again. [8]

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1 Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 32.

2 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism."

3 David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), pp. 25-26.

4 Derek Kidner, p. 50.

5 Derek Kidner, p. 50.

6 Derek Kidner, p. 50.

7 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1949, 2001) p. 46.

8 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 44-45.

What were we put in the world to do?

Creation, Work, and Rest

Study 2 | **Genesis 1:26 - 2:25**

INTRODUCTION

The first two chapters of Genesis are pregnant with profound teaching about a large number of fundamental subjects. Last time we looked at the first verses of Genesis 1, which centered on God and the creation. Now we look at the end of Genesis 1 and the first part of Genesis 2, focusing on the subjects of creation, work, and rest. We will wait until next time to study the important subject of human nature—"the image of God" and sex and gender.

1. **Compare Genesis 1:1-26 and 2:4-25. (a) Do you notice any differences in the details and order of creation between the two chapters? (b) Do you notice any differences in style and literary form?**

Do you notice differences in the details and order of creation?
In Genesis 1, the order of the things being created does not fit the normal "scientific order" of nature. First, there is light (Day 1) before there are any sources of light, i.e. sun and moon (Day 4). Second, there are vegetation and seed-bearing plants (Day 3) before there is any sun—and thus before there is any atmosphere and air, before photosynthesis is possible, or rain, and so on. [By the way, this makes it very hard to insist that these "days" were really long epochs or periods of time if creation occurred in this order. Imagine going long stretches with vegetation but no air.] Some object, "So what?! God does not need to do things in the natural order—this was supernatural." That would be correct if we didn't have Genesis 2, but when we compare Genesis 1 with 2 we see different sequences.

Genesis 2 indicates that God *did* follow what we would call a natural order in creation. Genesis 2:4-5 reads, "When the LORD God made the earth and heavens—and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, *for* the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground." Here the word "for" (or "because") shows that natural causality is assumed. This states clearly that God did not put vegetation on the earth before there was an atmosphere and rain, while in Genesis 1 we have vegetation on Day 3 before there is any rain possible (Day 4) or any man to till the earth (Day 6). In Genesis 1, natural order means nothing—there are three "evenings and mornings" before there is a sun to rise and set! But in Genesis 2 we see that natural order is the norm.

Do you notice differences in style and literary form?
We noted last time how highly patterned Genesis 1 is, with a remarkable repetition of words, phrases, and ideas. When read, it sounds like something that was chanted. The six days of creation themselves are clearly patterned, with the first three days devoted to the creation of "realms" (light-dark, sky-

sea, land) and the second three days devoted to the creation of corresponding "rulers" for the realms (sun-moon, birds-fish, animals-man). Normal narrative never reads like this; this is more like the lyrics to a song. Genesis 2 is much more prosaic and reads like any other narrative history, like Judges, Samuel, or Chronicles.

2. Since a single author either wrote both accounts or put them together, we know they were not seen as contradictory but as complementary. How would you say the two accounts supplement each other?

In short, Genesis 1 is telling us more about the *why* of creation than the *how*. The first chapter's style is that of a song, filled with the repetition and imagery of poetic language. It should not be read as an attempt to provide exact details about the amount of time and the exact order involved in creation. Rather, God's creative work is categorized and summarized in order to teach us about the majesty and sovereignty of God. It tells us that God made the universe (a) orderly, (b) good, (c) to serve and delight him, (d) under his authority and under our authority as his servants. As we saw last time, these all have enormous practical implications for us. The *why* is much more important information than the *how*.

If we didn't have Genesis 2, we might be more tempted to read Genesis 1 as narrative history. But if Genesis 1 and 2 are *both* to be read as simple history, we are in some trouble! Not only do they then contradict, but it would be inexplicable why any author would write or unite them in one text. However, two other places in the Bible shed light on this practice of a "dual" treatment of a mighty act of God. In Exodus 14, we read a narrative history of the crossing of the Red Sea, and in Exodus 15 we read the "Song of Miriam," which recounts the event in musical and poetical form. Similarly, in Judges 4 we read a historical account of Israel's defeat of the Syrians, and in Judges 5 we read Deborah's song about the victory, in which she says that the stars came from heaven to fight against the Syrians (v. 20) and the river Keshon swept the Syrians away (v. 21)—all of which Judges 4 indicates was not literally the case. Here we see how often a "mighty act" of God is given this two-fold treatment, both historical and theological. His actions are described and also explained.

I believe that this is the best answer to the questions, "Why were the two accounts included together?" and "How do they complement each other?" I realize that many people become very nervous about any failure to take Genesis 1 "literally." There are two objections.

Objection #1: "If we don't take this literally (that is, as historic narrative), why should we take the Gospels literally (as historic narrative) or any other part of

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Scripture?" Response: We always read literature differently according to its genre. No one takes Judges 5, Exodus 15, or the Psalms "literally" as historic narrative. They are obviously poetry—they give all the obvious signals. On the other hand, when we read Judges, Kings, Matthew, and Acts, we are obviously reading narrative history. Again, we have all the signals, with dates given and a prose style. There are only a few places in the Bible where the genre is not easily identifiable. Genesis 1 and Ecclesiastes are two examples. There will always be debates about how to interpret those passages. But to grant that *one* part of Scripture can't be taken "literally"—as historic narrative—is not to say that *no* part can be taken as literal narrative history.

Objection #2: "If we don't take this literally (again, as historic narrative), aren't we opening the door to the teaching of evolution?" In response, David Atkinson's comment is helpful.

> If "evolution" is . . . elevated to the status of a whole world-view of the way things are, then there is direct conflict with biblical faith. But if "evolution" remains at the level of scientific biological hypothesis, it would seem that there is little reason for conflict between the implications of Christian belief in the Creator and the scientific explorations of the way which—at the level of biology—God has gone about his creating processes. [1]

Obviously, we know that the "Grand Theory of Evolution" is at odds with the Bible. This theory says: (a) organic life came out of inorganic material through random occurrence; (b) all life forms have evolved from that first single form; and (c) all "design" and all phenomena in the natural world are strictly the result of natural selection and adaptation to the environment. Having rejected such a theory of origins, we can acknowledge that Genesis 1-2 (as we are interpreting it) does leave the door open to a variety of "Origins Theories"—from the view that (a) the world was created in a single act several thousand years ago to the view that (b) God created the world over a long period of time with a succession of creative acts, as well as an evolution within species. *All* of Scripture (not just Genesis 1) forbids us to believe that we are merely the product of blind forces of biological evolution.

3. (a) What is significant about the fact that God worked six days and then rested (2:2)? (That is, why did the author depict creation as a seven-day week?) (b) What can we learn from the fact that God planted a garden (2:8)?

What is significant about the fact that God put in a work week?
The most obvious reason the author would depict God's creation as a regular work week is to relate our own work patterns to God's work. This tells us something of the basic *dignity* of work. The passage is saying, "Look, even the great God is not above work!" The bald statement (twice) in 2:2-3 that God performed "work" is extremely important. Some Greeks believed that the gods created humanity to do the hard labor they found too demeaning. We saw in

the last study that the Greeks tended to pit matter against spirit. The physical was considered dirty and demeaning, while the immaterial and the spiritual were considered good. Therefore, in Greek thought, work was a necessary evil: one should aspire to be free from it as much as possible. In complete contradiction to that view, we have Genesis 1-2. Here is a God who *works;* in fact, he puts in a full week like anyone else. So we learn here that *work has dignity because it is something God does.*

What can we learn from the fact that God planted a garden?
Not only do we learn that work itself has great dignity, we also learn that *all* kinds of work have dignity. If your worldview does not grasp the goodness of material creation, then manual labor—labor that is more physical and involves more contact with the "stuff" of the natural world—will be seen as an inferior activity that is beneath us. Greek philosophy was one source of this perspective, but the current era of global capitalism has given us new reasons to despise work like farming, teaching, and caring for children. "Information" work now pays far better than manufacturing, for example. Also, though feminism has rightly sought to open up the public work world for women, it has unfortunately also demeaned child rearing and domestic work because they are unsalaried.

Yet God's work in Genesis 1 and 2 is manual labor, since God "planted a garden" (2:8). Not only that, but when he created Adam, he literally got his hands into the "dust of the ground" (2:7). This idea is too familiar for us to really grasp how revolutionary it is.

> If God came into the world, what would he be like? For the ancient Greeks, he might have been a philosopher-king. The ancient Romans might have looked for a just and noble statesman. But how does the God of the Hebrews come into the world? As a carpenter. . . ." [2]

4. Read Genesis 2:8-25. (a) List all the human needs that were fully met in the earthly paradise. (b) What can we learn from God's decision to include work in paradise (2:15)?

List all the human needs fulfilled in Eden
Derek Kidner shows how work was part of the fully-orbed delights and conditions of this earthly paradise.

> The earthly paradise . . . is a model of parental care. The fledgling is sheltered but not smothered: on all sides discoveries and encounters await him to draw out his powers of discernment and choice, and there is ample nourishment . . . for his aesthetic, physical and spiritual appetites; further, there is a man's work before him for body and mind (vv. 15, 19). [3]

First, for our physical needs there was lots of food (v. 9c: "trees . . . good for food"). Second, for our aesthetic needs there were beauties "pleasing to the eye" (v. 9b). Here already we see the artistic sensibility and the need for beauty. Third, for our spiritual growth there was a divine Word to bring about spiritual discernment (vv. 16-17). As Kidner points out, the animals receive no such Word. We alone are capable of voluntary obedience to God. We will look at the command regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil when we study the fall. Fourth, for our cultural and creative development there were the physical work of tending the garden (v. 15) and the mental stretching and understanding involved in naming the animals (v. 19). Finally, in the creation of Eve and of marriage, there is the provision for our social-relational and sexual needs (vv. 19-25).

What can we learn from God's decision to include work in paradise?
The fact that God included work in paradise is startling to us because we almost always think of work as drudgery or even punishment. By contrast, this shows us that work is as much an essential good as food, beauty, rest, friendship, prayer, and sexuality. Work is not simply a drain but an important means of fulfilling our deepest needs, and thus an important component of the "good life." Though that seems counter to common sense, we can see the truth of it in the unhappy lives of those who, through wealth or physical disability, have been cut off from a life of work. We also learn that we are not intended simply to work for our own fulfillment, but for the sake of the beauties and living things around us. God put us into the garden not simply to enjoy it but to "work it and take care of it" (2:15). We are to work for the common good, not simply for our own benefit.

5. **Read Exodus 20:8-11. (a) List some views of work prevalent today that differ from the biblical perspective. (b) Which of these views tend to ensnare you? What can you do about it?**

Common views of work
We have seen three things so far about work. (1) First, work is *necessary for our own fulfillment* as human beings. It was put in paradise (2:15) with the many other things that would meet all our needs. (2) Second, work is *for the care and benefit of the world and people around us.* The purpose of our work is to "care for"—to cultivate and protect—creation. (3) Third, work is nonetheless a *duty*—something we are commanded to do (2:15) and something that expends energy (since we need to rest from it). Thus the biblical theology of work is rich, and many modern-day views are distortions that reflect only one aspect of the original divine design for work.

For example, one common contemporary view of *work is work as my only identity.* It focuses exclusively on work's God-given power to bring human fulfillment (see Eccl. 3:22, 5:12). We have seen above that human fulfillment is

one biblical purpose for work. Our accomplishments do help us to know who we are—to create a "self" and an identity. (We can see this in the many names—"Fisher, Baker, Smith"—that originally referenced a person's job.) Work is also valuable because it gives our lives structure. All by itself, however, this one-sided view of work can lead to distortions. It can lead, obviously, to true workaholism. It also can lead to "careerism"—a selfish concern for one's own career over the common good. This view of work can also, ironically, lead to a deep dissatisfaction with one's work. If you think that the main (or only) purpose of work is personal fulfillment, you are discounting sin's impact on work (see Gen. 3:17-19) and forgetting that our work is intended to serve the world as well. One mark of this distorted view is the seven-day work week with little or no "Sabbath." Rest is seen, not as a blessing, but as a necessary but unpleasant interruption. Yet in the garden, work was only one of the many things we need. It cannot give us what worship, aesthetics, fellowship, etc. can give us. It must know its place. It cannot meet all our needs.

A second common view of work is *work as a way to make a living* (i.e., provide life's necessities). Again, this *is* one biblical purpose of work (see 2 Thess. 3:6-15). It was a simple duty even in the garden of Eden. Even there, food was not handed to Adam and Eve; they had to work the garden. [We saw above that God knew, in the long run, that a paradise without work would cease to be paradise!] Thus, one reason for work is purely utilitarian: You work to produce goods or services you can be paid for. With money, you acquire the goods and services you need to live. All by itself, though, this one-sided view of work as a source of income will rob work of its intrinsic value. It will lead to foolish vocational choices (using income as the only selection criteria rather than the use of one's gifts and capacities). It can lead to the opposite extreme of "work as my identity"—a lack of conscientiousness, shoddiness of work, cynicism, etc. In this work-view, work is not a blessing, but a necessary and unpleasant evil that allows me to do recreation, travel, or the things I really want.

These first two distortions miss the balance of Exodus 20:8-11, in which work and rest are complementary and both seen as good.

A third view of work is less common today but an improvement on the first two. This is to see *work as a sacrifice for others.* For example, many immigrants come to the U.S. and work horrendous hours in bad conditions for little pay in order to bring their families "up" in the world. Others see work primarily as service to one's society or community. This too is one biblical purpose of work. We *do* have obligations to others. Second Thessalonians 3:8 reminds us that we burden others if we don't work, and this results in a command: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). All by itself, though, this one-sided view of work is also inadequate. It is less of a

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distortion of the biblical view than the first two views but, in the long run, it could lead people to burn out (like the "work-as-identity" view) or to take jobs ill-suited to their gifts (like the "work-as-duty" view).

Perhaps the Genesis view of work could be summarized as "work as partnering with God." This view of work encompasses all the others and keeps them in their proper context. As Carl Henry states:

> Work is permeated by purpose; it is intended to serve God, benefit humankind, and make nature subservient to the moral program of creation. [We] must therefore apply [our] whole being—heart and mind, as well as hand—to the daily job. As God's fellow workers, [we are] to reflect God's creative activity on Monday . . . no less than on Sunday. [4]

Lester DeKoster expands these ideas:

> The difference between life in a wilderness and here is work. In the wilderness, you must do everything for yourself. But civilization is sharing in the work of others. Look at the chair you sit in. Imagine making it yourself--even if you had the skills, you'd need the tools. Do you have the skill to make the tools? And even if you had the skills for that, could you mine the ore to get the metal? And if you had the skills to do that, how would you get the ore down from the mountain? Would you make the truck? In other words, to simply make a chair from scratch is, in a sense, a lifetime of work for one person. But through the work of others, you can buy it with the fruit of a few hours of labor. Civilization is sharing in work of others. Your paycheck, whatever it is, can buy you the use of far more than you could possibly make for yourself in the time it took to earn the check. Work makes us interdependent. Work is cultivating the resources of the material and human universe. Work plants the seed; civilization reaps the harvest. Work is the form in which we make ourselves useful to others; civilization is the form in which others make themselves useful to us. Work unifies the human race and carries out the will of God. [5]

Which views tend to ensnare you? What can you do about it?
There are many possible answers here. One of the most important practical issues in our work lives involves balancing our hopes for work with Christian realism. Work is neither a necessary evil *nor* the only way to find identity and fulfillment. Since the fall, work is cursed, yet it is not itself a curse. Because of sin, a curse rests on the world that includes our work ("Cursed is the ground because of you . . ." Gen. 3:17-19). All our labors will be somewhat frustrated; we will never reach full satisfaction in work. Sin makes work toilsome but, even under the curse, work will bear fruit: "through painful toil you will eat of it." At the same time, we must make every effort to do work that satisfies our gifts and calling and produces value for those around us.

To look for *complete* fulfillment or for *little* fulfillment is to miss the biblical vision for work.

6. Read Genesis 1:31-2:3. The phrase "Sabbath observance" has a negative ring to us, but that is not the case here. (a) What does the text imply about what God's "rest" is? Read Exodus 23:10-11; Deuteronomy 15:1-11; Leviticus 25:8-17. (b) How can we follow God's example of Sabbath rest better in our own lives?

What does the text imply about what God's "rest" is?
First, since God cannot get physically tired, we know that his rest cannot be mere inactivity (as ours sometimes must be). Rather, the close linking of 2:3 with the master benediction of 1:31 indicates that God (1) enjoyed and delighted in (2) a work that was in some sense "finished" and thus capable of giving enjoyment. Derek Kidner says, "It is the rest of achievement, not inactivity, for He nurtures what He creates; we may compare the symbolism of Jesus 'seated' after His finished redemption (Heb. 10:12), to dispense its benefits." [6] These two aspects are very important. God delights in his creation and enjoys the benefits of a finished achievement.

Second, there is no "evening and morning" to the seventh day (2:2-3). This means that the seventh "day" continues to the present time. That is why believers are invited to enter it in various ways throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, of course, the people were called to rest from their work one day a week so that they could be refreshed (Ex. 23:12). But there were many other levels and ways to participate in God's Sabbath. The Israelites were called to give their land "rest" one year out of seven—a Sabbath year (Ex. 23:10-11). This denotes care of the created environment. When God brought Israel into the good land of Canaan and gave them an ordered society, he called it entering the land of "rest" (Deut. 12:9; Ps. 95:8-11). Leviticus 25:8-17 even prescribed a "Year of Jubilee" every fiftieth year—the Seventh Sabbath year—in which all slaves were freed, all debts forgiven, and all property lost through normal economic means returned to the original family allotments. To join God in his Sabbath was more than to knock off work once a week. It was and is about devoting yourself to enjoying, affirming, and nurturing life—especially weak and fragile life. The Sabbath is an extremely deep and profound concept. Indeed, it is almost about the meaning of life itself. God calls us to enjoy and care for his created world *with* him.

How can we follow his example better in our own lives?
We join God in his Sabbath in at least three practical ways (based on the Old Testament texts above). We join him when (a) we nurture our created bodies and souls once a week; (b) we join in enjoying and protecting the wonders of nature; and (c) we cultivate a society in which life is protected and honored. (This last reason is why even the Puritans allowed "works of charity and mercy" on the Sabbath. To help the poor is part of joining God in the Sabbath of enjoying and nurturing life. Unfortunately, the Puritans recognized the need to do (a) and (c) but not (b). They forbade recreation on the Sabbath, though that seems to be an obvious part of what the Sabbath is all about.)

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Remarkable! One seventeenth-century writer, Thomas Traherne, rhapsodized (literally) about the importance of enjoying and sustaining the world of nature.

> By an Act of the Understanding therefore be present now with all the Creatures among which you live: and hear them in their Beings and Operations Praising GOD in an Heavenly Manner, Some of them Vocally, others in their Ministry, all of them Naturally and Continually. We infinitely wrong our selves by Laziness and Confinement. All Creatures in all Nations and Tongues and People praise God infinitely; and the more, for being your Sole and Perfect Treasures. You are never what you ought till you go out of yourself and walk among them. [7]

7. Read Hebrews 3:7-4:11 and Mark 2:23-3:6. (a) What deeper and fuller kind of "rest" do these passages discuss? (b) How is Jesus the key to connecting this deeper rest to our weekly pattern of rest and work?

When we get to the New Testament, we see that there is an even deeper meaning to "entering God's rest." As we saw above, Genesis 2:3 shows God enjoying the achievement of a finished work. When we come to the New Testament, we discover that this means more than just caring for the physical creation. Derek Kidner says (commenting on Psalm 95):

> "My rest" is pregnant with more than one meaning, as Hebrews 3 and 4 make clear. In relation to the Exodus it meant God's land to settle in . . . . But Hebrews 4:1-13 argues that the psalm still offers us, by its emphatic *Today* (v. 7c) a rest beyond anything that Joshua won, namely a share in God's own sabbath rest: the enjoyment of His finished work not merely of creation but of redemption. The quitters who turned back to the wilderness . . . may be but pale shadows of ourselves, if we draw back from our great inheritance. [8]

This is what the Hebrews passage shows us so clearly. God's redemptive work is "finished" (John 19:30). When we realize that God has saved us solely by grace through Christ's merits, we "rest from our work" (Heb. 4:10). The gospel of free justification—that we are saved not by our continuing striving and good works, but by Christ's finished work on our behalf—is an image of God's Sabbath rest. This is why worship must always be part of our Sabbath! In every worship service, we enter into "rest" when we remember again the finished work of Christ for us. Then we take our worship off false gods (Ps. 95:3) through which we seek to save ourselves, and we give our heart's worship to him alone.

Ironically, it is only as we enjoy the "rest" of the work of redemption that we are able to truly enter into the "rest" of caring for creation. That is why Jesus said we cannot get true rest through Sabbath regulations, but only through him (Mark 2:27-28). Why? Overwork in general comes because we are not truly resting in Christ. As we saw above, it reveals that we are using work to get an

identity instead of relying on Christ. When we use work to earn a sense of self-worth, the work (ironically) is not about the work itself or about others: It is about us. We are doing it for ourselves—for the money and status we need to shore up our identity. But if we "rest" from our work by trusting in the finished work of Christ, we will be able to truly enter into the rhythm of work and rest God calls us to.

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1 David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 31.

2 Phillip D. Jensen and Tony Payne, *Beginnings: Eden and Beyond, Genesis 1-11* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999), p. 40.

3 Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 61.

4 Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 48.

5 Author's paraphrase of Lester De Koster in *Work: The Meaning of Your Life* (Grand Rapids: Christian Library Press, 1982), pp. 3-14.

6 Derek Kidner, p. 53.

7 Thomas Traherne, *The Second Century*, 76, cited in David Atkinson, p. 51.

8 Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 346.

What were we put in the world to do?

Creation and Culture

Study 3 | Genesis 1:26 - 2:25

1. **Read Genesis 1:26-28. (a) What does the term "image" imply about who we are? What sorts of things bear an image? (b) What light do Colossians 1:15 and 3:5-10 shed on the concept of the "image of God"?**

What does the term "image" tell us about who we are in relationship to God?
The nature of the "image of God" (*the imago Dei)* has been a matter of ongoing debate. Virtually every theology—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, etc.—has a different "take" on what the image really is. It is clear to all that this image is what differentiates human beings from everything else in creation. We are unique. But how? Some say the image of God is our rationality; others say it is our personality; still others say it involves our creativity or our moral nature. The very term "image," however, is a metaphor designed to convey its own meaning. What sorts of things bear an image? (a) A mirror bears the image of the object it reflects. (b) A child bears the image of its parent. (c) A work of art bears the image of what it is designed to portray. Let's look at these three: a mirror's reflection, a family likeness, and an artistic representation.

First, a mirror (or any reflecting surface) has the ability to catch the light and form of an object and reflect it back. To do this, the surface must face the object at the proper angle. In other words, the mirror must be in the "right relationship" to the thing it will reflect. Therefore, the image of God is not so much a *particular* quality within us, like rationality, morality, or personality. It is more that our *total* being—body, mind, soul, etc.—has been created to have a relationship with God in a way no other creature can. Westermann states, "Human beings are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship with God." [1] We are created *in*to a relationship with God, which we have even if we don't acknowledge it.

Probably, however, this also means that our humanness is found in all sorts of relationships. For example, when we are said to be made in the image of God, we are immediately said also to be made male and female (1:26). This means that the image within not only prepares us for relationship with God but with one another. Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne explain:

> In Genesis 1:26-27, God is both singular (God, He, His) and plural (Us, Our). It is not surprising, then, that when man is created in God's image, he, too, is both singular and plural. . . . Like God, mankind is both unified and diverse. . . . The three persons of the Godhead are nevertheless a single God . . . that from all eternity . . . enjoyed relationship with each other. [So] mankind is created in this image, with separate persons . . . created to enjoy a deep unity. [2]

So, first of all, the image of God means that true humanness is found in loving, personal relationships, especially in God's personal relationship with us.

Second, a statue or sculpture is another kind of image bearer. In the Bible, the word "image" usually means just that: a physical, visible representation of deity, an idol. It is not surprising to learn that:

> The rulers of the ancient Near East set up images and statues of themselves in places where they exercised or claimed to exercise authority. The images represented the ruler himself as symbols of his presence and authority. [3]

The close connection of 1:26 with the mandate to "rule" shows that this is definitely a second aspect of being made "in God's image." We are called to "stand in" for God, ruling and caring for creation as his vice-regents. Imagine a king who sends a representative to negotiate and manage a situation in his name. On the one hand, the representative has a great deal of personal authority. On the other hand, the representative must closely follow the will of the one he or she represents. So we are made God's representative authority over creation. We participate in all the things God has done in creation: bringing order out of chaos, creatively building a civilization out of the "stuff" of physical and human nature, caring for all God has made, and so on.

Third, a child bears the image and family resemblance of his or her parents. This is the third kind of image bearer. This comes out clearly in Genesis 5:3, where the text says that "Adam had a son in his own likeness, in his own image." These are the same two words used in Genesis 1:26. Thus the *imago Dei* means we were created not just for a general relationship with God, but for an intimate family relationship with him. Also, we are not put here to rule God's earth just as stewards, but as heirs. In many ways this concept unites the first two aspects of the image of God. We are called to be God's "sons," resembling him in character (holiness, righteousness) and in creativity, rationality, personality, and so on. Yet we are also called to be God's "servants," doing his work and representing him in the world.

In summary, the image of God means "sonship" and "servanthood."

What do Colossians 1:15 and 3:5-10 tell us about the image?

The two passages show us that sin has severely distorted the image of God in us, yet through Christ it can be renewed. Notice that we are still *in* God's image. Something "renewed" is something that is still there. James 3:9 and Genesis 9:6 tell us that human beings are, even in a fallen condition, still "in the image" of God. Therefore, today, only Christ is the perfect image of God (1:15). Only he has an absolutely perfect relationship with the Father and only he perfectly represents him in perfect servanthood and obedience. But our growth in Christ gradually renews this image in us. (See also Ephesians 4:23-24 and 2 Corinthians 3:18). In the work of salvation the Holy Spirit makes us both sons and servants.

This teaching—that we are still in the image of God while fallen—does not mean that our sinfulness is reduced. Indeed, the remaining image makes our sin in many ways more heinous and devastating. Someone once asked, "Would you rather be in the same room with a rabid mouse or a rabid elephant?" The

greater the being, the more dangerous and devastating its madness. Thus it is because of both sin *and* the *imago Dei* that we (1) tend to dominate and rule others (we were built to "subdue"), and (2) use technology and science to destroy the environment rather than care for it (we were "given" nature). In this way, even our sin shows us the image of God. This warped image explains our deep relational needs for love, our impulse to always worship *some*thing (Rom. 1:21-23), and our relentless drive to rule over nature and people, though now in a terribly exploitative way.

2. What are some practical implications of being made in the image of God? How should it affect the way we regard others and even ourselves?

All the basic teachings in Genesis 1-3 have enormous implications. Here are just a few implications of the *imago Dei.*

First, the *imago Dei* means that *all* human life has value and dignity. Murder should be punished because we are made in God's image (Gen. 9:6). Just as you would (rightly) consider an attack on a painting or photograph of yourself to be an expression of antagonism toward you, so God considers an attack on any human being to be an attack on himself. Thus any kind of oppression, exploitation, or attack, either against an individual or a group, race, or class, is not simply a crime against justice. It is an attack on the dignity of human beings in the image of God, and an attack on God himself. David Atkinson writes:

> There is . . . an affirmation here of the specialness of human beings, which needs to be asserted over against some humanist philosophers and [others] who find this "specie-ism" . . . as reprehensible as . . . sexism and racism. . . . [4]

Second, since we are *all* created in the image of God, we must deeply respect not only those of other races and cultures, but those of other faiths—or no faith. We must not overdo the difference between believers and unbelievers. We must not see ourselves as inherently superior to those who do not believe in the God of the Bible. Our sin keeps us from ever being as good as our "right beliefs" should make us, and the image of God keeps them from ever being as bad as their wrong beliefs should make them. The image of God is warped but still present in everyone. In non-believers, we see the Creator's gifts of wisdom, nobility, and beauty. As we will see below, we are all continuing to do God's work in building culture and civilization. This means that the art, learning, and creativity of all human beings must be appreciated as special gifts of God to the world. God is not only concerned with religion, but with agriculture, architecture, medicine, and so on.

Third, because everyone is made in God's image, all people intuitively relate to God and know that he is "there" deep down. The image of God means we are created *into* a relationship to God and we have that relationship even if we won't admit it! That is Paul's teaching in Romans 1:18-25 and also in Romans 2. We can only renew our image if we develop a conscious, joyous relationship

with him. But, fundamentally, all people are dependent on him and are being "held up" by him. Therefore, when we speak to non-believers about God, we do not need to prove the existence of God to them. Rather, we need to prove to them that they already *know* God is real. They are relying on him in the way they live their lives every moment. For example, if there is no God, we should not act as if human beings are more valuable than rocks and trees, for we are all just the result of random forces. Yet we know that this is not true and we don't live as if it is. Also, if there is no God, there might be such a thing as moral feelings, but there could not be such a thing as moral obligation. Everything would be relative. Yet we unavoidably know that there is such a thing as real right and wrong, and we live that way. If there is no God, love is just a chemical reaction in my brain, and the air of significance I attach to it is an illusion. But we know this isn't true. In short, no one can live as if there is no God. This is what we should point out to people.

Fourth, of course, is the enormous implication of this teaching for our self-image. Regardless of the self-assessment of our hearts or the evaluation of others, there is a rock-hard, objective, irreducible glory and significance to every human being. Someone once said that human beings are like castles—even in ruin, we are magnificent. While the doctrine of sin (see Genesis 3) should be enough to humble every person, the doctrine of the image of God should be enough to convince any person of his or her own infinite worth. C. S. Lewis put this perfectly in one of his children's books:

> "You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve . . . and that is both honor enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth." [5]

Fifth, as Lewis hints, the doctrine of the image of God stands completely against a rigid classism or caste system in society. The poorest beggar is ultimately of no less worth than the greatest emperor. This has implications not only for jurisprudence and government, but for our friendships and associations. A single human being in the image of God is a soul that will last forever, and thus of more importance than an entire government. We must never feel it is "practical" to destroy a few thousand people so we can install a new administration. A human life is of infinite worth. We must not treat people of lower socio-economic power as beings of lesser value. If the city police respond 100 percent faster to calls in the rich part of town than in the poor part of town, they are violating this principle.

Sixth, of course, the doctrine of the image of God has great implications for our attitude toward and treatment of the very old, the mentally and physically handicapped, and the unborn. This is obviously a *very* complicated subject, but the doctrine of the image of God certainly requires us to be extremely wise and cautious in using "quality of life" arguments to eliminate any individual being. Just because someone is not happy or completely rational does not mean that he or she is not made in the image of God. We saw earlier that the "image" cannot be confined to any one quality that then gives us the definition of a

person—like rationality, creativity, etc. Rather, we are in God's image because we are created into a relationship with him. We are in that relationship even if we don't acknowledge it. We have seen that the weakest human beings are to be held in honor. All of this means we should err on the side of respecting and protecting all human life, even in its weakest and most incomplete forms. Someone has suggested that the *imago Dei* dictates that we practice the "doctrine of carefulness" in this area. We can put it this way: It is not only wrong to do something to take a human life, it is also wrong to do anything that *might* take a human life. (That is why it is illegal to disregard the fire code in a building, etc.) So when it comes to the handicapped and the unborn, we do not have to be sure about the status of a being before we act to protect it. We should not take an action even if it only *might* be the killing of a human life.

Please encourage your group to exercise self-control at this point. Don't get into a debate about abortion and euthanasia! Neither the text nor this commentary are meant to lay down specific guidelines for cases such as when to allow a sick person to die without extraordinary measures, when abortion may or may not be justified, and so on. However, we do need to notice that Christian teaching for 2,000 years, based on Genesis 1-2, has affirmed and protected even the weakest forms of human life.

3. Read Genesis 1:28. What are the two basic directives in our "job description" of 1:28? (a) What does each mean, and (b) what are the practical implications of each?

What do the two directives mean?
This famous statement by God has been called the "cultural mandate" or the "creation mandate." It offers the deepest insights into what we are meant to do on earth. There seem to be two things: (1) "Be fruitful . . . increase . . . fill the earth" and (2) "subdue it . . . rule over . . . every living creature" (1:28).

The first directive seems rather easy to understand. We are to fill the earth with our own kind. Because God is rich with outbursting life, he makes all living things capable of handing on the Creator's gift of life by reproducing "after its own kind." Within every living thing is the power for new life. (Though, in keeping with our relational nature, we cannot do so on our own—only through relationship and cooperation between two persons, male and female.)

Second, we are called to "rule" (vv. 26, 28) and to "subdue" (v. 28) the earth and its inhabitants. This is much more difficult to comprehend. It might be read to imply that the forces of nature are rebellious and need to be fought in a violent, adversarial way. Some have complained that this gives human beings a license to kill and exploit nature. Indeed, this *is* how much of humankind is carrying out the directive of "ruling the earth." For most of our history, humanity has looked at the environment as something to be cut up and packaged for our profit. But all this exploitation is the result of sin's warping of the image of God in us. The adversarial relationship with nature is the result of

sin and part of the curse (Gen. 3:17-19, which we will study later). But what, then, did God mean when he calls us to "subdue" the earth?

Most commentators think that God is calling us into an extension of his own creative work. We noticed that when God first created the material world in 1:1, it did not come "ready made." Rather, it was "formless" and "empty" (1:2). We then see God address these two characteristics again and again in Genesis 1. First, he forms something. Where it is unshaped, general, and undifferentiated, he separates, distinguishes, and elaborates. Notice how often he takes a general and separates it into particulars, for example, "separating" sky from sea (1:7) and light from darkness (1:4). Second, he fills it. On the first three days he creates realms, and on the second three days he fills each realm.

Can it be a coincidence that in Genesis 1:28 we are told to do the same two things God has being doing? No. We are called to continue what he was doing—fill and form. Albert Wolters explains:

> The earth had been completely unformed and empty; in the six-day process of development God had formed it and filled it—but not completely. People must now carry on the work of development: by being fruitful they fill it even more; by subduing it they must form it even more. . . . as God's representatives on earth, [we] carry on where God left off. But this is now to be a *human* development of the earth. The human race will fill the earth with its own kind, and it will form the earth for its own kind. From now on the development of the created earth will be *societal* and *cultural* in nature. [6]

So, to "subdue" the earth (1:28) is similar to what God did when he "formed" it (1:2-25).

Nature is not "bad," needing to be beaten down, but it is undifferentiated, undeveloped, uncultivated. When we take a piece of land and garden, farm, or preserve it so it can produce its peculiar life splendors, when we take fabric and make a piece of clothing, when we push a broom to clean up a place, when we use technology to harness the forces of electricity, when we take an unformed, naïve human mind and teach it a subject, when we take unprocessed material and turn it into a poignant work of art, when we take undifferentiated tones and pitches (noise) and separate and arrange them to create music, even when we pass a comb through our hair—whenever we bring order out of chaos, whenever we draw out creative potential, whenever we elaborate and "unfold" creation beyond where it was when we found it—we are continuing God's work of creative, cultural development. Just as he "subdued" the earth in his work of creation, so he calls us to labor as his representatives in the continuation and extension of that work.

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The practical implications

The implications of the first directive for fruitfulness are much debated. Some say this means we should not use birth control in sex, but remain "always open to life." Others counter that this interpretation implies that deliberate singleness and celibacy would be inherently wrong. This could not be, since our Lord himself was single. However, what the first directive *does* do is show us the high dignity and importance of bearing and raising children. In a society that denigrates the sacrifice and skills that family building requires, this mandate from God is a corrective. Another implication is that sex itself is not dirty and sinful, but a good gift through which we image God, who gives birth through the love that is within him.

What are the implications of the second directive? They are many, and we can only mention a few here.

First, this means we must take a balanced view of nature and the environment. On the one hand, we are not worshipers of "untouched" nature. We do not think it is perfect just as it is. We do not think that a mine is always a bad thing to happen to a mountain. We do not think we should never cut down trees. On the other hand, we see that nature is "very good" (1:31) and that we are to care for it, not destroy it. The metaphor of being the earth's *gardeners* has the powerful implication that we are to be respectful stewards of nature. (See the next question for more implications of "gardening.")

Second, this gives us a high and dignified view of work, just as the first directive gave us a high view of the dignity of building families and rearing children. Many people might consider Christian ministry a high and noble calling and secular work just a way to make a living. But here we see that all work from science to farming to teaching to art to sewing to "pushing a broom" to hairdressing—anything that takes "unformed" nature or human nature, draws out its potential, and brings shape to it—is an extension of the very work of God! Last time we noted that work is a "good" because God put it in paradise. But in the creation mandate we see *why* work is such a good, and also why *all* kinds of work, from manual to mental, from simple to highly sophisticated, have nobility and dignity. It is a remarkable vision.

> The task of living obediently looks awesome when we consider all of the kinds of possibilities God has created for us to unfold and develop. They include, for example, understanding the geology of the planet earth, finding creative ways of enriching family life, teaching methods of nurturing children, and exploring the imaginative realm of fiction. [7]

4. What further information does 2:8-20 give us about our work as an extension of God's creative work in Genesis 1? (a) What does "gardening" tell us about our work? (b) What does "naming the animals" indicate about our work?

What does "gardening" tell us about our work?
God creates a garden and puts us in it to *live* in (2:8) and care for (2:15) it. How does this show that we are to be doing what God was doing in Genesis 1?

First, just as God prepared creation to be our home, so we are to continue working and shaping the world for the joy and comfort of humanity. Notice that 1:26 is a climax. After God created the earth, sea, sky, and all the plants and animals, he finally creates us and "gives" it all to us (1:29). In many ways, God created the house and now gives it to us to live in. In the last few years, much has been written about the "anthropic principle," which states that the universe is perfectly calibrated for human life. That is what Genesis 1 teaches. When we come to Genesis 2, we see that the garden is created for us to live in. What are the implications for us if we are to continue God's work? It means, ironically, that we are *not* supposed to turn every acre of land into a literal garden or park. We also need homes and even parking lots. We are not to value untouched nature over the needs of human beings. David Atkinson points out, "'Dominion' cannot be exploitation, but must [also] be seen [as a] sort of facilitating servanthood which maintains an environment in which persons who reflect [the image of God] can be at home." [8] Our job is to confront the "formless" places of the world that are inhospitable to human beings and make them places of beauty and goodness that can support human life. In Atkinson's words, "The concerns of town planners for an environment in which the good life can be lived; the work of doctors and therapists in seeking to facilitate that health which is the strength for good living . . . " [9] —all such work is very important.

Second, just as God in Genesis 1 continually elaborates and unfolds creation into greater and greater complexity, so we are to both *study* the work of God and *develop creation's enormous unrealized potential*. The potentialities God put into the garden are now to be drawn upon and drawn out by us. The very metaphor of the garden is suggestive of what we are put on earth to do. A gardener is not the same as a park ranger. She does not simply allow the ground to produce whatever it can without help. Rather, she *cultivates* the ground (watering, weeding, planting) to produce a far more wonderful variety of plants than it would without cultivation. By calling us "gardeners," God calls us to do what we see him doing in Genesis 1. He creates and then calls each created thing to multiply ("teem"), elaborate, and develop complexity (1:11; 1:21-15).

God is showing us that *all* nature—not just the physical world, but the givens of human nature, talent, and relations—is like a garden. God left nature unfinished, rather like an unfurnished house. We are called to develop all the capacities, energies, and potentials of human and physical nature to build a civilization that

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glorifies God. Just as a gardener neither destroys the ground nor leaves it as it is, so in our work—whether arts, science, business, technology, finance, academia—we are "gardening" the creation, drawing out the resources and powers of the material universe. We are supposed to do this to create a "city" that glorifies and reflects back to God his own richness, life, love and wisdom (Rev. 21-22).

What does "naming the animals" indicate about our work?
The naming of the animals in 2:19-20 is evidence that we have now entered into God's creativity. Why didn't God just name the animals? After all, in Genesis 1, God continually names things, "calling" the light "Day" and the darkness "Night." Why didn't he name the animals as well? Obviously, because he is inviting us to continue his work of developing creation without exploiting it.

In particular, this shows that *studying* and understanding creation are important. The life of the mind is an important aspect of our creation and purpose. As Mark Noll observes:

> For a Christian, the mind is important. . . . Who, after all, made the world of nature, and then made possible the development of sciences through which we find out more about nature? Who formed the universe of human interactions, and so provided the raw material for politics, economics, sociology, and history? Who is the source of harmony, form, and narrative pattern, and so lies behind all artistic and literary possibilities? Who created the human mind in such a way that it could grasp the realities of nature, of human interactions, of beauty, and so made possible the theories of such matters by philosophers and psychologists? Who, moment by moment, sustains the natural world, the world of human interactions, and the harmonies of existence? Who, moment by moment, maintains the connections between what is in our minds and what is in the world beyond our minds? The answer in every case is the same. God did it, and God does it. [10]

5. In light of all we have learned about work in this study and last week's, devise a set of guidelines for choosing a job or a career path.

First, we would want to choose work we can do well. It should fit our gifts and capacities. One purpose of work is to realize our own God-given potential. To take up work we can do well is like cultivating our *selves* as gardens filled with hidden potential.

Second, we would want to choose work that benefits the human community. One purpose of labor is to make the world a *home*, a better place for others to live.

Third, we want to choose work that enables us to do family building. This means, of course, that we must earn a living with our work. This is because the two directives of the creation mandate—to "fill" (family building) and to "form" (work and development)—go together.

Fourth, if possible, we do not simply wish to benefit our family, the human community, and ourselves. We also want to benefit the "field of work" itself. Genesis 1 and 2 show that there really is such a thing as "progress." This term has been much abused, but our goal should not simply be to work, but to increase humanity's knowledge and cultivation of the created world. In short, you want to "make a contribution" to your field, if possible. Show a better, deeper, fairer, more skillful way of doing what you do. We are seeking to build a culture that glorifies God, so it is appropriate to ask if we are producing something that truly enriches the culture or degrades it. As Carl Henry puts it:

> To consider work a channel of divine creation, by which the creature serves God and [humanity], carries certain consequences for one's attitude toward labor. The Christian becomes morally obligated to withhold producing, and even purchasing (since money is simply the conversion of his talent into cash) culturally worthless, let alone wicked and harmful, items. [11]

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1 Westermann, cited by David Atkinson in *The Message of Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 37.

2 Phillip D. Jensen and Tony Payne, *Beginnings: Eden and Beyond, Genesis 1-11* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999), p. 21.

3 H. Ringgren, cited by Alec Motyer in *Look to the Rock* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 71.

4 David Atkinson, p. 40.

5 C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), p. 212.

6 Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmanns, 1985), p. 36.

7 Bradford Frey, William Ingram, Thomas McWhertor and William Romanowski, *All of Life Redeemed* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1983), p. 49.

8 David Atkinson, p. 41.

9 David Atkinson, p. 62.

10 Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 51.

11 Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 48.

What were we put in the world to do?

Creation and Marriage

Study 4 | **Genesis 1:26 - 2:25**

INTRODUCTION

The creation account addresses all the fundamental aspects of our basic humanity: (a) the natural order and the basis for science; (b) the meaning of human culture building; (c) the meaning and importance of work and rest. It is not surprising to discover that Genesis 1 and 2 also address the subjects of sexuality, gender, and marriage.

1. **Read Genesis 1:26-28. What principles can we learn from this text (a) about the importance of gender for our self-understanding, (b) about the relationship of the genders to each other, and (c) about the relationship of the genders to God?**

The Bible's first mention of sex and gender occurs with the very first mention of humanity itself. "In the image of God, created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen. 1:27 KJV). That concurrence is highly significant. In a nutshell, it summarizes what the rest of the Bible teaches about the importance of gender and its impact on our relationships to each other, the world, and God.

The importance of gender in our self-understanding
Our maleness or our femaleness is not incidental to our humanness; it is part of its very essence. We were not made into a generic humanity and then differentiated; rather, from the first moment, we are made as male images *or* female images of God. Only through accepting and understanding our maleness or femaleness can we accept and understand ourselves. I will not be able to understand myself if I try to ignore the traits and realities my gender gives me. This is in contrast to the post-modern view that gender is a social construct.

The relationship of the genders to each other
Genesis 1:26 confirms the equal dignity of male and female. Both are said to be created in the image of God from the beginning. Both genders, not just males, are given "dominion" over the earth in Genesis 1:28. ["God blessed *them* and said . . . "Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over . . . ."] Only as male and female, in full joint participation, can we carry out our mandate to build civilization and culture. This is in contrast to the traditional view that "a woman's place is in the home."

Besides this explicit statement of equality, these verses also hint that the sexes are complementary. Immediately after making us male and female (v. 27), God says, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth . . ." (v. 28). Here God gives us the ability of *procreativity,* which is a reflection of his own life-giving creativity. David Atkinson says, "Human procreativity is part of the outworking in our histories of the creative love of God in us as his image." [1] However, this wonderful ability to create new human life is something we can only carry out

together. Neither women alone nor men alone can produce what is necessary to create new human beings. It is only in complementary union that we can do so.

Thus, male and female are equal in dignity but different in many traits and functions. We are equal but not interchangeable or equivalent. There is a tendency for the liberal mindset to emphasize the first of these truths and a tendency of the conservative mindset to emphasize the second. But they must be believed together.

The relationship of the genders to God

As we saw last time, one implication of the term "image" is that we were made to reflect many of God's attributes and qualities, though on a lesser scale. As many commentators have pointed out, it is as male and female together that we "image" God. Since both males and females "image" or "reflect" the being of God, it means that God has all the traits associated with human maleness and femaleness. Thus, only as male-female *together* can we show forth and understand the full range of God's character.

In addition, Genesis 1 hints at what Paul explicitly states elsewhere. The only time God refers to himself as "we" or "us" is when he is about to create us as male and female. This is a hint that the relationship between male and female reflects the relationships within the Godhead itself—the Trinity. Gender relations tell us something of the relationships enjoyed by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jensen and Payne's comments bear repeating:

> In Genesis 1:26-27, God is both singular (God, He, His) and plural (Us, Our). It is not surprising, then, that when man is created in God's image, he, too, is both singular and plural. . . . Like God, mankind is both unified and diverse. . . . The three persons of the Godhead are nevertheless a single God . . . that from all eternity . . . enjoyed relationship with each other. [So] mankind is created in this image, with separate persons . . . created to enjoy a deep unity. [2]

In 1 Corinthians 11:3 Paul likens the relationship of the Father and the Son to the relationship of husband and wife. That is an implication of Genesis 1:26. The unity-yet-diversity that occurs between two complementary genders in marriage is a mirror of the deep unity yet diversity within the Godhead itself. Paul very explicitly says that the relationship of husband and wife is a great "mystery" that gives us insight into the very heart of God in the work of salvation for us (Eph. 5:32). As C. S. Lewis states,

> [In the imagery describing Christ and the church,] we are dealing with male and female not merely as facts of nature but as the live and awe-full shadows of realities utterly beyond our control and largely beyond our direct knowledge. [3]

So our gender traits reflect something of the image of God. In our interaction with the other gender, especially in marriage, we learn something about the way Father and Son relate to each other and about the way they love us.

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2. Read Genesis 2:18-25. (a) Why would Adam be lonely if he has a right relationship with God? (b) Does the fact that this part of his creation is "not good" mean that God made a mistake? (c) What are the practical implications of this passage for handling loneliness?

Why would Adam be lonely if he had a right relationship with God?
The term "image" makes it clear that human beings are made for relationships. This makes loneliness a problem for any human being. God sees that there is something wrong—"not good"—about Adam's loneliness. What is extremely interesting is the implication that Adam's relationship with God is *not,* in itself, enough! Adam is without sin and therefore has an unimpeded relationship with God. Nothing blocks his fellowship with the Father, yet his aloneness is substantial. That means that Adam's relationship needs and capacity are such that even a relationship with God himself is not sufficient to satisfy them.

Does this mean God made a mistake?
Verse 18 is a striking contrast to the repeated affirmation that God's creation was "good." In the first chapter, God looks at his creation over and over and sees that "it is good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Now, for the first time, God looks at part of his creation and says, "It is *not* good." It would be natural to wonder whether this is a flaw in God's creation. Here is Adam, who is given a right relationship with God and a home in paradise, but he still needs something more. Maybe verse 18 shows God realizing his mistake and correcting it. Maybe he is saying, "Whoops! I made this human being weaker than I intended. I'll have to do something to fix the situation."

But this interpretation cannot be right. The entire Bible tells us that God is perfect in knowledge (Job 37:16; Ps. 139:1-18). Therefore, this profound need for human relationships must have been intentionally designed by God.

What are the practical implications for handling loneliness?
First, it means that friendships and loving relationships are of enormous importance. What more vivid testimony could there to this fact than to see a man *lonely* in the Garden of Eden? All the money, comfort, and pleasure in the world cannot fulfill like love can. This confirms our intuition that happy families and relationships are a greater blessing than anything money can buy.

Second, it means that loneliness is neither a sin nor a sign of immaturity and weakness. It is startling to see that even the love of God *alone* was not enough for Adam. This must be God's design; he made us—*on purpose*—to deeply need other human beings. That means we must not think that loneliness is the result of some imperfection in us. It is not the result of the fall (sin) but of creation. Of course, a particular case of loneliness might be the result of sin or foolishness on our part. We may have lost significant relationships through selfishness, pride, etc. But loneliness *per se* is not a sin or flaw. In fact, loneliness may be a sign of maturity, not immaturity. We should admit our need for friendship and human love.

Third, it means that easing our loneliness may take a lot of searching! Adam and God do a lot of sifting and searching as they look for a "fit" companion. It is not a simple process. Not everyone can be the companion you need.

3. Genesis 2:18-25. (a) Look up Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:26, 29; Psalm 33:20 and Psalm 121:1-2. What light do these passages shed on the way woman is a "help" to man in verse 18? (b) How does the mode of Eve's creation (vv. 21-22) shed light on what "help" means?

What is a "help"?
The solution to the "not-good" of Adam's aloneness is not just friendship in general. Rather, God says that he needs a "helper suitable for him." The English word "helper" is, unfortunately, a rather weak word. It connotes an "assistant"—someone less capable who runs errands and does menial tasks. However, almost every other time the Hebrew word *ezer* is used in the Bible, it describes God himself. All the citations illustrate this fact. As we use the word "help" for God, we see that it means "provid[ing] . . . what is lacking in the one who needs help." [4] In this biblical sense, a helper is someone who helps out of strength, yet in a supportive way. For example, what does it mean for a parent to help her child with his arithmetic homework? The word "help" implies two things: First, it means that the helper is more capable in something than the one being helped. You can help with arithmetic if (and only if!) you do multiplication better than your child. Second, however, it means that you use your power in a way that enables and supports. You are not "helping" your child with his homework if you actually do the work for him. You must not usurp his responsibility but use your power in a way that enriches, supports, and "empowers" him.

What are the implications for an understanding of gender? At first glance, this text seems to teach that women are by nature weaker and less capable than men. But now we see that the word does not convey that at all. Indeed, if anything, it conveys that women are *stronger* than men, at least in many areas. It is not that a woman lacks things a man has, but that she has things he lacks. Here, then, we have a vivid confirmation and elaboration of the hint in 1:27-28 that the sexes are deeply complementary.

The text contradicts, then, both very traditional and very feminist views. On the one hand, it teaches that women are *not* inferior to men. If to be a "help" is to be inferior, then God is inferior to us, for he is our help! In order to be a help to men, women must somehow be stronger. Yet, on the other hand, it teaches that there must be some ways that the genders are irreducibly different. There must be some things that women can do better than men. And, by way of implication, there must be some things that men can do better than women.

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How does the mode of Eve's creation shed light on the word "help"?
The curious but vivid mode by which Eve is created out of Adam's rib underscores this lack of interchangeability. David Atkinson develops this point:

> The removal of a piece of the man in order to create the woman implies that from now on neither is complete without the other. The man needs the woman for his wholeness, and the woman needs man for hers. . . . Nothing could make clearer the complementarity and equality of the sexes. How much this needs to be reasserted today, in contrast to asserted male supremacy in some quarters on the one hand, radical feminist insistence that there is no need for men at all on the other, and a refusal of some . . . even to take seriously at all the complementarity and mutuality of the sexes as part of a God-given order. [5]

The other word in verse 18's phrase, *ezer kenegdo* ("helper suitable" NIV), means someone who "fits" as a "counterpart." Some translate it "like opposite." Again, there is the sense of a complementary, irreplaceable companion.

It is hard to resist quoting the famous and quaint comment of the Puritan Matthew Henry on the phenomenon of "Adam's rib." He says that woman was:

> Not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved. [6]

4. Read Genesis 2:18-25. (a) Why does God make Adam search through the animals looking for a companion? (b) What can we learn from the fact that God gives Adam neither an animal nor another male?

Why does God make Adam search the animals for a companion?
This is speculative, but here are some possibilities. First, it could be that Adam himself does not recognize or understand the "not-goodness" of his aloneness. We see in verse 18 that God understands that his loneliness needs to be addressed, but perhaps Adam does not clearly understand. By being asked to "name" each animal, Adam is forced to discern the natures of each species. Perhaps the process of distinguishing and delineating the natures of the different animals was a way to awaken his understanding of his own nature and needs. The word "now" (some translate it "at last!") in Adam's song of welcome to Eve (v. 23) shows that the process created in him a hunger for her.

What can we learn from the fact that God gave Adam neither an animal nor another male?
This fact teaches us that the deepest answer to the need for human companionship is a covenant relationship with a person of the other gender. (See question #5.) We need someone who is in a deeply paradoxical relationship to us. We need a strong "tension" with someone who is very like and very unlike us at the same time.

(1) Very *similar* and *like* us. The animals are too *un*like us to fill our deepest relational needs. The fact that animals cannot fulfill us does not mean we are not to care for them. The process of naming the animals shows that God wants us to care for them and shows why we can experience great comfort in that caring. Nevertheless, it also shows that we need a great similarity of nature in the person who will cure our aloneness. But we also need someone—

(2) Significantly *different* and *unlike* us. Another person of the same gender is too *like* us to fill our deepest relational needs. The need for complementarity is taught here. This is very mysterious and not fully developed, but it is obvious that only a person of the other gender can draw out many of the potentials in our own being *and* supplement and complement us where we are weak.

There are some obvious observations to make and some less obvious. An obvious one is that this passage undermines some of the premises of homosexuality. A less obvious one is that we all need, even apart from marriage, "cross-gender" discipling. That is, we need the friendship and fellowship of persons of the opposite sex—whether they are siblings and relatives, Christian brothers and sisters, or just friends. There are always ways in which we need the stretching and enriching experience of cross-gender friendships. There are things you can only learn (either through counsel or example) from people of the other gender. We must not think we have to be married for this enrichment to take place.

5. Read Genesis 2:24-25. What do we learn about marriage from these famous verses? What do we learn about the purpose and boundaries for sexuality? What does it mean that they were "naked and unashamed"?

First, we see that there is a need to *leave*. This implies several things. (a) It means that new couples must make each other their first priority, not their parents or their families of origin. The needs and concerns of your spouse must take precedence over the needs and concerns of your parents and your family of origin. (b) This probably also implies that the new marriage is to be a truly new family. You should work out new patterns of life together that fit your particular context, gifts, and needs. You have not "left" your original family if you reflexively insist that everything in your marriage be done as you saw it done in your parents' marriage and home. There must be a psychological separation from the father and mother as well as a physical leaving. In short, the marriage union is to be an *exclusive* union. No one else in your life should have priority over your spouse in your heart.

Second, we see that there must be *covenantal unity*. The old word "cleaves" brings out more of the sense of the original than the word "united" (NIV). In Deuteronomy 10:20, 11:22 and Joshua 22:5; 23:8, we see that the word "cleave" means to unite to someone through a covenant, a binding promise or oath. (See Deuteronomy 10:20: "Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast [cleave] to him and take your oaths in his name.") This is the missing piece

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in contemporary thinking. In our individualistic society, the legality of marriage seems inconsequential—"just a piece of paper." "What matters is that we love each other." The Bible, however, insists on a public act of social accountability. A covenant was always enacted through a ceremony before witnesses. In fact, Genesis 2:22-25 actually *is* the first marriage ceremony, in which "God himself, like a father of the bride, leads the woman to the man." [7]

Why is a covenant so crucial to the biblical understanding of marriage? First, despite the rhetoric ("We don't need a piece of paper to love each other"), a binding public oath is actually an enormous act of love in and of itself. Someone who says, "I love you but we don't need to be married" may be saying, "I don't love you enough to cut off my options for you." So the willingness to make a binding covenant is a test that your love for each other is marriage-level. Second, the rhetoric ("We don't need a piece of paper") is also too naïve. Maintaining love and loyalty to another is extremely hard. The personal relationship will often be hard (or impossible) to maintain without the restraints and constraints of a social-legal bond. In summary, the marriage union is also to be a *permanent* union.

[**Note:** The Bible does allow for divorce in some situations, but do not allow the group to be sidetracked to that subject for more than a few moments! This text does not address that topic, and you should not launch into a lengthy discussion of the passages that do. Genesis shows, however, that divorce is highly unnatural and that marriage should be entered with the full intention and expectation that it will be permanent.]

Third, we see that the husband and wife should be *one flesh*. This refers to "the personal union of man and woman at all levels of their lives, which is expressed [visibly] in and deepened through the sexual relationship." [8] Most commentators agree that the phrase "one flesh" includes sex but is more all-encompassing. The purpose of sexuality, then, is to be a mirror, a visible expression of the complete unity that should be happening in the rest of the marriage. Another way to put it is that the covenant made ("shall cleave to his wife") is then to be regularly renewed ("shall be one flesh"). Covenant renewal is enormously important in the Bible. The book of Deuteronomy is a long renewal of the covenant of Sinai. The Lord's Supper is a regular, ceremonial renewal of the covenant of baptism. Sex physically expresses the oneness created by the marriage covenant in all other areas of married life (economically, legally, personally, psychologically). Sex thus renews and revitalizes the marriage covenant. So thirdly, marriage is a *physical and personal* union.

There are many implications that are extremely relevant for life in our culture.

First, if sexuality is clearly good, God-created, and a requisite part of marriage, one spouse may not simply deprive the other spouse of sex. ("The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to the husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." [1 Cor. 7:3-4 ESV])

Second, if sexuality is linked to covenant, and indeed is given for the purpose of symbolizing, deepening, and renewing a covenant commitment, it needs the *context* of a covenant commitment! You can't renew a covenant unless you've made one, and you can't be sure you love a person enough to have sex with him or her unless you've made one. Not only that, you shouldn't trust another person with your sexuality unless he or she has "left father and mother" and made you his or her number one priority. It all fits together rather logically, but in our modern world we have split them all apart. C. S. Lewis had this to say on the subject:

> The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (the sexual) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union. The Christian attitude does not mean that there is anything wrong about sexual pleasure, any more than about the pleasure of eating. It means that you must not isolate that pleasure and try to get it by itself, any more than you ought to try to get the pleasure of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again. [9]

Lewis' illustration is very telling. The purpose of the sense (and pleasure) of taste is to get you to "commit" the food to digestion, to actually making it part of yourself. In the same way, sexual pleasure is intended to get you to commit yourself (and recommit yourself) to a person, to attaining deep unity with your spouse in every way. The apostle Paul assumes this same logic when he insists that even sex with a prostitute is to engage in an action meant to express an exclusive, permanent, "one flesh" relationship (1 Cor. 6:12-20).

In summary, this is why Chistians continue to maintain that sexual intercourse has only one proper context: heterosexual marriage.

Third, we should remember that Genesis 1:27-28 tells us that the other purpose of sex is procreation. If we put 1:27-28 together with 2:24-25, we see that the two purposes of sex are covenantal unity and procreation. The implication, in David Atkinson's words:

> If the "unitive" and "procreative" aspects to human sexual relationships belong in principle together, we need to be careful of practices which separate them. Some Christians, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition, believe that this rules out [any sex act that uses contraceptives and thus is not 'open to life']. This does not seem to follow. It seems perfectly possible . . . [for] a marriage [to be] open to parenthood without requiring that every sexual act be open to [conception]. Indeed, by far the more important focus in Genesis 2 is the unitive aspect of the marriage relationship. . . . However, there are other practices, such as artificial insemination by a donor, or embryo transfer, not to mention surrogate motherhood, which separate procreative activity completely from the love-relationship of husband and wife. These do not seem possible to justify on the basis of the theology of sexuality we have outlined [here]. [10]

What does it mean that they were "naked and unashamed"?
This is a wistful comment. Adam and Eve had a perfect relationship. Just as sex is supposed to reflect the unity of the relationship, so their nakedness reflected their total transparency and vulnerability to each other. They had nothing to hide; they were absolutely open to each other and neither partner abused this privilege. Their relationship had "no alloy of greed, distrust, or dishonor;" [11] it had an "openness and a unity, not masked by guilt, not disordered by lust, not hampered by shame." [12] [**Note:** The lack of clothing not only indicates a perfect relationship, but also a perfect physical environment. It was never too hot, too cold, or otherwise uncomfortable!]

Nearly all commentators believe that the author is preparing us for the contrast that will come in Genesis 3. There, sin brings disorder to all relationships and all sexuality. We must remember that today, heterosexual sexuality is also "broken"—no one has the kind of relationship Adam and Eve enjoyed. Heterosexuality in this world can be marked by fear, guilt, obsessiveness, idolatry, addiction, and oppression. This reality balances the "critique" of homosexuality the passage has given us, for in 2:25 we also see an implied critique of heterosexuality after the fall. That does not mean that married heterosexuality is not God's will; rather, we must recognize its brokenness and imperfection in this life and world. Even in a Christian marriage, we must beware of obsessiveness, fear, guilt, idolatry, addiction, and oppression.

6. Read Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Corinthians 7:27-31. How do these passages put marriage into perspective for Christians, both single and married?

1 Corinthians 7
First, we see that Christians are not required to be married *or* to be single. Neither course is seen by Paul as a sin. This may seem surprising in the light of Genesis 1-2, which implies that no one will be happy or fulfilled without marriage. (That is why we finish out this study with the balance of 1 Corinthians.) What we see in Paul's writing is the reality of a sinful, broken world and the swift passage of time (1 Cor. 7:31). That is a situation very different from the garden of Eden. How does this fallen world put marriage in perspective? On the one hand, it means that marriage itself will always be deeply imperfect. ("Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this" [7:28].) Thus marriage will never be the perfect fulfillment it could have been or that we want it to be. To marry with overblown (idolatrous) expectations is a recipe for disaster. On the other hand, living in a fallen world also means that there are now people who may wish to be married but cannot be. If every human being was a healthy, wise, and good person, *perhaps* there would be spouses for everyone, but that is not the case. Paul indicates elsewhere in the chapter that there will be many people who can minister and function best as single persons. In summary, a fallen world means that not everyone should be married, and no one should think of marriage as a "cure-all."

Ephesians 5
This passage shows us that human marriage finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ.

> What does this mean for us? Every Christian is already engaged to be married—to Christ. This is the really important marriage, and our preparation for it is holiness. Christ has paid the "bride price" to win us for Himself, and we might even regard the gift of the Holy Spirit as an engagement ring, guaranteeing our participation in the wedding day at the end of time. In the meantime, we are to prepare ourselves for the wedding by putting on "holiness" . . . as our bridal clothes. [13]

Someone may remember that the marriage of Adam and Eve seemed to be necessary despite the right relationship each one had with God. Now, in Ephesians 5, Christ's "marriage" is not with you or me as individuals, but with the church, the *Body* of Christ. In other words, the relationship with Christ we have in heaven will somehow unite us not only to him, but to each other, thereby ending all loneliness and relational incompleteness forever. Therefore, if we find ourselves single and wishing to be married, or unhappily married, we must rely on our spousal love in Christ, the only spousal love that will ever truly complete us. On the other hand, if we are in happy marriages, we must beware of making our spouse an idol—for the same reasons. Our betrothal to Christ is the one betrothal we cannot live without.

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1 David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 41.

2 Phillip D. Jensen and Tony Payne, *Beginnings: Eden and Beyond, Genesis 1-11* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999), p. 21.

3 C S. Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church?" in *God in the Dock,* Walter Hooper, Ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 239.

4 David Atkinson, p. 68.

5 David Atkinson, p. 71.

6 From Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible,* cited by David Atkinson, p. 71.

7 Gerhard von Rad, cited by Derek Kidner in *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 66.

8 David Atkinson, p. 76.

9 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1943, 1960), p. 96.

10 David Atkinson, p. 77.

11 Derek Kidner, p. 66.

12 David Atkinson, p. 79.

13 Phillip D. Jensen and Tony Payne, p. 34.

What were we put in the world to do?

Paradise Lost I

Study 5
Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-8

INTRODUCTION

The creation account in Genesis 1-2 addresses all the fundamental aspects of our humanity. But everyone who has ever lived recognizes that there is something very wrong with human beings and human life. Why do we have death, disease, and evil? The account of the "fall" in Genesis 3 addresses this basic question.

Note on the Origin of Evil: The Genesis 3 account tells us about the *entry* of evil into the world but it does not tell us much directly about its *origin*, which has occupied thinkers throughout the ages. However, the narrative *does* rule out a couple of theories of the origin of evil. First, God does not tempt the human couple himself, so he is not the author of evil. Second, Adam and Eve do not disobey out of their own impulse and energy, so they were not created sinful. There is not yet an "inner voice" of temptation within the human heart. Rather, the tempting voice comes from the outside. But who is the Serpent, the source of the temptation? Genesis is (maddeningly!) silent on this. Derek Kidner notes, "His [the Serpent's] malevolent brilliance raises the question, which is not pursued [in the text], whether he is the tool of a more formidable rebel." [1] In 3:15, which we will look at next week, there is a strong implication that the Serpent is simply the tool of a supernatural being, the Devil (see Rom. 16:20; Rev. 12:9). Nonetheless, this does not answer some basic philosophical questions: How did Satan become evil? And why did God let this happen (or why did God create us as we are), if he obviously knew it would happen? C. S. Lewis gives the classic "free-will" answer for these questions:

> If a thing is free to be good, it's also free to be bad. And free will has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. [2]

Having said that, the origin of evil is to remain a mystery—otherwise Genesis 3 would tell us more. We do not know for certain why an all-powerful God would allow evil. "Freedom of choice" makes some sense, but it certainly can't account for it all. Ultimately, we need to realize that there is a certain uselessness to philosophical speculations. What we *need* to understand is (a) what sin is, (b) how it works in us, and (c) what to do about it. To all these practical issues, Genesis 3 (and the rest of the Bible!) has plenty to say.

1. Read Genesis 2:16-17. (a) What explanation does God give Adam and Eve for this prohibition? Why is this a good test? (b) How would this test provide "knowledge of good and evil" regardless of the human response? (See 3:5, 22.)

What is the explanation? How is this a good test?
In the garden of God, Adam and Eve are given only one prohibition: "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (2:17 KJV). This is the only boundary to human freedom that God lays down. This does not seem very difficult—considerably less difficult than following all of the Ten Commandments! And yet there is a very difficult aspect to the command. God gives no word of explanation as to *why* they were not to eat of the tree. They are told that they will be punished—"in that day you will surely die"—but they are not told what is wrong with eating from the tree or why they would be punished. For example, God does not say, "Don't eat of the tree because it is poison" or "Don't eat of the tree because it will release a terrible power into the world."

Therefore, in a way, this single prohibition shows us the essence of the test of obedience. If we know why it is practical to obey a command of God, then we are complying with his will out of self-interest. But if we obey a command simply and solely because "the LORD God commanded" it (2:16), then (and only then) have we truly obeyed God. In other words, God is saying in 2:16-17: "I want you to do something *just because I said so,* not because it immediately benefits you or is practical, helpful, and exciting. I want you to do something just because I am God." Thus this commandment contains the essence of all commandments.

To clarify, consider the possible motives we might have for complying with the command, "Do not lie." One possible motive might be *fear*. We might say, "If I lie, I'll get caught." A second possible motive might be *pride*. We might say, "I am a good person, better than the low-down, immoral people who lie." Now, both of these reasons have some validity: lying often does not "pay," and people who tell the truth *are* more honest and helpful to others than people who do not. But if either or both of these motives are our primary reasons for obeying, we are ultimately only watching out for our own skin. We are not honest for God's sake or for honesty's sake—but for our sake. Thus God is calling Adam and Eve to do something just because he says so—for his sake. [**Note:** This line of reasoning is supported by the fact that Adam and Eve could not have been deterred by the warning, "You shall surely die." They probably had no concept of what that would involve.]

How would this test provide knowledge of good and evil no matter what the response?
At first glance, this test gives the impression that God does not want humanity to have the knowledge of good and evil at all. But in 3:22, God says, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil" (ESV). If God "knows good and evil" and he is holy, then the knowing of good and evil

cannot be a bad thing in itself. What was bad was the *way* humankind came to that knowledge. Derek Kidner explains:

> The serpent's promise of "eyes . . . opened" came true in its fashion (cf. 3:22) but it was a grotesque anticlimax to the dream of enlightenment. Man saw the familiar world and spoiled it now in the seeing, projecting evil on to innocence (cf. Titus 1:15) and reacting to good with shame and flight. His new consciousness of good and evil was both like and unlike the divine knowledge (3:22), differing from it and from innocence as a sick man's aching awareness of his body differs both from the insight of the physician and the unconcern of the man in health. [3]

There are two ways to learn the difference between good and evil—either through resisting evil or through doing it. The person who resists evil understands good and evil properly. He or she is like the physician who is in a position to deal with a disease. But the person who has given in to evil now has a knowledge that is distorted by the self-centeredness of sin. Another way to put it: A very good man like Lincoln can understand a Hitler, because goodness leads us to an honest understanding of our own sinfulness. But a very wicked man like Hitler could never understand a good man. He could not understand self-sacrifice, honesty, etc. They make no sense to him. Thus evil continually leads you to make bad decisions. "Evil oft doth evil mar." [4]

Therefore, the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" was aptly named. The command regarding the tree would give Adam and Eve some kind of knowledge and experience of good and evil whatever they chose to do.

2. Read Genesis 3:1-3. This is the first approach or strategy of temptation. Neither the Serpent nor the woman restates God's command properly. What does this teach us about the Serpent's first strategy?

In his first strategic approach, *the Serpent creates mistrust in the authority of God's Word.* The Serpent does not contradict at first, but only insinuates and hints. How does he do this?

First, he "tampers" with the Word God has spoken. He exaggerates the original command and then asks a question. But it is clearly a rhetorical question, not designed to get information but to create an attitude. "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (v. 1). The question is really a way to express incredulity. He implies that God's command is burdensome and unreasonable. To paraphrase, he is saying, "So God actually said you can't eat the fruit of your *own* garden? If God really is as generous as we have been led to believe, surely he would not have forbidden such a natural thing!" By tampering and scoffing, he creates an atmosphere in which the command of God is subjected to human evaluation.

That is the goal of this first approach. The first question insinuates that God's command is something we have a right to weigh and judge. "The incredulous

[question]—'So God has actually said . . .?'—is both disturbing and flattering: it smuggles in the assumption that God's word is subject to our judgment." [5] Let's feel the full weight of this. How does sin begin? We learn here that it does not begin when we decide to disobey. It begins when we assume we have the right and wisdom to decide *if* we should obey.

As soon as you begin asking, "Is this obedience to God really beneficial to me or not? Should I obey or not?"—then you have already disobeyed! How so? You are assuming God's place. You are not being neutral when you ask such questions. Rather, you are already committed to the idea that you can stand in judgment over God's wisdom. So the first step in temptation begins *not* with disobeying his will, but with putting yourself in a position to judge its wisdom.

The Serpent's first stratagem (3:1) begins to work, for Eve's response exaggerates the command of God as well. She says God told them not to eat of the tree, "neither shall you *touch* it, lest you die" (3:3 ESV). She "over-corrects the error, magnifying God's strictness." [6] Why does she exaggerate? Apparently, she has begun to feel some self-pity and has picked up the spirit of the first strategy. She is beginning to put herself into the position of judge. Alec Motyer writes:

> There is nothing truer to the portrayal of Satan than a determination to undermine the word of God, to get people to live on any other basis than revelation. [7]

3. Read Genesis 3:4-5. (a) What is the Serpent's second strategy? How does he challenge God's motives? (b) What do we learn here about the essence of sin?

The Serpent's second strategy

The Serpent evidently recognizes Eve's drift, so he now turns to his second strategy, which is an *open assault on the goodness of God's works.* It is remarkable how thoroughly he does this in just a few words.

First, he assaults God's truthfulness. He says flat out, "You will not surely die." As is evident from the rest of the passage, Adam and Eve do *not* physically die the day they eat the fruit. But they die spiritually, falling under the curse of God's condemnation, which eventually leads to physical death as well. The Serpent here is apparently denying all of this. He is particularly denying the reality of the doctrine of judgment and condemnation. Of course, plenty of people deny this reality today for the same reasons. They wish to live as they wish.

Second, he assaults God's love and good will. He says, "God knows that . . . your eyes will be opened." This is a flat charge that God does not have our best interests at heart. This is to say, "If you obey God, you won't be happy!" This is the Big Lie that lives at the heart of every sin and every sinner. It is at the root of any particular disobedience. We don't believe that "God is for us."

We believe we have to obey God to please him, but we don't believe his authority really benefits us.

Third, he assaults God's sufficiency and character when he says, "You will be like God." The Serpent is saying two things: First, God's motivation is to keep us down! God is insecure and envious, and he does not want us to grow into our potential. Second, it is possible for us to become God's rivals. We *don't really need God* to live our lives.

> The climax [3:5] is a lie big enough to reinterpret life (this breadth is the power of a false system) and dynamic enough to redirect the flow of affection and ambition. To be "as God" and to achieve it by outwitting him is an intoxicating program. God will henceforth be regarded, consciously or not, as rival and enemy. . . . So the tempter pits his bare assertion against [first] the word and [second] the works of God, presenting divine love as envy, service as servility, and a suicidal plunge as a leap into life, "All these things will I give thee . . ."; the same pattern repeats in Christ's temptations, and in ours. [8]

And, of course, along with the assault on God comes the promise that self-sufficiency will bring enormous rewards. As we saw above, the promise "your eyes will be open" is a tragic irony, since the new kind of "knowledge" they receive is full of shame and misery (3:7). And the promise "you will be like God" is a similarly tragic paradox. Sin most definitely *does* put you in the place of God—but you are horribly unqualified for the job. It is like putting yourself in the place of a foundation pillar for a skyscraper. You can do it—but it will crush you.

The essence of sin

Genesis 3 shows us that sin is a deeper concept than just "breaking the rules." Nothing could make that clearer than God's choice for his first command. He did not make his first command "Don't kill" or "Don't lie." Those, of course, are moral absolutes put in the heart of every human being. Why did God choose, instead, such an arbitrary rule—"Don't eat of that particular tree"? It shows us that the essence of sin is not breaking a rule; it is trying to be your own God—your own Savior and your own Lord. Seeking to be one's own judge is the beginning of sin, even before you've decided to break a rule! The desire to be God's rival and to be "like God" has now passed into every human heart. It informs absolutely everything we do, consciously or unconsciously, whether we are Christians or not.

4. Read Genesis 3:6. How do (a) the emotions, (b) the mind, and (c) the will play a role in the committing of sin? Why is it important to see that every aspect of our nature is polluted by sin?

It is evident from this verse that Eve has subtly made the choice to substitute herself for God. First, she determined to sit in judgment on God (strategy #1)

which, second, led to the choice to seek power and wisdom on her own without God (strategy #2). Now the visible action of sin flows from these invisible choices.

The emotions ("pleasing to the eye")
The first dimension of sin mentioned is the emotional dimension: "The woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing [lit. "attractive"] to the eye . . . ." We have already been told that the trees of the garden were "pleasing to the eye and good for food" (2:9). Therefore, this aesthetic and physical appetite—this strong feeling—cannot be wrong in itself. Food and beauty are good things to desire. But now the desire and feelings for good things have become *inordinate*. When the desire for anything grows greater than the desire to please God, we are ready to sin.

This is very important to remember. We see here that the heart of sin is not so much a desire to do bad things; it is an excessive desire for good things. Satan has enticed Eve to go get her own happiness, enlightenment, and power through eating from the tree. The tree was in itself a good thing, but now Eve turns to it to get for herself what only God can give her. Thus a good desire is choking out and replacing her desire for God. That will always lead us to sin. Because of sin (the fundamental choice to put ourselves in God's place), all natural and good desires (for comfort, love, or accomplishment) become disordered and out of proportion.

Just as it happened in the garden, the disorder in our good emotions is hidden from us. "What could be so wrong about wanting to eat fruit? What is so wrong about wanting to be in love? What could be wrong about wanting to be successful in business?" The answer is that nothing is wrong with these desires in themselves. But now, since the garden, the human heart's good desires are tainted by our desire to sit in the place of God. Because of the inherent goodness of so many of our desires, we are blind to the way sin has made them inordinate and disordered. So the first result of sin is: Even our good emotions and desires can overpower us to entice us away from God.

The mind ("desirable for gaining wisdom")
Secondly, we see that Eve's reasoning is now affected by and involved in the sin: "and desirable for gaining wisdom." She is using her reason, and here is how her thinking goes. She knows that God already has this knowledge of good and evil. She hears the name the tree bears; surely this would be the way to gain the knowledge! After all, the name of the tree and its effects should surely match! Why name a tree after a particular form of knowledge if it can't provide it? So, it follows that to *eat* of the tree would be the way to get the knowledge and move to a new level of enlightenment.

With hindsight, we see that this line of reasoning is somewhat logical, but ultimately flawed. As we noted in the first question, there were *two* ways for the tree to give out this knowledge—one through obedience and one through

disobedience. (In the same way, there are two ways to come to "know" the bubonic plague. One is to study it and learn how to treat it; the other is to catch it and die from it within hours. Which one is "better"?!)

Where did Eve's logic go wrong? She started with a false premise: that she was *already* wiser than the command of God. In reality, she didn't have enough information to make a right decision; she should have relied on the command of God, but she did not. Therefore, we see that even the most brilliant man or woman will not be wise enough to live in this world if that person thinks he is wise enough to live without God's revelation. So the second result of sin is: Human reason that arrogantly rejects God's revelation and assumes its own self-sufficiency. Any philosophy, science, or theory that leaves out our need for revelation and ignores the insufficiency of human reason will lead to disaster.

The will: "She took some and ate it. She also gave . . . to her husband . . . and he ate it."

Lastly, we see that the will is engaged. The will only does what the mind and heart most want. If the heart and mind are committed to human autonomy, the actions of the body will follow.

Notice the simplicity of the statement that Eve gave the fruit to her husband and he ate. Very simply, this teaches us that sin enjoys company. We do not like to do wrong alone. There is a real need for community in sin, and one of the best ways to overcome sin is to get out of communities that provide self-justification and reinforcement for bad behavior. On a deeper level, we see in verse 6 a complete reversal of God's creation order. First, man and woman were to care for and rule over the plants and animals (1:26) yet here the Serpent is leading Eve. Second, Eve was made to be a help to Adam (2:18) but here she is a hindrance. Third, Adam surely was responsible to reclaim his wife from temptation, but instead he goes down with her without a word of protest. In fact, it is possible that the narrator is telling us that he sinned more readily than she did. There is no mention of any reflection and reasoning on Adam's part, nor any retort, as Eve gave the Serpent.

5. Read Genesis 3:7-8. (a) Why is verse 7 so unexpected after the threat of 2:17? (b) What immediate results do we see from our sin? (c) What three results of sin are immediately obvious?

Why is verse 7 so unexpected?

Derek Kidner notes:

> The opening of the verse, utterly unexpected after 2:17, forces the reader to re-examine the meaning of the death that was threatened there. Augustine comments: "If . . . it be asked what death God threatened man with . . . whether . . . bodily or spiritual or that second death, we answer: It was all. . . . He comprehends therein, not only the first part of the first death, wheresoever the soul loses God, nor the latter only, wherein the soul leaves the body . . . but also . . . the second which is the last of deaths, eternal, and following after all." [9]

We saw that the "eyes opened" was a "grotesque anti-climax." Sin does give us a new perspective, but it is distorted and tragic. Adam and Eve now "knew" sin by being infected with it. Now they could not understand it rightly, as they would have if they had resisted it.

What are the initial results?
Next time we will look in detail at "the curse": the effects of sin on the world and human nature. But three effects are seen immediately in the narrative, and they are comprehensive.

First, our relationship with ourselves is affected by sin: "They realized they were naked" (v. 7). Though the word "shame" is not used here, it is strongly implied, because this verse is the opposite of 2:25, where we read that Adam and Eve had been "naked and *un*ashamed." David Atkinson writes, "Shame [is] that sense of unease with yourself at the heart of your being." [10] Some people make a distinction between shame and guilt, saying that guilt is feeling bad about what you've done and shame is feeling bad about what you are. That certainly fits this verse.

Second, our relationship with one another is affected by sin: "They sewed fig leaves together and made coverings" (v. 7). Adam and Eve are now ill at ease with each other and uncomfortable with absolute transparency. They now need to control what others see of them.

Third, our relationship with God is affected by sin: "they hid from the LORD" (v. 8). Though this comes last in narrative order, it is first in logical order. It is because their relationship with God was disrupted that their relationships with themselves and others are disrupted. The spiritual problem is what led to the psychological and social problems.

6. **What did you learn today about sin that most impressed you? How can it make a practical difference in the way you live?**

notes

[1] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 67.

[2] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1943, 1960), p. 52.

[3] Derek Kidner, p. 69.

[4] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*.

[5] Derek Kidner, p. 67.

[6] Derek Kidner, p. 68.

[7] Alec Motyer, *Look to the Rock* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 114.

[8] Derek Kidner, p. 68.

[9] Derek Kidner, p. 69, quoting Augustine from *City of God* XIII, xii.

[10] David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 87.

What were we put in the world to do?

Paradise Lost II

Study 6 | **Genesis 3:7-24**

INTRODUCTION

Genesis 3 answers two fundamental questions: "What is wrong with the world and with us? Why do we have death, disease, and evil?" This chapter describes humankind's "fall" into sin. Last week we considered the way sin entered the world and the human heart (Gen. 3:1-7). This week we look at the rest of the chapter, which describes the outworking of sin into the fabric of human life.

1. **Read Genesis 3:7-8. How is verse 7 unexpected after the threat of 2:17? How does the rest of the chapter shed meaning on the "death" God spoke of in 2:17? How does Romans 8:19-22 shed light on this death?**

We began considering this question in the last study. Most readers read 2:17 and think simply of physical death. They expect that as soon as Adam and Eve eat of the tree, they will drop dead or God will appear and destroy them on the spot. Instead, 3:7 says, "[Their] eyes . . . were opened, and they realized. . . ." It almost seems as if the Serpent was right when he promised that their eyes would be opened (3:5). Was God wrong and the Serpent right?

No. The opening of the eyes that came was not the opening they expected, and the death that came was not the death we expected.

First, the "opening of the eyes" was a new form of knowledge, but it led to bondage rather than freedom. As we saw last week, there are two ways to know about the bubonic plague. One is to understand it so you can treat it; the other is to *get* it and die from it. Humanity now "knows" good and evil in the latter way, and this kind of knowledge leads to distortion. That is, a bad person can't understand a good one, but a good one can understand a bad one. Derek Kidner's comment is worth repeating:

> The serpent's promise of "eyes . . . opened" came true in its fashion (cf. 3:22) but it was a grotesque anticlimax to the dream of enlightenment. Man saw the familiar world and spoiled it now in the seeing, projecting evil on to innocence (cf. Titus 1:15) and reacting to good with shame and flight. His new consciousness of good and evil was both like and unlike the divine knowledge (3:22), differing from it and from innocence as a sick man's aching awareness of his body differs both from the insight of the physician and the unconcern of the man in health. [1]

Second, the death God spoke of in 2:17 is now revealed to be far more comprehensive than we assumed. The fact that Adam and Eve survive after eating the fruit could lead us to think that God was only promising that they would *eventually* die and be lost eternally if they ate of the tree. But God had said, "When you eat of it" (NIV) or literally, "In the day you eat of it—you will surely die." Listen again to Derek Kidner:

> The opening of the verse [3:7], utterly unexpected after 2:17, forces the reader to re-examine the meaning of the death that was threatened there. Augustine comments: "If . . . it be asked what death God threatened man with . . . whether . . . bodily or spiritual or that second death, we answer: It was *all*. . . . He comprehends therein, not only the first part of the first death, where[in] the soul loses God, nor the latter only, wherein the soul leaves the body . . . but also . . . the second which is the last of deaths, eternal, and following after all." [2]

Physical death and bodily disintegration are only one vivid example of the death and disintegration that now come to all human relationships and every aspect of human life. *Nothing* works right now; everything falls apart. Sin leads to death and disintegration in every area of life: spiritual, physical, social, cultural, psychological, and eternal. The biblical view of the world is that it is "fallen" and subject to death in every respect. The rest of the chapter reveals the extensiveness of the fall.

This reality is important to remember, for many Christians divide the world into "worldly" and "sacred" space and practice. However, absolutely *everything* is affected by sin. Albert M. Wolters comments:

> The effects of sin touch all of creation; no created thing is in principle untouched by the corrosive effects of the fall. Whether we look at societal structures such as the state or family, or cultural pursuits such as art or technology, or bodily functions such as sexuality or eating, or anything at all within the wide scope of creation, we discover that the good handiwork of God has been drawn into the sphere of human mutiny against God. "The whole creation," Paul writes . . . "has been groaning . . . [and] subject to bondage and decay." [3]

2. Read Genesis 3:7-19. List all the results and consequences of sin you can find. Be sure to analyze the interview of verses 9-13.

This passage's teaching on the results of sin is rich and multi-dimensional. There is no one right "list" or outline, but here are some ideas.

First, there is *internal shame and guilt*. "They realized they were naked" (v. 7). (See question 5 from last week.)

Second, there is *mistrust and fear of other people.* The need for clothing (v. 7, "they . . . made coverings") is much more than a new reticence about sex. Alec Motyer writes, "[There is] a secretive awareness of self, and a desire . . . to hide, to retreat from the old unself-protective mutuality. . . . Innocence has changed . . . into fear, as each with 'urgency and desperation' seeks protection from the gaze of the other." [4] In short, Adam and Eve don't trust each other now. They erect defenses and only reveal what they think will keep them in control. Every human being, to some degree, is hiding from the rest of the human race. We are all desperately seeking to determine what others see of us, rather than allowing anyone to see the full truth.

Third, there is an *inability now to see their own sin*. When God comes to the garden, Adam and Eve hide within it (v. 8) because of a general fear that God is looking on them as they are ("because I was naked," v. 10). This, however, is not the godly "fear of the Lord" that the Bible encourages. On the one hand, they do unavoidably sense that they are now unfit for God's presence. But their understanding of the *reason* for that—their sin—totally escapes them. Motyer points out that if they had a true, clear sense of their unworthiness and sin, they either (a) would have fled the garden, knowing they did not deserve it (but they don't leave), or (b) would have stayed, repented, and admitted what they did wrong (but they don't confess—see verses 12-13).

> In Genesis 3:8 there is an inadequate awareness of the seriousness of sin, moral perceptions are clouded, and the self-centered view of values is well beneath the God-centered view. . . . They [sense that] they cannot meet and keep company with the Lord God as before, but neither do they see that the consequence of sin is loss of paradise. . . . Hearing the approach of the Lord God, [they] hide, but *within* the Garden. . . . The blindness of sin is beginning to take effect . . . . From the moment of the Fall, humankind has suffered from moral schizophrenia: neither able to deny sinfulness nor to acknowledge it for what it is. [5]

Fourth, there is *blaming and turning on others in self-justification.* The fascinating interview of verses 9-13 could be said to reveal point #3 above—that we cannot see, confess, and take responsibility for our own sin. But it also reveals a key way we now deal with our own sin: We blame and condemn others.

God's first question is general. He asks, essentially, "Why are you in this condition—hiding?" Adam's first answer to God completely avoids the real truth that he has eaten of the tree. He only talks of his inner psychological sense of shame and fear. God's second question is so direct that Adam cannot avoid the truth, but he immediately deflects the responsibility away from himself to Eve. She does the same to the Serpent. Here we see a further breakdown in human relationships. Not only are we afraid and mistrustful of one another (v. 7), but we are positively hostile. Different races, genders, and individuals foster a sense of superiority and/or a sense of victimhood in order to justify this.

Fifth, there is a *blaming and turning on God in self-justification.* Adam's answer in verse 12 shows that even in the very presence of God, humanity has now become resentful of God and hostile to him. Adam says, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me . . . and I ate . . . ." This is a clear accusation that God himself is to blame for what Adam has done. God gave him the woman who was supposed to help him! Clearly, he gave Adam an inferior, flawed product! Just as it is with other human beings, our relationship with God is not simply one of mistrust, but of anger and hostility. We consider God an enemy. Last week, we saw that this was implicit in the Serpent's temptation.

Sixth, there is *marital breakdown*. In Genesis 2 and 3 there are hints (though they are not strong or direct) of male leadership in marriage. Those hints are as

follows: (a) Man is created first and names his wife as he named the rest of creation. (See below for the balanced, nuanced way the woman is "named.") (b) Woman is created as a "helper," which (we saw) denotes an equal but complementary being. However, the word also *con*notes the ability to serve and advance another individual with your strength. Adam is not called to or given the same gift for interdependence and "helping" that Eve is given. This indicates her service to and support of him. (c) Even here in chapter 3, it is significant that God questions Adam first, then Eve, and then the Serpent. In a chapter like this, this is not likely to be an accident. Derek Kidner summarizes, "God, by addressing man, woman, and serpent in that order, has shown how He regards their degrees of responsibility." [6]

Despite these indications of a more traditional view of male leadership, the curse in 3:16 shows another perspective. Here we see that the domination of wives by their husbands is *not* the way God created marriage to function. Rather, it is a consequence of sin. "Your *desire* will be for your husband" (v. 16) is echoed in 4:7b: "Sin is crouching at your door—it *desires* to have you." The word indicates not a happy attraction but a desire to control. It says that the woman will now be seeking a husband and family as a way to gain control, happiness, and identity.

"But he will rule over you" (v. 16b) means "Instead, he will dominate you." What we see here, says Kidner, is that "[love] has slipped from the fully personal realm to that of instinctive urges passive and active. 'To love and to cherish' becomes 'to desire and to dominate.'" [7] Kidner is saying that if a woman inordinately needs a man for her identity, it is a result of the fall. And when a man tyrannizes and uses a woman, it is also the result of the fall. In other words, the often-seen gender stereotypes (of a passive, dependent woman and a domineering man) are bad things.

Motyer points out a delicate balance in the way Adam originally was to relate to his wife.

> In 2:23, the passive "she shall be called . . ." is less the giving of a name than the recognition of a fact . . . But now (in 3:20), the active form "he called her name, Eve, for she was the mother . . ." matches . . . the three-fold use of "called" [with regard to the animals] (2:19-20). Woman is now as much a possession and chattel as a beast, and [she is] named for a function. No longer is it what she can *be* to the man but what she can *do* for him. A cow for milk, and ox for ploughing, and a wife for offspring! [8] [**Note:** Nevertheless, see below for another perspective on the naming of Eve.]

Seventh, there is *economic-cultural breakdown.* In verses 17-19 God indicates that, because of sin, our ability to work and build a culture is seriously damaged. (Refer to Weeks 2 and 3 on work and culture building.) We saw that work was a good thing, put into paradise as something human beings need to be fulfilled and happy. Yet here we see that work becomes "painful toil" (v. 17).

Work is not a curse, but work has *been* cursed. Both aspects of culture building—"forming" and "filling" (Gen. 1:26-28)—are cursed. Now child-bearing will be filled with pain and suffering (3:16) and toiling in the soil will be as well. (Remember that gardening in the soil was a mirror of all kinds of work.) This means that, in all our work, we will be able to envision far more than we can accomplish, both because of a lack of ability and because of resistance in the environment. Art, science, business, agriculture, education—everything will be frustrating and difficult and will wear us down.

Eighth, there is *physical breakdown*. The final thing we see in this passage is that "pain" and "sweat" lead to physical death: "Until you return to the ground" (v. 19). Disease, old age, natural disasters, and death itself are the results of sin. Before the fall, God ruled over man who ruled over nature. Now, we see in verse 19, it is "God over nature over man." The dust of the ground "wins" over us in the end.

In summary, it is critical to see how far-reaching the results of sin are. We all recognize murder, adultery, theft, and heresy as sinful results of the fall. But do we realize that poverty, mental illness, bad government, and poor race relations are also part of the "groaning of creation" under sin? If in our minds we limit the results of sin only to individual unethical actions or heretical teachings, we will confine our concerns only to evangelism, and not also to counseling, social justice, and so on.

Conclusion: Adam and Eve were alienated from God ("they hid from the LORD," v. 8), which led to alienation from one another (vv. 7, 12-13, 16), from themselves (vv. 7, 10), and from nature (vv. 17-19). Spiritual alienation leads to psychological, social, cultural, and even physical alienation.

3. Why is it so important to remember both the goodness of creation (from Genesis 1-2) *and* the fallen-ness of creation (from Genesis 3)? What problems result when you forget one or the other?

Albert Wolters writes:

> The central point to make is that, biblically speaking, sin [does not] abolish [the goodness] of creation. Creation and sin remain distinct, however closely they may be intertwined in our experience. . . . Sin . . . attaches itself to creation like a parasite. Hatred, for example, had no place within God's good creation. . . . Nevertheless, hatred cannot exist without the creational substratum of human emotion and healthy assertiveness. Hatred participates simultaneously in the goodness of creation . . . and in the demonic distortion . . . .

> The great danger is always to single out some aspect . . . of God's good creation and identify *it,* rather than the alien intrusion of [sin], as the villain. . . . Such an error [conceives] the good-evil dichotomy as intrinsic to the creation itself. The result is that something in the good creation is [identified as the source of] evil. . . . In the course of history, this "something" has been variously identified as . . . the body and its passions (Plato . . .), culture in distinction from nature (Rousseau and . . . Romanticism), institutional authority, especially in . . . the family ([psychodynamic] psychology), technology and management techniques (Heidegger and Ellul . . .) . . . .
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> The Bible is unique in its uncompromising rejection of all attempts . . . to identify part of creation as either the villain or the savior. All other religions, philosophies, and worldviews in one way or another fall into the trap of [idolatry]—of failing to keep creation and fall distinct, and this trap [is] an ever-present danger for Christian thinking. [9]

For example, Genesis 1 and 2 tell us that work is inherently good. Genesis 3 tells us that work is cursed. To make work an inherent evil (as did Greek philosophy) *or* a way to get an identity for ourselves (as many in modern Western society do) is a failure to keep creation and fall separate and in balance.

4. Read Genesis 3:14-15. Genesis 1-2 tell us of creation, and Genesis 3 tells us of the fall. What do we learn even here about hope for future redemption?

First, God in verse 14 declares personal war on sin and evil when he makes his declaration. [**Note:** Verse 14 does not necessarily mean that the Serpent had never been "on [its] belly" before.] Kidner says, "These words do not imply that . . . the story is . . . a 'Just So Story' on how the serpent lost its legs . . . but that the crawling is henceforth symbolic (cf. Is. 65:25)—just as . . . a new significance, not a new existence, will be decreed for the rainbow." [10]

Second, God shows us that he will carry out this warfare not simply by saving individual souls, but by creating two basic "races" within humanity. He speaks of "the seed of the woman" and "the seed of the Serpent." This is (as Revelation 12:9, 20:2 reveal) two groups of people. As we saw last week, the chapter broadly indicates that the Serpent was not simply an animal but the agent of a far greater evil intelligence. Thus the "seed of the Serpent" is that part of humanity that follows the lies of the Serpent: that God is an enemy, that we have the right to judge his Word, that we can find our own salvation and happiness without him. But another group will be different.

Third, this other group, the "seed of the woman," is not made up of naturally good people, for God will "*put* enmity" between this group and the people and worldview of the Serpent. He is saying, "I will raise up a people who see your lives for what they are." This is a promise that God will intervene in the lives and hearts of these people. The "seed of the woman," then, is the people of God in every generation. These are the ones who, by God's grace and conversion, have come to see the truth about sin and God.

Fourth, the ultimate triumph over sin and the Serpent will be carried out by a single individual. Alec Motyer observes, "In Genesis 3:15 [t]here is an ambiguity waiting to be solved. . . . The word 'seed' [is singular and] leaves the door open for an individual fulfillment." [11]

We not only learn here that this individual will defeat the Serpent utterly (for to "crush a serpent's head" is to kill it), but that in the process he himself will suffer ("you will strike his heel").

5. What did you learn today about sin that most impressed you? How can it make a practical difference in the way you live?

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1 Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 69.

2 Augustine, *City of God* XIII, xii, quoted by Derek Kidner, p. 69.

3 Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 44, 46.

4 Alec Motyer, *Look to the Rock* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 118.

5 Alec Motyer, pp. 118-119.

6 Derek Kidner, p. 70.

7 Derek Kidner, p. 71.

8 Alec Motyer, p. 120.

9 Albert M. Wolters, pp. 47-51.

10 Derek Kidner, p. 70.

11 Alec Motyer, p. 34.

What were we put in the world to do?

Family of Sin, Family of Grace

Study 7 | **Genesis 4:1 - 5:32**

Background note: To interpret the story of Cain, we must understand why God rejected Cain's offerings. Many assume that Cain was rejected because he offered a grain offering while Abel brought animal sacrifices. But most commentators point out that God asks for both cereal and animal offerings in the Bible (Deut. 26:1-11; Lev. 23:9-14). It is true that in the Old Testament, specific sin offerings for atonement were to be animal offerings, but there is no indication that this was the issue here. Both men were simply bringing the "fruit of their labor" to God in acts of worship. Both were in *form* perfectly acceptable.

1. (a) What is Genesis 4-5 a history *of*? (b) How does the prophecy of 3:15 shed light on what we read in Genesis 4-5 and the rest of the Bible? (c) Why is it important to understand this if we are going to profit from the Bible?

What is this a history of?
The Bible contains real and true history, but not the ordinary kind. All sorts of events that are important for the military, political, and cultural history of the ancient world are overlooked or touched on only briefly. The Bible does not give a complete account of any historical era or any particular region—not even of the nation of Israel. What we have instead is a history of *redemption*. What mattered to the biblical writers is the history of God's unfolding salvation.

How does 3:15 shed light?
In Genesis 3:15, God prophesies that from now on there will be one great divide in the human race. There will be the "seed of the woman" and the "seed of the Serpent." The "seed" of the Serpent is evidently those who resemble the Serpent and believe its lies—those who seek life and wisdom without basing their lives on the revelation of God. The "seed" of the woman seems to refer to those people who reject the Serpent's lies and live in faith and hope in God's promise of salvation.

Genesis 4 is the first case study of this history. Cain turns out to be the seed of the Serpent and Abel the seed of the woman. This is a microcosm of the history of the human race. God will create a people who hate the lies of Satan and they will be in conflict (3:15, "enmity") with those who believe the Serpent.

Commentator Derek Kidner asks why the faithful weren't called the "seed of Adam." Why was Eve named instead? Kidner thinks this was deliberate, so that the term "seed of the woman" could have a compound or dual meaning. The Hebrew word "seed" (just like the English word) can be singular or plural; it can mean many seeds or one seed. Not until Matthew 1:23 and Galatians 4:4 do we see that "the seed of the woman" can refer both to a people *and* a person. From the perspective of the New Testament, we see that in Genesis

3:15, God is saying both "I will save the world through line of faithful people" *and* "I will save the world through one born *only* of a woman, not of a man." [1]

Therefore, in the rest of the Bible we have the history of these two lines: the seed of the Serpent vs. the faithful seed, the people of God, through whom eventually the Messiah will come. He is *the* Seed who will destroy the work of the Serpent and save the world. From now on, the Bible will trace the line of the family and people through whom Jesus came into the world. It will tell us about his forebears—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Moses, and David. So the Bible is not simply a collection of stories with "morals" attached to tell us how to live. Nor is it a standard history of a particular nation or region. Rather, it is the history of redemption.

What difference does it make to know this?
The history of redemption (the lives of Abraham, David, Moses, etc.) always shows us two important things. First, the accounts of these figures "typify" or foreshadow their great descendent Jesus in many ways, enriching our understanding of the meaning and operation of God's salvation. Second, they "typify" or foreshadow *us*—we ourselves—as sinners who struggle and fall but remain objects of grace.

This means that the Bible is not primarily a "book of virtues," though there are many great examples in it. Rather, it is a record of the unfolding grace and saving purposes of God. It tells us all we need to know about (a) who God is, (b) who we are, and (c) what we should do about it. If we read the Bible primarily as a series of stories about people to emulate, we will be deriving a message that is the exact *opposite* of what the gospel teaches. It is *God* who will "put enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent." Only God, intervening in grace, can open our eyes to the Serpent's lies. Only God can save us. Thus, the history of redemption is a history of the gospel. Yes, it tells us how to live, but it shows us that our salvation is primarily through faith in the grace of God. "Right living" flows from that.

The key idea of 3:15, then, sets the stage for the rest of the Bible.

2. (a) Read Genesis 4:1-2a. Why does Eve seem so excited about Cain's birth? (b) 4:2b-7. Why does God reject Cain's offering? (See background note and Psalm 51:15-17.) How does Cain take the rejection?

Why does Eve seem so excited about Cain's birth?
Eve's cry—"With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man!"—seems to go beyond the normal expression of gratitude for a safe childbirth. "With the help of the LORD" indicates that Eve sees this as a mark of God's grace and favor. "The LORD" is the covenant name, "Yahweh," used by people in a personal relationship with him. Verse 26 of chapter 4 uses the phrase "call on the name of the LORD" to describe corporate worship. Eve's statement is an act of worship.

"I brought forth a man" suggests that Eve is thinking of God's promise that salvation would come through her "seed." Having a child, any child, was evidence that God had begun to fulfill his promise. Some suggest that Eve may have thought that *this* child was the one who would crush the Serpent's head, but that is speculation. What does seem certain is that Eve's cry of gratitude to God was a cry of faith. She was looking toward God in dependence, at least for the activities and duties of life in the world, and probably also for his promise of salvation in 3:15.

Why does God reject Cain's offering?
We don't know how Cain and Abel knew their offerings were rejected and accepted. It may have been a direct communication into their hearts and consciousnesses, as were God's words to Cain in verses 6-7. It is more likely that God's favor or disfavor was something more concrete, like prosperity for Abel and his flocks and hard times for Cain and his crops.

But *why* was Cain rejected? As the background note at the beginning of this study shows, we can't explain the rejection by saying that Cain didn't follow the rules for sacrifices. At the time, there *were* no rules like those we have in Leviticus through Deuteronomy. And when we go to those Mosaic rules, we see that both grain offerings and animal offerings were acceptable for different purposes. What seems pretty clear from verse 7, where God says "do what is right," is that Cain's life and heart did not match his acts of worship. The Bible is filled with warnings about people who come to worship and give their offerings when their hearts are far from God. (Read Isaiah 1:11-17 for a vivid example.) Psalm 51:15-17 is another classic statement of the principle. An offering poured out is meant to be a visible token of a heart "poured out" in humble love and surrender. (In the very same way, a financial offering to the church is of no value to God if it does not express a humble, loving gratitude for grace.)

How does Cain take the rejection?
Obviously, Cain does not understand the rejection, not even after God speaks to him. Surely, he simply saw it as unfairness on God's part. Think of it from Cain's angle for a minute and it is easy to see how he felt. Here were two men, both of whom were bringing essentially the same offering to God. Each brought part of his "work" (Cain his agriculture, Abel his animal husbandry) to offer to God. When you offer something, you lose it, of course. That shows you are devoted to God. So they both did the same thing. Why would God let Abel prosper and not Cain? They both work hard. It's not fair! God is not being fair!

This is the typical way we respond to differing "fortunes" in life. We cannot see what God sees; only God is in a position to know what is "fair." However, we do get a tiny glimpse of God's reason for Cain's rejection. God seems to want him to look at his own heart. (See the next question.) Cain, however, looks on the surface of things and sees only unfairness.

The result is put vividly in the Hebrew. It says literally, "His face fell" (NIV, "his face was downcast"). This describes a kind of depression based on anger and resentment ("So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast," v. 5). Who was he angry at? It seems he was angry at both God and Abel. His resentment later broke out into murder.

3. How does Hebrews 11:4 shed light on the difference between the sacrifices of Cain and Abel? How does Genesis 3:15 shed light on the difference?

Hebrews 11:4 says that Abel offered his sacrifice "by faith" and Cain did not. It is possible that this simply meant that Abel offered his sacrifice with "*stronger* faith in God," but that is not the most likely meaning. Did Abel believe in God more than Cain did? (If God can speak directly to Cain as he does in 4:6-7, 9, it doesn't seem that he would have believed in God any less than Abel.)

We must not forget that just a few verses earlier, God speaks of the two races—the seed of the Serpent and the seed of the woman. Here the author of Genesis is giving us the first illustration of this development. The seed of the woman would be those who believed in the gospel, the promise of grace in 3:15. That seed of the Serpent would believe the Serpent's lies that we must be our own saviors and lords. The promise of grace, however, was that God would send a savior who would someday come and destroy the sin and death that now characterized life in the world. Abel's sacrifice was offered "in faith"—in response to the promise of grace. Cain's was not. From the perspective of Hebrews and the New Testament, this means Cain was offering his sacrifice expecting to merit God's favor. He was saying, "Look what I've done for you! Look at my accomplishments! Now show favor to me." The great paradox of the gospel, however, is that those who try to earn God's favor are never sure of it and never find it. Those who go to God, admit their complete unworthiness, but put their faith in the gospel are the ones who experience objectively and subjectively the favor of God! That was what happened with Cain and Abel.

Both Cain and Abel approach God in worship and bring offerings. Outwardly their lives probably look the same. They both are apparently good people who do religious exercises, but Cain's heart is not right with God. Specifically, he either misunderstands or rejects the promise of salvation by grace. Thus he is of the "seed of the Serpent" while Abel is of the "seed of the woman," those who believe the gospel. One sign that you are a Cain and not an Abel is that you are often resentful because God is not treating you as your good life deserves. Cain acts as an "elder brother" who resents his "younger brother" (see Luke 15:11-32). Like the elder brother in that parable, he feels the father has not treated him fairly.

notes

4. Read Genesis 4:6-7, 9. (See Genesis 3:9-11.) What do we learn about God as we see him asking questions?

Derek Kidner comments, "In the Lord's repeated 'Why . . . ?' and 'If . . . ,' His appeal to reason and His concern for the sinner are as strongly marked as His concern for truth (5a) and justice (10)." [2] It is striking to see how God asks Cain questions in the same way he did Adam. Kidner explains what this means. If God were only concerned with truth and justice, he would simply tell the sinner the truth and pronounce sentence. But God's questions show his concern for the sinner, for repentance and grace. Here we see God as the wonderful counselor, not God the cosmic policeman. God's questions teach us several things about him.

First, we see God's *wisdom*. Sin progresses in stages and God intervenes early. He begins to confront Cain about his heart before there has been any eruption into violence.

Second, we see God's *gentleness* and tenderness. He does not say, "I will show favor as I see *fit*! Who are you to question me?" Rather, he comes in like a good counselor, with questions.

What is the purpose of questions in a situation like this? One purpose is to gain information for the questioner, but God does not need information! Questions can also be a way to get information for the *one being questioned*. Counselors ask questions of counselees to help them understand their own hearts.

> Then the heart of Eowyn changed, or else at last she understood it. [3]

God's purpose in the interview is to bring the truth in love. If he were just after truth, he would not take such a roundabout way to confront Cain. If you are only after love, you don't confront someone at all—it's too unpleasant for you both. God wants to show Cain his sin, but in a way that allows him to discover it for himself and change. God insists on truth. Notice that he is saying, "Cain, you can't blame either me *or* Abel for how depressed you are. It is your own wrong actions and attitudes that are causing the problem. It is *you* who must change!" On the other hand, God is clearly leading Cain lovingly. He shows great compassion. "Sin is going to get you! I don't want it to take you over. Be on your guard!" God's questions show how insistent he is on both truth *and* love. Even here we see a glimpse of the character of God that made the cross of Jesus a necessity.

5. Genesis 4:7. What do we learn about sin from this chilling metaphor?

First, we learn that sin *hides* itself from us. "Sin is crouching" means it is trying to avoid your view, or to make you think it is much smaller or more benign than it really is. To crouch is to stay low to the ground and not move a whisker. What does this mean? It means that your most dangerous flaws—the things most likely to destroy your life—are even now "crouching down" and

presenting themselves to you as much smaller and less serious than they really are. You may know you are resentful, or selfish, or jealous, or that you lack self-control in a certain area, but almost always you underestimate the severity or depth of your problem. In so many cases, sin hides completely. Substance abuse counselors know a lot about denial in the areas of alcohol and drug addiction, but the Bible tells us that all sin has the same dynamic. Most of us weave intellectual or psychological webs of deceit over our consciences so that we completely deny the sinfulness of our worst sins. We see workaholism as productivity, obsession with physical beauty as good grooming, stinginess as prudence, ruthlessness as being a "sharp businessman," and so on.

Second, we learn about the *growing* power of sin. The word "crouching" depicts sin as a wild animal, "at your door," ready to spring upon you and "to have you"—to devour you the moment you step outside. But notice that it only can do this because Cain has not been "doing right." "If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door . . . ." This means that sin does not immediately destroy you. First, we do it; then, it "does" us. The Bible indicates here that when we sin, our sins do not simply pass away. Somehow they take shape, shadow us, and become a presence of their own that takes us down. For example, Cain's cold-blooded answer in verse 9 "betrays a hardening in comparison with the shuffling answers of 3:10ff." [4]

This need not be read in a completely magical or mystical way. The first time you lie to someone, it breaks a barrier and makes it easier to do it again. Psychologists call it "habit"—a useful psychological capacity that nevertheless can participate deeply in evil. Sinful actions become sinful habits of mind and heart that become virtually invisible (habits become unconscious) and difficult to change. But this metaphor probably goes beyond the simple psychological explanation. There is also something in the fabric of life that has been called "the law of sowing." (Galatians 6:7: "A man reaps what he sows.") This is not an absolute rule but a general principle of justice in the world that mirrors the justice of God. Gossipers tend to be gossiped about. Haters tend to be hated. Cowards tend to be deserted. He who lives by the sword tends to die by the sword. People who do anything to be popular often are very unpopular. Why? Even in a fallen world, there is a fitful reflection of the justice of God. Sin sets up strains in the fabric of the universe because of the nature of the One who created it.

Third, we learn a balance between respect for the power of sin and courage in its face. On the one hand, the metaphor is surely intended to warn Cain that sin is vastly more powerful than he thinks. On the other hand, God says, "You must master it." In light of the rest of the Bible, this is certainly not a declaration that we can overcome sin by our own will-power without God. In fact, God's questions show us that we will never even *see* our sin without his illumination! But with this last phrase, God is taking away our excuse. We must never say, "I couldn't help it! I'm too weak!" (See 1 Cor. 10:13.) God is calling Cain to exert himself. He is saying, "*We* can overcome this." God is removing over-optimism and over-pessimism in the face of sin.

notes

6. Read Genesis 4:11-16. (a) Is Cain's reaction repentance? (b) Many see the "mark of Cain" as a curse. Is that what it is? (c) What do we see here of the justice and the mercy of God? (d) Read Hebrews 12:24. How does the New Testament show us how God can be both just and merciful?

Is this repentance?
Cain's cry in verse 13 does not have the marks of repentance. First, he is not expressing any regret over what he has done, only regret over the pain of the punishment (v. 13a). Second, he is complaining that the punishment is unfair, that it is too harsh. He is not accepting blame for what he has done. Compare this with the lack of repentance and the self-pity of the rich man in hell (Luke 16:24, 27-28) and the penitent thief (Luke 23:41).

Is the "mark of Cain" a curse?
Even though Cain's response is not repentant, there is still a cry of helplessness within it that God responds to in mercy. Derek Kidner writes:

> Even the querulous prayer of Cain had contained a germ of entreaty; God's answering pledge, together with His *mark* or *sign* (the same word as in 9:13 [for the rainbow]; 17:11)—not a stigma but a safe-conduct—is almost a covenant, making Him virtually Cain's *go-el* or protector (cf. 2 Sam. 14:14b). It is the utmost that mercy can do for the unrepentant. [5]

How is it both just and merciful?
Just as we saw in the questioning of Cain, we see in the sentencing of Cain a God of infinite justice *and* infinite mercy. On the one hand, to simply forgive Cain would be unjust and unfair to the slain victim. God says, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (v. 10). This remarkable metaphor is seen also in Luke 18:7-8 and Revelation 6:9-10. God is a God of justice, and crimes against innocent victims "cry out" to him day and night for redress. He is the God of the oppressed. The enormity of "man's inhumanity to man" cannot be overlooked. God responds to the cry for justice by putting a curse on Cain that is deeper than the one on his parents. (If we compare 4:11 with 3:17, we see that Cain is himself cursed, while in 3:17 Adam and Eve are sent into a cursed and broken environment. Deeper sin leads to deeper brokenness.)

On the other hand, as we have just seen, the "mark of Cain" is also a remarkable act of mercy, a "safe-conduct." Kidner shows that God apparently responds even to the "germ of appeal" that exists inside all the self-pity, resentment, and blame-shifting of Cain's complaint. He is a God who is merciful to the unrepentant, who loves and cares even for those who utterly reject him. God does not choose between justice and mercy but honors both—a classic case of "loving the sinner but hating the sin." God judges Cain, but without the slightest hint of vengefulness, rancor, or ill-will. This is the hardest balance to strike. The Cains in our lives almost fight to force us to either accept them and all they do *or* hate, despise, and detest them and all they do.

Hebrews 12:24
The stunning phrase in Hebrews 12:24—that Jesus' blood "speaks a better word [or, more graciously] than the blood of Abel" shows how the gospel of Christ resolves the tension between justice and mercy. It's almost as if the author of Hebrews had read the narrative of Genesis 4 and, seeing the amazing love and severity of God, used the metaphor of "crying blood" to solve the mystery. How can God continue to offer mercy and hope to the Cains of the world who slay the Abels of the world? Hebrews' author, in this brilliant metaphor, puts it like this: "The ultimate Abel, the ultimate man of faith, the only truly and literally innocent man, came into the world and we—Cains all—killed him. But this was not a random accident. This One came into the world to be our substitute, *to bear the curse* we Cains deserved. He was a wanderer without a home, rejected (Gen. 4:11) and killed—the innocent victim of injustice. But *his* blood cries out for grace! It cries 'Grace! Grace! for all who believe in me!' It cries, 'Father, if they believe in me, they must be accepted, for I have paid the debt!'" The cry-for-blessing of the blood of Jesus can save us from the cry-for-cursing that the record of our deeds would otherwise make in the ears of God.

7. Read Genesis 4:19-24. What signs do we see of the unfolding development of sin *and* of the mercy of God in Cain's descendants and in human culture?

The description of the human society that descends from Cain is remarkable for its mixture of darkness and light. On the one hand, we see the beginning of city building. (This, by the way, is a good thing, since God is a city builder [Heb. 11:10] and the new world will be a city [Rev. 21-22].) Cain's descendants develop music (Jubal, v. 21), technology (Tubal-Cain, v. 22) and animal husbandry (Jabal, v. 20). This means that God did not withhold his gifts and help from them. Everything good has its source in God and is a gift from him (James 1:17).

On the other hand, we see a terrible spirit of pride and violence growing. First, Cain builds a city as a refuge *from* God. It is interesting to see in Revelation 21-22 that the heavenly city God creates for us at the end of time has the Tree of Life in it. The heavenly Jerusalem, then, is the garden of Eden built up into a God-honoring, glorious civilization. Cain, however, goes and seeks a life of security without God, and he begins by building an alternate city. He names it "Enoch" after his son. Later, we will see in Genesis 11 that, under the influence of sin, people go to the "big city" in order to "make a name for themselves" (Gen. 11:4). The city becomes a place where we forge power and glory for ourselves to build a life without God. This is the beginning of "man-centered" civilization.

Cain's descendent Lamech shows the development of sin. He is the first to deviate from God's marriage ordinance of one spouse (compare 2:24 with 4:19). As Kidner says, "The attempt to improve on God's marriage ordinance set a

dangerous precedent, on which the rest of Genesis is comment enough." [6] Second, we see a terrible spirit of vengefulness and violence in him. He boasts in song that he kills people for harming him. The word "young man" (v. 23) means a "lad" or "boy." To kill a youth over a wound and then sing a song of joy about it shows how sin has developed. His commitment to vengeance—to pay back seventy-seven times for what happens to him—is matched by the love of Christ, who tells us to forgive seventy-seven times (Matt. 18:22). (Seventy-seven is a symbolic number that essentially means "infinite.")

What we see, then, is the same remarkable severity and mercy of God in the lives of Cain's descendants that we saw in God's dealing with Cain. The curse is having its effect. God "gives us up" to our sin (Rom.1:18-32) and lets it take us over. That is our just punishment. But God continues to work in their lives, allowing them to develop art, industry, and culture that still have much good in them. Calvin writes:

> It is truly wonderful, that this race, which had most deeply fallen from integrity, should have excelled the rest of the posterity of Adam in rare endowments. . . . Let us then know, that the sons of Cain, though deprived of the Spirit of regeneration, were yet endued with gifts of no despicable kind; just as the experience of all ages teaches us how widely the rays of divine light have shone on unbelieving nations, for the benefit of the present life; and we see, at the present time, that the excellent gifts of the Spirit are diffused through the whole human race. [7]

8. Read Genesis 4:25-26. What is the significance of Seth's birth? (See the rest of chapter 5.)

Seth's birth proves the truth of Genesis 3:15, God's commitment to us that he will create a people of faith who are at *enmity* with those who believe Satan's lies. Abel and Cain represent the seed of the woman and the seed of the Serpent. The "enmity" of 3:15 is literally played out in their lives. Cain kills Abel but he cannot kill off the "seed of the woman" —the people of God. Seth is born, and the last verse—"At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD"—means that a faithful people are descended from Seth. For example, Genesis 5 shows us that Noah, a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), is born through Seth. Thus God keeps his gospel promise and continues a line of faithful people through whom the Messiah will come. Genesis 4:25 through chapter 5 tells us, simply, that God will build his church "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

[1] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 71.

[2] Derek Kidner, p. 75.

[3] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1955, 1994), p. 943.

[4] Derek Kidner, p. 76.

[5] Derek Kidner, p. 76.

[6] Derek Kidner, p. 78.

[7] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis, Vol. I* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 217-218.

What were we put in the world to do?

Judgment and Grace

Study 8 | **Genesis 6:1 - 8:22**

INTRODUCTION

The account of Noah and the flood is intriguing, filled with many puzzling details that can easily absorb time and energy. Who were the "Nephilim" (6:4)? Did the flood really happen, and, if so, was it worldwide or regional? We should not ignore such issues, because a confused or unsatisfied intellect makes it difficult for our hearts to ponder the teaching of the passage. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to be distracted from discovering the overall teaching and thrust of the narrative. We do not need to be certain about the Nephilim or the extent of the flood to hear God's message to us.

Background note: To be true to my own principle, I won't inundate you with information about different views of the flood. I will just lay out my own assumptions. I believe Noah's flood happened, but that it was regional, not worldwide. Those who insist it was a worldwide flood seem to ignore scientific evidence that there was no such thing. Those who insist it is a legend seem to ignore the trustworthiness of Scripture. After Genesis 1, the rest of Genesis reads like historical narrative. If someone asks about the biblical assertions that the flood covered every mountain over the whole earth (Gen. 7:19, 21), remember that the Bible often speaks of the known world as the whole world (compare Gen. 41:56-57; Acts 2:5, 9-11; Col. 1:23).

1. Read Genesis 6:1-4. What is the purpose of this enigmatic paragraph in the flood narrative? What sin do you think is being referred to?

The purpose of the paragraph

The purpose of the paragraph is to continue tracing the development of sin that has been growing since Genesis 3. From Adam's sin through Cain's sin to Lamech's life, we see that sin makes the heart harder and harder. It does not "stay put" in society or in the heart; it continually claims more territory until, like cancer, it strangles and destroys the good. By the time we get to Genesis 6, it is clear that some new boundary has been crossed. Things have become desperate and God must intervene. Verse 5 is a commentary on the whole history: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become . . . ." So the sin in Genesis 6:1-4 is the reason for the great deluge God is going to send.

What exactly was the sin?

What does it mean that the "sons of God" married the "daughters of men"? The two most prevalent views are the following: (1) One view notices that believers in the Old Testament are called "sons of God" (Deut. 14:1; Is. 1:2; Hos. 1:10) and therefore posits that the believing line of Seth had begun intermarrying with the unbelieving line of Cain (called the "daughters of men").

The result was a generation of very violent and oppressive men ("Nephilim" can mean simply "powerful men."] The problem with this view is that the term "sons of God" in the Old Testament more often refers to angels (see Job 1:6; 2:1). (2) The second view believes that the "sons of God" *were* angels—demonic, fallen angels intermarrying with human beings. The problem with this view is that no other biblical information indicates that such a thing is possible. Derek Kidner wisely (as usual!) says:

> More important than the detail of this episode is its indication that man is beyond self-help, whether the Seth-ites have betrayed their calling, or demonic powers have gained a stranglehold. [1]

Another phrase capable of two interpretations is "his days will be a hundred and twenty years" (v. 3). This may mean that because of increasing wickedness, God shortened the human life-span to remind them of their fragility and mortality. Or it may mean that the human *race* only has 120 years until the flood. Again, either way, it means that God is about to intervene.

2. Read Genesis 6:5-7. These sentences are a comprehensive outline of the nature and effects of sin. What do we learn about sin here?

First, we learn of the *seriousness* of sin: "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth" (v. 7). One of the main points of the flood narrative is that God cannot tolerate evil. We may acknowledge that we are flawed and sinful, but we don't believe it needs to be punished. Though the belief in heaven or hell lingers in our country, belief in Judgment Day has almost vanished outside seriously Christian circles.

Second, we learn of the *interior* nature of sin: "the thoughts of [the] heart. . ." (v. 5). Sin is first and primarily a matter of the heart. Certainly, there is always plenty of wrong behavior to observe. But if we focus too much on behavioral violations, we will miss the embryonic and internal forms of sin that can fly beneath our radar. Sin is first a matter of attitude and motives. It can influence and grow even before it erupts into behavior.

Third, we learn of the *content* of sin: "every *inclination* of the . . . heart was only evil. . . ." At first glance, verse 5 seems to indicate that the human heart is only evil, that there is no good in it at all. However, the verse doesn't say that the heart is "only evil all the time" but that the *inclination* of the heart is so. Neither the NIV "inclination" nor the KJV "imagination" fully conveys the term *yeser*, a word that refers to a potter shaping clay into a vessel. The word means *design* or *purpose*. It means that even when we are doing a good thing, our motives and purposes are tainted. Everything we do is done with the goal of being our own saviors and the masters of our own lives (Rom. 1:18-25). A classic example is the two sons in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Both sons are trying to gain control of their father's wealth so that they can do with it as they like. The strategies could not be more different. The younger

brother completely contradicts the father's values and lives a riotous, debauched life. The older brother completely obeys the father's every rule and value. But they are both—one through obeying the rules and one through disobeying them—seeking to be their own masters. In other words, the motive, design, and inclination of their hearts were the same, even though in one case there was no behavioral violation.

Fourth, we learn of the *grievousness* of sin: "The LORD was grieved . . . and his heart was filled with pain" (v. 6). Here is the ultimate reason why sin is *sin*. What makes something *wrong* and not just impractical or harmful? Romans 3:23 says famously that what makes sin *sin* is that it contradicts the "glory" or nature of God. That is a rather abstract way to put it. Here the same truth is put more vividly. Because sin contradicts the nature of God, it deeply grieves him and actually causes him pain! This has profound practical implications for people who want to change their lives and habits. It is one of the secrets to repentance. If you say, "I must stop doing this thing because it will get me into trouble," you are not really sorry for the sin but for its *consequences* or *results*. You are not sorry primarily because it grieved God, but because it grieved you and/or others. This means that as soon as your sinful habit stops causing you trouble, you will stop "troubling" your sinful habit. But if you feel poignantly what your sin is doing to God, you will have a deeper motivation to turn away from the sin itself.

Fifth, we learn of the *universality* of sin. Notice that there are really no exceptions in the human race with regard to sin. It is *Adam*—all humankind—that is wicked (v. 5a), that has hearts whose thoughts are "all" evil (v. 5b), and who deserves to be destroyed (v. 7). There are no exceptions noted (see Rom. 3:10-20).

3. If we take 6:7 seriously—that all mankind deserved to be "wiped . . . from the earth"—how do we understand 6:8? Why do you think Noah "found favor in the eyes of the LORD"?

Genesis 6:8 reads, "Noah found *grace* in the eyes of the LORD." The Hebrew word that the NIV translates "favor" is the main Old Testament word for "grace"—*chen*. It is normal for readers to see verse 9 as the cause of verse 8. Verse 9 tells us that Noah was "a righteous man, blameless. . . and he walked with God." "Well," the reader thinks, "the reason God favored Noah is because Noah was a good man who walked with God."

However, that reading fails to take into account the emphatic nature of 6:5-7 about the universality of sin and judgment. Over and over we are told that there were no exceptions: All mankind was to be wiped from the face of the earth. As noted above, this is in line with what the rest of the Bible says. (See classic verses like Romans 3:10, 23; 6:23.) This means that Noah and his family were included in that assessment. So why did Noah escape the flood?

The Hebrew word *chen* in 6:8 means grace, and grace is always unmerited—or it would not be grace. Even if you are not a Hebrew scholar, the sentence gives you a broad hint about why Noah escaped. The sentence does not say, "Noah *earned* or *won* favor in the eyes of the LORD," but "Noah *found* . . . favor." To "find" something is to discover it, to come upon it. What is the difference between finding $10 and earning $10? When you find $10, it has come to you freely without regard to your work or behavior. In the same way, to *find* God's blessing is not the same as to earn it. Alec Motyer elaborates:

> The formula "x found favor in the eyes of y" is found about forty times in the Old Testament. . . . Sometimes it is a purely formal politeness not really intended to be taken seriously . . . but, when the impression of all the passages is gathered, it becomes clear that in its strict intention it deals with a situation where "x" can register no claim on "y" but where "y," contrary to merit or deserving, against all odds, acts with grace . . . . Taking Genesis 6:8 then, in its preceding context, we meet Noah . . . as a typical man among men. Like the rest, because he too is part of humankind, he is wicked outwardly and inwardly, a grief to God and under divine sentence. But in distinction from the rest of humankind a grace of God, as unexplained as it is unmerited, has come to him. He has not "found" this grace by merit or effort; rather it has found him. [2]

In summary, verse 8 is the cause of verse 9, not the other way around! Noah walked with God because he found grace/favor with God. He did not find grace/favor because of his walk.

4. Read Genesis 6:6,13. What two very different attributes of God are described? How does the flood itself illustrate them both?

These two verses provide a stunning contrast. On the one hand, 6:6 gives us a picture of *God's love*, "using the boldest terms, counterpoised elsewhere if need be, but not weakened." [3] It tells us that God's grief over our sin goes to the point of his own personal pain. Commentators point out that the terms describing our misery under sin—"pain" (3:16) and "toil" (3:17)—are very similar to the words "pain" and "grieved" here in 6:6. In other words, God has so tied his heart to us that the pain and brokenness of human life actually affects him too! Even this early in the Bible, we see him entering into our difficulties.

On the other hand, 6:13 is a chilling and sweeping expression of *God's holiness and justice.* The "violence" of the human race is a tremendous issue that cannot be ignored. Ironically, contemporary people complain, "If there is a just God, why does he allow so much evil, injustice, and oppression in the world?" However, when we find a biblical account in which God *does* something about the violence, we complain that he is a harsh, punishing God. Verse 11 provides a telling and subtle answer to this objection. We are told that God saw that "the earth was corrupt," but "corrupt" translates the Hebrew word for

"destroyed." In other words, what God decided to judge and cleanse was "virtually self-destroyed already." [4] The human race had destroyed itself! Sin is a kind of self-judgment, self-punishment, de-constructive. God's judgment work is simply to confirm our choices.

How does the flood narrative illustrate both?
The flood vividly illustrates both attributes of God. On the one hand, the fury and power of the flood teach us that God is a God of might, justice and, yes, destruction: "Every living thing that moved on the earth perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind" (7:21). David Atkinson notices that the flood is the pattern of creation in reverse. [5] God has the right, the power, and the wisdom to judge: (1) Because he is Creator, he has the *right* since he owns all that is. No one else would have the authority to destroy. (2) Second, because he is Creator, he has the *power*, since he assembled all that is. No one else could un-knit the fabric of nature as he could. (3) Third, because he is Creator, he has the *wisdom*, since he knows all hearts and all ends. Only he knows what people deserve, or what they would do if he gave them more time, and so on.

On the other hand, the flood shows also the love and grace of God. In the midst of God's judgment he shows mercy to Noah and his family. He prepares a way to save them despite the coming judgment. The ark is a "vessel of grace." Because they get into the ark, Noah and his family are saved. The purpose of the flood, in the final analysis, was to *save* the human race. Faith was going to die out without God's intervention. The human race had waxed evil very quickly. By judging the incorrigible and saving the receptive, God gives the human race a new start and "saves" it. Thus both his justice and mercy are evident in the flood.

5. How can we see the gospel promise of Genesis 3:15 continuing as the basic theme in Genesis 6-8?

When reading Genesis, we must always remember that the basic, underlying theme is the gospel promise of grace-salvation in Genesis 3:15. There God promises that, in the midst of a world filled with the "seed of the Serpent" (people who live according to the lies of Satan), he will always preserve a "seed of the woman"—a people who live according to the revelation of God. God will preserve a faithful line of people out of which will eventually come one particular figure—*the* Seed of the woman—who will destroy sin and death.

This is the reason for all the emphasis on "generations" that you find in Genesis. Genesis 2:4 says literally, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth." Then Genesis 5:1 says, "[These are] the generations of Adam" (ESV); Genesis 6:9, "These are the generations of Noah" (ESV); Genesis 10:1, "These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth" (ESV); Genesis 11:10, "These are the generations of Shem" (ESV); and

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Genesis 11:27, "These are the generations of Terah" [Abraham's father] (ESV). The NIV translation badly muffles the important repetition of this phrase by translating it "this is the line of" or "this is the account of." Why is this phrase so important? Edmund P. Clowney explains:

> The point of the emphasis on generations is that God has not forgotten His promise. The appointed line of descendents of the woman must continue. Through the dark and bloody history of human sin and violence, God continues the line of the promise.
>
> That continuing promise involves a continuing separation. The separation appears at once, for God is pleased with Abel's offering, not Cain's. . . . Genesis does not present the line of Cain as a "book of generations." The narrative turns instead to Seth [to show that God's promise is faithful.] . . . Division, judgment, and blessing continue . . . [when] the line of Seth is corrupted [Genesis 6], perhaps through intermarriage with the line of Cain. Human wickedness and violence reach such a depth of degradation that God intervenes with the judgment of the great flood. [6]

The basic theme of the Bible is that though we cannot save ourselves, God saves us by grace alone (see Jonah 2:9). But here in early Genesis, that theme takes the form of God's preservation of a godly line, a godly people, through his continual, gracious intervention.

It may seem rather odd to consider the theme of the Cataclysmic Deluge to be the gospel-grace of God! But this has been the real, underlying theme all along. In the midst of the judgment of Adam and Eve comes the promise of the Messiah. In the midst of judgment on Abel's murderer comes (not only) a remarkably gracious "mark of Cain," but the restoration of the line through Seth. Now in the midst of judgment on the world through the flood, God again acts to preserve a faithful remnant, the faithful line, providing a new start for the human race. Though we must take seriously God's hatred of sin and the reality of his judgment, we must see that he always expresses his holiness in a way that leaves the door open for grace and new beginnings.

Of course, the flood as a judgment and as a salvation both did and did not work. Noah shows that he was *of* the seed, the line of faith, but he is not *the* Seed. Both the judgment and the grace were partial and incomplete. They only point to a complete judgment and a complete salvation to come later. As Derek Kidner observes,

> The earth's share in the destruction (6:13c) was to be only in measure: 2 Peter 3:5-13 points out how different will be the final annihilation. In fact the whole act of judgment was partial: the survivors passed through a mere token of judgment, only to carry into the new world the sin of the old, as if to demonstrate that nothing less than complete death and rebirth will meet our situation. [7]

notes

6. How does the judgment and grace of the flood provide a picture of the judgment and grace of the cross? (Read 1 Peter 3:20-22, below.)

Peter writes:

> In it [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him.

This passage takes some reflection, but it rewards meditation. Peter is saying, first, that Noah was saved *through* or by water. An interesting point! Surely, Noah would have thought that he needed to be saved *from* the water, but Peter points out that he is actually saved *by* the water. How did that happen, when everyone else was drowned by it? Peter's answer is "the ark." The same water that sinks everyone *out*side the ark actually lifts up and saves those who are *in*side it. The water lifts them away from the depths filled with death and saves them because they are "hidden" in the ark.

Now, Peter turns to the water of baptism. He says, "Baptism . . . saves you," which some take to mean that the very act of water baptism automatically brings forgiveness. The problem with that view is three-fold. First, Peter himself immediately says he is not talking about the physical act of water-washing—"not the removal of dirt from the body." Second, the Bible emphatically declares that faith, not the performing of any ritual, is what saves us (Galatians, Romans). But third, Peter here makes a parallel of baptism with the waters of the flood. And we know that the water *itself* did not save Noah—it was the ark. Only because they were already in the ark did the water save them. Now, in the same way, the water of baptism can't save in itself. (In fact, water baptism, all by itself, is as dangerous as flood water!) Rather, it is only "*by* the resurrection" that baptism has an effect. Only because we rely on what Christ has done are we saved. The waters of God's judgment that should sink us do *not* sink us. They actually save and lift us up if we are in Christ.

How could that be? Just as the lethal waters beat on the ark, so the punishment we deserved fell on Christ. Then, in Christ, the righteousness and justice of God actually become our allies. In 1 John 1:8-9, John has the audacity to say that God forgives believers' sins now because he is *just*. In other words, his justice now *demands* that we be forgiven for our misdeeds. Why? The work of Christ! If Christ paid for our sins, we cannot be punished for them too. God would be getting two payments unjustly. Therefore, if we are in Christ, the waters of God's justice and righteousness that would otherwise sink us now carry us to heaven.

This is remarkably vivid! In the flood, we see a judgment, but through the judgment a new life. It points to the ultimate judgment that fell on Jesus so

that we can be brought into new life. Because we believe in him now, the final judgment that falls on the world will not harm us.

7. Read Hebrews 11:7. What practical lessons do we learn from this verse (and Genesis 6-8) about faith?

> By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

First, we see that faith is *deeply connected to God's Word*. Noah got a "warning," or a Word of God, that contradicted his sense experience. The things God told him were "not seen" and quite at odds with everything visible and tangible. But Noah lived and acted on the basis of God's revelation, not the basis of his feelings or senses. (Here he truly shows himself not to be the "seed of the Serpent," for the heart of the Serpent's strategy was to contradict the Word of God.) The practical application is that we should take the Bible very seriously and seek in a disciplined way to saturate ourselves with it.

Second, we see that Noah lived in a condition of *"holy fear."* Commenting on the flood narrative, Thomas Manton said, "Those in Noah's time [trembled only] when they ran from the bottom of houses to the top . . . but Noah trembled when God did [but] speak of these things." [8] We must be careful, though, to distinguish Fear from fear. The term "*holy* fear" is a good way to differentiate the biblical concept of the "fear of God" from the condition of being scared. Trust in God's Word put Noah into a condition of inner awe and wonder before God. This was not a surge of fright, but almost its opposite! It meant his heart and behavior were controlled by reality as God defined it, not as the world defined it. He was imperturbable. Nothing dissuaded him or dismayed him.

Third, he let his example, not his words, *"condemn the world."* This is an interesting phrase. We are not called to "condemn the world" with judgmental verbal denunciations. Even Jesus said he did not come to "condemn" the world, but to save it (John 3:17). Yet there is much in the world that is bad and wrong, and God's Holy Spirit is in the world to "convict it of sin" (John 16:8). Nevertheless, to show the world its sin, the Holy Spirit can use your faith and behavior far more than he can use your words.

Fourth, he *"saved his family."* This does not mean that our family members do not need to exercise faith themselves, nor does it mean that God is not ultimately the only savior. It does mean that Noah's faith was a key way God's protection and blessing came into the lives of his family. Remember, though, that his faith-life, his example, was the main way he condemned the world and helped his family. Later on, we will see that Noah was a very fallible parent who was not able to bring all of his family into true faith.

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Fifth, Noah's obedience *exhibits* his salvation by faith, but does not *earn* it. If we wanted proof that Genesis 6:8 is the cause, not the effect, of Genesis 6:9, here it is! Paul says that the gospel reveals a "righteousness . . . apart from [obeying the] law . . . [that] comes [is received] through faith" (Rom. 3:21-22). The writer to the Hebrews says that Noah was living and acting in accord with this gospel dynamic. He too was not "righteous by works" but "righteous by faith."

In summary, Noah is a great example for believers living in a pagan world. In this sense, he is like Joseph, Daniel, Esther, and Ezekiel. He was saturated with the Word of God and so could see the world as God saw it, and not as the world culture defined reality. He was able to preserve faith in his family.

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1 Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 84.

2 Alec Motyer, *Look to the Rock* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 43.

3 Derek Kidner, p. 86.

4 Derek Kidner, p 87; David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 136.

5 David Atkinson, p. 136.

6 Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 1988), pp. 40-41.

7 Derek Kidner, p. 87.

8 Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton,* Vol. 14, "Several Sermons upon Hebrews 11," Sermon 36 (London: James Nisbet, 1873), p. 190.

What were we put in the world to do?

Creation Renewed

Study 9 | Genesis 8:20 – 9:19

1. **Read Genesis 8:20-22. (a) What is a burnt offering? (See Leviticus 1:3-10.) (b) Why was a burnt offering appropriate? (c) Why did God promise to never again strike the earth with a flood-like cataclysm? (d) Is verse 22 promising that God will never allow a natural disaster (major flood, earthquake, etc.) again?**

What is a burnt offering?
Leviticus 1 explains that a "whole burnt offering" was performed when the one making the offering laid a hand upon the sacrifice and identified with it. It was then offered up in the person's place to make atonement for sin. Therefore, a burnt offering was an acknowledgment that we are saved by grace and that we owe God our lives. [**Note:** The author of Genesis apparently knew about the Mosaic legislation that came later, in which some animals were designated "clean" and suitable for sacrifices.]

Why was a burnt offering appropriate?
The fact that Noah made a burnt offering reveals something of his mind and heart when he came out of the ark. First, it shows he was aware that his salvation through the flood was by sheer grace—undeserved. Thus the sacrifice was an act of gratitude and joy. Second, it shows that Noah was committing himself to God as the "steward" of the new world. The animal sacrifice was a token; Noah was offering up the whole world *to* God and offering to "rule over it" *for* God.

Why does God make his promise?
In verse 21, God promises to never again "curse the ground," that is, send another devastation like the deluge. Why? We are told that God found the offering's aroma to be "pleasing." That is, he found the offering acceptable. Why? It was not because of any improvement in the human heart. Verse 21 of chapter 8 is striking. This is exactly what God said about human nature before the flood (6:5). As we read it again here, it more strongly emphasizes that sin is inborn. God is *not* saying, "I will not curse the ground because Noah and his family are better people than the ones I was dealing with before."

However, if there is no real improvement in human nature, why would God accept Noah's sacrifice and promise to no longer send cataclysms? Derek Kidner says:

> If God seems too lightly propitiated, this arises partly from the simplicity of the [writing] style, partly from the inherent limitation of all Old Testament sacrifices, "which can never take away sins." The real propitiation, in the mind of God, was the sacrifice of Jesus (Rom. 3:25, 26). [1]

The God who sent the flood is no patsy or pushover. He is *not* the kind of God who can overlook evil and sin. A simple animal sacrifice, no matter how heartfelt and grateful, could not possibly turn aside the wrath of God. Kidner is probably right. In Noah's burnt offerings, which point to substitutionary atonement (see Lev. 1:3-17), we see a picture of Jesus' sacrifice. That is what God sees in Noah's offering.

What did God promise in verse 22?
The promise that the seasons will not be disrupted is a way of saying that all disasters will be local; there will be no disaster that is destructive on a global scale. David Atkinson writes, "The Noah story assures us, in our nuclear age, of God's commitment to human survival on earth." [2]

2. How can we follow Noah's example today? (See Hebrews 13:15-16.)
The book of Hebrews teaches that the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament could not atone for sin. What did they do? First, they taught the people of God that obedience to the law was not going to be enough. God gave Moses both the law *and* the tabernacle. That was a way to say that, though we should seek to obey the law, we would never keep it. Atonement would have to be made. So, first, sacrifices were a way to get our *inside life* right with God. It helped people to be gospel-based as they came to him. It was to say, "O Lord, I do not come to you in my own merits. Put away my sin. Receive me in your mercy." Second, it gave the people a way to signify that their lives belonged to God. To bring or to purchase an animal for sacrifice meant that they were bringing God a portion of their wealth. The sacrifice meant that all they owned was his. So sacrifices were also ways to put their *external life*—possessions and behavior—right with God. Sacrifices were a way to show that we must approach God both with faith-in-grace, and yet with resolve to obey him in every part of life. Worshiping with a sacrifice was a way to say, "You alone are my Savior, and you alone are Lord of all I am and have."

Hebrews also tells Christians that we are not to offer animal sacrifices anymore. To do so would negate the work of Christ on our behalf. Yet at the end of the book, we are enjoined to offer non-physical "offerings." In Hebrews 13:15 we are told that worship itself is now a "sacrifice." In verse 16 we are told that "to do good and to share with others" is also a sacrifice that pleases God. This refers to practical giving and ministry to people with material or economic needs. So, like Old Testament sacrifices, Christians are still supposed to get our *inside* life right with God and our *outside* life as well. We are to do this with a discipline of worship, prayer, and contemplation, and a discipline of radical generosity.

So, though we don't offer literal physical sacrifices, we are still called to the basic discipline of re-enacting the gospel in our worship. There we give God our hearts in gratitude for grace, and there we give God our lives in obedience to his will.

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3. Read Genesis 9:1-7. Compare God's mandate to Noah's family to his mandate to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:26-31). How are they alike and how are they different?

We immediately see the similarity of God's charge to Noah and his charge to Adam, especially in 9:1 and 9:7. Both Adam and Noah are told to multiply and fill the earth. This means we are still to marry, have children, and build civilization. Second, and very significantly, we are still seen to be "in the image of God" (v. 3). These similarities are extremely important. It means that the "creation ordinances"—the calls by God to marriage, to work, to care for creation, to build civilization—are still in effect. We are not too weak or sinful to attempt them. We are responsible to follow them. The *imago Dei* has not been eradicated. Human power and dignity are still significant.

But the dissimilarities are very stark. Our relationship with the creation is now one of "fear and dread" (v. 2). Violence and bloodshed will mark our relationships with animals and other human beings. The creatures of the world will now fear us. This comes right after the charge to be fruitful, in the place where Adam was told to "rule" or "have dominion" (Gen. 1:26). God is saying that we will still have power over nature, but the relationship is now to be one of struggle and conflict.

4. In Genesis 9:3-6, what do we learn of (a) our relationship with animals, and (b) our relationship with other human beings? What do we learn here about God's attitude toward life in general?

Our relationship with animals

Our relationship with animals is outlined in verses 3-4. There has been much discussion over the fact that 9:3-4 seems to say that man was not a meat-eater in the garden of Eden. Some believe that Genesis 1:29-30 teaches that humans and animals were originally only plant-eaters. Others think that animals-as-food was implicit in Genesis 1. What *is* clear is that our relationship with animals is now one of violence, coercion, and strife. Though we can't conclude from this passage that Christians should be vegetarians (after all, God does mandate the eating of animals!), we must recognize that violence toward animals is part of sin.

If we only had verse 3, we might conclude that all God was doing here was giving us (literally!) a hunting license. But that is not true. Second, God prohibits consuming animal blood. At first, this seems to be a very curious statement. But many other places in the Old Testament insist that *blood symbolizes the life* (v. 4, see Lev. 3:17) and the life belongs to God. Why would God insist on this symbolism? It had two functions. First, the symbolism of blood was a way to teach the significance of sacrifice. It paved the way for the Mosaic sacrificial system, which prepared us to understand the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. Derek Kidner says, "The law on blood . . . is theologically far-reaching. . . . It also prepared men to appreciate the use of blood in sacrifice. Belonging to God, it could be seen as His atoning gift to sinners, not theirs to Him (Lev.17:11)." [3]

More significantly, the prohibition against blood was a way to remind human beings that their rights over animals and God's creation were limited. All life belonged to God. We must not do anything we wish with it. David Atkinson writes, "Even when man slaughters and kills, he is to know that he is touching something which, because it is life, is in a special manner God's property." [4] In other words, the creation ordinance—to be stewards, not owners, of nature—is still in force. We are to humbly respect the nature over which we have been given so much power. Ironically, this biblical attitude is embodied in the speech of unbelieving Native Americans to a slain deer ("We are sorry to have to kill you, brother") in *The Last of the Mohicans.*

Our relationship with human beings

Our relationship with other human beings is outlined in verses 6-7. We are told that because human beings are made in the image of God, each life is so infinitely precious that God will even hold an animal guilty for killing a man (v. 5). (What God intends to do about it is not mentioned!) Before we get distracted by the issue of capital punishment (raised in verse 6) we need to take in the implications. A great deal is implied in this remarkable expression of the dignity of human life in 9:5-6. John Calvin writes on these verses in his *Institutes.*

> The Lord commands all men without exception "to do good" [Heb. 13:16]. Yet the great part of them are most unworthy, if they be judged by their own merit. But here Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider what men merit of themselves—but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love. . . . Therefore, whatever [one] you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him. . . [You] say, "He is contemptible and worthless"; but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image. . . . Now if he has not only deserved no good at your hand, but has also provoked you by unjust acts and curses, not even *this* is just reason why you should cease to embrace him in love and to perform the duties of love on his behalf. . . . You will say, "He has deserved something far different of me." Yet what has the *Lord* deserved? . . . It is that we remember *not* to consider men's evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which . . . effaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them. [5]

This remarkable passage shows the far-reaching implications of 9:5-6. Calvin reads the "image" of God to be a reflection of God's own goodness and beauty in our being. If even an animal sheds human blood, God will respond. Calvin draws this out to show what this means for Christians. Not only does it mean we should be profoundly patient, forgiving, loving, and hopeful for all individuals, but it is the most solid possible basis for working for racial, social, international, and economic justice and peace. It is a reason to protect and care tirelessly for the elderly, weak, disabled, sick, and so on. It means we must never use human beings as "objects," as mere means to an end. It means we must never demean human beings by lying (for to lie is to dis-empower and to manipulate them). We must never demean them by scorning or abusing them

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emotionally. We should never assess the worth of a human being in economic or purely functional terms. This reminds us of C. S. Lewis' statement that "next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses." [6] He says that the "weight" of your neighbor's "glory" is too much for anyone but the humble to bear.

Note: Verse 6 certainly gives warrant to those who believe that governments should impose capital punishment, at least on those who have done murder. But it is far too complicated to simply say that, and the group discussion should not get bogged down here.

5. Read Genesis 9:9-12. What does this "covenant" imply about our relationship with the natural environment?

We have already seen by implication that our relationship to animals is not to be one of mere violence and force. Now we have a remarkably direct statement about the importance of the creation, the physical environment. In verse 9 God says, "I now establish my covenant with you [Noah and his family] . . . and with every living creature . . . on earth"! This seems to put God into a "covenant relation" with animals and plants. But in verse 13 he goes further and talks about "the covenant between me and the earth." What is going on here? When God makes a covenant with someone in the Bible, it is a relationship of grace through which God saves the person from sin. Obviously, there is a difference here. God is going to save the earth—not from its own sins, but from *our* sins.

Romans 8:18-22 tells us that the "creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning . . . right up to the present time." Paul tells us that nature does not work right because of human evil. It has been caught in God's curse on us—not because of its own sin or choice. It is subject to decay and death because we are. But Paul says that this is not permanent. God intends to restore nature when he restores us. Here, we see God telling nature that he will preserve and protect it, and (by implication) save it from sin.

What does this mean for us? We could not have a stronger basis for ecological stewardship than this "covenant with the earth" and the explicit claims of Romans 8. We have more than just pragmatism to go on. (E.g., "Don't tear up the environment—it's impractical. We'll hurt our quality of life.") God loves the mountains and trees and streams. In Psalm 19 we are told that nature "declares the glory of God" simply by being what God created it to be. We, as nature's stewards, must do our part to help it be itself, and thus aid it in glorifying God every day by its beauty. Of course, this principle does not answer all questions about conservation and environmental protection, but it shows

that Christianity is at least as good a resource and motivation as any other religion or philosophy for the care of the environment.

6. Read Genesis 9:13-17. How does a rainbow symbolize the grace of God? Consider when a rainbow occurs, how it looks, and so on.

First, a rainbow shows us the beauty of God's grace. It conveys the beauty and glory of what he has done for us.

Second, a rainbow shows something of how to receive God's grace. It comes only after storms and rain, as the grace of God is only discovered after repentance and, very often, after trouble and sorrow. Only after experiences of weakness do we find God's strength (Heb. 12:1-15).

Third, a rainbow shows something of the variety of God's grace. The rainbow is many-colored, like the "variegated grace of God" (see 1 Peter 4:10). It comes in many forms and embodies itself in a multiplicity of ways.

Fourth, a rainbow tells us something of how God accomplishes his grace. The rainbow exists "where the darkness and light come together." Rainbows do not happen on sunny days; their beauty exists against a background of judgment. "The obvious glory of the rainbow, however, against the gloom of the cloud . . . arises from the conjunction of sun and storm, as of mercy and judgment." [7] God is not simply a God of love who ignores the need for justice, nor is he merely a just God who ignores the yearnings of love. Rather, he brings his grace *through* judgment. On the cross this is supremely seen, where he judged sin *so that* he could forgive sinners. The greatest glory of God is seen there, where, in a single stroke, his justice and mercy were fulfilled as his Son died.

Fifth, the rain*bow* tells us something of the results of God's grace: no more condemnation. Though the NIV translates it "rainbow," the Hebrew word used is simply *bow*, the same word used for a bow that shoots arrows. Atkinson writes, "The hostility is over: God hangs up his bow! . . . The light of his beauty shines through even the reminders of a watery judgment. The weapon of war itself is transformed into a delight. Here is the Creator's overarching care: the Creator God is the Covenant God. He who made us still loves us." [8]

When God "smelled" the sacrifice of Noah, he hung up his bow. No more arrows of wrath. Why not? The flood had served its purpose. It was a token of judgment on evil for all of history, and it gave the human race a new start. It did not deliver any real, final solution to the problem of human sin, but God had a plan. His Son would come to become the only *truly* acceptable sacrifice—the One to whom all other sacrifices point. He would take the ultimate judgment-flood of eternal justice—he would take the "arrows" of wrath—so that God could hang up his bow forever.

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[1] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 93.

[2] David Atkinson quoting Richard Bauckham in *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 150.

[3] Derek Kidner, p. 101.

[4] David Atkinson quoting G. von Rad, p. 159.

[5] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book III, Chapter 7, Section 6.

[6] C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1949, 2001), p. 46.

[7] Derek Kidner, p. 102.

[8] David Atkinson, p. 164.

What were we put in the world to do?

City of Man, City of God

Study 10 | Genesis 9:18 - 12:3

1. **Read Genesis 9:18-24. (a) What is Noah's essential sin (see Prov. 25:28)? (b) What was Ham's sin (see Ex. 20:12)? Why is this sin so dangerous in the Messianic line?**

At first reading, Noah's drunkenness and Ham's response do not seem to warrant the severe response of verses 24-27. So let's look more closely.

Noah's sin

Drunkenness is often condemned in the Bible (Prov. 23:29-35), especially in people who have responsibility for others (Prov. 31:4-5). But what makes it a sin? If God forbade all drinking of alcohol *per se*, we might not have to ask that question, but he does not. (See Deut. 14:26; Ps. 104:15: "Wine that gladdens the heart of man…"). So if drinking isn't wrong, what is wrong with getting very drunk? The problem is best seen in the proverb, "A man without self-control is like a city . . . without walls." (25:28 ESV). In ancient times, the city's wall was all-important. The wall was protection against wild animals, marauding bands, or organized armed forces from other tribes or nations. The very word "civilization" comes from the Latin word *civitas* for "city." Why? Civilization was possible inside the wall. Inside cities, it was possible to have a system of law rather than simple acts of vengeance and blood feuds. Inside cities it was possible to develop an economy because life was more predictable. In other words, a city without walls was defenseless and thus no city at all. Drunkenness tears down "the walls" of a person's life. When you are drunk, you are literally defenseless (someone could easily kill or rob you). You are also defenseless in that you don't have the wisdom to speak or act in a responsible way. If your life were your own, this might not be so bad. But we are stewards of our body, mind, and heart, as well as of our wealth, family, and other responsibilities. We are like a guard put in charge of someone else's treasure. We can't go to sleep during our watch.

In Noah's case, his drunkenness led him to lie naked, exposing himself in a way that ordinarily he (particularly in his culture) would have found very immodest and deeply demeaning.

Ham's sin

Verse 23 tells us that Ham, one of Noah's three sons, "saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers . . . ." The brothers refuse to look directly at their father lying naked, but rather walk in backward and cover him. When Noah recovers, he is deeply disturbed by what Ham "had done to him." Modern readers have to ask, "What's the big deal?"

There are two reasons we don't understand the seriousness of Ham's sin. First is the cultural reason. We live in a far more individualistic culture, in which honor and respect of one's parents is considerably less important than in more traditional cultures. The contrast between Ham's behavior and his brothers'

shows that he gazed directly—probably with amusement—on his father's exposure. Rather than being concerned to limit his father's humiliation, he tells others about it. This was a major breach of the father-child relationship.

In our culture, it is easy to imagine a younger son seeing his drunken father acting like a fool and responding by laughing at it, egging him on, and telling others, while the older children try to get their dad to lie down and cover up. They might hiss at the younger brother, "You could show him a little more respect, you know!" and that would be it. In our society, this would not necessarily mean that the younger brother had a lot of contempt in his heart toward his father. However, in a culture where the customs and mores put a huge emphasis on respect for parents, Ham must have had a great deal of disdain and contempt for his father. Public nakedness and drunkenness were a far greater humiliation for this patriarch, and Ham's enjoyment bespeaks a much deeper spiritual problem. Did he resent his father's authority? Did he resent, even more, his father's faith and religion? Was he thinking, "Ha! And you think yourself so spiritual! You are always telling me that *I* need to be more devoted to the Lord. Look at you now!" Of course, this is speculation, but something like this must be true to warrant Noah's curse. Ham's enjoyment of his father's humiliation must have been a sign of deeper flaws and fissures in the character of Ham's heart.

The second reason we don't quickly grasp the seriousness of Ham's sin is that we tend to read Bible narratives as individual "moral-of-the-story" fables, rather than parts of the whole biblical story line. The flood and the ark were God's way to give the human race a new start—to "save" it from the sin that was about to completely destroy it. Noah's drunkenness and nakedness surely are designed to show us that sin has *not* been eradicated by the flood. And just as the human race was divided within Adam and Eve's family (Cain vs. Abel and Seth), so it is again divided within Noah's family. In showing honor to their father, Shem and Japheth show that they are basing their lives on the gospel faith of their father. They were going to keep the line of the faithful community "going." Ham did not show the same respect. So, then, this narrative about Noah's drunkenness is here to point us to Christ! We will need a greater salvation than the ark! God's work of intervention to create a new humanity is not by any means completed. God has much more to do before we can be saved.

2. What practical lessons do we learn for our own lives from this incident?

As noted above, we must never think that biblical stories were primarily designed to offer moral examples (like Aesop's fables). They are always there to give us a "history of redemption"—to tell us how God progressively unfolded his saving purposes in the world. Of course, once you put the individual story into the context of the whole Bible story line, we do find plenty of very practical and helpful lessons for living. Here are just a couple.

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First, we learn that anyone can sin—and everyone will sin. Noah was "blameless," we were told in 6:9. "Blameless," we now see, does not mean perfectly sinless. (Most biblical scholars believe the word means that there is no overt inconsistency between a person's profession of faith and life patterns.) Noah was a towering figure of goodness, virtue, and faith, so much so that some commentators feel that this story must be a legend placed here by another author. How could the same man who stood in faith without flinching against the whole world—who essentially said, "Let God be true and every man a liar"—now fall into such a silly sin of personal weakness? Well, the answer is that "the same man" can, does, and will. We are all sinners through and through. We should never proudly let down our guard, thinking, "I'm not the kind of person who could ever do that." At the same time, we should not feel hopeless and uniquely bad when we do sin.

Second, we learn that God is a God of grace. The Bible persists in giving us stories like this about the supposed "heroes" of the faith. Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Peter: It is amazing to consider the kinds of serious, humiliating sins that are recorded in the Bible about some of the greatest saints who ever lived. Why does the Bible do that? It is because the message of the Bible is not "be strong and good and God will use you" but "God uses people who admit and know that they are not strong and good." God is a God of grace, working in and through weak people. As Edmund Clowney puts it:

> [This] story is not a fantastic mythology of a super-race. The people [of faith] are not choice, but chosen. Their sins and failings are described with painful candor. The focus is not on the exploits of the fathers, but on the faithfulness of God, who called the fathers in order that His promise might not be void. [1]

Third, we are reminded about the danger of being a "city without walls." Noah's lack of self-control was an occasion for Ham to sin. We must avoid the abuse of drink, drugs, food, or anything else that becomes an addiction that leads to self-absorption and keeps us from thinking of the needs of those around us.

Fourth, we are both comforted and warned about the difficulties of raising a family in faith. If we look at the biblical story line, we see that the faith of our children is both our responsibility *and* theirs. On the one hand, there are some parents who are clearly to blame for the unbelief of their children (Eli in 1 Sam. 3-4), and Titus 1:6 says that an elder should have children "who believe." On the other hand, there are other places where we see a division between belief and unbelief within a family without a word of blame for the parents. (That seems to be the case with Noah.) The Bible reminds us that our children have wills of their own. There is no way we can guarantee that our children will believe. Their unbelief is not necessarily the result of our failure. At the same time, the Bible is not so individualistic that it treats children as detached units who make decisions in a vacuum. They are most deeply influenced by the consistency of their parents' faith and walk, and that of other Christians (in their church). That is more critical than whether the child was given religious schooling, made to do family devotions, and so on.

Fifth, we learn here the importance of showing respect and honor to our parents. This text alone does not provide the Bible's whole teaching on our relationship to our parents. The biblical view is quite nuanced. For example, the commandment is to always "*Honor* your parents." It does not say we must always obey them, or even that we must always love them. Why? Parents might be wicked, and we are to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). So why would the Bible make *honor* the only universally required attitude? If your parents are good people, honor is right and warranted in multiple ways. But if your parents have wronged you, "honoring" them will keep you from being controlled by bitterness and anger (or from over-reacting and doing the *opposite* of everything they ever did). To honor bad parents means to forgive them and to show respect and deference to them. Why should we do that? For the good they have done for you (there's always something!) and for what they represent, namely, the institution of family and the God who stands behind it.

This biblical attitude toward parents and family is very balanced and does not really align with the views of a secular culture or a traditional one. The Bible will lead a Christian in a secular culture to honor his parents *more* than that culture would expect, and it will probably lead a Christian in a traditional culture to honor parents somewhat *less* than that culture prescribes.

3. Read Genesis 9:25-32. (a) Why do you think Noah singled out Canaan (Ham's youngest son, 10:6) for a curse? (b) If Canaan is father of the Canaanites, if Shem is the father of the Semitic (Jewish) people, and if Japheth is the ancestor of the Gentiles, what might the prediction of verses 26-27 mean?

Why single out Canaan?
Noah does not draw a simple "cause-effect" relationship between Ham's sin and Canaan's destiny. Noah does not say, "God will punish Canaan for what Ham has done." Ham's sin may be more the *occasion* for Noah's prophecy than a simple *cause*. The sin of Ham will eventually show itself in the violence and destructiveness of tribes and peoples descending from him. Noah is saying, "Ham, your flawed heart (as exhibited in this incident) will warp your son Canaan, and thus your seed will fail." Of course, Canaan shares the responsibility with his father for what is going to happen to him. As we noted above, a father's character can have a great impact on a child, but it is up to the child to decide whether or not to follow in his footsteps.

As Derek Kidner notes, this means the "curse on Canaan" is a wonderful example of both justice and mercy (despite its initial appearance). On the one hand, the fact that Canaanites will become a subjugated and broken people is a just and natural consequence of Ham's sin. His own traits will bear evil fruit in the history of his descendants. On the other hand, the fact that *only* Canaan is cursed and not the other three sons (10:6), shows that God in his grace is going to limit the destructive influence of sin in Ham's family.

> For his [Ham's] breach of the family, his own family would falter. [But] since it confines the curse to this one branch within the Hamites, those who reckon the Hamitic peoples in general to be doomed to inferiority have therefore misread the Old Testament as well as the New. It is likely, too, that the subjugation of the Canaanites to Israel fulfilled the oracle sufficiently (cf. Jos. 9:23; 1 Kings 9:21). [2]

What does the prophecy mean with regard to the future?
Most commentators believe that the prophecy is fairly straightforward. As Kidner noted immediately above, it is prophesied that the Canaanites would be a wicked and "low" people who would rightly be subjugated by Semites (Shem) and Gentiles (Japheth). See below for a discussion of how the ancestors represent people groups or nations.

The most interesting part of the prophecy is that God would "extend the territory of Japheth," yet he would "live in the tents of Shem" (v. 27). This means that, though the Gentiles would become far greater in number and power than the Shemites, they would somehow be dependent on their less numerous brethren. Most Christians believe this prophecy was fulfilled in Ephesians 3:6: "Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." The true faith—the Messianic line and community of faith—was preserved through history through the Shemites. Today, all peoples in the world find salvation through the revelation that entered the world through Israel.

4. Read Genesis 10:1-32. What is the purpose of this chapter? Why this fairly tedious listing of all the nations?

Note: This list of names is essentially a list of all the nations that ancient Israel knew about anywhere in the world. Derek Kidner writes, "Most of the names appear to be those of individuals [but] they meet us later in the Old Testament as peoples. . . . The natural sense of the chapter seems to make these the founders of their respective groups; but the interest lies in the group so founded and it its relation to other peoples. This is borne out by the sprinkling of plural (e.g. Kittim, Dodanim, v. 4) . . . which . . . show that the compiler of the list did not automatically ascribe ancestors to the groups he recorded." [3]

First, this chapter teaches us that humankind is unified and one, despite all its astonishing diversity. There are seventy names on the list, though the Old Testament knows of other nations not on the list (Deut. 2:10-12). The number seventy, then, is likely to stand for "all the nations of the world." Despite their differences, all nations of the earth are "brethren." The implications of this are very significant. It means on the one hand that we are never to regard any one race as "sub-human." It is a powerful argument against racism. At the same time, it also means that every culture does not have the right to "its own" religion and God. All nations have an obligation to submit to the true God, their Creator. (See Paul's use of the unity of humankind in Acts 17:26-28.)

Second, however, this teaches us that God elects particular leaders, families, and a particular people to be the "carriers" of the gospel faith and the Messianic line. That is why Shem, though the smallest group of nations, comes last in the "Table of Nations" and becomes the one group of people the Bible continues to follow. The rest are left behind, as it were. This shows us an interesting balance that is hard to maintain. First, there *is* such a thing as God's sovereign choice and election. He chooses Jacob not Esau, he chooses David not Saul, and so on. He chooses some to be the ones who keep the faith, act as deliverers of their people, and point to Christ in their words and deeds. However, at the same time, those of us who are (out of the nations) "chosen" are chosen in order to be a *light* and *blessing* to the nations. When Abraham is called to be a "blessing" to "all the peoples of the earth" (Gen. 12:3), we are being told explicitly what we were shown implicitly in Genesis 10. Though God gives special illumination and grace to some people, it is so that they can take the message and invite all other nations into that grace and blessing. *All* of the nations are part of God's plan! Yet he is bringing his salvation into the world through the Shemites.

This is a hard balance to maintain. It means we are not to be universalists who say, "All good people can find God," as if God were not bringing his salvation into history through one unique revelation that all must accept. But it also means we are not to be sectarians (or worse, racists) who say, "We are the saved and chosen ones, and the rest of the world are wicked heathen races and cultures who are going to be deservedly lost." Some believe that the seventy missionaries chosen by Jesus in Luke 10:1 symbolized the seventy nations of Genesis 10, to show the church that "they have to regard all nations as future partakers with them of the same salvation, and to embrace them with an interest of hopeful love unheard of elsewhere in the ancient world." [4]

5. Read Genesis 11:1-9. (a) For what purposes do the builders of the first skyscraper use their technology? (b) Look carefully at verse 4. In what two ways are these people looking to get "a name"—an identity?

The purposes

It is interesting to see that there are two reasons given for the building of the tower of Babel. In verse 3 they say, "'Let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly' . . . instead of stone . . . ." This means that a group had made a technological advance. Evidently, this particular way of making bricks was an advance over previous building methods. It meant they could build a much taller building than had been made previously. Like millions of people since then, they wanted to take their new talents and discoveries to a big "city" (v. 4) where they could use them. Even today, the people with the most creative ideas often trek to the cities, where they hope to find a fertile environment for experimentation and the implementation of their dreams.

notes

But there is a second, deeper reason for their project of city-building: "So that we may make a name for ourselves, and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (v. 4). This is a deliberate attempt not to build the "City of God" (Rev. 21-22, the heavenly Jerusalem) in which the purpose of all technological and cultural production is the glory of God's name. Rather, this is an attempt to build the "City of Man" (the earthly Babylon). The "City of Man" takes the wonderful possibilities of a city and turns them to self-glorifying ends. Cities are places where the talents and gifts of human beings are concentrated, stimulating one another, producing greater and greater art, science, architecture, business, and organization. But what is it all *for*? Verse 4 tells us vividly. The "City of Man" is where we go to use the power of the city to maximize our own power, glory, and autonomy. It is a way to make ourselves *in*dependent of God. Yet the very statement of verse 4 shows our radical insecurity. We only go to the city to "make a name for ourselves" through our accomplishments if we *lack* a name, if we don't know who we are. Kidner observes, "The project is typically grandiose; men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement . . . . At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes." [5]

In what two ways do they look for an identity?

"To get a name" in the Bible is to get what we call today an "identity." God, of course, constantly names people in the Bible. When he names Adam, Abraham, Israel, and even Jesus, he refers to what he has already done or is going to do in their lives. When God tells someone "what I have done/will do *is your name*," he means that his grace in our lives should be the defining factor. Our security, our priorities, our sense of worth and uniqueness—all the things we call "identity"—should be based on what he has done for us and in us. This means that if we do not have a "name," if we are insecure and have to "find out who we are," we have little or no grasp on what God has done.

The two ways that the people of Babel/Babylon seem to be getting their identity is in the greatness of their personal accomplishment (technology), and in the size and power of their group. First, the grandiose statement—"a tower that reaches to the heavens"—means that *at least* (see below) they are assigning spiritual value to their work and accomplishments. They are getting from their work the significance and power they ought to be getting from God. It is fair to say that they are "saving themselves" through their work, trying to "get to heaven" without God. "I don't need religion in order to face the world with confidence and joy! I know I'm great. Look at the skyscraper I've built!" Surely there are many people in New York City right now saying the same thing, almost literally. (Why do you think it is so easy to get people to give money to build buildings *if* the wealthy donor can put his or her name on it?)

Secondly, the desire to "not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" seems to mean that they also got "a name" from being gathered into a large group. They got a sense of power and greatness from the size and wealth of their city and their people. While the first pursuit of identity makes an idol of one's talents and accomplishments, the second pursuit of identity makes an idol of one's group. It appears that they feel they will have a "name" if their nation or tribe is great and powerful. This leads, of course, to imperialism, colonialism and various forms of racism.

Note: We should observe here that many commentators believe that the Tower of Babel was a *"ziggurat,"* a temple building common in the ancient Near Eastern pagan world. A ziggurat was made tall so that worshipers could ascend and make sacrifices to the gods and the gods could easily descend to earth. Ziggurats were "artificial mountains" and represented human efforts to unite heaven and earth through their religious rituals and practices. It is possible, then, that this was an effort to begin a new religion of some kind. But even if this was not an *explicitly* religious building, we see that it was nonetheless a symbol of how we seek to be our own saviors in the city, without God, through our personal and social accomplishments.

6. How does God intervene? How is the intervention of God a blessing (in a sense) as well as a curse? What does Babel teach us about the possibilities for human society?

How does God intervene?
God "confuses their languages"; in other words, he creates disunity! This seems rather remarkable. Aren't peace and unity among people good things? The answer depends on what that peace and unity are being used for. A totalitarian empire can very easily use a form of peace and unity to oppress and enslave.

We need to be reminded that God ordinarily provides punishment through natural means (Rom. 1:18-32: "he gave them up . . . to [their desires]" KJV). The things the sinful heart desires set up strains in the fabric of the real world that always lead to breakdown. Pride and the need for personal glory (v. 4b) necessarily lead to contention, competition, disunity, and strife (v. 4c). In other words, when we live a life of pride and self-glorification, it makes unity and love between people impossible. The two things they wanted so desperately were antithetical to each other apart from God. Through the years, we have seen the same thing. Apart from God, we have to choose between making the self an idol (which leads to the disunity of individualistic cultures) or else make the tribe/family into an idol (which leads to the suppression of individual freedom). God's intervention and judgment, though very sudden and supernatural, nonetheless reflect the self-inflicted results of sin on human society.

How is the intervention both blessing and curse?
In one sense this was, of course, a terrible judgment. Yet God's intervention leads to an even greater diversity of culture and language than the designers of Babylon wanted. Thus the scattering and disunity of humanity, though a fruit of sin, led to the further diversifying and enriching of humanity, which is, of course, a blessing.

Have we noticed yet (in the mark of Cain, the sending of the flood) that God always finds way to put mercy into his judgment? This is why Luther says that judgment is "God's strange work."

What does Babel tell us about the possibilities for society?
Babel is a vivid case study of the impossibility of building a human society that really "works" unless it is grounded in God. Every society that is not completely based on a God-centered worldview *and* is filled with converted people will have to make an idol out of something. Either the family, or the individual self, or the national interest, or the accruing of personal wealth—something will end up being considered the "bottom line," the *summum bonum*, the greatest good. But any idol leads to a breakdown somewhere. "The half-built city is all too apt a monument to this aspect of man," comments Kidner. [6]

This means that Christians are not to be utopian. No one kind of government is ideal. No one approach to government will avoid the disunity or oppression that is endemic to all human organization. Also, we must not look to technology to "save us." As we see in Genesis 11, as long as we are insecure, looking for "a name," we will use technology to glorify ourselves or our own people group, which leads to evil.

7. Read Acts 2:1-13. This is the only other "Table of Nations" in the Bible besides Genesis 10-11. What is the only real solution to the "curse" of Babel? What are the implications for Christians today?

We must not think that the separation of races and culture is a good in itself. There are some who have taken Genesis 11 to mean that the races and cultures should not mix or associate, that it leads to evil. But surely that is missing the whole point. The disunity of the human race was a punishment, the result of sin. Disunity is a clear distortion of God's original will for us. The loss of community because of our pride is a terrible loss, and it is not what God wants.

Proof of this statement is seen in Acts 2. Here we see another "Table of Nations." It almost seems unnecessary. Why is Luke giving us such a long, tedious list? He is deliberately trying to get us to draw a link to Genesis 10 and 11. At Babel, people of one speech could not understand the others because they were trying to get to heaven by themselves, to get their own name.

At Pentecost, people of many speeches *were* all able to understand one another. Why? Because in Acts 2 God "comes down" again, only in blessing, not in judgment (Gen. 11:5-9). At Pentecost, God reverses the curse of Babel because of the work of his Son. Now, in Christ, there is no Greek or Jew (Gal. 3:28). In Ephesians 2:14-22, Paul explains that the cross removes the pride and self-naming that lead to racial animosity and human disunity. The church is to show the world how, in Christ, the lost community of humanity can be recovered. That is what we are to be now! We are to be an "alternate city" of God (Matt. 5:14-17) in the midst of every "City of Man," showing the unity of cultures, races, and classes that only Christ can bring. And finally, someday, the curse will be totally gone. "At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD, and serve him with one accord" (Zeph. 3:9 ESV).

Here are two implications for Christians. In general, it means that Christians must be very wary of residual racial and cultural prejudice in themselves. As Kidner says,

> Racial roles are superceded in the New Testament, where "there cannot be Greek and Jew . . . barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:1). Any attempt to grade the branches of mankind by an appeal to Gen. 9:25-27 is . . . re-erecting what God has demolished. . . . [7]

And in particular, it means that Christians should live in places and look for opportunities to show *within the church* the unity among people groups that the gospel can bring.

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[1] Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 1988), p. 42.

[2] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 104.

[3] Derek Kidner, p. 105.

[4] F. Delitzsch quoted by Derek Kidner, p. 105.

[5] Derek Kidner, p. 109.

[6] Derek Kidner, p. 110.

[7] Derek Kidner, p. 103.

What were we put in the world to do?

The Call of Abram

Study 11
Genesis 11:27 - 12:20

INTRODUCTION

We now begin the second major section of Genesis, the narratives of "the Patriarchs" which last the rest of the book, chapters 12 through 50. Genesis 1 begins with God calling creation into being. Genesis 12 begins with God calling his *new* creation into being. Genesis 1-11 showed us that God's original designs for his creation were unfulfilled. From the time of the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, there was a downward spiral of sin and evil that judgment could only retard, not remedy (as with the flood and the confusion of Babel). It seems that God's only option is to destroy the creation that will not answer his call to service and fellowship with him.

But instead, God begins with a single human being, Abram. He calls to him to go to a new land and to begin a new nation that will provide a new hope for the eventual "blessing" and salvation of the whole world. God's general call of creation is now supplemented by his special call of "re-creation" or salvation. He will create a people for himself who will bear the message of his saving truth and grace into the world. This will eventually bring the whole universe to God's originally designed fulfillment. All this begins with the call of Abram in this chapter. Not only is everything else in Abram's life an unfolding of the meaning of this call, but so is the rest of the Bible! In Galatians, Paul is absorbed with showing how Christ is the fulfillment of the promise to Abram.

Note: It may be occasionally confusing that we go back and forth between calling this man "Abram" and "Abraham." "Abram" means "exalted father." Midway through the Abraham story, God gives him the name Abra*ham*, which means "father of a multitude." Don't be confused—it's the same person! Note also that our study concludes with Jacob. The story of Joseph is explored in the study, "Living in a Pluralistic Society."

1. Read Genesis 11:27-32. Read also Acts 7:2-4. What do we learn about the background of Abram's call? What do we learn about his family situation?

Genesis 11:27 tells us that Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran, who all lived in "Ur of the Chaldees" (v. 28). After Haran died, Terah and the rest of the family left Ur to go to the land of Canaan (v. 31a). However, they did not get there. Verse 31b tells us that when they got to a place along the way (which they named "Haran" after Abram's deceased brother), they "settled" there. If we did not have Acts 7, we would be left with some real mysteries: Why did the family ever leave Ur to go to the remote and unknown land of Canaan? And, having left, why did they stop and settle less than halfway to their goal?

Acts 7:2-4 is an important supplement. There we learn that Abram heard God's call originally when they were in Ur, before they got to Haran (vv. 2-3). So it was

at Abram's request that Terah and the whole family left their homeland. But either because of unwillingness or some incapability, the clan stayed and settled in Haran until Terah died. Then God called Abram again (Acts 7:4), so that the call we read in Genesis 12:1-3 is really God's second call to Abram. Notice also that the first call (Acts 7:3) only calls him to leave country and people, but the second call (Gen. 12:1) adds that he has to leave his "father's household." That means that Abram's extended family (at least Nahor and probably many others) was unwilling to go to Canaan. (That could easily be the reason they stopped in Haran in the first place.) The second call to Abram required that he not only leave his land and nation but most of his family.

The other thing we learn by way of background is that Sarah was "barren, she had no children" (Gen. 11:30). As many have noted, even small digressions and comments in the middle of genealogies are always significant. Packed into this little phrase is a world of misery that is hard for today's readers to comprehend. To understand the rest of Genesis, however, we need to realize the importance of child-bearing and the bitterness of barrenness in ancient cultures.

In our individualistic society, our fondest dreams and aspirations are for personal success, prominence, and prosperity, but that was not the way ancient, traditional societies operated. In those cultures all aspirations were focused on one's family. It was for the success, prominence, and prosperity of one's *family* that everyone dreamed. It was considered selfish and perverse in the extreme to seek glory for your *own* name apart from or rather than the glory of your family's name. In that context, then, the importance of having children was paramount. All the hopes and dreams anyone had were bound up in having strong, faithful, successful children who carried on the family name and honored their parents. Further, in old age, childless couples were economically and physically completely helpless. Sarah's barrenness, then, would have been a source of the greatest shame, pain, and discouragement possible.

2. Why is this background important for understanding the call of Abram? What do we learn about the call of God even before we study it?

This background makes the call of Abram less abstract. It gives us a better picture of Abram's personal situation, and therefore of the cost, challenge, and nature of God's call to us. Specifically:

We learn that the "call of God" comes repeatedly and unfolds in stages. We will see that this call—with its challenges and promises—gets clearer and clearer as the years pass. That does not mean it gets easier! In the final test of the offering of Isaac, the full depth of God's call becomes overwhelming. Nevertheless, we learn here that "hearing God's call" in our lives is a process, not a once-and-for-all revelation and crisis.

We also learn how radically individual the call of God is, at least in some sense. As we noted, Abram lived in a highly *non*-individualistic culture. In ancient societies, it was not the lone person but the tribe, the group, the family that mattered. And yet this background shows how, even in this context, the call of God is a profoundly personal, individual responsibility. A careful reading of the Hebrew in 12:1 shows the use of the "ethical dative" which should be literally translated "go *by yourself*." God is saying essentially, "Even if no one else in your family comes, I want you to come." Abram had done everything he could, as a good family man of his time, to get his whole family to come with him as he obeyed the call of God. In the end, he couldn't get them off dead center. So God comes again and says, "I don't care if no one else is coming. You come without them, then."

On the other hand, we can't help but notice that Abram *did* try to get the whole family to come. It even seems as if God allowed him to stay in Haran until his father died. This is a bit speculative, but it seems safe to infer that Abram's attitude toward his call from God steered a middle course between thumbing his nose at his family and letting his family's reluctance and unbelief keep him from following God himself.

Lastly, the ending of chapter 11 and the word about "barrenness" may be a way for the narrator to tell us that the call of God is simply our only hope. All of Genesis 1-11 shows us that humanity has come to a dead end. Sin and evil had put all humanity in a downward spiral. God's partial judgments (the flood and the confusion of Babel) can only diminish sin; they can't eradicate it. And now in the family of Abram, we have a miniature version of the same thing. Abram can't get his family to go on past Haran. His wife is barren and so his own family and line have reached a dead end as well. He has no hope and future. Walter Brueggemann develops this thought.

> . . . This family (and with it the whole family of Gen 1-11) has played out its future and has nowhere else to go. Barrenness is the way of human history. It is an effective metaphor for hopelessness. There is no foreseeable future. There is no human power to invent a future. But barrenness is not only the condition of hopeless humanity. The marvel . . . is that barrenness is [also] the arena of God's life-giving action. . . . [Into] a situation of . . . irreparable hopelessness . . . God speaks his powerful word. That is the ground of the good news. This God does not depend on any potentiality in the one addressed. . . . The speech of God presumes nothing from the one addressed but carries in itself all that is necessary to begin a new people in history. The power of this . . . word is without analogy. It is a word about the future spoken to this family without any hope of a future. . . . The remainder of the text is simply the announcement that the speech of God overcomes and overpowers the barrenness of human reality. [1]

3. Read Genesis 12:1-3. Analyze the call to Abraham. What does God require of him? In what ways do we have to answer this same call? (See Galatians 3:8-9.)

The call of God has two parts: the challenge and the promise. God requires something *of* Abram and offers something *to* him.

What does God require of Abram?
First, God asks him to leave all that he (or any human being) holds as his foundation and security. Abram is to (1) leave his country, (2) leave his people, and (3) leave his family. Second, God asks him to do so without any firm idea of where he is going or of when the promises will be fulfilled (v. 1b, "to the land I *will* show you.").

First, what God asks him to leave.

Leave your country. He was to let go of his *economic and material* security. He was leaving a much more settled, civilized environment for a "backwoods," uncivilized destination. He was putting at risk all the normal social advancement to be hoped for. He was leaving all physical and social safety.

Leave . . . your people. He was to let go of his *cultural* security. He left a familiar culture and customs for a foreign society. He was going to a place where he would always be an outsider, never an insider, never comfortable.

Leave . . . your father's household. Finally, he was to let go of his *personal, emotional security.* In traditional cultures one's identity was tied to one's family. He was no longer allowed to rest in the sorts of relationships that ordinarily give us our sense of self-worth and significance.

We have to remember how radical this call was in a non-mobile, non-individualistic culture! Abram is being asked to make his relationship to God more fundamental to his identity than any social, cultural, or psychological factor. This is no call to simply subscribe to doctrines, to worship in a particular way, and to follow some ethical pattern (though it involved all of these). This is an "all or nothing" demand for unconditional, sweeping allegiance. God is saying, "Make *me* your real country, your real people, your real family—your real security."

Second, God asks him to set out not knowing how or when the promised blessings (see below) will be fulfilled. This is a final blow to any residual desire on Abram's part for negotiation or control. The blessings promised are quite remarkable, and it would be fairly easy for Abram to follow God not for God's sake but for his own benefit and profit. God very explicitly says, "You have to commit to this life and set out not knowing where and how you are going to land." That is the meaning of verse 1b ("to a land I *will* show you"). The writer to the Hebrews understands this perfectly and sums it up like this: "And [Abraham] went out, not knowing where he was going." (Heb. 11:8, ESV). Abram's life can be summed up as a series of calls from God that go like this:

> "Go out." *Where?* "I'll tell you later. Just go."
>
> "You will have a son." *When?* "I'll tell you later. Just trust."
>
> "Now offer up your son on the mount." *Why?* "I'll tell you later. Just climb."

notes

What do we learn for ourselves?
Abram is unique in many ways, and his call is so radical that we might think that this is only something for specially chosen people. "Surely," it might be said, "the rest of us just have to try our best to live a good life, but some very special 'heroes of the faith' get this kind of dramatic call to leave everything." But the New Testament answers that God's call to Abram is a model for how he deals with us all.

In Galatians 3:8-9 Paul makes this very clear. We have seen that there are two parts to God's call: what he requires and what he offers. Paul refers to these two parts. First he says that God "announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'" This is the promise offered to Abraham in verse 3—the salvation of Christ that Paul teaches is the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to bless the world through him (Gal. 3:15-18). Then Paul says, "So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (v. 9). This, then, is Paul's understanding of what exactly is required of Abraham. He is being called to faith, to trust, to believe. The "call away from all security" is really the radical saving faith God requires of us all. We can paraphrase Paul like this: "Abraham was told that if he put his faith not in himself, his own resources and ability, but in God, salvation would come. When we believe in God's saving work in Christ, we get the blessing of salvation just as Abraham did." Hebrews 11:8-10 also makes it clear that Abraham is a model for our faith as well. His call is the same call every person must answer to follow Christ.

"But," someone asks, "surely we are not all called to leave our homeland and families in this way?!" Of course, the Bible is filled with examples of people who followed the Lord without literally leaving their home and families. Yet we are all called to:

1. Follow the Lord *personally*. We looked at this under question #2. We all have to "leave" in that we must follow Christ whether or not our family and friends do, whether or not it is "accepted" in our culture and class. Fervent Christian faith is extremely unpopular in many social and family circles. We may have to take a lot of ridicule and ostracism to be true to the call.

2. Follow the Lord *without conditions.* There is a strong tendency for spiritual seekers to do a "cost-benefit" analysis when thinking about Christian faith. They ask, "If I give my life to Christ, will I be guaranteed of a protected, happy life?" Or they want to know exactly what changes will be required. They ask, "If I become a Christian, how much money will I have to give away? Will I have to change the way I spend my money? Or will I have to change my sex life? By how much?" But just as Abram is called to go to "a land I *will* show you," so we are called to follow Christ simply because we owe it. We can't possibly foresee even a fraction of what that will entail. A person who bargains, who says, "I'll obey *if* I know what is coming, *if* it looks like it will be worth it," is not really listening to the call at all. God is saying, "Take your hands off your life! Give up your right to self-determination! Stop living according to what seems to profit, benefit and please *you*."

3. Follow the Lord *by trusting in his grace*. As Paul indicates in Galatians 3, Abraham's faith is analogous to trusting in Christ. Saving faith is not saying, "Bless me because I am believing so well and so hard!" Saving faith is saying, "I turn from all the other things I thought could make me significant and secure and I put all my hope in you." God will now be his only wealth, honor, safety, and approval. Abraham is being called to transfer his trust from his own abilities and efforts to rest wholly in God's miraculous intervention in history. All the promises depend on the miraculous, "impossible" birth of the "son of promise." (See question #4). That is how we become Christians: not by trying very hard to live a certain way, but by giving up all efforts at self-salvation and turning to Christ as Savior.

4. Follow the Lord *by becoming a person "in mission."* Yes, of course we are not all called to leave our homeland and culture to follow Christ. But the call of Abram includes "I will bless you . . ." (Gen. 12:2a) and "you will *be* a blessing" (v. 2b). God only blesses you so that you can *be* a blessing to others. *Any*one who answers the call of God becomes a person "in mission" wherever he or she is. It destroys the "consumer mentality." You not only live for God, but for others. In general, we choose where we live, who we associate with, and how we spend our time to maximize our own safety, status, success, and prosperity. But the call of God changes all that. The call of Abram shows us a principle: if we are going to be a blessing to others, we will have to "leave" our security zones and comfort zones. There are lots of people we feel intimidated by or disdainful of, and there are lots of situations in which we feel uncomfortable or out of control, so we avoid them. But here we see we won't be able to serve others if we only spend time with "our kind of people."

People who have been changed by the gospel find that they have a new ability to critique their own class and culture. They have a security in Christ so that they do not need to cling to a sense of their own cultural superiority. They do not need as much to have the approval of their own kind. This gives mature Christians some critical distance that enables them to relate to people of other races and classes better than they could have before. In other words, everyone in Christ is called "to leave" their country and their people. As Miroslav Volf writes:

> The courage to break his cultural and familial ties and abandon the gods of his ancestors . . . out of allegiance to a God of all families and all cultures was the original Abrahamic revolution. . . . In the same way Christians "depart" from their original culture. . . . Christians can never be first of all Asians or Americans, Croatians, Russians or Tutsis, and then Christians. Christians take a distance from [the gods of] their own culture because they give the ultimate allegiance to God and God's promised future. But [now in Christ] departure is no longer a spatial category; it can take place within the cultural space one inhabits. It involves neither a typically modern attempt to build a new heaven out of the worldly hell nor a typically postmodern restless movement that fears to arrive home. . . . When they have responded to the call of the gospel they [put] one foot outside their own

> culture while the other remain[s] firmly planted in it. Christian distance is not flight from one's original culture, but a new way of living within it because of the new vision of peace and joy in Christ. [2]

Another commentator, Joyce Baldwin, shows how the call of God always changes the way we relate to our culture.

> By leaving Ur and Haran, where moon worship was the dominant cult (the name Terah is related to the Hebrew for "moon"), Abram would be set free from the drag of the familiar culture [and the] ancestral tradition in so far as these were idolatrous. [3]

In short, the radical call of God to Abraham comes to every person, who must "leave the gods" of his or her culture. Every culture has idolatrous aspects that become clearer in the light of the gospel. As we distance ourselves from those gods, we set out on a journey of sorts. We no longer relate to our own culture as we once did. There is a new flexibility, a new creativity. We abandon some things in our culture, revise others, and maintain others. We can see ways in which our own culture and people are wrong. We can relate to those outside it in a new way.

4. Read Genesis 12:1-7. Continue to analyze the call to Abraham. (a) What does God promise him? (b) Verse 7. What is the one promise necessary to make all the other promises come true? (c) In what ways do we also participate in these blessings? (See Numbers 6:22-26.)

What does God promise Abram?
First, Abraham will be made "into a great nation" (v. 2a). So the first promise is that God will make Abraham into a whole new country or society. As we have seen, this is a dream come true for a man in ancient, traditional society. But the significance, in the context of the whole book of Genesis, is that God is now creating a *new* humanity, a new society in which God's truth and love can reign, in which the rest of the world will get a glimpse of how God wants life to be lived. There are several subsidiary promises that come under this general one. For example, it is hinted here that Abram will get "a land" (v. 1), and it is also stated that God will protect Abram ("I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse," v. 3a). But these are all means to the end that Abram's descendants will become a new human community. They need a place to dwell, and they will need God's protection if that is to occur.

Second, Abraham will be blessed and get a great name (v. 2b). The second promise is for a special covenantal, personal relationship with God. It is unfortunate that the word "blessed" or "blessing" has come to be so debased in our English usage. It normally is used to indicate being "inspired" in some general way. But in the famous Aaronic benediction, which God gave to be the climax of the tabernacle worship, to be "blessed" is equated with an experience of intimacy with God ("make his face shine upon you") and total fulfillment and well-being ("give you peace [*shalom*]"). This is certainly what

God is promising Abram, since immediately after Abram sets out, we read that "the LORD appeared to Abram" (v. 7). Probably the idea of "make your name great" has also to do with this intimate relationship, for Abram in later literature is known as "the friend of God" (2 Chron. 20:7; Is. 41:8).

Third, Abraham will be the source of a universal salvation: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (v. 3b). This is, of course, astonishing. We have seen that the word "blessing" is a very strong word, entailing God's *shalom*, the well-being and peace of God's kingdom. This promise indicates that God's purpose in (a) making Abram a personal friend, and (b) making Abram's offspring into a new human community is all for the ultimate aim of (c) bringing salvation to the whole world. God is going to save the world through Abram's family. God will bless Abraham with personal intimacy so that he can pass the true faith down to his children. He must pass on this faith so that his children will become an alternative society, a counterculture, a new humanity in the midst of the world. And then, in some way, the healing of the nations and the salvation of the world will come out of that faithful community.

In summary, God says, "I'll give you a special relationship with me. I'll make you into a new, faithful human community. I'll use you to save the world from its downward spiral into self-destruction."

What is the one promise on which all other promises hinge?
All of these incredible promises rest on one "linch-pin" promise. In verse 7 God says that Abram will have "offspring." If no child is born to Abram, there will be no need for a land and no possibility for a new humanity or salvation for the earth. The salvation of the world will hinge on the miraculous birth of a little child. We have seen that Sarah is barren, so everything depends on something Abraham and Sarah cannot accomplish in their own strength. There needs to be a supernatural intervention of God into history for all of this to take place. Salvation will not come through human effort.

In what way do we participate in these blessings?
Is it just a coincidence that all the incredible promises of intimacy, community, and salvation for Abraham hinged on the birth of "the son of promise"—just as it does for us? No. Jesus in Luke 24:44-48 says that everything in the Bible points to him. In John 8:56 he says, "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day." Paul in Galatians 3:15-18 tells us that the ultimate offspring ("seed") of Abraham that fulfilled all the promises was the miraculous birth of Christ, the One to whom Isaac points. All of our salvation hinges not on anything we have done or can do, but only upon the miraculous coming into history of the ultimate "Son of the promise," Jesus Christ. We too must believe in the sheer grace of the birth of the "Son of promise." Paul says that whoever believes in Jesus Christ is a spiritual descendant of Abraham (Gal. 3:7) who is "blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal. 3:9). How so?

notes

1. First, like Abraham, through the gospel we get a *community*. First Peter 2:9 says that all Christians are now part of a "chosen race . . . a holy nation." The gospel is so transforming that it makes Christians one people across all other race, gender, and class barriers (Gal. 3:28). We are not simply saved as individuals; we are grafted into a new human community in which we grow in grace and minister to others.

2. Second, like Abraham, through the gospel we get an *intimate personal relationship.* Jesus tells us that we are not just his servants, but his *friends* (John 15:13-17). Paul also speaks of this subjective, intimate relationship when he says that through the gospel we are not just servants but *sons* (Gal. 4:6-7). The gospel removes all fear of condemnation and initiates us into a relationship of love.

3. Third, like Abraham, we can become the vehicles for others to learn of Christ through our words and deeds. We too receive the blessing of being *"people in mission."*

4. Fourth, however, like Abraham, we will never realize the fullness of the promises in this life. The writer of Hebrews points out that Abraham saw almost nothing of the fulfillment of the promises. He never owned any land except his own grave. He never saw even his grandchildren, let alone the "new nation." In the same way, we live "between the times." We see more of God's saving person than Abraham did, but God's kingdom is still largely invisible to the world. His people are still wanderers and pilgrims with little power and success. We must see that we will be like Abraham, in that all the promises of God will only be partially fulfilled in our lives.

5. Read Genesis 12:10-20. What does this incident add to our understanding of Abraham's call and ours?

God called Abraham to live in the land he promised him by special revelation (v. 7). But almost immediately there was a famine that made living there difficult. Abraham very quickly left Canaan. Though there is no direct statement that this was wrong, ancient biblical narrative is very spare with commentary anyway. The negative fall-out of his sojourn to Egypt is probably the narrator's way of telling us that Abraham's flight was a form of unbelief. He didn't trust God to provide for him in the land.

At any rate, when he got to Egypt, he faced the possibility of being killed by those who wished to curry favor with the Pharaoh by presenting him with a beautiful "trophy wife." With complete disregard for Sarah, Abraham told a half-truth (for she *was* his half-sister [20:12]) that left her vulnerable. When she was taken, he did not defend her. Despite this astounding lapse, God finds a way to do both justice and mercy. He punishes Egypt, but evidently in such a way that Pharaoh learns the truth and restores Sarah to Abraham.

What do we learn here about Abram's call and ours? The Bible is brutally candid about the flaws and failings of its prominent figures. If readers are astounded at how quickly Abram can fall into unbelief and cowardice after a "mountaintop" spiritual experience (Gen. 12:1-9), they are being prodded by the narrator to look at themselves. Our greatest role models are really just models of grace. The Bible is *not* a "book of virtues" with moral exemplars for us to emulate. Of course, there are plenty of good and bad examples for our instruction. But the basic point of these episodes of moral failure is to show us that God's choice of Abraham was an election of sheer sovereign grace. He is not chosen because he is faithful. He eventually becomes faithful because he is chosen. It is the same with us.

6. The call of Abraham is radical. A person might say, "I can't answer such a call because I'm not sure I trust God, and/or I'm not sure I trust myself." What would you say to such a statement?

The call of Abraham is a call to radical, unconditional commitment. The two fears most people have are to mistrust God (out of fear that he'll abuse us) or to mistrust ourselves (out of fear that we will fail) or both. How do we answer?

Basically, we will never be like Abraham simply by trying to be like Abraham. It only happens by believing in the One to whom Abraham points. Abraham was to be the head of a new humanity, but ultimately it is Christ who is the founder, head, and source of a new humanity through his death and resurrection (Eph. 1:20-23). Jesus is the *true* Abraham, who left the ultimate security, wealth, status, and home—heaven itself! Jesus *truly* "went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb. 11:8, KJV). He went into the ultimate wilderness of the cross and took our punishment. He lost the ultimate city, home, and family so we could be absolutely sure of our secure place in God's city, home, and family.

Only by seeing the "true Abraham" can we have the courage to live like the original Abraham. When we see what Christ has done for us, we know we can trust him. And when we see what he has for us, we know there can't be any condemnation of fear.

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[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 116-117.

[2] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 39-51.

[3] Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 29.

What were we put in the world to do?

Abram and Lot

Study 12
Genesis 13:1 - 14:24

INTRODUCTION

Lot was Abram's nephew, the son of his deceased brother Haran. Lot was evidently the only member of Abram's extended family who went out with him to Canaan (12:4-5). His story is woven within Abram's history, but it is a much sadder one. It begins here in chapters 13-14 and ends in chapters 18-19.

1. **Read Genesis 13:1-4. Where does Abram go and what does he do when he returns from Egypt? (Review Genesis 12:10-20.) What do these actions tell us about his heart attitude as he comes back to Canaan?**

We saw last time that Abram failed to exercise faith in the Lord when a famine came upon the land (12:10). He left for Egypt and there allowed his wife to be taken into Pharaoh's harem, in a cowardly attempt to save his own skin. Despite Abram's faithlessness, God did not abandon him. He intervened, enlightening Pharaoh to the true situation while preventing him from killing Abram (12:17-18). Instead, Abram was sent back "with his wife and everything he had" (12:20). An enormous disaster was averted.

Verse 3 tells us that Abram very deliberately retraced his steps as he returned to Canaan. First he returned to the Negev, where he had made his near-disastrous decision to go down to Egypt (12:9). Then he apparently went from the Negev to Bethel along the same path ("from place to place") he had traveled from Bethel to the Negev. Finally, he came back to the place where he had first worshiped God formally (12:8). Now he again "called on the name of the LORD" (13:4).

What is going on here? This retracing of his steps is somewhat reminiscent of the way Jesus called Peter to confess his love three times (John 21:15-18) after Peter had denied him three times. In other words, Abram is *repenting*. He is not simply trying to repress the painful memories of his failures, trying "to put them behind him and go on" in some general way. Rather, he is facing his sins fully and directly. He is *dealing* with them in repentance. Then he renews his commitment to God in worship.

This behavior is very telling. If failure drives you *away* from God or you can't bear to face your failures fully, it is because you have a deficient understanding of the gospel. Abram's behavior shows that he was coming to a deeper understanding of the gospel.

How? He had been called by God out of idolatry to put his faith in him (12:1-3). Then Abram failed God badly, but God intervened and brought him out of Egypt, even though he didn't deserve it. This showed Abram that the basis of his relationship with God was not his own worth or merit but the sovereign and free grace of God. This revelation *always* has two effects: (1) First, it humbles you to realize that you may be "chosen" but you are not "choice." It *humbles*

you enough to be repentant. It also (2) assures you that God loves you and is going to be there for you no matter what. That *comforts* you enough to be repentant. We need to have hope of God's mercy and acceptance if we are going to dare to be honest with ourselves about the extent of our sin. If I think my worth and my loveability are bound up with my moral performance, I will never be able to admit to myself or anyone else how much of a failure I am.

If—and only if—you know *both* of these facts will you be able to respond to failures with the humble and joyous confidence of gospel repentance. Only then will you be able to look your past sins full in the face and "deal" with them.

2. Read Genesis 13:5-9. What was Abram's and Lot's problem? What does Abram's solution tell us about his priorities? How does this give us practical instruction for our own lives?

Now Abram faces a new test—not adversity, but prosperity! (Prosperity and success can be as great a trial and problem for our faith as difficulty and failure.) Abram and Lot found that their herds and flocks had greatly increased, but the pastures in that part of the land were very limited. Soon fights were breaking out between their herdsmen as each side sought the most adequate spots for grazing. (The same situation initiated similar conflicts between parties in Genesis 26:12-22 and 36:6-8.) The narrator also mentions other groups living in the area at the time (v. 7), which made it even harder to find enough room for the herds and flocks.

It was obvious that Abram and Lot could not continue living near each other. They would have to go to different parts of the country if they were both going to thrive. It did not take much wisdom to see that. But Abram responds to the situation in a remarkable way. He allows Lot to make the first choice about where he will go. He allows him to go to the choicest part of the land. Why is this remarkable? In that patriarchal culture, seniority in the family meant everything. It would have been completely fitting for Abram, the head of the family in Canaan, to simply take up his abode in the best place and let Lot fend for himself. Instead, the elder defers to the younger and lets him make the choice. As Derek Kidner notes:

> [Abram's] wisdom sprang from his faith. By faith he had already renounced everything; he could afford to refresh the choice: and by faith he had opted for the unseen; he had no need to judge, as Lot did, "by the sight of his eyes." [1]

How did he arrive at this approach? Abram first sorted out his priorities—his "core values," as they are often called today. As we have just seen in verses 1-4, Abram now is recommitted to following God's call to stay in the land and to trust God to fulfill his promises in his time. But there is a second priority he mentions, namely, that "we are brothers" (v. 8). Abram singles out another non-negotiable priority—the maintenance of a strong relationship within the

family. He wants a strong, positive relationship between Lot and himself. Now, what are Abram's options? (1) He could have stayed with Lot and moved out of Canaan altogether. That might have enabled them to find a place where they could grow wealthy together. That would have maintained his relationship with Lot, but not with God. (2) He could have chosen the fertile part of Canaan (the plain of Jordan) for himself and left Lot to fend for himself in less desirable places. That would have maintained his relationship with God (because he would have been obedient to the call to live in Canaan) but it would have probably bred resentment in Lot. (3) Finally, Abram could offer to stay in the more arid part of Canaan while Lot took the fertile land. In that case he would maintain his relationship with both God and Lot, but at the risk of his own economic future. In the end, that is what he chose. He said, in effect: "You choose where you want to go and I will take what is left over" (v. 9).

Abram chose to put "God and family" ahead of "career and wealth." The practical implications for us are obvious. We live in a time and place where the demands of career and wealth-creation have never been more all-encompassing. The forty-hour week is a thing of the past for most professionals. Obviously, we are not being much of a help to our families if we make no sacrifices for our career, but there must be balance and, in the end, our spiritual growth and our relationships have to take precedence.

3. Read Genesis 13:10-13. What does Lot's choice tell us about his heart and character? How does this give us practical instruction for our own lives?

What does Lot do in response to Abram's gracious offer? It is easy to read past verse 10 without noticing it. It said that Lot looked toward the fertile Jordan plain and saw that it was like "the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt." These two phrases show us something of how his heart was operating.

Like the land of Egypt. He'd seen the luxury, sophistication, and wealth of Egypt, which developed its civilization in a narrow watered plain (the plain of the Nile). He was dreaming of getting his own living standard up to the living standards of Egypt.

Like the garden of the LORD. This might simply be hyperbolic language to say that it looked "like paradise." But it may also indicate the kind of spiritual idolatry that the heart is capable of. Sin leads us to treat good things like career, family, or money as *ultimate* things—things that will fulfill our deepest spiritual longings. All human beings live "east of Eden," alienated from God and therefore always restless and unhappy, even in the best conditions. The only way "back to the garden" is through God's salvation, but instinctively we try to "get back" our own way. We say, "If I can become a successful artist, I will finally experience happiness and fulfillment." But nothing is the garden of the LORD except the garden of the LORD.

Verse 12 seems to indicate that when Lot moved to the southern plain of the Jordan, he actually moved out of Canaan. If that is the case, Lot's priorities are revealed to be the opposite of Abram's. He was quite willing to leave the land of (eventual) promise in order to grow in wealth *now*. The result will be disastrous, as is hinted in verse 13 and as we will see in chapter 19.

There are many practical implications for us. Notice that Lot moved from the "country" to the "cities" and the result was terrible. Does that mean that everyone should stay away from cities? This is (of course!) not a valid inference. The city *per se* is not the source of human wickedness and there are many places where God calls believers to *go* to cities, even very "pagan" cities (Jonah 1:1; Jeremiah 29:1-14). However, what we do learn here is that we must have the *right motives* for moving to cities or the temptations of the city can harm us. Lot's selfish ambition put his own wealth and status ahead of God and family, which was why he was defenseless against the city's seductions.

4. Read Genesis 13:14-18. What does God promise Abram that he has not said before? Why does this promise come now? How can God be so generous to Abram so soon after his failure in Egypt?

Now God comes to Abram and tells him to "lift up your eyes . . . and look north and south, east and west" (v. 14). Commentators tell us that there is a spectacular "lookout" point between Bethel and Ai with a panoramic view of virtually the whole land. God now repeats his promise to give this land to Abram's descendants (v. 15). He also strengthens the promise to make his descendants into a great nation. Abram is told that his descendants will be as innumerable as grains of dust. God is renewing Abram's call, emphasizing its rewards and promises, not its challenges and requirements.

Why is God doing this now? This is a rather typical pattern. Abram has just passed a test. After a failure—the trip to Egypt—he repented, and that repentance has matured and deepened him. It gave him the wisdom, love, and humility to make a very wise choice and escape the snare of wealth and riches. As a result of Abram's obedience and sacrifice, God comes to him in a new and deeper way. Abram senses God's approval and love in a heightened way. He becomes aware of God's purposes for him in a clearer way. That is generally the pattern for us all. Increased communion and wisdom come in the wake of increased obedience and sacrifice. Derek Kidner writes:

> The sequel for both men is instructive. Lot, choosing the things that are seen, found them corrupt (13:13) and insecure. Choosing selfishly, he was to grow ever more isolated and unloved. Abram, on the other hand, found liberation. With the call of 12:1 at last fulfilled, the promise of "land" and "seed" was now amplified (v. 14) . . . . [2]

So we see Lot becoming spiritually more blind and enslaved by his choice while Abram becomes more spiritually clear-eyed and liberated by his.

notes

A question naturally arises at this point: Which Abram is the *real* Abram? In the sojourn to Egypt and in the conflict with Lot, Abram acts in diametrically opposite ways. In the trip to Egypt he showed himself "anxious about [his] life, what [he] will eat or . . . drink" (Matt. 6:25 ESV) and put his own safety and comfort ahead of his commitment to God and his family (Sarah). Now in chapter 13 he has put God and his family ahead of his material safety and comfort. The teaching is that we are *both* deeply sinful and yet growing in God at the same time.

How can God make this promise to such a flawed, mixed, imperfect man? Yes, Abram just passed a test, but does that warrant the extravagant promise in verses 14-17? Why doesn't God follow up the failure of chapter 12 with a radical condemnation (e.g. "Now you shall surely die") instead of following up the faith of chapter 13 with such an over-the-top reward? The answer is God's grace, of course, but from the perspective of the New Testament we know that this grace is only possible because of Jesus Christ.

> The ultimate answer to how Abram could be accepted in spite of his failure came much later . . . [at another "look out point"]. On that occasion, the Devil took Jesus up onto a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world . . . and promised to give them all to Jesus if he would just bow down and worship him. (Matt. 4:8-9). [3]

Jesus turned down what was his by right to die on the cross for us, so that we could receive by grace what was *not* ours by right. God can only give Abram what he saw from the high place because Jesus turned down what *he* saw from the high place.

5. Read Genesis 14:1-16. Trace out what happened to put Lot in jeopardy. Contrast where Lot was living in 14:11 with 13:12. Although we don't know the exact numbers on the other side, Abram is victorious with a small number of men. What is the significance of this?

The cities of the plain (represented by the five kings named in verses 2-3 around the "Salt Sea" or the Dead Sea) had been under the military power of King Kedorlaomer (v. 4), paying tribute to him. After twelve years of this they rebelled. Kedorlaomer gathered some allies and began a campaign of conquest that eventually led to an invasion of the five cities to coerce them back under his lordship. The five kings of the cities of the plain (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar) made a defense but were utterly defeated. The Kedorlaomer alliance "seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah . . . . They also carried off Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions" (14:11-12).

Notice that while Lot originally was living *by* the cities of the plain (13:12), he was now living *within* Sodom. The city had drawn him in. As a result, he was enslaved with the rest of the town.

Abram receives word from a survivor that Lot has been abducted. Abram attacks the victorious alliance with a force of just 318 men. We don't know how big Kedorlaomer's force was, but surely it was far larger. At the purely natural level, surprise and confusion can aid a smaller force against a larger one, but it is hard to believe that the victory can be completely attributed to that. There seems to have been a divine intervention here, greatly magnifying the power of Abram and his men in the battle.

What does this show us? Chapter 14 is placed immediately after God's strong promise and call to Abraham to "go, walk through the . . . land, for I am giving it to you" (13:17). God is showing the world that *his* chosen one is the real king of the land. God is showing the world (albeit briefly) the glory of his kingdom.

6. Read Genesis 14:17-24. Contrast the response of the two kings to Abram's victory. What accounts for the difference? Here now is another test for Abram. What is it? How does he deal with it?

The mysterious king Melchizedek comes out to meet Abram after his great victory. He is king of a place called "Salem" (Hebrew *shalom*), which is simply the word for "peace." He is a believer in the true God; in fact, he is called a priest of God. He praises Abram and blesses the God of Abram, giving him credit for the victory. The king of Sodom gives no credit either to God *or* Abram for the victory, nor does he thank Abram for his own rescue. He simply gets "down to business." He concedes that Abram has a claim to the goods of Sodom and proposes that he keep them as part of the reward. This contrast is again a test of Abram's faith—an opportunity for him to grow and increase or fall and decrease. Derek Kidner writes:

> Melchizedek, king and priest, his name and title expressive of the realm of right and good (see Heb. 7:2) offers him, in token, a simple sufficiency from God [bread and wine], pronounces an unspecified blessing (dwelling on the Giver, not the gift), and accepts costly tribute. All this is meaningful only to faith. The king of Sodom, on the other hand, makes a . . . businesslike offer; its sole disadvantage is perceptible, again, only to faith. To these rival benefactors Abram signifies his Yes and No, refusing to compromise his call. . . . At this distance we can see that . . . more hinged on this than on the most resounding victory or the fate of any kingdom. [4]

"The eye of faith" can perceive that the offer of the king of Sodom was spiritually seductive. Abram had been called by God to create a *counter-culture* in Canaan. He had been called out of an idolatrous society to create a new humanity, a new human society in which sex, money, and power are not used idolatrously but in service to God and others. Had Abram accepted this great wealth from Sodom, it would have put him *at least* in a situation where others could claim that his people's prosperity was based on military conquest and plunder, rather than on the blessing of God. Perhaps the luxuries of Sodom

would have drawn Abram or many of his people in the same direction as Lot. Instead, after he had given Melchizedek a "tithe" of what he had won in battle (v. 20) and after he remunerated his allies (v. 24), Abram returned the rest of the plunder to the people of Sodom. Remarkable!

Kidner is right to point out that the *real* history of the world—the *real* list of world-changing significant events—is not what most historians record. At the time, a major battle between "the powers that be" seemed like a history-making incident. But we see here that the invasion's true significance was as the setting where Abram's faith could be clarified and tested. Abram's response to this test prepared him to be the founder of the people of God, out of which the world's salvation would come. What the world thinks is important and what God knows is important are (usually) two different things.

7. Read Hebrews 6:20-7:19. What does the New Testament say is the significance of Abram's encounter with Melchizedek?

The Hebrews text points out all sorts of ways in which Melchizedek resembles Christ. For example, because Melchizedek seems to "come out of nowhere" (we have no idea of his lineage or family genealogy), he reminds us of Christ—the eternal, final priest, without successor, whose sacrifice is final and satisfying to God.

But the main point that the Hebrews writer makes is that Abraham seems to defer to Melchizedek, though he is the Jewish patriarch, the builder of his own altars, the offerer of his own sacrifices (12:7-9), and the forefather of all the Levitical/Mosaic priests. "This man . . . did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him . . . and without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater" (Heb. 7:6-8). The point is that there was a priesthood—a way to approach God—that is superior to the Levitical priesthood and its animal-sacrificial system. Melchizedek points to the reality that the Levitical priesthood was only a foreshadowing of something much greater. In other words, even Abram himself (at the moment of triumph) needed a priest to get God's blessing. Even the great model of faith needed a mediator. And if he needs a mediator, doesn't everyone? There is a chasm between us and God that must be bridged, and it was bridged by the life and death of Jesus, the ultimate priest to whom Melchizedek points. We cannot bridge that gap ourselves.

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[1] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 118.

[2] Derek Kidner, p. 118.

[3] Iain Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R Publishing, 1999), p. 38.

[4] Derek Kidner, p. 121.

What were we put in the world to do?

The Oath of God

Study 13
Genesis 15:1-21
Romans 4:1-8 , 16-24

INTRODUCTION

There is no exciting event in this chapter, so it is much less famous than others in the Abraham narrative. Nevertheless, this account is "theologically . . . probably the most important chapter of this entire collection." [1] The first part of this passage later becomes a crucial part of the apostle Paul's great treatise on faith in Romans 4, and the second part later becomes a crucial part of Paul's great treatise on grace in Galatians 3.

1. Read Genesis 15:1. "After this" (v. 1) shows that God's word to Abram is connected to what has just happened. Why do you think Abram needs to be told "Do not be afraid"? Have you had a similar experience?

In chapter 14 Abram rescued his nephew Lot in a daring military action. God blessed him and he was victorious. Abram then resisted the temptation to self-trust and spiritual compromise that new political power can bring. (Recall last week's study of Genesis 14:18-24.) In other words, chapter 14 is about victory for Abram on all fronts: material, political, and spiritual. But God's word comes and says up front, "Do not be afraid, Abram" (v. 1). This means that Abram was far from confident and triumphant after his battle. We see him continuing to express doubts in verse 8. As Joyce Baldwin puts it, "The battle, with its prolonged period of exertion and tension, was followed by morbid fears and a sense of failure." [2]

Why would this be? First, it is possible that Abram now realized he was "on the radar" of the political powers. Before he had been barely noticed, the head of a wandering clan on the margins of others' awareness. Now he had intruded into the political-military world and made powerful, nation-sized enemies for himself, though his clan was still a rather small entity with just over 300 fighting men. He may have felt quite vulnerable and fearful of retaliation. Second, he may have had second thoughts about giving back to the king of Sodom all the spoils and wealth he had taken in the triumph. Had he kept his "share," he would have been far more wealthy, powerful, and secure. For these and perhaps other reasons, Abram had been thrown into confusion, fear, and doubt.

This is much more common than we would think—that after a period of success and victory come doubts and fears. Elijah, after his triumph in 1 Kings 18, is cast into almost suicidal depression in 1 Kings 19. Jonah, after his preaching brings the whole city of Nineveh to repentance in Jonah 3, falls into bitterness and despair in Jonah 4. The reasons this so often happens are many and complex. Sometimes the exertion and the triumph bring a "high" that normal life cannot sustain. As soon as the adrenaline wears off and you return to your routines, you find life bleak and boring. You look for the next "charge." Sometimes the success reveals to you just how desperate your heart is for honor and glory, for approval and power, and you become disillusioned with

yourself. In short, for various reasons, no one can "stay on the mountaintop." After successes and spiritual "highs," there is often a negative reaction in the heart.

We need to remember that if Abraham, the great model of faith and faithfulness, finds himself filled with doubts soon after great triumphs and revelations, then no believer should expect to get "beyond" doubt. We never get to some spiritual level where we leave doubt behind.

2. Genesis 15:1. How does God's promise to Abram relate well to Abram's situation and circumstances? Why is God's promise both wonderful and challenging?

First, "the word of the LORD came to Abram." It is interesting that this particular phrase, so frequent in the prophetic books, is only found in the Pentateuch here and in verse 4. This terminology—of the word of God "coming" to someone—was the characteristic way to speak of God's revelation to those called to be prophets. The term is not used in any description of God's dealings with Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, or Moses. This means at least that this particular revelation to Abram was extremely clear and unmistakable. The term "vision" confirms this. This term is also used of Ezekiel (13:7).

Second, God says, "I am your shield." The reference to what has just happened is unmistakable. By embarking on a military-political operation, Abram had made himself vulnerable to military retaliation. But Abram had no trained army or military equipment. He did not even live in a city with walls. But God assures him that God himself will be Abram's wall, armor, and defense. God is only confirming what Melchizedek said in Genesis 14:20: "God Most High delivered your enemies into your hand." God is saying in effect, "It wasn't your might that brought you the victory in the first place. If I was your military offense, surely I'll be your military defense."

Third, God says "I am . . . your very great reward." Here the reference to what has just happened is also rather clear. Abram has just given up certain wealth when he refused to profit from his military exploits (14:21-24). Now God says that the Lord himself *is* the only "very great reward." In Ezekiel 29:19, the Hebrew word translated "reward" specifically refers to the booty of a successful soldier.

This last part of God's word to Abram is as wonderful as it is challenging. On the one hand God is saying, "A relationship with me is more rewarding than anything else possible. Pleasing me, knowing me, loving me, and depending on me will give you infinitely more joy, fulfillment, and security than political power, economic wealth, or human acclaim and affection." On the other hand, he is calling Abram to serve him for God's sake—simply for the joy and delight of having God as his God. The book of Job begins with a debate between God and Satan over the genuineness of Job's devotion to God. Satan says, "Does

Job [serve] God for *nothing*? Have you not . . . blessed the work of his hands and his possessions have increased . . . ? . . . Touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face" (Job 1:9-11 ESV). God takes up Satan's challenge and the implication is that he also considers invalid any spirituality based on self-interest. Satan is saying, in essence, "Job is not serving you for your sake; he is serving you for his own sake. You are simply a means to an end—and the 'end' is various rewards of prosperity, success, and comfort."

This is a searching test. In Jonathan Edwards' book, *Religious Affections,* he pondered long and hard on what distinguished genuine Christian life and experience from mechanical religiosity. One of the key differences Edwards noted was that Christians are attracted to God and his ways for their own sake. He noted that many people were very religious, "but the truth is, their desires are not properly the desires of appetite after holiness, for its own sake, or for its moral excellency and holy sweetness; but only for by-ends . . . ." [3] If we look at our hearts closely enough, we will always see mixed motives. But real Christians should find God more and more attractive, and they should be more willing to obey him regardless of the "pay-off"' in earthly fortunes and circumstances.

3. Read Genesis 15:3-6. How is Abram's response to God's promise a mixture of faith and doubt? How does God handle Abram's continued doubt? What does this teach us about handling doubt—our own or someone else's?

Robert Alter writes:

> Until this point, all of Abram's responses to God have been silent obedience. His first actual dialogue with God . . . expresses doubt that God's promise can be realized: this first speech to God reveals a hitherto unglimpsed human dimension of Abram. [4]

God's promise in verse 1 is tremendous, but Abram is not comforted. This first dialogue with God is not, however, triggered by total unbelief and skepticism. Abram's question remembers and reflects on God's past promise of descendants and a son (12:2,7). He is committed to the original vision God gave him and he is not content with the generalities of 15:1. Therefore he questions. At the same time, however, Abram shares his exasperation at the seeming impossibility of the original promise, and at God's seeming inaction in the face of the problem. Despite God's promise of a "seed" and "offspring" (12:2, 7; 13:16), Abram remains "childless" (v. 2). His estate would be inherited by his steward, Eliezer of Damascus. Why isn't God doing something about the situation? Verse 2 suggests that Abram is old by now and has "made up his will."

God's response to Abram is an emphatic and positive one. He insists that Abram will have a real son, not just a legal heir. Then God uses an unforgettable visual aid. He likens the future people of God who come from Abram to the stars of heaven (v. 5). This is an even better and more positive illustration than the "dust of the earth" (13:16).

This interaction reflects the generally balanced and nuanced view of doubt that the Bible gives. On the one hand, God does not leave Abram's doubt unchallenged. He comes against it with vision, revelation, and (soon) an astonishing oath (see below.) On the other hand, it is obvious that God is very gentle with Abram. He does not say, "How dare you question me?!" The most famous doubter, Thomas, got a similarly balanced approach. Jesus does give him what he asks for—a tactile experience of his nailprints. Yet he also challenges Thomas to "stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27).

There are different kinds of doubt, and some have a greater proportion of cowardice and willfulness in them than others. Therefore, we sometimes see God or Jesus being more patient with doubters and, at other times, less. But what the Bible avoids is both the liberal sensibility about doubt (that unresolvable spiritual skepticism is the only mature and sophisticated position) *and* the conservative sensibility (that all questioning and doubt is a sin and moral failure.) Both positions are too simplistic. So we should "be merciful to those who doubt" (Jude 22), showing respect and graciousness to people with fears and good questions about God's ways. On the other hand, we should not acquiesce in doubt or let it alone. Doubts are great opportunities for growth.

4. Compare Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4:1-8. What does the term "credited as" mean? (Think of some modern illustrations.) What does it mean that Abram's faith was "credited . . . as righteousness"? How does Paul make the implications clear? (See especially Romans 4:5.)

What does the term "credited" mean?
Generally, the English term "credited" means to confer a status on something that was not there before. If a college registrar "gives credit" for life experience in the workplace, she is conferring a status and a value on that work that was not there previously. Your labor is now "credited" to you as college degree work. A new status is conferred on it.

If you "lease to buy" a house, it means your rent payments can be used to purchase the house later if you so choose. At the moment that decision is made, your rent payments are "credited" to you as mortgage payments. A new status is conferred on them.

What does it mean that Abram's faith was "credited to him as righteousness"?
It is obvious to the ordinary reader of the Bible that human "righteousness" is defined as moral, lawful conduct. All through the Psalms, "righteousness" or "unrighteousness" is the concern of the divine Judge. Righteous behavior leads to acquittal by the judge; unrighteous behavior leads to condemnation and punishment.

It is common sense that faith in God's Word and promise *results* in righteousness. If we believe God exists, that we owe him our obedience and life, and that he is worthy of worship, etc., then out of that faith will flow righteous living. But here we have something unique, surprising, and counter-intuitive. Here we have faith counted *as* righteousness. To "credit" something means to confer new status and value on it—to make it what it was not before. So when Genesis 15:6 tells us that God "credits" Abram's faith *as* righteousness, it is saying that God is treating Abram as if he were living a life a righteous behavior. Gordon J. Wenham explains:

> Righteousness is a guarantee of salvation, of acquittal in the day of judgment. It involves conformity to God's will set forth in the law. Here, however, faith counts *for* righteousness. . . . To be sure, such faith, when genuine, issues in righteous deeds, but that is not what the text says: faith counts for (instead of) righteousness. It is therefore natural and right for the NT writers to refer to this text in describing how salvation is available in Christ. [5]

How does Paul make the implications clear?

Over the years many commentators have resisted the remarkable implications of Genesis 15:6. Many have said that we are being told that Abram's faith is itself a form of righteousness that pleases God. In that interpretation, his faith was an act of obedience that deserved God's favor. It was a kind of righteousness. But the text doesn't say that his faith *was* righteousness; rather, it was counted *as if* it was righteousness.

Douglas Moo observes:

> If we compare other verses in which the same grammatical construction as is used in Gen. 15:6 occurs, we arrive at [the] conclusion . . . that the [crediting] of Abraham's faith as righteousness means "to account him a righteousness that does not inherently belong to him." [6]

Paul explains that when God "credits righteousness," he is conferring a legal position, status, or standing. To have righteousness "credited" to people means that they are treated *legally* as if they were actually righteous and free from condemnation even though *actually*, in themselves, they are still unrighteous in their heart and behavior. This flies in the face of all traditional religion, which tells us that we are either living righteously and therefore pleasing and acceptable to God, or we are living unrighteously and therefore alienated from God. But this says it is possible to be loved and accepted by God *while* we are sinful and imperfect. Luther's famous phrase is that Christians are *simul justus et peccator*—"simultaneously righteous and sinful."

If there is any doubt that this is the biblical teaching, Paul makes a striking statement in Romans 4:5, where he speaks of the "God who justifies the wicked." The word translated "wicked" by the NIV is the word *asebas*, which means literally "one who refuses to worship." Here is the boldest possible statement that the moment a person receives credited righteousness

("justifies"), he or she is still wicked! The justified status is not given *because* they have gotten their hearts into a certain level of submission and worship. You don't clean up your life in order to earn credited righteousness. (Then it wouldn't be *credited*.) Rather, you receive it even *while* you are a sinner. Then, Paul says that the credited-righteous person cannot lose this status. In Romans 4:8, Paul says that when we sin, they don't "count" against us. (The Greek word Paul uses is *logizdomai*.) While our faith is credited to us as righteousness, our sins are not credited to us as unrighteousness. They can't bring us into condemnation; they don't ruin our status with God.

5. How is Abram's faith both like and unlike ours? Why do we need the work of Christ to help us make sense of God's radical act of credited righteousness?

How is Abram's faith both like and unlike ours?

Clearly, Paul considers Abram to be a model or paradigm of faith for us. (He says so explicitly in Romans 4:16 when he says, "The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace . . . to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all." But Abram's faith is both like and unlike ours.

His faith is unlike ours because he did not know about the person and work of Christ. When Paul says that God justifies those "who believe," he doesn't mean those who believe in God in general or the Bible in general. We only get "credited righteousness" by transferring our trust for our relationship to God from our own efforts over to the work of Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 3:23-26: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God [but] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this . . . so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.") Here the difference between Abram and us is very stark. He had no idea *how* he could be acceptable to God despite his flaws. He would have discerned God's unfailing favor despite his many lapses, and he could have discerned that this standing he had with God was connected to his faith. But he could not know exactly *why* or *how* a holy God could give such a personal relationship to a sinful man.

However, Abram's faith was not simply in God in general but in the particular promise God originally made in chapter 12 and expanded in chapter 13 and now 15. This was a "proto-gospel," and its elements were: (a) God would send a son to him that he could not humanly produce for himself. It would be a divine intervention in history. (b) Through that son would come a new people of God, and from that people would come salvation and healing for the whole world. Therefore, what "saved" Abram was not a general commitment to believe God's Word and to try hard to live a good life. What saved Abram was a willingness to trust in God's promise of gracious salvation beyond human ability. That is what we do as well.

Paul's point is that salvation has *always* been on the same basis. "The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness . . ." (Rom. 4:23-24). Abram was not saved by his own righteousness but by credited righteousness that came to him through faith in God's gracious promise to save.

Why do we need the work of Christ to help us "make sense" of God's radical act of credited righteousness?
First, on the objective side, the work of Christ explains what seems to be a contradiction. The Bible shows us a God of absolute justice who can "by no means clear the guilty" (Ex. 34:7 ESV). Yet in the Old Testament he continually rescues his people and establishes personal relationships with people who fail to meet his standard of righteousness. The teaching that God "credits righteousness" (Gen. 15:6) or that he refuses to "credit sin" (Ps. 32:1-2) simply doesn't make any sense. On what basis can a just God do such a thing? The cross of Christ answers the question. If we don't understand and accept Jesus' claims, we are simply not going to admit that "credited righteousness" even exists. It is nonsense.

Second, on the subjective side, the work of Christ is the only way to provide a transformed motivation for holiness that does not oppress. The average person listens to Paul's claim that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1) and that now we are the people "whose sin the Lord will never count against [them]" (Rom. 4:8). The natural response is, "Well then, why live a holy life? If I can't lose God's favor or salvation no matter what I do, I may as well sin with impunity!" The simplest answer to that is: If you lose all incentive to live a holy life when you lose all fear of God's punishment, then the only incentive you ever had was *fear*.

"Credited righteousness" only brings about inner transformation of motive if its wonder is mixed with deep conviction over its cost. The wonder is that I no longer need to achieve or perform in order to know I am loved and accepted. The cost is that Jesus loved me so much that he willingly endured the uttermost punishment for me. This creates a new, non-fear-based motivation for holy living. I am grateful to him. I want to delight and please the One who already has given me everything.

6. **Read Genesis 15:7-21. Abram again expresses doubts and fears in verse 8 and God deals with them in a definitive way. (a) Why is he asked to bring animals and cut them up? (Read Jeremiah 34:18.) (b) What does it mean that (a) God goes through the pieces and (b) *only* God goes through the pieces?**

Why is he asked to bring animals and cut them up?
Jeremiah 34:18 speaks of a "covenant" or contract that certain men made with God. When they made this covenant, they cut a calf in two and then walked between the pieces. God says that since they broke their part of the covenant, he will "treat [them] like the calf they cut in two . . . ."

Even without much background it is possible to discern from this text in Jeremiah something about ancient contract (or "covenant") making ceremonies. In today's societies, contracts are validated mainly through writing and signatures. Unless you get it down on paper, it is not considered legally binding. But ancient cultures were oral cultures and story-telling cultures. And the way contracts were often ratified (parallel to our signing or handshake) was when the parties dramatically acted out the penalty for breaking the covenant. For example, the contracting party might pour dust on his head and say, "If I do not do all the words I am saying today, may I be smitten and made as this dust of the earth." Another way covenants were made was to kill an animal, cut it into pieces, and walk between it as the oath was taken. In this way the speaker was identifying with the animal and expressing his willingness to receive the "curse of the covenant" if he is not faithful to his promise. Gordon Wenham writes:

> Most modern commentators take their cue from v.18, "The LORD made [literally, *cut*] a covenant with Abram" and from Jeremiah 34:18 . . . . This act is then interpreted as an enacted curse. "May God make me like this animal, if I do not fulfill the demands of the covenant." [7]

What does it mean that God goes through the pieces and that *only* God goes through the pieces?

The mysterious apparition ("a smoking firepot with a blazing torch") is almost certainly a physical manifestation of the presence of God. Most commentators have noted how the fire and smoke of this passage reflect the fire, smoke, and cloud of God's theophanic presence on Mt. Sinai (cf. Ex. 13:21, 19:18, 20:18). This, then, is God himself taking a covenantal oath and entering into a contractual, binding relationship with Abram. There are two amazing facts about this covenant-making ritual.

First, it is amazing that God goes through the pieces himself. In the ancient Near East, when a lesser vassal made a treaty with a great king, it was often customary that only the vassal took the oath and walked between the pieces. But here God condescends to take the oath and make himself accountable. He actually agreed to be cursed and killed if he did not bless Abram and the nations in the way he had promised. God's passing between the animal parts is tantamount to his saying, "If I don't bless you with my salvation, may my immortality become mortality. May I be cut off and die if I do not bless you and keep all my promises to you."

Second, it is even more amazing that Abram is *not* asked to go through the animal pieces or take an oath. Later (see Genesis 17) he is called on to take an oath to follow and serve the Lord, but not here. If Abram were to walk through the pieces here and now, the promised covenant blessing would be as dependent on Abram's keeping his promise as on God's keeping his. *Either* God could fail to keep the covenant *or* Abram could fail—and in either case the blessing would be forfeit. But God does not call Abram to walk between the pieces. He takes the full responsibility for the blessing.

> [The Lord] *alone* makes the covenant: the accent is on his initiative and his giving, as verse 18 makes clear, in contract with the [equal] bargain-like covenant of, say, 31:44. [8]

> Here the covenant is simply a promise. It is one-sided as a commitment on the part of God to Abraham and exacts no comparable allegiance from Abraham to God. It is a commitment of free grace . . . . God's movement toward Abraham is free and unconditional. [9]

This is nothing short of astonishing. When God does not call Abram through the pieces, it is tantamount to his saying, "I will not only pay the penalty if *I* fail to do my part, but I will pay the penalty if *you* fail to do *your* part. I would rather be torn apart than see my relationship to you broken." Of course, Abram had no idea what this promise and oath would cost God. Years later, Isaiah understood the implications when he said that the Messiah would be "*cut off* from the land of the living" (Is. 53:8) as he paid for his people's sins. To be "cut off" was the covenant curse. God really *would* become as those animal pieces when he was broken, speared, and pierced on the cross.

7. How does this help our doubts about God? How does this help our doubts about ourselves?

Abram had said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I *know* . . . ?" Basically we have two kinds of doubt when we think of putting our trust in God. (a) How can we be sure ("know") about God? How can we be sure he won't abuse us or let us down? (b) How can we be sure ("know") about ourselves? How can we be sure we won't fail to follow through?

The oath of God answers both kinds of doubts. How can we "know" about God? This God—the biblical God—is the only God who even *claims* to be willing to suffer destruction and death for us. What else could he do to assure us of his love? He can't always give us what we want, nor can he explain it to us when that happens. But this is also true of every parent who ever lived. Parents constantly do things that are good for their little children which nevertheless frustrate them and can't be understood by them. Why should God not be the same?

How can we "know" about *us*? This God—the biblical God—says not to worry about you. The covenant does not depend on you, but on his free grace (Gal. 3:17-18).

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), p. 140.

[2] Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 49.

[3] Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections,* Part III, Sect. XI, in *The Complete Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 314.

[4] Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 63.

[5] Gordon J. Wenham *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), p. 335.

[6] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 262.

[7] Gordon J. Wenham, p. 332.

[8] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 125.

[9] Walter Brueggemann, pp. 149-150.

What were we put in the world to do?

The God Who Sees

Study 14
Genesis 16:1-16

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult today to appreciate the significance of child-bearing in ancient times. We live in an individualistic age in which we tend to dream of individual success, achievement, and prominence. That was not true in ancient times. All aspirations and dreams were for your *family's* success and prominence. The family was your primary identity, not your vocation, friendships, and so on. It was the bearer of all hopes and dreams. Therefore there was *nothing* more important than to have and raise children who loved and honored you and who walked in your ways. In light of this, female "barrenness" was considered the worst possible curse. A woman in this situation could not avoid feeling like a terrible failure.

Background note: Sarai's proposal regarding Hagar was not original to her. Near Eastern documents from the period indicate that the arrangement was culturally and legally acceptable. As Robert Alter explains:

> The tradition of English versions that render this as "maid" or "handmaiden" imposes a misleading sense of European gentility on the sociology of the story. The point is that Hagar *belongs* to Sarai as property, and the ensuing complications of their relationship build on that fundamental fact. . . . The institution of surrogate maternity [is] well-attested in ancient Near Eastern legal documents. Living with the human consequences of the institution could be quite another matter, as the writer shrewdly understands. [1]

In other words, Hagar's son with Abram would "belong" to Sarai because Hagar was Sarai's property. However, it was still a brutal, cruel, and unwise custom. As Alter notes above, the narrator is criticizing, not supporting, what Sarai and Abram did with Hagar.

1. Read Genesis 16:1-4a. What pressures on Abram make his decision understandable? Look carefully at Genesis 15:4. Is Abraham disobeying God's promise or any other "rule"?

There are very understandable reasons for Abram to listen to Sarai. First, Abram could rationalize that the promise of a son "from your own body" (Gen. 15:4) could technically include a child from a slave-wife, not Sarai. All the promise said was that the child would be from *Abram's* body. Second, slave-wives and surrogate maternity were accepted parts of the culture. God had not yet revealed to his people that the cultural practices of polygamy and slavery were contrary to his will. (See question #5 for more on this.) Technically, Abram was not breaking any "rules" as he knew them. Thirdly, over a decade had passed since Abram's initial arrival in Canaan (v. 3). "Perhaps," he may have reasoned, "it is up to me to do something. Maybe God is waiting for me to take the initiative." Fourth, any husband will find it difficult to resist the wishes of his wife when she is deeply sad and angry. Sarai is clearly in deep emotional pain. Abram would feel the pressure of her strong feelings.

So, superficially and technically, Abram was doing nothing wrong in following Sarai's plan.

2. What are some typical ways we can be tempted to "take matters into our own hands" because of God's apparent inaction? What is the result?

A classic example is marriage. Common sense and biblical guidance direct the believer only to marry someone who believes in Christ and has a similar level of commitment to him. Of course, this "narrows the field" tremendously, especially in major U.S. cities. As the single believer looks for a suitable mate and partner, it may soon look like "God is against me ever getting married! I just have to do something myself." A common response is to marry someone who doesn't (really) believe in Christ. (Participants will have many more personal examples.)

We must be careful here, however, not to fall into the opposite mistake of passivity. Some Christians may expect a "sign from God" or a very clear inner sense of peace from God before making decisions. Some say, "I don't know if I should go back to school or not, so I'm waiting for a sign from God to be sure. I don't want to act on my own without his guidance." But where God has not spoken clearly in the Bible, we are free to make decisions relying on the Spirit to guide us.

3. Genesis 16:1-4a. (a) What is wrong with Sarai's reasoning and motive? (b) What is wrong with Abram's response? See Galatians 4:22-23, 28-29 for Paul's answer to this question. (Notice how he describes Abram's two sons.)

What is wrong with Sarai's reasoning and motive?
Sarai says, "The LORD has kept me from having children" (v. 2). This is the presupposition and premise for her whole plan. She does not see God as on her side. She believes he is actively against her. Her reasoning goes like this: "God is against me ever having children. Therefore, if we are going to get a child, we are going to have to do it ourselves. It's no use waiting on God!" Her plan rests on a falsehood, so it is doomed.

What is wrong with Abram's choice?
The first thing wrong with Abram's response is that he did not challenge Sarai's false premise. As far as we know, God had only spoken directly to him at this point, not to Sarai. Abram had received God's vivid assurances, promises, and oath. It is understandable that Sarai might feel that God would never come through, but it is not acceptable that Abram should think so. Because of the greater revelation Abram had received of God's nature and purpose, he was definitely the most blameworthy party in this whole sad affair.

notes

Application note 1: If we are Christians, especially Christians who have had a lot of instruction, we are more responsible in God's eyes for the wrong things we do than those *doing the same things* who have not had the same opportunity to learn of him.

But the main thing wrong with Abram's response is that he chooses salvation through self-effort rather than salvation through grace. Paul lays this out clearly in Galatians 4. He speaks of Ishmael as "born in the ordinary way" (Gal. 4:23, 29) but of Isaac as the son "born as the result of a [free] promise" (v. 23) and "born by the power of the Spirit" (v. 29). The apostle recognizes that Ishmael was a son that Abram had the ability to produce without divine help. It did not take a divine promise or the power of the Spirit to bring about his birth. However, if Sarai was going to be the bearer of Abram's son, there was nothing to do but wait on God. Sarai's biological son could not be achieved by human effort or ability alone—it required nothing less than a miraculous intervention by God in history.

Paul says "These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants . . ." (Gal. 4:24). He says Hagar and Ishmael symbolize salvation through the works of the law; Sarah and Isaac symbolize reliance on God's promise and salvation by grace. These are the two basic ways to approach God. The normal "religious" approach to God is: "I give God a righteous record and then he owes me blessing and salvation." The gospel approach to God is: "God through Christ gives *me* a perfect righteousness that I receive by faith, and then I live wholly for him." Paul brilliantly recognizes that these two approaches to God confronted Abram in the choice Sarai gave him. She said, "Don't wait for God to give me a child. That would take a miracle, and all we can do is wait to receive it. Instead, go get a child yourself, using your own power and ability." Abram could have trusted God for his saving grace in history, but he chose the way of self-effort.

On the surface, Abram has understandable reasons to do what Sarai asked. But under the surface we see that his faith was given a basic and fundamental test. He failed it.

Application note 2: At this point, some may notice a theme emerging in the Abram narrative—testing! Why is Abram exposed constantly to "tests," some that he fails and some that he passes? If God saves by grace, why all the testing?

It would be better to wait until God's ultimate test of Abram's faith in chapter 22, when we get a bird's eye view of all the tests and their common characteristics. For now, consider the simple analogy of educational testing. An educational test has two purposes. First, it reveals to the student his or her true level of ability. (This may be good or bad news! But the function of the test is to give you a picture of your real condition.) Second, a test challenges a student and enables him or her to learn and grow in the area being tested. In the same way, faith cannot really be measured (like height or weight), only tested. Difficulties and challenges to our faith at least show us our true condition and immaturity. At best they move us to new levels of spiritual maturity.

Application note 3: Our salvation also depends on the miraculous birth of a baby boy through God's intervention in history. When we believe in him instead of trusting in our own good works, we are taken into God's love and kingdom.

4. Read Genesis 16:4a-6. How does the plan backfire? How does Sarai respond? How does Abram respond to Sarai's response? Notice the destructive effects of sin in this sad family breakdown.

First, in verse 4b we see the scheme begin to backfire in Hagar's new sense of dignity. Hagar's son will be owned by Sarah because Hagar is nothing more than her property. But now, though Hagar is still a slave, she has become a kind of "secondary wife" (v. 3) to the head of the clan, and this endows her with a new sense of dignity and self-esteem that makes it difficult for her to maintain the same submissive, servile attitude toward Sarai. "She began to despise her mistress" (v. 4). This is one way the narrator shows his criticism of what Sarai has done. Sarai is exploiting Hagar in a cold and calculating way, but her plan empowers Hagar so that she begins to rebel against her exploitation!

Second, in verse 5 we see Sarai's unfair and deeply bitter reaction. Sarai surely would have had deeply ambivalent feelings about putting a woman in her husband's arms in any case. In an effort to erase one humiliation (her childlessness), she is enduring another (her husband in the arms of a younger, more fertile woman). Now this young woman is in some way "rubbing her nose in it." Sarai takes her shame and fury out on Abram. "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering." The word that the NIV renders "wrong" is literally "violence." Sarai says in effect, "I cannot take this! I am being subjected to one shame and humiliation after another. I feel I am being attacked and violated! You are to blame for this! You are not defending me." Ironically, Sarai's speech to Abram is itself abusive. It reveals the hate and anger under the claim of injustice. She uses harsh and graphic language. (She says, literally, "I put my servant between your legs.") She ends with what is practically a curse: "May the LORD judge between you and me." (See 1 Samuel 24:13, 16.)

It is important to notice how Sarai hides the truth from herself. (1) She refuses her own responsibility ("*You* are responsible.") Abram and Sarai did this together, and both are responsible, but Sarai refuses to admit her part in it. She puts all the blame on Abram. We saw in the garden of Eden that, almost immediately, sin leads to blame-shifting as Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the Serpent. Blame-shifting is directly tied to the impulse of self-justification that is the very essence of sin. (2) She couches the whole system in terms of injustice ("for the wrong [lit., violence] I am suffering"). It is amazing that a slave-owner who plans to take a slave woman's child as her own is complaining of being the victim of injustice! Yet it is not so amazing. Sin makes "the heart . . . deceitful above all things" (Jer. 17:9). Overly wealthy people can feel poor. Abusive people always feel that *they* are the ones being abused.

Third, in verse 6 we see Abram's cowardly response. He says, in effect, "She is still *your* servant, you know—she is still under your power. Don't come to me! Exert your authority and do what you want with her." This is an enormously callous response. Though Hagar is still Sarah's slave, she is now Abram's wife and the bearer of his child. Yet Abram seems to regard her as nothing more than property. Abram's false neutrality is complete cowardice.

The final result is terrible. The text says "Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled . . . ." The Hebrew word rendered "mistreated" by the NIV is the same word used to describe the oppression the Israelite slaves endured in Egypt (Ex. 1:12). And when it says Hagar "fled" from Sarai, the text uses a Hebrew word frequently used of people trying to escape from assassins or parties trying to kill them (Gen. 27:43, 35:1; Ex. 2:15; 1 Sam. 19:12,18). In other words, Sarai abused Hagar and perhaps had her beaten, until the pregnant woman fled for her very life.

Sarai's plan has ended in disaster.

5. How do these consequences follow naturally from Abram's wrong choice?

As we have seen, while Abram did not break any rule, he sinned at the most fundamental level when he listened to Sarai's plan. As John Stott has put it, the essence of sin is human beings substituting themselves for God; the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. [2] The core of sin is self-salvation and self-justification, seeking to do for ourselves what only God can do, seeking to be our own Savior and Lord. That is a deeper definition of sin than "breaking the rules." Every act that breaks God's law is a sin, but sin is not always law-breaking. You can try to be your own Savior through law-*keeping*, as the Pharisees did in their efforts to be saved through their morality. Here Abram shows how you can technically do nothing wrong but still be moving far from God.

Because Abram's basic response was one of self-justification, it is not surprising to see how all the parties act in ways that lead to complete breakdown. When Sarai puts getting a child above waiting for God, she makes an idol out of being a mother and child-bearer. It is no surprise, then, that she finds her heart intolerably humiliated and bitter by seeing her slave happily pregnant. Pregnancy and child-bearing are now Sarai's main source of life and identity, and thus she feels attacked by the smugness of her servant. When Sarai comes to Abram and blames him and Hagar for her misery, she continues her self-justifying behavior. She needs to see herself as a victim. Her idolatry creates a delusional view of the situation. She can't admit her own sin and need for forgiveness. Lastly, Abram's callous response is also self-justifying. He probably is stung by the complete unfairness of Sarai's claim that "it's all your fault," but he doesn't want to look honestly at the situation and admit the part he *has* played. (When your accuser wrongfully exaggerates your wrong, the natural tendency of the self-justifying human heart is to refuse to admit *any* blame at all.)

From the fundamental root of self-salvation flow bitterness, blame-shifting, denial, jealousy, exploitation, injustice, classism, paranoia, family breakdown, and despair.

6. How do we answer the objection, "This story demeans women, condones slavery, and holds up as spiritual heroes people acting despicably!"

First, we should point out that the writer of Genesis is in no way condoning polygamy, slavery, etc., simply by reporting what happened. In fact, the thoughtful reader will see that all of these institutions, culturally accepted at the time, are being undermined by the narrator, who highlights the destructiveness of these practices. For example, in that hierarchical and patriarchal time, the "iron law of primogeniture" dictated that the oldest son inherited the lion's share of the father's estate. But at almost every point in Genesis, we see God subverting traditional cultural practices. God chooses Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Judah and Joseph over older children. Likewise, polygamy and slavery do not look like anything but disasters in every story and event.

Second, the reader of the Bible must keep in mind that God reveals his mind and will progressively, in stages, to the human race over the centuries. It is clear from Genesis 2:24 and Jesus' reflections on it that monogamy was God's will from the beginning. Why, then, did God not tell Abraham, Jacob, and David about the evils of polygamy? But why not ask: why did God not tell them about Jesus, the cross, the resurrection? The two are linked, because "To whom much was given . . . much will be required" (Luke 12:48 ESV). The more God revealed of his salvation, the greater the responsibility of those who received that revelation. God unfolded his revelation about redemption, the power of his Spirit, and his specific ethical prescriptions in stages that progressively increased in detail and clarity. This does not mean that polygamy was not wrong in the Old Testament. We see monogamy as God's will from Genesis 2:24 (interpreted by Jesus) and from the obvious fact that God placed one man and one woman in the garden of Eden. The fact that polygamy was not penalized or addressed directly by God does not mean it was legitimate. As a violation of the created order, it still brought devastation and breakdown.

Third, we must repeat what we mentioned in the chapter 12 study. The Bible is *not* primarily a series of stories with morals attached. (Though there are plenty of good and bad examples!) Rather, it is a record of God's grace intervening in the lives of people who don't seek it, don't deserve it, continually resist it, and don't appreciate it even after they have been saved by it. Those who are shocked and offended by this story may find that it is well-designed to reveal the misguided assumptions of their own hearts. Do you say, "I'm shocked and confused! These are spiritual heroes I'm supposed to emulate, but they are really moral failures." Your shock may be because you have bought into a completely mistaken idea, namely that Christianity is about living a good, moral

life (like Abram, Moses, and David) and then being taken to heaven. If so, you are missing the whole point of stories like these—that even the best human beings who ever lived could not rise above the brutality of their cultures or the self-centeredness of their own hearts. Yet by God's grace, and by their reliance on the promise of God's grace to moral failures, they triumphed.

7. Read Genesis 16:7-12. (a) What is the good news and "bad news" of the angel's message to Hagar? (b) Why is it best for Hagar to return? (c) How do you respond when God asks you to do something difficult and even unfair?

The angel of the LORD meets Hagar and tells her two things. First, he says she should go back to her slave-owner and submit to her (v. 9), a prospect that must have seemed terrible to Hagar. But second, he immediately makes a remarkable promise. He says that he will make *Hagar* into a great nation, with descendants too numerous to count (v. 10). There is no promise that Ishmael and his descendants will bless the world, as God said would be true of Isaac. In fact, God lets Hagar know that Ishmael will be a very headstrong man (v. 12). The consequences of Abram's bad choice will be lasting (as the consequences of sin usually are). There will be strife between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites for years to come.

We should not assume that God is supporting the institution of slavery here. We must be very careful when we try to infer universal principles from historical narratives. We can't reason "God told her to go back; therefore God wants all slaves to submit to their masters." It doesn't follow, because there might be other reasons he told her to return. God does not say, "Go back, because you are a slave," but rather, "Go back, because I want to make you a great nation." From our perspective, we can see why the Lord sent Hagar back for her own good. We know (a) as a runaway slave she was not safe, but might have been killed if caught, and (b) if she goes back, Sarai's continued jealousy would lead her to press Abram to divorce Hagar and send her away legally.

Application note: Very often God asks us to endure something very difficult with nothing more than the general promise of his good will and desire to bless us. Hagar could not possibly see how going back would help, but God says, "Trust me. I will work it out." God will always give us what we would have asked for if we knew all he knows.

8. Read Genesis 16:13-16. What do we learn about God from (a) the fact that God heard an Egyptian slave, and (b) the fact that he heard a slave who did not (apparently) pray to him? (See verse 11.)

God heard an Egyptian slave

Here again we see how God's grace subverts and contradicts (does not condone) traditional social institutions. Hagar is a woman, a slave, a non-

believer in Yahweh, and of a race outside the chosen line of Abraham. Yet God comes to her and blesses her. This means that:

> God has not exclusively committed himself to Abraham-Sarah. God's concern is not confined to the elect line. There is passion and concern [even] for the troubled ones who stand *outside* that line. [So great is] the passion of God for the outsider. [3]

Christians are not to love and help only those of their own faith, race, and tribe. God is the Creator of all and "loves all he has made" (Ps. 145:13-16). Christians should be the least parochial of all people.

He heard a slave who did not pray to him

One of the most interesting statements in the text is the assurance that "the LORD has heard of your misery" (v. 11). Literally, the sentence is: "The LORD has heard your oppression." There is no preposition "of" and the Hebrew word rendered "misery" by the NIV is the same word translated "mistreated" in verse 6. The blessing of God is not a response to Hagar's prayer or call. There is no indication that she was seeking the God of Abram and Sarai—not after the way they treated her! But despite the poor witness of his chosen representatives, God comes to Hagar simply because he is moved by her oppression and misery. God is so sensitive to injustice and human suffering that he "hears" it. It "rings in God's ears." He is the God who *notices* ("who sees me," v. 13). This was a revelation to Hagar. There is a God who notices even marginal, unimportant people. He sees their suffering and injustice and does something about it. What a contrast from the pagan gods, who are remote and only moved to action by elaborate prayers, rituals, and sacrifices! A "God who sees *me*" is a God of grace.

It is possible that Hagar is expressing amazement that she has been in the presence of such a God and lived. Her expression is not just "There's a God who sees me" but "I have *seen* the God who sees me! He was visible to me! I was in his presence!" That *is* something to be amazed at! How could a God great enough to notice the cry of the weak and little be so gentle, gracious, and approachable? The answer to that lies in the future. As usual, "the angel of the LORD" who appears in 16:7-14 is a mysterious figure who speaks in the first person, as if he is the Lord himself. Yet he is referred to as the messenger *of* the Lord. This happens throughout the Old Testament and seems to indicate that this is God himself come in visible human form. As such, he points to the ultimate example of God coming to earth in visible, human form—Jesus Christ.

notes

[1] Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 67.

[2] See John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 160.

[3] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 153.

What were we put in the world to do?

Our Covenant God

Study 15
Genesis 17:1-27

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with a reference to Abram's age (ninety-nine years) and hinges somewhat on Sarah's age (ninety years). This brings up the subject of the long life span enjoyed by the patriarchs in Genesis. The ages given often seem to make no sense. For example, when Sarai is called a woman of remarkable physical beauty (12:11), she is at least sixty-six years old (compare 12:4 with this chapter, in which Sarai is said to be nine years younger than Abram.) Many have thought that the patriarchs counted shorter years, but that is hard to justify historically. Derek Kidner probably has the most reasonable view:

> The patriarchal life-span . . . was . . . approximately double our own (this seems to have been a special providence [cf. Deut 34:7]: there is no indication that it was general.) Abraham died at 175 and Sarah at 127; Jacob was to think 130 years "few and evil." Their continued vigor shows that this was no mere postponement of death but a spreading out of the whole life process . . . . Sarai's sixties would therefore presumably correspond with our thirties or forties . . . . [1]

1. Read Genesis 17:1-16. How is this covenant-making event the same as the one in 15:9-19? How is it different?

Similarities
In both ceremonies (1) there is an oath-sign (17:11b) taken, a dramatic, symbolic action (15:17; 17:23). (2) The symbolic action entails cutting with a knife and blood (in one case, passing between the pieces of dead animals; in the other case, circumcision). (3) God initiates the covenant-making and determines the form of the ceremony (15:9-11; 17:10-11). (4) God makes a promise that Abraham will have a nation of descendants who will possess the land of Canaan (15:18-21; 17:8).

Differences
(1) In the first ceremony God "made" a covenant with Abram (15:18), but in the second ceremony God "confirmed" the covenant that already existed. (17:2: "I will confirm my covenant between me and you . . ."). (2) In the first ceremony God alone makes a promise and takes the oath-sign (15:17), but in the second ceremony it is Abram who takes the oath-sign (circumcision, 17:23). (3) In the first ceremony there were no conditions. God simply made the promise to bless Abram and vowed to accept the consequences rather than fail to do so. Abram is not asked to make any reciprocal or answering vow. But in the second ceremony, Abram binds himself to "walk before" God (17:1). In the circumcision covenant, Abram is becoming solemnly accountable to obey God's will in all things.

2. How does this covenant-making relate to the covenant of chapter 15? Why is it significant that God's oath came before Abram's oath? (See Romans 4:9-11.)

A covenant relationship is a relationship between two parties that mixes intimacy ("I will . . . be *your* God," v. 7) and legal, binding commitment. When you enter into a covenant relationship, you get many benefits but you also give up much of your freedom. You are now committed to the other party. Iain Duguid summarizes:

> People back in those days would have been familiar with the idea of a covenant, but the idea is not so familiar to us today. Essentially, a covenant is a *relationship based on the surrender of control.* [2]

In Genesis 15, God established a covenant relationship with Abram, but it was significant that this relationship was characterized only by *God* taking the oath, and therefore "giving up" some of his freedom. He was now bound to bless Abram. It is amazing that the God of the universe would take a covenant oath, but he does. In some ways, however, the covenant is not complete. Abram also has to take an oath. Why didn't God have Abram do so in the original ceremony?

We can only speculate, but it seems clear that God was demonstrating that his covenant with Abram was a covenant of *grace*. It was not a *quid pro quo*, with God saying, "If you do *a* and *b* for me, I will do *c* and *d* for you." If Abram had taken the oath when God did, the gracious character of the covenant relationship would have been much less clear.

The apostle Paul is particularly emphatic about the relationship between chapters 15 and 17. In Romans 4:9-10 he writes, "We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!" Paul points out that Abram was accepted by God (he received "credited righteousness") in chapter 15. But it was not until chapter 17 that he was circumcised and took the oath to "walk before God" and obey him. Well, Paul says, look at that order. It is *not*: (1) Abram binds himself to obey God's law, and then (2) God accepts him and brings him into a personal relationship. Rather, it is: (1) God accepts Abram and brings him into a personal relationship, and then (2) Abram binds himself to obey God's law. The covenant relationship of chapter 15 comes first, and it is a relationship based on God's grace, entered into only through Abram's faith. It is only later that Abram takes on a visible oath-sign and promises to follow God's law. Of course, this is at the heart of what makes the biblical gospel different from religion. It is not that we obey God and then he accepts us, but he accepts us by grace through faith and then we obey God.

We see the same pattern throughout the Bible. Before the exodus, God gives the people the Passover sacrifice meal. In it God shows that he is providing grace for Israel: "When I see the blood, I will *pass over* you" (Ex. 12:13). Then he leads them out of bondage and takes them to Mt. Sinai. There they are

given the Law and take an oath of obedience to him. Notice the order. They don't take an oath of obedience and then God saves them from bondage. They are saved from bondage by sheer grace, and then they take an oath of obedience. This is how it always works in the Bible.

In summary, the covenant relationship is already in effect through grace after chapter 15. Then in chapter 17 Abram is called "confirm" or ratify the covenant. The only reasonable response to someone who has given himself freely and utterly for you is to give yourself freely and utterly to him. Abram is responding to the unconditional grace of chapter 15 with a promise of unconditional obedience in chapter 17.

Another way to put it is that in chapter 17, the covenant is "going public." Joyce Baldwin writes, "Whereas in chapter 15 the covenant made with Abram was private and personal to him alone, now the time had come for the matter to be made public." [3]

3. In Genesis 17:3-6, 15-16, what do the new names mean? Why did God give Abraham and Sarah new names as he ratified the covenant?

In verses 3-6, God changes Abram's name to *Abraham*. His old name meant "exalted (or honored) father," but his new name meant "father of many nations." In verses15-16 God changes Sarai's name to *Sarah*. Interestingly, both names mean "princess" or "queen"; the latter is only a different version or pronunciation. There is no new meaning. Why would God change her name then?

First, to change someone's name signifies *ownership*. You only have the right to name someone or something you have brought into being or acquired, and over which you now have ownership rights. This is why naming was often part of a covenant ceremony (see 2 Kings 24:17). Abram was giving himself and his family to God. He was promising uncompromising obedience. "I am yours," he was saying. To signify this reality, God gives him a new name. This also reveals why God renamed Sarai *Sarah* even though there was no real change in the meaning. God was simply bringing Sarah into the covenant, showing his sovereignty over her, and indicating that he expected her uncompromising loyalty.

Second, to change someone's name means *a change of identity.* A covenant relationship with God is *the* dominant force in a person's life, and no one can enter into such a relationship without personal transformation. Many English names indicate the original vocation of some ancestor—Fisher, Baker, Smith. The reason someone was once named "John the Smith" is because his job was fundamental to his identity. "Who are you?" someone asked him. He answered, "I'm a blacksmith." His smithing was a crucial factor in his self-understanding. But a covenant relationship with God changes all of the most fundamental factors of your life—what you live for, your priorities, your main

hope and comfort, your definition of success. This means that you experience a basic change in identity. A new name from God signifies this.

Third, to change someone's name means *a change of status.* This is closely connected to the first meaning. When a child or youth was adopted into an ancient family, it was customary for the child to receive a new name. It signified his or her new status as legal heir and family member. In the same way here, "the covenant changes [Abram's] status, a fact which requires a new name that will point to the promise, just as the Christian name, given in baptism, indicates a person's standing in Christ." [4]

4. What does that mean for us practically?

Historically, there are many churches that give a person a new name at baptism. (As we will see below, baptism is the Christian equivalent of the covenant-making that happens in chapter 17.) But as vivid and meaningful as such a rite is, getting a literal new name is not the point. Even here in chapter 17, the name is only symbolic for the change in identity and mission. What we must remember and practice is the following:

First, we will only *discover* who we are through deeper commitment and relationship to God. It is in covenant with God that we discover our true "name." This happens in stages, of course. The more we come to know our gifts, the more we come to see what God has called us to do in the world, the more we come to know our hearts realistically through prayer and knowing God's Word, the more we come to see who we are.

Second, only in relationship to God can we *heal* and renovate our identity and self-understanding. Many of us have distorted self-images because of our covenant-service to other "gods" or idols. God created Adam and Eve to be his children and servants. Therefore we were created to be "in covenant" with something greater than ourselves that would save us and keep us. If we do not serve the true God, we will have to serve *something*. And, as Paul says in Romans 1, every human being enters into "covenants" with created things—idols ("They worshiped and *served* created things rather than the Creator," Rom. 1:25). We look to persons, careers, performance, or other objects to fill our hearts with meaning. For example, we may decide that if we are physically attractive, financially successful, or have a family filled with happy, prospering people who all love us—then we can have a sense of significance. Paul's use of the word "serve" shows that we are essentially bound to these replacement-gods and salvations. We *have* to have them; we are committed to obeying them. But any idol covenant leads to a distortion of self-image. You will either have too low a self-esteem (if you are failing in your idol covenant) or too high a self-esteem (if you have done well). The only way to truly change our fundamental self-understanding and identity (our "name") is to change our heart covenant. As we go deeper into our relationship with God, we lose both

the overblown superiority *and/or* the hopeless inferiority that flow out of serving other gods besides the true one.

5. Let's look at the outline of the covenant. (a) Verses 4-8, 15-16: "As for me." What does God promise to give? (b) Verses 1-2, 9-14: "As for you." What is Abram required to do?

What does God promise to do?
(1) First, God gives Abram a new name (vv. 4-5). As we have seen, this name represents a new status in Abram's relationship with God and a new personal identity. (2) Second, God now promises not only to make of Abraham *one* nation but *many* nations (v. 6). Multiple kings will come from him, a new magnification of the promise. The same thing is said to Sarah in verse 15. (3) Third, God promises that he will enter into a covenant not only with Abraham but with his descendants as well, and that this will be an *everlasting* covenant (v. 7). Again, this is a new magnification over anything said before. The relationship with Abraham's descendants is based on grace and will last forever. (4) Fourth (easily overlooked), God reiterates his promise to be *your God* (v. 7). This is the essence of the covenant—a personal relationship with the God of the universe. (5) Fifth, he promises the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants (v. 8). This too is a new focusing of the promise. The actual boundaries of the land have not previously been mentioned. (6) Sixth, God now specifically promises that the "son of promise" will come not only from Abraham's body but also from Sarah's (v. 15). The child of promise will be Sarah's child.

God's earlier promises had been remarkable, but now they are magnified to astonishing proportions. No wonder Abraham's response is to fall down and laugh (v. 17)!

What is Abram required to do?
The stipulations of the covenant for Abram are: (1) First, he must "*walk before*" God. This is a very rich metaphor in the Bible. It has already been used of the relationship humanity had with God in the garden of Eden (3:8), of Enoch (5:24), and of Noah (6:9). It means (a) at least *obedience*. "Walking with" includes treading the same path as someone else. It means to do as God does—to live in righteousness, holiness, faithfulness, and so on. (b) In addition, it means *relationship*. To "walk *before*" means to be in God's presence, to be near him so that you can converse with him and relate to him. This is at least a call to prayer and spiritual communion with God. (c) In addition, it means *process*. The metaphor of walking evokes the idea of pilgrimage and journey. Abraham is not called just to obey God or just to relate to him, but to *grow* in God. As Baldwin observes, "There can be no 'once for all' formula for instant holiness, because life's circumstances and demands keep changing, like the different phases of a journey." [5] So we see that "walking before God" is a call to obedience,

personal relationship, and continual growth in grace. Overall, it means living every second and step of your life in relationship to God. There is no "secular" and "sacred" division to the covenantal life. Everything must be done with reference to him.

(2) Second, Abram must be "*blameless*" (v. 1). The word's root meaning is "whole" or "completely integrated." This word does not mean so much perfection of performance as wholehearted dedication and devotion. It is calling for a completely undivided heart.

(3) Third, Abram is to take upon himself *the oath-sign of circumcision,* and then put it on all male children of his household. The mark of circumcision was the physical symbol of the spiritual commitments God required. (See below for more on this oath-sign.)

(4) Fourth, this covenant requires *a commitment to a people*. Notice that the punishment for breaking the covenant is to be "cut off from his people" (v. 14). This is very significant. The rite of circumcision was a way of being brought into relationship with God *and* all others who are in covenant relationship with God. Every believer shared the same oath-sign. You cannot enter into a covenant relationship with God individualistically. It automatically brings you into a believing, covenant community.

This last point should not be underemphasized. The main way we are held accountable to walk before God obediently is by entering a community of those who have taken the same oath. Together we discipline and encourage one another. Thus circumcision was a way to create a new community, as seen by the fact that God told Abram to put the sign on slave and free, Jew and Gentile, in his house. All are included. Class and race distinctions are swallowed up in the covenant relationship we all have with God.

Notice that very little has yet been revealed by God regarding his Law. The Ten Commandments have not yet been given. Kidner notes, "The striking feature of the stipulations [of this covenant] is their lack of detail. To be *committed* was all. Circumcision was God's brand; the moral implications could be left unwritten (until Sinai), for one was pledged to a Master, only secondarily to a way of life." [6] The covenant was "You will be my people, and I will be your God." The essence of the promise is a personal relationship with God, given by grace. The essence of the requirement is a personal commitment to God, given with the whole heart.

If anyone reading this thinks, "But I could never keep this up! I can never be totally wholehearted in my obedience to God," you are forgetting that the covenant of chapter 15 came before this one. You are bound to live like this *because* God has already committed himself to us.

6. Why do you think God chose circumcision to ratify the covenant with Abram? Read Colossians 2:11-12. How does this rite shed light on what Jesus did for us on the cross?

Why was circumcision chosen?
Circumcision was already practiced in many cultures at the time, but God now adopts it as the oath-sign of his covenant and gives it new meaning. In other cultures, circumcision was a coming of age ceremony administered at puberty. Under God, "its new meaning [was] to mark the threshold not of manhood . . . but of the covenant." [7] Of course, an oath-sign has to represent features of the covenant; it was chosen for its illustrative power. So what does circumcision show us and represent?

First, the marking of the body in circumcision is *permanent*. This reflects the eternity of the covenant between God and Israel (v. 19).

Second, circumcision is *intimate*, put on the most private member of the body in an act that makes its subject very vulnerable. It reminds us of how wholehearted and personal the covenant is to be. We are to serve God with all our inmost being, not simply with behavioral compliance.

Third, circumcision is done through *cutting off* with a knife. It is no coincidence that God says that the penalty for breaking the covenant is to be "cut off" (17:17). That confirms the symbolism. Therefore, circumcision is like other oath-signs used in the ancient Near East, and like the one God himself used in Genesis 15. There God "passed between the pieces." He was promising to keep his Word or become like the dead animals. In the same way, circumcision was a solemn way of saying, "I will follow you wholeheartedly or be cut off." Circumcision points to the devastation that will result from covenant breaking.

Note: Joyce Baldwin comments that "mercifully, women were not subject to any cutting, as they have been in some parts of the world; this did not mean that they were excluded from the covenant, for they were . . . accepted [as full members] with their fathers, husbands, and brothers." [8] Despite her positive words, some observers would consider baptism a superior covenant sign, since it is put equally on males and females.

What does Jesus show us?
Colossians 2:11-12 is a remarkable passage that likens the crucifixion of Christ to circumcision. Paul writes, "In him you were also circumcised . . . not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, and raised with him through your faith . . . ." Here Paul is speaking, as he often does, of how we "died and rose" with Christ. That is, when we believe in Jesus, his death and resurrection are imputed to us. (That is, we are treated by God as if *we* had died and paid our sins.) But notice how Paul speaks of Jesus death as his "circumcision." What does this mean? It means that Jesus' death was a bloody, violent act in which he was cut off from God, his people, and life itself.

Here, then, we see our confidence. When Abraham entered the covenant, he took a solemn oath to obey it or else to experience the curse of the covenant—to be cut off physically, socially, and spiritually. Of course, no human being has ever walked blamelessly before God, so how does God stay in covenant with his people? Jesus took the curse of the covenant for us. He came as a human being and was circumcised as a child (Luke 2). He entered the covenant! But though he was the only human being in history who fulfilled it, and who truly earned the blessing and promises of the covenant, at the end of his life he took the curse of the covenant. He was "cut off from the land of the living" (Is. 53:8). Jesus took the great curse and circumcision that all the oath signs of circumcision pointed to. He went under the knife.

7. What does the rite of circumcision tell us about how our children are to be involved in our faith and relationship to God?

God's command for Abraham to put the covenant sign on his male children, including infants, raises a problem for modern people in a way it did not for ancient people. Here are some of the objections.

First, some say we should not commit our children to being God's followers when they are too young to be involved in that decision. We should not impose our values and beliefs on them; rather, we should wait for them to make their own choices. But God did not want Abraham to raise his children like that. He wanted them to grow up *in* the covenant, so that as they became rational and conscious, they would find themselves already obligated to walk before God, to obey him, and to live with his people.

Although it is certainly true that children often resist heavy-handed coercion, there is also much naivete behind the notion that you can raise your children without imposing your values on them. If you say to your child, "I'm not going to tell you which faith is right or wrong—you have to do that for yourself," you are raising your children to believe that spiritual truth is a matter of preference, not objective reality. For example, you don't leave it up to your children to decide if they want to use modern medicine when they grow up. If you believe modern medicine is more in line with reality than witch doctors, you simply bring up your children with its benefits. So to raise your children without "imposing" your values on them is actually to raise them in a very particular worldview. You *can't help* but raise your children to accept what you believe to be crucial truths.

It is clear that God intends believers to raise their children from their first days to worship and know God and to live among his people.

Second, some object that we should not put the covenant sign on our children today. Common sense and Colossians 2:11-12 show us that there is an analogy between baptism and circumcision. They both represent salvation. (Paul said, "He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness

notes

that he had by faith" [Rom. 4:11]). Just as circumcision was a sign of salvation through faith, so is baptism. Just as circumcision did not save Abraham but instead brought him into a life of obedience to God with the people of God, so is baptism. But today many Christians do not believe it is right to put a sign of saving faith on a child who has not yet believed. Therefore they do not believe in infant baptism.

It is not possible to make a full case for infant baptism here, nor would it be fair to the many people using this material from churches that don't accept the practice. You didn't choose this Bible study to have your beliefs attacked. However, it is important for Christians inside and outside infant-baptizing churches to at least realize that infant baptism is a practice that claims to be biblical. It is not just a tradition. And at this point we come to an important part of the case for it. If it is wrong to put a sign of saving faith on infants now, why wasn't it wrong for Abraham to put it on infants then? Remember, circumcision was a sign of the salvation Abraham had *by faith* (Rom. 4:11). So why was it alright to put the sign of faith on those without faith?

The answer is that it is *faith* that brings you into the personal, saving relationship with God, and it is the *oath-sign* that brings you into the covenant community, where you are held accountable to live in a way that pleases God. God want us to have both the saving faith *and* the binding commitment and membership in the community. But Genesis 15-17 shows us that these two elements can come in either order. Abraham first got saving faith (Gen. 15) and later added commitment to live obediently in covenant community (Gen. 17). But the children of Abraham would experience this in reverse order. First they would find themselves living in covenant community, and later they would have to be "circumcised in heart" (Jer. 9:24-26) and get saving faith. Either order is fine. They almost never happen at the same moment anyway. Therefore, those who practice infant baptism also practice "believer's" baptism. You can be brought into covenant life as an infant and later put your faith in Christ for salvation. In that case, you are baptized as a child and admitted to the Lord's Supper when you profess your personal faith in Christ. Another person might live outside the church/covenant community but find faith in Christ. Then that person is baptized, receiving the sign as an adult, like Abraham.

8. What about the laughing?

The promises of God do seem too good to be true. This is one kind of doubt that is reasonable.

[1] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 117.

[2] Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 1999), p. 74.

[3] Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 62.

[4] Joyce G. Baldwin, p. 64.

[5] Joyce G. Baldwin, p. 63.

[6] Derek Kidner, p. 129.

[7] Derek Kidner, p. 130.

[8] Joyce G. Baldwin, p. 66.

What were we put in the world to do?

The Friend of God

Study 16
Genesis 18:1-33

INTRODUCTION

At this point in our study we should pause and ask, "What is the *point* the writer of Genesis wanted to make? What is the book's main theme, main message?" It is important to ask that question of any book of the Bible. You don't want to study individual episodes and stories as if they were stand-alone tales included to teach us some "moral." What is the book of Genesis really about? I would summarize it this way: The main theme of Genesis is the way God fulfills his promises to Abraham unconditionally and, through those promises, restores the world that was lost in Eden. In the beginning God created a world filled with creatures who would become themselves (what they were designed to be) in worship and service of the Lord (Gen. 1-2). But the creation turned from God and began disintegrating (Gen. 3-5). God's judgment slows the spread of disintegration but cannot stop it; creation will not answer God's call to service (Gen. 6-11). God determines then to begin a new creation, enabling Abraham to answer his call (Gen. 13-15) and creating a new people from his seed who will obey and serve him. Within this new creation, this covenant community, fellowship with God and with one another will be restored (Gen. 16-17). All of this, however, is based on the gracious, miraculous birth of the son of promise. Through him all nations of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:3).

From our vantage point we can see that this is not just the theme of Genesis, but of the whole Bible, and therefore of all human history. God is recreating the world that was lost by creating a new people of God (calling them out by his grace) and through the ultimate Son of promise, born of Mary, who truly is going to bless all the nations.

Note 1: As background for this chapter, remember that hospitality to travelers was an essential virtue in the ancient Near East. Abraham's welcome of the three travelers was elaborate but not out of the ordinary. We need not assume that he knew who the strangers were in order to account for it.

Note 2: Derek Kidner writes, "Christian commentators have been tempted to discern three Persons of the Trinity here; but the passage differentiates clearly between the Lord and his two companions (see verse 22, and 19:1)." [1]

1. **Read Genesis 18:1-8. (a) Contrast this communication from God with previous ones. (b) Why the difference? How does this story of God's meal with Abraham relate to the main theme of Genesis—God's promises to Abraham?**

Contrast this communication with previous ones
The difference between this visitation from God and his previous communications with Abraham is remarkable. From what we can tell, all Abraham received before chapter 15 was a disembodied voice. Then, in chapter 15, God takes a visible form, but the result is an extremely frightening,

overwhelming sight and experience (15:12). God came in dreadful darkness, smoke, and fire (15:17) and moved between bloody, dismembered carcasses! So first God was remote, then terrifying. Now in chapter 18 we have God coming in the form of an ordinary-looking man (18:2), happy for rest and food. The Lord asks questions, gently chides Sarah for laughing (rather than rebuking her), and opens a discussion about Sodom, virtually inviting Abraham to question his judgment.

Why the difference?
It cannot be a coincidence that in Genesis 17 the covenant with Abraham is "completed." First, God showed in Genesis 15 that his new relationship to Abraham is based on sovereign grace, not on anything meritorious in Abraham. God even hints that ultimately he will take the curse to sustain the relationship with Abraham's people. Second, God showed in Genesis 17 that this grace is to be answered by wholehearted commitment and a willingness to submit to the Lordship of God in every area of life. One result of this covenant relationship will be intimacy with a holy God that would otherwise be impossible. They are to "walk" together (17:1) and belong to one another ("I will . . . be *your* God," 17:7).

Primarily, then, this warm, even charming account, told with loving detail, is a fulfillment of God's promise to have a personal, intimate relationship with Abraham. Now that the covenant has been made by God (Gen. 15) and ratified by Abraham (Gen. 17), God no longer comes as a remote voice or a terrifying fire. He comes in an accessible, palpable form to speak face to face with Abraham and Sarah about their promised son, and to dialogue with Abraham about the fate of Sodom, the home of his nephew Lot. God promised Abraham that they would have *fellowship* with each other. They would walk together as God and man had walked together before the fall (see 17:1 and 3:8). Now God begins to do just that.

2. If Genesis 18:1-33 is meant to be a picture of fellowship with God, what can we learn practically from it? (Read James 2:23; Rev. 3:20; Heb. 13:1-2; Matt. 25:35; John 15:13-15.)

James 2:23 is very significant: "And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend." "Credited righteousness," our new standing with God within the covenant of grace, must lead to *friendship* with God. (See also 2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8.)

Derek Kidner says that two biblical qualities of friends are *candor* and *constancy*. [2] Friends are transparent with each other, sharing deeply and honestly. They are always there for each other in faithfulness. They spend time with each other. Friends always let you in but never let you down. In this chapter we see all of these elements.

notes

First, we see an interesting illustration of *constancy*. Abraham is very faithful to the duty of hospitality to hungry, weary visitors. As a result, he finds himself going deeper into fellowship with God. The writer to the Hebrews makes a remarkable reference to this incident when he writes: "Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb. 13:1-2). Abraham was simply doing his duty well, welcoming tired strangers with generosity, deference, and courtesy. But his reward was contact with God himself. In the same way, we are being taught that friendship with God depends on our faithfulness in our covenant duties of prayer, worship, keeping our conscience clear, caring for people with needs, ministering to those who are hurting (Matt. 25:35), and putting God first in our lives. Experiences of the presence of God cannot be programmed; rather, they come to us. However, they won't come if we have stopped being faithful and diligent in our basic Christian duties. If we have no time for Christian ministry, service, and the "means of grace" (hearing the Word, regular prayer and worship, the sacraments), then we won't come to know him personally. You can't create or deepen a friendship unless you are committed to spending time together.

When Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears . . . and opens . . . I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20 ESV), he is speaking to Christians. To eat with someone in the Near East was a highly relational act. Meals took a long time, since the purpose was to get to know one another.

Second, we see interesting illustrations here of the need for *candor*. God kindly insists on candor from Sarah, with whom he is seeking a personal relationship (see question #3 below). Verse 15 tells us that Sarah lied to God—to God! Yet God shows the essence of friendship by (on the one hand) insisting on honesty ("I did not laugh!" "Oh, yes you did.") but (on the other hand) not attacking or rejecting Sarah for her dishonesty. In other words, he shows both candor and constancy. God then provides candor when he remarkably begins to think out loud about Sodom in a way that invites Abraham into his inmost thoughts. "Shall I hide from Abraham . . . ?" (v. 17) is a rhetorical question. The obvious answer is, "No, we are friends." The third and most breathtaking example of candor between friends is seen in Abraham's boldness in seeking to dissuade God from judging Sodom (vv. 22-33). Even Abraham is amazed at his own candor and honesty (v. 31), but boldness, familiarity, and direct talk are marks of friendship.

Ultimately, this kind of intimacy, boldness, and familiarity is inexplicable. Why should a holy God treat sinful, weak human beings with such respect? And how could we ever be so sure of God's love and acceptance that we would dare to be so honest and transparent? The ultimate answer is in Jesus Christ. His work on the cross paves the way for intimacy with God. But his incarnation also truly makes the Deity something palpable and accessible. Watching Jesus live shows us holiness, wisdom, love, grace, and majesty in forms we can relate to

personally. The three men at Abraham's tent were temporary apparitions, but in Jesus Christ God becomes someone we can know, talk to, and befriend (John 15:13-15).

3. Read Genesis 18:9-15. Who has the main dialogue with God at Abraham's tent? Why does God have this conversation—what is his purpose? How does God help Sarah's progress in faith?

God had spoken audibly to Abraham several times and had once appeared visibly but, as far as we know, this is the first time he has made direct contact with Sarah. She had heard God's promise of a son many, many times, but it had always been through Abraham. Now these three strangers come to Abraham's tent. It is not clear who they are until they ask in verse 9, "Where is your wife Sarah?" It must have been surprising that they knew her name. Not until it is clear that Sarah is listening is it also clear that the speaker is "the LORD." From verse 10 on, the conversation is between Sarah and God. God had come for Sarah. We learn from this that it is not enough to have a second-hand experience of God. If Sarah is to become a part of the covenant, she must also have a personal encounter with God. It is not enough to only know *about* God, or even to believe in and obey *in general* the God you know about. You have to *know* God personally yourself.

As we look at God's conversation with Sarah we see that, first, he talks about the promised son in the most specific terms. He says, "This time next year . . . Sarah . . . will have a son" (v. 10). Second, he responds to her self-hating, despondent doubt with a gentle challenge and assurance.

After his statement of the promise, we read that Sarah "laughed to herself" (v. 12), but her laugh had little humor in it. When she says she is "worn out" (v. 12), she uses a word that really means "useless" or good-for-nothing. When she says, "Will I now have this pleasure?" she uses a term that means sexual pleasure. The English reader thinks she is talking about the pleasure of having a child. (Actually, only male readers would be tempted to think that giving birth is pleasant!) Rather, she is probably saying, "I am so old, shriveled and useless that my husband isn't even having sex with me! So how am I ever going to have a child?" We see why God came to see Sarah. Only he could deal with the unbelief that had taught Sarah to consider herself beyond hope.

God deals with her bitter laughter and self-hatred the same way he deals with everything in our lives—with a combination of conviction and comfort. First he "calls her on the carpet" and won't let her off. He convicts her of her unbelief by looking under the mask (she had only laughed *to herself*, trying to hide it) and telling her, "You laughed at me!" (v. 13). When she denied it, he pressed on: "Yes, you did" (v. 15). At the same time, he is remarkably assuring. Even when he convicts her of sin, he is gentle. But most of all, he calls her to wonder at his grace. Literally, he asks, "Is anything too *wonderful* for the

LORD?" This is a challenge with tremendous promise in it. He is saying, "I can do more than you can even imagine. I will fill your life with wonder." It is this mixture of firmness and loving assurance that is the essence of parenting and spiritual shepherding in general.

4. Read Genesis 18:18-19. What do we learn from God's summary of Abraham's call in verses 18-19? What is the relationship between God's favor and Abraham's obedience as seen in verse 19?

First, we learn that Abraham is to teach and order his household in "the way of the LORD" (v. 19a). This is the most explicit expression to date of Abraham's responsibility to create a counter-culture, a new God-fearing community in which God's ways are pre-eminent. This underscores the corporate nature of our covenant relationship with God. Though we are saved individually, we are automatically saved *into* a community of other saved persons. We are all, like Abraham, called to live in and shape this alternate humanity, new creation-community.

Second, we learn that the two marks of this "way of the LORD" are "righteousness" and "justice" (v. 19b NIV—"what is right and just"). These two words are often paired in the Bible, and probably have to do with personal godliness and socially just and generous behavior. God is Lord of every area of our lives.

Third, however, we see the connection between God's choosing Abraham and Abraham's obedient behavior. First, it says, "I have chosen him" (v. 19), a Hebrew word that literally means "I have known him personally." Many commentators say that the word means almost "to make someone a friend." Second, it says, "*so that* he will . . . [do] what is right and just." The order and relationship of the two things could not be clearer. Derek Kidner writes:

> Verse 19 shows particularly clearly how grace and law work together, for it opens with grace ("I have chosen him") directed toward the firm discipline of law ("direct . . . to keep the way of the LORD") through which eventually grace may reach its goal (that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him). [3]

God does not choose Abraham because he does what is right and just. Abraham does what is right and just because he is chosen. We are saved by grace alone, but that saving grace always and gladly turns to obedience as a way to relate to our Lord and to bring about his loving purposes in the world and in our lives.

5. Read Genesis 18:17-33. What do we learn from this passage about intercessory prayer?

First, Abraham's prayer is really *initiated by God.* Notice that God's thoughts are what lead Abraham into passionate prayer. That tells us that prayer is not simply an appeal to God as much as a *response* to God. We would not be able to pray at all if we didn't have God's promises in his Word that he is a prayer-hearing God. We would not be able to pray with confidence and boldness if we didn't have God's gospel in his Word that tells us of our new standing as his adopted, beloved children. But even further, we generally pray best when we respond to God speaking to us (challenging, assuring, comforting, warning) by the Holy Spirit through his Word. In short, our prayers really are dependent on God drawing us out through his Word and Spirit.

Second, Abraham's prayer is extremely *persistent and specific*. He simply will not give up. He comes back again and again. He knows exactly what he wants and he is set on getting it. The Bible calls us to prevailing prayer that is continual and relentless. The gospel produces this kind of prayer, and we can also say that this kind of prayer is a good indication that the gospel is in your life. The gospel gives you a sense of your helplessness and weakness so that you pray fervently, knowing you cannot bring this about by yourself. At the same time, the gospel gives you a confidence that God is for you and on your side. Without that hopefulness, you can't sustain relentless prayer.

Third, Abraham's prayer is *"familiar" and bold.* We have already alluded to the candor and "cheek" of Abraham's prayer. His temerity takes our breath away. It is far more aggressive than most people would ever dare attempt with God. However, just as interesting is the fact that —

Fourth, Abraham's prayer is *passionately humble*. He is filled with fear and trembling. He calls himself "dust and ashes" (v. 27). He repeatedly recognizes that his audacity and boldness are a great risk, and that God has every right to be angry with him (vv. 30-32). He has absolutely no sense of entitlement. It is remarkable that someone so aggressive would have so little sense that he deserved to be heard. Either Abraham is desperately concerned for those he is praying for, very, very confident in God's grace and mercy, or both. But his assertiveness is not based on any belief in his own worthiness.

Fifth, Abraham's prayer is *deeply theological*. Abraham is not simply crying out; he is reasoning theologically, appealing to God on the basis of his truth. In verse 25 he argues from the "given" that God is absolutely just, for example. He is not simply bringing his "shopping list" of requests to God; he is seeking a biblical understanding as he prays. He is asking, "This is true, so wouldn't this be true?" Though his emotions and heart are obviously engaged, so is his mind. The best prayers (best both for changing our hearts and engaging God) are prayers based on and filled with Scripture.

Sixth, Abraham's prayer is *committed to the unbelieving city*. Abraham's prayer has been called "high priestly" because he comes before God on behalf of others. Moses intercedes before God for the children of Israel after they sin (Ex. 33) and others do the same. But there is something in Abraham's intercession that goes beyond them all. It is easy to miss *exactly* who Abraham is praying for. Of course he wants Lot and his family spared, and next week we will see that God does answer Abraham's prayer in that regard. But if we look carefully, Abraham is praying for the whole city of Sodom, with all its wicked inhabitants: "Will you not . . . spare the place . . . ?" (v. 24). Abraham is pleading for God's mercy for a city filled with injustice and evil. Gordon Wenham notes how radical this is:

> We have already noted verbal links [of this passage] with Moses' great intercession [with God] in Exodus 32-34. Samuel (1 Sam. 12:23), Amos (7:1-9), and Jeremiah . . . also pleaded with God on the nation's behalf. Here, [however,] Abraham is not praying for his own people (he does not mention Lot) but for Sodom, and this makes this episode unique among prophetic intercessions. [4]

Seventh, Abraham's prayer is *not answered in an all-or-nothing way.* In one sense God turns him down. He does not "spare . . . the place" (v. 24). And yet, as we will see next week, God initiates repeated interventions to spare Lot, and the reason given is that God had listened to Abraham (19:29).

This prayer shows that God has truly made Abraham his friend. This kind of prayer life is far beyond most of us. How can we approach it? See below.

6. Genesis 18:17-33. What is Abraham's basic argument as he asks God to spare the city? What is God's response? (Does he agree or disagree, do you think?)

As noted above, Abraham is not simply pleading with God, but appealing to him on the basis of truth. In the heart of his prayer he hits upon a remarkable theological logic. He stands before God, as it were, as a defense attorney. (Indeed, several commentators say that verse 23—"Abraham *approached* him"—is a legal term meaning "to approach the bench"). A lawyer cannot simply plead with a judge or jury but must make a case on the basis of the law, the truth. In that sense, Abraham is truly being an advocate for Sodom. (Remarkable!)

The logic of his case is seen best in verse 24: "Will you . . . not spare the place *for the sake of the . . . righteous*?" He argues like this: "I know you won't let the righteous perish for the sake of the wicked (v. 23), but why not let the wicked live for the sake of the righteous (v. 24)?" Abraham is asking, Could there not be a situation in which the righteousness of the few "covers" the unrighteousness of the many? Gerhard Von Rad puts it like this:

> [Abraham's question] proceeds from the deeply rooted solidarity of a community incriminated in any felony, a solidarity . . . from which the individual could not be simply released. . . . (See Joshua 7:24ff.) Now it would be a great misunderstanding to see in this conversation a protest against this ancient collective idea . . . One must not interpret this section from the viewpoint of [an] individual[istic] tendency [that comes later in history] . . . .
>
> [Abraham's question] is not one that forces its way from collectivism to individualism, but one that dares to replace old collective thinking with new. Should not a smaller number of guiltless men be so important before God that this minority could cause a reprieve for the whole community? "The law of guilt transference has its counter-point in the law of substitution." . . . What is amazing is how his courage increases during conversation as Yahweh's grace is willing . . . until he arrives at the astonishing fact that even a very small number of innocent men is more important in God's sight than a majority of sinners . . . so predominant is God's will to save over his will to punish! [5]

Modern people are very individualistic, and have little or no sense of the reality of collective guilt. Ancient people (and the Bible), however, have a more balanced view, and realize that there is both individual responsibility *and* corporate responsibility. For example, in Joshua 7, we see that an entire family is punished for the sin of one member. Since they knew and could have stopped him, *or at least* since they were part of the family system that produced him, they were all held to be guilty. "Well, then," argues Abraham, "why couldn't this corporate responsibility work the other way as well? If it is true that the guilt of the one can be transferred to the many, why can't the righteousness of the few cover the guilt of the many?" To Abraham's amazement—and ours—he finds that the idea of "imputed righteousness" is valid before God. He finds over and over again that, yes, God will cover the guilt and spare the many if there are only a few truly righteous persons among them. Abraham has found that God's desire to save us is so "preponderant" over his desire to judge that someone else's righteousness could save us if we are in solidarity with him.

Yet in the end, this new concept seems to fail. Abraham stops his appeals at ten righteous persons (vv. 32-33) and goes no further. Why? Ten was the number traditionally considered the minimum for a synagogue. It was the minimum administrative number for constituting a believing community in a city. Abraham may have been unwilling to go further than ten because of the importance of a believing community for a city, not just believing individuals.

But the real reason Sodom is not spared is not because the *principle* failed, as we know from the New Testament, but because *there were no truly righteous persons in Sodom.* Even Lot was very flawed. Abraham's intercession uncovered the principle of imputed righteousness—that God could save and cover guilty sinners with the righteousness of another (Rom. 5). But alas, there was no perfectly righteous person there.

7. How does Jesus fulfill Abraham's prayer? How does Jesus help us to become priestly pray-ers like Abraham?

Abraham prayed for people who might have killed him had they lived, but Jesus prayed for people who *were* killing him ("Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" [Luke 23:34]). Abraham risked his life before a holy God to save a wicked city, but Jesus *gave* his life for the people. "[Jesus was] a high priest [who perfectly] meets our need. . . . Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day. . . . He sacrificed for [our] sins once for all when he offered himself" (Heb. 7:26-27). "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25 ESV). Jesus is the only truly righteous one whose righteousness saves us (2 Cor. 5:21).

We will never become pray-ers like Abraham just by simply trying; it comes only by believing and rejoicing in the One to whom Abraham is pointing. We said that it is essentially impossible to be as aggressive *and* as humble in prayer as Abraham is. Outside of the gospel, we may see ourselves as "dust and ashes," but then we won't feel we deserve to go to God. Or we may feel we are good enough to go to God, but then we would lack Abraham's humility and passion for people who are lost and even evil. Only if we know that in Christ we are simultaneously lost sinners *and* legally righteous and accepted will we have the dynamite in the heart that leads us to pray like Abraham and care for our city as he did.

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[1] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 131.

[2] Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Chicago, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1964), p. 45.

[3] Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 133.

[4] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 2* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1994), p. 53.

[5] Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 212-214.

What were we put in the world to do?

Judgment on Sodom

Study 17 | Genesis 19:1-38

INTRODUCTION

The first bit of background information we need is to remind ourselves of the moral significance of hospitality in ancient times. The way a family, village, or city treated travelers was considered a crucial index of its character.

Another piece of background information has to do with the destruction of the cities of the plain. The famous text tells us that the cities perished in "fire and brimstone" or "burning sulfur" (Gen. 19:24). Geological studies show us that God probably used existing conditions and materials (just like he does for judgment through storms and rain). As we saw in Genesis 14:3-10, the region of the cities was filled with underground pits and beds of petroleum and bitumen, salt and sulfur. "Exudations of bitumen, petroleum and probably natural gas . . . catching fire from lightning or human action would adequately account for recorded phenomena." [1] The Bible tells us that this natural phenomenon was a judgment of God, not a random accident.

1. Begin by re-reading Genesis 18:20-21. What does God say is the reason he judges a city? (Who do you think is doing the "outcry"?)

God says that there has been an "outcry" against the city, which implies that people have been harmed and are crying out for help. About this word Robert Alter writes, "The Hebrew noun, or the verb from which it is derived . . . is often associated in the Prophets and Psalms with the shrieks of torment of the oppressed." [2] See, for example, Proverbs 21:13, where the verb is used in reference to the misery of the oppressed poor. The Bible uses this same image of the victims' blood "crying out" to God elsewhere, as in the case of the blood of Abel (Gen. 4:10). The fact that God describes the sin of the cities of the plain with this metaphor does not bode well for them, since this was the same language used to describe the condition of society before the great flood (Gen. 6:5). All this suggests that the sin of Sodom could not *simply* have been immoral sex, because it is the cry of *injustice* that God hears. That means additional sins besides sexual ones. As Ezekiel 16:49 says, "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom. She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy." More on this later.

We will not discuss at length the whole issue of God's justice and judgment, which we studied when we came to the narrative of Noah and the great flood. Nevertheless, people struggle greatly with the idea of a judging God. Here, briefly, are two reasons why there *must* be a God of justice who will judge oppression, evil, and injustice. There must be a divine "judgment day" or:

(1) There is no *intellectual* defense against the "*naturalness*" of violence. Many people say that they don't believe in God, that this world is all there is. But if this world is all there is, violence is perfectly natural. Nature operates on a principle of the survival of the fittest, the stronger eating the weak. Now, if it is

natural for a big fish to eat a smaller fish, why isn't it perfectly natural for a stronger nation or culture to oppress a weaker one? It there is no God, or no supernatural reality outside nature, how can anyone say that the violence of life is wrong? You can't judge any part of nature to be "crooked" unless you have a straight-edge that comes from outside nature. Unless there is a just God who says that oppression, slavery, and violence are against his will and law, there is no intellectual basis for objecting to bigotry and oppression. It's just your opinion against mine.

(2) There is no emotional and personal defense against the bitterness of violence. Unless I know that there is a God (a) who knows what others deserve better than I do, and (b) who will do justice and put everything right eventually, I will be unable to avoid the trap of bitterness and maybe revenge. If you are the victim of oppression, you will experience enormous internal pressure to act as judge, unless you know deep down that there is a true Judge who can do this better than you can, and you don't have the right to sit in his chair.

In short, we need (intellectually, emotionally, socially, and culturally) the *hope* that comes from knowing there is a God who is the Judge. Many say, "I don't believe in a judging God; I believe in a merciful God." But a God who will never come down in judgment isn't truly merciful! Who will hear the "outcry" if he does not?

2. Read Genesis 19:1-3. What hints does the narrator immediately give us about the condition of Sodom? What does Lot's seat in the gate tell us about his position and influence in the city?

The skillful narrator gives us dark hints about what is to come. First, Lot is the only person at the city gate to greet the travelers and offer them hospitality. Gordon Wenham notes, "That Lot was alone and no-one else greeted the visitors is ominous . . . ." [3] As noted in the introduction, this lack of hospitality immediately shows that the city was a brutal place. Apart from Lot's invitation, the guests would have had to sleep on the street. ("We will spend the night in the square," v. 2b.) Secondly, when the travelers express their intention to sleep on the street, "Lot's alarm in v. 3a reveals that he knew his Sodom." [4] Lot knows that any strangers out after dark would be the objects of violence. Since it was "evening" (v. 1), he is frightened for them and wants to protect them. [**Note:** It is not evident that he recognizes them as divine messengers until later.]

In light of all this, Lot's position "sitting in the gateway of the city" (v. 1) is something of an indictment. Why? The "gate" of the city was the place where local dignitaries sat to set policy for the town. (See Genesis 34:20-24 as an example. There an issue is brought to those in the "gate" for discussion and decision.) To be given a seat in the gate was like being on city council or getting a seat on the stock exchange. It meant you were recognized as successful and

prominent, and you were then able to deliberate on public policy and social/cultural norms for the city. What is immediately obvious, however, is that Lot has had absolutely *no* positive impact on the city. It is filled with selfishness, brutality, violence, licentiousness, and oppression, and he is simply presiding over it!

This does not mean that Lot participated or condoned what was going on. On the contrary, the New Testament tells us that he was deeply distressed by the evil he saw (2 Peter 2:7-8). Nonetheless, despite his standing in the city, he was either too cowardly to speak out against the wrongdoing or completely unpersuasive when he did so. Verse 9 shows this when the crowd speaks disdainfully of him. Either his life pattern or his reasoning (or both) failed to win respect and gain a hearing. The contrast with other Old Testament figures like Joseph, Daniel, and Esther is very noticeable. They also were believers who came into prominent official positions in pagan societies and ungodly cities. Yet they had a great influence on their cultures for good.

3. How is Lot's ineffectiveness in Sodom a warning to us? What should we learn from it?

Some might say that Lot's ineffectiveness in Sodom warns believers against becoming involved in secular affairs—or even living in unbelieving cities. Someone might say, "Lot's mistake was to live in such a wicked city in the first place! He should have stayed in the country and kept himself pure." The trouble with that reasoning is that Daniel and other civil servants in pagan cultures are held up as models for us. If Lot was sinning by entering an unbelieving city and participating in its government, why wasn't Daniel sinning? Moreover, at one point the exiled Jews *en masse* refused to move into Babylon and become engaged with that society, but God told them otherwise (see Jeremiah 29:1-9). The prophets who told the Jews to stay out of the big, wicked city were false prophets!

What the story of Lot warns us against is more subtle. Lot's failure was that—instead of his family being salt and light to mold the values of Sodom—Sodom influenced and molded the values of Lot's family (as we will see later). Why did this happen? Derek Kidner gives us the best hint.

> As for Lot, his place "in the gate" proclaimed him a man of standing in Sodom, little as he relished its ways (2 Peter 2:7-8). His public ineffectiveness must be balanced against the influential careers of Joseph and Daniel, whose high office was a vocation; the difference lay there. [5]

Kidner's insight is profound. Daniel and Joseph saw their careers primarily as a "vocation"—a calling from God. They sought to use their gifts in such a way that their God was honored and shown to be the true God. Joseph, for example, let it be known "up front" to the Pharaoh that he was a believer in Yahweh. When Pharaoh appointed him prime minister, he knew exactly what

he was getting. Daniel did the same. Both men only came into positions where they had the freedom to profess their faith and work with integrity. With God's help they rose in the ranks despite their loyalty to God (which often brought them into danger). But because they put their service to God above prosperity and advancement, they were seen as men of great integrity when they *did* advance, and their words and deeds had an impact. [**Note:** The lives of both men are studied in depth in the "Living in a Pluralistic Society" study series.]

As we saw in Genesis 14, Lot's primary reason for moving to Sodom was for the benefit of his career and prosperity. Being an influence for God and the good of the city was secondary. Career advancement was the non-negotiable. Thus he rose in the ranks but ended up having no influence at all. The people of Sodom probably knew he worshiped some strange foreign god (19:9), but there was no unusual courage, compassion, or character about him to grab their attention or respect.

So what is the warning for us? We are not being warned against involvement with an unbelieving culture or society. Rather, we are warned against being a "thermometer" (an instrument controlled by the environment) instead of a "thermostat" (an instrument that affects its environment). We are not being warned against secular vocations but against making an idol out of our career, achievements, or the approval of the culture. We must see our entire lives, including our work, as part of our calling to glorify God with our gifts. We must make service to God the non-negotiable, not career advancement. That means, for example, that we should not take jobs that absorb all our time for rest, prayer, and relationships. We should not take jobs that produce things that harm or exploit others. We should not take jobs with companies whose corporate cultures are immoral or corrupt.

In addition to his or her job, a Christian should also seek to contribute to the good of the community or neighborhood. We should not simply "use" the city we live in for entertainment, personal advancement, and cultural enrichment. We should also be working to solve its community problems. This too is a way for a Christian to put the service of God ahead of personal peace and affluence.

Only if our priorities are straight will we be able to be "salt and light" in our cities and society.

Background note: Before going any further, we must address the long-standing question that has confronted readers of this passage: What was the sin of Sodom? The traditional view is that (1) the sin of Sodom was homosexuality, and (2) this account teaches that homosexuality is to be abhorred and condemned. The basis for this view are verses 4-5, where the men of Sodom seek to have sex with Lot's male visitors. Others deny this interpretation. Some who deny the traditional view believe that the Hebrew word (literally) "to know" in verse 5 (translated by the NIV "have sex with") does *not* refer to sexual intercourse. They believe the sin of verses 4-5 is rather a failure of

hospitality or perhaps a desire to do violence. Obviously, the debate rages on. The traditional view is often motivated by a desire to prove homosexuality wrong from this passage, while the contemporary view is motivated by a desire to deny that homosexuality is wrong.

I suggest a third way. I believe that the narrator's purpose was not to teach us about homosexuality *per se*. However, the contemporary view is wrong in saying that sex is not in view in verses 4-5. If the mob was not asking for sex, why does Lot offer them his daughters in verse 8, mentioning that they are virgins? At the same time, the traditional view is forced, because it is obvious that the mob is after something like gang rape. Thus it is impossible to know whether the narrator is saying that *any* homosexual act is wrong or just rape. Elsewhere, the Bible shows us that Sodom was judged for a complex of issues—for its social injustice (Ezek. 16:49), for lying and corruption, as well as for adultery and sexual sin (Jer. 23:14; see also Isa. 1:9-10 and 3:9).

In short, we shouldn't try to make this text condemn or exonerate homosexuality. If we want to discern the Bible's views on homosexuality and heterosexuality, we must go to the texts that are written to teach on those subjects, especially Genesis 1 and 2 and Romans 1.

4. Read Genesis 19:4-11. How do you assess Lot's efforts to defend his guests against the mob?

Lot's reaction to the mob is an incoherent mix of character and stupidity, of moral sense and moral nonsense. On the one hand, he shows great courage to go outside and face the mob with "the door shut behind him" (v. 6). He shows a peacemaker's spirit when he pleads with them, "My friends, don't do this . . ." (v. 7). He also shows the highest regard for his responsibility as host: "They have come under the protection of my roof" (v. 8). On the other hand, the mob's response shows that Lot has been in denial about the depth of Sodom's violence and depravity. His speech only incites the crowd to greater violence. He has completely misread the situation and put everyone's lives in greater jeopardy. His offer of his daughters to meet the sexual needs of the mob (v. 8) is astonishing. (Imagine what his daughters were thinking and feeling when they heard this!) It is *at least* tremendously callous and probably reveals that Lot is being guided by cultural conventions more than godly wisdom. He seems to value the women (though they are his daughters) far less as human beings than the traveling men.

Here we have Lot's character in microcosm. He is sincere and consciously committed to moral values and conventions, but he has no real wisdom or spiritual maturity (discernment, love) to manage the situation. He is a "nice man," a moral man, but God is not at work in his life to grow him in faith and grace. Lot has not made a covenant with God; he has not left everything to serve the living God as Abraham has. God is just one of many concerns in

his life; he is not Lot's "Lord." So Lot's character is a patchwork of light and darkness. In one stroke he completely alienates his family (see vv. 30-38), enrages the mob, and put the lives of his whole household in such danger that only the angels' supernatural intervention saves them.

What we see, as usual in the Bible, is that we cannot save ourselves. Lot is a great example of a well-meaning, good, and "decent" person who has a conscience and who tries to be religious in a general way. However, his human resources and wisdom have only brought him into a place of peril and to the brink of utter disaster, spiritually and physically. Only God, through the angels, can save him.

Note: The word used in verse 11 is not the normal Hebrew word for "blindness." It actually means a "dazzled state." This means that the angels did not actually remove the people's sight but probably created an explosive flash of overwhelming light that struck everyone with temporary blindness, debilitating the mob and removing the threat. The word also occurs in 2 Kings 6:18, when angels are again present and an attacking army is struck blind. The suggestion is that the angels may have flashed out a ray of divine glory that devastated the eyes and minds of the attacking men. "Out of the brightness of his presence . . . the LORD thundered from heaven . . . . He . . . scattered . . . great bolts of lightning and routed them." (Ps. 18:12-14).

5. Read Genesis 19:11-29. Trace the ways that God (through the angels) seeks to save Lot and how Lot and his family respond to each effort. What do we learn here about how God works in our lives?

Abraham had prayed for God to save his nephew Lot (Gen. 18). Now we see how God proceeds to do this.

First, we see God *initiating*. Lot has not called on God to come and help him. Lot has not "earned" God's help through his good life. God does not come to Lot because Lot is cognizant of his spiritual need. Rather he comes to *make* Lot cognizant of his spiritual situation. He initiates in grace. The first step of this initiation is to open Lot's eyes to his peril and his need to leave the city. The visit of the angels "shattered the uneasy peace in which [Lot] has lived too long," [6] writes Kidner. Lot is forced for the first time to publicly call the residents of Sodom "wicked" (v. 7). But they only see him "trying to be judge over us" (i.e., "He's trying to tell us how to live!") and they become murderously enraged. Lot's ineffectiveness and Sodom's wickedness are laid bare. There is no escaping it. The end result is that Lot can no longer live in the city under any circumstances. His hand is being forced.

notes

Second, we see God *working salvation through relationships, especially the family*. The angels give Lot the chance to speak to his whole family—including his in-laws "or anyone else in the city that belongs to you"—about the coming destruction and to offer them a chance to escape (vv. 12-13). What does this show us? On the one hand, unlike our individualistic culture, God looks at us in communities and families, not just as individuals. His salvation very often works along family lines. This is realistic. As much as contemporary people want to think they are "self-made," we are inescapably and largely a product of our families. Much of what we are comes directly from our parents' character. Our family's sins tend to be our sins; our family's virtues tend to be our virtues. Therefore God wants to save families, not just individuals. He wants Christian members of a family to winsomely attract the other members to him. On the other hand, we must notice that God does not save anyone automatically, just because they are related to Lot. They have special privileges and opportunities because of their relationship, but they still have to make their own decision to follow. Thus in this story, "The family's solidarity in God's eyes (cf. Gen 7:1; 17:9; 18:19) and the members' freedom to defy it are *both* vivid realities here." [7]

Third, we see God (through the angels) *empowering*. Lot shows he has no innate ability to cooperate with God's grace. Early in the morning they call him to flee (v. 15) but Lot "hesitated." Lot knows God will destroy the city and, even if that doesn't happen, the angry mob from the night before *will* destroy him—yet he can't bear to leave! Then the angels "grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, *for the LORD was merciful to them*" (v. 16). Then they call him to flee again (v. 17). What a vivid illustration of Paul's famous statement that human beings are not capable of seeking God (Rom. 3:10) and Jesus' famous statement that everyone must be drawn or they cannot come to God (John 6:44).

Fourth, we see God *accepting imperfect responses*. The angels command Lot to go to the hills (v. 17) but Lot asks if instead he can go to a smaller city, Zoar (v. 20). This request for a revision of the plan shows how unwilling Lot still is to trust God and leave his comfortable life in Sodom. Yet his request is granted (v. 21). This final example of divine patience shows us that not only is our salvation not initiated by us, but it is not even "earned" by us through the quality of our response. God calls us to believe, but our belief is always flawed. Our acceptance is not based on the quality of our love and faith, but on his mercy (v. 16).

Fifth, we see God <u>working through prayer</u>. "So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe . . ." (v. 29). Prayer and how it "works" is certainly shrouded in mystery, but we learn here that it makes a difference in the lives of people we love. Look at how patient God is with Lot. And why? Because "God . . . remembered Abraham."

This is a valuable lesson on the importance of praying for our friends, but we should probably look even deeper. God's commitment to Lot seems absolute. No matter how slow and unwilling Lot is, God waits for him. Notice the angel's remarkable statement, "Flee there [to Zoar] quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it" (v. 22). This shows how deeply (unconditionally?) God was committed to Lot's safety. The angel "could not do anything" in judgment until Lot was safe. I believe we would do well here to think of the ultimate advocate (1 John 2:1-2) and intercessor (Rom. 8:34) whose prayers for us *guarantee* our security in the Lord (Luke 22:31-32). If Jesus is our Savior, he is our intercessor, and God will thus patiently and unconditionally shepherd us to safety—not for our sake, but for the sake of our Great Abraham, our great intercessor, whose prayers are never turned down, even though we are as spiritually stupid as Lot.

6. Read Genesis 19:26. Lot's wife "looks back" and "becomes a pillar of salt." How does Jesus' warning in Luke 17:32-33 shed light on what happened here?

Lot's wife (along with everyone else in the family) is specifically told by the angels in verse 17, "Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain . . . or you will be swept away!" However, she does look back and she dies. The typical Sunday school version of the story (and its depiction in movies) portrays this as a supernatural event: Lot's wife looks over her shoulder or turns around momentarily and God immediately turns her into salt. This seems unfair and arbitrary, especially considering God's patience with Lot's procrastination and resistance at every point. It also seems cruel.

But we must notice that the text doesn't say "God turned her into salt"—only that "she became a pillar of salt." Also, the fact that she became *salt* indicates that (just as the angel warned her) she must have stopped and lingered and gotten caught in the conflagration. It was a completely natural consequence. "She was caught up in the molten tide that swept across the plain like volcanic lava. Thus she became fossilized . . . ." [8] Nevertheless, though her death was "natural," "in the context of judgment it captures in a single picture the fate of those who turn back (cf. Heb. 10:38-39; Luke 17:31-33)." [9] The picture of Lot's wife reminds us that we cannot tell God, "I'll flee to you when I'm ready." It is typical, for example, for younger adults to want to postpone a strong spiritual commitment until they have "experienced more of life." But you don't know whether your heart will be too hard or indifferent to repent and turn to him later. We must never put off submission to God when*ever* we sense him calling to us in our hearts. If he is softening your heart and drawing you, you have no right to tell him, "Come back and help me in about five years." You may find that you are spiritually hardened by then—you've become a stone.

Jesus' warning in Luke 32-33 is especially helpful because it shows us that Lot's wife did not just "break a rule" in a momentary impulse. She was failing to hear God's call to discipleship. God was saying to Lot's family, "If you are

going to be saved, you must follow me and leave everything behind! All your status, money, comfort, friends—everything! It is the only way you will be saved." Jesus says that God calls us *all* to the very same thing. Of course, few of us must literally and physically leave everything, but we are to make a profound change in our center and begin to live wholly for God. Nothing else is central or necessary. He is the only Savior and Lord. God calls us all to do this, and if we aren't willing to listen to the call, we will be lost.

7. Read Genesis 19:30-38. How is this sad epilogue a result of Lot's sins "coming home to roost"? What hope does Matthew 1:5 provide us after reading this story?

This epilogue shows us the end results of a life led by a basically good man who compromised with the world.

First, we see that Lot, whose great goal in life was affluence and security, is now virtually homeless. Having begged God to let him go to Zoar, he now flees it out of fear (v. 30). God's judgment on Sodom left Lot full of fears and insecurity. He leaves the city for his bitter, final living quarters—a cave (v. 30). Originally, Lot had not been satisfied with the tents of Abraham. He wanted a large and gracious "house" (v. 3) in the city. but now he has nothing left but a dark, dank cave. The irony of the situation is that he refused to stay with Abraham and be a "pilgrim"—a man who put God's will and mission before his own personal comfort and security. In the end, the man who refused to be a spiritual pilgrim is now a homeless wanderer, like Cain.

Second, we see that Lot's daughters have imbibed his own pragmatist values all too well. Wenham writes, "Putting their desire for children above principle (for their deeds breach both incest rules and filial duty) Lot's daughters contrived to have intercourse with him." [10] Lot was a moral man who would never have done something like this willingly. But, though Lot had been formally obedient to moral rules, he had always made his life choices on the basis of his own self-interest above all. His daughters simply took this philosophy to its logical conclusion.

The tribes that descended from these two children were particularly cruel and perverse. The Moabites worshiped fertility gods and their society was riddled with sexual license and organized orgies (see Numbers 25). The Ammonites were particularly cruel. Their god Molech demanded child-sacrifice. As Kidner observes, "[Lot's] legacy, Moab and Ammon [was] carnal . . . and cruel . . . . So much stemmed from [his] self-regarding choice (Gen. 13:10ff) and [his] persistence in it." [11]

Why this epilogue? The narrator puts the swift disintegration of Sodom and Gomorrah beside the slow but sure disintegration of Lot's family. We see that sin will always bear a harvest of destruction, but the fruit may come in suddenly or very slowly. Kidner comments, "It is a superb study of the two aspects of judgment: the cataclysmic, as the cities disappear in brimstone and

fire, and the gradual, as Lot and his family reach the last stages of disintegration, breaking up in the very hands of their rescuers." [12]

Despite the fact that Moab and Ammon were enemies of Israel and particularly debauched cultures, Matthew 1:5 records a remarkable sign of the power of God's grace. Ruth, the Moabitess, who turned to the true God in faith, became a mother in the line of Christ himself. No people, no person, is beyond the reach of God's grace.

8. How does this account fit in with the theme of the rest of Genesis?

We have said that the theme of Genesis was that God restores the world lost in Eden through the promises he makes to Abraham. Originally, the world was whole and perfect, but when Adam and Eve trusted themselves instead of God, sin entered and disintegration began. Abraham is the beginning of God's salvation, however. God calls Abraham to trust him (as Adam and Even did not). Abraham must "lose the world to gain it." He must be willing to put God ahead of security, status, and even home if he is going to become a new people who will eventually bring salvation for the whole world.

Why, then, the story of Lot? Sadly, Lot is not the exact opposite of Abraham—he is not wicked, violent, and corrupt. Rather, he is the *counterfeit* of Abraham. He fools even himself. On the surface he seems moral and good, but he refused to put God first. He is "the righteous man without the pilgrim spirit." [13] He refuses to get out of his security zones; he refuses to become a spiritual pilgrim. As a result, he is the counterpoint to everything Abraham is. Abraham is called to teach his children and build a strong family (Gen. 17) but Lot's family disintegrates. Abraham has the king of Sodom in his debt (Gen. 14) but Lot has no impact on the pagan society at all.

notes

[1] F. G. Clapp cited by Joyce G. Baldwin in *The Message of Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 78.

[2] Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 80.

[3] Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis" in *New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 74.

[4] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 134.

[5] Derek Kidner, p. 134.

[6] Derek Kidner, p. 134.

[7] Derek Kidner, p. 135.

[8] Joyce G. Baldwin, p. 79.

[9] Derek Kidner, p. 135.

[10] Gordon Wenham, p. 75.

[11] Derek Kidner, p. 136.

[12] Derek Kidner, p. 134.

[13] Derek Kidner, p. 133.

What were we put in the world to do?

Isaac and Ishmael

Study 18 | **Genesis 20:1 - 22:19**

INTRODUCTION

The story of Abraham offering up Isaac is so famous that it is usually studied by itself. This has obscured some interesting parallels (and lessons) that come from comparing the stories of Ishmael and Isaac, Abraham's two sons. This week we will look at chapters 20 through 22 to understand what the writer wants to tell us about God's redemptive purposes in the birth and wilderness experiences of both sons. Chapter 20 shows us the last threat to the birth of Isaac—and it comes from Abraham himself! Chapter 21 tells us of Isaac's birth and the crisis it precipitates in Abraham's family. Chapter 22 relates the climactic test of Abraham's faith. (We will skip the incident of 21:22-32, where Abraham secures legal rights to a well near Beersheba, the first piece of land he acquires in Canaan. This is a small but significant way that God continues to fulfill his promises to Abraham.)

GENESIS 20:1-18

Summary of the Event

- Abraham moved to the region of Gerar, an important caravan center on the southern border between Canaan and Egypt. Abimelech was head of the city of Gerar.
- As before in 12:10-20, Abraham was sure that foreign kings would seek to kill him in order to take and marry Sarah (20:11-12). He again lies, saying that Sarah is his sister rather than his wife. Indeed, despite Abraham's and Sarah's ages, Sarah retains her looks and Abimelech takes her into his harem. (See introductory note to chapter 17 on the longevity of the patriarchs and family through a blessing of God.)
- There are many reasons why Abraham is more guilty and blameworthy this time than in the previous instance.

  First, in chapter 12 Abraham had far less experience of God and far less understanding of his promises and ways. It is amazing that he would put the promise of a son at risk like this, after so many confirmations and signs.

  Second, in chapter 12 Abraham exhibited far less character development. Now, through testing and intimacy with God, he had learned unselfishness (chapter 14), and courageous love and prayerful concern even for his enemies (chapter 18). Yet here Abraham lets his fears get the best of him.

  Third, Pharaoh and the Egyptians seem much more ignorant of God and his will, but Abimelech and the city of Gerar seem far more righteous than the Sodomites or the Egyptians. Abimelech gets a direct word from God (vv. 3-7) and shows a strong moral conscience

(v. 9), as well as real graciousness when he discovers that Abraham lied to him (vv. 14-16). Abraham's fears led him to misjudge Abimelech's character.

- Most remarkable is the way Abraham retains his special relationship to God and prays for Abimelech (v. 17).

1. Read Genesis 20:1-18. How does this incident confirm and illuminate the main theme of Genesis? What do we learn practically?

We have said that the main theme of Genesis is the way God fulfills his promises to Abraham unconditionally, and through those promises restores the world lost in Eden. How does this passage confirm that theme?

(1) Abraham is a vessel of God's salvation, but that salvation is strictly a salvation of grace. (The promises to Abraham are "unconditional.") Abraham is not chosen because his moral quality is higher than the "pagans" around him. This is demonstrated forcefully in this incident because the pagan king seems much more decent, wise, and righteous than Abraham. Perhaps the writer wants to keep the reader from inferring from chapters 18-19 that God's people are very, very good and all those who don't worship God are very, very bad. Gordon Wenham comments:

> So we learn that Abraham was not as saintly as chapter 18 perhaps suggested, nor were all the Canaanites as wicked as Sodom. Real life is often a mixture of contradictions—the totally pure or completely evil exist only in fiction. [1]

In light of this, verse 17 is remarkable. There, despite the fact that Abraham has acted despicably and Abimelech has shown himself to be a conscientious, wise, and generous man, it is Abraham who prays to God for Abimelech (not the other way around). Abraham's special relationship to God—as the means by which God will bless the nations—is still intact. Obviously, his status is not one he earned. It is all by grace. Abraham is chosen but not "choice." He has been saved by grace and given a new status, but he has not earned it. He cannot assume moral superiority over those who have not received his call or his place in the people of God.

(2) Another way this incident confirms the theme is by showing that God is committed to fulfilling his promises no matter what. He not only made the promises despite Abraham's unworthiness, he now will fulfill the promises despite Abraham's continued spiritual weakness and failure. God was going to give Abraham and Sarah a son—and that was that. He would not let Abraham's fears and sins thwart his saving purposes.

What do we learn practically for ourselves? On the one hand, there is a set of challenges. (1) Don't be haughty toward those who don't believe or worship God. You are only what you are by grace. (2) Don't think that you ever "get

over" sin. Even sins you thought you had dealt with long ago can have deep roots that spring up again when you don't expect them. We are to maintain our guard and watch over our heart in situations that are particularly tempting to us. On the other hand, there is a set of comforts: (1) Don't think you have to be better than anyone else to be used by God. God uses broken and failed people. Even his greatest leaders and vessels—Abraham, David, Peter—have been guilty of horrendous moral lapses. (2) Don't think God will ever "give up" on you. The comforts without the challenges can lead to laxity, but the challenges without the comforts are crushing.

GENESIS 21:1-21

2. Read 21:1-7. Isaac means "laughter." (a) How is Sarah's laughter here different from her laughter in 18:12? (b) How did the change in laughter come about? (c) To what two complementary truths, then, does the name Isaac bear witness? (d) How does Jesus bear witness even further? (See Luke 1:37.)

How are the laughters different?
As we saw in a previous study, Sarah's laughter in 18:12 was a humorless laughter that was equal parts bitterness and unbelief: one part an attack on herself ("Old, washed up *me* have a child? What a joke!") and one part an attack on God ("A ridiculous promise! You'll never do it!"). Here in Genesis 21:7 we see that Sarah's laughter is the exact opposite of the old laughter—it is a laughter of joy in herself and confidence of God.

How did the change come about?
We saw in 18:14 that God responded with a remarkable combination of rebuke and assurance. He asked Sarah literally, "Is anything too *wonderful* for the LORD?" (18:14). This rebuke for questioning God convicts Sarah of the sin of insufficient wonder and joy in him! It is a challenge with tremendous promise in it. God is saying, in effect, "I will do more than you can even imagine. I will fill your life with wonder."

Now in 21:6, when Sarah says, "*God* has *brought* me laughter!" she shows that she understands her laughter to be the result of the free grace of God. The combination of humbling confrontation yet joyful assurance may even be evident in the ambiguity of the Hebrew phrase, "and everyone who hears . . . will laugh (at or with) me."

> The ambiguity of both the Hebrew noun *tsehoq* ("laughter") and the accompanying preposition *li* [which can mean] "to" or "for" or "with" or "at me" is wonderfully suited to the complexity of the moment. It may be . . . triumphant joy that Sarah experiences at the moment . . . but *tsehoq* also means mockery, and perhaps God is doing something to her as well as for her. [2]

In this quote, Alter, the Jewish Hebrew scholar, points out that the word "Isaac" has nuances of both humiliation and exaltation, and Sarah (and the narrator) may well be drawing on both. On the one hand, Isaac's birth shows Sarah's unbelief to have been silly and foolish. She laughs at her own stupidity. On the other hand, Isaac's birth shows Sarah's God to be gracious and powerful beyond all imagining. Her heart is filled with wonder and amazement at his grace. These two realizations—our laughable weakness and his delightful love—only serve to strengthen each other and make us laugh more deeply. The more we see how weak and undeserving we have been, the more his patience, love, and grace shine out and cause us to wonder.

What two complementary truths does the name Isaac witness to?
One way to put it is that our situation is impossible, but nothing is impossible with God. We are faithless and hard-hearted (we laugh at God's promises and summonses), yet God graciously works in us despite our weakness and unworthiness (we laugh at God's gift). God's confrontation and assurance in the gospel (you are more sinful than you dared believe, but more accepted than you dared hope) changes our self-hatred into joy. These two truths together comprise the gospel.

It is hard not to notice that, centuries later, when another angelic messenger tells another incredulous woman about another miraculous birth, he answers her doubt by saying, "For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). Unless Isaac was born, the world cannot be blessed and saved (18:18), but in the end, he is only pointing to the ultimate "Isaac" who turns our self-hatred to joy, Jesus Christ. As Edmund Clowney once put it, "In Jesus we have the true Isaac, in whom we hear the laughter of God's grace, triumphing over all the impossibilities of our condition." [3]

GENESIS 22:1-18

3. In 21:8-20 and 22:1-18, each of the sons of Abraham undergoes an ordeal. How are the two incidents alike? How are they different? What do we learn practically from the parallels?

How are the two incidents alike?
First, in both situations, the boys are taken out into the desolate wilderness. Second, out in the wilderness, each son comes to the brink of death (21:16 and 22:10). Third, each son is delivered from death by the intervention of the angel of the LORD, who does so first by calling out (21:17 and 22:11) to the parent, and then by providing a physical, life-saving object. In 21:19 it was a well of water that Hagar is given the ability to see. In 22:13 it is a ram caught in a thicket, again something Abraham "looked up" to see. Fourth, at the climax of the narratives, a prophecy comes that the delivered boy will become the progenitor of a great people and nation. The Ishmael story ends with reference

to his getting a wife, and God promises Abraham that Ishmael will be a great nation in 21:13. The Isaac story ends with the promise of descendants in 22:17-18.

How are the two incidents different?
The first obvious difference is that Sarah drives Ishmael out, while God calls Isaac out into the wilderness by direct command. The second obvious difference is that it is Ishmael's mother, Hagar, who is with him, passively watching him die, while it is Isaac's father, Abraham, who is with him, actively causing his death. The hand of Abraham is the cause of Isaac's peril.

But the most interesting contrast is less obvious. Ishmael's life is in danger because of Abraham's disobedience. Even though we see that Abraham does not want Ishmael to leave (21:11) and only allows him to go when God assures him that his leaving is part of God's plan to prosper Ishmael *and* Isaac (21:12-13), it is still Abraham's faithlessness and foolishness that caused the whole situation. (We explored this in Genesis 16.) The reason Hagar and Ishmael are part of Abraham's family is because of Abraham's unbelief in God's promise, resulting in the callous exploitation of Hagar. The jealousy, strife, and heartache in the family were inevitable. Ishmael probably "was mocking" (21:9) Isaac because of his jealousy and hurt over being displaced in his father's heart. Sarah's fury and jealousy are terrible but understandable. All of this is the result of Abraham's failures of faith and wisdom.

But if Ishmael's peril is a result of Abraham's *dis*obedience, Isaac's peril occurs as a result of Abraham's obedience. It is only because Abraham is now following God's word and promise with almost astounding faithfulness that there is a dagger over Isaac's heart. If Abraham were still the man of Genesis 16, Isaac would not be in danger.

What does this teach us?
At the very least we should learn that there is no exemption from "dangers, toils, and snares" for anyone! It is easy to think that if we are obeying God and following his will, life will go smoothly for us. That is a half-truth. The painful brokenness of Abraham's family is a consequence of his sin, and it would not have occurred if Abraham had been wiser and faithful. Perhaps we can say that this kind of suffering is more painful and destructive. But chapter 22 shows that God can call faithful, godly people to endure terrible suffering. In fact, there will be a kind of suffering that comes *because* we are obedient. Honesty, keeping promises, refusing revenge, generosity, and a host of other spiritual character qualities can often lead to difficult situations that lying, breaking promises, and selfishness can avoid in the short run.

So an obedient life does not mean a suffering-free life! It leads us into a life of greater usefulness, greater growth, and greater joy—but not into a life of greater comfort.

4. Read 22:1-2. (a) How does this charge to Abraham fit in with his original call in 12:1-3? (b) What makes this command, however, the most severe test?

How does this fit with Abraham's original call?
It is hard to miss the resonance of this call to Abraham with all the others, especially the first one in Genesis 12. Then and now he was called to "go" (21:2), leaving all his security and comfort behind. Then and now he is called to go without knowing the final destination. (In 12:1, it was to a place "I will show you" while in 22:2 it is to a mountain "I will tell you about.") In other words, then and now he was called to make his heart's dearest objects into an "offering" to God. In Genesis 12, those things were more general. He was giving up all friends, and most of his family. He was giving up life in a civilized, safe place. These are major sacrifices. God was asking him to trust in God's promise as his security and significance, not these other things. And that is what he is doing now, as he is called to offer up Isaac, the dearest thing in his life.

In every case, God is saying, "Don't look to anything but me. Make *me* your ultimate security, worth, and hope. Don't trust in anything but me for your vindication and joy. Don't rest your heart in anything more than me for your significance and acceptability."

What makes this command the most severe test?
The ultimate nature of this test is summed up in the term God deliberately uses with emphasis: "Your son, your *only* son" (v. 2). Isaac is not literally Abraham's only son. As we have seen, the writer deliberately draws parallels between the stories of Abraham's *two* sons. But Isaac *is* Abraham's only son in the sense that all his hopes are focused on him alone. God had said over and over again, "Give up this . . . and wait for the promised son. Give up that . . . and wait for the promised son." Abraham had given up his other securities, the rest of his family, etc., etc.—all for the sake of the promised son. As we saw in Genesis 21, God even calls Abraham to give up Ishmael, whom he certainly loved, for Isaac's sake (21:13).

That means that now Isaac was *everything* to Abraham. First of all, Isaac would certainly have been everything *personally* to Abraham. He would have been the emotional center of Abraham's life in a way that nothing in Genesis 12 could have been. Abraham was now very old. He had been stripped down over the years, giving up everything to wait for Isaac. Isaac would have been Abraham's very soul and joy.

But there was even a greater test here. Second of all, he was everything *spiritually* to Abraham. Isaac was, essentially, the salvation God had promised. He was going to make Abraham a great nation, which was (in the culture of the time) the greatest possible legacy and vindication. But he was also the promised one through whom God's blessing would come to the whole world. So Isaac *is* the salvation God had promised for so long. God is virtually saying, "Trust in me, though I am about to damn you." God seems to be contradicting his own word! Gerhard Von Rad writes:

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> One can only answer all plaintive scruples about this narrative by saying that this concerns something much more frightful than child sacrifice. It has to do with a road out into utter God-forsakenness . . . [for] in this test God confronts Abraham with the question of whether he could give up God's gift of promise . . . . God appears to want to remove the salvation begun by himself from history. [4]

> By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac . . . . He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." (Heb. 11:17-18)

Background note: Some readers will have understandable objections to this story, especially as it is often interpreted. Many people have interpreted the moral of this story as: "God called Abraham to murder his son, and Abraham showed his faith and submission by getting ready to do it. So we should do whatever God calls us to do." But this is to misunderstand the meaning of the firstborn son in Jewish thought and symbolism. If Abraham had heard a voice like God's saying, "Go and kill Sarah," Abraham would have never done it. He would have (rightly) assumed that he was hallucinating (or something!) and that God wouldn't ask him to do something that was clearly wrong. But God over and over told the Hebrews that because of their sinfulness, the lives of their *firstborn* were automatically forfeit, though they could redeem them with sacrifice (Ex. 22:29, 34:20) or Levitical service (Num. 3:40-41) or ransom payment (Num. 3:46-48). In the same way, God punished Egypt by taking their firstborn. The firstborn or heir was, in those traditional cultures, the bearer of all the family's hopes for a prosperous future. When God said that the child-heir's life belonged to him unless ransomed, he was saying in the most vivid way possible that every family on earth owed a debt to eternal justice—the debt of sin. That is why God's commandment to Abraham was enormously painful, because it appeared that he was abandoning his promise to bless Abraham and the world through a son (Heb. 11:17-18). But the charge was not incomprehensible. God was *not* asking him to murder his son. He was calling in Abraham's debt! And so Abraham was faced with the ultimate question: "I do owe this. Our sin means that Isaac's life is forfeit. Yet God is a God of grace as well. How can a holy God still graciously fulfill the promise?"

5. Read 22:3-8. What hints do we get about Abraham's thoughts and hopes as he goes to the mountain with Isaac? Read Hebrews 11:19. What light does this shed?

Did Abraham push himself up the mountain simply saying, "I have to obey perfectly! I have to! I can do it! I must do it!" and so on? No, verse 8 and perhaps verse 5 show us that Abraham had simply decided to cling to the goodness and promises of God despite all appearances. He says, "God . . . will provide the lamb" (v. 8). I doubt he knew exactly what God would do; it seems unlikely that he believed specifically that a ram-substitute would be discovered.

He was simply saying, "God will provide . . . somehow." In other words, he did not go up the mountain saying, "I *can* do it" like the Little Engine That Could, filled with will power and self-talk. Rather, he went up the mountain saying, "God will do it . . . but I don't know how." Do what? Somehow God would remove the debt on the firstborn and keep the promise of grace. Verse 5 also seems to indicate hope in Abraham because he tells his servants that "*we* will come back to you" (v. 5). Abraham's faith in God's provision (somehow!) did not, surely, mean that he went up the mountain with a light heart. It was still agony, as the eloquent and detailed dialogue shows in verses 6-8. Finally, Hebrews 11:19 suggests that Abraham even considered resurrection as a possible way God could be both just and gracious.

This, then, is the ultimate test. Abraham was not just exercising blind faith in the general sense. He was not saying, "This is crazy, this is murder, but I'm going to do it anyway." Instead he was saying, "I know God is *both* holy and gracious. I don't know how he is going to be both—but I know he will." He was specifically trusting in God as both holy and gracious at the same time. How? If Abraham had not believed God was holy and just and that he was owed a debt of sin, he would never have been *willing* to go up the mountain with his firstborn. But if Abraham had not believed God was *also* a God of grace, he would never have been *able* to go up the mountain with Isaac. He would have been too crushed and hopeless. He would have just lay down and died. He had hope that God would do something up on the mount—and thus he trusted God.

6. Read 22:9-14. What provision did God make on the mountaintop that dealt with sin yet allowed Abraham to keep Isaac?

Abraham could not see a whole lot! He saw that God wanted faith from the heart: "Now I know that you fear God" (v. 12). Secondly, once he believed God was able to provide a substitute for Isaac, he saw the "ram, caught by its horns" (v. 13). Perhaps Abraham intuited that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats [or children] to take away sins" (Heb. 10:4) and that there was something more to Isaac's deliverance than the ram offering.

Of course, the New Testament writers knew what this incident was pointing to. First, Abraham's *sense* of God-forsakenness (see the Von Rad quote above) was only symbolic. God did not truly forsake Abraham as he obeyed God in this ultimate test. But on the cross, when the ultimate beloved child cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" "the Father paid the price in his silence," as Ed Clowney says. [5] Second, the *true* substitute for Isaac was God's only Son, Jesus, on the cross. Ironically, years later, God led his only Son up into those very same mountains. (Jerusalem was in this region; see 2 Chronicles 3:1). The wood was laid on this true Isaac. But on that day there was no one to say, "Stay your hand." Paul understood the true meaning of this

story when he deliberately applied its language to Jesus: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). In other words, Paul is telling us that we can look at Calvary and say to God, "Now, finally, we know that you love us, for you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love, from us."

7. What are some practical lessons to learn from the story of Isaac's offering?

First, this narrative teaches us that God will identify our idols and ask us to give them up. Isaac had become an idol, even in the midst of Abraham's faith and obedience. Isaac was more important to Abraham than God. Idols can be very subtle. For example, Christians can look to their spiritual activities and ministry as sources of significance and worth rather than to God, even though the ministry involves bringing others into contact with God. All of us have our "Isaacs" that God wants us to be at least willing to give up. Most idols are (like Isaac) good things that can remain in our lives once we have demoted them to second place behind God. There they won't control us and bedevil us with anxiety, pride, anger, and driven-ness. Nevertheless, we must not make the mistake of thinking that all we have to do is be *willing* to part with our idols rather than actually leave them behind. If Abraham had gone up the mountain thinking, "All I'll have to do is put him on the altar, not really give him up," he would have failed the test. Idols are only safe for us to maintain in our lives if they really have stopped being idols. That can only happen when we are truly willing to live without them, when we truly say from the heart: "Because I have God, I can live without you."

Second, this narrative teaches us that sometimes God looks and seems to be killing us when he's saving us. Here he was saving the whole world and turning Abraham into a great man—but on the outside it looked like God was being absolutely destructive. We can't know the reasons God allows bad things to happen but, like Abraham, we trust him in those times.

Third, we have seen that we will never be like Abraham simply by trying to be like Abraham. Abraham passed the test not with will power but by looking to the "provision" (22:8). Literally, he said, "My son, God will see to the Lamb." Abraham had his eyes fixed on a provision he could not imagine but knew was there. But we *can* see the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. As we look at him and rejoice in what he did for us, we will have the joy and hope necessary—and the freedom from idols and pseudo-securities—to follow God's call when it is dark and difficult.

[1] Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis" in *New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 75.

[2] Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 97.

[3] Edmund P. Clowney in a taped lecture.

[4] Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), p. 244.

[5] Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 1988), p. 58.

What were we put in the world to do?

Isaac and His Sons

Study 19 | Genesis 25:19 - 26:33

INTRODUCTION

Our purpose is to trace how God's promises to Abraham began to bring about the redemption of the world. Chapters 23-26 are a bridge between the story of Abraham (chapters 12-22) and the story of Jacob (chapters 27-50). In chapter 23 Sarah dies. The lengthy negotiations for her tomb show how Abraham finally became a landowner. Chapter 24 tells us how Abraham secured a wife for Isaac from among his own relatives. Thus God continues to move the promise forward to the time when Isaac will have many descendants. Finally, Abraham dies in the first half of chapter 25. Chapter 26 is a series of snapshots from the life of Isaac, a man who is overshadowed in the book of Genesis both by his father Abraham and his son Jacob. But even this brief look at Isaac shows God fulfilling his promises.

1. Read Genesis 25:19-21, 26b. How long did Rebekah wait before she had children? What did Isaac do about it? What do we learn from this?

A comparison of verse 26b with verse 20 shows that Rebekah waited twenty years before having children. (Most likely, she was married in her teens and did not have children until she was in her late thirties.) This period of time, easily missed, throws considerable light on Rebekah's condition and Isaac's response. As we noted before, the state of being "barren" (25:21) in that culture brought social and emotional desolation. Rebekah and Isaac both would have suffered greatly, especially since the condition persisted for twenty years. In response, Isaac "prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife" (25:21). The word in Hebrew means "to intercede." It was a word often used of Moses and Abraham. It means to act as an advocate before the Lord, "arguing" and pleading someone's case. We learn two things from this incident.

First, we learn that God's sovereignty does not imply human passivity. Our assurance regarding the promises of God must not lead to complacence. God promised that Rebekah would be the mother of "thousands upon thousands" (24:60). It would be easy to infer that, since this is God's will and was destined and fixed, there would be nothing Isaac and Rebekah would need to do to bring it to pass. And yet here we see that Rebekah conceived because "the LORD answered his [Isaac's] prayer" (25:21). Some would ask, "Why would Isaac have to pray for something we know was absolutely certain? Rebekah *had* to have children if God's salvation was to come into the world." But this comes from thinking in a reductionistic way about how God's sovereignty relates to our actions. We tend to think, "If God is totally in control, our choices don't matter. It will happen anyway." However, the Bible never reasons so one-dimensionally. We see here that though God's plans can't be thwarted, he somehow works out his plans *through* our choices, not just despite them. Isaac has to pray mightily (see below) for Rebekah to have children, even though it was God's will all along.

Second, more personally, we learn that the chosen recipients of God's promises do not have smoother sailing than other people. Indeed, there is reason to argue (from biblical passages such as Hebrews 12) that exactly the opposite is the case! We find an unusual amount of female infertility in the chosen line (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel). Beautiful young Rebekah unites with God's chosen family, the most divinely blessed and privileged family in the world, and immediately undergoes twenty years of barrenness. (Rebekah's cry, "Why . . . me?" in verse 22 indicates that she feels she has been having, in general, a terrible life!) Joyce Baldwin comments on these verses:

> It is no vain thing to trust the Lord, but faith involves being shut up to God's way and God's time, and demands much patience. This lesson, taught so early on in the Scriptural lesson book, needs to be presented to young Christians in a forceful way to prepare them for the tests that are sure to come . . . and . . . unsettle them . . . . [1]

Thirdly, more specifically, we learn about the need for persistent intercessory prayer. "Isaac prayed" is a pithy understatement. Almost certainly he didn't just pray once during twenty years of barrenness! He must have prayed continually for years and years before God answered his prayer. Most people would surely give up after a few years saying, "God has denied my prayer."

There are indications that Isaac was a man of prayer. (See the interesting statement in 24:63 that Rebekah arrived when Isaac was out in the fields "to meditate.") Why did Isaac persist in prayer so long? It was probably a combination of humility and confidence. On the one hand, he had the confidence of God's promise. Surely the man who had almost been slain on the altar of Moriah knew "God will see to it . . . somehow!" as his father Abraham said that day. Isaac knew that God will keep his promise—maybe not in the time or way we would expect or even imagine—but he will keep it. On the other hand, Isaac knew that we cannot presume on God. We must pray, depend, obey, and submit to him. Only if we have this combination of humility and confidence will we persist in intercessory prayer and see God do things through us.

As we saw in Genesis 18, the ultimate reason that intercessory prayer "works" is the intercession of Christ (Rom. 8:34). Because he stands on our behalf and because God regards him with approval, we can pray and know we will be heard.

2. Read Genesis 25:21-26. (a) What does Rebekah's cry "Why . . . me?" tell us about her? (b) What does the Lord's prophecy mean? (c) How does this prophecy fly in the face of conventional expectations?

What is Rebekah's state of mind?
Rebekah finds herself pregnant with twins, but all is not joy. Commentators tell us that Rebekah's statement is a sentence fragment, indicating it is more of a cry and emotional exclamation. She literally cries, "If so, why me—?" She is

saying. "After all I've been through, now this!! Why does this always happen to me?" The exclamation indicates that there was something more troubling going on than the NIV translation conveys with the word "jostled" (v. 22). The Hebrew word for what her babies are doing to each other in the womb was literally "to smash" or "crush," a word used for destruction, as of skulls smashed (Judges 9:53; Ps. 74:14). Rebekah's pregnancy, therefore, was an exceptionally painful one. More than that, the violent struggle within probably led her to despair about whether the children would survive. In near despair, she went to ask the Lord what was going on. [**Note:** Elsewhere, this involves consulting a prophet. See Ex. 18:15; 1 Sam. 9:9.]

What does the Lord's prophecy mean?
The word from God explains that the violent competition in the womb foretells the lives and destinies of the two boys, and even the two nations that will descend from them. The fact that multiple nations would descend from Isaac and Rebekah was not new information (see 17:4-6, 16). But the oracle goes on. Even now, the two children were struggling in fierce competition, as they would in life. But the final outcome will be this: "the older will serve the younger" (25:23d). This indicates that it is Jacob, the second-born, who will be the bearer of the Messianic seed and the one chosen by God to be the new head of the people God is creating for himself.

How does this prophecy fly in the face of convention?
As Robert Alter says, "The birth, like the oracle, again invokes the struggle against primogeniture." [2] Here, then, at the beginning of Jacob's story is a recapitulation of two themes we saw in the story of Abraham. First, the birth of the son of promise again comes out of barrenness (11:30; 25:21). God brings life out of barrenness; no human ability can bring about the new birth of the human community and the salvation of God. God has to open wombs and bring about birth where there is no human power to do so. Second, the son of promise is *not* the expected one—the oldest. Ishmael and Esau, the firstborns, were in the eyes of the world the "chosen ones." In virtually all ancient, patriarchal societies, the oldest son got the lion's share of the father's wealth and the headship of the clan. God, however, repeatedly refuses to allow his gracious activity to run along the expected lines of worldly power and privilege. He puts in the center the child that the world would put on the periphery.

This connects to a major theme of the Bible, that the kingdom and grace of God creates a "great reversal." God "raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes . . . . He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children" (Ps. 113:7-9) but "the proud he knows afar off" (see James 4:6). Salvation by works and moral effort would favor the more able, competent, accomplished, and privileged. But salvation by sheer grace favors the failed, the outsider, and the weak because it only goes to those who *know* salvation is by sheer grace. In token of this,

Jesus comes not as a wealthy and powerful person but as a poor man, the child of an unwed mother. The people he attracts with his teaching are "sinners" and other un-respectable outsiders. The way he triumphs is through the weakness and apparent defeat of the cross, followed by the miracle of the resurrection—life out of hopeless death. Thus the Bible does not show us a line of "heroes of the faith" who go from strength to strength, but rather a series of individuals who are usually *not* the people the world would expect to be spiritual paragons and leaders. God chooses as his vehicles the barren woman, the second son, and the failed, lapsed man.

Walter Brueggemann explains it this way:

> The oracle of 25:23 casts its power over the entire Jacob narrative. . . . The oracle is against all conventional wisdom. . . . The Israelites must have wondered about this patriarch who was always in trouble . . . . That is the premise of the ministry of Jesus: the poor, the mourning, the meek, the hungry . . . are the heirs to the kingdom (Matt. 5:3-7). This God does not align himself only with the obviously valued ones, the first-born. This oracle speaks about an *inversion*. It affirms that we are *not fated* to the way the world is presently organized. [3]

3. Read Genesis 25:27-32. What is Isaac's response to the oracle? What impact does Isaac's treatment of his sons have on them? What do we learn for our own family life?

What is Isaac's response to the oracle?
We should assume that Isaac knew about the oracle. Though it may have been fairly cryptic when first received, the subsequent birth and development of the children would have made the prophecy rather clear to anyone who reflected on it. It is likely that Rebekah thought about it and understood it. But Isaac evidently made no attempt to understand it or else deliberately ignored it, because he clearly showed favoritism to Esau, his eldest: "Isaac . . . loved Esau" (25:28). Esau was an outdoorsman, probably athletic and skilled with weapons. The fact that "Isaac had a taste for wild game" indicates that either Isaac himself was a hunter or he wished he was. We also see that Esau was (from the famous incident in verses 29-32 and the comments in Hebrews 12:15-17) impetuous and temperamental. In all these ways he was more conventionally masculine than the quiet Jacob. Isaac may have seen himself in Esau (or seen the self he wished he had been). Or perhaps Isaac was simply following the overwhelming cultural and social consensus that the oldest son was the family's future. In any case, Isaac favored Esau and, as we see in verse 31, he promised Esau the "birthright"—the headship of the clan and family.

How does Isaac's treatment of his sons account for their character?
We see from 25:27 that Esau was impetuous and assertive while Jacob was quiet and almost "domestic," "staying among the tents." Immediately we are told that Esau was Isaac's boy and Jacob was Rebekah's boy. We are led to

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ask, do the parents dote on their favorite because of their nature or is their character a result of their parents' selective love? The wisest answer is that these two factors mutually strengthen each other. Esau may have been naturally aggressive and Jacob may have tended to be quiet, but their parents' inordinate, selective love probably accentuated and distorted the sons' temperaments.

Esau, the spoiled one, the "golden boy," becomes impulsive, selfish, and without any ability to delay gratification. Thus he is willing to sell his birthright for the stew. He exaggerates, "Look, I am about to die . . . " (v. 32). All of these qualities are marks of an undisciplined spirit. On the other hand, Jacob certainly would have had a sense of rejection and probably of injustice. (Surely Rebekah told him of the oracle.) Commentators say it is unlikely to be a coincidence that Jacob was a great cook (25:29) and his father a gourmand (29:28). Jacob probably longed for his father's love and approval, but it was not to be. Though "staying among the tents" because he was so tied to his mother, he schemed to get out and "on top." He became a calculating, mistrustful, manipulative, and insincere man—the very opposite of Esau!

We know that when parents to play favorites, it is terribly damaging to a family, but here Isaac's behavior is especially blameworthy. We can understand a father's emotional involvement with a son who is like himself (or like the man the father wishes he were). But Isaac knew that his family was unlike any other family, and the one who got the birthright and blessing was going to be the one to steer the whole family toward God's purposes. Isaac was under a particular obligation to consider whether Esau was really qualified to do that. He was under a particular obligation to think out the meaning of God's prophecy. He doesn't seem to do either, but simply to follow conventional cultural wisdom and his own psychological and emotional needs.

What do we learn here? First, we must be very *deliberate* and thoughtful about our parenting. We must not simply parent the way our parents did, or the way everyone we know does. We should think out the implications of biblical wisdom and Christian doctrine for the way we approach our children. We must not simply do what was done to us nor even *the opposite* of what was done to us. (Reacting—doing something because our parents did or did not do it—is still a failure to reflect.) Be sure your parenting "fits" God's Word, the spouses' temperaments, and the children's temperaments and situation. Second, we must be careful about using our children to meet our emotional needs instead of looking to God. When we use our children's love, achievements, or talents to make us feel better about ourselves, we introduce distortions into both our lives and theirs. Third, we should have a balanced view of how the failures of parents and the failures of children relate to each other. On the one hand, we see that Isaac and Rebekah are partially responsible for their sons' character flaws. But the Bible also shows that Esau and Jacob are held responsible for their own actions. And consider: Isaac's weaknesses were to some degree the product of Abraham and Sarah's failures, so we cannot blame Isaac fully for his

children's problems. Later, Jacob will damage his own family with the same kind of favoritism (toward Joseph) that brought him so much pain with his father.

In short, we must neither feel like complete victims nor complete villains. We are always both sinful and sinned against. Sin is complex. My sins are partially from my parents and my children's sins are partially from me. Yet that excuses no one. We must learn to understand our weaknesses in terms of family patterns, but we should not be particularly bitter toward anyone. Instead, we should seek grace and mercy for ourselves, so that we can avoid passing on our own flaws to the next generation.

4. Read Genesis 25:29-34. (a) What does each man do wrong in this incident? (b) Read Hebrews 12:15-17. What are we to learn practically from Esau's failure?

What does each do wrong?
Esau's failure, according to Hebrews, was his inability to forgo immediate gratification and comfort and wait for the greater but deferred blessings. He gave up his inheritance for the sensory experience *now* of a great meal when terribly famished. In the process, he lies to himself, saying "Look, I am about to die" (25:32). It seems obvious that since Jacob stayed "among the tents," Esau was not far away from sustenance. He was in no real danger. This is the emotional language of self-deception. (e.g. "I can't take it any more! I know it's wrong, but I just can't help it!")

Jacob here is revealed as scheming and manipulative. Commentators point out how Esau's language is filled with incomplete sentences and wild language. Robert Alter writes, "Each of Jacob's words, in striking contrast to Esau's impetuous speech, is carefully weighed and positioned, with 'me' held back until the end of the sentence." [4] Jacob has planned every syllable. Gordon J. Wenham adds, "The way Jacob states his demand suggests long premeditation and a ruthless exploitation of his brother's moment of weakness." [5] While Esau is easy to despise for his unruly, uncontrolled spirit, Jacob is the exact opposite. He has resentfully plotted against his brother for a long time. This is one carefully orchestrated part of a detailed plan to undermine and usurp him.

What do we learn from Esau (Heb. 12:15-17)?
The writer to the Hebrews uses Esau as an example to professing Christians who were in danger of retreating under hardship and persecution. He is therefore a model of two kinds of people. First, he is a model of the Christian who stays in a state of perpetual infancy because he or she cannot give up immediate gratification for the long-term benefits of obedience. Some people just cannot stay obedient during times of trouble. When everything goes wrong, they stop praying, stop attending worship, and stop actively seeking to

practice God's Word. Others never are willing to do the costly things that are necessary to grow deeper. They don't tithe or give sacrificially; they don't put in the weekly hours necessary to learn to meet God in prayer; they don't speak up and let themselves be publicly identified as converted Christians. If we do any of these things, at first the cost usually exceeds the benefits. Later, however, obedient discipline leads to great peace and fruit (see Heb. 12:11). Esau is a model of the backsliding or perpetually immature and useless believer. Second, he is a model of the person who never becomes a Christian because of the initial cost. These people are like the second "soil" in Jesus' parable of the soils (Matt. 13:1-23).

5. (a) Who is most to blame in this incident? (b) How do verses 25:19-34 illustrate Romans 9:10-16?

Who is most to blame?
This is a trick question. One could make the case that Jacob's deliberateness showed greater heart evil than Esau's impulsive decision. Yet Hebrews 12:15-17 tells us that Esau was "profane," a word that means, literally, unaware of God. Esau was living as a secular man, as if God and his promises did not matter. He shows enormous spiritual obtuseness regarding the significance of his family's relationship to God and the future, and enormous indifference to what the headship of the family meant. However, Jacob shows no sign of any such spiritual interest either. He simply wants to beat his brother.

How do verses 25:19-34 illustrate Romans 9:10-16?
In Romans 9 Paul is touching on the doctrine of election and predestination. He turns to this chapter in Genesis to illustrate it. Let's discipline ourselves *not* to try discussing this subject as a whole (e.g. "Why doesn't he choose everyone, then?") but instead to simply see how Paul's words can help us understand the meaning of Genesis 25:19-34.

Paul says that God chose Jacob, the younger, but not because Jacob was a better person in any way from Esau. "Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—[Rebekah] was told, 'The older will serve the younger'" (Rom. 9:11-12). In other words, Paul is very carefully and deliberately showing us that there is no moral or character difference between the two brothers. Both are fighting in the womb. Both have character flaws (though different, even complementary ones). Both sinned terribly in the "selling of the birthright" incident. And yet it is Jacob whom God eventually brings to his senses, disciplines, and persuades to believe in the promised salvation (Heb. 11:20-21). Why? Paul says it was (a) sheer grace, "not by works," and also (b) "God's purpose." God had reasons to choose Jacob as his vehicle, but those reasons had nothing to do with his moral merit. Walter Brueggemann comments:

> Jacob is . . . a visible expression of God's remarkable graciousness in the face of conventional definitions of reality and prosperity. Jacob is a scandal from the beginning. [6]

We have already seen that God's love to Jacob goes against the world's *cultural* expectations (because Jacob was a second son). Now we see it also goes against the world's *moral* expectations. Jacob is a crook, a coward, a manipulator, a schemer. If Jacob and Esau are moral equivalents here, in chapter 27 we see that Jacob's deceit and exploitation have grown (when he takes advantage not of his impetuous brother but of his aged and blind father). And yet God makes him the vehicle of his redemption. Jacob is a scandal, and God chooses him. That makes "the powerful grace of God . . . a scandal" [7] to the world. It not only works with social and cultural outsiders, but moral outsiders.

Note: Though we can't do a thorough job of treating the idea of "election" here, the reader of Genesis should remember that God shows great concern for the *non*-chosen! He saves Hagar and Ishmael and promises prosperity to them, even though their descendants will be violent. Later we will see that Esau is materially blessed as well.

6. Read Genesis 26:1-33. (a) Isaac seems to be a rather bland and uninteresting character. What can we learn from that? (b) Make a list of Isaac's right and wrong actions. (c) How does this pastiche of stories about Isaac confirm the themes we have been discussing?

This is the only chapter in Genesis devoted simply to Isaac's life. Overall in the Genesis narrative, he is greatly overshadowed by his father Abraham and his son Jacob. His significance is first in his role in God's covenant-making with Abraham and second in his role in the life of Jacob. In fact, after chapter 27 he essentially disappears until the brief note about his death in 35:28-29. Chapter 26 is the only place we see Isaac acting on his own, and even here he seems to have far less drive or charisma than Abraham before him or Jacob after him.

Some have noted that this may be because, frankly, Isaac is less interesting. He neither seems to have the enormous faith and exceptional talent of his father nor the enormous flaws of his son. Great talent and great flaws (or both) make for memorable characters and great stories (and great "testimonies"). Isaac is neither kind of person. If that is so, chapter 26 is designed to show us that God needs neither unusually great and talented people nor unusually broken people to move his purposes forward. This is a great comfort to many of us! God's grace works just as readily with people who are not "larger than life" and who do not have lots of adventures, either because of extraordinary tests or extraordinary mistakes.

What does Isaac do wrong? In the first section (vv.1-12) we see God repeating to Isaac the promise he made to Abraham. Then, in response, we see Isaac making the very same mistake as Abraham did, trying to pass off his wife as his sister. He has the same fearfulness (26:7) and tells the same lie. (See above on how the sins of parents are passed down.) Yet just as God did with Abraham, God delivers Isaac by a "chance" glance that the king of Gerar gets of Isaac with Rebekah (26:8). After this deliverance God blesses Isaac with a *hundredfold* harvest (26:12), prosperity far beyond anything Abraham had. In the second section (vv. 13-25), Isaac encounters jealousy and opposition from the Philistines. This time Isaac responds with a mixture of peace-making (he moves away from hostile groups rather than fighting them, vv.17, 22) yet persistence (he keeps on digging wells!—vv. 19, 22). Finally his relations with other nations and peoples improve.

How does this confirm the themes of Genesis?

First, God is a God of grace. He doesn't just humble the proud and lift up the broken, but he works with average people too. He does not favor the spectacular. Isaac's sins don't seem very "big," yet despite Isaac's timidity and other shortcomings, God provides safety and prosperity. God continues to be a God of grace who keeps one family true to the faith, so he can build a new people of God out of them. Portia is right in the *Merchant of Venice* when she says:

> "Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
> That in the course of justice none of us
> Should see salvation." [8]

Second, this chapter's repeated comparisons to Abraham show that God is moving his promises forward, even with a less distinguished head man. Isaac is even more prosperous than Abraham. Blessings seem to come to Isaac even more easily.

Third, this passage reminds us that the ultimate salvation is not only spiritual but material. God is renewing creation, not simply saving us into an ethereal afterlife. The material blessing and the feasting all remind us of this. [9]

1 Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 104.

2 Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 128.

3 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 215.

4 Robert Alter, p. 129.

5 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1994), p. 178.

6 Walter Brueggemann, p. 217.

7 Walter Brueggemann, p. 217.

8 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice,* Act IV, Scene i.

9 See Walter Brueggemann, pp. 225-226.

What were we put in the world to do?

Jacob and the Blessing

Study 20 | Genesis 26:34 - 28:9

INTRODUCTION

After Genesis 26:33, Isaac recedes in prominence, leaving Jacob on center stage, an unforgettable character largely because of his great flaws. Walter Brueggemann notes, "This grandson of the promise is a rascal compared to his faithful grandfather Abraham or his successful father Isaac." [1] Three themes run through Jacob's life.

First, there is the theme of God's sovereign *gracious* blessing. If we look at Abraham and Lot or at Isaac and Ishmael, we can see character strengths in the former that are absent in the latter. Somehow God's choices of Abraham and Isaac make sense to our normal ways of thinking. But when it comes to Jacob and Esau, we see no such obvious difference. Despite Esau's impetuousness, he also possesses good qualities (see 33:4). There is nothing more admirable about Jacob that provides a moral justification for God's choosing and using him. It is sheer grace.

Second, there is the theme of God's *sovereign* gracious blessing. Despite the remarkable amount of conspiring, manipulation, and "scamming" that goes on all through Jacob's life (both *by* him and *to* him!) it is obvious that God is in control. This is a major theme of the Genesis writer. Joseph's words almost summarize the whole book: "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

Third, there is the theme of God's sovereign gracious *blessing*. Some commentators have pointed out that while the main concern of Abraham was the *promise* ("Will God keep the promise of a son?"), Jacob is more concerned about the *blessing*. He cheats Esau of his father's blessing (chapter 27). He won't let the mysterious wrestler go until he blesses him (chapter 32). From his earliest days, Jacob seems to lack a sense of affirmation and value, and everything in his life is oriented to procuring it.

1. Compare Genesis 26:34-35 with 24:3-4. Compare 27:1-4 with 49:1, 28. In light of these comparisons, how did Esau and Isaac contribute to this sad affair?

On our initial reading of this story, it seems that Jacob and Rebekah were the villains who took advantage of Isaac's age and blindness and Esau's obliviousness to extract Isaac's blessing for Jacob rather than Esau. However, upon deeper reflection, we see that "all four participants in the present scene [are] almost equally at fault." [2]

This episode does not really begin in chapter 27 but at the end of chapter 26, where we learn that Esau married Canaanite women. As we have seen, from the perspective of the writer of Genesis, polygamy itself is a mistake. (See Lamech in Genesis 4 and the entire sorry history of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar.) But more than that, Esau marries *Canaanite* women, though it was of

the utmost importance to Abraham that Isaac *not* marry a Canaanite. Abraham sent a servant all the way to Haran in chapter 24 to find a wife from among Abraham's clan. Even though Abraham's relatives were not likely to be in the kind of intimate covenant with God that Abraham's family was, they were much closer in outlook and would therefore not bring rank idolatry into the family. (In the same way, Paul insists that Christians not marry non-Christians [1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-18]). Despite this theological principle and family tradition, Esau marries Canaanite women who, in some unspecified way, cause great pain and grief to Isaac and Rebekah. Esau seems unaware of this fact until the very end of the passage, in 28:8-9. What does this mean? It means that Esau shows very little awareness (if any) about the promise to Abraham and the need to guide the entire family into the ways of God (chapter 17). The narrator therefore casts grave doubt on Esau's suitability to lead the family of God.

Isaac is shown to be blameworthy too, in several ways. First, in this patriarchal society, it would have been virtually impossible for Esau to marry over Isaac's strong objections. Why didn't Isaac forbid Esau the Canaanite wives? Why didn't he do for Esau and Jacob what Abraham did for him—why did he not find them suitable wives? It could be that Isaac's rather passive nature is to blame. Or it could be that his love and favoritism for Esau blinded his eyes to his son's flaws and spiritual "profaneness" (Heb. 12:16 KJV). Secondly, however, "Isaac on his deathbed flouted convention and showed total bias toward Esau. When patriarchs knew their death was near, they were expected to summon all their sons and give them each a blessing [even those who did not receive the birthright of the eldest]. Now, lamely pretending he does not know his day of death (v. 2) Isaac summoned only his favorite, Esau. No wonder Rebekah . . . was incensed." [3] Thirdly, Isaac seems not only to be fighting Rebekah and Jacob, but God. He almost certainly knew the oracle of 25:23, and he may even have known of Esau's oath to forgo his birthright-blessing to become head of the clan (25:33). But he proceeds anyway. He tries to use the power of his patriarchal blessing—which is God's power, ultimately—to thwart God's will for Jacob to be clan-head.

Of course, the lies and trickery of Rebekah and Jacob are completely inexcusable. They had self-assurance that their cause was just. (e.g. "After all, Isaac is fighting against God's oracle!") But they "made no approach to God or man, no gesture of faith or love, and reaped the appropriate fruit of hatred." [4] Jacob would spend the rest of his life haunted by what he did. He often found himself lied to and deceived until the end of his days. And, for his safety, Rebekah would have to send away the young man she loved most in the world. She would never see him again.

2. Read Genesis 27:4, 7, 28-29, 33, 39. What is the father's "blessing"? The assumptions of the family about the importance of this blessing are foreign to us. What can you discern about its nature and power from these verses?

First, we can see from verse 4 ("before I die") and verses 28-29 that the blessing is something like a last will and testament. This is especially clear when Isaac says, "Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you" (v. 29b). All in the family and community would honor such words. He gives the son authority in the family after he dies.

But secondly, the Bible regards the father's words as having a genuine power of their own, beyond anything we know in a "last will." Isaac says, "Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness . . . you will live by the sword . . ." (vv. 39-40), and all who listen know that this will happen. The words will bring about these effects. How? Is this some primitive, magical view? No. Modern people underestimate the power of affirmative words and condemning words, especially from parent to child. Words of blessing and cursing enter into the hearer and have a life and power of their own (see James 3:10). Our own counselors and psychologists know this well. Even off-handed comments of criticism and affirmation pass into a child and lodge for years. How much more affecting would be the words of a parent spoken in an authoritative, climactic setting? Walter Brueggemann writes:

> The narrative presumes that *symbolic actions have genuine and abiding power* . . . [and] that spoken words [especially of a parent to child] *shape human life.* . . . Words here are not a matter of indifference which may be attended to or not, as is convenient. . . . There is pathos in this text, for the sons as well as for the father. It lies in the awareness that nobody wants to live a life that is unblessed. Nobody wants a life without the special words and gestures that bind that life to a precious past and a promised future. . . . The unblessed are those left empty-handed . . . . [5]

Thirdly, the Bible seems to expect the patriarchs to have prophetic foresight on their deathbeds. A third kind of statement within the blessing seems not to be legal action (e.g., "you will rule your brothers") or deep affirmation and ordination (e.g., "you will live by the sword") but rather a kind of accurate foretelling. "May nations serve you . . . . May God give you . . . an abundance" (vv. 28, 29). So Gordon Wenham comments, "Clearly, Genesis sees the deathbed blessing as more than a prayer for the future; it is a prophecy whose fulfillment is certain." [6]

In summary, the death-bed blessing is a fascinating and powerful combination of the legal, the psychological, and the prophetic. It entails binding lawful action, identity-shaping symbols and gestures, and accurate spiritual discernment and foretelling.

3. Read Genesis 27:33. Why do you think Isaac can't or won't take back the blessing?

Esau's tears and cries of pain ring in Isaac's ears. He says that Jacob got the blessing "deceitfully" and literally stole Esau's blessing (v. 35). Yet he will not take the blessing back (v. 33, "he will be blessed" and v. 37, "I have made him lord . . . what can I possibly do for you, my son?"). This makes no sense to modern readers. Surely Jacob came fraudulently and therefore the agreement was null and void. All Isaac would have to do is call Jacob back and say, "You crook! I'm not giving you what I said. It was all done under false pretenses. Esau is my heir." If, on the other hand, the blessing was a kind of "word of power," why couldn't Isaac undo it?

The answer is that the biblical blessing cannot be reduced to *just* a legal action or *just* a magical "word of power" (or something of that nature). It is a complex composite of legal action, deep psychological shaping, *and* prophetic insight into the future. Isaac's blessing of Jacob is therefore something that really could not be revoked. It was partly the prophetic insight he received, and partly the deep, symbolic affirmation and shaping act. The power of the blessing is real and substantial and comes from God (27:7). It immediately goes into effect. Such a moment cannot be revoked. In addition, it is likely that Isaac realizes he has been fighting God. Derek Kidner explains:

> Isaac's "and indeed he shall be blessed" (v. 33) expresses more than mere belief that the spoken word is self-fulfilling: he knows he has been fighting against God, as Esau has, and he accepts defeat. [7]

It is significant that the New Testament calls us to "bless" others (Rom. 12:14). This is not using the term in the sentimental way it is often used today. "To be a blessing" usually means that our actions bring someone comfort or joy. "To bless" verbally is a ministry to others that has some elements of these patriarchal death-bed blessings. To bless means to offer deep insight into what a person needs to be and can be, and then to offer powerful words and gestures affirming and encouraging them to become that.

4. Compare the dialogues of verses 27:6-12 and verses 27:30-40. Which characters arouse more sympathy in us? Why would the narrator allow this to happen when Jacob is the chosen one? How does this teach us about God's grace?

The scene of verses 30-40, when Isaac and Esau realize that Jacob has taken the blessing, is one of the most poignant in the Bible. Seldom do ancient Hebrew narrators speak as specifically about emotion, yet we see Isaac trembling violently (v. 33) with the recognition that his favorite son has lost the blessing. We hear Esau crying aloud in his pain (v. 34). Brueggemann comments, "The narrative makes ready contact with every parent whose dream for the child is fractured. Every parent wants to 'fix it' and make it right for his or her precious child. But it is beyond the parent, always, because other

things are at work that do not yield to us. And so the parent is a mixture of hurt and failure and sorrow." [8] On the other hand, the scene of verses 6-12 arouses no sympathy in us. We see nothing but cold calculation. We see a wife so resentful of her husband that she is willing to take on herself any curse (from God or Isaac, v. 11). We see a son who participates only begrudgingly, afraid of being caught and cursed.

Many readers have felt that the narrator finds Esau a more attractive character than Jacob. Despite his impetuousness, he is also seen as a man capable of generosity and forgiveness (see 33:4-16.) He is much more accessible, wearing his heart on his sleeve, while Jacob is almost a slimy figure, never letting his guard down, never telling us what is up his sleeve. The point is this: God's grace to Jacob seems to move forward even against the tastes of the narrator. Here we come to the theme of God's grace mentioned in the introduction. Indeed, here is the theme of God's *scandalous grace*.

Jesus was constantly offending (scandalizing) people because he ate and associated with the "wrong" people, the people who led un-respectable lives (Luke 15:1-2; Matt. 11:2-6). Paul said that the cross itself was a *skandalon* (a stumbling block) to many because (a) it was a method of salvation through weakness and humiliation, not strength and triumph, and (b) it identified Jesus with the criminals and off-scourings of society (1 Cor. 1:23). So here we see (more than in any other Old Testament figure) God's grace given to someone is singularly unattractive and unworthy, and at some points despicable. Unlike Abraham, who regularly rises to model exemplary unselfishness (chapter 13), courage (chapter 14), concern for others (chapter 18), and amazing faithfulness (chapter 22), Jacob provides almost no such examples. The stories of Jacob's life have almost no edifying material in them (to conventional religious or moral sensibilities). Almost nothing he does can be cited as an inspiring example. He is continually spinning out (and getting caught in) webs of deceit, cunning, favoritism, and trickery.

This is therefore the primary Old Testament example of the "scandalousness" of God's grace. God chooses, loves, and stays with a disdainful character, unworthy and unvalued. This is scandalous to the world's mind. It makes no sense. Truly, God seems to have chosen Jacob simply *because* he is so weak, foolish, and despised (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

5. Read Genesis 27:41-28:5. (a) How do we see the consequences of sin here? What do we learn about how sin works? (b) Rebekah now must make another plan. How does it end up fulfilling God's purposes in ways she cannot anticipate?

What do we learn about the consequences of sin?
Esau's murderous grudge now poisons the family and leads to its breakdown. Esau is deeply alienated from his mother. Notice how, in 28:8, Esau only evaluates his married life in terms of his father (despite the fact that his

marriages caused pain to both parents, 26:35). His mother is no longer part of his life. As a result, Rebekah is going to lose Jacob for the rest of her life. When he goes away, she will never again see the son for whom she risked everything. And Jacob will be deceived and swindled as he himself had deceived and swindled his father and brother. All of these things are natural consequences of their deception, lying, and subterfuge.

The Bible is filled with sayings such as, "All who draw the sword die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52) and "If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it" (Prov. 26:27). As Derek Kidner puts it, "Sin . . . sets up strains in the structure of life which can only lead to breakdown." [9] The laws of God issue from the One who created the world and all moral, spiritual, physical, social, and psychological reality. When God says, "Don't lie" or "You must forgive," he is describing how he designed people to live in the world he made. "*Shalom*," or God's peace, is not simply some kind of inner tranquility; it is the multi-dimensional wholeness that comes when all things function as they were designed to function. *Shalom* includes perfect physical health, perfect social harmony and justice, perfect union between our creative aspirations and our achievements, perfect inner harmony, joy, and fulfillment, all flowing from a perfect relationship with God. Every sin is a violation of that *shalom*, an attack on the fabric of reality, the way things ought to be. Thus, when we sin against God we attack our own well-being, psychologically, socially, and spiritually.

How does Rebekah's plan end up fulfilling God's purposes?
Rebekah sees Esau's sustained, murderous anger (v. 41) and realizes that if Isaac dies while Esau continues in his "grudge," Jacob could die. She knows that Jacob must be put beyond Esau's reach temporarily, so she decides to send Jacob to her own brother Laban's house in Haran. Her goal is strictly Jacob's protection, not the goal of marriage she puts forward to Isaac as a pretext for the trip. This is seen in her statement to Jacob that she expects him to be gone "only a few days" (v. 44). The NIV translation renders this term "for a while," obscuring Rebekah's true design. She doesn't want him to stay until he gets a wife, but until she can tell that Esau is over his anger (v. 45). Evidently, Rebekah knew her impetuous older son and believed he would "get over it" eventually. Isaac immediately approves the plan and sends Jacob off. But why didn't he think of it himself? The evidence is that he is indifferent to Jacob's marital choice, but he is glad to see Jacob leave home and reduce the (now) terrible tension.

But God is at work in all of this, with designs and purposes far beyond those of Rebekah. Jacob's long sojourn in Haran not only keeps him from marrying a Canaanite and brings him the family he *did* need, but it is a refining and humbling time in which Jacob finally begins to grow in character. At this point we are confronted with one of the most important teachings of the Bible: how God works his plan not just in spite of human sin but *through* it. Brueggemann and Kidner offer these reflections:

notes

> The [parties in these texts] discuss as though none were involved except the two of them. . . . They proceed as though they themselves could resolve the issue . . . . What they do not know . . . is that their bargaining works to implement the purposes of God. . . . There is no conflict between divine promise and human ingenuity. The one is an instrument for the other. [10]

> These rival strategems only succeeded in doing "whatsoever God's hand and . . . counsel foreordained" (cf. Acts 4:28). As a crowning touch, at a moment when Isaac was in no mood to care whom Jacob might marry, Jacob found himself thrust out of the nest he had feathered, to seek refuge and a wife among the very kinsmen to whom Abraham had turned in obedience to the vision (24:3ff). [11]

The Bible teaches that God's sovereignty is absolute. Human choices and sin cannot thwart his will. But this goes further. It shows us that God actually can and does work his will out *through* our sinful choices, and yet that does not render those choices less sinful. Jacob is one of the most vivid cases in point. On the one hand, we see that his sin was terrible and it had consequences he experienced for the rest of his life. He is held responsible for those choices. Yet if Jacob had not sinned and ruined his family relationships so that he had to flee for his life, he would never have come to Haran, married, and had the children through whom the Messiah eventually came. Many people believe that if we sin, we somehow force God to give us a secondary course in life, a "Plan B." But how can the Messiah be "Plan B"? Jacob met *exactly* who he had to meet and marry in order to bring Jesus into the world. Jacob went *exactly* to the place he had to go in order to learn humility and faith and become the head of God's family and people.

None of this would have happened if Jacob hadn't sinned. Does that mean God *made* him sin, so that he couldn't help himself? No. His sin was his choice and the consequences were terrible. And yet, when you belong to God by his grace, your sins cannot screw up your life and put it on "Plan B."

As usual, the ultimate example of this is Jesus Christ himself. In Acts 2:23, Peter says to the people of Jerusalem: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose . . . and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death . . . ." There it is! Jesus' death was absolutely fixed and certain. God infallibly and unchangeably planned for people to put him to death. It was planned by God in order to save the world. Yet the people who did the crucifixion were "wicked" and thus responsible for their behavior. So God's sovereignty and our free responsibility are both true. And it means that even those who were responsible for the death of Jesus can be saved by the very thing they did wrong. That's Peter's whole point. He is saying to them. "Though you did something wrong, God will bring grace and life out of it! Repent and turn to the One you put to death. There is all the hope in the world!"

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 204.

[2] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 155.

[3] Gordon J. Wenham, *New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 79.

[4] Derek Kidner, p. 155.

[5] Walter Brueggemann, pp. 228-229.

[6] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1994), p. 216.

[7] Derek Kidner, p. 156.

[8] Walter Brueggemann, p. 233.

[9] Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Chicago, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1964), p. 84.

[10] Walter Brueggemann, pp. 217-218.

[11] Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 155.

What were we put in the world to do?

Heaven's Gate

Study 21 | Genesis 28:10-22

INTRODUCTION

Jacob is now essentially on the run for his life. He may have had a better grasp on his situation than did Rebekah, who naively assured him that he would be back in a few days (27:44) because Esau would "get over it." He would have derived little comfort from Isaac's dignified words of sending and blessing at his departure (28:1-3). Jacob knew his father had shown little concern for his future choices and most likely was just glad he was leaving. In short, Jacob was little more than a fugitive, unwanted by anyone but his mother, and completely unsure of his future. He is so lacking in resources that he is sleeping out in the open at night. Yet God now comes to him. Despite his moral and spiritual inferiority to his grandfather Abraham or even to his father Isaac, Jacob receives two major visitations from God. The first one comes here.

Background note: The famous word "ladder" (as in "Jacob's Ladder") is missing from verse 12. The NIV is right to consign it to the footnotes and put the word "stairway" in its place. The Hebrew word really describes more of a ramp. (The description of a stream of messengers coming and going fits in better with the idea of a broad ramp or staircase than a ladder.) The word is used elsewhere to describe the "siege ramp"—a man-made mountain, as it were—that is built up against a walled city in order to conquer it.

What is being described is a "ziggurat," a temple building that was common in the ancient Near East. Ziggurats would appear to our eyes as huge pyramids, but the reason for their shape and size was that they were man-made mountains. Ziggurats were efforts to unite heaven and earth. The religious person could ascend toward the gods to make sacrifices and the gods could more easily descend to earth. When people built a ziggurat, they often called it a "heaven-gate," a place where worshipers could meet and connect with the gods. Scholars tell us that the name "Babylon" means "the gate of the god." So it is not surprising that when Jacob saw a stairway to heaven, he called it "the gate of heaven" and began to worship (v. 17).

1. **Read Genesis 28:12-15. What does Jacob see, and what do you think each thing means? (Make reference to the promises God makes.)**

What things does Jacob see?
The visual elements of the encounter were three: (a) First, he saw a stairway linking heaven and earth. It reached all the way in both directions and it touched both. (It literally says that the stairway "set against the ground with its top touching heaven," v.12a.) (b) Second, he saw angels ascending and descending on it (v. 12b). (c) Third, he saw the Lord himself above him (v. 13). [**Note:** Unfortunately, the Hebrew prepositional phrase at the beginning of verse 13 could mean "over it" (meaning Jacob saw God at the top of the stair) or "over

him" (meaning Jacob saw God standing just over him, having come down the stair).] Though the second picture is more intimate, the basic picture is the same. The stairway means access to the Lord himself.

What does each one mean?
Although the biblical writer does not tell us directly what these elements mean, we can speculate with some confidence because of the explicit words that follow (see below).

First, the "*stairway*" (v. 12a) gives us "the news . . . that there is traffic between heaven and earth. . . . Earth is not left to its own resources and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for the gods. *Heaven has to do with earth*." [1] We saw above that the peoples of the Near East built their own ziggurats. (The tower of Babel was probably a ziggurat. See Genesis 11.) These buildings were an effort to coax the gods to come down and pay attention to the needs of the worshipers. But this is quite different. Here we have God himself establishing his own connection with the earth. This is not then (like the ziggurats) a stairway *to* heaven as much as it is a stairway *from* heaven! This is not human religion, in which man seeks to reach up to heaven and merit the gods' attention. Instead, this is the gospel, in which heaven itself has come down to earth. This is remarkably different from so many of the other ancient religions, which saw salvation and spiritual growth as a process of ascending out of and away from this evil, material world. The idea that heaven sought out earth, literally setting the bottom of its stair into the dirt, was radical! Other religions saw the earth as the accidental result of a great celestial battle, not the design of a concerned Creator. In this stairway *from* heaven we have the seeds of the truth that God will embrace and renew the world.

Second, the "*angels*" (v. 12b) tell us that God's sovereign plan and purposes are actively being carried out. We do not have to fear. He is in charge. The Hebrew word translated "angels" means messengers or heralds. It connotes royal decrees and power. Just as a king's royal messengers and attendants proceed out into the world from the throne, so angels ascend and descend from the royal power of God out into the world. Most of all (in this situation), the vision of the angels speaks of protection. God's power is everywhere. In a similar way, in 2 Kings 6:17, Elisha prays that his servant would have his eyes opened so that he would not fear, even though they were in a besieged city. Suddenly the servant is able to see an angelic host—"chariots of fire all around Elisha." In the same way, Jacob was having his normal human blindness peeled away. For a moment he sees the earth full of the glory of God's kingly power and purposes. Remarkable!

Thirdly, *the Lord standing above him* (v. 13) tells us that fellowship with God is possible, as is access to his very presence. [**Text note:** The Hebrew word in the verse could be translated "over *it*" or "over *him*," meaning that God may have been standing over the ladder—thus at the top of the ladder—or over Jacob—thus at the bottom of the ladder. However, in Genesis 35:13 the same term is

used when God appears to Jacob at Bethel a second time. After the term is used, it says clearly, "God went up from him at the place where he had talked with him." Therefore we conclude that in Genesis 28, God has come down the ladder to stand just over and near Jacob.] What an image! Since the angels signify the royal presence of God, the dream-vision depicts the possibility of a pathway right into God's heart, to his inner royal chamber, his inmost presence. See Isaiah 6:1-6, or notice the golden cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant, which is his royal throne in the Holy of Holies. We can come right *in*.

2. Read Genesis 28:12-15. What does Jacob hear, and what do these things tell him about God and his purposes?

First, in verses 13-14, Jacob hears the familiar. God says things he has said before to Abraham and Isaac, and these are promises that almost certainly Jacob has heard before. God says: (a) He will give to Jacob and his descendants the land of Canaan, "the land on which you are lying" (v. 13c). (b) He will give Jacob a great number of descendants and make of him a great nation (v. 14a). (c) God is doing all this not simply to prosper and honor Jacob or a small number of favorites, but for the blessing of all the nations of the earth (v. 14b). Thus Jacob is called into the "active duty" of God's redemptive purposes.

We have spoken of this before, but we should take a moment to review what those purposes are. God made the world an Edenic paradise of *shalom*. When human beings lived with the earth and one another under God's rule, there was harmony, justice, creative growth, and delight. But humanity turned away from the rule of God and creation was deeply marred. Now God is creating a new humanity, a new people, who will live under God's rule and authority and embody his *shalom*. Out of this people will eventually come the Messiah, the King who will save the world and eventually renew the creation completely. All of this is far beyond Jacob's imagination, yet it is all foreshadowed in this familiar promise. The land is important because God's salvation is not just spiritual; it involves the renewal of all creation—spiritual and material. The descendants must increase so they can be a new nation, a new society showing the world what human life can be under God. And the call to *be* a blessing tells us that all who take part in this must get past self-interest. This new people of God live for others. (Of course, Jacob in particular needed to realize this last challenge!)

But secondly, in verse 15, Jacob hears some things no one has ever heard before. God says: (a) "I am with you" (v. 15a). This is a promise of *intimacy and nearness*. The average reader underestimates the force of the word "with." Jesus appointed his disciples "that they might be *with* him" (Mark 3:14). "In the beginning . . . the Word was *with* God" (John 1:1). This is a term that speaks of relational intimacy. Though many others were to hear these words as

a covenant promise, Jacob was the first. Of course, he had no idea to what extent God would go to make this a reality for his people. The ultimate example of "God-with-us" is Jesus himself (Matt. 1:23). So we see how committed God is to coming near, becoming accessible, having friendship with us. God then says: (b) ". . . and will watch over you" (v. 15b). This is a promise of *protection*. The word literally means that he will "guard" Jacob. It goes along with the first promise. God is saying, "I will not simply be with you on your life journey; I will guard and protect you at every turn." While very reassuring, it is interesting to reflect on the meaning of this in light of Jacob's subsequent history. (See below). Then God says: (c) "and I will bring you back to this land" (v. 15c). This is the promise of *homecoming*. A true "home" is a rich concept in any language or culture. It includes elements of belonging, stability, community, and familiarity. The opposite of "home" is alienation, restlessness, isolation, instability, and so on. Jacob is being promised that God will bring him home. Finally, God says: (d) "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (v. 15d). This is a promise about all the other promises, namely, that they are *unconditional*. While this was strongly implied in God's oath to Abraham in Genesis 15, here it is explicitly stated. There is no "*if*" in the promise. God is saying, "I will not stop until I get all this done for you." Period.

3. Genesis 28:12-15. At what point in Jacob's experience does this come? What do we learn about God's grace from this appearance?

Derek Kidner writes, "This is a supreme display of divine grace, unsought and unstinted . . . [and] also immediately apposite." [2] Kidner uses three words that are a bit unusual, but his analysis is incisive! Let's take them in reverse order.

First, the grace of God is *healing—exactly matched to Jacob's precise needs*. ("Apposite" is the opposite of opposite!) Jacob sleeping out in the open is the perfect embodiment of all three aspects of his great need. Jacob was completely alone and abjectly lonely. Only one person in the world cared about him, and she was far behind (never to be seen again). God says, "*I* will be with you." Jacob was completely defenseless, in danger from his brother, in danger in the wilderness, and at the mercy of the strangers he was about to meet. And God says, ". . . and will watch over you." Jacob was, of course, homeless. He only had his mother's story of the strange oracle: "You will be the head of all this house." But now all that was in tatters! How naïve to think Esau would *ever* get over Jacob's subterfuge. He had no home, no money, and no family. He was, like Cain, a wanderer in the earth. And God says, " . . . and I will bring you back." How remarkable that God lovingly adapted his message to Jacob's particular hurts, needs, and weaknesses. He did not simply deliver the truth, but applied it like a physician, father, and shepherd in order to assure, heal, and build up.

Second, the grace of God is *free—unsought and unconditional*. God met Abraham in the night after he pleaded with God for more assurance (Gen. 15). God met Moses in the wilderness where he fled after trying (clumsily) to liberate an Israelite from oppression (Ex. 3). God met Elijah in the wilderness where he fled, demoralized, after trying to turn Israel's rulers back to God from Baal (1 Kings 19). But Jacob is isolated, alienated, and despondent because of his own grasping and dishonesty. He is not seeking God, nor is he repentant, nor is he weary and crushed by his efforts to serve others. And yet God appears to him! Moreover, he makes a promise that is unconditional, not contingent on Jacob at all. There is no demand made and no requirements listed. "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (v. 15d). That is free, unmerited grace.

Third, the grace of God is *extravagantly lavish* ("unstinted"). Remarkably, there is not a word of condemnation or even criticism, despite the fact that Jacob has shown no contrition, change of heart, or character development. The lack of such a word is not evidence that God is unconcerned with all of that! But when this repentant spirit and heart develop, it will be in response to this free, unmoderated grace. The free-flowing breadth of this grace is stunning. It is, in Kidner's words, "a stream of assurances flowing from the central 'I am the Lord' to spread from the past (13a) to the distant future, from the spot where Jacob lay (13b) to the four corners of the earth (14) and from his person to all humankind (14b)." [3]

4. Genesis 28:15. How do we assess God's promise to "guard" Jacob, considering how much heartache and trouble he continues to experience for the rest of his life? What light does Luke 21:16-19 shed?

After God's promise, Jacob's life is far, far from "blessed" and comfortable. In chapter 29 his uncle Laban swindles him and forces him to marry someone he does not want to marry. In chapter 35 the love of his life dies in childbirth. In chapter 37 he loses the second love of his life—Joseph—through the deceit and jealousy of his other sons. He lives his life in permanent grief and mourning. This is "guarding"?! Readers can be excused for asking, "If this is what God means by 'watching over' and 'guarding' someone, what use is it?" There are many places in the Bible that reflect on God's promise to "keep" us. (This is the same Hebrew word translated here as "watch over" or "guard".)

> The LORD watches over you . . .
> the sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night.
> The LORD will keep you from all harm—
> he will watch over your life . . . . (Ps. 121:5-7)

The life of Jacob seems to contradict this promise of God being our "keeper." Jacob suffered a great deal of "harm" under God's keeping, and others (like Job) suffered even more than he. How do we respond to this?

Part of our problem is our own cultural expectations. When a civilization like ours experiences unprecedented peace and prosperity for so many years, it becomes natural for us to expect that a long and trouble-free life is the natural right of all decent people. When we read about Jacob's life, we ask why God allowed all these bad things to happen. But we must realize that most people, throughout most of history, expected to bury at least a couple of their children in infancy and a couple of different spouses. Contemporary Westerners expect more comfort and safety than anyone ever has.

But the ultimate problem is that we lack perspective. God puts every incident you experience in the context of (a) your whole life and (b) everything that is going on in the world and in history. He can see all the different lives we *could* have had if this or that had happened, in light of everything going on in the world and in history. In other words, something that feels pretty terrible might help us avoid something far worse—we just don't have the eyes and wisdom to see it. In histories like Jacob's, we as readers can see a bit of this bigger perspective. We can see how Jacob's troubles honed him, humbled him, prevented him from bigger mistakes, and so on. Jacob was being protected from "harm" in a broader and deeper way, though he often was literally harmed by the conflicts he suffered. (For example, he was permanently crippled by his mysterious wrestling match.)

Luke 21 includes a fascinating passage that shows how different God's perspective is from ours. Here Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the kind of opposition they will face.

> "They will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to . . . prisons . . . . You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish." (Luke 21:12, 16-18)

Rather startling isn't it? Jesus can calmly say that they will be hounded, imprisoned, and put to death, but "not a hair of your head will perish." There is no mistake. He says "you will be killed" and "you won't be harmed" in virtually the same sentence. What does that mean? First of all, the reference to "not a hair" means that God is not simply staying aloof and watching. He is exercising minute control over the situation. Second of all, Jesus is thinking of "perishing" ("harm" in Psalm 121) differently than we do! This is because he is thinking of happiness in a more multi-dimensional way than we do. People are ultimately "happy" who know themselves well, know God well, rely on his grace, accomplish things for him, and as a result live with little or no fear. In short, people are only "happy" who are like Jesus. The many strong assertions that God is a God of love, that our anguish is anguish to him, and that he has suffered immeasurably in order to eventually wipe all suffering and tears out of our lives, mean that God never allows suffering or trouble unless it is absolutely necessary to make us like Jesus. He is "watching over" us even in the suffering, because (a) he is with us in it, (b) he gives us resources for it, and (c) he only allows it if it is a way to get reach his goal of a new world and a new "us" in Christ.

notes

5. Read Genesis 28:16-22. How does Jacob respond to God's visitation? What do we learn about worship from this incident?

Jacob wakes up and begins to worship. Although he does so in accordance with the customs of his time, his actions nonetheless give us guidelines for how to conduct (and recognize) any act of worship.

First, we see that worship is *coming into the presence of God*. Jacob says, "Surely the LORD is in this place . . . . This is none other than the house of God, . . . the gate of heaven" (vv. 16-17). Of course the Bible assumes the omnipresence of God. He is everywhere (Ps. 139). But biblical worship also assumes that there is a special presence, the "face" of God. That is why Jonah can flee "from the presence of the LORD" (Jonah 1:3 ESV) and yet turn around and confess that God is everywhere, Lord of all heaven and earth (Jonah 1:9). There are many ways to speak of this "presence," God's relational nearness. In the New Testament the disciples had a prayer meeting and, as a result, the house was shaken and the fullness of the Holy Spirit came down upon them (Acts 4:31). David speaks of "gaz[ing] upon the beauty of the LORD" in the temple (Ps. 27:4) and "seek[ing] your face" (Ps. 27:8). Moses was told that he could not look upon the face of God and live (Ex. 33), so David is probably not talking about a direct vision to his physical senses but an experience of the presence of God. To be in the presence of God is to sense his reality, to have intellectual concepts (such as his love, power, glory) become vivid, affecting, clear, delightful, consoling, and transforming. That is why David can say, "I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. . . . Your [steadfast] love is better than life . . ." (Ps. 63:2-3). This is what it means to enter God's "house."

Jacob had never experienced the presence of God. This is his first personal encounter. Before, his religion was second-hand. The sense of "awe" he refers to is the difference between a sense of being in the presence of the holy and majestic God and the intellectual belief that he is holy and great.

So we see that worship is not primarily the following of a ritual form nor just a time of teaching nor just a time for fellowship. None of these things is the primary goal or essence of an act of worship. Worship is *coming into the presence of the Lord through his grace*.

Notice one implication of this definition. Jacob calls this place "the house of God" and "the gate of heaven" though there is no building there (or any humanly constructed object). Pagan temples and ziggurats had to be built by human beings in the hope that the gods would make it their home. But Jacob has encountered the God of grace, who takes the initiative and comes down to a man who was not seeking or sacrificing at all! God's sovereign grace and presence turn a nowhere place ("a certain place," v. 11) into the house of God. Buildings are not important. The presence of God amid his people called by grace—that is the true "sanctuary."

Second, we see that worship consists of *hearing from God and then responding to God*. Jacob's acts of worship are responses to the promise and words of God. Worship does not start with us seeking God and then God responding to us. Worship starts with God's Word. When his Word penetrates and convicts us, it evokes the awe and worship we see in Jacob. Another interesting example is in 2 Samuel 7, where God sends a prophet to give David a word from the Lord. David turns and says, "O LORD Almighty, God of Israel, you have revealed this to your servant . . . . So your servant has found courage to offer you this prayer" (2 Sam. 7:27). Hearing God's Word deep in the heart creates adoration, confession, petition, and thanksgiving. This is the essence of any personal or corporate act of worship. This has always been the basic dynamic in the structure of any biblical worship service. We hear the Word (by reading it, chanting it, hearing it, preaching it) and in response we give back to God our prayers and gifts.

Third, we see that our worship response is *giving God what he is worth*. Notice all the things Jacob does. First, he gives God the stone on which he laid his head. He honors it by anointing it with oil, setting it apart from ordinariness to commemorate the grace of God (v. 18). It was a way of saying "everything about this place is now precious to me." Second, he gives God of his income: He promises God a tithe of his money (v. 22b). Third, he gives God himself—"The LORD will be my God." So we see that, in response to the Word of God, we are to give God all: all our sins (in confession), all our hearts (in dedication), all our resources (in offering), all our needs (in petition), and all our love (in praise and thanksgiving). The old English word for this was originally "worth-ship." An act of worship has two parts: (a) seeing the worthiness of God (through his Word) and then (b) giving him what he is worth.

6. Genesis 28:20-22. Many people believe that Jacob's vow is weak and just a form of bargaining. What do you think? What do we learn from God's response to Jacob's vow?

It's true that Jacob seems to be bargaining. There was never a contingency clause in anything God said. He never said, "I'll do this *if* . . . ." Yet Jacob starts his vow with "if." Some people have felt that there was nothing wrong with what Jacob said. For example, Derek Kidner thinks that "the vow was no more a bargain than any other vow (the 'if' clause is inherent in the form)" [4] but I don't think that is right. God was able to avoid the word "if," and this audacious bargaining attitude perfectly fits what we know of Jacob's character. He is not going to change on the spot! He has just had his first encounter with the living God and he is responding as best he can. Joyce Baldwin's insight is better (and comforting!) when she says:

> The terms of his vow sound calculating . . . . Jacob was dull and unresponsive to the loving reassurance of God. Before he would commit himself completely Jacob wanted the circumstantial evidence of the outworking of God's promises in his life. . . . "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails . . . I will not believe," said Thomas with the same desire for tangible evidence (John 20:25). Marvelously patient, the Lord meets us where we are. [5]

This does not mean it is alright to come to God with conditions! It just means that God often accepts our half-hearted, fitful efforts at dedication and helps us purify them over time.

7. Compare Genesis 28:17 with Isaiah 6:1-6 and John 1:51 and 2:21. What "progress" do we see through the ages?

Jacob found "the house of God" in the wilderness, where God temporarily let his glory and presence appear. Later, God became even more accessible when he brought his glory and presence into the tabernacle and temple. That meant people could know where to find him, and they could approach him any time through the sacrifices and the priesthood. Later, however, Jesus makes a cryptic and remarkable claim. When he tells Nathanael something secret about his past, Nathanael is amazed and calls him "the Son of God" (John 1:49). Jesus is almost bemused that Nathanael is so easily impressed. Then he says, "You shall see greater things than that. . . .You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:50-51). Jesus now reveals why a holy God could be so gracious to a sinner like Jacob—or like us. *He* is the true gate of heaven, the true "house of God" (John 2:21), the real link between heaven and earth. It is because of his life, death, and resurrection that the very presence of a holy God, forbidden to Moses, can come right into our lives. The angels and all that the vision signified—the life of heaven come down to earth, the kingly reign of God, the intimate presence of God into our lives—all can come because Jesus is the true stairway. He was of heaven but touched down on the earth. He died to bring us to God.

This means that when we belong to him, we become the temple of God (1 Peter 2:4-5; Eph. 2:20-22), filled with God's glory and presence. We have an access to the presence of God *through Christ* that Jacob could only dream about. We have not come to fire and smoke and visions in the night, but to Jesus, who brings us to God (Heb. 12:18-28). "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Heb. 12:28). We conclude with Edmund Clowney's reflection:

> The stairway was a picture in Jacob's dream. But what the dream promised became a reality in Christ's Incarnation. God came down in the person of His Son to dwell on earth. Christ is the link between earth and heaven. He is the true Bethel, the House of God, Immanuel, God with us. Jacob anointed a stone with oil to memorialize the presence of God . . . but God anointed his only Son with the Spirit. [6]

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 243.

[2] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 158.

[3] Derek Kidner, p. 158.

[4] Derek Kidner, p. 158.

[5] Joyce Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 119.

[6] Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 1988), p. 67.

What were we put in the world to do?

Jacob's New Family

Study 22 | **Genesis 29:14 - 30:24**

INTRODUCTION

The next part of the Jacob story spans three chapters (29 through 31) which cover Jacob's long years living away from Canaan with his uncle Laban. This is a continuous, self-contained account that is best studied as a unit despite its length. It begins with the kiss of meeting (29:11, 13) and ends with the kiss of departure (31:55) and so stands as a unity. It stands between two personal encounters with God, at Bethel on the way to Haran (chapter 28) and at Peniel on the way home from Haran (chapter 32). It begins with Jacob escaping the problem of Esau and ends with Jacob returning to face the problem of Esau. At the center of this section is the heart of it: the birth of Jacob's children. If we outline the larger passage, we can see how it centers on Jacob receiving a new family: [1]

29:1-14a: The kiss of meeting; Jacob is received by Laban

29:14b-20: The contract with Laban

29:21-30: The 1st "sting"; Laban outwits Jacob

29:31-30:24: The birth of Jacob's children

30:25-43: The 2nd "sting"; Jacob outwits Laban

31:1-42: The dispute with Laban

31:43-55: The kiss of departure; Jacob leaves Laban

We will focus our study on the central sections about (a) how Jacob got married and (b) how Jacob's children were born. Here we see God fulfilling his promise to Jacob and to the world. To understand the selected passage, we will provide a context with a summary of the narrative that precedes it.

PRE-PASSAGE SUMMARY

Genesis 29:1-14a. On the surface, Jacob's entrance to Haran appears very "lucky." He arrives at the very well that Rachel, daughter of his uncle Laban, will soon use. The shepherds at the well were merely standing around, neither watering nor grazing their animals, because there was a large stone over the well that was not rolled away until all the shepherds of the area got there to remove it. Jacob shows he feels this is a waste of time (v. 7). When Rachel comes with her flocks, Jacob rolls the stone away all by himself and waters her sheep. He gets to show his new family member his physical strength, his enterprise, and his initiative, and he caps it off with a tearful, dramatic

announcement. He is the son of Rebekah, her father's sister. Rachel runs to Laban, who runs to Jacob (much like Laban had run to meet Abraham's servant some forty years before, 24:29). The whole scene is sunny and joyful. What an entrance! Is this luck? The narrator has shown the readers the promise of God in 28:15. There is no luck about it.

Like Abraham's servant years before (chapter 24), Jacob travels to Haran where he finds a bride. However, Abraham's servant went laden with wealth and possessions (24:10) to convince the prospective bride's family that their daughter would be marrying into prosperity. Jacob came with nothing, however, and this left it to the very money-conscious Laban to figure out a way to get wealth from this suitor.

1. **Read Genesis 29:14-20. What signs or hints can already be seen of Laban's calculation?**

We should ask what Laban knows about Jacob and his situation. Before he speaks, Laban knew that Jacob had come looking for a wife. (Though we are not told this specifically [see 29:13], it seems natural that this would have been understood. Isaac had gotten a wife from Haran, and now Jacob had come. Laban was there both times.) But there is a now major difference. Though Isaac was more wealthy than Abraham had been (26:12-14), Jacob had to come by himself, without a servant or a bride-price (as in 24:10). This showed that all was not well with Jacob and his family, whether Jacob had divulged the struggles or not. Laban knew that Jacob was economically vulnerable.

Also, it is hard to imagine that Jacob's adoration for Rachel (vv. 18, 20) escaped Laban's notice. Rachel was unusually beautiful (29:17 explicitly refers to her sexual attractiveness, her (lit.) "great figure"). Someone has pointed out that Jacob and Rachel constitute a rarity in the ancient world and in the Bible—a marriage based on romantic love. So it is unlikely in the extreme that Laban did not know of Jacob's lovesickness. Therefore Laban knew also that Jacob was emotionally vulnerable.

If we look at Laban's statements in this light, we begin to see hints of his scheming. First, the offer of "wages" (v. 15) seems generous on the surface, but now we realize that he very likely wanted to get Jacob to make an offer on a bride-price. Laban's offer was a bit of a risk, financially, in that Jacob was working for nothing at the time and wages would put a dent in Laban's profit. But Laban has read Jacob well. Connecting Jacob's wages to the bride-price would actually provide Laban with far more financial value.

Second, after Jacob offers to work seven years as a bride-price for Rachel (v. 18), Laban is indirect in his response. Jacob says, "I'll work seven years if you'll give me Rachel," and Laban never gives an unambiguous "Yes!" or "Agreed!" to Jacob's proposal. He makes an oblique comment that "it's better that I give her to you than to some other man" (v. 19), and Jacob takes it for a

positive agreement. But if the "her" in Laban's statement is Rachel (even that is not certain), he is only saying it would be good for Jacob to get her for a wife. Laban did not "shake hands" on the specifics.

2. Read Genesis 29:21-26. Laban's scheme is finally revealed. In what ways is it ingenious, though cruel? What did Laban get out of it?

In what ways is the scheme ingenious?
The day of the wedding arrived (v. 22). The wedding would begin with a procession from the bride's home to the wedding site. Then the marriage covenant would be read and entered into. After that, there would be a great feast, after which the groom would put his cloak around his bride and lead her into his tent to consummate the marriage. After that, more days of feasting would follow. All day, of course, the bride would be heavily veiled. We can still see the importance of veiling in Near Eastern cultures. [2] All day Jacob assumed that the veiled bride was Rachel, but it was really her older sister Leah. Jacob made vows to Leah, took her into his dark tent, and consummated the marriage—all the while thinking it was Rachel. Only the next morning does he discover his mistake.

Laban's scheme was based on weaknesses in Jacob we already have seen, as well as some others. First, it was based on a legal technicality—a custom of their region (v. 26; notice his word "here")—that Jacob probably did not know about. Second, it was probably only possible to hide the bride's identity from Jacob (until it was too late) because Jacob had no family at his wedding. Had there been female members of the groom's family present, it would have been very difficult to hide the scheme from them during all the preparations that women did together. But all the women in this wedding were under Laban's control. The conspiracy stayed hidden until it had succeeded.

Finally, the scheme took into consideration the aftermath. Laban knew Jacob would be furious, and that his answer—that this was "just the custom"—was a thin and inadequate one. That answer does not excuse the lying and subterfuge. But Laban knew that Jacob was still emotionally and economically vulnerable. After seven years of labor, all he had was a wife he did not want, and the love of his life was still there. Laban knew Jacob would be compliant through it all because of his lack of financial and emotional leverage. (There was another reason he accepted Laban's new terms. See the next question below.)

What did Laban get from it?
He made out very, very handsomely.

A suitor was required to present a gift to the family of his bride—a "marriage present" or "bride price." Deuteronomy 22:29 later put a fifty shekel "cap" on the bride price that could be expected or demanded, and typically the gifts

were far lower. Jacob's offer of seven years labor was then remarkably handsome, since the going wage rate for a laborer was one shekel a month or less. [3] In fact, the extravagance of the offer requires an explanation. The reader of the narrative would immediately wonder at Jacob's voluntary offer of a sum three or four times higher than normal. (Jacob did not ask a price from Laban. There was no haggling.) The most natural conclusion was that Jacob wanted Rachel—and everyone else—to know how much he valued her. He was a man incredibly in love, and he wanted others to know about it. (There was probably a lot of bravado in this, just like Jacob's showing off his strength for Rachel in removing the stone from the well.) He could have gotten off with a lot less—but he'll show her and everyone how much loves her! This plays right into Laban's hands. He has him now. Seven years! What a deal! But Laban was able to get much, much more.

Verse 29:17 tells us "Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form and beautiful." No one knows what the word translated "weak" really means. It usually means "soft," but here it clearly has a negative connotation. It could mean that her eyes were particularly unattractive in some way. She may have had some kind of eye disorder. The overall point, however, is clear. Leah was physically unattractive and undesirable and, as a result, it was very unlikely that she would ever be married. Here we see an even more base and mercenary aspect of Laban. He sees an opportunity not only to get Leah married, but to get an enormous bride-price for her as well. As we immediately see, Laban puts her into a situation in which she is unloved and despised, but that does not seem to be of any concern to him.

So Laban pulls off a "career-making" deal. He gets enormous sums for his daughters. We also know that (at least during the first seven years!) he got a shepherd who was strong, vigorous, and enterprising (29:1-14, 20). Laban grew rich by exploiting Jacob's many weaknesses.

Note: We should stop and address an issue that will trouble many modern readers of the text. Today we find the concept of "bride-price" repellent. We have women being virtually bought and sold and evaluated on the basis of their looks. Doesn't this show us that the Bible is a primitive book that in many ways we have "gotten beyond"? But we must keep two things in mind. (1) First, the writer is not lifting up this process as a good and worthy model. Far from it! The Bible in no way enjoins its readers to follow suit. Rather, the writer is simply giving an account of what really happened. In these early days of God's dealing with human beings, there is much in their lives that is undesirable and corrupt. But God's revelation of his will and nature grew over time. He unfolded more of his will for our lives at Sinai, and later, even more in the life and teaching of Jesus. (2) Second, we should not think that our present culture is that much different from this one. Legally and superficially, we have more individual rights today. But it is a simple fact that a woman's looks are still, to a huge degree, a kind of "currency." This is probably truer today than it was in those days, because we live in a media-driven world in which image and looks are far more important than previously. Women are very much judged on the

basis of their looks. And further, a woman's physical attractiveness is still the best predictor of the amount of money her husband will be making. Yes, this is repugnant. Our point here is that this is how sinful human nature has worked for centuries. It is not fair to look at ancient times and feel superior to them over matters like this. The Bible vigorously calls us away from all of this—and one of the ways it does so is through narratives like the one we are reading.

3. Read Genesis 29:25-29. Why did Jacob, who is clearly shocked and furious in verse 25, agree so compliantly to Laban's explanation and further offer? How was Laban's deceit with Jacob parallel to Jacob's deceit with his family?

Jacob was shocked and furious with Laban in verse 25. The narrator helps us understand the depths of the fury by showing us Jacob's almost pathetic longing for Rachel in verse 21. When he says, "Give me my wife . . . I want to lie with her," his statement is so bald and explicit about his burning sexual desire that Robert Alter tells us that rabbis have spent years trying to explain or justify its rudeness and lustfulness! [4] He is overwhelmed with emotional and sexual desire for Rachel. The narrator lets us see this so that we can imagine the depths of horror and shock he must have felt when he finds Leah in his bed. Verse 25 reads literally, "And in the morning, behold she (was) Leah." This is a vivid statement of the event through Jacob's eyes. Jacob's first question, "What have you done?" is the same question God asks Adam and Eve in the garden after they sinned (Gen. 3:13). So he begins his conversation with Laban with thunder.

It is at first difficult to understand why Jacob seems to agree with Laban's weak and inadequate answer: "Well, surely you knew that this is the way we do it here?" Many devastating "comebacks" are possible. Jacob could have said, "That's not the point! Why didn't you *tell* me? Or why didn't you procure a husband for Leah before that? Our commitment was *for Rachel*! Seven years for Rachel, I said! If you couldn't do that, you should have told me then!" It is also remarkable that Jacob should have agreed to work another seven years for Rachel. He could have very easily demanded to marry her as well. If he had appealed to others around Laban, they probably would have agreed. Jacob could have kept up his indignation and blown through Laban's cool exterior. But his indignation seems to melt away. Why does Jacob seem to quietly give in?

The answer is (as most commentators note) that Jacob's own words in verse 25 and Laban's words in verse 26 would have suddenly forced Jacob to painfully relive his past, much like the way Jesus' three-fold question "Do you love me?" made Peter relive his three-fold denial of his Lord. First, when Jacob asks in verse 25, "Why have you *deceived* me?" he uses the very same verb Isaac uses to describe what Jacob did to *him* (27:35, "deceit"). Thus Jacob is condemning himself! "Why did you deceive me for your own profit? Why did you exploit my weaknesses?" Does Jacob know what he is saying? Perhaps it dawned on him as the words came out of his mouth. If not, it all would have dawned on him when Laban makes his retort.

Laban says, "Around *here*, it is not the custom to put the younger before the firstborn." Those words must have been like a dagger in Jacob's heart. Alter says, "Laban is an instrument of dramatic irony." [5] Perhaps Laban was saying this unconsciously, since it was perfectly true. Or perhaps Laban had learned what Jacob had done and was making reference to it. Either way, these words could not fail to make Jacob think of what he had done and set his guilty conscience on fire. ("Oh no! He's only doing to me what I did to my father and to Esau!") The deceiver has been deceived. The parallels are hard to miss. Jacob's deceit and Laban's deceit both entailed deception, exploitation of weaknesses, and the switching of the firstborn and second-born.

There is a second irony and parallel between Jacob's deceit and Laban's. The very form was the same. In both situations, a man in the dark was unable to see who it was he was touching. Robert Alter even quotes a rabbi who imagines an angry encounter with Leah the day after.

> And he said to her, "I called out 'Rachel' in the dark—and *you* answered! Why did you do that to me?" And Leah said to him, "Your father called out 'Esau' in the dark—and you answered! Why did you do that to *him*?" [6]

4. What is God doing with Jacob? Look ahead to the prayer of 32:9-12. How does the affirmation of chapter 28 and the discipline of chapter 29 work together to get Jacob to this place?

What has just happened to Jacob was enormously painful, and Laban's sin against Jacob (and his daughters) was terribly wrong. It will have lasting consequences. But as Genesis 50:20 tells us, Laban "meant it for evil" but God "used it for good." There is no better parenting than this! A simple punishment (like a spanking or confinement to a room) is never as effective as a true "taste of one's own medicine." There is no better way to convict an exploiting deceiver than to give him the experience of being exploited and deceived! God is lovingly but firmly saying, "How do *you* like it?"

Therefore, just because God is with you does not mean that there are no consequences to your behavior or no discipline. Hebrews 12:5-6 and Proverbs 3:12 tell us that the Lord disciplines those he loves. In fact, Amos 3:2 says, "You only have I known/loved of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins." We are not only disciplined despite being freely, unconditionally loved—but *because* we are. In love, he disciplines us to change us.

All through his life we see that Jacob is a "man of conflict"—a wrestler. Robert Alter comments on his moving the stone from the well in 29:10: "He must contend with a stone [to get the water], the motif that is his narrative signature." [7] Jacob was a man who, bereft of his father's affirmation and blessing, feels the need to force life to give him the honor, blessing, and things he wants. So he is a "wrestler." He wrestled with his brother in the womb. He

wrestled the blessing away from his father. He marries two women wrestling with each other (30:8) and with him! Even at the end of chapter 28, his response to the grace of God is a negotiation: "I'll do this *if* you do these things for me." He trusts no one. He serves no one. There is no free giving or free receiving. There is only negotiation, wrestling, and maneuvering. He is always looking out for himself. But God did not deal with Jacob in the same way—and that was his (and is our) salvation. So, how will God break him of this and lead him to be unselfish, humble, trusting, and loving?

God begins this work of growth and healing in Jacob's life when he meets him at Bethel. There he gives Jacob the free-grace affirmation and blessing he needs, but Jacob is only partially helped by it. He picks it up with suspicion and bargaining, though he clearly is amazed, grateful, and changed. But now comes the harder part. God simply lets him meet a bigger wrestler and conniver than himself—Laban!

See how God is proceeding with him. First, in Genesis 28 comes the "Good News" of God's love and grace. God promises unconditional support, love, and generosity. Secondly, in Genesis 29 comes the "Bad News" of Jacob's selfishness and dishonesty. This incident convicts Jacob of how cruel and wrong his deeds have been. He sees how much pain they have inflicted. Notice, God first brings the good news of love and *then* the bad news of his sin. Why? Only if we have the confidence and assurance of being loved will we be able to admit how weak and unlovely we really are. (Otherwise we would stay in denial. God's unconditional grace frees the heart from its denial and repression.) See how the assurance of grace and the conviction of sin deepen and support each other! Because he knows he's chosen and loved, Jacob can finally begin to admit how bad he is. But because he sees his own sin, he can begin to appreciate and be amazed at the assurance of grace. This is how God moves Jacob away from the halting, partial response of 28:20-22.

In summary, God uses this experience to convict Jacob of his sins of lying and deception—and his sin in general. This is why we will see that Jacob can finally say in Genesis 32, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown [me]. Save me . . . for you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper . . .'" (vv. 10, 12). We see a humble appreciation of God's love and a more complete reliance on and confidence in God's help.

5. Jacob has promised (28:21) that the Lord will be his God. Yet chapters 29 and 30 reveal three people who make other things their God beside the Lord. What does Jacob make into "an idol"? What is Rachel's idol? What is Leah's idol?

Jacob has clearly set his heart on Rachel in an inordinate way. He is willing to do virtually anything to get her, as we have seen. This feeling—"I *must* have her"—makes Jacob a complete pawn in Laban's hands. This overwhelming desire for Rachel is in fact Jacob's Achilles' heel. It makes him easy to dupe. Later it leads to a favoritism of Rachel over Leah that created enormous pain

within the family for years to come. Not only does Leah feel rejected, but Jacob comes to love Rachel's children far more than Leah's, which sows poison in the children's hearts and in the corporate life of the family for generations. A mark of emotional idolatry is its non-negotiability and its delusional quality. No matter what Laban did, Jacob agreed to it. No matter how much hurt it sowed in his family, Jacob remained blind to it.

Why did Jacob make Rachel into such an idol? One commentator offers a fascinating suggestion. There is a good chance that Rachel, being Rebekah's niece, could have looked very much like Jacob's mother, the only person who ever loved him. But this is speculation. It is more likely that because of the general lack of affirmation and blessing Jacob had received, he loaded his hopes and dreams inordinately onto Rachel. "If I have a woman that beautiful as my wife, it will make up for my unhappy life. Finally, everything will be fixed."

What were Rachel and Leah's idols? On the one hand, in 29:31-35 we see the most pathetic description of a woman yearning for her husband's love. Leah was used to being ignored as the unattractive, ungainly older daughter. She was used to being treated as if she wasn't there. But being married to a man who did not love her (29:29-30) and probably resented her made the rejection far more poignant and traumatic. So she kept having children, saying "*Now*, maybe my husband will finally love me!" That was a legitimate assumption in ancient times when child-bearing was such a desirable thing. But she is continually disappointed. On the other hand, Rachel makes a clear statement of emotional idolatry in 30:1: "Give me children or I'll die!" Alter says:

> Surprisingly . . . [Rachel] speaks with the impetuousness reminiscent of her brother-in-law Esau, who also announced to Jacob that he was on the point of death if Jacob did not immediately give him what he wanted. [8]

All the commentators notice that the two women seem to make an idol out of the one thing the other sister has that they do not. Leah wants her husband's love but just has children (30:15). Rachel wants children but has her husband's love. If we reflect on this, we see a "far idol" under the "near idols." Leah and Rachel's *real* idol was to be better then her sister. Over the years, Leah chafed under Rachel's beauty, and for various reasons Rachel chafed under Leah's being the oldest. Rachel acknowledges that their competition had been a life-long struggle, memorialized in the name of Naphtali (30:8).

Idols are devastating. Everyone has them because (1) we must get our identity—our sense that we are distinctive and special—out of *some*thing, and (2) whatever that something is becomes a non-negotiable center. We must have it "or we die." That means we are inconsolably shattered if we lose it and we become uncontrollably angry or afraid if it is threatened. Idols control us. They dominate those who don't know God personally, but (as we see here) they continue to operate in the lives of those who have personally encountered God and entered into a covenant relationship with him.

6. Read Genesis 29:31, 30:22; see Hebrews 7:14. How does God deal with Leah's lovelessness and Rachel's barrenness? What does this tell us about God's salvation?

Look at the comfort of 29:31: "When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb." This is more than simply an evidence of God's merciful compassion. It is that, but much more. First, it reinforces that God particularly loves the outcast, the rejected, and the outsider. God chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong, and the despised things to shame the accepted (1 Cor 1:26-29). God's own Son came as a poor man, a man who was rejected and killed. He brought salvation through suffering and death, not achievement and power. All through history, therefore, God has preferred the ones the world rejects as the instruments of his salvation. He has to do this over and over again to break us of our addiction to status, influence, beauty, and privilege. Second, it shows us God as the true bridegroom (Ezek. 16). *He* is being the husband to Leah that Jacob is not! He is loving the wife who is unloved. He is the father of the fatherless and defends the widow and "sets the lonely in families" (Ps. 68:6). Leah is a husband-less wife, but God is her husband and groom.

But thirdly, God gives her the most astonishing gift of all. The last (and climactic) child of this passage is her fourth son, Judah (29:35). All the commentators notice something strange about Leah's statement when he is born. Finally she seems to "get past" (at least for the moment; see 30:15-21) her yearning for her husband's love. She stops singing songs of lament and offers an undiluted note of praise, almost defiantly so. "*This* time, I will praise the Lord." She gets some kind of triumph over her idolatry and seems to feel particularly blessed and loved by God. Of course she couldn't know (but maybe sensed intuitively) that God had just blessed her remarkably. Judah (as the Genesis writer knows) is the one through whom the coming King will come (see Gen. 49:8-10). Look, then. Not beautiful, loved Rachel, but unattractive, rejected Leah becomes the mother of our Lord. Why? Because even God's foreshadowing of his salvation must be true to its nature. It is the way of the cross, of repentance, humility, unselfishness, and sacrifice. God saves not the great and proud but those who know they are not great at all. It is the people the world rejects who soonest grasp the gospel of grace. God becomes the true bridegroom to Leah and lets her give birth to the true Bridegroom of the world (John 3:29-30; Eph. 5:21-33).

And yet God does not reject Rachel. He opens her womb and she gives birth to Joseph, who is really the star of the rest of the book of Genesis. Through him will come the first concrete fulfillment of God's promise that through Abraham's seed the nations of the earth will be blessed. (His life is covered in the "Living in a Pluralistic Society" study.) The theme of God bringing life out of barrenness is one of the key themes of Genesis. In every generation (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel) in the life of the chosen family, there has been a natural human inability (barrenness) that God breaks through with his power. Over and over this shows

us that God's salvation is not the fruit of our human ability "topped off" with God's help. It is by his grace and power from first to last. It is a miracle.

So we have the birth of the royal line through the rejected wife, and the birth of greatest son (of that generation) through the barren wife. Genesis continues the "pattern of inversion" we have seen all along. The deceiver becomes deceived, but the empty-handed fugitive will leave Haran as a man of means and wealth. In this generation it is the son not loved (Jacob) and the wife not loved (Leah) who bear the Messianic seed into the world. The gospel turns things upside down. The weak are really the strong. The repentant are the righteous. The people who think they are righteous are rejected. The cross is a victory.

It is amazing that God works with such unpromising material! Everyone in this narrative is desperately needy, wrestling, and struggling. There are no heroes at all. No one is close to being admirable, though some are pathetic at times. What kind of book *is* this Bible? Where are the good examples for us to emulate? Where are the inspirational stories? Where are the heroic quests? Instead we are given, in detail, the squabbles of a very, very dysfunctional family. Yet out of all this comes chastened, humble, strong, gracious character. And out of this the Messiah comes! This should not surprise us. God brings his salvation through ordinary people he hones and shapes through the troubles of life and their own sins. Even when they give themselves to him, they do so fitfully and imperfectly and lapse regularly. Yet he saves the whole world through them. So why shouldn't he do great things through you?

7. What can we learn from this passage about family life?

Bigamy and polygamy are not explicitly condemned in Genesis and this has bothered many people. But as we have said previously, the overall story of Genesis does more to undermine the practice than any simple prohibition could. Genesis 2:24 strongly indicates that marriage as God instituted it was between one man and one woman. The rest of the book bears this out with a vengeance! We already saw the problems of Abraham's bigamy, but the storminess of Jacob's marriages to four women is laid out in the most detail. It is compelling evidence that polygamy doesn't work.

If we want to extrapolate a little further, we can safely learn a few other things from the narratives, all by way of negation.

First, *put your spouse first*. It is painfully clear that the wives of the patriarchs were dying to have the primary place in their husbands' hearts. The same, of course, is true in reverse—a husband needs to have the primary place in his wife's heart. We must not be "married" to someone or something else. (This goes for your career or other interests, not just other persons.) A spouse needs to feel that he or she has the spouse's primary loyalty, second only to God.

notes

Second, *love your children equitably*. The obvious favoritism of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob for one child over another wreaks havoc on everyone. In fact, it is likely that it was "passed on." Isaac saw Abraham do it, then he did it, and then Jacob (though hurt by it) continues to do it. The reasons for favoritism are many, but they are at best a selfish lack of discipline on the parent's part and at worse a form of idolatry the parent uses to meet an inner need that God should be filling.

Third, *don't make idols of romance* (as with Jacob—"This will make it all better") *or spouse* (as with Leah—"If only my husband will love me") *or children* (as with Rachel—"Give me children or I die!"). It is strange that the Bible, thought to be the source of "family values," should give so many examples of people who made an idol out of family!

In summary, we see that leading a family to wholeness takes wisdom, faith, and a right ordering of our loves through a healthy relationship to God.

What if we have already made a lot of seemingly irrevocable mistakes with our family? Keep in mind that the founders of Israel, the twelve sons of Jacob, were fathered by a liar with deep need to be honored, loved, and mothered by women who used everyone around them to fill their inner emptiness. Into that family these children were born, and they grew up with many problems. Yet through them God created his people and saved the world. It is by grace you are saved, through faith. That is our hope.

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1 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 249.

2 See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1994), p. 236.

3 See Gordon J. Wenham, p. 235.

4 Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 154.

5 Robert Alter, p. 155.

6 Author's paraphrase of Robert Alter, p. 155.

7 Robert Alter, p. 152.

8 Robert Alter, p. 158.

What were we put in the world to do?

Jacob Wrestles With God

Study 23 | Genesis 30:25 – 32:32

INTRODUCTION

This is one of the most powerful and dramatic narratives in the Bible and one of the most mysterious. But it clearly stands as the centerpiece of Jacob's life, where all the themes of his life converge. Though God's promise had actually come to Jacob as an unborn child, his first direct experience of God was at Bethel, where he entered into a covenant with him. Though all have noticed how imperfect his attitude was (28:20-22), at Bethel we see that he has a conscious, personal relationship with God. After receiving that new awareness of God in his life, Jacob begins to learn about his sin and the deceitfulness of his heart (chapters 29-31). Now, however, he is returning to his homeland. He is about to meet Esau, a moment he has dreaded for years. And at this climactic moment, when surely Jacob is reviewing his whole life and what it means, God meets him in a very unusual way. It is quite different from their first encounter.

It is fair to say that after this meeting, Jacob is a changed man. It is not helpful to impose our post-cross, post-Pentecost experience back onto Jacob to try and determine when he was really "born again." But we can learn for ourselves that it usually takes more than one encounter with God to understand the true dimensions of our sin and God's gracious provision. Looking back over our (usually) multiple experiences, it is not easy to tell exactly which one was *the* conversion experience. God knows, but we often can't be sure.

PRE-PASSAGE SUMMARY

Genesis 30:25-32:2. After Rachel finally has a child, Jacob decides to go home (30:25-27). Perhaps the birth confirmed to Jacob that God was going to honor all his promises to him. He asks Laban's permission to leave. Laban's refusal is cast in very courteous and pious-sounding terms (as we might expect). He insists that God is blessing him because of Jacob and then offers him a higher salary (30:28). This was a veiled way to say, "I'll let you go if the price is right!" Laban asks Jacob to name a higher salary figure (30:31).

Jacob makes the following offer. He wants as his salary the dark sheep or the bi-colored sheep and goats (v. 32). The great majority of the sheep and goats are white, but a small percentage is either black or black-and-white ("streaked," "spotted," or "speckled"). Jacob names them as his—and thus his wages. This makes sense on several fronts. First, it is a clear way to be sure "whose were whose" and a check against theft or cheating (v. 33). Second, it is just and equitable. It would seem that this percentage of bi-colored and dark animals would generally be a fixed percentage. Thus, if the flocks increased under Jacob, both Jacob and Laban would profit. If they decreased, both would suffer loss. Laban agrees to the deal (30:34-36) and sends off the dark and bi-colored animals to be cared for by his sons. That way, these animals could not mate with others and increase their genetic characteristics within the flock.

However, despite Laban's machinations, the number of bi-colored animals born during the next mating season was unusually high. Why? The text tells us that Jacob carefully put bi-colored branches in front of the stronger animals. He (and perhaps the author of Genesis) thought that this actually produced bi-colored sheep and goats. This certainly is what happened, and Jacob probably thought that his intelligence had finally triumphed over Laban's scheming. But most modern readers can see even more clearly that it was God who intervened and prospered him at Laban's expense so he could return home with real substance. Although Laban's sons felt cheated and were furious about it (31:1), Laban had been outwitted in a freely negotiated deal that had been followed to the letter. There was nothing Laban or anyone else could do about it. Jacob had not cheated. God had worked in the situation to fulfill his promise to Jacob that he would eventually return to his land and take up his inheritance (28:13-15).

But now Laban and his sons were resentful toward Jacob (31:1-2). Jacob realized that he had to leave immediately or risk some kind of counter-move (perhaps even a violent one) by his in-laws. He convinced his wives to leave their father (31:4-16) and then took off while Laban was away from home, giving himself a three-day head start (31:19-22). When Laban discovered their flight, he set out in hot pursuit, almost certainly with the intention to have a literal fight with Jacob to bring him back. But God intervened again and warned Laban in a dream (31:24). Instead, Laban meets Jacob and they make a very testy and wary covenant not to harm each other (31:48-53). As Jacob comes near his homeland, he has a vision of angels to encourage him and remind him of God's protection (32:1-2).

Rachel's behavior again reminds us how gradual (but progressive!) the work of salvation is in the lives of these central biblical figures. Rachel steals Laban's household idols (Gen. 31:19) as she flees to the Lord's Promised Land! Why did she steal the *teraphim* when they were of no particular value (they were not made of silver or gold)? Rachel reveals how incompletely she understands the power and grace of Jacob's God. She wants to have "all her bases covered." Laban's gods are a superstitious insurance policy. [1] *Maybe* the Lord will help her the next time she is in trouble, but if not, maybe the old gods will do the trick. This supposed spiritual safety valve almost brings disaster on Jacob's entire household (31:31-35). The Lord God cannot be "added" to our lives as one more hedge against failure. He is not one more resource to help us achieve our agenda. He *is* a whole new life agenda. Rachel has not learned this. The family that brings the salvation of the Lord into the world is itself deeply flawed and in need of grace.

1. Read Genesis 32:1-2. Jacob now turns away from his fear of Laban to his fear of what lies ahead. What does the name "Mahanaim" mean? What does that show about Jacob's state of mind? What does that show about God? (See Ps. 32:2; 2 Kings 6:15-17; 1 Cor. 10:13.)

The word *Mahanaim* means "two camps." Jacob was, of course, anxious and frightened by the prospect of meeting Esau. He felt small and vulnerable. The name seems to indicate that he had seen angels who appeared to be in a troop or an army of soldiers because they appeared to be a "camp." Thus, the name is the sign of an encouraged heart. Jacob realized he was not alone. He was in charge of one camp, but there was a second camp that was marching with him.

God does not promise that his children will be exempt from suffering, temptations, and tests. But there are numerous places where God promises to give us what we will need to meet the tests. (First Corinthians 10:13 is one of many examples.) We need a sense of his presence, or an increase of courage and self-control, or wisdom to make a good choice, and so on. We may not know what we need for the situation, but God promises to give it to us. These two little verses (32:1-2) demonstrate that.

2. Read Genesis 32:3-22. What evidence do you see of a changed character in Jacob? What do we learn about prayer from Jacob's prayer?

Jacob hopes that time has healed the wound and bitterness of his brother Esau, but the initial scouting report is alarming. "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him" (32:6). This is stunning news. It can mean only one of two things: Esau is coming to welcome Jacob royally or he is coming to attack him. Since there seemed to be no likelihood of the former possibility, Jacob was horrified. This was the greatest crisis of his life. His response reveals, however, a marked change in his character after years under God's hand.

The most obvious change is *the fact and the grace-awareness of prayer* (32:9-12). The fact that Jacob prays in a crisis is, in itself, a major change. In the past, he dealt with crises with his own ingenuity. The content of the prayer is also significant. It is theological, humble, and specific. First, it is *theological*. Jacob takes time to remember that this God is the "God of my father Abraham . . . my father Isaac" (v. 9). He puts his personal need into the larger context of God's saving purposes and actions in the world. He does not come pointing to his fear or hurt, but to God's own Word and character (v. 9: "[You] said to me 'Go back to your country and your relatives,'" and v. 12: "But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper'"). Second, his prayer was *humble*. "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown me" (v. 10). This is a major change from the negotiated, conditional vow he made to God at the

end of chapter 28! There he says that he will serve God if God will show himself reliable (28:20-22). But now he admits that God has been serving his needs though *he* has not proved reliable. This is the first overt expression of grace-awareness in Jacob. He has moved from deep self-pity toward God ("I am not getting anywhere near what I deserve") to conditional obedience toward God ("I hope to get pretty much what I deserve") to grace-based gratitude toward God ("I am getting far, far better than I deserve."). Third, the prayer was *specific*. Jacob does not hide his real intention under flowery phrases. He comes to the point: "Save me . . . from the hand of my brother" (v. 11).

The second change in Jacob is the *balance between (resourceful) resistance and (obedient) acceptance of his dangerous situation*. We have already noted his awareness of "two camps," of his confidence in the presence of God's unseen forces exercising his power in this setting. In the past, he had no such awareness or confidence. For example, in chapter 27, he knew of God's promise that he was the heir of Abraham's promise (25:23) but he took it upon himself to fulfill God's promise *for* him by deceiving and manipulating his father Isaac. He believed he had to "take the matter into his own hands" if justice was to be done. He lied, cheated, and exploited. In so doing, he was putting himself, almost literally, on God's throne. He was breaking God's law left and right to bring about an outcome he believed *had* to happen. Like God, he was determining which ends justify what means.

Now we see a very different man. On the one hand, he is not passive. When he hears Esau is coming, he immediately devises a plan and puts it in motion. He divides his company so that it cannot be attacked all at once (32:7-8). He sends ahead of him three waves of choice gifts to mollify Esau (32:13-20). Jacob is still very resourceful and shrewd! On the other hand, he does not resort to lying, deception, or any effort to ambush Esau. Most interesting of all, Jacob does not do the most risk-free act of all. He does not flee! Why? As he says in his prayer, he is obeying the Lord, who called him to return to Canaan. When we obey God's Word, even though disobedience would seem safer, we are putting ourselves in God's hands and trusting him. When we disobey him to be "safe," we are actually running into spiritual danger. Sin against God ultimately leads to spiritual, personal, and relational breakdown. In the past, that was what Jacob would have done. But now he is a changed man.

3. Read Genesis 32:22-24. Why do you think Jacob wanted to be alone? How is the mysterious wrestler an unexpected answer to Jacob's prayer?

The verses that introduce the famous incident are not unimportant. The strong implication is that Jacob sent everyone away so he could be alone to think and especially to pray.

In Jacob's mind, the next day would be the climax of his life—the day of revelation. All the lines of his life were converging. All his life he had wrestled with Esau for the blessing. In 25:22 we saw that Rebekah, pregnant with Esau and Jacob, had sought a prophet to understand the nature of the violent struggle going on in her womb. Then in 25:27-34 we see Jacob beginning to struggle with Esau for the favor and love of his father and the honor and leadership of his family. But Jacob had overreached. He had awakened murderous anger in his physically more powerful brother, and he had gone into exile for it. This is how Jacob would have seen his whole life—as one long wrestling match with Esau. Esau was the one who had kept him from his blessing, his happiness, his destiny, his father. And now Esau was coming with a small army. Tomorrow would be the last battle. Was this to be the final defeat? Or would he be able to win his brother over? What would happen? No matter what happened, the next day would set the course for the rest of his life, even if it ended that day.

It is not surprising, then, that Jacob wanted to spend this last night alone before the most crucial day of his life. It was highly unlikely that Esau would attack by night, so Jacob didn't need to be protected by his company. Almost certainly he sent everyone else across the Jabbok so he could spend the last hours alone, in prayer with God, before he faced Esau. We already saw in verse 9 that he has developed the instinct to turn to God in a crisis. That is surely what he was doing in the deep darkness, all alone.

This makes the strange attack even stranger. The sentence of verse 24 says, "So Jacob was left alone" but finishes with "and a man wrestled with him till daybreak." The artistry of the narrator is remarkable. First, notice how he shows the mysterious nature of this figure. *Jacob was attacked even though he was alone*. The text is deliberately paradoxical. Was he alone or was he attacked? The answer is that he was alone—and yet he was still attacked. Obviously, this is not an ordinary man. Also notice how sudden and out-of-the-blue this attack is. There is no introduction. The attack comes in the middle of a sentence that gave no hint of it as it began. That is how sudden and astonishing this attack must have been to Jacob.

But what is most strange is that this is "God" (v. 30). Jacob is praying to God for strength and protection—and God attacks him. Literally! God assaults Jacob in a life-and-death struggle that leaves him permanently crippled. Is this any way to help a man who is scared, weak, and at the end of his rope? Is this the way to answer the prayers of a man you promised to bless and love? The answer, of course, is that God does sometimes respond to prayers for protection with difficulties and even wounds. He sometimes allows us to go through great troubles for mysterious reasons the Bible insists are wise and loving. But there is no more vivid depiction of this principle than this incident. Jacob is praying, "Oh, Lord! Give me peace and strength! Protect me!" And God in response literally smacks him to the ground.

This is the teaching: God may sometimes answer prayers for peace and protection with difficulties and wounds. But we should not wield this principle lightly. We should not say breezily to someone in pain, "I see you are suffering, but I am sure God is doing this to you for a loving purpose." The Bible does definitely say that if we trust him, even the bad things that happen to us will be used by him as part of his plan for good and glory (Rom. 8:28). But we must also remember other aspects of God's attitude toward evil and suffering in the world. We need to see Jesus weeping and angry at the death of his friend Lazarus and the grief of his family (John 11:1-44). Suffering and death are not God's original design for the world, and the cross shows his willingness to enter pain and suffering so that he can someday end it all *without* having to end us along with it! We must not imagine God coldly inflicting pain on us with clinical detachment. Yet this passage starkly shows us how God may answer our heartfelt prayers in very counter-intuitive, shocking ways. Our God is not a "tame" God.

4. Read Genesis 32:24-30. How is the mysterious wrestler's identity slowly revealed? What are the pieces of evidence?

The narrator deliberately keeps the identity of the "man" of verse 24 as obscure to the reader as it was to Jacob. And in the end, though the conclusion is drawn, the evidence is as spotty and enigmatic to us as it was to Jacob.

First, there is the powerful "touch" (v. 25). Commentators note that the Hebrew word means "touch" quite literally—it is nothing but the merest tap. Yet immediately, Jacob's hip is permanently damaged. As Gordon Wenham observes, "A touch that dislocates indicates an opponent with superhuman power." [2]

Second, there is the need to leave "for it is daybreak" (v. 26). Some have thought that the man was afraid of daylight—and therefore this was some kind of a "night spirit" who would disintegrate under the sun. But the evidence suggests that the man's concern about daybreak was not a concern for *his* safety but for *Jacob's*. When Moses asked to see God's glory, God insisted that no one could look upon his face and live (Ex. 33:20). The real reason for his desire to leave is borne out by the name given to the place: *Peniel*, "the face of God." Jacob's claim that he saw God's face and lived (v. 30) probably indicates that in the first grayness of incipient dawn, he was able to make out the face of the divine wrestler just before he left or vanished.

Third, there is the wrestler's remarkable knowledge of Jacob's life. Though he asks Jacob to speak his name, this is not due to a lack of knowledge. When he says, "You have struggled with God and with man and have overcome" (v. 28), he shows he knows Jacob's whole life history and can sum it up in a sentence. (Compare how Jesus does this with Nathanael in John 1:43-51).

Fourth, and most decisively, he changes Jacob's name and declares that he has wrestled with "God" and come out victorious (v. 28b). No one has the right to name or rename someone except a person in great authority—a parent or a king—or a Creator. And who has the right to pronounce a man's whole life a triumph? Who has the right to say that he is victorious with God? The most overt piece of evidence is that the wrestler simply says that Jacob has been wrestling with God himself. No wonder Jacob finally concludes, "I saw God face to face" (v. 30).

5. Who won the match? Make a case from the passage for the thesis that the wrestler won. Make a case from the passage that Jacob won.

This question brings the paradoxes and oppositional aspects of this strange wrestling match into greater focus.

Thesis: The wrestler won.
First, the mysterious wrestler shows his enormous power in his "touch" that permanently cripples Jacob (vv. 25, 31-32). This shows he was holding back his strength. Second, the wrestler names Jacob—a sign of authority and power, not humiliation or defeat. But thirdly, the wrestler is God, and he has promised to bless and make Jacob great and be with him (28:13-15; 31:3). So isn't this what God wanted? Didn't he want Jacob to hold onto him in faith and seek the blessing from him? Fourth, there is no place that says God lost. Though God declares that Jacob has "overcome" or "prevailed" (i.e., was victorious), there is no place that says directly that God was defeated. God got all he (obviously) wanted to happen. So God won.

Thesis: Jacob won.
First, there is the remarkable evidence that "the man saw that he could not overpower [Jacob]" (v. 25). Even if we balance this statement with the evidence of the "power-touch," this seems to indicate a genuine limitation on the wrestler's power with Jacob. It suggests that God voluntarily limited himself and wrestled with Jacob as an equal. Second, the divine wrestler directly says that Jacob won (v. 28). Why? Jacob finally got the blessing (v. 28) he had longed for from the beginning (27:19). Jacob was victorious because once he began to realize the divinity of this mysterious wrestler, he does not flee. Rather he held on despite his pain and weakness (v. 26) and sought the blessing from God. In this he triumphs. So Jacob won.

6. Someone has said that this is a defeat and a victory for both parties. How does each party win through losing? Where do we see the ultimate example of triumph through defeat?

How is it possible that both wrestlers won? It is possible because both "won through losing." First it was Jacob who "won through losing." Derek Kidner shows that Hosea 12:4's comment on this is illuminating.

> It was defeat and victory in one. Hosea . . . illuminates it: "He strove with the angel and prevailed"—this is the language of strength; "he wept and sought his favor"—the language of weakness. After the maiming, combativeness had turned to a dogged dependence, and Jacob emerged broken [but] named and blessed. [3]

Initially, Jacob would have been fighting to get the man *off* him, out of his reach and clutches. Verse 25 says that the man was trying to "overpower" him, so Jacob's wrestling would have been aiming to put him off. But when the maiming happens and Jacob is broken and aware of his vulnerability and weakness, he changes his strategy. He begins to hang on! The one he was struggling to get away from he now wrestles to stay near. "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (v. 26). What has happened? Jacob has spent his life thinking that Esau was the one he was struggling with, the one who was keeping him from leading a blessed, successful, and happy life. But now, in the most vivid way possible, we come to see that it is *God* he has been wrestling with all his life—not Esau, Laban, or Isaac. And it is from God that he should have been seeking his "blessing," not any other source. Derek Kidner explains:

> The conflict brought to a head the battling and groping of a lifetime, and Jacob's desperate embrace vividly expressed his ambivalent attitude to God, of love and enmity, defiance and dependence. It was against [God] . . . that he had been pitting his strength, as he now discovered; yet the initiative had been God's, as it was this night, to chasten his pride and challenge his tenacity. [4]

The weakness and pain he experienced led Jacob to the realization of a lifetime—he had been fighting God, and he needed God's presence and blessing in his life over anyone else's. By clinging bravely and doggedly to God in this weakness, he triumphed. He was saying, "I see now that what I need above all is you. Not you as a means to the end of something else. You. I won't let go until I have your blessing and presence permanently in my life." But it was only through terrible weakness that Jacob won.

Second, however, it is obvious that God also voluntarily made himself weak. God, though Lord of the universe, limited himself to fight on Jacob's level. He experienced weakness. He put himself in a position where he had to ask to be let go! But think: it is only by limiting his power that he won Jacob's mind and heart and transformed his character. So God triumphed through becoming weak. Of course, this points to another time when God became weak yet triumphed. Walter Brueggemann reflects on this:

> What kind of God is it who will be pressed to a draw by this man? . . . Certainly no ordinary God! . . . There is something new underway here about the weakness of God . . . . This theology of weakness in power and power in weakness turns this text towards the New Testament and the gospel of the cross. This same dialectic stands behind Jesus' encounter with his disciples (Mark 10:35-45). They want thrones, an equivalent to 'asking the name.' Jesus counters by asking them about cups, baptisms and crosses. Like Jacob, they are invited to be persons of faith who prevail, but to do so with a limp. . . . Jacob's struggle . . . may hint at an anticipation of the Crucified One. [5]

Why can Jacob come so close to God and still have his life spared (v. 30)? It is because Jesus came in weakness and died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. In this, his weakness became our strength, his defeat our victory. Jesus was thus the ultimate Jacob, who was overpowered by the justice of God. He took the devastating blow of justice we deserved so that we, like Jacob, could only receive the bearable wounds of love and grace to wake us up!

7. What does Jacob receive from God? How are these things analogous to what all Christians receive from their saving encounter with God?

First, he receives *a new name*, "Israel" (v. 28). This shows that when we meet God, we do not just receive an added boost to our lives. Instead there is a complete new start; a whole new identity is forged. It is interesting that this name incorporates what Jacob already is and yet still expresses a transformation. "Jacob" meant "wrestler"—one who grapples, claws, and grasps. "Israel" literally means "God fights" and refers to Jacob's triumph in his wrestling with God. When Jacob realized who he was struggling with, he did not stop wrestling. He is a wrestler after all! But he turned his prowess toward holding onto God rather than resisting him. As Derek Kidner said, Jacob's "combativeness" was turned into a "dogged dependence." [6] In short, the new birth does not wipe out our old temperament and personality. We are new and yet continuous with what we were. As Paul says, the Christian is "me, but not me" (see Gal. 2:20). The new birth takes our fundamental capacities and directs them to new ends. Kidner writes:

> [God] would have all of Jacob's will to win, to attain and obtain, yet purged of self-sufficiency and redirected to the proper object of man's love, God Himself. [7]

Second, he receives *the blessing*. When he says, "You have overcome" in verse 28, God is saying, "You have won!" Even though Jacob has been maimed and crippled and is holding on for dear life, Jacob is declared a winner. This is a good image of justification by faith. Though we have all sorts of flaws and failures, and though we still have all our lives ahead of us, God declares us victors if we put our faith in Christ. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

Third, he receives *a limp*. The permanent crippling would remind Jacob of his foolishness in fighting with God. It was a permanent humbling. How remarkable that along with the great affirmation of Jacob's victory comes an abiding reminder of his failure! This is a great picture of what it means to be a justified Christian. Luther said that we are *simul justus et peccator.* If we are saved by works, then we are bold (but not humble) when succeeding in our moral performance, or humble (but not confident) when we are failing in our moral performance. But if we are saved by sheer grace, we are both bold and humble together. We joyfully limp. The sun rises on us though we walk haltingly. We know we are accepted, but only by sheer grace.

8. Compare verse 29 with Exodus 3:13-15 and Judges 13:18. Why do you think God doesn't tell Jacob his name? What can we learn from this?

When Moses asks God his name, he is told it is "I am that I am." When the parents of Samson ask God his name, they are told that it is "wonderful beyond imagining." [**Note:** some translations translate the word "beyond understanding" and thus see the response as a brush-off similar to God's response to Jacob. But actually the name is given.] Unlike the request to see God's face (Ex. 33:20), God does not automatically deny the request to know his name. God's name is, of course, multi-dimensional, as is God himself. But it is a bit surprising that God will not answer Jacob at all.

Some believe that Jacob's question is an effort to put himself on the same level with God in his new relationship. God asked Jacob his name in a re-naming ceremony (vv. 27-28). Now Jacob wants to know God's name in an effort to simply "stay even." This would explain why the name is withheld, but the theory doesn't ring true to me. Others believe Jacob simply wants to put the matter of the wrestler's identity totally beyond doubt. That makes the most sense as his motivation. But why then was the name withheld?

Maybe the main thing to learn is (again) that this God is not a "tame" God who is under our control. He has his curriculum laid out for every one of us. He knows what we need when we need it. We may see Moses or Samson's parents getting something from God and we assume we can get it too. But every person is unique and God's training curriculum for every person is tailored to our particular needs.

notes

[1] See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1994), p. 274.

[2] Gordon J. Wenham, p. 296.

[3] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 169

[4] Derek Kidner, p. 169.

[5] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 267, 269, 271.

[6] Derek Kidner, p. 169.

[7] Derek Kidner, p. 169.

What were we put in the world to do?

The Meaning of Free Grace

Study 24 | **Genesis 48:1-22**

INTRODUCTION

After Jacob wrestles with God in Genesis 32, he recedes from the scene as Genesis shifts its focus to Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37-50). [1] However, in Genesis 48 Jacob has a prominent place again. He has been reunited with Joseph and is nearing death. Of all the incidents in Jacob's life that Genesis records, this appears to be the most unexciting, especially compared to the wrestling at Peniel, the vision of the stairway between heaven and earth, the love story with Rachel, and the conspiracy to cheat Esau out of his blessing by duping his blind father Isaac.

However, this is the last scene in Jacob's life. On his death bed, he brings in his family—in this case, his grandchildren Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of his beloved Joseph. He gives them a final blessing, which carries authoritative weight regarding the future of the family. It was more than a benediction; it was a prophetic utterance.

Hebrews 11, the great New Testament chapter on heroes of the faith, singles out this incident in Jacob's life as the one worthy to summarize his spiritual pilgrimage. Verse 21 reads: "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff." To the writer of Hebrews, this is the triumphant moment of Jacob's life, the preeminent expression of his faith. We will conclude our study of Genesis and Jacob's life by considering why.

PRE-PASSAGE SUMMARY

After Jacob's night of wrestling with the Angel of the Lord (Study 23), his long-feared meeting with his brother Esau finally takes place (Gen. 33). Esau's gracious welcome and his willingness to reconcile with the brother who cheated him of his birthright and blessing twenty years earlier is evidence to Jacob of God's blessing and protection. Nevertheless, Jacob's ingrained distrust of Esau leads him to decline his invitation to settle near him, as well as his offer to accompany his family on the journey. Jacob promises to follow Esau at a slower pace, but he travels instead to Succoth, buys land near Shechem, and sets up his household there (33:17-20). Despite the building of an altar, Derek Kidner regards this as "a backward step, spiritually as well as geographically. . . . The deviousness of the old Jacob comes out, for he could have said plainly [to Esau] that he was under oath to go to Bethel [see Gen. 28:20-22]." [2]

Jacob apparently lived for years near Shechem instead of traveling a short distance to return to Bethel, as he had promised the Lord when he fled from home twenty years earlier. In Shechem, this spiritual compromise brought him into regular contact with the local Canaanites. The eventual result was the sexual violation of his daughter Dinah by the infatuated son of Hamor, a city leader (Gen. 34). Jacob did nothing to avenge this wrong, but Dinah's brothers

devised a plot in which all the townsmen were circumcised as a pre-condition of Dinah's marriage to Hamor's son. While they were incapacitated, Simeon and Levi (perhaps alone) attacked Shechem and killed every male. Their brothers then looted the city, making it necessary for Jacob to leave the area for safety's sake.

Once in Bethel (Gen. 35) God calls Jacob to purge his household of idols and gives him an additional blessing (vv. 9-13). Soon after, Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin (vv. 16-17). Isaac also dies (v. 29) and is buried by his two sons.

Very little is heard about Jacob in the Joseph narrative, except to note that the favoritism Jacob had for Joseph is transferred to Benjamin after Joseph is presumed dead. Jacob's grief for Joseph and his refusal to be parted from Benjamin drive the dramatic events of the story. They are what enable Joseph to test the character of his brothers twenty years after they betrayed him. Finally, the family is reunited and settled in Egypt, and Jacob now calls Joseph to bring his children to receive his final blessing.

1. **Read Genesis 48:1-7, 15-16. On what reality does Jacob base the blessing he is about to give? How does he summarize his life?**

Jacob summarizes the basic theme of his life as the overpowering grace of God. The blessings he is about to give are based on the faithfulness of God's promises (vv. 3-4). God has a long history of faithfulness to Jacob's family, which is about to be extended to the fourth generation.

2. **What is significant about the way Jacob describes God in verses 15-16 as (a) "the God before whom my fathers walked," (b) "the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day," and (c) "the Angel who has delivered me from all harm"?**

   (a) Derek Kidner writes, "The threefold invocation of God opens up many vistas, not by naming his attributes . . . but by recalling his dealings. He was the God in covenant with 'my fathers,' a fact which had steadied Jacob's faith at many crises." [3] Jacob knew he had a historical and legal connection to the God who had pledged himself to Abraham and Isaac before him. This was something God initiated and it was on the strength of God's character and commitment that the relationship continued. Here he is describing the objective fact of a relationship initiated by a gracious God.

   (b) When Jacob says, "The God who has been my shepherd" (v. 16), it is the first time in Scripture that God is called a shepherd. This is also Jacob's way of characterizing his own spiritual condition and his need of God's grace—if God is a shepherd, Jacob is a sheep. A sheep that gets

away from a shepherd dies, because sheep are the most helpless and stupid of all livestock. They cannot find food on their own or get home on their own. They are helpless against predators. Almost all other animals take much less care. You can let horses and cattle out in the morning and bring them back in at night, but you can't do that with sheep unless they're in a very enclosed area. Sheep need twenty-four-hour care.

What does this tell us about our spiritual state? If we, like Jacob, are that weak and clueless, we don't need a God like the gods of other religions that say, "Here is what you must do. Do it. Seek me, find me, obey my rules and keep my law." Jacob knows that he is (and we are) too clueless for that. Spiritually, we're sheep who need a shepherd to constantly rescue us. We don't need a God who gives us the religious rules for life and sends us out to do them. We need a God who fulfills the rules for us, then tells us over and over again that he's done it, and constantly comes back to rescue us, though we neither deserve it nor seek it. We have an absolute need for God's grace.

(c) Jacob alludes to his personal *experience* of the grace of God when he says in verse 16, "The Angel who has delivered me from all harm, may he bless these boys." This is a clear reference to what happened to him at Peniel, which we considered last week.

There's a mysterious but repeated tendency in the book of Genesis (and all of the Hebrew scriptures) that in times of personal or national crisis, God comes in visible, physical, human form as the Angel of the Lord. Notice that Jacob does not say "*an* angel of the Lord." The three clauses in verses 15 and 16 are parallel references to God. The Angel is a synonym for God. The night Jacob wrestled the mysterious stranger, he was wrestling the Angel of the Lord, and that night God blessed him.

What can we learn from Jacob's personal experience with this God of grace? The encounter at Peniel teaches us that an experience of God's grace always has two aspects. On the surface, the two seem contradictory, but actually they are interdependent. On the one hand, the night Jacob was attacked by the great wrestler until he was wrestled into the ground, crippled, and humbled was the night he had an experience of God's grace. He saw his lostness; he saw his foolishness; he saw that he'd been fighting God all his life. He got a deeper view of his own brokenness and stupidity. He saw that he wasn't just a man who was trying his best to live the best life he could; he was a sheep. But the second thing that happened that night was that he began to see God not just as a remote law-giver, but as a shepherd. As One who would come after him. One who wanted to bless him. One who only hurt him in order to wake him up.

Experiencing the grace of God always includes these two superficially opposed but deeply interdependent aspects. A deeper experience of your lostness—

seeing that you're really more broken and alienated from God than you thought—leads to a deeper experience of his blessing—seeing that he is more committed to you, more in love with you, more patient with you, and more of a shepherd than you ever dared hope. That's what happened to Jacob that night.

3. How does the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh compare to the blessing Jacob secured from his father (Gen. 27:1-40)?

Like Isaac, Jacob was old and could not see well when he gave this blessing. Like Isaac, Jacob gave the greater blessing to the younger son, Manasseh.

Unlike Isaac, however, Jacob gave his blessings purposefully; he was not deceived or manipulated into acting as he did. Also unlike Isaac, Jacob gave his blessings in faith. Isaac certainly must have known that God had said that Rebekah's older son would serve the younger (Gen. 25:23). In his plan to give Esau the greater blessing, Isaac was defying this word from the Lord. Jacob, on the other hand, was giving the greater blessing to the younger son as an act of faith, one that revealed how thoroughly an understanding of grace had permeated his life. Jacob is not looking at the good news of grace just as a doctrine or legal contract, not just as an experience, but as a worldview, a new way of looking at absolutely everything in the world, both his social reality and his personal reality. This is why Hebrews singles out the incident as the triumph of grace in his life.

4. Read Genesis 48:17-20. How does Joseph respond to Jacob's actions? How does Joseph's view of social reality differ from Jacob's?

Joseph leads his two sons to Jacob and, very carefully in light of his failing vision, places each of Jacob's hands on the appropriate son. He leads his older son, Manasseh, to Jacob's right hand because the elder son was the one who got the inheritance in those ancient cultures. He was supposed to get the lion's share of the family's wealth, power, and honor. The right hand was the place of power, so Joseph brings Manasseh to Jacob's right hand and he brings Ephraim, the second son, to his left hand. Everything is ready for them to receive their blessings, but as Jacob begins, he reverses his hands and places the right hand of greater blessing on Ephraim and the left hand of lesser blessing on the older son, Manasseh.

Joseph is upset by this. Some commentators say that when Joseph (vv. 17-18), saw his father place his right hand on Ephraim's head, he was displeased. He removes his father's hand and interrupts: "No, my father." He must have been agitated. He must have assumed that Jacob couldn't tell the two boys apart. But Jacob says, "My son, I know exactly what I'm doing." The narrator is

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showing us that for the first time in his life, Jacob is seeing clearly through the lenses of grace. When Jacob refuses to move his hands back to their original position, he is showing that his understanding of the grace of God has changed the way he looks at social reality. He sees things very differently from the way Joseph sees them.

Joseph gets agitated because he is a man of his time, and he knows that the world decreed that things got done through certain people. They got done through boys, not girls. They got done through older boys, not younger boys. They got done through wealthy families, not poor families. The world always decides the set of people who get things done. Today we may not follow the law of primogeniture that favors the firstborn male, but we still favor those who are born smart, born rich, or born with the right cheekbone structure. The world still has a set of people through whom things get done: the bigger, the taller, the more slender, the more beautiful, the wealthier, the more educated, the savvier, and the more successful. Jacob refuses to go that way. He senses the grace of God moving toward Ephraim and, when he puts his right hand on Ephraim's head, he is deliberately following God's economy.

When God works in the world, he repeatedly chooses the one the world says is *not* "the one." In Genesis, he chooses the younger son over the older son every time, utterly confounding the cultures of the day. He chooses Abel, not Cain. He chooses Isaac, not Ishmael. He chooses smarmy Jacob, not manly, dynamic, charismatic Esau. The salvation of the world comes not through fertile, beautiful Hagar but barren, old Sarah; not through beautiful Rachel but unattractive Leah.

This theme pervades Scripture. In the book of Judges, every single judge is the wrong kind of person. Every one is a mess or from the wrong side of the tracks. Years later, when Israel comes face to face with Goliath, God's deliverer is the only one of Jesse's sons who hasn't gone through puberty.

When you go to the Gospels, every time there's a prostitute and a religious leader, a tax collector and a teacher of the law, a racial outsider and a racial insider, a sexual outsider and insider, a morally degraded outsider and an upstanding, moral, Bible-teaching leader—every time there's a racial, sexual, moral, or political outsider versus an insider, Jesus works with the outsider. Why is this?

In the incident we are considering today, it's not that God has rejected Manasseh. Jacob assures Joseph, "Manasseh will still receive a blessing. But I want you to see that God's economy opposes the economy of the world." God works through the people the world thinks are failures. God's grace flows through them. Why? Because the ultimate example of God's work in the world was the only founder of a major religion who died in disgrace, abandoned by everyone he loved, including his Father, and beaten into the dust. Jesus Christ's salvation came through defeat, poverty, and rejection. Why?

Because God is a shepherd. If God were *just* a king, his salvation would be: "Here's the law. Do it and you will live." But because he is a shepherd and because we are sheep, he must come and fulfill everything *for* us. He does it by sending Jesus Christ to live the life we should have lived, and die the death we should have died, and take the penalty for our sin. This means that the salvation of God had to come into the world in weakness and defeat. We receive it in a way that is the opposite of the way we receive any other salvation offered by any other philosophy or religion. Every other philosophy or religion says: "Here's how you relate to God. Pull yourself together. Be strong. And then say, 'God, accept me because of what I've done.'" But the gospel says, "Admit that you're not together. Admit that you're weak, and say, 'God, you're going to have to relate to me because of what *he's* done.'"

That is why, as Walter Brueggemann says, "Jacob refuses to switch his hands. . . . Jacob refuses because he knows the God who, in the end, walks with the crucified one and who leads the band of all those excluded by the claims of primogeniture, merit, and reason." [4]

Joseph is still thinking like the world and wants the blessing for the older son. But Jacob has finally gotten over it. He has finally let the gospel of grace affect the way he views social reality, the way he looks at class, at birth order, at everything.

It took a long time. Jacob experienced the grace of God years earlier, but he continued to be like Joseph. He still liked the pretty over the ugly. He still liked the children of Rachel over the children of Leah. But at the end, it finally dawned on him. If I'm a sinner saved by sheer grace, if I am no better in any way than the people who are *not* saved or anyone else who *is* saved, that's got to change the way I look at everyone. I am not superior to anyone. Social reality has changed for Jacob because he's learned to look at it through the gospel of grace.

5. What are some ways that a worldview of grace would affect your social reality?

Here are two examples.

The gospel and the poor. If the gospel has shaped your worldview on social reality, instead of just pitying the poor and having compassion on them, you will respect the poor and serve alongside them. I once knew some highly motivated, middle class believers who moved into an inner city area to set up a free medical clinic. It was well-staffed and well-run, but virtually no one came to use it. When they went out to ask why, the people in the neighborhood said, "You didn't ask us what we wanted. You didn't put us on your board. You didn't involve us in the decision making process. Why not?" Though they had

compassion for the poor, these believers hadn't thought of that. Our society tells us repeatedly to care about the poor. It doesn't require spiritual change to care about social justice. But it takes a transforming spiritual experience to keep you from feeling superior to the poor when you meet them. You must look at them as equals. You should see them as partners.

The gospel and dating. Some years ago somebody said, "You know, the Christian singles at Redeemer are really not that different from everyone else in Manhattan. In most of Manhattan, the men wouldn't think of dating a woman who's overweight or unattractive, and the women would not think of dating a man who's not on a good career track. It's no different inside the church than it is outside."

Why can't the average Christian single bear to think about dating someone who has wonderful character and deep spirituality, yet isn't very cool or polished or good-looking? It's because their self-esteem can't handle dating somebody like that. If that is true, what is your self-esteem based on? Even if you're a sinner saved by grace, you have not learned to look at social reality differently. God does not put his right hand on the bigger kid, the more talented kid, the older, the more slender, the prettier, or the richer person. In the world, the first is first and the last is last, but in God's economy, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

6. Read Genesis 48:15-20. How does Jacob see his personal reality differently through the lens of grace?

Joseph has plans for Manasseh and for Ephraim. But Jacob is saying, "God is not going to give you the life you want. God is not going to do things the way you have planned. God is going to thwart your agenda." Joseph is saying, "Father, no, no," but Jacob is saying, "Yes."

Jacob looks back on his life and makes an astonishing statement in verse 16. He says, "May the God who has been my shepherd all my life . . . ." Consider the life Jacob had. He was raised by a father who didn't love him, which poisoned him psychologically. Then he worked twenty years for Laban, who exploited him, manipulated him, cheated him, and stole from him constantly. He was forced to marry a woman he didn't love. Though he finally married the woman he did love, she died young in childbirth. Finally, the light of his eyes, Joseph, was sold as a slave by the rest of his children out of jealousy. They lied to Jacob and told him that he was dead, so Jacob seems to spend the last twenty years of his life in a clinical depression. After all this, he now looks back at his life and says, "At every point throughout my life, I was under the care of a loving shepherd." Jacob was a professional shepherd. He knew that shepherds are always doing the best for the sheep but the sheep don't always know it.

A minister who was once a professional shepherd said this about finding lost sheep. "A sheep is a stupid animal. Sheep proverbially follow one another and lose their direction continually in a way that cats and dogs do not. But even when they are found, they are never happy to be found. It is extremely difficult to round up a lost sheep and bring it home unless you have a dog to scare it. The lost sheep rushes to and fro, so that even when you find it, you must seize it, cast it down, tie its forelegs together and its hind legs together, put it over your shoulder and carry it home struggling." [5]

How do you love a sheep? How do you save a sheep from death? You seize it, you cast it on the ground, you tie it up, and you pull it home struggling. The sheep never feels loved when it's being loved. The sheep never feels safe when it's being made safe. Jacob knows that, and that's what's so moving about him applying the shepherd grid to his life. The night he experienced the grace of God was the night he didn't see God as just a king and himself as a subject. He saw himself as a sheep in need of comprehensive care and God as a shepherd. Now he can say, "All those places when I thought God had abandoned me, that God was hurting me, that God was doing me wrong, *I* was wrong. He was always my loving shepherd." Instead of saying, "Why has God let this and that happen?" now, through the lens of God's grace, Jacob can say, "Thy will be done." Incredible peace comes from that.

When you look at your personal reality through a gospel lens, you will realize that in the history of the world God has done his saving work through defeat, suffering, pain, and confusing, inexplicable, tragic, difficult situations—especially in Christ. Wouldn't it make sense that he will sometimes work like that in *your* life? He is a shepherd and he's bringing you home.

7. In what ways does Jacob's experience of God's grace look ahead to the grace we know more fully in Christ? In what ways can we parallel Jacob's response?

In verse 17 Jacob refers to "the Angel who delivered me from all harm." The word he uses for "delivered" is the Hebrew word *goel*, the word for "redeem." It referred to what happened when a person incurred a debt so large that it was beyond his ability to repay. In such a case you would lose everything and you and your immediate family would go into indentured servitude. The *goel* was a relative who would come and, out of his or her own substance, pay the debt you owed and deliver you from slavery. For Jacob to say, "The Angel of the Lord redeemed me," he must have sensed somehow that he was getting a blessing he didn't deserve, that somehow God had paid his debt. He had a general spiritual intuition that what God was doing for him came at such a high personal cost that it proved that God loved him. Somehow Jacob knew that when he was being cast to the ground, seized, and tied up, there was a Shepherd behind it who loved him.

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In John 10, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd . . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep" (vv. 14-15). Jesus is the only shepherd who became a sacrificial lamb: "Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29 KJV). Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I am powerful, I am great, I am transcendent, and I am surpassingly sweet, and you can be sure that I will do anything for you." If we say, "How do I know?" he answers, "Because I *have* done anything for you. You can know I will do anything for you because I already have. I lost my glory, I lost my Father, I lost my life, I lost everything so I wouldn't lose you."

In light of such love and grace, we've got to be able to say, "Thy will be done," and get the peace that comes from that. There's no better way to intimacy with God than to have something horrible happen that makes you really doubt God's love, yet you go to him anyway and say to him, by God's grace, "Thy will be done." Teresa of Avila, one of the great teachers of the church on prayer, wrote a letter to one of her nuns who had confessed, "I'm not experiencing intimacy with God in prayer." Teresa wrote to this sister: "We complain of feeling dryness in prayer, but you do not need some formula or other mysterious thing to attain it. Embrace the cross your Spouse bore on his shoulders and remember that intimacy in prayer comes from being willing to do the will of God." [6]

Instead of saying, "Why don't I have a sense of God?" when it's hard to pray, pray anyway. When it's hard to obey, obey anyway. When you feel like you're being seized and thrown to the ground, say, "Thy will be done." It will push you into an intimacy you never had because you will have to get to know him as a shepherd. Let's say you've been wounded and you say, "Lord, I want you to heal me." If it doesn't look like you're getting healed, the only way through it is to say, "God, evidently you want a wounded me in this world to do certain things and to be a certain person and to get certain things done that wouldn't happen unless I was wounded. What are those things, Lord?" The only way you're going to get through anything is intimacy. To say, "Thy will be done" is the way of intimacy.

It is one thing to believe in God's grace as a principle. It's another thing to experience God's grace personally. But the highest thing is to look at life through the gospel and to see everything differently because of it.

[1] Joseph's life is not covered in this study but is part of the "Living in a Pluralistic Society" study.

[2] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), pp. 171-172.

[3] Derek Kidner, p. 214.

[4] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982).

[5] J. Douglas MacMillan, *The Lord Our Shepherd* (Great Britain: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1992).

[6] Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, "The Second Mansions: Parts 14-15" (Forgotten Books, 1978), p. 34.

Participant's Guide for Leaders reference

What were we put in the world to do?

Creation

Study 1 | Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

1. **Read Genesis 1:1-3. (a) Was the earth "without form and void" (v. 2) before God began to create (v. 1) or after? Why is this question significant? (Look at Hebrews 11:3 for help with the answer.) (b) What do verses 2-3 tell us about the "means" by which God always creates?**

2. **A quick reading of Genesis 1 reveals a highly repetitive, patterned text. (a) What are the main repetitions in words, phrases, and ideas? (b) What broader repetitive pattern do you see among the first six days? (For example, how are days four through six a recap of days one through three?)**

3. **Look at each repetitive pattern you have identified and answer: What is each repetition designed to teach us about (1) God, (2) the world and creation? (What are the "lessons" we are to learn from each repetition?)**

4. **What is different about the way humanity is created from the way other things are created? What does that teach us?**

5. **Read John 1:1-18 and Colossians 1:15-17. (a) In what ways do John 1 and Colossians 1 confirm what we have already learned in Genesis 1? (b) How do these passages shed additional light on the meaning of creation?**

What were we put in the world to do?

Creation, Work, and Rest

Study 2 | Genesis 1:26 - 2:25

1. **Compare Genesis 1:1-26 and 2:4-25. (a) Do you notice any differences in the details and order of creation between the two chapters? (b) Do you notice any differences in style and literary form?**

2. **Since a single author either wrote both accounts or put them together, we know they were not seen as contradictory but as complementary. How would you say the two accounts supplement each other?**

3. **(a) What is significant about the fact that God worked six days and then rested (2:2)? (That is, why did the author depict creation as a seven-day week?) (b) What can we learn from the fact that God planted a garden (2:8)?**

4. **Genesis 2:8-25. (a) List all the human needs that were fully met in the earthly paradise. (b) What can we learn from God's decision to include work in paradise (2:15)?**

5. **Read Exodus 20:8-11. (a) List some views of work prevalent today that differ from the biblical perspective. (b) Which of these views tend to ensnare you? What can you do about it?**

notes

6. **Genesis 1:31-2:3. The phrase "Sabbath observance" has a negative ring to us, but that is not the case here. (a) What does the text imply about what God's "rest" is? Read Exodus 23:10-12, Deuteronomy 15:1-11; Leviticus 25:8-17. (b) How can we follow God's example of Sabbath rest better in our own lives?**

7. **Read Hebrews 3:7-4:11 and Mark 2:23-3:6. (a) What deeper and fuller kind of "rest" do these passages discuss? (b) How is Jesus the key to connecting this deeper rest to our weekly pattern of rest and work?**

What were we put in the world to do?

Creation and Culture

Study 3 | Genesis 1:26 - 2:25

1. **Read Genesis 1:26-28. (a) What does the term "image" imply about who we are? What sorts of things bear an image? (b) What light do Colossians 1:15 and 3:5-10 shed on the concept of the "image of God"?**

2. **What are some practical implications of being made in the image of God? How should it affect the way we regard others and even ourselves?**

3. **Genesis 1:28. What are the two basic directives in our "job description" of 1:28? (a) What does each mean, and (b) what are the practical implications of each?**

4. **What further information does 2:8-20 give us about our work as an extension of God's creative work in Genesis 1? (a) What does "gardening" tell us about our work? (b) What does "naming the animals" indicate about our work?**

5. **In light of all we have learned about work in this study and last week's, devise a set of guidelines for choosing a job or a career path.**

What were we put in the world to do?

Creation and Marriage

Study 4 | **Genesis 1:26 - 2:25**

INTRODUCTION

The creation account addresses all the fundamental aspects of our basic humanity: (a) the natural order and the basis for science; (b) the meaning of human culture building; (c) the meaning and importance of work and rest. It is not surprising to discover that Genesis 1 and 2 also address the subjects of sexuality, gender, and marriage.

1. **Read Genesis 1:26-28. What principles can we learn from this text (a) about the importance of gender for our self-understanding, (b) about the relationship of the genders to each other, and (c) about the relationship of the genders to God?**

2. **Read Genesis 2:18-25. (a) Why would Adam be lonely if he has a right relationship with God? (b) Does the fact that this part of his creation is "not good" mean that God made a mistake? (c) What are the practical implications of this passage for handling loneliness?**

3. **Genesis 2:18-25. (a) Look up Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:26, 29; Psalm 33:20 and Psalm 121:1-2. What light do these passages shed on the way woman is a "help" to man in verse 18? (b) How does the mode of Eve's creation (vv. 21-22) shed light on what "help" means?**

4. **Genesis 2:18-25. (a) Why does God make Adam search through the animals looking for a companion? (b) What can we learn from the fact that God gives Adam neither an animal nor another male?**

notes

5. **Genesis 2:24-25. What do we learn about marriage from these famous verses? What do we learn about the purpose and boundaries for sexuality? What does it mean that they were "naked and unashamed"?**

6. **Read Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Corinthians 7:27-31. How do these passages put marriage into perspective for Christians, both single and married?**

What were we put in the world to do?

Paradise Lost: I

Study 5
Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-8

INTRODUCTION

The creation account in Genesis 1-2 addresses all the fundamental aspects of our humanity. But everyone who has ever lived recognizes that there is something very wrong with human beings and human life. Why do we have death, disease, and evil? The account of the "fall" in Genesis 3 addresses this basic question.

1. **Read Genesis 2:16-17. (a) What explanation does God give Adam and Eve for this prohibition? Why is this a good test? (b) How would this test provide "knowledge of good and evil" regardless of the human response? (See 3:5, 22.)**

2. **Read Genesis 3:1-3. This is the first approach or strategy of temptation. Neither the Serpent nor the woman restates God's command properly. What does this teach us about the first strategy of the Serpent?**

3. **Read Genesis 3:4-5. (a) What is the Serpent's second strategy? How does he challenge God's motives? (b) What do we learn here about the essence of sin?**

4. **Read Genesis 3:6. How do (a) the emotions, (b) the mind, and (c) the will play a role in the committing of sin? Why is it important to see that every aspect of our nature is polluted by sin?**

notes

5. **Read Genesis 3:7-8. (a) Why is verse 7 so unexpected after the threat of 2:17? (b) What immediate results do we see from our sin? (c) What three results of sin are immediately obvious?**

6. **What did you learn today about sin that most impressed you? How can it make a practical difference in the way you live?**

What were we put in the world to do?

Paradise Lost: II

Study 6 | **Genesis 3:7-24**

INTRODUCTION

Genesis 3 answers the fundamental questions, "What is wrong with the world and with us? Why is there death, disease, and evil?" This chapter describes humankind's "fall" into sin. Last week we looked at how sin entered the world and the human heart (Gen. 3:1-7). This week we look at the rest of the chapter, which describes the outworking of sin into the fabric of human life.

1. **Read Genesis 3:7-8. How is verse 7 unexpected after the threat of 2:17? How does the rest of the chapter shed meaning on the "death" God spoke of in 2:17? How does Romans 8:19-22 shed light on this death?**

2. **Read Genesis 3:7-19. List all the results and consequences of sin you can find. Be sure to analyze the interview of verses 9-13.**

3. **Why is it so important to remember both the goodness of creation (from Genesis 1-2) *and* the fallen-ness of creation (from Genesis 3)? What problems result when you forget one or the other?**

4. **Read Genesis 3:14-15. Genesis 1-2 tell us of creation, and Genesis 3 tells us of the fall. What do we learn even here about hope for a future redemption?**

5. **What did you learn today about sin that most impressed you? How can it make a practical difference in the way you live?**

What were we put in the world to do?

Family of Sin, Family of Grace

Study 7 | **Genesis 4:1-5:32**

Background note: To interpret the story of Cain, we must understand why God rejected Cain's offerings. Many assume that Cain was rejected because he offered a grain offering while Abel brought animal sacrifices. But most commentators point out that God asks for both cereal offerings and animal offerings in the Bible (Deut. 26:1-11; Lev. 23:9-14). It is true that, in the Old Testament, specific sin offerings for atonement were to be animal offerings, but there is no indication that this was the issue here. Both men were simply bringing the "fruit of their labor" to God in acts of worship. Both were in *form* perfectly acceptable.

1. **(a) What is Genesis 4-5 a history *of*? (b) How does the prophecy of 3:15 shed light on what we read in Genesis 4-5 and the rest of the Bible? (c) Why is it important to understand this if we are going to profit from the Bible?**

2. **(a) Read Genesis 4:1-2a. Why does Eve seem so excited about Cain's birth? (b) 4:2b-7. Why does God reject Cain's offering? (See background note and Psalm 51:15-17.) How does Cain take the rejection?**

3. **How does Hebrews 11:4 shed light on the difference between the sacrifices of Cain and Abel? How does Genesis 3:15 shed light on the difference?**

4. **Read Genesis 4:6-7, 9. (See Genesis 3:9-11.) What do we learn about God as we see him asking questions?**

5. **Genesis 4:7. What do we learn about sin from this chilling metaphor?**

notes

6. **Read Genesis 4:11-16. (a) Is Cain's reaction repentance? (b) Many see the "mark of Cain" as a curse. Is that what it is? (c) What do we see here of the justice and the mercy of God? (d) Read Hebrews 12:24. How does the New Testament show us how God can be both just and merciful?**

7. **Read Genesis 4:19-24. What signs do we see of the unfolding development of sin *and* of the mercy of God in Cain's descendents and in human culture?**

8. **Read Genesis 4:25-26. What is the significance of Seth's birth? (See the rest of chapter 5.)**

What were we put in the world to do?

Judgment and Grace

Study 8 | **Genesis 6:1 – 8:22**

INTRODUCTION

The account of Noah and the flood is intriguing, filled with many puzzling details that can easily absorb time and energy. Who were the "Nephilim" (6:4)? Did the flood really happen, and, if so, was it worldwide or only regional? We should not ignore such issues, because a confused or unsatisfied intellect makes it difficult for our hearts to ponder the teaching of the passage. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to be distracted from discovering the overall teaching and thrust of the narrative. We do not need to be certain about the Nephilim or the extent of the flood to hear God's message to us.

Background note: To be true to my own principle, I won't inundate you with information about the different views of the flood. Let me just lay out my own assumptions. I believe Noah's flood happened, but that it was regional, not worldwide. Those who insist it was a worldwide flood seem to ignore scientific evidence that there was no such thing. Those who insist it is a legend seem to ignore the trustworthiness of Scripture. After Genesis 1, the rest of Genesis reads like historical narrative.

1. **Read Genesis 6:1-4. What is the purpose of this enigmatic paragraph in the flood narrative? What sin do you think is being referred to?**

2. **Read Genesis 6:5-7. These sentences are a comprehensive outline of the nature and effects of sin. What do we learn about sin here?**

3. **If we take 6:7 seriously—that all mankind deserved to be "wiped . . . from the earth"—how do we understand 6:8? Why do you think Noah "found favor in the eyes of the LORD"?**

4. **Read Genesis 6:6, 13. What two very different attributes of God are described? How does the flood itself illustrate them both?**

5. **How can we see the gospel promise of Genesis 3:15 continuing as the basic theme in Genesis 6-8?**

notes

6. **How does the judgment and grace of the flood provide a picture of the judgment and grace of the cross? (Read 1 Peter 3:20-22.)**

7. **Read Hebrews 11:7. What practical lessons do we learn from this verse (and Genesis 6-8) about faith?**

What were we put in the world to do?

Creation Renewed

Study 9 | Genesis 8:20 – 9:19

1. **Read Genesis 8:20-22. (a) What is a burnt offering? (See Leviticus 1:3-10.) (b) Why was a burnt offering appropriate? (c) Why did God promise to never again strike the earth with a flood-like cataclysm? (d) Is verse 22 promising that God will never allow a natural disaster (major flood, earthquake, etc.) again?**

2. **How can we follow Noah's example today? (See Hebrews 13:15-16.)**

3. **Read Genesis 9:1-7. Compare God's mandate to Noah's family to his mandate to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:26-31). How are they alike and how are they different?**

4. **In Genesis 9:3-6, what do we learn about (a) our relationship with animals and (b) our relationship with other human beings? What do we learn about God's attitude toward life in general?**

5. **Read Genesis 9:9-12. What does this "covenant" imply about our relationship with the natural environment?**

6. **Read Genesis 9:13-17. How does a rainbow symbolize the grace of God? Consider when a rainbow occurs, how it looks, and so on.**

What were we put in the world to do?

City of Man, City of God

Study 10 | Genesis 9:18 – 12:3

1. **Read Genesis 9:18-24. (a) What is Noah's essential sin (see Prov. 25:28)? (b) What was Ham's sin (see Ex. 20:12)? Why is this sin so dangerous in the Messianic line?**

2. **What practical lessons do we learn for our own lives from this incident?**

3. **Read Genesis 9:25-32. (a) Why do you think Noah singled out Canaan (Ham's youngest son, 10:6) for a curse? (b) If Canaan is father of the Canaanites, if Shem is the father of the Semitic (Jewish) people, and if Japheth is the ancestor of the Gentiles, what might the prediction of verses 26-27 mean?**

4. **Read Genesis 10:1-32. What is the purpose of this chapter? Why this fairly tedious listing of all the nations?**

5. **Read Genesis 11:1-9. (a) For what purposes do the builders of the first skyscraper use their technology? (b) Look carefully at verse 4. In what two ways are these people looking to get "a name"—an identity?**

notes

6. **How does God intervene? How is the intervention of God a blessing (in a sense) as well as a curse? What does Babel teach us about the possibilities for human society?**

7. **Read Acts 2:1-13. This is the only other "Table of Nations" in the Bible besides Genesis 10-11. What is the only real solution to the "curse" of Babel? What are the implications for Christians today?**

What were we put in the world to do?

The Call of Abram

Study 11
Genesis 11:27 – 12:20

INTRODUCTION

We now begin the second major section of Genesis, the narratives of "the Patriarchs" which last the rest of the book, chapters 12 through 50. Genesis 1 begins with God calling creation into being. Genesis 12 begins with God calling his *new* creation into being. Genesis 1-11 showed us that God's original designs for his creation were unfulfilled. From the time of the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, there was a downward spiral of sin and evil that judgment could only retard, not remedy (as with the flood and the confusion of Babel). It seems that God's only option is to destroy the creation that will not answer his call to service and fellowship with him.

But instead, God begins with a single human being, Abram. He calls to him to go to a new land and to begin a new nation that will provide a new hope for the eventual "blessing" and salvation of the whole world. God's general call of creation is now supplemented by his special call of "re-creation" or salvation. He will create a people for himself who will bear the message of his saving truth and grace into the world. This will eventually bring the whole universe to God's originally designed fulfillment. All this begins with the call of Abram in this chapter. Not only is everything else in Abram's life an unfolding of the meaning of this call, but so is the rest of the Bible! In Galatians, Paul is absorbed with showing how Christ is the fulfillment of the promise to Abram.

Note: It may be occasionally confusing that we go back and forth between calling this man "Abram" and "Abraham." "Abram" means "exalted father." Midway through the Abraham story, God gives him the name Abra*ham*, which means "father of a multitude." Don't be confused—it's the same person!

1. **Read Genesis 11:27-32. Read also Acts 7:2-4. What do we learn about the background of Abram's call? What do we learn about his family situation?**

2. **Why is this background important for understanding the call of Abram? What do we learn about the call of God even before we study it?**

3. **Read Genesis 12:1-3. Analyze the call to Abraham. What does God require of him? In what ways do we have to answer this same call? (See Galatians 3:8-9.)**

4. **Read Genesis 12:1-7. Continue to analyze the call to Abraham. (a) What does God promise him? (b) Verse 7. What is the one promise necessary to make all the other promises come true? (c) In what ways do we also participate in these blessings? (See Numbers 6:22-26.)**

notes

5. **Read Genesis 12:10-20. What does this incident add to our understanding of Abraham's call and ours?**

6. **The call of Abraham is radical. A person might say, "I can't answer such a call because I'm not sure I trust God, and/or I'm not sure I trust myself." What would you say to such a statement?**

What were we put in the world to do?

Abram and Lot

Study 12
Genesis 13:1 – 14:24

INTRODUCTION

Lot was Abram's nephew, the son of his deceased brother Haran. Lot was evidently the only member of Abram's extended family who went out with him to Canaan (12:4-5). His story is woven within Abram's history, but it is a much sadder one. It begins here in chapters 13-14 and ends in chapters 18-19.

1. **Read Genesis 13:1-4. Where does Abram go and what does he do when he returns from Egypt? (Review Genesis 12:10-20.) What do these actions tell us about his heart attitude as he comes back to Canaan?**

2. **Read Genesis 13:5-9. What was Abram's and Lot's problem? What does Abram's solution tell us about his priorities? How does this give us practical instruction for our own lives?**

ABRAM AND LOT

3. **Read Genesis 13:10-13. What does Lot's choice tell us about his heart and character? How does this give us practical instruction for our own lives?**

4. **Read Genesis 13:14-18. What does God promise Abram that he has not said before? Why does this promise come now? How can God be so generous to Abram so soon after his failure in Egypt?**

5. **Read Genesis 14:1-16. Trace out what happened to put Lot in jeopardy. Contrast where Lot was living in 14:11 with 13:12. Although we don't know the exact numbers on the other side, Abram is victorious with a small number of men. What is the significance of this?**

notes

6. **Read Genesis 14:17-24. Contrast the response of the two kings to Abram's victory. What accounts for the difference? Here now is another test for Abram. What is it? How does he deal with it?**

7. **Read Hebrews 6:20-7:19. What does the New Testament say is the significance of Abram's encounter with Melchizedek?**

What were we put in the world to do?

The Oath of God

Study 13
Genesis 15:1-21; Romans 4:1-8, 16-24

INTRODUCTION

There is no exciting event in this chapter, so it is much less famous than others in the Abraham narrative. Nevertheless, this account is "theologically . . . probably the most important chapter of this entire collection." [1] The first part of this passage later becomes a crucial part of the apostle Paul's great treatise on faith in Romans 4, and the second part later becomes a crucial part of Paul's great treatise on grace in Galatians 3.

1. **Read Genesis 15:1. "After this" (v. 1) shows that God's word to Abram is connected to what has just happened. Why do you think Abram needs to be told "Do not be afraid"? Have you had a similar experience?**

2. **In Genesis 15:1 how does God's promise to Abram relate well to Abram's situation and circumstances? Why is God's promise both wonderful and challenging?**

3. **Read Genesis 15:3-6. How is Abram's response to God's promise a mixture of faith and doubt? How does God handle Abram's continued doubt? What does this teach us about handling doubt—our own or someone else's?**

4. **Compare Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4:1-8. What does the term "credited as" mean? (Think of some modern illustrations.) What does it mean that Abram's faith was "credited . . . as righteousness"? How does Paul make the implications clear? (See especially Romans 4:5.)**

5. **How is Abram's faith both like and unlike ours? Why do we need the work of Christ to help us make sense of God's radical act of credited righteousness?**

notes

6. **Read Genesis 15:7-21. Abram again expresses doubts and fears in verse 8 and God deals with them in a definitive way. (a) Why is he asked to bring animals and cut them up? (Read Jeremiah 34:18.) (b) What does it mean that (a) God goes through the pieces and (b) *only* God goes through the pieces?**

7. **How does this help our doubts about God? How does this help our doubts about ourselves?**

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), p. 140.

What were we put in the world to do?

The God Who Sees

Study 14 | Genesis 16:1-16

1. **Read Genesis 16:1-4a. What pressures on Abram make his decision understandable? Look carefully at Genesis 15:4. Is Abraham disobeying God's promise or any other "rule"?**

2. **What are some typical ways we can be tempted to "take matters into our own hands" because of God's apparent inaction? What is the result?**

3. **Genesis 16:1-4a. (a) What is wrong with Sarai's reasoning and motive? (b) What is wrong with Abram's response? See Galatians 4:22-23, 28-29 for Paul's answer to this question. (Notice how he describes Abram's two sons.)**

4. **Read Genesis 16:4a-6. How does the plan backfire? How does Sarai respond? How does Abram respond to Sarai's response? Notice the destructive effects of sin in this sad family breakdown.**

5. **How do these consequences follow naturally from Abram's wrong choice?**

6. **How do we answer the objection, "This story demeans women, condones slavery, and holds up as spiritual heroes people acting despicably!"**

notes

7. **Read Genesis 16:7-12. (a) What is the good news and "bad news" of the angel's message to Hagar? (b) Why is it best for Hagar to return? (c) How do you respond when God asks you to do something difficult and even unfair?**

8. **Read Genesis 16:13-16. What do we learn about God from (a) the fact that God heard an Egyptian slave, and (b) the fact that he heard a slave who did not (apparently) pray to him? (See verse 11.)**

Our Covenant God

Study 15 | Genesis 17:1-27

1. **Read Genesis 17:1-16. How is this covenant-making event the same as the one in 15:9-19? How is it different?**

2. **How does this covenant-making relate to the covenant of chapter 15? Why is it significant that God's oath came before Abram's oath? (See Romans 4:9-11.)**

3. **In Genesis 17:3-6, 15-16, what do the new names mean? Why did God give Abraham and Sarah new names as he ratified the covenant?**

4. **What does that mean for us practically?**

5. **Let's look at the outline of the covenant. (a) Verses 4-8, 15-16: "As for me." What does God promise to give? (b) Verses 1-2, 9-14: "As for you." What is Abram required to do?**

6. **Why do you think God chose circumcision to ratify the covenant with Abram? Read Colossians 2:11-12. How does this rite shed light on what Jesus did for us on the cross?**

notes

7. **What does the rite of circumcision tell us about how our children are to be involved in our faith and relationship to God?**

8. **What about the laughing?**

The Friend of God

Study 16 | Genesis 18:1-33

1. **Read Genesis 18:1-8. (a) Contrast this communication from God with previous ones. (b) Why the difference? How does this story of God's meal with Abraham relate to the main theme of Genesis—God's promises to Abraham?**

2. **If Genesis 18:1-33 is meant to be a picture of fellowship with God, what can we learn practically from it? (Read James 2:23; Rev. 3:20; Heb. 13:1-2; Matt. 25:35; John 15:13-15.)**

3. **Read Genesis 18:9-15. Who has the main dialogue with God at Abraham's tent? Why does God have this conversation—what is his purpose? How does God help Sarah's progress in faith?**

4. **Read Genesis 18:18-19. What do we learn from God's summary of Abraham's call in verses 18-19? What is the relationship between God's favor and Abraham's obedience as seen in verse 19?**

5. **Read Genesis 18:17-33. What do we learn from this passage about intercessory prayer?**

notes

6. **Genesis 18:17-33. What is Abraham's basic argument as he asks God to spare the city? What is God's response? (Does he agree or disagree, do you think?)**

7. **How does Jesus fulfill Abraham's prayer? How does Jesus help us to become priestly pray-ers like Abraham?**

What were we put in the world to do?

Judgment on Sodom

Study 17 | Genesis 19:1-38

1. **Begin by re-reading Genesis 18:20-21. What does God say is the reason he judges a city? (Who do you think is doing the "outcry"?)**

2. **Read Genesis 19:1-3. What hints does the narrator immediately give us about the condition of Sodom? What does Lot's seat in the gate tell us about his position and influence in the city?**

3. **How is Lot's ineffectiveness in Sodom a warning to us? What should we learn from it?**

notes

JUDGMENT ON SODOM

4. **Read Genesis 19:4-11. How do you assess Lot's efforts to defend his guests against the mob?**

5. **Read Genesis 19:11-29. Trace the ways that God (through the angels) seeks to save Lot and how Lot and his family respond to each effort. What do we learn here about how God works in our lives?**

6. **Read Genesis 19:26. Lot's wife "looks back" and "becomes a pillar of salt." How does Jesus' warning in Luke 17:32-33 shed light on what happened here?**

notes

7. **Read Genesis 19:30-38. How is this sad epilogue a result of Lot's sins "coming home to roost"? What hope does Matthew 1:5 provide us after reading this story?**

8. **How does this account fit in with the theme of the rest of Genesis?**

What were we put in the world to do?

Isaac and Ishmael

Study 18 | **Genesis 20:1 - 22:19**

INTRODUCTION

The story of Abraham offering up Isaac is so famous that it is usually studied by itself. This has obscured some interesting parallels (and lessons) that come from comparing the stories of Ishmael and Isaac, Abraham's two sons. This week we will look at chapters 20 through 22 to understand what the writer wants to tell us about God's redemptive purposes in the birth and wilderness experiences of both sons. Chapter 20 shows us the last threat to the birth of Isaac—and it comes from Abraham himself! Chapter 21 tells us of Isaac's birth and the crisis it precipitates in Abraham's family. Chapter 22 relates the climactic test of Abraham's faith. (We will skip the incident of 21:22-32, where Abraham secures legal rights to a well near Beersheba, the first piece of land he acquires in Canaan. This is a small but significant way that God continues to fulfill his promises to Abraham.)

GENESIS 20:1-18

Summary of the Event

- Abraham moved to the region of Gerar, an important caravan center on the southern border between Canaan and Egypt. Abimelech was head of the city of Gerar.
- As before in 12:10-20, Abraham was sure that foreign kings would seek to kill him in order to take and marry Sarah (20:11-12). He again lies, saying that Sarah is his sister rather than his wife. Indeed, despite Abraham's and Sarah's ages, Sarah retains her looks and Abimelech takes her into his harem. (See introductory note to chapter 17 on the longevity of the patriarchs and family through a blessing of God.)
- There are many reasons why Abraham is more guilty and blameworthy this time than in the previous instance.

  First, in chapter 12 Abraham had far less experience of God and far less understanding of his promises and ways. It is amazing that he would put the promise of a son at risk like this, after so many confirmations and signs.

  Second, in chapter 12 Abraham exhibited far less character development. Now, through testing and intimacy with God, he had learned unselfishness (chapter 14), and courageous love and prayerful concern even for his enemies (chapter 18). Yet here Abraham lets his fears get the best of him.

  Third, Pharaoh and the Egyptians seem much more ignorant of God and his will, but Abimelech and the city of Gerar seem far more righteous than the Sodomites or the Egyptians. Abimelech gets a

direct word from God (vv. 3-7) and shows a strong moral conscience (v. 9), as well as real graciousness when he discovers that Abraham lied to him (vv. 14-16). Abraham's fears led him to misjudge Abimelech's character.

- Most remarkable is the way Abraham retains his special relationship to God and prays for Abimelech (v. 17).

1. **Read 20:1-18. How does this incident confirm and illuminate the main theme of Genesis? What do we learn practically?**

GENESIS 21:1-21

2. **Read 21:1-7. Isaac means "laughter." (a) How is Sarah's laughter here different from her laughter in 18:12? (b) How did the change in laughter come about? (c) To what two complementary truths, then, does the name Isaac bear witness? (d) How does Jesus bear witness even further? (See Luke 1:37.)**

notes

GENESIS 22:1-18

3. In 21:8-20 and 22:1-18, each of the sons of Abraham undergoes an ordeal. How are the two incidents alike? How are they different? What do we learn practically from the parallels?

4. Read 22:1-2. (a) How does this charge to Abraham fit in with his original call in 12:1-3? (b) What makes this command, however, the most severe test?

5. Read 22:3-8. What hints do we get about Abraham's thoughts and hopes as he goes to the mountain with Isaac? Read Hebrews 11:19. What light does this shed?

6. Read 22:9-14. What provision did God make on the mountaintop that dealt with sin yet allowed Abraham to keep Isaac?

7. What are some practical lessons to learn from the story of Isaac's offering?

What were we put in the world to do?

Isaac and His Sons

Study 19 | Genesis 25:19 - 26:33

INTRODUCTION

Our purpose is to trace how God's promises to Abraham began to bring about the redemption of the world. Chapters 23-26 are a bridge between the story of Abraham (chapters 12-22) and the story of Jacob (chapters 27-50). In chapter 23 Sarah dies. The lengthy negotiations for her tomb show how Abraham finally became a landowner. Chapter 24 tells us how Abraham secured a wife for Isaac from among his own relatives. Thus God continues to move the promise forward to the time when Isaac will have many descendants. Finally, Abraham dies in the first half of chapter 25. Chapter 26 is a series of snapshots from the life of Isaac, a man who is overshadowed in the book of Genesis both by his father Abraham and his son Jacob. But even this brief look at Isaac shows God fulfilling his promises.

1. **Read Genesis 25:19-21, 26b. How long did Rebekah wait before she had children? What did Isaac do about it? What do we learn from this?**

2. **Read Genesis 25:21-26. (a) What does Rebekah's cry "Why . . . me?" tell us about her? (b) What does the Lord's prophecy mean? (c) How does this prophecy fly in the face of conventional expectations?**

ISAAC AND HIS SONS

3. **Read Genesis 25:27-32. What is Isaac's response to the oracle? What impact does Isaac's treatment of his sons have on them? What do we learn for our own family life?**

4. **Read Genesis 25:29-34. (a) What does each man do wrong in this incident? (b) Read Hebrews 12:15-17. What are we to learn practically from Esau's failure?**

notes

5. **(a) Who is most to blame in this incident? (b) How do verses 25:19-34 illustrate Romans 9:10-16?**

6. **Read Genesis 26:1-33. (a) Isaac seems to be a rather bland and uninteresting character. What can we learn from that? (b) Make a list of Isaac's right and wrong actions. (c) How does this pastiche of stories about Isaac confirm the themes we have been discussing?**

Jacob and the Blessing

Study 20 | Genesis 26:34 - 28:9

1. **Compare Genesis 26:34-35 with 24:3-4. Compare 27:1-4 with 49:1, 28. In light of these comparisons, how did Esau and Isaac contribute to this sad affair?**

2. **Read Genesis 27:4, 7, 28-29, 33, 39. What is the father's "blessing"? The assumptions of the family about the importance of this blessing are foreign to us. What can you discern about its nature and power from these verses?**

3. **Genesis 27:33. Why do you think Isaac can't or won't take back the blessing?**

4. **Compare the dialogues of verses 27:6-12 and verses 27:30-40. Which characters arouse more sympathy in us? Why would the narrator allow this to happen when Jacob is the chosen one? How does this teach us about God's grace?**

5. **Read Genesis 27:41-28:5. (a) How do we see the consequences of sin here? What do we learn about how sin works? (b) Rebekah now must make another plan. How does it end up fulfilling God's purposes in ways she cannot anticipate?**

Heaven's Gate

Study 21 | Genesis 28:10-22

INTRODUCTION

Jacob is now essentially on the run for his life. He may have had a better grasp on his situation than did Rebekah, who naively assured him that he would be back in a few days (27:44) because Esau would "get over it." He would have derived little comfort from Isaac's dignified words of sending and blessing at his departure (28:1-3). Jacob knew his father had shown little concern for his future choices and most likely was just glad he was leaving. In short, Jacob was little more than a fugitive, unwanted by anyone but his mother, and completely unsure of his future. He is so lacking in resources that he is sleeping out in the open at night. Yet God now comes to him. Despite his moral and spiritual inferiority to his grandfather Abraham or even to his father Isaac, Jacob receives two major visitations from God. The first one comes here.

1. **Read Genesis 28:12-15. What does Jacob see, and what do you think each thing means? (Make reference to the promises God makes.)**

2. **Genesis 28:12-15. What does Jacob hear, and what do these things tell him about God and his purposes?**

3. **Genesis 28:12-15. At what point in Jacob's experience does this come? What do we learn about God's grace from this appearance?**

4. **Genesis 28:15. How do we assess God's promise to "guard" Jacob, considering how much heartache and trouble he continues to experience for the rest of his life? What light does Luke 21:16-19 shed?**

5. **Read Genesis 28:16-22. How does Jacob respond to God's visitation? What do we learn about worship from this incident?**

notes

6. **Genesis 28:20-22. Many people believe that Jacob's vow is weak and just a form of bargaining. What do you think? What do we learn from God's response to Jacob's vow?**

7. **Compare Genesis 28:17 with Isaiah 6:1-6 and John 1:51 and 2:21. What "progress" do we see through the ages?**

What were
we put in the world to do?

Jacob's New Family

Study 22 | Genesis 29:14 - 30:24

INTRODUCTION

The next part of the Jacob story spans three chapters (29 through 31) which cover Jacob's long years living away from Canaan with his uncle Laban. This is a continuous, self-contained account that is best studied as a unit despite its length. It begins with the kiss of meeting (29:11, 13) and ends with the kiss of departure (31:55) and so stands as a unity. It stands between two personal encounters with God, at Bethel on the way to Haran (chapter 28) and at Peniel on the way home from Haran (chapter 32). It begins with Jacob escaping the problem of Esau and ends with Jacob returning to face the problem of Esau. At the center of this section is the heart of it: the birth of Jacob's children.

1. **Read Genesis 29:14-20. What signs or hints can already be seen of Laban's calculation?**

2. **Read Genesis 29:21-26. Laban's scheme is finally revealed. In what ways is it ingenious, though cruel? What did Laban get out of it?**

JACOB'S NEW FAMILY

3. **Read Genesis 29:25-29. Why did Jacob, who is clearly shocked and furious in verse 25, agree so compliantly to Laban's explanation and further offer? How was Laban's deceit with Jacob parallel to Jacob's deceit with his family?**

4. **What is God doing with Jacob? Look ahead to the prayer of 32:9-12. How does the affirmation of chapter 28 and the discipline of chapter 29 work together to get Jacob to this place?**

5. **Jacob has promised (28:21) that the Lord will be his God. Yet chapters 29 and 30 reveal three people who make other things their God beside the Lord. What does Jacob make into "an idol"? What is Rachel's idol? What is Leah's idol?**

notes

6. **Read Genesis 29:31, 30:22; see Hebrews 7:14. How does God deal with Leah's lovelessness and Rachel's barrenness? What does this tell us about God's salvation?**

7. **What can we learn from this passage about family life?**

Jacob Wrestles With God

Study 23 | Genesis 30:25 - 32:32

1. **Read Genesis 32:1-2. Jacob now turns away from his fear of Laban to his fear of what lies ahead. What does the name "Mahanaim" mean? What does that show about Jacob's state of mind? What does that show about God? (See Ps. 32:2; 2 Kings 6:15-17; 1 Cor. 10:13.)**

2. **Read Genesis 32:3-22. What evidence do you see of a changed character in Jacob? What do we learn about prayer from Jacob's prayer?**

3. **Read Genesis 32:22-24. Why do you think Jacob wanted to be alone? How is the mysterious wrestler an unexpected answer to Jacob's prayer?**

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4. **Read Genesis 32:24-30. How is the mysterious wrestler's identity slowly revealed? What are the pieces of evidence?**

5. **Who won the match? Make a case from the passage for the thesis that the wrestler won. Make a case from the passage that Jacob won.**

6. **Someone has said that this is a defeat and a victory for both parties. How does each party win through losing? Where do we see the ultimate example of triumph through defeat?**

notes

7. **What does Jacob receive from God? How are these things analogous to what all Christians receive from their saving encounter with God?**

8. **Compare verse 29 with Exodus 3:13-15 and Judges 13:18. Why do you think God doesn't tell Jacob his name? What can we learn from this?**

What were we put in the world to do?

The Meaning of Free Grace

Study 24 | **Genesis 48:1-22**

INTRODUCTION

After Jacob wrestles with God in Genesis 32, he recedes from the scene as Genesis shifts its focus to Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37-50). [1] However, in Genesis 48 Jacob has a prominent place again. He has been reunited with Joseph and is nearing death. Of all the incidents in Jacob's life that Genesis records, this appears to be the most unexciting, especially compared to the wrestling at Peniel, the vision of the stairway between heaven and earth, the love story with Rachel, and the conspiracy to cheat Esau out of his blessing by duping his blind father Isaac.

However, this is the last scene in Jacob's life. On his death bed, he brings in his family—in this case, his grandchildren Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of his beloved Joseph. He gives them a final blessing, which carries authoritative weight regarding the future of the family. It was more than a benediction; it was a prophetic utterance.

Hebrews 11, the great New Testament chapter on heroes of the faith, singles out this incident in Jacob's life as the one worthy to summarize his spiritual pilgrimage. Verse 21 reads: "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff." To the writer of Hebrews, this is the triumphant moment of Jacob's life, the preeminent expression of his faith. We will conclude our study of Genesis and Jacob's life by considering why.

PRE-PASSAGE SUMMARY

After Jacob's night of wrestling with the Angel of the Lord (Week Study 23), his long-feared meeting with his brother Esau finally takes place (Gen. 33). Esau's gracious welcome and his willingness to reconcile with the brother who cheated him of his birthright and blessing twenty years earlier is evidence to Jacob of God's blessing and protection. Nevertheless, Jacob's ingrained distrust of Esau leads him to decline his invitation to settle near him, as well as his offer to accompany his family on the journey. Jacob promises to follow Esau at a slower pace, but he travels instead to Succoth, buys land near Shechem, and sets up his household there (33:17-20). Despite the building of an altar, Derek Kidner regards this as "a backward step, spiritually as well as geographically. . . . The deviousness of the old Jacob comes out, for he could have said plainly [to Esau] that he was under oath to go to Bethel [see Gen. 28:20-22]." [2]

Jacob apparently lived for years near Shechem instead of traveling a short distance to return to Bethel, as he had promised the Lord when he fled from

home twenty years earlier. In Shechem, this spiritual compromise brought him into regular contact with the local Canaanites. The eventual result was the sexual violation of his daughter Dinah by the infatuated son of Hamor, a city leader (Gen. 34). Jacob did nothing to avenge this wrong, but Dinah's brothers devised a plot in which all the townsmen were circumcised as a pre-condition of Dinah's marriage to Hamor's son. While they were incapacitated, Simeon and Levi (perhaps alone) attacked Shechem and killed every male. Their brothers then looted the city, making it necessary for Jacob to leave the area for safety's sake.

Once in Bethel (Gen. 35) God calls Jacob to purge his household of idols and gives him an additional blessing (vv. 9-13). Soon after, Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin (vv. 16-17). Isaac also dies (v. 29) and is buried by his two sons.

Very little is heard about Jacob in the Joseph narrative, except to note that the favoritism Jacob had for Joseph is transferred to Benjamin after Joseph is presumed dead. Jacob's grief for Joseph and his refusal to be parted from Benjamin drive the dramatic events of the story. They are what enable Joseph to test the character of his brothers twenty years after they betrayed him. Finally, the family is reunited and settled in Egypt, and Jacob now calls Joseph to bring his children to receive his final blessing.

1. **Read Genesis 48:1-7, 15-16. On what reality does Jacob base the blessing he is about to give? How does he summarize his life?**

notes

2. **What is significant about the way Jacob describes God in verses 15-16 as (a) "the God before whom my fathers walked," (b) "the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day," and (c) "the Angel who has delivered me from all harm"?**

3. **How does the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh compare to the blessing Jacob secured from his father (Gen. 27:1-40)?**

4. **Read Genesis 48:17-20. How does Joseph respond to Jacob's actions? How does Joseph's view of social reality differ from Jacob's?**

5. **What are some ways that a worldview of grace would affect your social reality?**

6. **Read Genesis 48:15-20. How does Jacob see his personal reality differently through the lens of grace?**

7. **In what ways does Jacob's experience of God's grace look ahead to the grace we know more fully in Christ? In what ways can we parallel Jacob's response?**

notes

[1] Joseph's life is not covered in this study but is part of the "Living in a Pluralistic Society" study.

[2] Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967), pp. 171-172.